

Transcultural Aspects in Elif Batuman's Fiction

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Abstract

This study aims at exploring Elif Batuman's *The Idiot* and *Either/Or* from a transcultural perspective. This study examines Elif Batuman's novels from an interdisciplinary perspective combining Wolfgang Iser's philosophical approach to transculturalism, transcultural literary studies as well as Bakhtinian concepts such as polyphony and intertextuality. Benefiting from this framework, the present study highlights the themes of the representation of national identity, mobility, cultural and linguistic diversity in Batuman's fiction. The study also emphasizes how the protagonist transcends the stable categories related to identity and fiction writing within the framework of transculturalism.

Keywords: Intertextuality; polyphony; transculturalism; transcultural literature.

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INTRODUCTION

Transculturalism, originally coined by Fernando Ortiz in 1940 as *transculturation*, refers to the mutual interaction between cultures, rather than a one-sided *acculturation* process. Although it was Ortiz who put forward the term, it has been evolving since then. According to Wolfgang Welsch (1999), the existing concepts of multiculturalism and interculturalism are not enough to explain the conditions of our times. At this point, he offers the deployment of the word transculturalism pointing out the interrelated structure of cultures today. As Welsch claims transculturalism has two dimensions: macro-level and micro-level. While the former deals with complexities in societies which stem from the coexistence of cultures, the latter focuses on individual domains in which identity is constructed through multiple cultural interactions.

Welsch (1999) does not regard cultures as homogeneous and separate entities, rather they continuously reshape through *external networking*. The interconnectedness of cultures results from the dynamic process of migrations, developing communication systems as well as economic dependencies/independencies. At a micro-level, transculturality is regarded to be an individual phenomenon. In order to illustrate how transculturalism is observed at a micro-level, Welsch exemplifies Salman Rushdie as a transcultural author whose identity is not shaped by a single homeland. Welsch also makes a distinction between cultural and national identity. He asserts that cultural identity cannot be limited to a national one since one's cultural identity might be a mixture of different aspects of various cultural forms. In addition, Welsch emphasizes that transculturalism does not denote the homogenization of societies; on the contrary, he emphasizes the necessity of celebrating diversity and envisions societies in which each individual expresses themselves in their unique way. He points out that being transcultural is not sameness, in contrast, it is having one's distinctive individual identity.

Transcultural literary studies, on the other hand, dwell on the issues such as the representation of national identities, the coexistence of multiple modes of beings, multicultural environments, translingual practices like code-mixing or translations, intertextual relationships and the impact of mobility on characters/authors in literary works.

It does not disregard the critical approach of postcolonial theory, rather it mostly borrows the concepts such as *hybridization*, and *in-betweenness* or deals with the conditions of diasporas in literary works of cross-cultural authors. Arianna Dagnino (2015) regards transcultural literature as a new form of *literatures of mobility* which includes literary works that are influenced by “migratory flows, wanderlust, travel experiences, diasporic, exile, or postcolonial situations, and more recently, the multiple trajectories of transnational and neonomatic movements” (p. 145). In *Transcultural Identities in Contemporary Literature*, it is stated that our understanding of self is shaped through interaction with others; thus, it is an open and ongoing process. Since identity formation involves fluidity, individual identity continues to change through interactions with others. As a result of the confrontation of diverse groups, each individual in a group constructs a unique identity, identifying with different characteristics of local or global. (Hansen, Llena and Nordin et al., 2013, p. ix-x-xvi)

According to Mikhail Epstein (2009), transcultural individuals can redeem themselves from the dependence on not only their native cultures but also on the culture they live in. He defines the situation of transcultural as *being beyond* (p. 332). As Epstein (1999) suggests, any kind of experience involving interconnectedness is valuable from a transcultural perspective. He adds that the central question of transcultural identity is how we change our perception of self in the way of evolving from who we are (p. 94). On the other hand, Sissy Helff (2009) points out the challenge of defining a transcultural novel since its features mostly intersect with postcolonial and postmodern writing. She acknowledges the fact that it is a relatively new concept; however, she still clarifies some common features of transcultural literature. According to Helff, a transcultural character continuously doubts himself/herself questioning her/his views and the world. Different world views are questioned by the protagonists of these novels. Transcultural narrative perpetually crosses boundaries through a narrator who challenges the collective identity belonging to a particular community. Finally, the conventional understanding of home is defied in transcultural novels. These characters might feel an attachment to a place that is different from their home or they might prefer not to fit in anywhere at all. Helff points out that storytelling strategies such as designing an unreliable narrator in transcultural novels

sometimes enable the author to incorporate metafictional elements within the narrative itself by inserting her/his own views in the novel (p. 83).

Concurring with Helff, Dagnino (2015) also contributes to the description of transcultural novels. She defines the key characteristic of a transcultural novel as follows: “physical or cultural mobility and transformative nature of its fictional characters—together with their ability to re-envisage common situations from alternative points of view—which mainly reflects that of its authors” (p.180). At this point, Dagnino recalls Schoene who envisions transcultural novels to be novels that depict the world rather than particular nations. As well as defining the features of transcultural novels, Dagnino (2015) illustrates the attitude of transcultural authors in five categories: 1) these authors set their novels in multiple places; however, none of these places is exoticized by the narrator. 2) The characters in these novels represent more than one culture and lead a transcultural life. 3) They prefer multiple narrative voices and present their stories involving different perspectives. 4) They use foreign words blending linguistic spaces/cultures in their texts. 5) They generally reject classifying texts according to national literatures (p. 183). She also acknowledges that transcultural authors tend to mix genres defying the traditional classification of them.

Dagnino relates the approach of transcultural authors with what Rosi Braidotti calls *nomadic subjects*. In *Metamorphoses*, Braidotti (2002) defines a nomadic subject as being mobile, changeable in nature and transitory; therefore, becoming is a perpetual interconnectedness (p. 8, 70). In her article, “Writing as a Nomadic Subject” Braidotti (2014) relates the becoming process of nomadic subjects to writing practice. As Braidotti suggests, nomadic writers not only use language as a tool, but they also feel resided as the other in it. As she remarks, creativity requires the riddance of fixed notions of identity. Instead, it is a nomadic process through which writers do not cling to a stable category of identity. Braidotti indicates that through the mobilization of differences, it is possible to destroy the supremacy of powerful nations. She adds late postmodernity involves “transculturality, polylingual and multi-cultural social space,” that is marked with “nomadic intervention.” She defines nomadic intervention as a process of “destabilizing dogmatic, hegemonic, exclusionary power structures” (p. 166-181).

Since one of the most defining features of transcultural literature is involving different languages and worldviews in a single text, most transcultural novels are also polyphonic and dialogic in their very nature. Drawing on Bakhtin, Epstein suggests, only when one locates oneself outside, engaging in a dialogue with the other, that different cultures confront thus enriching one another. This encounter does not result in mixing; however, it leads to a different understanding (Epstein, 2004, as cited in Rollins, 2013, p.260) In a similar vein, Bakhtin (1986) argues cultures are never disclosed entities; on the contrary, they spread through other epochs. Achieving creative understanding is only possible when one locates oneself outside the norms of given culture. Meaning can only be achieved through a dialogue with others. This dialogical interaction among cultures along with the coexistence of various cultural elements enriches the structure of a literary work.

In his seminal work *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin (1981) defines the novel as a form which involves diverse languages as well as conversations in different social circles. Novels that include different world views cannot be considered closed systems (p. 295). The heteroglot nature of the novel creates *double-voiced discourse* mixing the voices of the characters and that of the authors. Bakhtin (1984) defines the polyphonic novel to be “a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses” (p. 6-8). While each unique voice is representing itself, their worldviews create a real polyphony. By its nature, a novel is a dialogized structure and dialogue penetrates the structure of novels. In a polyphonic novel, each representation has an equal value, different views are not more important than one another; therefore, there is a constant interaction among the ideas. The components related to the dialogic nature of texts that are explained above establish the foundation of the term intertextuality, which was coined by Julia Kristeva. Drawing on Bakhtinian concepts like dialogism and polyphony, Julia Kristeva (1980) first used the term intertextuality and she defines texts as consequences of a productive process in which meaning is constructed and deconstructed. In a novel, one can trace the fusion of different utterances and see the novel as a unity only by stepping outside it, defining its relationship with other utterances. While theorists like Bakhtin, Kristeva and Barthes theorize intertextuality, it is Genette who scrutinized the term in detail demonstrating how to apply

intertextuality to a literary text. Therefore, intertextual references are examined by benefiting from Genette's classification of transtextuality in this study.

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RESULTS

Drawing on the features of transcultural novels as well as Bakhtinian concepts such as polyphony, dialogism as well as intertextuality, this study discusses Elif Batuman's *The Idiot* and *Either/Or* from these standpoints. Batuman is a multilingual Turkish-American novelist and literary scholar, and her novels demonstrate the depth of her cross-cultural identity and creative writing style. In *The Idiot* and its sequel *Either/Or*, Batuman tells the story of the experiences of Selin Karadağ who studies at Harvard. Selin's enthusiasm for living her life as the literary characters she admires clashes with real life experiences which are mostly painful due to the difficulty of the transitionary stage of growing up. Readers witness the evolving process of the protagonist from the beginning of *The Idiot* to the end of *Either/Or*. While *The Idiot* revolves around the experiences of the heroine in her freshman year, its sequel *Either/Or* takes readers on a journey through the narrator's sophomore year in college. While Selin is more inexperienced and dazzled with the complexities of life in *The Idiot*, *Either/Or* presents Selin as a more mature character who is gradually constructing herself as a female author. Set in various locations, both of these novels are polyphonic, intertextual and bear several aforementioned qualities of transcultural literature. In addition, Batuman uses an innovative style benefitting from genres including autobiography and academic writing and she carefully blends them in her fiction.

Most of the characters in Batuman's fiction come from different parts of the world, meeting in a university setting. Therefore, characters bring their cultural background and their unique perspectives, which creates a fusion in the novels. Along with revealing this richness, Batuman also points out national stereotypes as well as prejudices directed towards others in societies. Selin confronts these attitudes not only in America and Turkey but also in other countries she has visited. In accordance with one of the qualities of transcultural novels, neither America nor Turkey is depicted in a romanticized way. She does not favor American or Turkish attitudes, rather she points out that regardless of their socioeconomic status, people encounter certain prejudices in all societies. This study also discusses how the main characters transcend the fixed categories of identity questioning the nature of belonging to a particular place. On the other hand, one of the most important

themes of transcultural literature is mobility. In Batuman's fiction, the characters are on the move, perpetually crossing borders physically and virtually. In alignment with Braidotti's concept of a nomadic subject, Batuman both portrays characters who are traveling from one place to another and she introduces readers to different destinations all around the world from a university setting. Throughout the novels, Selin and her friends interrogate cultures, the nature of languages and national histories. The countries that are visited, their impacts on the characters as well as the symbolic significance of these places are analyzed from a transcultural perspective.

Another focus of this study is on linguistic elements existing in Batuman's novels. In one of her interviews, referring to Bakhtin, Batuman expresses that being proficient in more than one language, opening a space for youth language and implementing these features in a single national language add layers and richness to a novel (Oreskovic, 2017). In her novels, Batuman brings together people from different walks of life, cultural backgrounds, and people whose native languages/world views are vastly different from one another. Both novels include various languages, mainly English and Turkish, as well as Hungarian, French and Russian expressions. Batuman's novels contain linguistic terms, academic language, philosophical terms, youth language, occupational language, idiomatic Turkish expressions as well as daily English. She continuously moves among various modes of expression creating harmony in her novels.

This study has also attempted to analyze the intertextual references which also reflect the transcultural mode of Batuman's fiction. Although there are lots of intertextual references in *The Idiot* and *Either/Or*, some specific works stand out that she compares from different national literatures such as French, American, English and most dominantly Russian. Analyzing these literary works from a critical eye and primarily focusing on the representation of female characters, Selin attempts to construct her identity as a female author. As well as using intertextual references to pay homage to her favorite novels, Selin also subverts patriarchal discourse in these novels through her writing experience. For this reason, the intertextual references in Batuman's fiction not only reflect the polyphonic

structure of her novels but also become significant components of her transcultural narrative since they contribute to shaping transcending perspective of the narrator.

As well as bringing together different national literatures, Batuman shapes her novels destroying the boundaries among genres. She carefully blends fiction and non-fiction in the body of her novels transcending fixed categories of genre. Regarded to be autofiction in their essence, Batuman's novels reveal much about her reading and writing experience as an author as well. Lastly, the final part discusses Batuman's novels from the lens of a Turkish reader, who reads these novels in English. Although the narrator translates most of the Turkish conversations into English, some of the expressions are difficult to translate since they are culture-bounded references. In this regard, it has been intended to highlight the significance of these references from the point of view of a Turkish reader.

DISCUSSION

In *The Idiot* and *Either/Or*, reading experience, friendship, love, mobility and growing up are outstanding themes; however, the issues regarding national identities are not ignored, rather they are smoothly blended into the narrative. Although the characters represent different nations, none of these places is centralized throughout the novels. The protagonist Selin never exoticizes nations, rather she carefully portrays the inner complexities and insufficiencies of the societies she is in touch with. National histories and prejudices set by each nation towards others emerge as a part of the whole narrative. Although it is not highlighted by the author, most of the characters face stereotypes about their national identity. In *Either/Or*, we see preconceptions towards a whole nation in some parts of the novel. The psychologist assigned to Selin says that when she thinks about Turkey, she imagines camels, and she asks whether veiling is required in public. Being the first generation American in the family, Selin calmly explains the importance of secularism for the Turkish national identity (Batuman, 2022, p. 48). Both the psychologist and Selin's mother's colleagues, who ask similar questions, are educated individuals, yet they display a prejudiced and ignorant attitude about Turkey.

The characters face stereotypes about their national identity in daily life as well. A conversation between a Russian clerk at a shop in Boston and Svetlana is significant in this respect. Since Svetlana speaks Russian well, the clerk presupposes that she is Russian. Svetlana emphasizes that she is a Serb and she is just learning Russian at school (Batuman, 2017, p. 42). When Selin is in Turkey, she encounters a similar attitude. A German girl in Side asks Selin if she can do a belly dance. Selin replies she is from New Jersey causing the girl to move away when she learns it (Batuman, 2022, p. 324). Although she has a Turkish name, she is regarded as a foreigner since she does not fit a certain stereotype of a Turkish woman. Selin continuously encounters a similar attitude, either because people think she is Turkish or because they think she is American. In another part, Selin reveals that not only individuals' but also the discourse of governments are problematic by referring to the biased attitude of the American government about genocides that were committed in different areas (p. 72). Consequently, the fact that these issues are not the main themes of Batuman's fiction does not mean that they are not a part of the whole narrative or they are disregarded. Not attaching to the idea of belonging to one nation and defending it blindly, Selin brings together different views pointing out the biased approach of people towards others. However, the main characters are more self-conscious about these issues because each represents a different nation, which brings them a transcending perspective.

Regarding children who grow up in a country other than that of their families, Pollock (2009) states that these individuals form a relationship with all cultures; however, they do not necessarily feel attached to any. Pollock adds owing to this freedom, these individuals belong to nowhere and anywhere at the same time (p. 13,23). When she buys an English copy of Rumi's poems since the Turkish copy mostly includes Persian words, Selin feels a kind of dissatisfaction from not using her advantage of knowing Turkish (Batuman, 2022, pg. 305). In both *The Idiot* and *Either/Or*, Selin indicates a sense of alienation and not fitting in a particular place. From the transcultural perspective, individual identity is fluid, and a person can be an embodiment of different national/cultural identities. The feeling of alienation, in a sense, frees individuals from being trapped in a single country or culture. Selin defines herself as an American girl and then as Turkish in different parts of *The Idiot* (Batuman, 2017 p. 58, 221). However, she transcends both by being in different

places and encountering various cultures not only by being physically active but also by reading and learning a lot. Like a culturologist, who is also similar to a writer, Selin observes people aiming to reach the essence of the human condition. She juxtaposes characters and views in her narrative. This is one of the ways of understanding the human condition, which she says is also the objective of writing a novel (Batuman, 2022, p. 188). From this perspective, the objective of writing a novel is not to defend a nation, in other words, her identity as an artist cannot be restricted to a nation. She transcends these concepts by observing and writing about people from different countries in their circumstances, namely her identity as an author crosses the limits of borders. Selin's positioning herself as an artist corresponds to the definition of a contemporary artist who is able to bring together contradicting ideas, double perspectives and complex situations in narratives (Petersen, 2017, p. 142). A contemporary author is one who can stay outside when s/he is inside. Selin also acknowledges that the country or countries one has an organic tie with somehow enriches the author's writing practice. In *Either/Or*, Selin explains the challenge of writing a fictional character with a neutral, universal name since she does not want to harp on being Turkish. However, what she writes is only meaningful when she also refers to the characters' national backgrounds (Batuman, 2022, p. 83). While creating universal characters and not harping on one's nationality is considered a challenge in *The Idiot*, the author image ripens and starts taking shape in the sequel, *Either/Or*. Selin becomes more specific about the type of writer she aspires to be and at the end of *Either/Or*, readers see that her identity as an author is not formed merely as a result of being Turkish or American; on the contrary, it transcends both through her reading experience and the people she encounters in real life. Her enthusiasm for learning different languages, the dynamic structure of languages and their relationship with cultures enable her to walk across various cultures. At the end of *Either/Or*, she arrives in Russia, a place which holds no direct ties to her ancestry or any place that she has been to because of her family or friend circle. She expresses, "In the past, I had been in one country or another because of other people: my parents, Svetlana, Ivan, Sean. But I was in Russia because I had looked at the literatures of the world and made a choice" (Batuman, 2022, p. 326). She emphasizes that she made a decision, and that decision—to be in Russia—is wholly motivated by her desire. At this point, she adds, a gap is closing and everything starts becoming coherent

completing each other. Russia becomes the transcendent place where she gets the inspiration for constructing her artistic self.

In Batuman's novels, Harvard serves as the intersection of rich cultural diversity. The characters come from different cultural backgrounds meeting in a university setting. It is a space where different cultures, world views and identities interact and intermingle through a mutual exchange of ideas. Drawing on Epstein's *transcultural continuum*, Dagnino (2015) elaborates on *transpace/transplace*. As she puts it, transplace is an inclusive space of different consciousnesses, cultures and worldviews. She points out that it is also a space allowing "an openness to the reception, integration, negotiation, and permeation of other cultures" (p. 201). Selin expresses her passion and what she wants to get from Harvard stating that she expects to meet people who are willing to exchange ideas and live their life on the axis of free movement (Batuman, 2022, p. 208). Being on the move and meeting people who are open to exchanging their ideas contribute to Selin in the way of becoming an author. She values openness, interaction and juxtaposing different world views in alignment with the description of transcultural characters. As Braidotti suggests, individuals do not have to be physically mobile to be transcultural beings. As long as one is open to interaction with others, tries to comprehend the very structure of all cultures and questions different world views, they carry the features of a neo-nomadic self. Harvard, as a setting for interconnectedness, provides this atmosphere for students before they disband for different locations for the summer holiday.

Physical and Virtual Mobility in *The Idiot* and *Either/Or*

One of the main themes in Batuman's fiction is mobility in parallel with one of the features of transcultural novels. Most of the characters have transnational experiences leaving their homelands and exploring new destinations. As Helff (2009) states, readers also cross boundaries while characters are changing places in a transcultural novel. The locations that appear in the novels share the quality of being the intersection for people who meet there. In *The Idiot*, we observe that nearly all characters travel from one place to another. Selin travels to Turkey, France and Hungary. Ivan has been to France, Italy, Japan and Thailand. Svetlana takes a journey to France, Italy and her home Serbia for the summer.

Wherever Selin goes, she spins a web connecting cultures around the world feeding her narrative with sub-stories that perfectly contrast as well as match with the setting she is in. She destroys the border between the East and the West blending these two into one another; thus, the physical reality of a place is blurred with the inclusion of these other sub-stories. When Selin is in Svetlana's aunt's apartment in Paris, she grabs a chess book that she has borrowed from Bill. Flipping through the pages, she learns about a chess-playing automaton that is known as "the Turk" which was created by Wolfgang von Kempelen in 1760. Selin mentions that the mystery of the Turk is exposed by Edgar Allan Poe in *Southern Literary Messenger* (Batuman, 2017, p. 248). The automaton travels from one continent to another making it famous all around the world. The Turk toured around Europe and North America and even played against historical figures Napoleon Bonaparte and Benjamin Franklin. Following the years in America, the automaton ended up in a Chinese Museum and was destroyed in a fire there (Josić, 2022). Even if the characters in Batuman's novels are in a particular place, they are never stable on a symbolic level. The physical reality of a place and the abstract nature of the constant references to other places collide and dissolve in each other. One can infer that Batuman's novels present scenes from the world that are compiled in a fusion. After visiting the Picasso Museum, the characters attend a Turkish film festival in Paris. References to artworks in different locations point out the transcendent position of art that is beyond borders and nations.

As a perfect metaphor of connection and fluidity, the river Danube is referred to a few times when Selin is in Hungary in *The Idiot*. Flowing through ten countries such as Serbia, Slovakia, Germany, Austria, and Bulgaria, it is possible to state that the Danube is at the heart of Europe being one of the oldest trade routes. Thus, sailing down the Danube is like sailing through time and history. While canoeing with Ivan, Selin addresses the significance of the river. She says, "For a moment it felt like we weren't in the Danube at all but in the river of time, and everyone was at a different point, though in another sense we were all here at once" (Batuman, 2017, p. 376). Canoeing together, Selin and Ivan pass under bridges, which is a symbol of connection and crossing. The river, on the other hand, symbolizes fluidity through which everything intermingles. The scene might be interpreted as a metaphor for the whole history that all cultures are involved in one way or another. As a young writer, Selin is like an observer who travels through time and place.

While they are waiting for Peter on the bank of the Danube, Cheryl asks how to say bear in Hungarian and learns it is Medve, which is similar to Russian медведь. Andrea indicates that Hungary was once Shamanistic and bears were sacred animals; however, the word later became taboo resulting in it being replaced by a Slavic word (Batuman, 2017, p. 304). As Fazekas (1967) indicates in his article, Shamanistic elements in Hungarian folklore came from the East and became a tradition via migrant Hungarians. Hungarian Shamanistic tradition should be considered related to the practices that originated in the Eastern lands, especially Siberia. Also, contact with invaders in Central Asia and South-East Europe is considered to be one of the factors of the emergence of Shamanism in Hungary. Later, Christianity pervaded the country mostly modifying and overlaying these traditions (p. 98). It is also known that most Turkic peoples had a long history with Shamanism. The reference to Shamanism is an indication of the cultural background of the country, which involves interaction and modification through these encounters. For this reason, these references are significant from a transcultural perspective because each of them enriches the transcultural structure of the novel.

Although Turkey constitutes a very short part of *The Idiot, Either/Or* offers more about the country. The depiction of Turkey helps readers comprehend the multicultural essence of the country as well as Batuman's fiction in relevance to this perspective. While the first part of *Either/Or* mainly takes place at Harvard, the fourth part of the novel revolves around Selin's trip to Turkey for her summer employment. The summer job involves writing about the locations she visits for the Let's Go travel guide series which is written by Harvard University students. Her original itinerary is Central Anatolia, the Mediterranean coast, and North Cyprus, rather than the popular tourist attractions like Istanbul or the southern Aegean coast of Turkey. On a symbolic level, Selin's transcultural identity along with her personal experiences coincide with the multicultural history of Turkey.

Museums are on the characters' list of must-visit spots wherever they go in Batuman's novels. Museums, as well as historical sites, are places which tell us about national histories and individual lives. As Du and Cui (2021) point out museums are intercultural places and, in these places, people with diverse cultural backgrounds share an atmosphere where they

can interact and transform. From a transcultural perspective, museums are *third spaces* where cultures meet and collide transforming each other (p. 80). In *Either/Or*, Selin mentions an Early Bronze Age figurine from Hasanoğlan that has been displayed in the Hittite Museum. The finding is regarded to be unique; however, its original context is debatable. It is considered to have a relation to the six other royal burials in Alaca Höyük (Özen and Zimmermann, 2016, p. 21). Bearing in mind the mother goddess figurines found in excavations in Anatolia, the reference to the Hasanoğlan figurine alludes to a period when femininity was celebrated and held a sacred position in these lands. Selin remarks, “She was beautiful-lithe, doll-like, eminently portable. You wanted to move her through the world. In that sense, she seemed exciting and free” (Batuman, 2022, p. 295). This reference to the female goddess celebrates the strength of women that comes from our female ancestors. As it is also interpreted in the novel, women represent freedom, being here and there, not being bound to any restrictive categories of identity. On a metaphorical level, one can argue that the goddess with the dejected face alludes to all the suffering women have gone through. The way women are depicted in ancient times is linked to the women empowerment process today as well as Selin’s empowerment as an aspiring, female author. She is here and there and cannot be confined within the limits of a nation’s borders. The figurine serves as a mirror which reflects the power she holds wherever she goes, the power that is inherited by her female ancestors.

Another city Selin stops by is Konya, which is not Rumi’s birthplace but his final resting place. The reference to Rumi, known as Mevlana in Turkish, is one of the strongest aspects of the novel from transcultural and intertextual lenses. Although there has been an ongoing debate to claim Rumi as a part of their national identity by countries such as Turkey, Iran, and Afghanistan, Rumi’s approach to national identity seems much less significant for him considering his commitment to search for divine love. It transcends all other earthly labels that are related to one’s national identity or other earthly possessions. In his article, “Mevlana and the Illusions of Nationalism” Talât Saîr Halman (2015) argues that it is not reasonable to label Mevlana to a particular national identity not only because of his transcendent understanding of the world but also because he was an immigrant and was able to speak more than one language. In addition, Halman remarks neither Balkh, the city

he was born, nor Turkey was defined by one specific culture. These lands always hosted different communities as well as cultures. As Halman elaborates, “Rumi’s broad knowledge embraces many cultures other than Persian and Islamic -certainly Greek, Hebraic, Indian, and Turkish” (p. 126). The difficulty of defining Rumi as a part of a single culture, tradition and religion makes it possible to describe him as a transcultural artist. For this reason, the part through which Rumi’s life and some of his couplets are shared is significant considering the transcultural structure of the novel.

After briefly defining Rumi as a founder of the Mevlevi order, Selin remarks, “I never had into transcendental states that defied the limits of language, or anything else that defied the limits of language” (Batuman, 2022, p.330). The image of the artist who transcends all the stable categories of identity even defying the limits of language inspires Selin on her way to be an artist. The image of Rumi as an artist whose views transcend the stable categories of identity and Selin’s quest to be an artist intersect in Konya, far away from the country Selin was born. The places Selin visits and the emphasis on the features of these places as well as the people she meets on the road are in parallel with the transcultural approach which suggests that being on the road and growing on the way are significant themes in transcultural novels.

Not only physical places but also virtual space is as significant as physical places in Batuman’s fiction since it presents a fusion of physical and virtual in terms of their significance in interpersonal communication. One of the markers of transnational/transcultural discourse is that it is significantly shaped by the virtual world, namely the internet age. As Welsch (2001) puts forward, culture cannot be defined as a closed structure anymore, especially because media is at the heart of our globalized world. Drawing upon Hannah Arendt, Christina Schachtner (2015) suggests that this active participation process in the online sphere results in a new identity formation as well (p. 232). According to Schachtner, the internet creates transcultural cyberspace in which people from different parts of the world exchange ideas. She likens networks to interwoven threads that are accessible to people all around the world (p. 229). Selin recalls her father remarking that the time has been changing so fast. At the very beginning of *The Idiot*

Selin's father points out the power of the internet in terms of connecting the world just in seconds. He states that he was in the Metropolitan Museum of Art and then, he found himself in Antkahir, Ankara in seconds (Batuman,2017, p. 3). The reference to Antkahir and the Metropolitan Museum of Art might be interpreted as a symbolic bridge that connects the East and the West. On the following page, Selin defines the internet as "another world" and emails from different people resemble "universal writing" (Batuman,2017, p. 4). Similar to the way our lives collide and intermingle with the messages of others, the notion of fixity of personal identity is replaced by constant interaction and transformation. The internet, in other words, virtual space, functions as a transcultural space that facilitates these encounters.

Linguistic and Intertextual Components

According to Wilson (2011), translingual writers are navigators between languages and their social contexts. These authors are mediators of the encounters of different cultures fostering the process of transformation as a result of these encounters (p.235). Transcultural authors, who are bilingual and sometimes multilingual, are capable of writing in two languages or more. They are knowledgeable of the linguistic and cultural patterns of the languages they know. The transcultural approach regarding the existence of multiple languages and styles in a text is also in accordance with the Bakhtinian understanding of a polyphonic novel. Since Batuman expertly inserts other languages in her texts, her fiction contains elements that are significant from transcultural and Bakhtinian perspectives. Apart from fitting words and phrases from other languages, she translates her experiences in Turkey into English. She fits Turkish, as well as other languages, in an English narrative in certain parts of her novels.

In *The Idiot*, readers are familiarized with some Turkish idioms going between Turkish and English with the help of the translations provided by Selin. To illustrate, she translates the phrase "İyi aile çocuğu" from Turkish to English as "family boy" (p. 52). In Turkish, the phrase is used to describe boys who are well-behaved and reliable. The phrase is also

commonly used to describe young adults who are thought to be suitable for marriage. At another time, Ivan emails Selin with the subject line in Turkish. Ivan reads an English-Turkish dictionary and makes up “Domuzuna çalışmak.” Selin explains pig is not an animal that is associated with working hard and is not valued by Turkish culture. Instead, Turkish people use donkeys to describe people working hard (p. 105). The idiom used for describing people working hard is “Eşek gibi çalışmak.” Learning some Turkish words, Ivan makes up a new idiom which is actually close to the idiom “Eşek gibi çalışmak” in Turkish. It is possible to observe similar patterns in *Either/Or* as well. She translates “Kendini yerden yere attr” or “başını taştan taşa vurdu.” to English as “Prostrated by suffering” or she “beat her head from one stone to another stone” (Batuman, 2022, p. 75). In Turkish, the phrase is used to express suffering or the regret one feels upon hearing some bad news.

Despite the distinct qualities of languages, which are a result of cultural processes, there are also similarities in grammatical structures, especially among the languages under the same language families. Due to the existence of cognates and loanwords, many different languages share a large number of words. Sharing these linguistic patterns is also significant on a symbolic level since languages are not represented as closed systems in Batuman’s novels. Instead, they are explained to be evolving systems as a result of constant intercultural communication. When Selin and Svetlana are in a shop selling mostly Russian brands, some Turkish brands also catch their eyes. Svetlana states that she knows them not only because they have these brands in Belgrade, but also because there are some common words in Serbo-Croatian and Turkish such as eggplant, bean, chickpea and sour cherry (Batuman, 2017, p. 41). These words are placed in a novel narrated in English enabling readers to spot some similarities between Serbian and Turkish. There are also similarities highlighted between Hungarian and Turkish such as the words beard and handcuffs (p. 105). Beard, in Turkish *sakal*, is *szakáll* in Hungarian. In another conversation, Ivan and Selin discover that words like goat, apple and boot are similar in Turkish and Hungarian. The Hungarian words, kecske, alma and csizma are keçi, elma and çizme in Turkish (p. 212). Apart from the inclusion of linguistic components of languages in her novels,

Batuman also points out the existence of global, old and new language systems such as the usage of Creole, Pidgin and so to speak, the newly-evolving digital language.

While the translingual practices are significant components of Batuman's novels, the way that the author defies the limits of genres becomes an aspect of her works from a transcultural perspective. Batuman's works destroy the distinction between fiction and non-fiction blurring the line between the two. While this quality of her fiction is a significant component of transcultural literature, generic qualities are also indicators of intertextuality in Batuman's works, which are regarded to be close to autobiographical fiction/autofiction. As Ralph Clare (2020) points out, autofiction, which blends fiction, non-fiction and autobiography in a single text, has been gaining popularity in the American narrative. On the other hand, autotheory, through which an author blends philosophy and personal experience, is classified as a subcategory of autofiction (p. 87). As Clare indicates, contrary to the first wave of French poststructuralism which prioritizes the "death of subject", the subsequent waves such as queer, feminist, and race studies embrace the "specificity of personal experience" (p.89). Batuman is also one of the innovative authors who mesh these generic qualities in the body of her novels. In some parts of her novels, Selin interrogates philosophical concepts, analyzes the representation of literary characters, and investigates the nature of languages by combining all of these different styles in the body of her works. In an interview with Emre, Batuman declares that she finds it difficult to create fiction not involving her personal experience (London Review Books, 2022). She narrates personal experiences meshing them with her critical perspective as a reader and author in a fictional work. In doing so, Batuman defies the limits and traditional classification of genres. Her works reflect a mosaic of various genres as well as different narrative tones. It is possible to argue that Batuman's hybrid style of fiction deepens in *Either/Or*. She carefully blends philosophical interrogations, especially the parts where she ponders Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* and other canonical works of literature, especially focusing on female protagonists in canonical works. She uses humour as a tool when she is narrating serious issues in her novels.

The Idiot and *Either/Or* reflect the qualities of fiction writing as it is scrutinized in Batuman's debut, *The Possessed: Adventures with Russian Books and the People Who Read Them*. In the final chapter of *The Possessed*, Batuman states that she formulates the theory of the novel as follows: "The novel form is "about" the protagonist's struggle to transform his arbitrary, fragmented, given experience into a narrative as meaningful as his favorite books" (Batuman, 2010, p. 94). As she makes it clear, Batuman's fiction emerges as a result of her engagement with other works as well as her cross-cultural identity. Bakhtin (1981) claims that a novel is in a dialogue with other texts and an author's discourse is shaped by another one's discourse although authors liberate themselves at one point (p. 348). On the other hand, Airaksinen refers to Girard who suggests that a desiring subject copies a model and it follows a triangle pattern consisting of a subject, model and object. This model entails a paradox because the original is never accessible and all desires copy the others. Girard explains his theory by exemplifying Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, in which the protagonist sets out on a journey to become a knight like the ones he reads in novels. He becomes a copy of the fictional characters and narrates his journey as a fictional character (Airaksinen, 2019, p. 89-90). The reference to Girard in *The Possessed* connects readers to Batuman's perspective on the theory of a novel. A novel cannot be completely disconnected or alienated from other works; this approach ultimately connects Batuman's novels with other texts making them the main features of her narrative. In the interview Batuman gave to *The Harvard Crimson*, she elaborates on the connection between *Don Quixote* and *The Idiot*. She points out that when authors add their favorite books in a novel, just as in the case of *Don Quixote*, they get rid of the dullness of ordinary reality. Involving these novels in the narrative, an author adds layers to the narrative. For this reason, she thinks that Selin is a quixotic character. For Selin, books are an important part of her life and she envisages herself as a character in these stories. However, she is also aware that life does not flow the way it happens in her favorite novels. At that point, the reality of personal experiences interferes with the narrative. Batuman adds, "She has these kind of comic misadventures, but they are also very painful, kind of like running into a windmill with a spear would be painful" (Oreskovic, 2017). Similar to *Don Quixote*, Selin explores new places from the USA to Hungary, France, Russia, and Turkey. Batuman's novels also contain picaresque elements such as some satirical, comical and sarcastic features. All of

these qualities of Batuman's novels regarding genres create a fusion in her works making her novels a reflection of her transcended approach to fiction writing.

The Idiot and its sequel *Either/Or* are interwoven with ample intertextual references which also reinforce the transcultural mode of the novel. Readers engage in several texts from the early nineteenth century to the present day. Although intertextuality encompasses various forms, this study mostly intends to focus on some of the explicit intertextual relationships that contribute to the narrator creating new discourse in her novels. In *Either/Or*, Selin deepens the interrogation with the authors of earlier works, she questions the conditions of female characters who end up in unhappy marriages, suffering and even suicides. She uses her own writing as a resistance point to the dominant discourse of these novels. Even though Batuman mostly includes characters from Russian literature in her novels, she also refers to American and French literary traditions through the examples of *The Portrait of a Lady* by Henry James and *Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert. She refers to Tatiana from Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, Isabel from *The Portrait of a Lady*, Emma from *Madame Bovary* and Anna from Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. Tatiana, the female protagonist of *Eugene Onegin* is a smart young woman who loves reading novels as Selin does. She falls in love with Onegin who gets bored of everything quickly and leads a bohemian life due to difficulty in finding meaning in life. Tatiana writes him a letter revealing her love, yet Onegin rejects her. Anna, on the other hand, suffers from the dullness of married life. She is driven by her passion to lead her own life, but eventually, she suffers and dies. Emma, whom Flaubert is critical of since she is into trashy novels, imagines a colourful life but gets stuck in a province with her husband. Despite her passion for books, travel and freedom, Isabel ends up getting married to a man who wants his wife to be obedient causing Isabel to suffer in her marriage. Selin summarizes how Anna is torn between her lover and child drawing a parallel between her mother and Anna. Towards the end of *Either/Or*, Selin identifies with Isabel, the protagonist of *The Portrait of a Lady*, like she does with Tatiana from *Eugene Onegin*. She states that Isabel, who is the same age, creates her character as a work of art. She does not want to be cruel or mean not because of religious faith, but because it is a part of her character not to be so. Selin draws a parallel between Isabel and Shahrazad in *One Thousand and One Night* in a way that they both try to postpone an

upcoming death. Isabel, as she does, wants to discover the “fathom of human condition” which is why she has Henrietta as a friend. Isabel likes to be with different people who have completely different worldviews like Selin. Selin also draws a parallel between Tatiana and Isabel because they both get married and lead unhappy life. (Batuman, 2022, p. 347- 356)

After navigating among female characters of canonical literature, Selin subtly directs the eyes on Henry James who said Isabel “had no talent” and “none of the consciousness of genius.” She rejects this approach stating: “But I wasn’t dumb or banal, and I lived in the future. Nobody was going to trick me into marrying some loser, and even if they did, I would write the goddamn book myself” (Batuman, 2022, p. 322). Selin indicates the necessity of subverting the discourse of patriarchy demonstrating examples from world literature. Tatiana, Anna, Isabel, Emma, Sonya and other female characters she mentions find a place in Batuman’s narrative. Referring to seminal works from a critical perspective, as well as narrating her experiences in Turkey that involve sexual assault, positions Batuman’s writing as a resistance to the discourse which oppresses women. Selin defends women’s writing against the ongoing patriarchal discourse throughout the phases of history. At this point, she cleverly diverts readers’ attention from the nineteenth century novels to a book written by Ellen Fein and Sherrie Schneider called *The Rules: Time-Tested Secrets for Capturing the Heart of Mr Right*, which was published in 1995 in America. The book includes the rules to follow to attract men and marry them. Unlike the nineteenth century novels, in which the characters are portrayed in their circumstances, this book is non-fiction from the twentieth century America. According to the rules, a woman should not frankly express her love to a man (Batuman, 2022, p. 263). Selin draws a parallel between Tatiana and the Rules. She states that *Eugene Onegin* confirmed the Rules since it was only after Tatiana got married that Onegin threw himself at her feet (p. 263). She challenges and subverts male dominant discourse which is a part of the literature of different nations. She remarks that she wouldn’t end up marrying a lame man since she has self-sufficiency and the ability to be alone (Batuman, 2022, p. 265).

Selin's manifestation about claiming her own life and writing is reminiscent of Hélène Cixous's words in her essay "The Laugh of Medusa." Cixous calls out all women to claim their writing. Cixous emphasizes that women are driven away from women writing similar to the way they are forced to be disconnected from their bodies. She addresses all women pointing out the necessity of putting themselves in their own texts (Cixous, 1976, p. 875). In parallel with the ideas of Cixous, Batuman develops her female protagonist as an empowering female who is able to judge, make a choice and claim herself. As Batuman also refers to in the notes at the end of *Either/Or*, Rich (1980) states that feminist scholars should acknowledge that societies direct women's energies away from their own bodies and their relationship with other women. She defies the lie imposed on women that women are attracted to men even if it is suicidal (p.632- 658). These intertextual references to the representation of female characters in earlier works and Selin's character development as a young writer, who claims her own writing and makes her own choices at the end of the novel demonstrate that Batuman addresses the significance of women's empowerment. Not only do her novels transcend the existing categories of novelistic style, but they also subvert the patriarchal discourse that is at the heart of cultural productions of various nations. She masterfully blends her personal experiences challenging particular aspects of her favorite novels and creating a transcending perspective out of this fusion.

Reading Batuman from a Turkish Perspective

Some references related to Turkish or Turkish cultural identity are very striking from the perspective of a Turkish reader who reads Batuman's novels in their original language English. As Inose (2016) indicates, in texts that include dominantly two languages or more, there might be some components that are untranslatable. As Inose argues, it is difficult to validate the concept of untranslatability; however, there is still difficulty in finding the right words, especially with culturally loaded expressions (p. 220). In Batuman's novels, especially during the conversations between Selin and her family members, in some situations she relates to Turkey, it is possible to trace cultural components that are hard to translate from English into Turkish. Also, there are some situations in which Selin herself has difficulty comprehending because she is not fully proficient in Turkish.

In *Either/Or*, as well as culture-bound references, readers might notice some misunderstandings between Selin and others because she does not comprehend the meaning of certain Turkish expressions. At a party, Şahin introduces Selin to a Polish friend named Przemyslaw with whom she leaves the party. Şahin, who is unaware at first that Selin and Przemyslaw got closer and decided to leave, asks Selin “What’s new?” in Turkish. Selin replies that everything is good. Then, the conversation goes between the two as follows: “You don’t have to jump,” he said. “To jump?” I repeated. He nodded emphatically. “You don’t have to jump. I’m here” (Batuman, 2022, p. 219). To jump is “atlamak” in Turkish; however, the meaning of the word might change depending on the context. Here it basically means he does not have to leave with the guy she has just met. Şahin emphasizes that “I’m here” implying that it is not a good idea to leave with Przemyslaw or he does not approve of it. However, Selin does not understand it and leaves with Przemyslaw. Şahin uses a slang expression to warn Selin not to go with him; however, Selin does not get the message. The word “jump” in this context might sound ambiguous for readers who do not know Turkish.

In *Either/Or*, readers also witness that Selin uses the word *Maşallah* in two situations without translating the word into English. In one scene, Selin’s grandmother learns that she keeps a diary and says “Ah, maşallah, my girl is always writing, ah ah, you write your diary” (p. 161). In another scene, Aunt Arzu and Şenay see Selin’s heavy backpack and state that she cannot carry it. Selin’s grandmother states, “My strong girl, maşallah, she carries everything” (p. 295). Then, they compare Selin to a *hamal* and a *yörük* which are two other familiar expressions for Turkish readers. Selin explains the meaning of *yörük* and *hamal*. *Yörüks* are nomadic people who live in the mountains in Anatolia and the Balkan peninsula. *Hamal* is, on the other hand, street porters who work carrying a wicker basket on their backs. Porters are still very common in Turkey, especially in street markets. On the other, *maşallah* which comes from the Arabic phrase, *Mashallah* is often used to express awe when somebody does something extraordinary and succeeds in something. Also, *maşallah* is used to wish God to protect the person from the evil eye.

To conclude, in both *The Idiot* and *Either/Or*, there are some *translatable* expressions; however, Turkish readers might perceive these references from a different

point of view intermingling them with their own national and personal histories. These references add another layer to Batuman's novels, enabling readers to have a transcultural reading experience.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed at revealing transcultural aspects in Elif Batuman's novels *The Idiot* and its sequel *Either/Or*. Revolving around the themes of youth, love, friendships, mobility, reading experience and the transitional stage of growing up, Batuman presents readers multi-layered and polyphonic novels selecting her characters with different cultural backgrounds and points of view. Being close to autofiction, Batuman's novels reflect the richness of her cross-cultural Turkish-American identity as well as her academic background. The protagonist Selin is a Quixotic character who sets off on journeys to find her path in life under the guidance of her favorite novels. Although the protagonist Selin begins with the idea of living her life like the characters of her favorite novels, her experiences throughout *The Idiot* and *Either/Or* help her differentiate on the way to being a novelist one day.

One of the main themes of transcultural literature is characters' approach to national identity. In accordance with this feature of transcultural novels, this study aimed at revealing how prejudicial/stereotypical thinking is represented in Batuman's fiction. These issues are addressed from an objective perspective by the narrator. The protagonist Selin not only objectively demonstrates the injustices in societies, but she also liberates herself from a biased perception. Likewise, Svetlana and Ivan undermine fixed categories of identity, replacing fixity with fluidity, interaction and movement. These characters prioritize being on the move to being stable; therefore, they find ways to go beyond themselves through the mutual exchange of ideas with people on the road.

At this point, Harvard University holds significance for being the intersection for people coming from different countries. Harvard enables the characters to create a new culture through the confluence of different views and cultural backgrounds. Drawing on Dagnino's notion of *transplace* (2015), Harvard becomes a *transplace* that is inclusive towards

diversity and differing perspectives. It is a place which creates an open space for interaction and mutual engagement. Not only Harvard is portrayed as a transplace, but also the growing importance of virtual space is addressed in Batuman's fiction. The internet, as a transcultural space, is represented in alignment with the transcultural perspective.

Mobility, which is one of the outstanding characteristics of transcultural literature, was also discussed in this study. Being on the road and travelling to various destinations around the world are valorized by most of the young characters in Batuman's novels. However, Batuman's characters are not just depicted as travelers, they also prioritize learning the language, culture and history of the places they visit. Drawing on Braidotti's (2002) notion of *nomadic subject*, Selin and other characters continually cross borders both by being physically active and by being open towards others. The histories of the places they visit and the experiences they have with the people they meet on the road intermingle, becoming an aspect of their transcultural identity. On her journeys from Paris, Budapest, and Istanbul to Central Anatolia, and the Mediterranean Coast of Turkey, Selin encounters many people from different walks of life with differing perspectives. In doing so, she brings together characters from different parts of the world. She narrates the stories of historical buildings as well as artworks by interviewing them like threads of a web and opening the doors of different worlds for the readers of her novels.

Not only does Batuman reflect cultural diversity in her novels, but she also inserts diverse languages in her narrative. As well as including Turkish expressions, idioms and proverbs, she opens a space for languages like Hungarian, Russian, French and constructed languages like Esperanto. In alignment with the transcultural approach, she includes foreign expressions in her narrative enhancing the polyphonic nature of her novels. She translates expressions from various languages moving among different modes of expression.

Rather than writing fiction in a traditional way, Batuman blends genres in her novels in an innovative way. Her novels are regarded to be closer to autofiction since she blends autobiography and fictional elements in her works. The narrative of *The Idiot* and *Either/Or* gets closer to the essay format, epistolary form and fictional style in different parts of the

novels. She smoothly moves among different genres similar to the way she moves among languages, cultures and canonical works of literature. Not only does Batuman interconnect genres in her fiction, but she also brings together literary works from different national literatures. Directing the attention mainly towards the representation of female protagonists, she subverts male dominant discourse in these novels bringing them into the setting of a contemporary novel. Selin both pays homage to the authors of these novels and becomes the voice of female protagonists who were ultimately oppressed in their particular ways. Selin connects all of these characters addressing the necessity of the destruction of the discourse that oppresses women. She transcends it on the way to becoming a female writer who makes her own choices and claims her own writing.

The present study also aimed at pointing out some references relating to Turkish cultural identity from the perspective of a Turkish reader. Although the narrator Selin mostly translates Turkish conversations into English within the novels, there are still some *untranslatable* cultural components that make more sense to people who lived in Turkey at least for a period of their lives. At this point, Selin's personal history intermingles with cultural history enabling a transcultural reading experience for Turkish readers who read these novels in English.

To conclude, bringing together various genres, languages, cultures and stories, Batuman's fiction reflects a multi-voiced narrative and a transcending perspective. She blurs the boundaries among borders, languages, cultures and works of literature meshing them harmoniously in her narrative. In doing so, she defies the restrictions imposed on individuals by fixed categories of identity. Bearing these features, Batuman's novels provided the ground for this study within the framework of the transcultural approach.

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