

## Critics' Forum

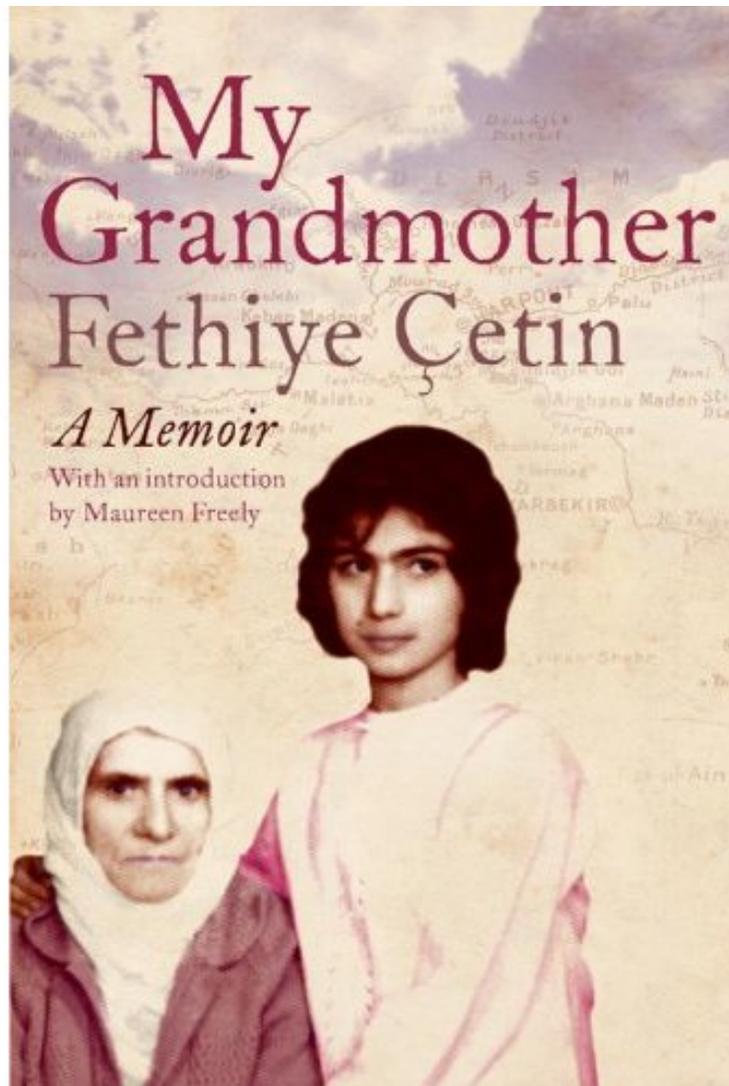
### Literature

#### A Shared History of 1915: Fethiye Çetin's *My Grandmother* and the Turkish Memoir Trend

By Talar Chahinian

Over the last decade, there has been an increased interest in the unraveling stories of an older generation of women with hidden Armenian identities living in Turkey. This interest has been augmented by the growing trend of memoirs, which recount the stories of these women framed within the autobiographical narrative of the grandchild.

Generally referred to as “cryptic” or “hidden” Armenians, these women belong to the generation of genocide survivors who, at a very young age, were saved, bought, or stolen by Turkish men during the Catastrophe, the years immediately following the genocide. Forcefully Turkified and converted to Islam, these women have only a vague recollection of their Armenian past, which they have outwardly suppressed for the sake of survival. The recent translation into English of Fethiye Çetin's *My Grandmother*, first published in 2004 as *Anneannem*, offers a glimpse at these “lost” stories to the English-speaking reading public.



In the immediate aftermath of the 1915 genocide and its deportations, the Armenian daily newspapers that emerged from large refugee-center towns quickly took on the role of institutions, actively participating in and facilitating the reconstruction of social networks. Amidst advertisements and public announcements crowding the back page of the Parisian *Harach* and *Abaka* or Boston's *Hayrenik*, it is not uncommon to find a "Search" column, weighing heavily on the page and serving as a reminder of the dark reality of refugee life. With this column, the newspapers provided a forum for their readers to search for missing relatives.

Indeed, stories of miraculous reunions with lost family members are almost intrinsic to the post-Catastrophe diaspora's narrative of dispersion. While oral histories of survivors often highlight moments of reunion, they just as often memorialize family members *not* found because assumed dead. Over the years, what diaspora's narrative has found difficult to take into account is the case of Armenians who survived as Turks. The encounter with the stories of these "cryptic" Armenians can now be facilitated by a

growing trend in Turkey – the publication of memoirs that reveal the part-Armenian background of their authors and, thus, complicate the notion of a homogeneous Turkish identity propagated by the Turkish state since the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Fethiye Çetin's *My Grandmother*, translated into English by Maureen Freely (Verso 2008), is exemplary of Turkey's growing memoir trend. As the title suggests, it presents the story of the author's grandmother, born to an Armenian family in Habab as Heranuş and taken by an Ottoman gendarme in 1915 to the nearby town of Çermik, to be raised as Seher. It is as Seher, a Turk of Muslim faith, that Heranuş lives her life externally, while secretly longing for a chance to reunite with her surviving relatives living in America.

Although ostensibly a story about family secrets, the memoir actually reveals Çetin's grandmother's Armenian identity from the very beginning. What unfolds in its place is a story of reconstruction that oscillates between the grandmother's funeral, Çetin's childhood, and various moments of the grandmother's young life. Çetin accordingly refers to her grandmother alternately as "my grandmother" or as "Heranuş," often switching from a first person to a third person narrative voice to emphasize the shift in perspective.

This shifting perspective belies the author's own complex view of her grandmother's story and its circumstances. The sections where Çetin recounts her childhood memories read like long dedications to her grandmother, in admiration of her strength, her outspokenness, her compassion, and her protectiveness of her grandchildren and their ambitions. Aside from her role as the matriarch within the familial household, Çetin presents her grandmother as a respected figure – guide, mentor, and mother for the larger community within the neighborhood. The sense of confidence and command with which the grandmother carries herself seems to contradict the vision of a woman carrying a silenced, hidden past that the already apprised reader expects to find.

Similarly, the author finds it difficult to reconcile the powerful and loving character of her grandmother with the story of a past full of suffering and loss. When her grandmother begins to tell her the story of her past as Heranuş, although Çetin relishes the act as a sign of her grandmother's trust, calling their new relationship "a special and very secret alliance" (62), she also finds the weight of the story agonizing. During one of the grandmother's storytelling sessions, she finds the interruption of houseguests relieving:

The doorbell rang; there were people coming. My grandmother stopped her story there. And anyway, I did not have the strength to hear much more. It was hard to keep myself from running out into the street to cry and scream. I would never have believed any of this, unless it was my grandmother telling me. (65)

Here, Çetin reveals the burden of the listener on the receiving end of a traumatic testimonial. As a listener, she is aware of the vital role she plays in her grandmother's process of giving testimony of her true life story and of the catastrophic events she has

born witness to. She cannot run into the street and cry, for she must present herself as strong enough to receive the story.

Yet the burden of the listener is not only limited by the transference of pain. It also consists of the imperative to act upon receiving the story. As much as the survivor is compelled to tell, the listener is compelled to act. In Çetin's case, this imperative is mandated by her grandmother's specific request to be reunited with her Armenian family members living in America.

Heranuş's family members' story of survival and settling in New York follows the all too familiar pattern of dispersion by way of Syria, experienced by most survivors. Her remembrances of the destruction of villages and death marches contain images often told in similar oral histories, or memoirs written by second- or third-generation Armenians. Yet the grandmother's own story of adoption by a Turkish gendarme who could not have children of his own also offers a different, "lost" perspective. After serving in her new Turkish family's household, she marries and starts a family of her own. Establishing contact with her brother during their youth, she becomes aware of her mother's survival and relocation to the States. During her lifetime, she misses two opportunities to visit her parents, having been prevented to do so by her husband and his family. Towards the end of her life, she pleads with her granddaughter, Fethiye Çetin, to find her ancestral family and re-establish contact. In return, she offers Çetin her story.

And Çetin, in turn, offers us the memoir. Whereas the revelation of her grandmother's past is presented as a climactic point in the development of their relationship, her grandmother's hidden Armenian identity is not used as a tool for suspense in the memoir. If her grandmother's cryptic past is not the center of the story, we might be prompted to ask what, then, does Çetin seek to highlight? During the first half of the memoir, having convinced her readers that her grandmother's funeral scene is the present-now of the narrative, Çetin then pushes her story forward, toward the end of the novel, to a time beyond her grandmother's ninety-five years of life.

Çetin announces her grandmother's death in the Armenian-language newspaper of Istanbul, *Agos*, an announcement that she reproduces in the novel as well. Decades after the initial post-Catastrophe dispersion, a community newspaper once again becomes the site for a search. It is through a proclamation of death, a chilling semblance to the calls made by survivors in the 1920s, that the announcement makes a call to lost family members. Soon after, Çetin is contacted by her grandmother's sister, born to their parents in America. In the final pages of the memoir, the grandmother is reunited with the remaining members of the family she longed to see but never had the chance to meet in person: her sister Margaret and her children. It is a beautiful, if perverse, homecoming scene: an Armenian family long settled in America, following their exile from Anatolia by Ottoman Turks, welcomes the arrival of a young Turkish woman to the United States and to their home as the missing link finally undoing their family's loss.

In this triumphant final scene, Fethiye Çetin's *My Grandmother* invokes a notion of *shared* history of genocide, which is otherwise narrated through the set categories of Armenian/victim or Turkish/perpetrator. On the day of her grandmother's funeral, her aunt's sister-in-law reveals that her own mother-in-law was Armenian, taken from the death march by a Muslim family. Criticizing her husband's family's obsession with cultural purity, she claims, "In the place where we come from, it's hard to find anyone without 'impure' blood – there's no one with any other kind" (84).

What Çetin's memoir succeeds in conveying above all is the abundance of hybrid identities that Turkish society is made of. It offers the reader a story of women, grandmothers of the author's contemporaries, derogatorily referred to as "leftovers of the sword," but remembered lovingly by their family members as mothers and grandmothers or as active participants of Turkish community (102). This is precisely the revelation that Çetin delays: Turkish society's private acknowledgement of the past, which explicitly opposes the public, state-sponsored narrative of denial.

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