

# OBJECTS ON THE MOVE TYING EMOTIONAL BONDS: A CASE OF SYRIAN TURKMEN'S BATTALNÂME

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**Abstract:** Migration is an experience of absence, and in this experience, immigrants replace the meanings they left behind with objects, and relate to them. In this sense, objects affect the way immigrants relate to the world by arousing emotions and are therefore emotional agencies. This study focuses on a Battalnâme, which was brought by a Syrian Turkmen from his homeland. Not only the story of the Battalnâme's arrival to Turkey, but also the centuries-old history of Battalnâme, constitutes a different meaning from other migration objects. First of all, it has been passed down from generation to generation and is a carrier of tradition. In this form, the Battalnâme also has a social life, and the cultural practices and traditions that develop around it are important for immigrant identity. As such, the Battalnâme exemplifies the relationships that immigrants establish with objects and shows how objects in return reshape their identities in a new location far from their homeland.

**Keywords:** Objects, material culture, emotions, affect, Battalnâme, migration, Syria, Turkmen, memory

## **Göç Deneyiminde Nesnelere Oluşturduğu Duygusal Bağlar: Suriyeli Bir Türkmen'in Battalnâmesi**

**Öz:** Göç, bir yoksunluk deneyimidir ve bu deneyimde göçmenler, yokluğu yaşanan anlamların yerine nesnelere koyar ve onlarla ilişkilendirir. Bu anlamda nesnelere, duygular uyandırarak göçmenlerin dünya ile ilişki kurma biçimlerine tesir eder ve haliyle duygusal eyleyicilerdir. Bu çalışmada Suriyeli bir Türkmen'in memleketinden getirdiği Battalnâme 'ye odaklanılmaktadır. Battâlname, sadece Türkiye'ye yolculuğu değil, yüzyıllara dayanan öyküsü ile diğer nesnelere farklı bir anlam teşkil etmektedir. Öncelikle o nesnelere nesillere aktarılmıştır ve bir gelenek taşıyıcısıdır. Bu haliyle Battalnâme'nin de bir sosyal hayatı vardır ve onun etrafında gelişen kültürel pratikler ve gelenekler, göç deneyimi özelinde göçmen kimliği için önem arz etmektedir. Battalnâme bu haliyle göçmenlerin nesnelere ilişkisini örnekleleyen, nesnelere duyulanım ile ilişkisinde onların kimliklerini göç edilen yerde yeniden biçimlendirir.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Nesnelere, maddi kültür, duygu, duyulanım, Battalnâme, göç, Suriye, Türkmen, hafıza

## **Introduction**

In this paper, I will discuss the importance and role of objects in relation to immigration. I will focus on a traditional story-telling book. Just as people relate to certain people, objects can be a part of our lives, trigger specific emotions and change our moods. There are a variety of occasions and contexts in which our attachment to objects produces different meanings. It may be an item left behind by a loved one, and it can evoke different feelings depending on who that person is. In the context of migration, these items can be objects that symbolize meanings such as a homeland left behind, traditions, family and sometimes the journey from the homeland to the new country of residence.

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Consisting of the words *battal* and *nâme*, the Battalnâme is named after an Arab hero called Battal. It was also adopted by the Turks because of Battal's efforts in spreading Islam and his heroism in the wars with Byzantium (Sakaoğlu, 1992). According to Köksal (1983, s. VI), Battalnâme, which has a tradition dating back centuries, first developed in oral culture and was probably written down in the 15th century. Some researchers argue that this tradition of storytelling is an Islamic-influenced version of the heroic tales of the Turks in Central Asia, known as the Oğuznâme, which are considered half epic and half mythical.

In this study, the case of a traditional epic storytelling book called Battalnâme is discussed. Hasan, a 40-year-old Syrian Turkmen who used to work as a construction worker brought the Battalnâme and a prayer along with him to Turkey. The case of Hasan shows the relationship that immigrants develop with objects. The study exemplifies the object's affective role on immigrants in different locations, revealing the meanings attached to them, and shows how the relationship established with these objects before and after migration makes a difference.

I will focus on Hasan's belongings, which he brought from his hometown, and reveal his immigration story through the Battalnâme. Hasan is from Aleppo, but he moved to Raqqa to work on a building site. However, just before the war became serious he fled the country and settled in Turkey. The Battalnâme and a seccade (prayer rug) were already with him in the building site in Raqqa. When the civil war in Syria worsened, he knew he would not be able to go back. His relationship with these objects took on a new form because he was away from home and unable to return. These were the only artefacts he could associate with his home. In the next section I will discuss the human-object relationship before examining the social life of the book in relation to Hasan's biography.

### **1. Human-Object Relationship and Emotions in Relation to Immigration**

Concepts such as religion, family life and homeland are cultural categories in which people find meaning and therefore they are very important values for most people. After migration, people are determined to maintain their cultural and religious practices, but are forced to do so in different ways and in different locations. To demonstrate, Syrian immigrants in Turkey are subjected to judgmental looks when they wear their traditional clothes to the mosque, hence they do not want to wear their traditional clothes when they go to pray. What the immigrant is forced to leave behind begins to carry a more potent sense of definition for that individual. Immigrants associate these meanings with certain objects (Parrott, 2012; Burrell, 2012; Yi-Neumann, 2022). From this perspective, objects have an important place and role in the immigration experience. In fact, they are considered as agents that shape the immigrant identity as these objects stir emotions (Svasek, 2012). These objects are also important in the way they evoke emotions in relation to times and places which all come to play a key role in forming the immigrant's identity.

Deprivation that immigrants experience is embodied through an object. The object can also be viewed as emotional capital (Svasek, 2012, s. 22). People emotionally invest in objects and form bonds with them. In various contexts and situations, these objects affect individuals and evoke emotions. Therefore, the immigrant's relationship with the object is not a one-way relationship but a mutual interaction in which immigrants instill the object with emotions and are then influenced by it. In the light of all this, the experience of migration creates a context in which people engage with objects.

In the interviews I conducted with Syrians living in Turkey, I encountered instances of these relationships that hold various meanings. For instance, the Suleymani family continues to hold on to the keys of their home in Syria. These keys evoke multiple

significances for them, ranging from memories of the house they left behind to reflections on their daily diet:

Nejla: This was for it [showing me the keys]. And here this is, umm you say cellar? It is upstairs, you say attic I guess. We use a different word referring to cellar and attic at the same time. This key was for it. We used to stock our provisions there. We would always buy our food in advance.

Mehmet: Just like a market. We also had roofs inside. We used to get six tins of olive oil.

Nejla: We do not always do grocery shopping. [Using present tense]

Mehmet: Say rice, we would buy rice in sacks.

In this scenario, these keys, which belong to a house they no longer possess, affect them by evoking feelings and conjuring various meanings associated with the house, their diet, and everyday life. For example, the keys to the storeroom where they used to store their food, reminded them of the method they employed for food preservation. And it reveals the difference in diets between the country they settled in and the country they migrated from.

Based on Spinoza's views on emotions, Deleuze states that encounters in the outside world create an effect in the body. External encounters can cause joy or sadness, which in return increases or decreases the agency of the subject (Özer, 2016, s. 39). Objects mediate this, taking us from one emotion to another. Objects not only function as a mediator, but they are also carriers of memories, experiences and emotions.

Through the *Battalnâme*, we will witness a bond Hasan created with people who are no longer alive, and with traditions, culture and relations he had to abandon. Individuals re-imagine the meanings they long for through objects. Thus, the relationship with the object should be considered together with the emotions manifest in the imagined (Baldassar, 2008), as what is imagined moves people to feel and act (Burrell, 2012, s. 50). Through the objects, what people are forced to leave behind is embodied and re-imagined whenever the individual engages with them.

## **2. Social Life of a Traditional Story Telling Book: Battalnâme**

While Appadurai argues that objects also have a social life, he emphasizes the circulation of objects and the relations they are in during this circulation (Appadurai, 1988, s. 3). Specifically, drawing on this concept, this study focuses on the emotional capital of objects rather than their economic or use value. Accordingly, one could argue that the book trusted to Hasan by his ancestors has a social life. The book not only belongs to a person but also enables a network of relations and creates a bond between generations and in his family. On this matter, Appadurai (1988, s. 5) argues that: "...even though from a theoretical point of view human actors encode things with significance, from a methodological point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context."

The book *Battalnâme*, which Hasan carried with him during his journey in Syria and his immigration to Turkey, is a good example of the social life that develops around objects. As it is written in Ottoman Turkish, only certain people who are educated in that language can read it. Hasan is one of those who can read the book, having acquired this skill within the family. His father acquired the skill from his own father. Being able to read the book is also an inheritance from the ancestors.

The following quote from the interview indicated that the book, as property handed down generations, was not only an important family heirloom but also an heirloom of tradition. In his own words:

...So in old Turkmen family villages, there is this room called 'oda'. What does it mean? An adobe room built outside the existing house structure. In this room guests are welcomed. I mean guests usually sit in this room. They don't have any contact with the house members and they are welcomed in this room. People from the village or from the community gather in here. Those people who were educated, I mean those who were able to read in old Ottoman, would come and read the stories in that Battalnâme. And my father was one of these people. He used to read it. And sure my grandfather used to read before him. And he passed it to my father. And later to someone else. And this tradition no more exists at all. You know, because of modern life and such things as tv and the internet, this kind of traditions exists no more. And this book was given me in 2008.

In this respect, the book has more meaning than being solely a family heirloom. Hasan explains the importance of the book as follows: "And the importance of this book is that it represents a tradition. I mean it was read in the community. So, it represents a tradition indeed. It is a symbol."

There were manuscript copies of the Battalnâme in the region of North Syria and in places where Ottoman Turkish were dominant, such as Turkey. The language used in Battalnâme is a written language formulated according to Turkish grammar rules consisting of Turkish, Arabic and Persian words. Only those who were educated in Ottoman Turkish in the family could read it. All this creates a sense of community that emerged around the book. In his book titled 'Imaginative Communities', Anderson (2006, s. 77) comments upon the imaginary ties established through the language of print:

... They had no necessary reason to know of one another's existence; they did not typically marry each other's daughters or inherit each other's property. But they did come to visualize in a general way the existence of thousands and thousands like themselves through print language.

As Anderson mentions here, a common literacy language creates an imaginary bond between a group of people who never have a chance to see each other or who are unaware of each other. In the same way, Hasan created a feeling of acquaintance with people he had never met, and this feeling created an imaginary sense of community. Connerton (1989) argues that shared past constitutes a national identity.

Battalnâme not only provides this transmission through the stories in it, but also realizes this transmission through the rituals and practices formed around the book. For example, this book was read in a private room. In fact, people refer it as 'the room' which alone indicates that the space where people would gather and listen to the stories has an important role in conveying the tradition. Only men were allowed to be in the room. While reading the book in the room, murra, a type of coffee specific to the region, was served. Accordingly, there was both a traditional storytelling tradition and a set of practices that developed around the book. The room is where the tradition of storytelling is carried on. These rooms are traditional places where folk narratives are produced, shared, listened and performed.

These stories, of course, did not stay in the room as such, they have been spread orally throughout history. As a matter of fact, these stories are also a product of the transition from oral culture to settled culture (Aça et al., 2015, s. 164). When printing became common later on, those in the region who could read it were still considered privileged because most of the region still relied on the oral culture, and education was not encouraged much in the village in the past. Hence Hasan emphasizes the importance of being able to

read the book. As Hasan puts it in his own words: “Maybe this is a book that does not belong to my grandfathers indeed, but it is something for sure it was only in those hands who were able to read it. I mean this is about our culture. Battalnâme, and being able to read it, is very important there.”

According to Goody (1968, s. 236-37), those who are illiterate in written culture fall under the influence of the power of written culture. What Hasan says about the book can be read in this sense. Because only educated people can read it, the book indexes a social hierarchy and reinforces the status of the reader to those gathered in the room to listen. When asked if Hasan felt proud about being able to read it, he stressed the ability of only certain people to read this book:

It made me feel proud. I mean, being able to read Ottoman Turkish was considered important in the region. It gave me serious prestige. ... Those who were able to read it survive to the present day, that is, he ‘reads’, ‘reads a story’. It was always told so in the community. I don’t know, say, Abdullah’s father, they would say he used to read books well, [Specifically talking about his father] they would say may God have mercy on him, he used to gather people and give his wisdom while he was reading the book or something, so it has something to do with wisdom.

Hasan started reading the book at an early age. The excitement he said he experienced while reading this book in his childhood made his relationship with the book even more meaningful.

The room is a particular spatio-social setting, where meetings were held and traditional stories in the book were read. The room has a meaning around these practices. Therefore, it is an emotional agency which re-creates the tradition in every remembrance. Explaining autobiographical remembering as a mediator that unites our moments of self with others and our environment, Barclay (1996, s. 95) states that it gives the person comfort and a culturally valuable sense of personal coherence. As a facilitator in the remembering process, objects provide the continuity and preservation of memory thanks to their durability (Forty & Küchler, 2001, s. 2). Reflecting on the centrality of the book in his childhood, Hasan re-imagines the room in which this book was read, the chest (originally *sandık*)<sup>1</sup> in which it was kept, and the people gathered in the room:

I remember the house in the village. My home back in the village, my room, the place where we used to keep this book. There is this chest we call it, in which the book was kept. Chest, you know, like these cabinets we use as a closet. It has a rectangular lid, which opens upwards. [Here he recreates it, pretending to open the lid with his hands] I remember we used to keep it there. I remember the environment when I was a kid, picking up the book and reading it. What’s more... mostly my village, my house in the village and the chest in which we used to keep it.

These stories were also a reflection of the transition from oral culture to literacy culture. Ong (2014, s. 356-57) states that experience of knowledge transmission changes with writing technology, but compared to printing, handwritten manuscripts allow for a closer relationship with the author. Ong explains this relationship as follows:

By contrast, manuscripts, with their glosses or marginal comments (which often got worked into the text in subsequent copies) were in dialogue with the world outside their own borders. They remained closer

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<sup>1</sup> It’s a kind of closet which you keep belongings in, but it’s different from wardrobes and closets in the modern sense. It’s kind of a big box. People usually keep special things in it.

to the give-and-take of oral expression. The readers of manuscripts are less closed off from the author, less absent, than are the readers of those writing for print.

Reading, which Ong (2014, s. 155) argued became individualized after the invention of the printing press, was still a social action performed around the book during Hasan's father's childhood. It is noteworthy that Hasan found it important that the people of a period that he "did not see/could not see" touched this book. It had a social quality that brought people together, made acquaintances, and established friendships and bonds. As a matter of fact, he used the metaphors of 'touch' and 'hand' when talking about another importance of the book for him: "what makes this book important for me is that my ancestors had their hands on it.". Considering he did not meet his ancestors, he makes this connection through materiality of the book. The people are gone, but the book is still here. Hence he emphasizes 'hands' and 'touch' which make their existence concrete.

It is entrusted [originally *emanet*] to him. *Emanet* has an important meaning in Turkish, as in Arabic. The meaning of the word, which is etymologically of Arabic origin, is given in the Dictionary of the Turkish Language Institution means as "goods, persons, etc., which are temporarily left to someone and need to be protected by the person receiving them." (TDK 2022)<sup>2</sup>. It has an ethical dimension, a religious dimension and a social dimension (Çelik, 2011; İslam Ansiklopedisi, "Emanet"<sup>3</sup>). The expression in Turkish oral culture "*Emanet must not be betrayed*" (*Emanete ihanet olmaz*) indicates both its ethical and social dimensions. In this sense, the book is given to Hasan, but does not belong to him. It is not his private property but instead, it is an object that ties him to others and demands his care.

And I'm told to take care of it. And I knew the history of the book so if I hadn't known the importance of it, I could have left it there [Syria] but this book was passed on from generation to generation, and my father had his hands on it and he passed it on to me. And I find this very important, so I took it with me.

The responsibility creates relational ties that connect him to his ancestors and other families who share the same tradition. Jackson (2020, s. 41) discusses the tension between immigrants' aspirations to establish their individual identity in a new place and their obligation towards others. He argues that while we strive to shape our own path and destiny, we are all reliant on others. The book also reminds Hasan of his commitment to the lives of others who passed away before him or who will live after him. One's fate may depend on another, a deceased family member, or on the life of an unborn child. In the example of Hasan, the book was entrusted to him by his ancestors to pass on to those who will live after him. In this sense, the book connects his life to the fate of people he will never see in his life. Accordingly, he plans his future through his children and a new relationship of loyalty. In this respect, the book also belongs to his children as well. In fact, he will probably have the opportunity to 'touch' the lives of people he will not have the chance to see thanks to this book. Objects index a concrete past and enable a dialogue with the individual (Jones, 2007, s. 56-61). So, although it comes from the past, it also belongs to the future. The book outlived everybody who came before Hasan and will outlive anyone who will come after him. The physicality of materials often remains constant as people move through time.

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<sup>2</sup> Access date: 19.09.2023

<sup>3</sup> Access date: 19.09.2023

Hasan re-imagines everything from the room to the lid of the chest. While describing the times he used to take the book out of the chest and read, he brings the past to the present. He pretends to lift the lid of the chest as he is talking about it.

There is a note on the book that Hasan wrote when he was in his teens. This note includes his name and the date of that day. "...For example, I took a note on it here, saying Hasan Bin Abdusselam<sup>4</sup>, 1998. I had written it, this is my own note here.". Stressing the material dimension of writing, Hallam & Hockey (2001, s. 168) state that writing outlives the dead and resists time. This action of Hasan also makes a reference to the eternity of writing despite the temporality of human beings. According to Goody (2013, s. 82-85), thanks to writing, information is preserved, the past is recorded and transformed into information, and at the same time, the problem of distance and time disappears.

Objects can affect us like an echo from the past, since the object resists time and people change. Objects have a permanence that surpasses everyone, but considering the relationship of this permanence with the people who come after it, the continuity of the meaning of every object may be in question. When personal belongings are left to a particular person, the social life of the object might come to an end when the person concerned dies. Within the context of a traditional storytelling book, as in this case of the Battalnâme, stories regarding the book are told and passed on to the next generation with the book itself. So the book lives or stretches out more than a few people's lives. In this sense, the book differs from other objects continuity-wise.

When Hasan says "times when the book is read", time and space are intertwined and Hasan is constructing time in terms of an object. On this matter, Jackson (2020, s. 33) states that "our consciousness of time passing is inexorably connected to our physical awareness of the places in which we dwell, between which we travel, and wherein we are actively and bodily engaged."

Ricoeur (1980), defines 'continuity' as the sameness of character, which he expresses as permanence in time. He states that the 'self' indicates permanence at a different time in this continuity, despite the change of things over time. This is precisely how one can remain 'oneself'. Hasan's statement that the book is entrusted to him and that he will protect it is also a claim to maintain constancy in temporality. This is also Hasan's connection to and shaping of the future. He claims modernism and technology are a threat to this resistance. He states, "And this tradition no more exists at all. You know, because of modern life and such things as tv and the internet, this kind of tradition no longer exists."

Hasan claims to remain the same in time against all dangers and threats. Hasan's claim can be read as a resistance against time. From this perspective, the book is a reminder of this, and at the same time constitutes the affective dimension of his agency, and in return shapes his identity.

Ricoeur, discussing the narrative identity (cited by Vanleene Acar, 2011, s. 143-163) he argues that when we recount our experiences, we script it to make sense of self-hood. Each narrative of self is also a selection and trimming process. Therefore, Hasan's recollections while talking about the social life of the book also indicate what he cares about, and what he chooses to remember. What he chooses to remember shapes his identity in the present. Now is not disconnected from the past. As Hasan goes back to his childhood and describes his relationship with the book, he conveys his feelings as

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<sup>4</sup> Due to privacy and ethical reasons, the original name in the note has been changed.

follows: “But even just when talking to you I remember the excitement, when I remember the environment, whether you want or not, there is this longing happening”.

His words indicate that people remember emotions. Sometimes people remember feelings more clearly than the events themselves. This can be conceptualized as the economy of memory<sup>5</sup>. Göle (2007), while trying to convey the image of a woman he is trying to remember, emphasizes the importance of emotions as well as temporality in remembering. The author, trying to remember the details of a blonde woman he saw, says he is not sure whether the things he thinks he remembers are real, but he is sure of one thing: the excitement. Accordingly, emotion is as important as temporality when remembering a retrospective moment. As J. Robinson (1996, s. 203), puts it “As we think and talk about the meaningful experiences in our lives, we quickly confront feelings”.

Lefebvre (2016, s. 206) likens the festivals to a microcosm, describing it as a place where everything reminding of work is left out. Thus, the individual breaks away from everyday life and extends to a moment where he has comfort. With these words above, Hasan conveys how he felt in the room at that time. Despite the changes that occurred in his life with migration, the book also provides stability of his biographical identity through the emotions he remembers. While objects carry us in time, they take us to the times that we miss and feel the absence of. In this sense, the book provides a break from everyday life, and turns into a microcosm where desired or longed-for emotions and actions are re-experienced.

Hasan describes these periods in the center of the book and the room as follows: ‘Neither the room remains, nor are the people I met through this book there’, which indicates that the book and the room in which the book was read is considered as a period of time that Hasan identifies himself with. Today, however, there are other meanings to which the book points. The book, today, also reminds him of the house, people and tradition that he is now deprived of. In another location, this deprivation of course has a stronger intensity.

You know when you remember intangible things you feel you miss them, not that you do not, but I guess some tangible things makes the feeling even deeper... Everywhere is bombed, the room you used to sit at does not exist anymore, you will not be finding the chest. There is no one you have met via this book. You might say why it is only the book but not anything else. There is only this book. You will not want to take many things when you immigrate.

“You don't want to take too much with you when you migrate,” Hasan remarks. Given that this migration is forced migration, they opt for portable and small objects. the choice of this book, in which his personal memories intertwine with tradition, becomes more comprehensible. Consequently, he emphasized why he deemed only this book worthy of taking it with him when he came to Turkey.

The book evokes mixed feelings for Hasan. He carries tradition and people to the future with the book, and this is his responsibility. Besides this, he cannot escape from his past and the things and people he is deprived of. Hasan emphasizes this situation and the mediating role of the book as follows: “You cannot delete your past. There is no

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<sup>5</sup> Inspired by the concept ‘economy of the relationships’ by Miller&Parrott (2007, s. 511). He uses the concept to refer to the process of people reducing the photos they have to free up space on their phones. Here, it is a matter of freeing up space not on the phone but in the memory itself. All events are reduced to just a feeling.

chance of not remembering. I wish there was a chance to do so. I don't keep this book to remind myself of the past actually. This is only a link, a mediator.”

The book has an emotive force, as it reminds him of the painful absence of things he left behind or which do not exist anymore due to the bombings. Emotions which we experience in specific situations shape our memory and thus shape our identity as well. In the case of Syrian refugees, they had to abandon their country and belongings, and this affected them emotionally, so that home, country, family and everything comes to play a role in shaping their identity as those would be what they will remember most for the rest of their life. Milton (2020, s. 34), citing Lazarus, argues that “we evaluate the situations in which we find ourselves through a relationship between cognition and emotion. What we learn from a situation generates an emotional response, which affects how we think about that and other situations we encounter.”

### **Conclusion**

The objects that an individual associates with themselves may vary depending on the context. It may be a personal item belonging to a loved one, or it may be an object that embodies social and religious life. In the context of migration, the relationship with the object has different meanings. In the case of Hasan, traditional, religious and social life is revealed through the book. The Battalnâme is the only object he brought with him along with a prayer rug. They are important to him because he has nothing else from Syria that he can hold on to. In his words: “It gains its importance after coming here. Only two things came here from Syria. After talking to you, I thought about what else came here with me. Indeed, a prayer rug and a book came. Nothing else came except the clothes I was wearing.”

When a family heirloom is considered together with its literary quality, value, and the functions of the stories it contains, the book becomes an even more important object compared to a more personal item, such as a prayer rug. From this perspective the absence of meanings experienced after migration was embodied through the book. Every engagement with the book evokes emotions, and the emotions developed around the book connect him to a community he had to leave behind.

The book, Battalnâme, has a social life as it will eventually outlive him, and will be passed on to one of his children. It was read in the room back then with people coming together from different villages in Syria, but now it will be read in the family. It brought people together and established bonds between people and times. The book is not just about him, it belongs to a tradition, a culture and a family. Even though it was given to him, that still doesn't exactly mean it belongs to him. He carries the responsibility of others with him. He carries responsibility to pass the book to future generations. Accordingly, he will look for ways to make sure the social life of the book continues. In return it will shape and re-shape his identity.

This case study is important in terms of demonstrating how an immigrant relates to the objects they brought with themselves. I analyzed the social relations that developed around the book, and how the book turned into a matter of traditional and cultural meaning for Hasan in a different location. Accordingly, I argue that objects play an important role in the experience of immigrants in another country in relation to their identity.

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