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Transculturality and Self-discovery in Alev Croutier's *Seven Houses*

Alev Croutier'in *Yedi Evin Sırları* Kitabında Kültür Ötesilik ve Kendini Keşif

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ABSTRACT
With the increased human mobility, people can no longer define themselves within a monocultural identity, leading to the emergence of multi-layered and fluid identities, a phenomenon known as transculturality. At this intersection of cultures, new possibilities, perspectives, and ways of being emerge. Analysing Alev Lytle Croutier's *Seven Houses* (2003) is key to understanding how Croutier constructs her transcultural identity. Croutier, who describes her literary self as not belonging to any of the cultures in which she has lived, needs to uproot her established cultural truths and challenge them with a new understanding. Analysing the semi-fictional autobiography *Seven Houses* is crucial not only for understanding how Croutier constructed her transcultural feminist identity but also for exploring how she subverted the conventional norms of the Western novel and autobiography to forge a new literary self. This article aims to examine how Croutier crafted a transcultural space through her narrative style, positioned between East and West, spirituality and rationality, magical realism and reality. It also seeks to explore how she used this space to reconcile with her past and resolve the internal divisions within herself.

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Introduction

As population movement increases, the concepts and behaviours associated with belonging are constantly being challenged. Most people no longer feel that they belong to a single culture and have difficulty defining themselves within the boundaries of that culture. The fact that one cannot define oneself with a monocultural identity often leads to the emergence of multi-layered and fluid identities, understood as the phenomenon of transculturality. At this intersection of cultures, new possibilities, perspectives, and ways of being emerge, and it is precisely at this point that an analysis of Alev Lytle Croutier's *Seven Houses* becomes necessary. Croutier, who describes her literary self as not belonging to any of the cultures in which she has lived, needs to uproot her established cultural truths and challenge them with a new understanding. Her pursuit of a literary identity that transcends fixed expectations and assumptions leads to a space of "both and neither," where seemingly contradictory positions can coexist.

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Alev Lytle Croutier moved to the United States in 1963 at the age of eighteen and has remained there ever since. Her books have been translated into over twenty languages, making her one of the most translated writers of Turkish origin. In addition to *Seven Houses*, she is the author of several other novels, such as *The Palace of Tears* and *The Third Woman*, as well as the non-fiction books *Harem: The World Behind the Veil* and *Taking the Waters*. Academic circles have yet to give these seminal works the recognition they so richly deserve. While Füsun Döşkaya's insightful critiques (Döşkaya, 2022a, 2022b) provide valuable historical contextualisation and examine the portrayal of the United States of America within the Croutier's narrative, this essay extends upon existing scholarship. This analysis centers on the ways in which Croutier formed a transcultural identity and its manifestation through deliberate narrative choices such as genre, narrative style, use of magical realism, and palimpsest layering. Analysing the semi-fictional autobiography *Seven Houses* helps us understand not only how her transcultural feminist identity is formed but also how her narrative choices are used to create such a transcultural identity that exists in a realm where everything is interwoven. There is no separation between the real and the imaginary.

Although Croutier has spent most of her life in the United States and has written her literary works in English, she expresses a distinct sense of displacement when it comes to situating her writing within established literary traditions. As she articulates in one of her papers, "I am not part of the literary production in the USA. Neither am I in Turkey. I come from different experiences, different mythologies" (cited in Döşkaya 2022a, 838).[1] She, therefore, had to create an alternative realm between magic and rational into which she fitted. Parallel to what Ellen Berry and Mikhail Epstein note for transcultural writing, *Seven Houses* can thus be read as "an attempt at self-differentiation without losing one's own identity" (1999, 11).

Seven Houses, a narrative encompassing the life story of Croutier's family with a particular focus on her grandmother Zehra, deliberately disturbs conventional boundaries and creates a zone in which seemingly opposing forces, East and West, spirituality and rationality, coexist. Through her narrative, Croutier succeeds in realising Epstein's suggestion that transcultural writers forge a new interpersonal transcultural community to which they belong because of their differences rather than their similarities (2009, 328). Preserving these differences aligns with Audre Lorde's assertion that embracing difference can ignite our imaginations and ultimately turn into a creative function (2007, 111). This framework sheds light on Croutier's approach to autobiography, which transcends established literary boundaries and embraces novel modes of existence. Her writing seamlessly blends elements of magical realism, deeply ingrained in her Turkish heritage, with the conventions of Western realist traditions acquired through her education. This fusion generates an interconnected narrative space where the spiritual world of her grandmother harmonises with the rational framework of Western autobiography. Croutier further reflects on this point:

> García Márquez used to claim he never made it up but merely related what people believed was happening. I grew up in Turkey at a time when superstition and magic were still a prevalent part of the society. People talked about ghosts and communicating with the dead, told coffee fortunes, wore evil-eye charms, and some believed in birds or other creatures being spirits. This atmosphere was compounded with the literature I read, transcendentalists like Nizami, Rumi, and Tales from a Thousand and One Nights. But then, there was my Western education and rational conversion. I was enchanted with the nineteenth-century French writers like Balzac, Flaubert, Nerval, and Loti, and also Henry James. (2003, 308)

[1] These quotations are taken from Döşkaya's article "The Ottoman State and Turkey in Alev Lytle Croutier's Historical Novels" which refers directly to Croutier's conference lecture entitled "Losing a Language" (held at Dokuz Eylul University on 31 October 2007).

As emphasised in this quote, Croutier does not invent magical realist features to subvert Western standards or attack the system or the rational; rather, she, like Garcia Márquez, describes her people, her grandmother's way of life and her belief in the natural flow of things. This is not "magic," but her people's lived reality. This transcultural understanding genuinely informs the reader about a new transcultural medium that can merge aspects of both cultures (East/West) and transcend the spiritual and rational binary. This would create a space where more than one culture is perpetuated, filling in each other's gaps and highlighting "the fundamental insufficiency and incompleteness of any culture" (Berry and Epstein 1999, 3).

The spiritual undertone of the story, extending beyond the narrative itself, is also recognised in the acknowledgment section of the novel placed at the end of the book. In this section, Croutier recounts a belief prevalent during her childhood in Turkey: that birds embody departed spirits and recalls being told that her grandmother, upon her passing, transformed into a nightingale (Croutier, 2003, 305). Croutier later describes a Christmas morning marked by writer's block, a feeling she describes as a "bird [having] eaten [her] tongue." This metaphorical bird manifests itself when a bird, neither indigenous to the area where she lives nor on the migratory pattern, dramatically crashes into her window. This jarring event unleashes a torrent of creative energy, enabling Croutier to complete the first draft of *Seven Houses* in a single week. Shortly thereafter, she receives news of her father's passing on that same Christmas Day (Croutier, 2003, 305). This confluence of events, presented by Croutier, suggests a narrative genesis fueled by forces beyond rational explanation. The bird, symbolic of her grandmother's and father's spirit, becomes the source of Croutier's inspiration and the catalyst for the emergence of her creative voice. She herself reinforces this idea, stating "[w]hat if the dramatic drive of stories is determined by "fate" more than intellect? That's what I'm looking for" (2003, 310). This is precisely the space through which *Seven Houses* needs to be approached, for it is a narrative propelled more by fate than by intellect.

Seven houses inhabited by the İpekçi family (Surrogate for Croutier's family) at different intervals become seven narrators who share the ups and downs of the İpekçi family, with a particular focus on revealing different aspects of womanhood, making the book a story of female empowerment. "I do not remember very much of the house in İzmir (Smyrna) where I was born. It faced the sea, was five stories high, and it had a hammam (bath house) […] A giant granite rock behind the house isolated it from the world" (Croutier, 1989, 9-10).

The first house introduced in Croutier's *Seven Houses*, a five-story dwelling complete with a traditional Turkish bath (a detail corroborated in her non-fiction work, *Harem: The World Behind the Veil*), serves as the residence of Esma, the family matriarch. Croutier draws inspiration for Esma from her own grandmother, Zehra, who resided in a familial harem in Macedonia and hailed from a lineage of affluent gunpowder manufacturers. Set against the backdrop of the fin de siècle, Esma's story reflects a woman navigating societal expectations and asserting her independence by establishing a home for herself and her two sons despite opposition from her elder brother, İskender. While the first two chapters capture the essence of the Ottoman dynasty, the next, Spinster Flat, illustrates the drastic change in the history of a nation and how this affects the smallest social unit — the İpekçi family. The final chapter of the first part, The Turquoise House, deals with Amber's connection to her mother, Camilla, and her grandmother, Malika. The novel's second part centers on "prodigal" granddaughter Amber's return from the United States to the family's ancestral home in Izmir. A grown woman, Amber grapples with her familial legacy, particularly her connection to her mother and grandmother. The final chapter closes the circle and ends where it all began in "The House in Izmir." Amber, the architect, the granddaughter of Esma, whom the critics and I resemble Croutier herself, somehow inhabits all seven houses and becomes

the "architect of the novel" (Croutier, 2003, 309).[2]

The Choice of Genre, Narration Style, Use of Palimpsest

Not belonging to one cultural literary production finds its reflection in the choice of genre in which Croutier wrote *Seven Houses*. Dagnino's definition of the transcultural writer is echoed in Croutier's dissection of both novel traditions and autobiographical conventions. As Dagnino puts forward, transcultural writers compose "in more than one linguistic code and narrative genre, thereby creating texts characterised by a mix of linguistic/cultural spaces and genres" (2015, 183).

Although *Seven Houses* was written as a novel with two parts and a total of seven chapters, it is steeped in Eastern storytelling conventions. Contrary to Benjamin's assertion that the tradition of the novel is distinct from that of the fairy tale, legend, and storytelling, *Seven Houses* achieves to entangle these two distinct narrative modes (1963, 83-84).

> Turkish culture is a highly evolved story-telling tradition. It is not a reflective culture where people spend a lot time pondering on the meaning of life and self-introspection. But they do excel in story-telling. My childhood, too, was full of story-telling, both traditional and modern. My Levantine grandmother from Bornova told Hellenic myths—I knew the Agamemnon trilogy and the house of Atrius at the same time as Cinderella or Snow White. Then came the transcendentals, Leyla ve Mecnun, 1001 Gece Masallari, etc. (cited in Döşkaya, 2022a, 838)

Croutier's positionality as a writer navigating multiple cultural landscapes informs her distinctive approach to narrative. Croutier views storytelling as a powerful form of oral tradition that helps her preserve her faith, culture, and roots. As she articulates, "I am not part of the literary production in the US. Neither am I in Turkey." This sense of existing between literary traditions becomes a defining characteristic of her work. She is not a storyteller; she is a novelist; however, she expands and punctures the boundaries that form the conventions of the novel. These holes are created by using features of magical realism, fairy tale conventions, and the tradition of storytelling —a tradition deeply rooted in her childhood experiences.

This genre hybridity is evident from the beginning of her semi-autobiographical work, which begins with the archetypal fairy tale phrase, "Once upon a time here in Smyrna." The beginning of the semi-autobiographical novel as a fairy tale is remarkable because it interrupts the reader's expectations of autobiography, which is expected to be a purely factual narrative, and releases the reader into a realm where the boundary between fantasy and reality is no longer clear. This blurring is further amplified by the magical realist traits and all the supernatural elements. Beyond the use of magical realism, autobiographical conventions are further challenged by the use of fictional elements and unconventional narrative devices. This deliberate blurring of fact and fiction serves to disrupt the traditional authority of the autobiographical voice, creating a space where multiple truths can coexist.

> I was deeply moved to describe an afternoon in my hundred-year-old grandmother's garden in Izmir. That story began clustering with other scenes with other family members, and then the fictional characters attached themselves, and soon I had a great tangle, a chaotic mélange of story and history. (Croutier, 2003, 234)

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[2] It is worth noting that the houses in *Seven Houses* not only chronicle the İpekçi family's evolution but also offer a nuanced perspective on Turkey's transition from empire to republic during the 20th century. While a comparative analysis of the official, secular, male-centric historiography with the spiritual narratives of the İpekçi women would undoubtedly yield compelling insights, such an endeavor falls outside the scope of this present study.

While *Seven Houses* is thinly fictionalised, its autobiographical underpinnings are easily recognisable. Croutier's highly acclaimed non-fiction book, *Harem: The World Behind the Veil*, in which Croutier draws from a number of first-hand narratives and memoirs as well as her own family history, becomes the sourcebook through which the autobiographical details are easily detected.

Croutier's approach to autobiography, as already stated, extends beyond the mere inclusion of fictional and magical elements. To establish authorial authority in an autobiography, one must write her/his autobiography in the first-person narrative. The narrator in *Seven Houses* is neither a singular "I" nor an omniscient third person; instead, Croutier employs the unconventional strategy of imbuing the dwellings inhabited by her family with narrative agency. This deliberate departure from established norms aligns with William Howarth's assertion that "even the simplest stylistic choices, of tense or person, are directly meaningful since they lead to larger effects, like those of metaphor and tone" (1980, 89). This conscious decision not to write a direct autobiography but to choose the houses as narrators makes sense, as Howard suggests, and definitely leads to more significant effects. Returning to Lorde's assertion that differences can give rise to new literary sub-genres that welcome innovative forms of existence and transcend conventional literary boundaries, these deliberate choices lead to a new form of autobiography that can exist outside the Western canon. Creating a new form of autobiography that can exist outside the boundaries of Western expectations is also necessary. As Gusdorf puts it, "It would seem that autobiography is not to be found outside of our cultural area; one would say that it expresses a concern peculiar to Western man […] When Gandhi tells his own story, he uses Western means to defend the East" (1980, 29). Croutier's writing, thus, challenges the autobiography notion suggested by Gusdorf by offering a form of self-narration that draws upon her own cultural background and resists easy categorisation within existing Western literary frameworks.

Croutier's decision to employ houses as the narrators in *Seven Houses* presents a compelling tension between literary innovation and established conventions of Western thought. This unconventional narrative strategy, while imbuing the text with a sense of magical realism, simultaneously challenges the Western emphasis on rationalism and verifiability. Attributing narrative authority to inanimate objects like houses can, for readers steeped in Western literary traditions, strain the bounds of believability and potentially undermine the perceived reliability of the narrative.

It is also critical to remember that autobiography, as William Howard argues, follows certain rules, one of which is the theme. "Theme may arise from the author's general philosophy, religious faith, or political and cultural attitudes. His theme is personal, but also representative of an era" (1980, 87). While inherently personal, the thematic concerns of an autobiography have evolved over time and reflected the changing demands of the era in which it was written. A brief survey of the history of the autobiographical genre, from the earliest apologies, orations, and confessions to the more contemporary forms such as memoirs and transcultural narratives, has revealed that autobiography has always been tailored to the converting intellectual and cultural landscapes of different periods. Each form, in their turn, reproduces the shifts in aesthetics that correspond to the evolving expectancies and sensibilities of its time.

Within this trajectory of evolution, transcultural autobiography emerges as a particularly salient framework for examining Croutier's work. Sonja Sarkowsky defines transcultural autobiographies as narratives that "overtly and self-reflexively refer to two or more cultural contexts and/or culturally coded narrative strategies" (2012, 629). By incorporating the houses with the narrative agency and using different modes of narrative techniques that are not typically accepted within the framework of formal autobiography, Croutier transcends the limitations of a single cultural

perspective, offering a richly layered and multifaceted exploration of autobiographical writing, reflecting the needs of her area.

> One of my European editors said to me, "But Alev, houses don't talk." Literally they don't, of course. But this is a point of view that allowed me to stay in the precinct of one house at a time, the constraint of one place, like a steady camera recording the incidents as in cinema verité. The inherent challenges were the unity of the place. Everything had to occur within the vicinity of the houses. This constraint liberated me in a sense to explore the interior world of the characters through an objective lens. (Croutier, 2003, 235)

The utilisation of stationary houses as narrative agents in Croutier's *Seven Houses* presents a compelling paradox within the framework of transcultural autobiographical practice. While this innovative approach facilitates the deconstruction of traditional autobiographical norms and aligns with a transcultural sensibility, it simultaneously raises questions about potential limitations. Can a narrative framework rooted in fixity and immobility adequately capture the experiences of a transcultural individual whose identity is often forged through movement and displacement? Croutier deftly navigates this potential pitfall by illuminating the paradoxical nature of "home" as a site of both constraint and liberation. The seemingly ironic phrase "this constraint liberated me" encapsulates this duality, exposing and subverting prevailing cultural assumptions about domesticity and female agency. While domestic spaces and traditional gender roles are often perceived as restrictive, particularly for women, Croutier reclaims and redefines these spaces as potential sites of empowerment and self-discovery. The houses, through their roles as narrators, become more than mere physical structures; they transform into symbolic spaces where the women who inhabit them can flourish and forge their own identities.

The idea of using immobile houses as narrators allows for the deconstruction of traditional autobiographical norms and entails a transcultural approach. However, this innovative approach simultaneously raises questions about its potential limitations, particularly for a transcultural writer whose identity is forged in movement. Croutier deftly dispels this pitfall by showing that returning to the cosy embrace of home can be both touching and liberating. The seemingly ironic phrase "this constraint liberated me" encapsulates this duality and reflects the nature of the story by exposing and criticising prevailing assumptions about domesticity and female agency. Although domestic life is presented as a constraint that can restrict women, and houses as narrators can restrict the author, Croutier redefines these spaces as potential sites of empowerment and self-discovery. The houses, as narrators, become more than mere physical structures; they transform into symbolic spaces where the women who inhabit them can flourish and forge their own identities.

Although Croutier drastically challenges the traditions of autobiography by using houses as narrators, she actually succeeds in dismantling hierarchies and creating a more egalitarian narrative space than a first-person narrative could. According to Eli Friedlander, telling stories in the first person promotes truthfulness and the dismantling of hierarchies: "If telling everything is of the essence, the events of life are equalised, and none can have higher significance in and of itself" (2014, 60). However, rather than using first-person narration, with the houses functioning as impartial observers capturing the unfolding events, Croutier manages to convey the feeling of a steady camera capturing moments through an objective lens as in a film verité. This technique enhances the sense of authenticity and immediacy while also deconstructing hierarchies.

Beyond analysing houses as narrative devices defying autobiographical traditions, it is equally important to consider how houses in Croutier's work also take on profound spiritual significance. To illustrate, in the following passage, Croutier describes the immediate spiritual connection and excitement Esma -drawing from Croutier's grandmother, Zehra- feels at the sight of her respective

house:

> Like an apparition, Esma shuffled from room to room, as if talking to the invisible faces on the walls, touching and smelling objects that caught her eye, chanting prayers. She opened the doors to every room cramped with dusty episodes […] Her eyes watered. She had come home, Love at first sight […] From that moment, we were inseparable. Even after death. (Croutier, 2003, 7-8)

As Gaston Bachelard asserts, the house serves as our refuge in the world, our primordial universe, a true cosmos in every sense of the word. Its intricate symbolism transcends mere functional aspects like room count or bathroom size. Entire universes find their place within its walls (1994, 5-9). Bachelard's assertion finds compelling expression in Croutier's depiction of Esma's relationship with her house. For Esma, the house is a refuge, a sanctuary, or a spiritual haven. She experiences a spiritual bond not only with the house itself but also with other life forms, such as djinns and peris that can dwindle within the walls. This spiritual dimension is further reflected in the passage that takes place after the great fire that almost destroyed all of Smyrna. Esma endeavours to save the house and breathe life back into it.

> Finally, Esma decided it was safe to unboard me but I had suffered so many scars … Touch the walls. Touch the walls, children. Give them your breath. Bring the spirits back […] Hosh! Hosh! Hosh! Hosh! Hosh! For Forty days and forty nights. The center of interest. The object of desire. Washed and scrubbed. Sang and smudged. New curtains. New kilims. New paint. New hope. (Croutier, 2003, 37)

Interestingly, the era in which Esma lived actually coincided with the fierce feminist demands that emerged in Europe. Yet her path to empowerment takes a different route as she refuses to give up her family or her role as a homemaker. As is evident from the passages above, Esma is closely connected to the house and becomes the proud guardian of the house. While European women empowered themselves through suffrage demands, and emphasised the separation of traditional gender roles and domestic spaces, Esma's power is initiated through the reawakening of the divine feminine in female spirituality. This feminine spirituality manifests in Esma's deep attachment to her home and her commitment to ritual offerings such as reading spiderwebs, pebbles, and coffee grains, lighting candles to Asclepius, offering sacrifices to Yadaji, Kum baba, the lord of sand, and Su baba, the famous water saint, and crafting magical charms. Esma's ability to read the language of spiderwebs and coffee grains reflects a kind of knowledge that goes beyond the limits of the rational mind. Her spiritual practices, passed down through generations of women, as we will see later, connect her to a lineage of feminine wisdom and power, offering a path to empowerment rooted in the pre-Oedipal, pre-linguistic realm of the maternal unconscious. These performances, which are not immediately available to symbolic-oriented minds, may help to grasp the spiritual connection with the unconscious and pre-oedipal mother.

> I can't allow you to live in a strange city all alone! In a big house like this! Who is to protect you? What will the people think? Her brother Iskender paced, exasperated. […] A woman shouldn't stray from her family.
> "This is my home," Esma was firm [….] God is on our side. (Croutier, 2003, 9)

Esma's courage is inextricably linked to her spirituality and the way she experiences her connection to the divine, never doubting that God would abandon her. This aligns with Wendy B. Faris' assertion that a writer's narrative is more connected to the "unconscious form of discourse that relates back to a connection with the maternal, and the spiritual, than with the symbolic kind of speech, which is allied with the father, patriarchal society, and rational thought" (2004, 171). Through the empowering passivity of spirituality and magical realism, Esma overcomes the limitations imposed by societal expectations. Not only does she become an influential figure who

can rival even the patriarch of her family, but she also becomes an inspiration to her prodigal granddaughter, Amber.

Croutier masterfully illustrates the transformative power of Esma's spirituality in a passage that seamlessly blends elements of magical realism, fairy tale motifs, prayers, music, art, colours, peace, and supernatural creatures. They are all intertwined, supporting each other in achieving perfection and serving as a solution to the never-ending human quest. When faced with financial difficulties, Esma uses her creative nature and nomadic ancestry to weave prayer rugs that have a spiritual meaning and follow the same pattern her mother taught her in Macedonia. Esma's spiritual energy is channelled through the meditative process of weaving into the intricate designs and vibrant colours of the rugs. She wove just like a harpist. Her prayer rugs, with their frenetic frenzy of patterns and colours and their colourful, bewitching trances, opened gateways into fantasy worlds reminiscent of fairy tales. These rugs, described as "magic carpets," were so unique that everyone wanted one. Customers who bought Esma's magic carpets floated away to realms of peace, beauty, and enchantment. In addition to overcoming her financial difficulties, Esma finds great inner serenity and spiritual pleasure through her artistic endeavours. Like Penelope, she concentrated on refining her designs. Her weaving, plucking, and pulling created melodies that were soothing to the sensitive ears. So much so that djinns and peris crawled out of their caves and danced (Croutier 2003, 44-45). This harmonious coexistence of the human and the supernatural highlights the permeability of boundaries in Esma's reality, a world where magic and spirituality infuse everyday life.

> My mother weaves her pain
> Entangling the threads
> So they will not break
> Their tension.
> My mother weaves her sacred self. (Croutier, 2003, 45)

This beautifully written passage, reminiscent of a fairy tale, perfectly encapsulates the essence of Esma's spirituality and its empowering effect on her feminine identity. The connection between harp playing and weaving becomes a manifestation of her artistic self. In a way, through her artistic self, Esma transcends the symbolic language and participates in the blissful realm of the pre-Oedipal. Through which she can communicate with invisible beings such as djinns and peris and even make them dance. This state of being also manifests itself as a long sought-after loving, soft hand that can soothe and bring peaceful dreams to anyone who comes into contact with the magic carpets. This passage further emphasises the significance of the connection both with nomadic ancestry and matriarch of her family in shaping Esma's strength and independence.

Esma's case also mirrors Croutier's own transcultural positioning, as her power also stems from her "difference" and her refusal to sever her ties to her ancestors. As Croutier herself states, "It's an odd position and in a way difficult, because I don't belong anywhere" (cited in Stone, 2006, 179). This resonates with Epstein's observation that those who "[have] turned their back on their past, become prisoners of a newly acquired culture. Only a small number of people, when acceding to two or several cultures, succeed in integrating them and thus are able to keep their freedom from any of them" (1999, 330). Croutier thus succeeds in keeping herself free from each of the cultures to which she has been exposed and in creating a transcultural palimpsest.

Another instance where Croutier draws from Eastern traditions is the reference to the transcendental love story of Layla and Macnun and Sufi spirituality. Esma not only manages to live on her own at the fin de siècle but also has a transcendental love affair with Süleyman Bey, the tutor of her sons. This relationship, transcending physical desire, becomes a source of spiritual sustenance for her. When her brother attempts to intervene and kill Süleyman during one of his

nocturnal visits, Esma's response is not one of overt confrontation but a prolonged silence. Her preference for silence may sound like a passive retreat and the result of a submissive attitude, yet this reading would be unfair to such a strong woman. Her silence can be read as a deliberate choice of defying to "enter masculine verbal space," recalling Clara in *the House of Spirits* (Ronie 1994, 189) and Wendy Faris' contention that women are keen to build a pre-Oedipal language register that links back to a relationship with the maternal (Faris 2004, 171).

During the heydays of the First World War, Esma, who is still inconsolable because she has lost Süleyman, does not know what to do when she suddenly sees him in her room. Croutier sets the stage for this pivotal moment with the following description:

> Down on earth, Esma unrolled her prayer rug, though it was past the prayer time; she peeled off her clothes just like in the hamam […]
> For hours and hours.
> Never a greater blessing.
> Never a more ardent prayer.
> Knowing it was the last.
> Before sunrise, Süleyman vanished.
> From that day on, Esma surrendered herself to prayer. It was like she's gone mad. (Croutier, 2003, 29)

This intertextual depiction of sexual desire and prayer may seem unsettling, yet for Esma, the sexual act was never a mere pleasure but an act of worship that reflects the devotion and utter bliss she experiences when praying. This transcendental love relationship between Esma and her lover Suleyman is reminiscent of the transcendental love of Layla and Macnun, which is a recurring motif in Sufi poetry. According to the Sufi understanding of love, when a man and a woman transcend their ordinary existence and reach a higher level of being, they draw closer to a divine experience (Khan, Mahmood, and Khan, 2022, 450). This concept reinforces the novel's exploration of spirituality and female empowerment, transforming sexual love from a solely physical act into a catalyst for spiritual growth.

Along with magical realism, Croutier employs palimpsestic layering as a critical narrative strategy. She points out on the very first page that the shores of the Aegean were home to a multitude of human civilisations, starting from the Olympian gods, Adonis, and Aphrodite, to Mother Mary, Homer, Anthony, and Cleopatra. "They all occupied the same land, along the same sea. The Aegean. The mirror of mirrors. […] To go back in time. Live past lives. Be other people. Some places store memory. This is one" (Croutier, 2003, 5-6). This emphasis on the different civilisations that lived on one and the same coast is reminiscent of palimpsestic parchment, where a later script is superimposed over the erased script but still bears the visible traces of the earlier script. Croutier extends this metaphor to the narrative structure itself, suggesting that the present unfolds upon a canvas of obscured histories. This is exemplified in the "Spinster Apartment," the third house featured in the novel, which becomes a vessel for revealing past narratives and hidden layers of time.

> Years later, when I was demolished, and they excavated the foundation, then workers uncovered terra cotta artifacts—Neolithic pots and pitchers, the remnants of six thousand years ago, way back from the matriarchal cultures that existed even before the Hittites. […] Little did anyone know that underneath, less than twenty meters, a whole ancient city lay not yet uncovered. So, after all, I was an old soul deep down. Despite the mask. (Croutier, 2003, 121)

Not only does Croutier evoke the palimpsestic stratification of human nature and the earth through archaeology, history, writing, and storytelling, but she also skilfully layers multiple disparate ideas

over one another without undermining any of them. In a way, it reveals the age-old reality that all human beings are, if looked at closely, transcultural beings as a culture cannot exist in a vacuum. Croutier sought to create a new creative medium by fusing all these attributes together to create a transcultural environment that could be both all and none simultaneously.

Chapter opening quotes are another example of palimpsestic technique. The use of quotes in every chapter, as she notes in one of her interviews, preserves the politics of the chapter by "capsulating each chapter's theme." "One should know beforehand that there will be in this book no terrible adventures, no extraordinary hunts, no discoveries, no dangers; nothing but the fancy of a slow walk, at the pace of a rocking camel, in the infinite bliss of the pink desert" (Croutier, 2003: 3). The strategic use of Pierre Loti's quote at the beginning of the novel not only "sets up the rhythm of the novel" but also foreshadows that male aesthetic standards are criticised throughout the novel. Croutier not only shifts the conventions of autobiography but also challenges and subverts the traditional male aesthetic, which valorises heroic events like wars and scientific breakthroughs as the only subjects worthy of great literature. Echoing Helene Cixous' remark that "the power and resources of femininity […] can be reabsorbed, covered up in the ordinary" (1991, 31), Croutier writes about Esma's daily life but transforms it into a powerful magical tool, as discussed in the preceding section.

The second part of the book, entitled "The Prodigal Daughter's Return," opens with a quote from Medea: "You have navigated with a raging soul far from the paternal home, passing beyond the seas' double rocks and now you inhabit a foreign land" (Croutier, 2003, 193). This sets "the emotional landscape" for this section while encapsulating the novel's broader political and thematic concerns. Croutier simultaneously deconstructs established literary conventions and prompts reflection on the multifaceted nature of the human search for belonging, particularly the yearning for an irrecoverable past.

This tension between detachment and belonging mirrors Croutier's own life experiences. She acknowledges this recurring motif of "crossroads" in various interviews, stating, "crossroads intrigued me, and so I wrote something about the melancholy one felt of a road not taken. Little did I know then that the crossroads would be a paradigm for my life" (as cited in Döşkaya, 2022, p. 838). Similarly, she declares in another interview that "I would always be standing at the crossroads of East and West" (Stone, 2006, p. 178). Croutier's journey towards an authentic transcultural identity necessitates a reconciliation with her past, a process mirrored in the novel. As Judy Stone observes, "*Seven Houses* characterizes a prodigal daughter's return to Turkey as a moment of reconciliation with the past" (2006, p. 178). Croutier, like a prodigal daughter, navigates beyond geographical boundaries to achieve a sense of wholeness and reconcile her own internal conflicts.

This urge for reconciliation is achieved in the novel through a mixture of the spiritual and the everyday. The first chapter ends with the birth of Esma's granddaughter Amber (a surrogate mother for Croutier) and Esma's death. Through her spiritual connection, which transcends mortality, Esma is able to exercise power over her newborn granddaughter.

> Esma prayed, "Great God. Take my life instead. Let my grandson live. Take my soul. Take what you want from me." […] Esma picked up the tiny little girl in her fragile arms and looked into her eyes—void as if she belonged to the soulless ones. She cut the chord. She licked the vernix. She breathed on the child's face. Within seconds, the baby's eyes became alert and inquisitive like a sea mammal […] Esma perceived in her granddaughter the reflection of her own spirit … as if they shared a great secret but felt herself swiftly expiring. (Croutier, 2003, 58)
>
> That night, in her sleep, she separated from her body. At dawn, Gonca came running upstairs.

> The sight of her mistress curled up on her prayer rug like a fava bean as in the old days of her passion. Brought tears to her eyes. She covered Esma. Then, she knew.
> A blue spirit floated over Esma's lifeless body; formless at first, it began to change like the clouds until a piece of it broke off and became a nightingale. The bird flew out the window, perched on the Adonis tree. The muezzin chanted the dawn prayer. The nightingale sang. And the baby began to cry. (Croutier, 2003, 59-60)

In the closing scene of the first chapter, Esma's regression to a pre-oedipal state, symbolised by the metaphor of "a fava bean," culminates in her transformation into a nightingale. This metamorphosis removes Esma from the symbolic material world, and she finds herself totally immersed in a spiritual, pre-oedipal state. This rather magical end of the first chapter indeed foreshadows Amber's (and by extension, Croutier's) need to reconcile with her cultural heritage and her grandmother. When Amber returns to her birthplace at the novel's end, it is as if she is responding to that earlier foreshadowing, actively seeking a reconciliation that feels both necessary and inevitable.

> Amber sat in front of the worn marble sink and poured a pitcher of cold water over her shoulders. Goosebumps spread all over her flesh. How lucky am I to have choices, she thought. How lucky. The muezzin's voice rose in the air. The nightingale sang a song of acceptance. A bus went by. (Croutier, 2003, 303)

The novel's end becomes reminiscent of the first chapter's ending. Amber, now possessing both the secret of her grandmother and the rational lens of Western education, finds herself in the hammam, a space symbolic of being reborn. As she poured cold water over her shoulders she thought how lucky she was to have choices. For Amber, the act of returning to her birthplace, coupled with the agency to choose her own path forward, creates a fertile ground for healing and self-discovery. Similarly, Croutier's transcultural identity allows her to embrace the paradoxical existence of being both and neither. As Croutier reveals in an interview with Judy Stone, "*Seven Houses* brought her closer to her Turkish heritage, making the theme of reconciliation very important to her" and adds, "It helped to free me to write about other things" (2006, 178).

Conclusion

Alev Croutier's *Seven Houses*, a semi-autobiographical narrative about Croutier's family, is a journey into the heart of a family. It offers a tale of two sides: East/West, spirituality/rationality, and magical realism/logic, which complement rather than cancel each other out. Analysing this centuries-old family saga is essential to understand not only how Croutier developed her transcultural feminist identity but also how she broke with the conventions of the Western novel and autobiography to create a new literary identity. In an era characterised by fluid identities that cannot be tied to specific cultures, Croutier transcended not only her maternal culture but also other cultures to which she was exposed. As a person split between two cultures and nations, Croutier needed to understand her grandmother in order to understand who she was. So Amber, the prodigal daughter, returns and buys her ancestral home in search of healing and a sense of belonging. Croutier, who stands at the crossroads of East and West, takes neither and walks a new path that corresponds to her transcultural identity. This third path becomes the narrative of *Seven Houses*.

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