

## The Insignias of History in Nicole Krauss's the History of Love

Yrd.Doç.Dr. Faruk KALAY

Muş Alparslan Üniversitesi, Eğitim Fakültesi,  
Yabancı Diller Eğitimi Bölümü  
E-posta: f.kalay@alparslan.edu.tr

### Abstract

Nicole Krauss, a distinctive Jewish American writer in modern literature, concerns about alienation, isolation, and emigration in Jewish society. Her successful novel, *The History of Love* deals with Jewish characters exposed to the Holocaust during the World War II. All characters directly or indirectly possess the marks of history, which is very crucial issue among Jewish writers. Coalesced with history, the characters are inspired from the real people and incidences. Krauss uses postmodern characteristics in her novel. For instance, the synchronistic narration blurs the readers mind by hesitating whether it is fiction or reality. The protagonist of novel, Leo Gursky living in America is an old man leaving his homeland and girlfriend because of Nazis and writing three novels which stuck between reality and fantasy according to his lover. Krauss creates a fictional world intertwining the history and present in the novel A great number of critics deals with the novel. For instance, Lang summarizes the novel with three phrases: "history, a wary critical community, and a contemporary audience longing for an imaginative connection between themselves and the historical event" (2009: 43). On the other hand, the Independent purports that Krauss authors the reality by using her past: "Moving between New York and Jerusalem, Oxford and London, Krauss looks at how multiple stories from the past are stitched together to create a new reality" (2011: 30). In this sense, the writer's relationship with history cannot be abnegated. In this study, the history and the marks of history on characters will be argued.

**Keywords:** The History of Love, Nicole Krauss, Leo Gursky, Holocaust

## Nicole Krauss'un Aşkın Tarihi Adlı Romanında Tarihi İzlekler

### Özet

Modern edebiyatta önemli Yahudi Amerikan yazarlarından olan Nicole Krauss Yahudi toplumundaki yabancılaşma, yalnızlık ve göç konularına değinir. Başarılı romanı olan *Aşkın Tarihi II*. Dünya Savaşı süresince Holokost'a maruz kalan ve etkilerini hisseden Yahudi karakterle ilgilidir. Tarihle bütünleşen bu karakterler gerçek hayattaki insanlardan ve olaylardan esinlenmiştir. Krauss romanında postmodern teknikleri de kullanır. Örneğin iç içe anlatım tekniği okuyucuya romanın kurgusal mı yoksa gerçek mi olduğu kuşkusunu doğurur. Romanın başkahramanı Amerika'da yaşayan Leo Gursky

Naziler yüzünden memleketinden ve kız arkadaşından ayrılmak zoruna kalan ve sevdiği kıza göre fantezi ile gerçeklik arasında sıkışıp kalan üç romanı kaleme alan yaşlı bir adamdır. Krauss romanında tarih ile bugünü birbirine katan kurgusal bir dünya yaratır. Birçok eleştirmen de bu romanla ilgilenmiştir. Örneğin Lang romanı üç öbikle özetlemiştir: “tarih, ihtiyatlı eleştirel bir toplum ve tarihsel olaylarla kendileri arasında hayali bir bağlantı özümseyen çağdaş bir kitle” (2009: 43). Diğer bir taraftan Independent gazetesi ise Krauss’un geçmişini kullanarak gerçekleri yazdığını ifade eder: “New York ve Kudüs, Oxford ve Londra arasında gidip gelen Krauss geçmişten gelen birçok hikayeyi yeni bir gerçeklikle yaratmak adına birbiriyle nasıl ilişkilendireceğinin yollarını arıyor” (2011: 30). Bu bağlamda yazarın tarihle olan ilişkisi azımsanamaz. Bu çalışmada tarih ve karakterler üzerindeki tarihsel izlekler tartışılacaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Aşkın Tarihi*, Nicole Krauss, Leo Gursky, Holokost

---

Nicole Krauss, a prominent third-generation Jewish-American author, has achieved considerable success early in her career, in large part due to listing in New York’s 20 Under 40. One of her well-known novels, *The History of Love*, explores the lives of Leopold Gursky, witness to the Holocaust, and his granddaughter Alma Singer, on a quest to find her roots. Sayers notes the protagonist is “a Holocaust survivor who has lost his entire world, including his own novel in manuscript, but who will ultimately connect to a young girl who has lost her father to an early death” (2011: 27). Krauss effectively interweaves characters, events, and narratives, which makes the novel confusing for readers. Her fictionalized world is so accomplished that the reader feels utterly drawn into her creation.

Krauss dedicates the novel to her grandparents. Her maternal grandparents were born in Germany and Ukraine and later immigrated to London. Her paternal grandparents were born in Hungary and Slonim, Belarus, and they met in Israel, and later immigrated to New York, places central to the novel. With her ancestors’ experiences serving as her backdrop, her work helps in illuminating the psychology of the twentieth-century Jews who escaped the Holocaust to settle in new lands.

The novel depicts distinctive protagonists: the European Holocaust survivor Leopold and the teenage girl Alma, who is along with her brother Bird, lost their father due to cancer and indirectly effected by Holocaust. The perspectives of these three characters are featured, leading “to dizzying effects, but it does allow the reader to piece together some of the story’s different strands” (Codde, 2011: 48). At the same time, these three different protagonists, stereotypical of their generations in Jewish society, offer hints about both their cultures and in the eras in which they lived. One critic associates the novel with recent Jewish history, stating: “The Holocaust, the tension between belonging to ‘us’ and belonging to history, is one that Krauss also identifies through the creation of two survivors” (Lang, 2009: 50).

## The Insignias of History in Nicole Krauss's *the History of Love*

Yet Krauss does not draw her characters as prototypes or distinguishable persona. She refrains from depicting them in an exaggerated manner or creating in them artificial attitudes: “All the characters are exposing themselves. It doesn't mean they are always being perfectly honest, but they are making an effort to be. They understand their shortcomings. They are aware of their mistakes” (New Statesman, 43). In this respect, the novel offers a realistic point of view. Although the reader knows the character Leopold is a survivor of Europe genocide carried out during World War II, this does not engender feelings of pity or ruth. Royal, however, thinks such exaggeration or imitation in Jewish literature is not suitable for realism:

If you tug at a Jewish weed in a Jewish story, it shouldn't come out of the ground like an artificial plant from a cube of Styrofoam; instead, you pull the weed and the earth erupts, and up comes an immensely elaborate root system with the culture, history, and myths of the Jews attached. (2007: 159)

The theme of Judaism and the awareness of being a Jew are effectively depicted in the novel. Each character displays all the characteristics of being Jewish. Titles of books written or read by characters reflect a Jew's subconscious or id. A nine-year-old boy in the novel finds a book of his father's on the day of his son Bar Mitzvah: “In it, Jewish thoughts are gathered under subheadings, such as: ‘Every Israelite Holds the Honor of His Entire People in His Hands,’ (Krauss, 2005: 59). In this sense, the novel contains features Jewish culture and, thus, indirectly Jewish history.

The Holocaust, an event that occupies a place of great significance in Jewish modern history, has been a focus of many Jewish authors. However, there is a difference in how the two groups, mid-twentieth-century authors and those of the twentieth-first century writers approach the event in their writing. Many of the former endured the Holocaust and wrote directly about what they had witnessed; whereas the latter grew up hearing their ancestors tell about the Holocaust:

Yet some tendencies of early twenty-first-century Holocaust representations reveal strategies that differ from the kind of memory work described by Hirsch, begging the question of how postmemory changes as additional generations come to be exposed to its remembered content. (Bayer, 2010: 117)

Krauss melds these two generations by outlining various events, creating a narrative describing three generations who have the same destiny, feelings and characteristics but live in different regions and countries.

Krauss takes pains to impart historical accuracy in her novel, giving exact dates, naming locales, and describing events to raise consciousness about Jewish history. For instance, in describing Leo and his lover (who are based on her grandparents), Krauss writes: “In the summer of 1941, the Einsatzgruppen

drove deeper east, killing hundreds of thousands of Jews. On a bright, hot day in July, they entered Slonim” (2005: 12). Even though such information may disturb her readership, it is evident she never forgets her own roots.

Krauss also uses scientific information in the novel, which varies from the geographical to the biological, for example: “THE DEAD SEA IS THE LOWEST PLACE ON EARTH” (author’s capitalization, 2005: 38). It is interesting that Alma gives the information about the Dead Sea, which is identified with the Jews. Alma also does a study on extinction. Dealing with animal extermination on the planet, Alma states: “Almost a quarter of the world’s mammals face extinction within thirty years. One out of eight species of birds will soon be extinct. Ninety percent of the world’s largest fish have disappeared in the last half century” (Krauss, 2005: 139). Further, the novel offers examples about mass extinctions over time. For instance, she writes about the extinction of dinosaurs. In this perspective, the extirpation reminds the reader of the Holocaust and its survivors. Not only does Krauss impose a consciousness of being Jewish on her readers by the rendering of historical facts, but also the scientific knowledge can be attached to the history or cultural quality of the narrative.

Imagination is one of the most distinctive elements used in the novel. The characters imagine everything very differently from what reality is. I think they do this because their actual reality is particularly devastating, such as enduring pogroms and the Holocaust. Even ordinary things are likely to serve as objects for inspiration. For instance, “I like to imagine the bed as home plate, the toilet as first, the kitchen table as second, the front door as third” (Krauss, 2005: 3). Such juxtaposition of household items indicates reflection on the part of the characters.

Acceptance of one’s destiny is another important element in the novel. This espousing makes the reader think about the characters’ feelings of desperation and the tracing of atrocities throughout history, especially those of World War II. Moreover, two generations in the novel share the same characteristics, which remind a nation to be a possible feature. For instance, when Leo immigrates to the United States, he works for his cousin, a locksmith. When I came to America I knew hardly anyone, only a second cousin who was a locksmith, so I worked for him. If he had been a shoemaker I would have become a shoemaker; if he had shoveled shit I, too, would have shoveled. But. He was a locksmith. (Krauss, 2005: 4)

Another important characteristic in the novel is its characters’ desire to always remain visible to other people. To die without having been known or seen by anybody becomes an obsession for the characters, with many such examples described in the novel. For instance, Leo notes his fear of dying alone:

## **The Insignias of History in Nicole Krauss's *the History of Love***

I try to make a point of being seen. Sometimes when I'm out, I'll buy a juice even though I'm not thirsty. If the store is crowded I'll even go so far as dropping my change all over the floor, the nickels and dimes skidding in every direction.... All I want is not to die on a day when I went unseen. (Krauss, 2005: 3)

This feeling can be regarded as both a prepossession and a kind of cultural phenomenon to be recognized by others. In observing Jewish history, this characteristic can be considered as conventional for Jews, like a society pressed and expatriated on the world stage.

In fact, Krauss represents a nation in an old protagonist. Leo Gursky's attitudes and destiny resemble his own nation. Corporeity and evanescence are always together in the novel, symbolizing Jewishness, which society experiences as both prosperity and poverty. Poignant reminiscence plays an important role for Jews who were exposed to genocide in Europe, as were the author's grandparents. In the novel, as mentioned above, Leo often recollects his past and what had been done to his parents in his hometown:

Yesterday I saw a man kicking a dog and I felt it behind my eyes. I don't know what to call this, a place before tears. The pain of forgetting: spine. The pain of remembering: spine. All the times I have suddenly realized that my parents are dead, even now, it still surprises me, to exist in the world while that which made me has ceased to exist. (Krauss, 2005: 10)

This remembrance is not limited only to the characters that had been exposed to genocide or the Holocaust. Even the generation alive in the present displays the same characteristics as its ancestors did. Leo's granddaughter has written a manuscript supporting this idea: "I decided to make a list of clues. I went home, closed my bedroom door, and took out the third volume of *How to Survive in the Wild*" (Krauss, 2005: 104). Thus, the modern age is regarded as a jungle, a place where a person may as well be attacked and in which her contemporaries are brutal. One critic asserts:

Holocaust studies have a natural affinity to questions of memory. As time moves away from World War II, memory takes on a different quality, as it becomes transformed from direct witnessing and the resulting testimonials to archival and mediated forms of remembering that carry the responsibility of firmly embedding the Holocaust in the cultural memory of later generations. (Bayer, 2010: 116)

The two primary characters, of two generations and living in different periods, experience the same feelings and milieus. Lang writes: "Taken together, Leo and Alma encapsulate a complex relationship between historical relevance and contemporary meaning" (2009: 47). In other words, history repeats itself. This catastrophic cogitation, which may again carry out a Holocaust or emigration, can affect a Jew's state of mind, such as that of Krauss. In his

interpretation, Lang asks: “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?” (2009: 47).

Both the concept of individuality and one’s own consciousness of his/her individuality play central roles in the novel. Krauss’s use of the mirror as symbol is noted by Weisel-Barth: “She holds up a mirror to fetishism” (2013: 188). A character who looks at his or her own silhouette is an indicator of recollection and a feeling of existence in this world. The novel presents numerous examples highlighting such events. For instance, “When I pass a mirror and catch a glimpse of myself, or I’m at the bus stop and some kids come up behind me and say, Who smells shit?—small daily humiliations—these I take, generally speaking, in my liver” (Krauss, 2005: 10). Still, the mirror may hold a different meaning for Krauss. Viewing oneself in the mirror could be understood as a renaissance signifying rediscovery and new hopes of self. When Leopold takes off his clothes, he reflects: “Then it occurred to me: what, exactly, did ‘nude’ mean?” (Krauss, 2005: 16). This inquisition is a self-reconnoitering indicating the protagonist/author is on the way to getting over traces of genocides.

Furthermore, the frequent use of the mirror as symbol points toward the characters’ awareness of personality, serving to remind the reader of the character’s consciousness of a nation: “Remember—that part of him was made of glass” (Krauss, 2005: 62). Weisel-Barth believes the breakage of Leo’s life is symbolized with the shattering of a glass:

Life changed for Weisz in 1944 with a Nazi stone hurled through the window of his father’s study in Budapest. The quotidian life of the family shattered with the glass: home destroyed, parents lost in the Holocaust, and life irrevocably refocused backward, oriented toward redeeming the loss. (2013: 188)

Perhaps, the most remarkable is that many of the characters depicted in the novel may be only imaginings of Leopold. Leopold, who has written three novels, has a friend called Bruno, but whether or not he is an actual person is arguable. Bruno has never been seen by nor does he share any dialogue with other characters; thus, the protagonist is Bruno’s sole friend. And although Bruno has been Leopold’s best friend since childhood, he was exposed to neither the Holocaust nor any pogroms. Moreover, at the end of the novel, Leopold writes that Bruno is the “greatest character I *ever* wrote” (249, author’s italics). At this point, the reader no doubt realizes that Bruno is likely an imaginary companion. Other such examples can be seen as well. Codde’s interpretation of this issue is juxtaposed with the imaginary events:

Throughout the novel, Leopold is shown as someone with a knack for inventing things and even people: in his youth, he convinced himself he once

## The Insignias of History in Nicole Krauss's *The History of Love*

saw an elephant (228 and 230); in Carnegie Hall, he is convinced he sees a young Alma Mereminski play the violin (131). (2011: 49)

Therefore, when thought about from this perspective, the other characters, such as his granddaughter or his son, also are likely to be imaginings in the protagonist's mind. The intertwined texts within others have the possibility of being Leo's inner world. Krauss arouses suspicion in her readers concerning whether or not these characters are figments of Leo's imagination. This could be a way of indicating a Jewish person's spiritual condition, which no doubt internalizes the effects of World War II. Codde asks a key question: "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 the voices of Alma and Bird, and of Leopold's meeting, in the novel's tragic finale, with the fifteen-year-old Alma Singer?" (2011: 50). This tragic finale reminds us of a statement Leo made: "I often wonder who will be the last person to see me alive" (Krauss, 2005: 3). It is likely that all objects and characters are "figments of Leopold's active imagination" (Codde, 2011: 50).

In conclusion, *The History of Love* by Nicole Krauss melds narratives from two vastly different generations: from the first, we are offered a survivor of the Holocaust; while from the second, we read of individuals indirectly affected by the Holocaust. Still, some critics deplore the novel. For example, Franklin criticizes Krauss for employing what he believes is a banal theme, noting "a great deal of [the novel] relies on the same neatly wrapped fables, the same disingenuous, aphoristic tone, as Zvi Litvinoff's volume [*The Death Of Leopold Gursky*]" (2005: 41).

Despite such a critique, Lang believes the work "both imagines the Holocaust and represents its historical presence in one Jewish family's American identity" (44). This assessment is meaningful and highlights the protagonists' identities, as we read of no sign of assimilation in their Jewish personalities, despite their living on different continents and in different periods. In her use of both realistic and fictional worlds, Krauss "is one of a number of Jewish-American novelists to recast the Holocaust, making it a point of transition, a point of intersection where direct memory experienced by eyewitnesses and memory generated only through reading meet" (Lang, 46). I believe the novel offers a unique perspective and merits a wider appraisal of how a literary work can make a contribution when considered in the setting of Jewish cultural and social history.

**Note:** This article is an extension version presented in 3rd International Bakea Symposium of Western Cultural and Literary Studies in Gaziantep University

**References**

- Bayer, G. (2010). "After Postmemory: Holocaust Cinema and the Third Generation" *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* V(28/4) 116-132
- Bellin, R. (2007). "Retrospection and Prophecy in the Structure of "Mad Love" *Journal of Modern Literature* V(30/2) 1-16
- Codde, P. (2011). "On the Problematic Omniscient Narrator in Nicole Krauss's *THE HISTORY OF LOVE*" *The Explicator* V(69/1) 48-50
- Franklin, R. (2005). "Surgings" *The New Republic* V(May 16) 39-41
- Krauss, N. (2005). *The History of Love* London: Penguin Books
- Krauss, S. (1894). "The Jews in the Works of the Church Fathers. VI" *The Jewish Quarterly Review* V(6/2) 225-261
- Lang, J. (2009). "The History of Love, the Contemporary Reader, and the Transmission of Holocaust Memory" *Journal of Modern Literature*, V(33/1) 43-56
- Royal, D. P. (2007). "Tugging at Jewish Weeds: An Interview with Steve Stern" *MELUS* V(32/1) 139-161
- Sayers, V. (2011). "Great House" *Commonweal* 28 Jan.  
The History of Love 7 March 2011 *NEW STATESMAN* 43
- Weisel-Barth, J. (2013). "The Fetish in Nicole Krauss' *Great House* and in Clinical Practice, Psychoanalytic Dialogues:" *The International Journal of Relational Perspectives*, V(23:2) 180-196