

## THE TIMELESS IDENTITIES IN NICOLE KRAUSS'S NOVELS\*

Kabul Tarihi: 29.02.2016  
Yayın Tarihi: 14.04.2016

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### Abstract

Nicole Krauss, an ethnically-Jewish author living in the United States, is a young, distinctive, and acclaimed twenty-first-century writer. Krauss deals with themes such as alienation, migration, and history in her three novels: *Man Walks into a Room* (2002), *The History of Love* (2005), and *Great House* (2010). The histories of her interacting characters extend back to these days and follow them into the present. Krauss intertwines characters from different generations; characters from the twenty-first century possess ones from the 1960s. In this respect, the characters resemble each other. On the other hand, Kraus's characters have many modern characteristics. Kraus also explores themes of aloofness, alienation, and immigration. All of Kraus's characters are shunned by their societies. In this paper, Krauss's novels will be argued in terms of her characters' identities, feelings of alienation, and experiences of immigration.

**Keywords:** *Great House*, *Man Walks into a Room*, Nicole Krauss, *The History of Love*

## NICOLE KRAUSS'UN ROMANLARINDA DEĞİŞMEYEN KİMLİKLER

### Öz

Yahudi kökenine sahip ve Amerika'da yaşayan Nicole Krauss yirmi birinci yüzyılın önemli yazarlarından biridir. Bu genç iddialı yazar *Man Walks into a Room* (2002), *The History of Love* (2005), ve *Great House* (2010) adlı romanlarında yabancılaşma, göç ve tarih ile ilgili temalara değinir. Tarihsel geçmişleri aynı çizgide iç içe olan karakterler/özellikler bu günlere kadar uzamıştır. Şaşırtıcı olan şey tarihin onları tüm kuşakları birbiri içerisine alan kuşatmasıdır. Daha açık bir ifadeyle yirmi birinci yüzyıl karakterleri 1960'larda yaşayanların karakterlerine sahiptir. Bu bağlamda karakterler birbirlerine benzer. Diğer taraftan karakterler modern çağın özelliklerini taşır. Yalnızlık, yabancılaşma ve göç bu romanlarda resmedilmiştir. Tüm karakterler toplumdan uzaktır. Bu yüzden Krauss tarafından yazılan bu romanlar kimlik, yabancılaşma ve göç temalarıyla irdelenecektir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Great House*, *Man Walks into a Room*, Nicole Krauss, *The History of Love*

### I. Introduction:

Nicole Krauss is a prominent American born Jewish writer has been recognized as one of the Best American Novelists Under 40. Her first novel *Man Walks into a Room* is about "an amnesiac man's search for himself" (Teisch, 2010: 25). Her other novel *The History of Love* deals with an elderly veteran, Leopold Gursky, who is writing a novel called "*The History of Love*". In her third novel *Great House*, the protagonists are connected each other by a desk that seeks its owner. Spence points out the novel "features four lives that intersect at a gargantuan writing desk" (2010: 35). The leitmotif in the novel is the writing desk combining four people whose common ground is their Jewish connection. For the critic, the desk "becomes the symbol of love and loss for a host of characters from different countries and time periods" (Humphrey, 2010: 69). Although these three novels are totally different from each other in their styles and techniques, they are similar in terms of their characterizations and themes.

Psychology and perspective are leitmotifs in Kraus's novels; she deeply analyzes her characters. Sayers (implying *Great House*) depicts Krauss's technique: "That work, writing fiction, means immersing herself in an unreality based on reality and confiscating stories for her own purposes; like confession, it becomes a key motif of the novel" (2011: 27).

\* An earlier version of this article has been presented in International Symposium on Culture and Identity in the Perspective of 21st Century 26-28 May, Erciyes University and Khazar University, Baku, Azerbaijan.

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Kraus details the complicated personalities of some of her characters and purports their complex densities. Her protagonists possess a feeling of acquiescence to society, the effects of the Holocaust, and World War II. Self-reference and self-recognition are general characteristics of Jewish society. A Jew herself, Krauss describes her characters' situations in an interview:

One of the things I have written about in all three of my novels is the effort to transcend a solitary position. I don't mean that in an overly dramatic way--but I think there is an enormous effort involved, for everyone, in becoming known to others. (Elmhirst, 2011: 43)

Characters from the various time-periods of Krauss's novels (World War II, or Pinochet's Chile, or the twenty-first century) have the same destinies, psychologies, and point-of-view. They are stalked by the shadow of the Holocaust – or other atrocities. Yvonne Zipp says, "Krauss's real subject is loss, the giant wrenching ones that her characters can't seem to escape from underneath" (2011). Across novels and generations, Krauss's protagonists experience similar events. In this paper, the indifference of Kraus's characters, their mental chaos, and their melancholy will be discussed.

## II. *Man Walks into a Room*:

*Man Walks into a Room* is Kraus's first literary work; it deals with Samson Greene, a young and famous Columbia professor who has amnesia and is on a "quest for self". Sayers depicts Samson as a man "who has lost significant parts of his memory cannot reconnect with his wife; its style is taut, spare, and melancholy, reminiscent of Camus's *The Stranger*" (2011: 27). Kraus launches Greene into a turbulent journey that takes him to the furthest extremes of solitude and intimacy. He gains nothing short of a revelation of what it means to be human. Though readers may see amnesia as unfortunate, Samson's condition aids him in his quest for himself and his recognition of the emotional and physical worlds. As one critic states, "This poetic "what if" novel about nostalgia and memory delves into the emotional consequences of amnesia and is, at heart, a quest to understand relationships, intimacy, and loss" (Teisch, 2010: 26). Samson's journey can inspire readers to rethink and question their social status, social connections, and affections.

Samson's misfortune that forces him the replication in a cyclical time. However, this replication becomes an advantage for acquaintance of friends or society in his social interactions. For instance, when he looks his wife, he says: "She had long, dark hair and a face that changed each time he looked at it" (*Man Walks into a Room*, 24). Sometimes, his forgetting and remembering to create an expectancy of living or dreams: "How sometimes the Angel of Forgetfulness himself forgets, and then fragments of another life stay with us, and sometimes those are our dreams" (*Man Walks into a Room*, 100). A great number of questions in Samson's mind aim at where he must stand or what points of view he should look. His self-interrogation is both a quest to find ideal reality and an insignia of human issues:

It's true that there's grief: it wakes me in a cold sweat thinking, Who was I? What did I care about? What did I find funny, sad stupid, painful? Was I happy? All of those memories I accumulated, gone. Which one, if there could have been only one, would I have kept?" (*Man Walks into a Room*, 47-8)

All characters have the same psychology and represent the modern person's mental chaos and spiritual and mental challenges. When Teisch considers this novel, he deals with Kraus's detailed analyses of her characters: "Critics hailed it for its imaginative complexity and literary pyrotechnics, depth of characters, and touching exploration of love, loss, and memory" (2010: 26). For instance, when Samson begins his journey to find his past, he feels lonely and does not know what to do. Krauss passes over Samson's wife, who feels

aloofness and alienated. While Samson gets a life lesson from his journey, his wife is learnt from her solitude. Krauss reflects contemporary individuals' contradictions and conflicts with themselves and their milieus. A critic says this is a hard continuum:

It is a perplexing process. It begins with a major trauma: the loss of a primary relationship(s) and/or the destruction of personally sustaining meaning systems. Such ruin brings a shattering of the sense of self and the unleashing of unmanageable anxiety. Feelings of helplessness and hopelessness along with emotional paralysis and/or apathy often attend the anxiety. (Barth, 2013: 180)

The other important figure in the novel is Samson's great-uncle Max; he has Alzheimer's disease and lives in a hospital. Max escaped from Germany during the Holocaust and he is almost a father to Samson. Although they have totally different personalities and social milieus, they experience the same destinies. Like his nephew, Max has forgotten his recent past: "I don't even know. It's been like a hundred years. I was maybe nineteen and I had a girl in California who I was crazy for." He paused, thinking. "You believe I don't even remember her name?" (*Man Walks into a Room*, 131). Max is similar to Samson, who experiences mental chaos and clashes.

Memory is a general characteristic of Krauss's characters. Memory in terms of the writer's cultural heritage means that a Jew should keep their experiences in mind. Krauss gives much importance to memories and experiences in this novel. Both Samson and Max struggle with their memories. When Samson talks to Max, he states: "That so much of the memory came through, it's monumental. Plenty of people would have fought to be in your place, to go down in history. It's ridiculous to be throwing a fit" (*Man Walks into a Room*, 161).

For Jews, memories represent a revolt against reliving an experience. Jews who survived the Holocaust or pogroms have nothing but their memories. As a third-generation Jewish writer, Krauss learned about these historical events as a child. For example, she emphasizes the concept of ownership:

But he hadn't lost his mind. To the contrary, he'd lost everything but. His memory, his wife, his job, his friends, twenty-four years of his life—but not his mind. That was all that had been left and he'd retreated into it because there was nowhere else. (*Man Walks into a Room*, 165)

In this context, *Man Walks into a Room* is a novel about memory, trauma, and chaos. Samson Greene and his great uncle Max have much in common. This resemblance is not physical or sociological, but psychological.

### **III. *The History of Love***

Krauss's second novel *The History of Love* features an old man, Leopold Gursky, who talks about the Holocaust and his granddaughter, Alma Singer, who wants to find her roots. This novel has two protagonists from two generations, a Holocaust survivor and a twenty-first-century person. Lang says:

Nicole Krauss's *The History of Love* is a novel that both imagines the Holocaust and represents its historical presence in one Jewish family's American identity. I argue here that the novel, published in 2005, represents, without the privilege of direct memory, both a Holocaust past and a postmodern present. Indeed, the representation of the Holocaust in this novel serves as witness to the end of a generation of Holocaust memoirs and to a future of Holocaust literature where imagination and history are interpolated. (2009: 44)

Lang summarizes this novel and Krauss's intentions therein because the aura of the Holocaust and gives inspiration about the survivors' psychology and inner life. Alma behaves as and thinks about what her grandfather did during the Holocaust. They get closer to each other and meet at the end of the novel.

Reisz deals with this from the point-of-view of magic realism and says, "But her own novel brilliantly interweaves the narratives of his geriatric complaints and Alma's adolescent fumbblings, while filling in the complex story of mistaken identities, missing manuscripts and mysterious commissions which turns out to link them" (2005). No matter how their lives intersect, it is clear that the reader can find all of Leopold's characteristics in Alma.

Both protagonists are inspired. Leopold authors three novels and Alma writes a nonfiction book. A critic states: "Gursky may be discomfitingly foolish, but he is given to idiosyncratic bursts of poetry" (Franklin, 2005: 40). Alma is a gifted girl who rewrites her mother's translations in addition to penning her book, *How to Survive in the Wild*. Alma astonishes her readers by living in a city center and writing a book with such a title. Both protagonists are survivors. Lang questions the reason why a child would write such a book:

Taken together, Leo and Alma encapsulate a complex relationship between historical relevance and contemporary meaning. What does it mean for a narrative that invokes the Holocaust to compress time and history, in some way relating the loss experienced by a survivor with the loss experienced by a child born in the 1990s? (Lang, 2009: 47)

In her book, Alma explains how a person can survive in a desert and why some species go extinct. The Holocaust can be associated with the concept of extinction. It is a kind of proof that the Jews are very sensitive about their history.

When the two protagonists, Leopold and Leo Gursky's psychology or inner world is argued, *The History of Love* "swirls with people traduced, abandoned, misunderstood or simply forgotten" (Lee-Potter, 2005). The figures in this novel are alienated, forgotten, and have some deficiencies. For instance, Leopold is an old man who lives alone. He pretends to fall his changes in the supermarket to express his existence. A critic says, "Leo Gursky is a tragic figure who escaped from Eastern Europe but left much behind and never recovered" (Herman, 2011). Alma is alienated girl who regards the world as a jungle. These two protagonists cannot be considered to be normal or healthy:

If at large gatherings or parties, or around people with whom you feel distant, your hands sometimes hang awkwardly at the ends of your arms—if you find yourself at a loss for what do with them, overcome with sadness that comes when you recognize the foreignness of your own body—it's because your hands remember a time when the division between mind and body, brain and heart, what's inside and what's outside, was so much less. (*The History of Love*)

Leopold's mental illness becomes worse because of his unhealthy attitudes, according to some critics like Codde. Some critics think all incidences and events are imagined by Leopold. Bruno, a close friend of Leopold, accompanies him; at the end of the novel, he dies. Bruno shares no conversations or events with other characters. Leopold describes him as the "greatest character I ever wrote" (249, author's italics). Leopold has the symptoms of schizophrenia or obsessive compulsive disorder. Krauss leaves the reader to speculate whether or not his other characters were real. A critic states:

If Leopold is indeed the author of *The History of Love* (the book in the reader's hands), then what is one to make of Alma's and Bird's voices, and of Leopold's meeting, in the novel's tragic finale, with the fifteen-year-old Alma Singer? Are they real, or are they just one of the many figments of Leopold's

active imagination? Instead of revealing a knowable past via an omniscient narrator, Krauss leaves her readers in complete uncertainty about the truth value of every single account in the novel. (Codde, 2011: 50)

In conclusion, it can be said that Leopold and his granddaughter have the same psychological and sociological characteristics. As Wittenberg says, Alma and Leopold are “narrators whose naiveté or social incapacity inhibits insight” (125). They are survivors in either the Holocaust or the twenty-first century. Leopold’s abnormal behaviors are signs of modern people’s struggles with alienation and isolation in this chaotic world.

#### **IV. *Great House*:**

Because of many its intertwined characters, Krauss’s latest novel *Great House* is her most complicated; it explores a writing desk and the people around it. Unlike the Holocaust, Pinochet’s Chile plays an indirect role in the novel; a previous owner of the desk died there. This novel, like her others, was inspired by Krauss’s grandparents. In an interview, she addresses with this issue: “Some elements of the stories came from my family. Lotte, my grandmother, was a German refugee who arrived in London as a chaperone on a Kindertransport” (Teisch, 2010: 27). As in *The History of Love*, which was dedicated to both her grandparents, Krauss writes about her memories and family history. The characters related to the writing desk in *Great House* are many which can confuse readers. This critic juxtaposes the characters:

In addition to Nadia and her self-absorbed and muffled neuroses, "Great House" also follows an Oxford don who's mourning his wife; a novelist and Holocaust survivor who once possessed the desk; an emotionally abusive father - also a Holocaust survivor - and his estranged son; an antiques dealer with an unusual focus; and an American grad student who is dating the antique dealer's son. (Zipp, 2010)

The desk is a very distinctive theme; it indicates Jewish tradition and culture. The writing desk plays very important role for symbolism and reflection of characters. Primarily, the novel “uses a desk to link strangers scattered in New York, London, Jerusalem and Santiago, Chile” (Kellman, 2010: 12). There are many perspectives indicating many Jewish subjectivity. One critic says this desk “represents the shattered home, the dead father, and the plight of literature, culture, and the life of the mind in the wake of the Holocaust” (Barth, 2013: 184). This desk has a different meaning for each character, in *Great House*. In fact, Krauss remembers her grandparents repeatedly speaking of its appropriation. Her grandparents—and most World War II-era Jews, had all of their belongings stolen.

In one of these letters (which I found hidden in an old Cadbury’s tin under the sofa in her study), she wrote: The book you gave me is sitting on my desk, and every day I learn to read it a little more. ...At the end of the year, she got a First on her exams and, despite her parents’ objections, dropped out of university and went to live with my father in Tel Aviv. (*Great House*, 54)

The characters’ psychologies and melancholic attitudes play a very important role in this novel. They belong to two generations and have the same melancholic, and chaotic personalities as those in her previous novel, In *Great House*, Krauss’s deals the Jewish inner world: “Her third novel is completely different in mood and tone. Whimsy is replaced with melancholia and exuberance with introversion” (Cheyette, 2011). Barth, however, complains about the great numbers of characters (and their fragmented memories) that complicate the novel:

*Great House* is a collection of obliquely connected stories describing several characters whose shattered histories render them unfit for normal life or relationship and whose legacies of traumatic loss inhabit their memories, wrap

them in sorrow and longing, and insulate them from direct emotional experience in the present. (2013: 181)

#### V. The Similarities between Krauss's Novels:

When studying on three novels together, it can be adverted that there are a great number of reciprocities between three novels. First of all, Krauss utilizes and exploits the history in terms of historiographic metafiction. Sometimes, she subverts the traditional images or interrelates her own familial information and her fictional world. For instance, *The History of Love* is inspired from her paternal grandmother Sasha Mereminsky whose surname is the same as Alma Mereminsky in the novel. Also Mereminsky disguises as "Lotte Berg, who like Krauss's grandmother was forced to leave Germany after Kristallnacht for a transit camp in Poland. One year later she evaded death in Auschwitz by becoming a chaperone on one of the last Kindertransports to London" (Berger & Milbauer 2013: 66). Also there are the author's many reportages and statements dealing with her novels. In one of the reportage, Krauss referring to *The History of Love* and *Great House* states:

it [had] something—or everything to do with—the fact that my grandparents came from these places that we could never go back to, because they'd been lost. And people were lost. My great grandparents and lots of great uncles and aunts died in the Holocaust. Maybe it is something inherited in the blood, a sense of a loss of a thing and a longing for it. (Wood, 2005)

By doing so, Krauss underlines that her family is a victim of Shoah [Holocaust]. Paying attention to history so much, Krauss gives importance to messages to Jewish next generations. Her aim is not to forget the Shoah and the cruelty of Nazism. Studying on Jewish Literary for many years, Caruth re-details of significance and use of history. According to the critic, "history is not only the passing on of a crisis but also the passing on of a survival that can be possessed within a history larger than any single individual or any single generation" (1996: 71). Krauss takes the responsibility of consciousness raising of history for her Jewish readers.

Furthermore, for Krauss, history equals Shoah. All her novels concern about the World War II or at least aftermaths of Holocaust which includes her family too. The critic combines Holocaust with the readers' reading experience. He states; "Krauss deals with heavyweight themes—the Holocaust, the different ways people cope with suffering, the special cruelty of fathers, the costs of creativity—with meditative, insightful prose that makes for an intense and memorable reading experience" (Humphrey, 2010, 70).

Another important theme in the novel Krauss gives hope to Jewish society although they are exposed to the Holocaust during World War II. In all her novels as well as old generation experienced the genocide or Shoah, there are young characters who are more conscious and determined what and how to do. For the critics; "In the Jewish tradition children bear great theological valence" (Berger & Milbauer 2013: 81). Krauss is aware that religious worth and uses it in her novels. On the other hand, the children are the diplexers to haul their grandparents' story to young generations. The characters in her all novels have at least one grandchild or a younger relative concerning about his/her story about her Holocaust years. Uncle Sam's Samson Greene in *Man Walks into a Room*, Leopold Gursky's grandchild Alma in *The History of Love* are the examples of the relationships of younger/older generation.

Krauss gathers many themes and 'richly textured' in her novels. In her novels, especially in *History of Love* and *Great House*, it is probed how the first and second generation deal with the experience and feeling of Holocaust. Furthermore the third generation, the grandchildren of survivors, oversees their elders' post-traumatic attitudes and results. This generation must be, according to Krauss, stronger and more determined against "the

memory of trauma and its ineluctable relationship to identity” (Berger & Milbauer 2013: 72). Continuing on the same issue, the critics think that “*The History of Love* and *Great House* are paradigmatic third generation representations of inheriting the Holocaust trauma” (2013: 64). In this sense, there are many resemblances and same themes in her all novels.

#### **VI. Conclusion:**

All three of Krauss’s novels have the same characteristics and features and are inspired by Jewish thoughts and dogma. Her characters, whether in the Holocaust or modern times, have same destinies and problems. In her first novel, two characters have amnesia; in her second one, Leopold and her granddaughter are concerned about their survival. Furthermore, some of Krauss’s characters have experienced traumas and psychological illnesses. Krauss may be attempting to embalm the memory of her Jewish grandparents. This linkage is a bridge connecting past, present and, probably, future of Jewish society. For Krauss there is always hope for the future.

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