

How Other is the “Other”: Mıgırdıç Margosyan’s Gavur Mahallesi (1988 / 1992 TR) (Christian Quarter) , Söyle Margos Nerelisen? (1995)(Tell Me Margos Where are You from?) , Biletimiz İstanbul’a Kesildi (1998) Our Ticket is for İstanbul_(1)

Prof Dr Burçin EROL

Burçin EROL, “Öteki ne kadar Öteki ? Mıgırdıç Margosyan’ın *Gavur Mahallesi* (1988/ Türkçe 1992) *Söyle Margos Nerelisen?*(1995) ,*Biletimiz İstanbul’a Kesildi* (1998)

Makalede, 1938 Diyarbakır doğumlu bir Türk-Ermeni taşra edebiyatı yazarı olan Mıgırdıç Margosyan’ın gerçek hayata dayalı üç eserinde, zengin, renkli kültür dokusu içinde çeşitli olaylarla “Ötekileme” konusunu ele alışını incelenmektedir. Margosyan’ın espirili bir üslup ile, pek çok ortak öge olmasına rağmen insanların kendilerini tanımlama ve karşıdakini yabancılaştırma yöntemini kullandıklarını, ötelemenin etnisizm, dini ayrılıklar, cinsel ayrımcılık, yörecilik, kent-taşra gibi pek çok düzlemde varolabildiğini, çok renkli ve çok kültürlü toplumun yabancılaşma ve öteleme var olmadan yaşatılması gerektiğini savunduğu ortaya konulmaya çalışılmaktadır.

Key words: Mıgırdıç Margosyan, othering, Turkish rural literature, *Gavur Mahallesi*, *Söyle Margos Nerelisen?* *Biletimiz İstanbul’a Kesildi*

Mıgırdıç Margosyan is a Turkish-Armenian writer who was born in Diyarbakır, a city in south-east Turkey, in 1938. He grew up in Diyarbakır and had his primary education there in a Turkish school. In 1953 he was among the Armenian youth recruited from Anatolia by an old Armenian master to be educated in İstanbul. Thus his unforeseen adventure, which was to change his life totally, began with his arrival in Karagözyan Armenian Orphanage at Şişli in İstanbul (Margosyan 1998:30-31). He attended the Bezirciyan Middle School and the Getronogan Lycee. The main aim of his parents in sending him to İstanbul to be educated was to get him to learn his mother tongue, Armenian, properly. The Armenian he could understand barely or the one he was familiar with was the one spoken by the elderly which was spiced with Kurdish, Zaza, Turkish, Arabic and Farsi words, which was only in spoken form. (Margosyan 1998:15). Later he graduated from the Department of Philosophy of the University of İstanbul. For a while (1966-1972) he acted as the principal of the (Surp Haç Tıbrevank) Armenian Lycee, where he also taught philosophy, psychology and Armenian language and literature. His interest and involvement in literature continued all the while. His stories were published in the *Marmara* newspaper in Armenian. So far he has

produced three short story volumes *Gavur Mahallesi* (1988 / tr 1992), *Söyle Margos Nerelisen?* (1995) and *Biletimiz İstanbul'a Kesildi* (1998) and a collection of his writings printed in the *Evrensel* newspaper entitled *Çengelli iğne* (Safety pin) which are in Turkish.*

The original of *Gavur Mahallesi* was written in Armenian (Mer Ayt Goğmeri 1984 / *Bizim Oralar*) and won The Eliz Kavukçuyan (Foundation) Literature Award in 1988 in Paris, which is given to works written in Armenian. The Armenian he writes in is classified as the “Western Armenian dialect” which is spoken by the Armenians living in Anatolia and by the ones who have emigrated from Anatolia after 1915, as opposed to the “Eastern Armenian dialect” spoken by those in Caucasia, Iran and The Armenian Republic of today. (Margosyan 1995:7).

Margosyan is identified as the last living representative of “village literature” or “rural literature (fiction)” (taşra edebiyatı) written in Armenian (Kaçan 2000: 39). This genre came into being in the 19th century in İstanbul and flourished, reaching its climax in early 20th century. It was a grass-roots movement and led to heated arguments with the controversies it created in opposition to the more refined, urban and civilised İstanbul literature (Margosyan 1995:8). The three short story books he has produced are autobiographical. He specifically underlines this aspect in two of his books through a note on the back of the title page; he says:

In my writings I have told about where we lived as I saw it, and as I lived it. I have presented the characters and their names almost without any alteration, just as they were. Most of the “baco”s and the uncles have passed away to the other side. Let their names and their memories live a little longer in these lines, in this book. (Margosyan 1992:6)

In his works Margosyan depicts the everyday lives of the people in 1940s and 1950s of Diyarbakır, which is a multicultural city. But his depictions focus on his own ethnic background and are a window opening both to the diverse, cosmopolitan multicultural society and also embody a close depiction of his own ethnic roots. He points to this fact in an interview;

I try to transmit my memories to those who haven't lived my childhood. Of course it isn't only about my memories, I also tell about the childhood and lives of the others who lived in the same geography, of the children, of my friends who are of different roots, I mean Armenian, Kurdish, Turkish, Keldani and Süryani. Of course in narrating my memories I indirectly voice the presence of a culture which lived in the area. (Kaçan 2000: 28)

Margosyan, who is at peace with his hyphenated identity, explicitly states that people who define themselves as a group, as “we”, should not distance and exclude the “other”. (Kaçan 2000: 30). In his works depicting the lives of common people, especially focusing on his own community, he presents many cases of “othering” and the “other”. His depiction of the other does not voice a direct

* The genre of these three works also deserve to be commented on.. Although the works relate autobiographical material they are not autobiographies in the true sense. On the other hand they are not novels. On the cover and title pages they are specified as “story”ies. Each volume consists of shorter narratives each of which have a subtitle. The works do not follow a single plot but present kaleidoscopic pictures which contribute to the general picture presented.

comment or rejection of these realities, but his language and style are of specific significance as they are the agents of his views. His approach to events is not bitter but humorous; he employs humour and laughter to evoke contemplation.

At this point special attention must be directed to Margosyan's language and his use of languages. The three books, that are the subject of this paper, are all written in Turkish but they not only incorporate Armenian, Kurdish and Zaza words and phrases, but also the Turkish employed is that of the Diyarbakır area reflecting local colour and is written in non-standard form as it is spoken. Moreover, the earliest fictional work *Gavur Mahallesi* was originally written in Armenian. However, the work which was published in 1992 in Turkish, is not a translation as Margosyan states in an interview:

I never attempted to translate into Turkish the books I wrote in Armenian. I keep the plot the same, making the necessary alterations and adding the necessary idioms I have developed them. I mean I rewrote them in Turkish. (Kaçan 2000: 32)

When inquired about which language he employs for thinking and which language he employs for narration, he states that he writes in the language he thinks. That is to say, if he is writing in Armenian then he is thinking in Armenian, if he is writing in Turkish, he is thinking in Turkish. He asserts that he has no problem with any of the two languages. (Kaçan 2000: 30). In relation to language and style he feels at home in both with no visible "otherness" in any of the mediums of expression. In fact, some of his stories are produced only in Turkish and all his Turkish works display a mastery of language, richness of idiom and expression, local colour and good willed but thought provoking humour. The language Margosyan uses is a bridge between the "other" and the "self", both defining and blurring the boundaries of the two entities by merging them into one another.

Margosyan depicts and satirises various forms of the "other" in his stories. The "othering" process may involve religion, ethnicity, gender or the rural-urban dichotomy. In none of these processes of "othering" does Margosyan directly express his own views, however, his humour and language make the author's statements explicit.

The most visible and prominent "other" observed in these mentioned works is the one that is based on religious beliefs. This is clearly evident in the title he chooses for his first book *Gavur Mahallesi*. The term "gavur" designates the non-muslim, the christian; however it also has a derogatory usage, though it also implies strength, power of excess. These implications are evident in various idiomatic usages which are also employed for the group, ie, the Armenians, by those "others" and also by the writer who is the other himself, in order to depict certain aspects of the characters portrayed. For instance, when the dearly awaited son is born into the family after the loss of the first baby boy, the father Sıke goes against the advice of the wise old women and Ebune Hore, the Armenian priest, and names the boy after his father as he had done with the first baby boy who had died. The first person narrator Margosyan humorously comments on the persistence of his father by using the idiom of "othering" employed for them and says he had understood what a "gavur stubbornness" his father had. (Margosyan 1995:28). Similarly when the boy was given as apprentice to his maternal uncle Haçadur, who was a skilled

blacksmith, he was expected to come early to the workshop. However, he was never that punctual. Having arrived at the shop later than his uncle he would be harshly reprimanded. "You've come late again. What kind of an apprentice are you, you idiot!" (Margosyan 1992:84) upon which the narrator comments by saying that his uncle behaved like a "gavur" like a "filla" (filla being the kurdish term) and yelled at him.

The process of othering is also evident in the title chosen for the first book *Gavur Mahallesi* which can be translated as *Christian Quarters*. This points to the actual distancing the groups exercised towards each other. The repulsion of the "other" is expressed in the forming of community of the other/others in certain localities, loosely to be formed perhaps as ghettos. The Diyarbakır area presents a rich mosaic of the cultures and as Margosyan states, the Armenians lived in Hançepek, that is, the exclusive Gavur Neighbourhood or Armenian quarters (Margosyan 1998:54, Margosyan 1992: 51) which was next to the Jewish quarters, where the jews lived, in addition to these other quarters are also named (Margosyan 1995: 54). The process of "othering" and distancing which is visible in the congregating of the "other" in certain quarters is also accompanied by linguistic labeling. However, Margosyan depicts how all groups tend to "other" the various other groups and moreover, how the "othered" group further subdivides and distances itself. In a sense, the process of othering seems to be a part of self-identification and self-definition. The labeling of the "other" is humorously presented in the local context by Margosyan; he explains:

Cehü was the Kurdish name given to the Jews. We christians called the Jews "Moşe." Although all the christians were called gavur or "fille," in themselves they were Armenian, Süryani, Keldani, or Pırot. The Armenians called the Süryanis "Asori."

Just as the Muslims called the christians "gavur", the christians called all the Muslims "Dacik."

But other than this there was one reality: the mad people were on one side and the rest , that is, the Daciks, Gavurs, Haços, the Kızılbaş, the Yezidis, the Armenians, the Turks, the Kurds, the Keldanis, the Süryanis, the Asoris, the Pırots, the Filles, the Moşes, the Cehüs and the Dürzis , we were all on one side.

(Margosyan 1995: 54)

As Margosyan deals with the issue of othering whether in the form of setting up quarters, labeling and sub-labeling each other or of encounters of "the other kind," his style assumes the forms of the mock heroic. Although labeling was a form of distancing and mystifying the other, the narrator puts a special effort into stating that it really was not meant as an insult: he says that "the othered" parties

agreed quite easily about issues relating to labeling those who lacked any religious belief. From time to time they came to logger heads with each other and conflicts arose. Driving power from their God they would call the other faithless, Fille, Yezidi and sometimes not being able to stop they would go as far as their religions and rituals. (Margosyan 1995:53)

He adds:

It was only an expression of anger to call "Gavur" or "Haço" those who were not your religious brethren. But these expressions ought never to be mistaken for swear words relating to your mother, father or forefathers. That was something else. (Margosyan 1995: 53)

Margosyan describes some scenes of encounter between the "others" where instances of physical skirmishes are displayed. In almost all these conflicts at least one side of the two opposing parties is formed of children. In one of the instances he brings up, he refers to the mock heroic encounter between the Armenian children and the Jews. The only way to get to the Jewish quarters is to pass through Hañepek, the Armenian quarters, he refers to the situation as follows:

If the season was summer and the streets were covered with the rinds of melons and water-melons, indeed it was no coward's business being a Jew. Sometimes you had to take a winding road so as, to jilt the "brats" waiting impatiently to ambush you, -to avoid becoming the target of this melon rinds. (Margosyan 1995:55)

However, within the many different circles of set boundaries and processes of othering, he depicts a similar scene set between two different parties, in the foreword he writes in the story *Biletimiz İstanbul'a Kesildi*. He states that it required a brave heart and a powerful arm to be a priest in this area, because as a priest you had to be alert to the "dacik" or "moslem" kids watching for your appearance at the last corner you had to take on your way to the church:

didn't it require only mastery to duck the water-melon and melon rinds and squashed tomatoes flung by these moslem kids? And what about the rhyming leer they sang after the priest with grinning mouths. Was it possible to bear the attacks and victorious battle cries of these close-shaven, bare-footed, baggy-panted, no good brats. No! Never!....Then you had to chase them, these "bastards" till the Çıgır bakery and cause their lines to break....and yet force their lines to withdraw into the Jewish Quarters. Then who could prevent you from going through a long line of swear words in their language in Kurdish!....Then you could approach the huge door of the church with the air of a victorious general. (Margosyan 1998:13)

The distancing of the "other" which basically arises from difference of some cultural traditions and basically belief, also involves the mystification of the other as a threat. This process is also illustrated in the passage by Margosyan in a seemingly childish and naive interpretation of the "street battles" taking place between the Armenians and Jewish children. In the local state primary school the day begins with the standard oath taken repeating the principles of honesty, industriousness, the rule to protect the younger and respect the elderly, to develop and advance. However, ironically, contrary to the daily ritual of oaths and the advice of the teachers, after school it is "battle time." The narrator begins questioning these reactions:

Why did we undertake these battles? These wars? Why did we chase...these Moşes, Gehüs (Jews), and throw stones at them?...Why was victory so sweet?...Why should we always be victorious? Because they were bad people! Because they had barrels with sharp-pointed needles! They caught children and put them in these barrels! Having killed them in this way they gulped down their blood! So children

should listen to their mothers' advice, and shouldn't go to the far far away Jewish Quarters. They should be good children and play in front of their own houses, right in front of their mothers' eyes. (Margosyan 1995: 94)

In fact, the distancing and the fabrication of myths of threat are dynamics that are not stable, but they are lucid and may turn upon the fabricator. As Margosyan states:

One day, the Moşes, our class mates, suddenly emigrated in so hurried a fashion that they couldn't pack their barrels with piercing needles. The Moşe Quarters were totally vacant. But now, we the Gavur, the Fille, had inherited their needled barrels. (Margosyan 1995:94)

Margosyan while depicting the daily lives and the colourful mosaïque of the area they inhabited also dwells on the commonalities of the inhabitants. Sharing the same geography, many traditional costumes, the architecture, food, values and rituals these communities have, display an important common denominator. Although their departure points may be the same and intended destinations similar, their philosophies and assertions lead to "othering". In the chapter or rather the short story dealing with the unimaginability and impossibility of intermarriage between these communities Margosyan comments on the similar yet differing philosophies of the cultures in the area. He says:

Back where we lived in Diyarbakır, we the creatures that God had created and named as human were living peacefully. Our God was the same but our prophets were different...we had built God's houses...when calling out to God we used different languages, different styles, different rituals and different beliefs...in order to make ourselves better heard by God, next to our God's houses we had built tall minarets, or bell towers vying with each other in height. Some of us called our fellow worshippers crying 'Allahu-ekber,' others tolled their bells with the chime of ding dong, while others went about it silently. (Margosyan 1995:52)

The absurdity of the exertion of priorities and superiorities in the face of common origins and common destinations becomes even more striking when Margosyan elaborates on all the sects who join the race of keeping up with each other or even outdoing each other:

while trying to reach God and fighting among ourselves to the death, we all never gave up asserting that the only way of reaching God was believing in him. Although we were searching for the one and the only way of reaching God we all went our separate ways.(Margosyan 1995:52)

At this point he lists the Moslems, Catholics, Protestants, Orthodox, Gregorians and the Jews as the competing parties. These stories in emphasizing the different claims of the "other" in a way, underline the relativity of the concept of the "other." The self occupying the centre stage seems to define the peripheral and the different as the "other". Interestingly enough, a group identified as the "other" due to its appearance, qualities, behaviour and rituals from the outside, was yet open to the process of distancing and othering from those which were defined as the "other."

At this point Margosyan widens his perception of the "other" and narrates episodes which reflect another form of "othering," the one created by unlikeness of the city dweller and the country dweller. Being a writer describing the life in

Anatolia, his characters are "othered" in the city and likewise the characters, in this case his protagonist, the narrating author describes the city dwellers of İstanbul, the seat of diversity, culture and refinement as the "other." When he is finally brought to the Karagözyan Armenian orphanage as a fellow Armenian for a life of education and better conditions, the reactions of greeting both surprise and shock him. He says, "The Turkish word Gavur, Kurdish word 'filla' had been replaced by the jeering, ridiculing words of the Armenian children in the orphanage: Hurry come and see, the Kurds have come from Anatolia" (Margosyan 1998: 31). Margosyan comments on this situation in an interview and tries to explain the situation. He says that the Turkish they spoke was the Diyarbakır dialect, where they had come from. They spoke almost no Armenian. What was interesting was that although they had arrived at the orphanage with their Armenian identity, they had been greeted with their Kurdish identity which he had found quite dishonouring in those days. He analyses the situation and concludes that this "othering," disowning and labeling was not on the basis of ethnic or religious origins but totally on the basis of local culture, local language and rural behaviour that differed from the urban behaviour of the İstanbul dweller (Kaçan 2000:29). Just as the city dweller others the rural arrival, the rural man's values, way of life and perception causes him to "other" the city dweller. The othering of the rural immigrant of the city dweller is depicted in a satirical vein in the narrator's perception of the fruits, vegetable and other food items he encounters in the city and his reaction is the othering of the city dwellers and their food. He is in İstanbul and he is listening to the peddler selling lemons and advertising it: "Lemons for tea... Lemons for soup!"

When he heard that the lemons were used for tea and soup in this big city, he was agast, he was almost left speechless! This disgusting, tasteless, fatless chicken stock in which, maggot like noodles wriggled was not soup but a means that the city dweller had devised to fool himself!...Putting lemon juice in your soup?...No! Never, ten times no, hundered times no! What became a soup was hot chyenne peppers, onions and some flat bread.(Margosyan 1998:58)

Then he continues questioning the behaviour of the city dweller, Greek woman Katina who is the total "other" for him:

Ok ,then why did this "Urum" woman ask everytime the same question: 'Paşam, these bed lemons?' Tövbe, tövbe, slut! What the hell had the lemons to do with beds and covers, couches and pillows! That was the intentions of these painted women anyway! (Margosyan 1998: 58)

Margosyan's narratives are rich in various forms of the "other" and yet another widespread misconception and perception of the other is the one related to gender. His depiction of the female figures around him as the able, masterly strong charactered midwife with her enterouge of old widows and women and his mother, is in no way demeaning or depreciatory. Especially his mother is the figure who runs the house, does all the menial jobs and chores in the simple country, tradition environment, he even refers to her as the main beam supporting their home. Nevertheless, he does relate the demeaning attitudes, limited roles and lower status of women prevalent. In a sense, the "othering" of women is also emphasized by Margosyan. He states that the girl who gets married is expected to get pregnant

without making a long story of it. If the baby who is born is a girl, it is “a black blot of dishonour” and if a boy it is “a pasha” (Margosyan 1992:21). Margosyan elaborates the matter to the extreme, he continues:

In reality over where we live, getting pregnant and giving birth were easy and ordinary activities. Because giving birth to a baby girl didn't even count as work. After the birth if it was a girl it was like defeat in the battle field. If it were a “Pasha”, then you could lift your hands making the sign of victory. All the pregnant, two-souled women could give birth to that thing called girl. What was more natural? If you didn't give birth to a boy what was the sense of being pregnant for nine months and ten days? Moreover, could you give birth to boys one after the other? Then you could boast of your womanhood and femininity...

To put it in numbers: a half-witted boy was equal to four brilliant girls... (Margosyan 1992:22)

The “othering” in case of gender is undertaken by viewing and distancing women according to the patriarchal values and expectations imposed on them.

Before concluding it is necessary to state the fact that since this paper has focused on some varieties of “othering” exemplified in the works of Margosyan, only the concept of othering has been dealt with. Whereas, Margosyan's three story books present a very rich and kaleidoscopic picture of Diyarbakır in the 1940s and 1950s, they relate a multitude of episodes depicting the common values, culture and traditions shared by all the inhabitants.

To conclude, it can be stated that Margosyan narrates and depicts various forms of “othering” making use of humour, wit and exaggeration. The “other” externalizes these realities by uttering them and by provoking laughter invites the many “others” to unite and to acknowledge common and different values. Hence, in his autobiographical works, that is, as he defines them fictionalised history and historicized fiction, he builds a bridge of understanding. Thus he accomplishes the mission he defined in an interview where he says, “As the people sharing the same geography with its blessings and curses, we should consciously do all that is required of us” (Kaçan 2000:33) to make the mosaique of the area live.

(1) All the texts referred to in the paper are originally in Turkish and the translations have been undertaken by the author.

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