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THE ECHOES OF FORCED DISPLACEMENT: READING *GURBETTEN İNİLTİLER* 3 FROM EDWARD SAID'S PERSPECTIVES

Abstract

Mircevat Ahiskali is one of the outstanding and influential external exile authors of Ahiska, Georgia, descent. Through his wide engagement with multiple literary genres, the author plays a crucial role in enriching Ahiska exile literature as a distinct field of literary studies. Ahiskali's literary works are generally based on real-life events such as the mass exile of Ahiska Turks from Georgia by the Soviet authoritarian and totalitarian regime in 1944 and the Fergana massacres in 1989. Through his fictional characters from the Ahiska Turk community, the author artistically and effectively illustrates the adversities, discrimination, racism, and impediments they encounter within the Soviet Union. In the third volume of his *Gurbetten İniltiller* series, titled *Karış Karış Fergana 3* (2010), which constitutes the focus of this study, Ahiskali recounts the agony and suffering of the Ahiska Turks during the Fergana pogroms. Through the protagonist Cömert Şakir, the author demonstrates how the Soviet authorities obstructed the efforts of the leaders of the Ahiska Turks as well as the community as a whole. He also illustrates the just struggle of Cömert and his comrades, who seek to secure the right to repatriation and reclaim their rightful entitlements. Furthermore, the author depicts his personal experience of internal, external, and self-imposed exile, which he succeeds in transforming into an enriching experience.

The aim of this study is to examine the struggle for repatriation of the protagonist, Cömert Şakir, and the Ahiska Turk community, while also analysing the experience of exile endured by both the individual and the community in the aftermath of the violent events that took place in the Fergana region of Uzbekistan. Furthermore, the study explores how, during his exile in Azerbaijan following prolonged and arduous struggles, the protagonist seeks to enrich Ahiska literature by revealing the oppression inflicted upon both himself and his community to the wider world, aspiring to become a writer and to produce literary works as a form of testimony.





Therefore, the study places particular emphasis on Edward Said's reflections on exile and displacement to interpret how exile provides the protagonist with a distinct and transformative perspective.

Keywords: Ahıskalı, Said, Exile, Displacement, Fergana Pogroms.

ZORUNLU YERİNDEN EDİLMENİN YANKILARI: GURBETTEN İNİLTİLER 3 ROMANIN EDWARD SAİD'İN BAKIŞ AÇISIYLA İNCELENMESİ

Öz

Mircevat Ahıskalı, Ahıska Türklerinin sürgün edebiyatı alanında öncü isimlerden biri olarak öne çıkmaktadır. Yazar, farklı edebî türlerde eserler vererek Ahıska sürgün edebiyatının gelişimine ve zenginleşmesine önemli katkılar sunmaktadır. Ahıskalı'nın edebî eserleri, genel olarak 1944 yılında Sovyet otoriter ve totaliter rejimi tarafından Ahıska Türklerinin Gürcistan'dan toplu olarak sürgün edilmesi ile 1989'daki Fergana katliamları gibi gerçek tarihsel olaylara dayanmaktadır. Yazar, Ahıska Türk toplumu temelinde kurguladığı karakterler aracılığıyla, bu toplumun Sovyetler Birliği sınırları içerisinde maruz kaldığı zorlukları, ayrımcılığı, ırkçılığı ve eşitsizlikleri etkili bir biçimde okuyucularına aktarmaktadır. Bu çalışmanın merkezinde yer alan *Gurbetten İnilteler Sürgün* (2007), *Gurbetten İnilteler Yaşam Savaşı* (2007) üçlemesinin üçüncü cildi olan *Karış Karış Fergana* (2010) adlı eserde yazar, Fergana olayları sırasında Ahıska Türklerinin yaşadığı derin acıları ve trajik deneyimleri ele almaktadır. Romanın başkahramanı Cömert aracılığıyla, Sovyet otoritelerinin Ahıska Türklerinin ve onların önderlerinin haklarını geri alma yönündeki çabalarını nasıl engellediğini gözler önüne sermektedir. Cömert ve arkadaşlarının anayurtlarına geri dönme ve tarihsel haklarını yeniden kazanma yönündeki meşru ve onurlu mücadelesi, eserin temel yapısını oluşturmaktadır. Ahıskalı ayrıca, içsel, dışsal ve gönüllü sürgün deneyimlerini bu metin aracılığıyla yansıtarak, sürgün olgusunun nasıl üretken ve dönüştürücü bir yaşantıya dönüştürülebileceğini ortaya koymaktadır.

Bu çalışmanın amacı, başkahraman Cömert Şakir'in ve Ahıska Türk toplumunun geri dönüş mücadelesini incelemek ve Özbekistan'ın Fergana bölgesinde yaşanan kanlı olayların ardından hem bireysel hem de toplumsal düzeyde deneyimlenen sürgün olgusunu ele almaktır. Bunun yanı sıra çalışma, uzun ve zorlu mücadelelerin ardından Azerbaycan'da sürgün hayatı süren başkahramanın, kendisine ve halkına yöneltile baskı ve zulmü dünya kamuoyuna duyurma amacıyla yazarlığı ve eser üretimini nasıl benimsediğini incelemektedir. Bu bağlamda çalışma, özellikle Edward Said'in sürgün ve yerinden edilme kavramlarına ilişkin düşüncelerine odaklanarak, sürgünün başkahramana sunduğu özgün ve dönüştürücü bakış açısını yorumlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Ahıskalı, Edward Said, Sürgün, Yerinden Edilme, Fergana Pogromları.

Introduction

The Ahıska Turks are one of the minority groups that inhabit the border regions of Türkiye and Georgia. During the Second World War, this community faces a traumatic and





tragic mass exile. Under extremely harsh conditions, the Ahiska Turks are forcibly removed from their homeland, Ahiska/Caucasia, and exiled to Central Asian countries such as Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan. By direct order of Joseph Stalin, members of the Ahiska Turk community, mainly women, children, and elderly men, construct the Borjomi railway. Ironically, this railway becomes a cemetery for some of them (Aslan 1995: 8) and, for others, a path leading toward uncertainty, pain, and darkness. In the cold and freezing November of 1944, the Ahiska Turks are given only a brief period, approximately two to three hours, to prepare for evacuation. They have no opportunity to take their lifelong belongings and are allowed to carry only a small amount of clothing and limited food supplies to survive under harsh conditions. As a result, the community begins its forced displacement almost empty-handed. More than 100,000 to 120,000 Ahiska Turks are transported in cattle waggons designed for animals and goods and are forcibly exiled and uprooted from their homes (Kurt 2017: 104).

It is important to note that this community endures a devastating exile and faces systematic punishment. The Ahiska Turks are considered a punished community, so they cannot move, even between villages. They live under military rule for twelve years, and after the death of Joseph Stalin, they receive limited permission to travel to other regions, with the exception of Ahiska (Kurt 2018: 199). It is highly probable that the Soviet totalitarian regime and its leaders aim to assimilate and weaken the community by dispersing its members among other ethnic and minority groups, in the hope that the Ahiska Turks abandon their Turkish identity and ties with their homeland. After the death of Stalin and the partial restoration of travel rights in the mid-1950s, the community and its leaders persistently demand repatriation to Ahiska. The community leaders such as Mevlüd Bayraktar, Enver Odabaşev, and his fellow defendant Ellez İzzetov make significant contributions to the legal struggle and repatriation efforts of the community. A major step in this process was achieved in 1962 with the establishment of the Central Union Organisation, the Temporary Organisation Committee (GOK-VOK), and a permanent commission (Buntürk 2007: 233).

Although the GOK-VOK and the community at large make efforts to deal with the hardships and obstacles throughout the struggle, the Soviet authorities (Moscow) consistently shift responsibility from one authority to another. In other words, the authorities put the burden on Georgia, while Georgia as a member of the Soviet Union, in turn, claims it has restricted legal power to implement definite legal measures. Moreover, the Georgian authorities assert that issues regarding repatriation of the exiled population take place out of the jurisdiction of the country (Niyazov and İzzatov 2007: 10). Correspondingly, the repatriation issue is transferred back and forth between Moscow and Georgia, with neither party taking responsibility. This process, in fact, looks like a political game of ping-pong among members of the Union.





The problems, grief, trauma, and suffering of this minority ethnic group continue long after the Stalinist mass exile. In the summer of 1989, the Bloody Fergana pogroms break out between two Turkic groups: the Ahiska Turks and the Uzbek Turks. Ironically, these two Turkic groups possess a shared culture, traditions, customs, and even language. Additionally, before the bloody pogroms, these Turkic nations lived in peace and harmony. Interestingly, the events take place during Mikhail Gorbachev's Glasnost and Perestroika reforms, which gave the Soviet population hope for freedom, independence, and democracy. This period is viewed as favourable in terms of policy, the economy, and overall living standards; however, the Fergana massacres exposed the opposite reality. The pogroms resulted in death, torture, rape, and the external mass exile of the minority ethnic group. Consequently, as Aliyeva (2013) states, after the Fergana pogroms, the Ahiska Turks undergo a second mass exile (19); however, this time it is realised not through the totalitarian Soviet authorities but through manipulation by another Turkic nation, the Uzbeks. The bloody events are a turning point in the community's historical and cultural memory, as their struggle for repatriation and the regaining of lawful rights becomes significantly stronger. This very struggle is clearly portrayed in the novel by Mircevat Ahiskali, *Gurbetten İniltiller 3: Kariş Kariş Fergana* (2010), whose author personally confronts the massacres and external exile, much like his protagonist, Cömert Şakir.

Method

This paper uses a qualitative research methodology to examine the endeavours and challenges faced by the protagonist, Cömert Şakir, and his associates in reclaiming their ancestors' seized rights. It also looks at how the legal fight plays out as both an individual and a group response to historical exile, unfair treatment, and expropriation, showing both individual and collective trauma. This research also explores Cömert's external exile in Azerbaijan and how it affected both his personal and literary awakening. It analyses how his engagement with literature becomes a means of articulating the experiences of torture, oppression, discrimination, and inequality faced by the Ahiska Turk community. Cömert's aspiration to become a writer is therefore interpreted not solely as a personal endeavour but as a form of collective responsibility. Drawing on Edward Said's conceptualisation of exile and displacement, the paper argues that exile functions as a formative condition that shapes Cömert Şakir's outlook and enables a distinctive perspective.

A Brief Look At Edward Said's Thought On Exile

Forced displacement, relocation, immigration, or exile, which occurs in the form of obligation or imperative, is not a new issue in the history of human beings. These concepts are continuously explored across various eras and disciplines. Their effects permeate all fields of people's lives and identities. It is an undeniable fact that, notably, the concept of exile leaves an essential mark on human consciousness, from the exile of the first couple from Eden to





contemporary displacements. Most probably, this persistence is rooted in deep bonds between individuals and their homes, communities, languages, cultures, or nations. Therefore, exile remains a central issue in different fields and is deeply addressed by scientists and scholars worldwide. Among these scholars, Palestinian-American intellectual Edward Said pays significant attention to the concept of exile, elaborating it through both negative and affirmative angles. On the negative side, he defines exile as an “unhealable rift forced [...] between the self and its true home” (2001: 173), articulating it as a condition of deep loss, pain, depression, and suffering. Moreover, the scholar epitomizes the emotional devastation associated with the loss of homeland, identity, culture, tradition, and even linguistic identity.

Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays (2001) is one of the scholar's essential works in which he debates the multifaceted nature of exile, focusing on both personal and political dimensions. Said (2001) discusses exile as the condition of people who profoundly desire to return to their home; however, they cannot realise this desire because of various reasons and circumstances beyond their control. Furthermore, another significant aspect he addresses is that he never approves of the tragic situation of Palestinians, which forces them to abandon their native land and become exiles. He defines Palestinian exile as “a sort of permanent outcast, someone who never feels at home and is always at odds with the environment” (Said 1994: 47). His interpretation underlines the deep psychological and emotional effects of dislocation, emphasizing how exile disrupts both geographical belonging and personal identity. He states that Palestinians and their rights “stand just for nondiscrimination, for social justice, for equality, and for enlightened nationality” (Said 2011: 547).

However, Said does not approach exile solely from a negative perspective; he also considers it from a more positive frame, underlining the creative possibilities it offers, particularly to intellectuals. He provides examples of intellectuals who experience exile in different forms, among whom are internationally renowned figures such as Theodor Adorno and Erich Auerbach. These intellectuals escape Nazi persecution and succeed in transforming exile into a productive experience. Exile enriches their perspectives as well as their intellectual output. Their high productivity remains undeniable, as they produce significant works that bear the imprint of the difficulties and obstacles they endure (Said 1994: 51-54).

Additionally, Said claims that people, particularly intellectuals, who experience exile, possess an awareness of at least two distinct cultures, unlike individuals who never encounter this condition. Another advantage of exiled intellectuals is that they not only retain their native culture but also attempt to integrate into the culture of the country in which they reside, navigating and transcending various cultural barriers. Most probably, a key advantage of exile emphasized by Said is the capacity to view life and its challenges through double lenses: the past that remains behind and the present that unfolds. This dual perspective prevents exiled





individuals from interpreting issues in isolation (Said 1994: 60). He defines this condition as a contrapuntal awareness, signifying belonging to multiple worlds while maintaining an active consciousness of diverse cultures. He borrows this term from the field of music and applies it to the social sphere, where it refers to the ability to perceive harmony between different lines. According to him, this awareness is both an essential and evident feature of displaced people (Bilgin 2016: 6). He further explains that most individuals remain conscious of a single culture, their native environment and homeland, whereas those in exile, particularly external exile, become familiar with multiple cultures, environments, or homes. This double vision fosters an awareness of parallel dimensions and remains fundamentally contrapuntal (Said 1984: 171-172).

Overall, Said characterizes exile as a multilayered phenomenon that transcends a purely negative interpretation and broadens the perspectives of individuals who experience it. Particularly for intellectuals, exile becomes a catalyst for cross-cultural understanding and critical reflection, ultimately transforming displacement into a profoundly enriching human and intellectual experience.

Echoes of Said's Exilic Consciousness in *Gurbetten İnilti* 3 *Karış Karış Fergana*¹

The novel that will be analysed in this part of the study, *G.I.K.K.F*² (2010), is the author's third novel and it draws on the struggle for returning the legal rights of Ahiska Turks and their repatriation to their homeland, Ahiska. The novel recounts the true events of the Fergana atrocities that force Ahiska Turk people to flee from their second home. The literary work can be considered a semi-autobiographical text, as it illustrates the author's experience of the Fergana pogroms, external exile, and the struggle for repatriation. Moreover, the novel is also based on real stories told by eyewitnesses of the pogroms whom Ahiskali interviews prior to the creation of the work. He prefers to fictionalise the events rather than chronicle them in a historical style. The author begins to produce the novel after relocating from Azerbaijan to Türkiye, where he feels free from oppression and censorship. Set during Gorbachev's PerestroikaGlasnost period, *G.I.K.K.F*.(2010) exposes the contrast between the freedom promised by the government of the time and the brutal realities faced by the community. The novelist shows how the minority Turkic community continues to feel a lack of belonging to any particular place and experiences the same traumas as their ancestors who faced mass exile during the Second World War. This idea aligns with Edward Said's view of exile, according to which exiles are forced to move from one place to another and continually feel "out of place" (2001: 180). According to Edward Said (2001), those individuals whom we consider as exiles often see non-exiles with different feelings like resentment. The reason for

¹ The quotations from the novel presented in this article are translated into English by the researcher.

² In the rest of the study, the name of the novel will be expressed in this abbreviated form.





this lies in the fact that non-exile individuals naturally belong to their surroundings, and they feel themselves as a part of them; however, exiles always feel out of place, lacking a stable sense of belonging to a particular society or place (180). Through the protagonist and other characters, Ahiskali portrays both personal and collective trauma and memory, using a realistic yet creative approach to provide voice to historical facts and lived realities that are often overlooked by “historians” (Sakallı 2016: 137–149).

To consider *G.I.K.K.F.* (2010) as an exile novel, one may examine its key themes, which primarily address displacement, inequality, lawlessness, discrimination, and belonging. The author begins the novel by raising the question of belonging to a particular place across two generations of the Ahiska Turk community. The first generation, who confront the Stalinist mass exile in 1944, still cannot develop a sense of belonging to Uzbekistan. This generational tension becomes evident in the episode in which Cömert Şakir and his mother, Melek Teyze, debate the name of the region. When the first generation is relocated from Georgia to Uzbekistan, they are forced to live in Mirzaçöl, which signifies “the desert of Mirza”; however, over time, through great effort and diligence, Mirzaçöl transforms from a desert or a place experienced as hell into a liveable and cultivated space described as a land of roses. Consequently, the authorities opt to rename Mirzaçöl as Gülistan, signifying “the land of roses”. Despite this reconstructed vision of the place, for members of the first generation such as Melek Teyze, Mirzaçöl represents nothing but hell, marked by pain, trauma, loss, fear, and exile:

“Mom, not Mirzaçöl? This is Gülistan now, Gülistan. I am twenty-eight years old. As long as I can remember, this place has been called Gülistan. Years have passed, and neither my father nor you can get used to saying Gülistan. Of course, this place was deserted when you were exiled here, but now it is a city, Mom, a city. Forty-four years have passed. You were exiled in 1944, but now, Mom, it is 1988” (Ahiskali 2010: 12).

As inferred from Cömert's speech to his mother, Melek Teyze still finds herself in “the perilous territory of not-belonging” (Said 2001: 177). In *Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays* (2001), Edward Said asserts not only that the twentieth century is an era of displacement, relocation, and exile, but also that “the territory of not-belonging” has existed since ancient times, when people were banished from their place of habitation (140). Correspondingly, from antiquity to modern times, the feeling of not belonging to the place of exile may provoke a sense of emptiness and uprootedness. Most likely, the first generation of Ahiska Turks, like Melek Teyze, fear developing a sense of belonging to Mirzaçöl because doing so threatens to distance them from their roots, which remain firmly tied to their homeland, Ahiska. Another significant point is that Mirzaçöl is associated with grief and trauma caused by the totalitarian regime, and it occupies a central place in their collective memory.





In this regard, Cathy Caruth (1995) argues that trauma refers to the psychological response to sudden or overwhelming violence that cannot be fully grasped at the moment of its occurrence. Traumatic experiences typically return later in the form of flashbacks, nightmares, and repetitive memories. She further maintains that trauma is often recognized only after an event has passed (1995: 91). Moreover, Caruth (1995) states that traumatic events resurface when they are triggered by similar situations (9). In light of this perspective, it can be argued that the traumatic memories of the first generation of the Ahiska Turks, including Melek Teyze, are reactivated whenever discussions involve specific places or place names.

“Yes, dear son, you may have known this place as Gülistan since your childhood; but for your father and me, this place will always remain Mirzeçöl. For when we were forcibly resettled here, this place was not merely a desert but a hell. You know, dear son, it was full of exiles.....this was the exile region of Uzbekistan. This land stole our youth, the most precious moments of our lives” (Ahiskali 2010: 12-13).

The novelist emphasises that even a change in the name of a particular place or an improvement in socio-economic living standards does not eliminate the effects of the trauma and terror to which people are exposed. Melek Teyze’s attitude and responses to Cömert reveal the terror that has haunted her mind and memory since the first day in an alien land, together with the trauma associated with that place. Therefore, whether the place of exile is called Mirzaçöl or Gülistan, it can never be “placid and secure” (Said 2001: 186) for either members of the Ahiska Turk community or Cömert Şakir’s mother. In this regard, Aydemir (2011) argues,

“[...] the importance of place does not lie solely in its function as a ground where social relations take place; at the same time, it serves as a location where social relations are produced, maintained, controlled, and differentiated... The sense of place is an important tool that connects the individual to the community, and by creating commitment, it also helps to satisfy the sense of belonging, which is one of the basic human needs” (89-90).

In *Motivation and Personality* (1954), Abraham Maslow underlines that belongingness, defined as the need to be part of a social structure, is a fundamental human motivation. He notes that this sense of belonging may be connected to an object, a community, an ethnic group, or a place. From this perspective, Mirzaçöl, or Gülistan, is not merely a geographical location for the first generation of the community, including the main character’s parents, but rather a place to which they feel no sense of belonging. Instead, it embodies traumatic memories, terrifying experiences, and the enduring pain of mass exile. As Melek Teyze says, “Dear son, do you know that this place was the exile zone of Uzbekistan? If Siberia was the exile region of the Soviets, Mirzaçöl was the exile place in Uzbekistan” (Ahiskali 2010: 12).

The first generation of Ahiska Turks, including Cömert Şakir’s mother, Melek Teyze, experiences a persistent fear that the generations born in new lands will forget their ancestral





homeland, having lived under Soviet rule and carrying the deep psychological scars of exile. It is crucial for the first generation of Ahiska Turks to ensure that their ancestral homeland, which they have never seen, visited, or been able to return to, is remembered and to instill love and attachment to it, as these concerns must be transmitted from one generation to the next. For a community shaped by exile, oral literature plays a vital role in preserving and conveying cultural traditions, collective identity, religious and cultural values, historical memory, ideals, customs, and ethical principles to subsequent generations. Therefore, no matter how bleak the circumstances are, the first generation manages to instill love for the Ahiska homeland in their children, who are born in the countries of exile. Expressions of love for the homeland, or patriotism, appear throughout the novel, particularly in the characters of Cömert and his friends. "Cömert loves his homeland, which he has never seen, so deeply that whenever he utters the word 'homeland', a thousand homelands fall from his lips" (Ahiskali 2010: 26). Cömert's attachment to Ahiska, his ancestors' homeland, is passed down to him by his parents.

Oral literature serves as a medium through which the exiled ethnic Ahiska Turks convey their patriotism, with forms such as short stories, fairy tales, and folk poems occupying a central place in their cultural heritage. Through these cultural forms, they succeed in passing their love for the homeland on to the second generation. They aim to position their children within a "home created by a community of language, culture, and customs" (Said 2001: 176). During ceremonies such as weddings, funerals, and other communal activities, the elder generation recites manis, folk poems, elegies, and songs traditionally performed in Ahiska Turkish to instil a sense of patriotism in the younger generation. In this context, Mammadova (2020) states that events such as funerals, weddings, victories, sorrows, and displacement through exile leave deep imprints on the psychological, spiritual, and social lives of people. Such collective experiences, in particular, occupy an essential place in literature by recalling moments of celebration or, conversely, grief (29).

The strong bonds between the protagonist and his friends, shaped by their commitment to Turkish nationalism, inspire them to resist injustice. Their unity during this difficult period, sustained by a shared sense of nationalism, permeates their inner lives and strengthens their resolve. This sentiment, in turn, makes them more productive. As Said notes, their minds and capacities are "flourishing, not to say benefiting, from such productive anguish" (1994: 53), while the challenges of life in Uzbekistan foster their determination. Consequently, Cömert Şakir, Vatan, and Osman decide to form "a temporary organisational committee in Uzbekistan to struggle to regain the homeland" (Ahiskali 2010: 57). They establish this committee to accelerate the repatriation process and to defend the legal rights of the Ahiska Turks. Although they are aware that the path they choose is full of challenges and obstacles, they remain committed to their cause.

"We have set out on a path with you that is full of obstacles, and we must overcome countless difficulties before we reach our aim. Along this hard path,





some of us will be frightened or threatened, and some will be led astray. Some may fall by the wayside.... Be mindful of your words, conversations, and behaviour wherever you are, and stay away from all kinds of discussions" (Ahiskali 2010: 37).

The protagonist warns his friends to remain vigilant, as every action, word, and movement is monitored, making the struggle for repatriation highly vulnerable to setbacks. This process is sensitive both for them as individuals and for the Ahiska Turks as a community; therefore, every action and measure must be approached with care and precision. Another crucial factor is the presence of serious risks, including the loss of employment, forced relocation to distant regions of the country, or even imprisonment. Cömert, for instance, works in the gas industry; however, his involvement in the organisation ultimately results in the loss of his job. At this point, it is important to note that the Ahiska Turks, as a minority community, possess limited rights and, until 1956, following Stalin's death, remain subject to the special settlement regime, which requires official permission to leave their designated place of residence (Aydingün 1999).

Although he is devoted to his profession, the main character decides to sacrifice his career for the cause of the Ahiska Turks and the restoration of their usurped rights. He carries within him two opposing feelings: on the one hand, he feels glad to struggle against inequality and injustice; on the other hand, he experiences sorrow over the loss of his career. He takes pride in choosing the future of his nation, and his emotional state can be clearly illuminated through Said's ideas on exiled intellectuals. Said states that such an individual "tends to be happy with the idea of unhappiness" (1994: 53). Cömert is sensitive and, at the same time, generous in his patriotic feelings, a quality that distinguishes him from others. For this reason, Osman focuses on the idea of making Cömert the leader of the organization:

"Dear friends, you know, I think that the most worthy of this duty is Cömert. He is the one who, together with me and Taştan teacher, goes to Fergana to negotiate these issues. Moreover, Cömert invites several significant people from our community here, and he is the first person to establish the committee. So why can't Cömert be the chairman of the committee?" (Ahiskali 2010: 34).

As a matter of fact, the repatriation process is highly sensitive; therefore, Cömert cannot serve as the leader of the temporary organisation. For this reason, the members decide to appoint someone else in his place. Another crucial point is that even when the members conduct their activities within the legal framework, the authorities may still find pretexts to imprison the protagonist, just as occurred in real history with Ahiska Turk leaders such as Odabashev, İzzetov, and others. During the Soviet era, these figures actively advocate for the repatriation of the community to its ancestral homeland. As one character bitterly observes, "But what does this government do? Whoever discusses the homeland and repatriation is instantly thrown in jail with a made-up excuse [...] Why did they put Enver Odabashev in jail?





Did he commit a crime? Did he beat someone? Was he against the law? No, they threw him in jail on lame excuses because he was demanding his homeland" (Ahiskali 2010: 38). In this context, Ellez İzzetov's wife confirms that community leaders are imprisoned on false charges simply for demanding the rights taken from their people and for pressuring the authorities of the Union to accelerate the repatriation process (Niyazov and İzzatov 2007: 11). During this period, the authorities present themselves as allies, only for it to become clear later that they are, in fact, adversaries. The distinction between friend and enemy remains uncertain. Consequently, Cömert chooses to operate secretly, using caution to determine who is loyal and who poses a threat.

Although Cömert and the other members of the temporary organisation operate within the framework of legality and with Moscow's formal approval, figures such as Şahan openly oppose their vision of repatriation. Significantly, Şahan is himself an Ahiska Turk; however, his understanding of exile and homeland fundamentally diverges from that of Cömert and his companions. Rather than viewing exile as a condition that sharpens critical awareness and sustains memory, Şahan seeks to sever the community's ties with the past. He collaborates with Soviet authorities to obstruct the repatriation process and encourages the community to continue their lives in Uzbekistan, effectively urging them to forget Georgia and Ahiska. Disguising himself as a loyal member of the community, Şahan prioritises personal security, economic advantage, and political influence over collective memory, national values, and honour. In doing so, he and his circle "try as much as they can to prevent the nation from returning to their homeland" (Ahiskali 2010: 57). His position reflects what Edward Said identifies as one possible response to exile: a desire to suppress memory in order to avoid pain, loss, and uncertainty. By repeatedly asserting that "homecoming is out of the question" (Said 2001: 179) and that "a full return, or repatriation, is impossible" (Said 2001: xxxv), Şahan embraces a resigned acceptance of exile that rejects both mourning and critical reflection.

In contrast to Said's view that exile and memory are inseparable and that remembrance shapes one's vision of the future, Şahan represents a form of internalised exile that transforms loss into denial rather than critique. His stance illustrates Said's warning that exile may generate not only insight but also rancor and accommodation. By discouraging repatriation and reinforcing the belief that Georgia has no intention of welcoming Ahiska Turks back, Şahan attempts to fix exile as a permanent condition, thereby foreclosing the possibility of political struggle, ethical responsibility, and collective hope.

Şahan, Behçet, and others who present themselves as "real" and "loyal" friends fail to understand Cömert, Vatan, Osman, and those who believe in repatriation and actively struggle for it. Indeed, these two groups can be clearly distinguished. For Şahan and those who share his position, the homeland of Ahiska signifies little more than a geographical space, a place where their ancestors once lived. For the second group, represented by Vatan and





others, Ahiska carries a sacred meaning comparable to a mother's embrace. Every individual, regardless of age or social status, needs such an embrace. Living far from it in a foreign land makes people feel like orphans in the arms of a stepmother; therefore, no alien land can ever replace one's native homeland. As the novel poignantly expresses, "A homeland is like a mother, and if there is no mother... there is a stepmother who cannot embrace you like your own mother. Her arms will never warm you. What you need is a mother; you need a homeland..." (Ahiskali 2010: 60). Regarding this issue, Said claims that "no matter how well they may do, exiles are always eccentrics who feel their difference ... as a kind of orphanhood" (2001: 182). From this perspective, it is possible to argue that the novelist, much like Said, emphasises that although the Ahiska Turks, particularly those who experience mass exile, live in Fergana for many years and attempt to adapt to this new "home" and "homeland," they continue to perceive themselves as different from the native population and to feel like orphans, since this place can never become their true home. The author further underscores that, as in many societies shaped by exile, the Ahiska Turk community is divided into two distinct factions with opposing outlooks. Figures such as Şahan and Behçet prioritise financial interests and personal power, whereas Cömert, Vatan, and Osman struggle for the values in which they believe, even at the risk of losing their jobs or their lives.

During the period in which Cömert and his friends struggle for the repatriation of their community to Ahiska, violent incidents begin to erupt in the Fergana region between two Turkic communities. At first, no one believes that the situation will escalate, and events appear to be under control. At the outset of the pogroms in Fergana, both communities assume that "nothing will happen" (Ahiskali 2010: 165), believing that "those responsible have already been arrested and imprisoned" (165). However, some individuals remain sceptical, and among them is Cömert, who, from the very beginning of the pogroms, believes that the situation is far more complex and most likely instigated "by the hand of the government" (Ahiskali 2010: 165). Cömert's concerns prove justified. The violence does not cease; on the contrary, it escalates, and the Ahiska Turk community becomes the target of brutal attacks. As a result of these violent assaults, many women are raped, some community members are brutally murdered, and others are forced to flee the country in order to save the lives of their loved ones.

In Fergana, one of the most violent acts of mass persecution against the Ahiska Turks takes place. The homes of people who had previously been exiled from Ahiska to Uzbekistan are burned down, and many women are subjected to sexual violence. Regardless of age or gender, numerous individuals are killed, while others are forced to flee the country in order to survive. They are compelled to abandon their so-called "new home," which they have built over more than forty years, and to seek yet another home in unfamiliar and foreign lands they have never seen or known. Thus, living in exile emerges as the enduring fate of the Ahiska Turks (Aydemir 2018: 146).





The Fergana events begin in May and end on June 13. During this traumatic period, Cömert and his companions, Vatan and Osman, attempt to contact Mikhail Gorbachev by telegram; however, none of their efforts receive a response. As the novel records, "The pogroms that started in Kuvasay city on May 23 do not stop; on the contrary, they intensify and spread across the entire Fergana Valley. The Turks are attacked, lose their relatives, and eventually have to abandon their homes and everything they have accumulated over forty-five years... It becomes clear that the Turks will not remain in Uzbekistan, yet it is uncertain where they will go, or rather, where they will be taken" (Ahiskali 2010: 326). The community thus finds itself trapped in a profound dilemma. The second generation of exiled Ahiska Turks, including Cömert, knows Fergana as home, since they were born and raised there; however, after the pogroms, both the first and second generations begin to experience this space as a form of confinement. What once appears as a "new home" gradually transforms into a prison-like space that ultimately forces them to leave. The image of Fergana as a prison echoes Said's argument that "borders and barriers, which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory, can also become prisons and are often defended beyond reason or necessity. Exiles cross borders, break barriers..." (2001: 185). In this sense, the Ahiska Turk community once again has to cross borders and dismantle barriers to ensure survival and safety.

Cömert Şakir and his family are no exception to this forced displacement; they decide to leave Uzbekistan for Kazakhstan and later Azerbaijan. In the aftermath of the brutal attacks in the region, Cömert realises that his struggle to return to his ancestral homeland must be temporarily suspended. In these circumstances, Cömert prioritises the safety of his family. The fight for the repatriation of his family and other Ahiska Turks to Ahiska therefore has to be postponed. Although the protagonist is reluctant to abandon his comrades and leave his home, Gülistan, his elder brother, insists that they must depart from Uzbekistan as soon as possible. Nevertheless, Cömert cannot forgive himself. He experiences deep anguish and embarrassment, feeling unable to articulate his inner turmoil to his family members. As the narrative reveals, "when he remembered his friends, his heart was burning with embarrassment... My heart... It does not hurt; it burns. I am ashamed of leaving my home and my friends; it pains me deeply" (Ahiskali 2010: 375-376). His suffering intensifies because Cömert, his family, and thousands of Ahiska Turks are once again forced into exile, this time as a result of violence in Uzbekistan. This rupture is particularly painful because the Uzbek people are part of the wider Turkic world. The Ahiska Turks and Uzbeks share common ancestral ties, and following the original mass exile of the Ahiska Turks to the region, the local population offered support by sharing their resources, thereby fostering a sense of solidarity. These acts of solidarity remain embedded in the collective memory and historical consciousness of the Ahiska Turks. However, the Fergana pogroms leave deep, unhealed wounds and lasting trauma, ultimately triggering yet another journey of exile. In this context,





Edward Said emphasises that exile is unavoidably secular and profoundly historical, a condition created by human beings and imposed upon others (2001: 174).

A year after the Fergana pogroms, Cömert, now living in Azerbaijan, receives uplifting news from his steadfast friend Osman. In Fergana, the two close friends share both hardship and hope, and in this new space of exile, Azerbaijan, Cömert has the opportunity to reunite with his trusted comrade. When Cömert meets Osman, he experiences deep emotions, which he initially masks with humour. After leaving Uzbekistan and enduring several years of separation, Cömert smiles for the first time, as suggested by the expression that “for the first time Cömert’s eyes smiled” (Ahiskali 2010: 391). Living in an external exile, far from his birthplace, Gülistan, and from his close friends, enables Cömert to reassess their struggle for Ahiska from new perspectives. Exile in Azerbaijan thus provides him with the opportunity to frame their fight within a broader intellectual and emotional context, which resonates with Edward Said’s idea of a “double perspective”. Said posits that exiled individuals develop the capacity to simultaneously perceive what they have lost and what is still within their reach. From this vantage point, Cömert connects past experiences with future aspirations, using reflection to link memory with hope, loss, and possibility:

“Well, Cömert, how is the struggle for the homeland going here?

It is going well, Osman. You know, there are some activities under way.

Did you set up a committee here?

Yes, it was established, but I am not part of it. I am ready to help whenever they need me, but I have decided to remain outside the committee.

I do not understand. So you are not active in the committee and have chosen to stay apart from it?

I have submitted a petition to go to Türkiye. Osman, I am a Turk, and the place to which I plan to migrate is Türkiye” (Ahiskali 2010: 394).

As it is understood from the speech above, Cömert admits that while he is in an external exile in Azerbaijan, he reflects deeply on the mass exile of the Ahiska Turks and his and his comrades' struggle for repatriation and restoration of the usurped rights. After a long time of thinking about these issues, he comes to the conclusion that before achieving repatriation rights, the world should know about his community and their social, psychological, and financial situations. The voice of his community should be heard on the globe. “If you cannot make your voice heard in the world, if the world does not know you, how can anyone help a nation they neither know nor hear about? First, you must make your voice heard; you must show your existence. You must prove that you were unjustly exiled, and only then can you declare your desire to return to your homeland and demand your rights” (Ahiskali 2010: 397). For Cömert, the most powerful way to transmit his nation’s trauma and injustice to the outside world is only possible through “its writers, poets, intellectuals, researchers, and scientists from





various fields" (2010: 398). Osman, deeply persuaded by Cömert's reasoning, acknowledges the urgency of introducing the plight of the Ahıska Turks to the wider world and agrees with the importance of reclaiming their rights. Knowing his friend's literary talent, Osman even encourages him by saying, "Then, this task falls to people like you" (2010: 398). Accordingly, the experience of exile for the protagonist not only exposes deep suffering, trauma, and pain, but also endows him with the responsibility to transform the negative effects of exile into literary testimony. Cömert Şakir's task, therefore, is to move forward rather than remain stagnant and wait passively for change (Said 1994: 64). In line with this understanding, Cömert chooses to live in a self-imposed exile in Türkiye, where he aspires to autonomy and seeks redemption through writing. Moreover, he searches for a home beyond the post-Soviet space, and in this context, Türkiye emerges as his new source of hope and homeland.

Conclusion

The trajectory of the Ahıska Turks, from the 1944 Stalinist deportation and the punitive special settlement regime to the Fergana pogroms and renewed displacement, demonstrates that exile was not a single historical episode but a structurally reproduced condition sustained by evaded responsibility. The repeated shifting of accountability between Moscow and Georgia prolonged dispossession through legal and bureaucratic mechanisms, turning repatriation into a permanently deferred promise and transforming the homeland into an abstract claim rather than an attainable right. *Gurbetten İniltir 3: Karış Karış Fergana* captures this continuity by translating collective trauma into literary testimony. Through the figure of Cömert Şakir, exile emerges as an ethical position shaped by memory, reflection, and responsibility, echoing Edward Said's understanding of displacement as a condition that sharpens critical awareness. At the same time, the novel exposes the limits of endurance, showing how repeated uprooting erodes any stable sense of belonging. The eventual turn toward Türkiye offers cultural and linguistic refuge and a space of relative safety, yet it does not resolve the core injustice of denied return to Ahıska in Georgia. Georgia remains the silent center of memory and claim, present as origin but absent as destination. In this sense, the novel affirms that literature does not compensate for exile but resists its normalization by insisting on visibility, accountability, and the unresolved demand for return. Furthermore, it is hoped that this paper will contribute to other studies on Ahıska Turks and Ahıska Turk exile literature since this type of literature remains a relatively new area within literary studies.

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