
Lyric Violence: the Bare Voice of the “Cruel” in Asli Erdogan and Tezer Ozlu’s Novels

di

*Sinem Meral**

Abstract: I romanzi che affrontano il tema della violenza o delle conseguenze della violenza sugli esseri umani non sono molto comuni. La scrittura di questo genere di racconti richiede un coinvolgimento personale e una identificazione con il contenuto e gli scopi della narrazione. All’interno della letteratura turca contemporanea due scrittrici di grande rilievo che hanno trattato questo tema sono Tezer Ozlu and Asli Erdogan. Il saggio che segue, sulla base del pensiero di Foucault sull’uso della crudeltà come strumento di disciplina sociale, dopo aver tracciato i profili biografici delle scrittrici, ne analizza alcune opere: *The Cold Nights of Childhood* e *Journey to the End of Life* di Tezer Ozlu e *The City in Crimson Cloak* e *The Stone Building and Others* di Asli Erdogan. La conclusione si sofferma in particolare sulle esperienze soggettive della violenza delle autrici.

Introduction

Testo The darkness of violence is everywhere: in our houses, prisons, barracks, streets, beds, schools, and universities, but also in the perineum of women, the men’s hands, their fingers holding knives or guns, in military tanks. It devours the individual. It watches until one is alone to attack and then leaves one isolated. It hates collectivism and is dexterous enough to destroy the powerful memories, those bold resistances to influence them and to be the “sole dominant” or to be fresh in minds and eternal in the language.

One of Foucault’s key insights was that since the 18th century the power and violence of the state and society have transformed slowly from explicit physical violence external to the subject into a subjectified, implicit threat of violence that is exercised by friends, family, superiors, and even one’s self. The internalized nature of this insipid form of violence is at once both harder to identify and to combat. But just as Foucault taught us that knowledge is power as violence, knowledge can also be power as resistance. In this article I highlight two examples of contemporary Turkish women authors whose own work deals directly with both

* Sinem Meral, independent researcher living in Izmir/Turkey. Meral deals mainly with gender issues, identity conflicts and legal notions in an interdisciplinary approach, and literary translation from English and French into Turkish. She is currently interested in comparative and interdisciplinary.

the physical and social forms of violence common in Turkish society. My argument is that their writing forms a two-pronged attack. First, by addressing this violence they effectively lay bare what might otherwise remain hidden from public discourse; the mechanisms of repression are shown in the disciplining function they truly have. And, second, through their individual prose styles the two authors take control of the process of subjectified violence, thereby actively exercising a counterweight to these acts of violence and repression. In short, although violence has taken a subjectified and dispersed form in many contemporary societies, their work both shines light on these horrors and demonstrates active modes of resistance.

While the bitter melody of violence echoes within the walls of prisons, clinics, houses or schools, the city closes its ears. It denies what is heard and defends with its internal mechanism that it is merely a hallucination just because the burden of being a witness of the violence is sometimes greater than being a victim. It desires to escape, avoid, ignore, exclude. It defends itself by claiming that the link between the violence and the victim is dual and that is why enlarging the circle is meaningless.

But for a writer witnessing is inevitable. The two Turkish women writers, Tezer Ozlu and Asli Erdogan, share the same gaze, but maintain different voices. Both uncover the violence in Turkey that is her history, moulded by pain and tears, and set it before our eyes through their own witnessing of the events.

Tezer Ozlu who rather expounds on her personal pains, violent experiences and her biography chooses to convey the “cruel” from her direct memoirs by using a direct (open) language. Her cruelty walks within a narrower field than that of Asli Erdogan’s tyrant, who is everywhere. To better understand this position, her two novels, *The Cold Nights of Childhood* (Cocuklugun Soguk Geceleri) and *Journey to the End of Life* (Yasamin Ucuna Yolculuk) are analyzed.

In contrast, Asli Erdogan, master of the poetic texts and one of the doyens of contemporary Turkish literature – who has recently received one of the most important national literature prizes – indicates the influence of violence through her inner world and the confused minds of the people in her work. And this direct influence makes these people more special and complex, isolating them from the real world. The language that Asli Erdogan’s characters use is ultra-lyric, fractured and unclear such as that coming from a disordered mind, a mind that has been deeply harmed by severe violence. In the framework of this article, her two works *The Stone Building and Others* (Tas Bina ve Digerleri) and *The City in Crimson Cloak* (Kırmızı Pelerinli Kent) are addressed.

Tezer Ozlu and Passive Lyricism: the Violence of Craziness

Semra Topal, an impressive Turkish woman writer who insists that a woman writer always refers herself in her works, said in an interview:

The feminine sexual organ, that is cheek by jowl with the menstrual blood, is a hole opening to life and death. What kind of traumas do we experience because of it and then do we have to

repair ourselves? From this point of view, as Foucault said, the writer and the work constitute a whole that cannot be separated from each other¹.

In line with Foucault's statement, Tezer Ozlu – considered the despondent princess of Turkish literature – always refers to her short and painful life. After being a prominent figure in the world of women writers in Turkey, Tezer Ozlu, died in 1986, she has recently been newly grasped and awarded distinction by Turkish readers. Ozlu's biography can be considered a catalog of a museum of violence. Tezer was faced with the male power and paternal discipline from her childhood on, she ran away home at 17 and left high school, then travelled around Europe and got married to a Turkish actor she met in Paris. In turn, this marriage completely ruined her life and psychology. Finally, she spent several years in mental hospital and received very strong shock treatments.

In the very beginning of *The Cold Nights of Childhood*, she recalls the oppressive atmosphere in the house:

My father, who was a gym trainer once upon a time, hid his whistle. In mornings, he whistles before taking off his pajamas and shouts at us: "If you were spoiled, then why did you come to the military? Wake up, wake up!". He shouts with a sound like a trumpet...I think about what kind of relation that my father can make between this house and the military service. My father demands military order at home life. That's for sure. If he was rich he would sound trumpets at the door...How big the love of my father's generation for the military is².

Tezer Ozlu's "pater domestas" pushed her to the hands of the death and it was in these years that the seeds of her insanity were sown. She attempted to suicide when she was a teenager:

In the late of a dark night, I woke up. Everyone was sleeping. The house was cold. I was careful about being very silent. I got drugs I had gathered for some days, one by one. I ate bread with marmalade not to puke. I was a young girl. I prepared myself to make my dead body look beautiful. It seemed that there were some people I wanted to take revenge on through my dead body. There were some houses, sofas, carpets, music and teachers I wanted to oppose. There were some rules to oppose. A scream! Get back to your little world. A scream! I turned silently back to the bed. There was no time to think about death and absence. Images in front of my eyes were like colorful prairies. There was nothing to fear. I ran in a prairie. It was like I hadn't been living in a sea side city. Everywhere was prairie. I was alone with the grass bending in the breeze. Death was going to take me in a minute³.

But this attempt failed and Tezer spent some time in a mental hospital. Eventually her father's attitude changed, but continued to harass her for her attempt, asking "How can a person think of death while life is so beautiful⁴?"

Tezer went to the Austrian High School, famous for its discipline and Prussian learning style. It was an educational environment designed for the minorities in Turkey, but open to the Turkish bourgeoisie that was eager to assure that their children learn a foreign language well. Thanks to her German language she was

¹ S. Topal, *Mesele Dergisi* (Magazine of Politics and Literature), 40, 2010, p. 24.

² T. Ozlu, *The Cold Nights of Childhood*, YKY, 2006, p. 1. All the translations into English are mine.

³ *Ivi*, p. 14.

⁴ *Ivi*, p. 15.

able study at this high school and Tezer then went on to work as an interpreter in several public and private institutions, earning her living in this way.

In this period of her life Tezer decided to marry a young Turkish actor, Guner Sumer, but unfortunately this emotionally violent marriage deeply affected her psychology. She depicted her very first days in the clinic she visited as result of these psychological injuries in *The Cold Nights of Childhood* as follows:

The old nurse asked to mum: ‘Can she throw herself from the balcony?’ No, I don’t. I love life. I want to live for years and years. I think about what they think about me. I don’t reply anything, mum replies on my behalf⁵.... “My medication is given. While looking for the sleep for long hours, my only assistant is the music coming from a small radio. Torelli and Marcello make me relaxed a little bit. This hospital will follow other clinics of the city; I will meet different patients; will be friend and quarrel with some of them. Sometimes, I will argue them by tearing their hair. I will learn to get the electroshock by laughing without reacting. If I want to save myself⁶.

The effect of the strong pills, the insomnia, the smell of the clinic, freaks, indifferent doctors, cruel nurses and some distorted relationships that doctors and male nurses established with Tezer, who was a young and beautiful patient, troubled the inner world of Tezer and she understood that to survive in the hospital meant to obey the rules and not create new problems. As a direct tool of violence, doctors applied electroshock therapy in the hospital and Tezer dedicated a piece to this in the novel:

Then I found myself in an electroshock coma. Finding myself in this kind of coma is extraordinary and very bizarre. Having this horrible experience is more than dying once. There is no middle of electroshock. There is a beginning and end of the electroshock. For a human being or for a patient. But I live the middle of that death and now I am in the middle of the electroshock. I am thinking and feeling while having electroshock. Now they are applying electroshock because events went off the rails/or they want to get me talking/doctor should be at home/moreover the electroshock device is really strange/like a painter’s fund/maybe he could not set the electricity well⁷

These treatments affected whole world of Tezer’s thinking. Especially her second book, for which she received Marburg Literature Prize in Germany in 1983, shows clearly that she could not adapt to normal life - being a wife, a mother, a city dweller, an involved revolutionary (considering the current political atmosphere of that time and her political intentions) and so she choose to leave Turkey and live on abroad. Receiving a scholarship from the Goethe Institute, she wrote her novel *Journey to the End of Life* that focuses mainly her journey in pursuit of her three favorite writers, Kafka, Svevo, and Pavese and in this novel one can find the traces of a passive lyricism as well.

The tension of death (suicide), joy of life and love (to a man), a very impressive intuitive ability and solitude all form boundaries to her way of thinking. This intuition and the inexplicable ontological sorrow connect her to Pavese and Kafka’s pessimist philosophy. In the novel she uses sentences borrowed from

⁵ *Ivi*, p. 35.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ *Ivi*, pp. 51-53.

Pavese: “In the depth of my sorrow, there is nothing remaining of me. Even the honor of perceiving my solitude is gone”.

This sentence from Pavese trembles within the world of Tezer and she says:

I go to this city’s (Berlin) each coin with my previous walls. With the wall of my family. With the oppressive wall of my marriages. With the cigarette smell walls of offices. With the painless walls of the schools. With the walls of homes, prisons in front of which the people killed and lead. The walls of hospitals. The walls of clinics, marble walls, the walls of poverty, the walls of rest home and cottages, walls of slums, walls of city and walls of systems⁸.

Between the lines of this quote there are deep scars of a past that wishes to be forgotten and despair with the sense of rebellion that loneliness brings. Trying to escape from the past actually means becoming closer to it. Therefore, the ill-fated rebellion lowers the tone of lyricism and a set of more direct, discrete, short-sentenced-texts occur.

While tracing the effects left by cruelty on Tezer – her lonely and suffocating childhood days, the torture sessions in the clinics – the feeling of isolation stemming from her presence guides us. In the light of this guidance, one can claim that her direct style and language make her biography and life experiences the main focus, using them as “nude” material; her short-sentenced, but very open language estranges from an intense and close lyricism while enclosing her in a style that could be called “passive lyricism”.

Passive lyricism is the author’s cry and tears, not that of the text. A thin wisp of smoke exudes from the places where the author and the text “kiss”; the clash of reading is not as jarring as expected, but instead leaves behind an unforgettable melancholy. For instance:

The end of life never seems far to me. I see the end of life in every breath, every face, every adult, every old person, every hug, and every morning. Even in my childhood, I see the end of life in field of rye, the twilight of summer, and the deep darkness of my childhood nights⁹.

Asli Erdogan and Active Lyricism: the Violence of the Life

Asli Erdogan’s writings are predominantly considered lyric and highly poetic. But in spite of this style, one can quickly realize the importance she affords violence and its effects. The depiction of brutality in Asli Erdogan’s work is neither direct, nor personal. She does not talk about her personal stories. Her language is indirect, possessing an active lyricism. In Asli Erdogan novellas violence is everywhere and not irresistible. The characters or persons live the violence, but never interrogate it. It is we, the readers, who interrogate the reasons for the intense violence immediately after finishing the novel.

Asli Erdogan– who had a very brilliant scientific carrier working at CERN as a physicist – chose to write and travel. But Erdogan is not a teacher who shows the truths of life, but a clerk who quotes what she lives and perceives.

⁸ Idem, *Journey to the End of Life*, YKY, 2006, pp. 15-16.

⁹ *Ivi*, p. 36.

Violence is in fact the whole of life. This attitude is most prominent in *The City in Crimson Cloak*. The urban violence and its isolating effects are presented as a lightning rod in this novel written about the days she spent in Rio de Janeiro. Although she does not originally come from Rio de Janeiro, it is the openness of her emotive channels that distinguishes her from authors addressing the violence in this regard. She feels the violence in her flesh, her soul, and this ability reaches to her skillful lyricism.

The story recounted in *The City in Crimson Cloak* is in fact a good portrait of a layered insanity set within the violence. The main character of the novel, Ozgur – who is writing her doctoral thesis – encounters Rio, accompanied by fireworks and gunfire:

The sound of gunfire started up again all at once; a startled Ozgur jumped, and the glass in her left hand fell to the floor. Her entire body tensed and began shaking as if she had been given an electrical shock. Sweat was gushing from every pore of her body, but at the same time she was freezing cold. Caustic tears welled up in her eyes yet failed to flow. ‘Enough! Enough! My god, put an end to this torture, now! Can’t you see that I have no strength left¹⁰?

And the war accompanies her life:

Who would’ve guessed that the worst war that Ozgur was to see during her two years in Rio would break out in Santa Teresa. Since last Saturday, the sound of infantry guns, Uzis, and hand grenades had ushered in the day and continued throughout. Two nights ago she was in Santa Teresa, famous for its bars, as she wandered its deadly silent streets lined with the defunct lamp lights, Ozgur saw half a dozen buses – their headlights dimmed, crammed full of soldiers, and long barrels hanging out of their windows – silently climb up the hill. But rather than put an end to the conflict, the army’s intervention had sent it spinning out of control¹¹.

The violence has even spread to the weather and the heat overwhelms Ozgur:

In Rio shut off from the ocean winds by jagged coves and precipitous mountains, not a leaf budges during the months of the so-called ‘dry season’, nor is its radiant, indigo blue sky stained by a single cloud. Heat descends upon you like madness, wraps itself around your throat, and chokes you. The city becomes a huge furnace slowly roasting human bodies alive. The sun removes the benevolent queen mask that it had worn all year and behaves like a dictator consumed by the desire to kill. The air absorbs all the humidity it can and thickens the consistency of water¹².

Is the tyrant horrible, the most hated, and ever-present? In Asli Erdogan novels, the traces of brutality and her style of presenting it, unfortunately, do not respond to those questions. She is interested more in how a society of discipline, of the sort that Foucault discussed, has been created through micro-stories and common macro-pains.

According to Foucault, from the 18th century on power utilized other micro-power mechanisms to seep into the social body. Overt state violence was transformed into an internalized discipline promulgated largely through the institutional organs of the state: schools, hospitals, prisons, and so on. But these

¹⁰ A. Erdogan, *The City in Crimson Cloak*, Soft Skull Press, New York 2007, p. 14.

¹¹ *Ivi*, p. 16.

¹² *Ivi*, p. 17.

micro-mechanisms of power that governed the social discipline were not based on a legal structure, that is, on politics, but on the information especially created by the humanities, by science. Violence was sublimated by the guise of truth.

The main body of Foucault's disciplinary society lies in the logic of the "*state as omnipotent*"; it is in our soul and flesh. While the domesticating forces of the state's eye pervade our environment, we can just hold our pain and cry. There is a dense smoke coming from Asli Erdogan's text that deals with the moods, mental conditions, and stalemates that follow on the heels of violence.

This smoke is the smell of those who were burned in the concentration camps, the smell of hair burnt by the electrical apparatus of the torturer, of those who died alive at home due to racist arson. And in fact, the smell of the torturer mixes that of the tortured; the greatest form of punishment is to torture a human being. In an interview with the author regarding this issue, she replies:

Question: We cannot talk about a total defeat of humanity if there is still the ruler and the oppressed, can we?

A. Erdogan: I think we can. That is why I do not blame the torturers while I mention the torture in *The Stone Building and Others*. Because we are all victims.

Question: But the rate of suffering is not equal...

A. Erdogan: Everything done on behalf of justice deepens the injustice. The pain is not distributed equally among people. But this does not make the torturer a winner; he simply does not suffer, that's it, otherwise he is a victim too¹³.

In the concurrent inabilities, the language is broken up, fractured; a fragmented language and fiction are dominant in the author's text. The description of the places where an intense pain is experienced and the emotional analysis increases the proximity of the language and the lyric tone as well. This feature nearly reaches its peak in *The Stone Building and Others*.

The cold walls of the place of torture, a mysterious and *bohemian* stone building where the walls absorb the screams of the draconian tortures. The author said in an interview that before typing the story sequence, she wanted to write something on the continuous systematic torture of the Turkish since the '80s military coup and its individual effects. She added that she found the metaphor of the stone building while looking at the Beyoglu Police Station, one of the oldest police stations in Turkey.

We witness the acts of the cruel from the perspective of Filiz who is a political refugee, A. who has lost his mind because of torture and an imaginary angel. The stone building symbolizes the insensitivity and barbarity of the violence and, in fact, of all societies. A., rebels in the story and protests:

Don't you believe me and think the stone building is one of my dreams, right? But anyway, weren't we created from the yeast of dreams? Eventually dawn comes, blood red marks appear on the eastern horizon...Stars remain solidified in the nervous, dull, flat sky, one by one invisible to the scatter. The latter star will hang a rope down to us. The rope that can be

¹³I. Aktan, "Zaman Gazetesi", interview with the author, 2010.

climbed by the silent night, the words in the blood, stray shadows, the dreams of the color of heart that nobody wants [...]¹⁴.

And the imaginary angel, as a witness or the conscious, translates the torture, increasing the lyricism at the end:

You listen voices, whispers, steps, yelling, calls of the outside world...The world that already deleted you from all pictures. The echoes of voices that are generously communicated by stones, that you cannot distinguish reality, dreams or memories...Tinkling heels, knocking doors, a telephone insisted on ringing but not answered. A scream begins, cuts, turns into a moan, starts again... A scream that you cannot understand whether it comes from a woman, a man, from a more innocent creature or not. From the body itself or from the soul...¹⁵.

Conclusion

Tezer Ozlu: “Until I was ten years old, I tried to understand the silence of the universe. Between twenty and thirty, I searched for the boundaries between *ratio* and insanity. How can I explain this lightning-fast jump between reason and madness with words? The world of mind must have been something else. I made the most profound journey into the world of my madness. What great courage I’ve showed to save myself from madness”.

Asli Erdogan: “I have the dilemma of staying or going through. I believe that I am an eternal passenger or eternal exile. Figuratively, I think that each experience is a journey too”.

Although these two women writers who describe themselves above cannot be considered representatives of the Turkish women writers’ overall attitudes regarding the axis of pain, torture and madness, they managed to carve their own channels of sensitivity through their perception, attitude, and narrative techniques. These aspects will bring them into focus while understanding life wishing to increasingly continue over time. One should heed the feminine sensitivity of these two women writers whose original protests against the violence of madness and life boldly reveals themselves.

¹⁴ A. Erdogan, *The Stone Building and Others*, Everest Press, New Delhi 2010, p. 48.

¹⁵ *Ivi*, p.68.