

NARRATOR'S PLAY: WEAVING VOICE AND SILENCE IN  
*PERPERIK-A SÖE AND HAWARA DICLEYE*

by  
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Submitted to the Institute of Social Sciences in partial  
fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

Sabancı University

August 2016

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DATE OF APPROVAL:

8 Augustos 2016

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## ABSTRACT

### NARRATOR’S PLAY: WEAVING VOICE AND SILENCE IN *PERPERIK-A SÖE* AND *HAWARA DICLEYE*

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Cultural Studies, MA Thesis, 2016

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Keywords: catastrophe, literature of catastrophe, silence and voice, Mehmed Uzun, Haydar Karataş,

This study aims to explore how the narrators in the literary accounts of catastrophic experience whereby the survivor or the victim faces a loss –the loss of law of mourning as well as a loss of the capacity to narrate that loss– weave the literary word in pursuit of voices or through silence. Closely investigating how voice and silence are tailored in the fictional narratives in which authors strive to find a “voice” for the unspeakable, this study aims to scrutinize the ways in which the narrators play with voice and silence in two particular novels– *The Voice of the Tigris* and *The Nocturnal Butterfly* in order to engage in an act of remembering the past that is replete with the memories of the catastrophe. It tries to understand how voice, already absent in writing as claimed by the long-established discussions on voice in writing, as well as silence is re-written in such texts with a view to comprehending the capacity of art to liberate the voice. If speech or voice is already absent or lost as in the case of traumas or the catastrophic experience, how does writing narrate what is already absent? How does the narrative voice, as a narratological element, inscribe the silence in and on a ground that has come to be associated with the absence of voice?

## ÖZET

### ANLATICININ OYUNU: *GECE KELEBEĞİ* VE *DİCLE'NİN SESİ* ROMANLARINDA SESİ VE SESSİZLİĞİ DOKUMAK

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Kültürel Çalışmalar, Yüksek Lisans Tezi, 2016

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Anahtar Kelimeler: felaket, felaket edebiyatı, sessizlik ve ses, Mehmed Uzun, Haydar Karataş

Hayatta kalanın ya da mağdurun bir kayıpla –yas kanununun kaybı ve söz konusu kaybı dile getirme ve anlatma kapasitesinin kaybı– yüzleştiği felaket tecrübesine ilişkin edebi anlatılarda, anlatıcının bir ses arayışı ya da sessizlik içinde edebi sözü nasıl nakış gibi işlediğini irdelemeyi amaçlıyor. Yazarların, konuşulamayan bir tecrübe için bir “ses” bulma çabasına giriştiği kurgusal anlatılarda sesin ve sessizliğin nasıl işlendiğini inceleyen bu çalışma, *Dicle'nin Sesi* ve *Gece Kelebeği* romanlarında anlatıcıların felaket hafızasıyla oldu bir geçmişi hatırlamak amacıyla ses ve sessizlikle nasıl bir oyun kurguladığını irdeliyor. Bu çalışma kapsamında, ses üzerine yürütülen köklü tartışmalarda iddia edildiği üzere yazılı anlatıda halihazırda kayıp olan ve bulunmayan sesin ve aynı zamanda sessizliğin bu metinlerde nasıl yeniden yazıldığını anlamaya çabalarken sanatın sesi özgürleştirici gücünü de anlama amacını güdüyor. Travma ya da felakette konuşma imkanı ya da ses yoksa ve kayıpsa, yazı halihazırda kayıp olan bir olguyu nasıl anlatıyor? Anlatıbilimin bir unsuru olarak öyküleyici ses ya da öyküleyici çatı sesin yok olduğu bir düzlemde sessizliği nasıl yazıyor?

*Emel'e*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

“Fiction is like a spider’s web, attached over so lightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corner,” writes Virginia Woolf in her seminal essay *A Room of One’s Own*, accentuating how literature, the world of fiction, is attached to our material world, to the life itself at all directions. When I first read these lines for a literature class as an undergraduate student, my whole journey as a literature aficionado gained more meaning, leading me to contemplate on how I have become attached to literature. After prolonged struggles and contemplations, I have decided to study literature. I am and will be eternally indebted to Sibel Irzık who guided me throughout this difficult journey. Without her enlightening and inspiring guidance, I would not be where I am now and this thesis would not be written. I would also like to express my deepest gratitude to Matthew Gumpert and Ayşe Parla who invaluable contributed to this thesis.

I am also indebted to my parents İsmail and Emel, whose encouragement has always inspired me to follow the paths I have chosen. Without the friendship of my mother, I would not have understood the true value of companionship in life, which made me stronger every time I encounter a struggle. I would also like to thank my brothers Halil and Samet, who have nurtured me with their love and support.

During the course of this difficult process and throughout my entire life, I have come to realize that a true friendship can take one anywhere. There has been times I wanted to quit and times I was surrounded by the love of my friends. I would like to extend my deepest gratitude and most sincere thanks to Hande Güngördü, Funda Çankaya, Süeda Kaya, Burçin Karabolat and Yazgülü Bilici. Our journey that began many years ago has been one of the most precious experiences of my life. Moreover, meeting Betül Sarı, Tolga Özata, Saliha Akbaş and Özge Olcay at Sabancı University has been one of the milestones in my life. The heated debates I engaged with them have been the part that I enjoyed most in this process. There are not enough words to express my thanks to Tuğba Altunbilek, Hilal Yıldız, Berker Erşen and Sibel Aksu. Their companionship has kept me on the track and given me great strength. Last but not least, I would like to thank everyone with whom my path has crossed and who made invaluable contribution to this life I enjoy to the greatest extent.

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## INTRODUCTION

(...) when they came to letters, This, said Theuth, will make the Egyptians wiser and give them better *memories*; it is a recipe both for the memory and for the wit. Thamus replied: O most ingenious Theuth, the parent or inventor of an art is not always the best judge of the utility or inutility of his own inventions to the users of them. And in this instance, you who are the father of letters, from a paternal love of your own children have been led to attribute to them a quality which they cannot have; for this discovery of yours will create forgetfulness in the learners' souls, because they will not use their memories; *they will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves. The specific which you have discovered is an aid not to memory, but to reminiscence, and you give your disciples not truth, but only the semblance of truth; they will be hearers of many things and will have learned nothing; they will appear to be omniscient and will generally know nothing; they will be tiresome company, having the show of wisdom without the reality* (Plato, *Dialogues* “Phaedrus” emphasis added).

The Egyptian God Theuth, who is the inventor of many arts such as arithmetic, calculation, geometry and astronomy, offers his discovery –writing– to Thamus, the King of Egypt, who is to decide the value of writing, the gift presented to him and presents it as a *pharmakon*, as a remedy to the memory. However, the King perceives *pharmakon* that comes to him from outside, thus external, as a poison. Although the God-King does not know how to write, he has no need for it because he speaks, he dictates. He establishes and confirms his sovereignty through speech and utterance. The mythic story between King Thamus and Theuth lays bare a long-standing opposition between speech and writing, devaluing writing with a premise that writing can only inscribe forgetfulness in the soul. By way of allusion to this story, Plato sees writing as a “dead discourse” as opposed to living speech, unable to defend itself and to know to whom it should address (Plato, 1972: 159). He alleges that writing does not know how to address the right people and how not to address the wrong kind. Once it is abused or ill-treated in the wrong hands, it seeks the help of its father–parent–which is *logos*, speech. Plato finalizes the dialogue between Socrates and Phaedrus by arguing that the man who believes that writing has no seriousness, or value, but is only a means for remembering is the right man.

In “Phaedrus” Plato therefore discusses writing on the basis of this binary

opposition, speech vs. writing. It seems that he creates hierarchization between speech and writing, in which writing has no essence and value because it operates within simulacrum. It is only a mime of memory, knowledge and truth. Plato regards writing as a signifier of the signifier. He claims that it is the phonic signifier that remains in proximity and the graphic signifier, the letters and writing, can only reproduce or imitate the phonic one. This is the very moment the misdeed of *pharmakon* unfolds: as an exteriority of the phonic sign, it dulls the memory and it can only constitute a remedy for the external signs because the memory always already needs external signs to call what is absent, non-present. This hierarchical structure between speech and writing presented within a metaphysical framework of presence/absence is an established conceptualization of the phonocentrism of the Western philosophy with regard to language.

The phonocentric approach to language has, however, been under close scrutiny in deconstructionist philosophy, which questions the idea that voice has an immediate proximity with mind and speech, or that spoken words are thus the symbols of mental experience and memory. In *Dissemination*, Jacques Derrida analyzes the above-discussed myth Plato talks about in “Phaedrus” whereby he particularly focuses on the word *pharmakon* and its meanings and exposes the polysemic usage of the word. For Derrida, this ambivalence and ambiguity rooted in the word *pharmakon* proves its irreducibility to simple binary oppositions such as “remedy” or “poison” as the word encompasses both. “The essence of *pharmakon*,” he writes, “lies in the way in which, having no stable essence, no “proper” characteristics, it is not, in any sense of the word (...) a substance. The *pharmakon* has no ideal identity” (1981:125-6). But where does this discussion lead the writing vs. speech debate? It basically reveals that neither speech nor writing can be considered superior to one another or that writing cannot be simply marginalized as “signifier of the signifier,” conditioned upon absence. Moreover, the development of language ensues from a play of *différance* between speech and writing, erasing the binary opposition between presence and absence, proximity and exteriority with regard to writing and speech (Derrida, 1977:12). Such deconstructive line of thought may be helpful in understanding what absence means in writing and problematizes the representation of the absent–voice–in the writings of an experience that is already absent within language and bereft of language.

Taking issue with the representation of a lost voice and language as well as

incapacity to utter that lost, this study aims to explore how something that is absent is weaved through writing, text, which has come to be acknowledged and treated as a signifier of the signifier, functioning within the limits of absence. Why has there been an ever-lasting insistence on writing something that is already absent? How is this double-absence worked out through the knots of the text? By double absence I mean the absence in the sense Derrida and Plato talk about. The absence ensued from writing, the non-proximity. Moreover, it is the absence of the voice and incapacity to enunciate that loss when faced with the kind of experience resulting in the inability to provide an account for the loss as well as in silence. In light of these questions, the study asks how the silence and loss of voice which might be defined as the victim's or survivor's incapacity to talk about the experience for which there remains no possibility to bear witness. Furthermore, it is an experience in which the witness can only bear witness to her own death as witness is written in literary works. To ask the same question by following Plato's and Derrida's steps, how does the ambiguity of *pharmakon*, stemming from its polysemic usage, challenge the writing of the loss? Derrida's criticism of the phonocentric approach to speech and writing, which asserts the primacy of voice over writing, demonstrates how the Western philosophical tradition is built on the metaphysical binary oppositions. However, his approach does not only liberate the philosophical conceptualization of voice and writing from being stuck in this war between binary oppositions, but it also offers another treatment of voice that is not predicated on metaphysical one inscribing the voice on the presence. Rather than seeing the voice as a safeguard of the presence, such an approach regards the voice as threatening, ruinous and dangerous, disruptive of presence and sense. This understanding seems to be a very negationist treatment of the voice and it acknowledges from the very beginning that voice cannot undertake any signifying function. That being said, with a view to focusing on the novels that try to form a narrative of a catastrophic experience whereby the survivor or the victim faces a loss—the loss of law of mourning—as well as a loss of the capacity to narrate that loss, the study problematizes the issue of silence and the pursuit of giving voice to the catastrophic experience. In other words, it tries to understand how voice, already absent in writing, as well as silence is weaved in such texts.

In her article titled "The Return of the Voice," Felman outlines how Claude Lanzmann in *Shoah* liberates the testimony and challenges the unspeakability of the witness. She writes, "It is the silence of the witness's death which Lanzmann must

historically here challenge, in order to revive the Holocaust and rewrite the *event-without-a-witness* into witnessing, and to history,” (Felman and Laub, 1992: 219; author’s emphasis). She continues attesting that what must be broken and transgressed is “the silence of the witness’s death and the silence of the witness’s deadness,” (ibid). How does the author creating a narrator with or without a claim to bear witness to historical atrocities bring back that lost voice? The silence stemming from the incommunicability and unspeakability of the event is an issue that is at the center of many such writings. However, as it is clear, the language and more importantly literary language is manifest as the sole way to reveal that muteness and silence of the survivor. Consequently, one can notice that the author cannot show the narrator’s silence without language. “But without language, nothing can be shown. And to be silent is still to speak. Silence is impossible that is why we desire it. Writing (or Telling, as distinct from anything written or told) precedes every phenomenon, every manifestation or show; all appearing,” writes Blanchot (1995:11). For Blanchot, it is clear that even silence needs language in order to be shown. “There is no silence if not written” as Blanchot says (8). The language, thus, is the medium via which the silence, or voice, could be represented and signified in addition to fulfilling the imperative to narrate the event in the form of writing. While talking about silence, however, it is necessary to discuss what does it actually mean. Does it refer to a literal loss of language or to an erasure of narration and one’s hearing herself as the witness of the experience.

Silence [here] is not a simple absence of an act of speech, but a positive avoidance –and erasure– of one’s hearing, the positive *assertion* of a deafness, in the refusal not merely to know but to *acknowledge*– and henceforth respond or *answer* to– what is being heard or witnessed. In this defeat of the presence of the witness to reality, silence is the active *voiding of hearing*, the voiding of the act of witnessing of a reality whose transmission to awareness is obstructed and whose content is insistently denied as known,” (Felman, 1992: 183; emphasis in the original).

Shoshana Felman discusses the absence or loss of voice –silence– not as a literal loss of the ability to talk. Instead, she asserts that silence is the refusal to acknowledge what is being heard or witnessed. It can be said that it is impossibility of witnessing to an experience for which the awareness or comprehensibility does not exist or is obstructed. In addition to being denied of the capacity to say something

about the event because of the loss of law of mourning, the witness's ability to comprehend that experience is paralyzed, which renders the experience unspeakable and incommunicable to the witness herself, henceforth the possibility to address and appeal oneself and the other and annihilated. Dori Laub explains the meaning of being a witness to oneself, which he defines as witnessing from inside. He claims that Nazi system convinced its victims that there is no potential witnesses from inside and their experiences are no longer communicable even to themselves, which is perhaps the true meaning of annihilation (1992: 82). Although he does not relate this point to silence and loss of voice, thinking in line with Felman's conceptualization of silence, it is possible to suggest that silence, or the loss of voice, is a manifestation of the loss of capacity to bear witness and acknowledge the event within the faculty of comprehension. Moreover, being ripped of the law of mourning, which is the catastrophic experience, the survivor is doomed to silence, no voice, no word. However, the urge to tell or say something with regard to that experience always remains. In addition being visible in testimonial archives, such imperative also asserts itself into literary narratives, which constitutes the main issue of this study.

The issue of voice, however, has been the topic of many theoretical discussions and writings since classical ages, as discussed above. When students and professors of literature, or even critics talk about "the voice" in a text, they by and large refer to the "voice" of the author reflected and tailored within the text. While proponents of the voice in writing suggest that the voice of an author is her true self and her rhetorical power, insisting on the idea that writing with a strong voice is good writing, those who are critical of the voice regard it as a misleading metaphor and emphasize the fact that the authors do not write but are written by their culture since they are socially constructed and the social position occupied by authors changes in accordance with the social positions that interrelate them (Elbow, 2007). Despite seemingly opposite stances with regard to voice, both approaches regard it as a phenomenon outside the text and as something that must be pursued either through the author or her socially constructed milieu, almost associating the voice with the real identity of the author.

Interrogating voice within the dynamics of texts, the structuralist analysis addresses the formal qualities of written narratives and asks the question of who is speaking in a text. Gérard Genette's structuralist formulation of narrative voice allows for understanding how the voice that has been thought of as the conduit of speech is

composed in writing. Additionally, it sheds light on how the construction of voice is interrelated with the dynamics of discourse and story. Such formalist or structuralist analyses bring voice into the writing neither solely as a metaphor nor as a matter of stylistics, but rather as a quality of the text that unravels, among others, the power relations, psychological status and social conditioning of the characters. In particular, contending with the narrative accounts concerned with the narration of historical traumas in which silence is an incessantly recurrent theme, such a line of analysis may ask the following questions: if speech or voice is already absent or lost as in the case of traumas or the catastrophic experience, how does writing narrate what is already absent? How does the narrative voice, as a narratological element, inscribe the silence in and on a ground that has come to be associated with the absence of voice?

Asking such questions raises the issue of representing voice and silence in writing. It might seem paradoxical to raise the concept of voice when dealing with a written text because some of the scholarly discussions on writing argue that voice is lost in writing. Paul Zumthor describes writing as language without voice and he asserts that live voice is in exile in writing (1990). “The literal voice and live voice is always lost in the very act of writing,” writes Vanessa Guignery (2009:187). She further suggests, “literature is an attempt to hear and regain the lost voices,” referring to Pascal Quignard who says, “to write is to hear the lost voice.” Yet another question emerges: how does literary writing regain or write the voice or the voice of silence as well as how does it render the catastrophic experience into poetics when the word is lost, when the poetic process is shattered, when the exchange between experience and language is lost or broken.

Approaching the concept of narrative voice from a philosophical and deconstructionist perspective, Maurice Blanchot discusses writing already as a form of erasure and effacement, which cannot be confined into a fixed genre. Rather, such writing produces an account of itself. For Blanchot, narrative voice communicates what it is:

to live once again in another, in a third person, the dual relation, the fascinated, indifferent relation that is irreducible to any mediation, a neutral relation, even if it implies the infinite void of desire; finally, the imminent certainty that what has once taken place will always begin again, always give itself away and refuse itself... But who is telling the story here?... *it is rather the one who cannot recount because she bears—this is her wisdom, her madness—the torment of the impossible narration*, knowing herself... to be the

measure of this outside where, as we accede to it, *we risk falling under the attraction of speech that is entirely exterior: pure extravagance* (2003:462; emphasis added).

The narrative voice implying an indefinite void of desire is irreducible to any mediation; no matter what it tries to give voice, it will always end up in a vicious circle in which it will always reiterate the story, always going back and forth between the imperative and urge to narrate itself. Moreover, this narrative voice belongs to the one who cannot tell or who refuses to tell. However, the exteriority of the voice, according to Blanchot, is always exposes one to the risk of complying with the desire or imperative to tell. Furthermore, Derrida conceptualizes narrative voice as an “aphonic” phenomenon because it always works through silence; it is neutral. The important point in his discussion is the fact that he makes a distinction between the narrative voice and the narrating voice. While the first is drawn into aphony, the latter is the kind of voice that the narratology handles as a putative structure of narrative; it is an inherent element of the narration or a genre (2011: 130). Accordingly, it can be said that the narrative voice is interestingly aphonic, which indicates that writing and narration is a refusal. It denies any form and cannot be reduced to any structure. Does it emerge in response to an exterior demand or injunction? For Derrida, the answer is hardly “yes.” Because the narrative voice re-conceptualized from the point of an erasure of effacement as seen in both Derrida’s and Blanchot’s discussion, is not and cannot be same as the narrating voice in testimonies which complies to an inquisitorial injunction demanding a full-fledged and constructed account of the event based on the facts.

The issue of voice has been also a topic of the psychoanalytic discussions, not only because the clinical practice of the psychoanalysis carries out a treatment method based on talking, but also because the voice, which also includes the silence and inability to talk and loss of speech is seen as manifestations of the conflicts taking place in the unconscious. The Freudian psychoanalysis considers the voice as a positive phenomenon as the patient’s voice reveals and discloses the conflict and tensions in the unconscious drives. In that sense, it unfolds the concealed substance of subjectivity. Moreover, Lacan’s conceptualizes the voice as a more transcendental and elusive phenomenon; it both refers to a relation from outside to inside and defines a lack or a void while constituting the subjectivity. He defines it as an *objet petit à*, as

an object of desire. In Lacanian terminology, desire refers to that which remains, a leftover after one's needs and wishes are fulfilled. Desire transcends the limits of the symbolic realm, to which language belongs or in which language operates. It is that which cannot be said or uttered. It is devoid of any material and external phonic substance and constitutes the lack, which is the origin of desire instead of a carrier of a sign and meaning. Following a Lacanian perspective, Mladen Dolar writes, "what language and the body have in common is the voice, but the voice is part neither of language nor of the body," (2006: 73). Material sounding voice and the idea of voice are both different and the same. Accordingly, it can be said that it occupies a threshold, a lacuna or it is an aporia. The voice in this context refers to an analytical impossibility stemming from the lack or loss; it represents the unthinkable or unnarratable in the symbolic realm of language, a blind spot or a hole in the linguistic universe. This dimension of the voice is difficult to cope with in writing. It defies or any differential oppositions; it cannot be limited to different opposite poles because this is the voice that produces the dissolution as reflected in the experience, as Derrida also puts it. Therefore, this approach to voice sees no potential for voice to produce any meaning. It does not carry a meaning as it is not a function of the signifier. Rather, it is a remainder –a relic perhaps– resisting to any signifying functions. Considering the psychoanalytical approach to the voice, particularly Lacan's idea of voice as *objet à*, one can ask how voice as referring to a void or a lack but at the same time a desire to compensate for that loss is reflected in writing particularly in writings that already deals with a loss? While looking at the voice and silence in two different novels from a comparative perspective, this is one of the questions this study tackles.

Bearing in mind the long-standing debates on voice, speech and writing, the departure point of this is the following question: Does or can a narrative of historical trauma or catastrophe have an unequivocal claim on constructing a voice that conveys the ruinous event? If not, how does it convey the memory of the event in question? Moreover, how does the tension between the oral and the written narrative play out in writing the catastrophic experience? Closely investigating how voice and silence are tailored in the fictional narratives in which authors strive to find a "voice" for the unspeakable, this study aims to scrutinize the ways in which the narrators play with voice and silence in two particular novels– *The Voice of the Tigris* (*Hawara Dicleye* in Kurmanji; *Dicle'nin Sesi* in Turkish) by Mehmed Uzun and *The Nocturnal Butterfly* (*Perperik-a Söe* in Zazaki; *Gece Kelebegi* in Turkish) by Haydar Karataş–in

order to engage in an act of remembering the past that is replete with the memories of the catastrophe.

In *Hawara Dicleye*, which consists of two volumes *The Scream of the Tigris* and *The Exiles of the Tigris*, narrates the story of the atrocious events befell on Kurdish people during 1840s in their effort to claim their sovereignty against the colonialist rule of the Ottoman Empire; a rebellion led by Mir Badr Khan. In the aftermath of the violent events, one of the people among the Kurdish undertakes the duty to narrate the series of ruinous events with a claim to testify to them. *Dengbej* Biro, who is the narrator, strives to break the silence of an entire people by establishing a literary narrative through which he claims to pass on the memory of a particular moment of violence in history so that it will always be remembered. The novel narrates the story of a relentless pursuit of voice. On the contrary to an ambitious claim on the formation of a structured narrative that could communicate the experience in Uzun's novel, *The Nocturnal Butterfly* by Karataş does not present such an obvious claim. The novel narrates the aftermath of the Dersim Massacre of 1938, which took place when the Turkish Republic was still at its nascency as a nation-state. The narrator of the novel, Gülüzar, is a child who literally loses her ability to speak after seeing her father's head severed, thus the narrator is already doomed to silence. In brief, while the male and adult narrator in Uzun's novel believes that he can form almost a testimonial account of the disastrous event as a *dengbej*, means the one who tells the voice, the child narrator unable to comprehend the course of events and establish a causal relationship between the series of events, thus undertaking no aim to assign a meaning to event, lays bare catastrophic experience as an event. The contrast between the two narrators in these two novels not only opens a new pathway to explore narrative voice in the literary narratives of catastrophe, but it also provides a ground to re-assess the witnessing.

The main question in this study is how voice/silence emerges as the medium or the dominant theme in the endeavor to construct a narrative account of the catastrophe that is impossible to witness as no symbolic order accommodates the narratability of such experience given the linguistic as well as experiential limits of the symbolic order. In other words, how do these two novels employ voice and silence and establish the form of memory that is erased from the archives of History? To what extent does the emphasis on the physical voice or silence of the narrator affect the voice in the narratological sense of the term? To formulate this question in

another way, how is the insistence on finding the voice for the catastrophic experience or the silence materialized in the physical loss of voice—already representing an absence—worked out at the narrative level? What kinds of literary techniques or strategies does such an insistence impose on the voice of the narration in these literary works of historical trauma?

This thesis mainly argues that if the voice is already absent in writing and it cannot be assigned any primacy vis-à-vis writing, the study argues that the quest of voice or silence in the narrative arise as the intensified version of an already existing problem in writing. In literature, the problem of voice provoked by the traumatic experience is witnessed in a more intensified manner. That is to say, in its all capacities and failures, literature unravels the tensions and conflicts in the pursuit of voice. In that regard, Uzun's novel is an exemplary attempt where the catastrophic situation reveals the longing for a voice for the experience and an already lost object as well as for the assertion of witnessing through that voice. Presenting failures to establish a voice or voices for/of the experience, *Hawara Dicleye* is a novel in which the imperative to voice the primary witnessing is manifest. Narrated by a mute child who literally lost her ability to speak, Karataş's novel as a work of literature weaves the silence. While doing so, the text itself discloses the tensions as worked out in the situation of the narrator. Both *Perperik-a Söe* and *Hawara Dicleye* do not make a claim to primordial witnessing to the experience of historical trauma despite the fact that the narrator in the latter utters that claim because both works pushing the limits of literature by way of dissolving and weaving the voice in all its aspects.

In her book *Life and Words*, Veena Das argues that voicelessness is a vicissitude of such traumatic or catastrophic experiences, yet it does not include a literal loss of words. Voicelessness indicates frozen and numb words. She further suggests that voice is not identical to speech and it cannot be evaluated as the opposite of writing which she does not confide into graph. Das maintains that voice can assert life into frozen words, however they can also be lethal. Das discusses the destructive nature of voice through an ethnographic study; however, it can be also thought in line what literature says about voice and silence. Having the capacity of exploring the limits of narrative and narrative voice, the works of literature blurs the distinction between truth and fiction by working against the putative structures and elements of novels and other genres. They enjoy the luxury to reject any solid claim on the factuality of witnessing and testimonial structures. Taking these discussions in

consideration, this thesis looks into such tensions two specific novels in their attempts and failures testifying to catastrophic situation reflected through voice and voicelessness.

CHAPTER 1: AN ENDEAVOR TO COMPREHEND THE INCOMPREHENSIBLE:  
THEORETICAL DISCUSSIONS AROUND THE CATASTROPHE, THE  
ARCHIVE, THE WITNESS, AND THE TESTIMONY

**1.1 The unspeakable, the unnarratable ... catastrophe**

*Her [Philomela's] silent lips could not tell tales of loss.  
Deep sadness turns to help from mother wit,  
And misery generates a subtle shrewdness.  
She strung crude country wool across a loom  
(The purple threads pricked out against the white);  
She wove a tapestry of her sad story.  
(Ovid, *Metamorphoses*)*

The Princess of Athens and the daughter of Pandion I, Philomela sets on a journey, accompanied by King Tereus of Thrace who is Philomela's brother in-law and who promises Pandion I to safely bring Philomela to her sister. Fascinated and driven by Philomela's beauty at first sight, King Tereus plots to lay his hands on Philomela. "With one look at her/Tereus was in flames—the kind of fire /That sweeps through com, dry leaves, or autumn hay/heaped in a barn. Of course the girl was worth it/But all his natural passions drove him on/ Men of his country were well known for heat/Their fire took root within him as his own/ His impulse was to bribe her maids, her nurse/ Or with hid riches make the girl a whore/Even at the price of losing all he ruled/Or rape her at the cost of war and terror," writes in Book VI of *Metamorphoses* the Roman poet Publius Ovidius Naso, known as Ovid in the English-speaking world (1958:164). Philomela, being raped by King Tereus of Thrace, tells him that she will make the world know about his crime. Upon Philomela's non-retreating determination, the tyrant – the sovereign body – performs the deed that completes his violence and expresses his will to annihilate the possibility for Philomela to bear witness to her rape, to her disaster. The King slits Philomela's

tongue and renders her speechless. As quoted in the epilogue of this chapter, Philomela, unable to speak about the event, weaves a tapestry across a loom with her catastrophic story on it. To put it another way, Philomela discloses her story by weaving it, hence creating a texture of the story.

With this mythic story that could be regarded as one of the early classical examples “narrating” a catastrophic event, Ovid creates a narrative of literary testimony and witnessing as a response to the phenomenon of catastrophe. The loss of tongue and speech, which is probably a metaphor, conveys the literal impossibility of speaking about a traumatic or cataclysmic event. Before delving into the discussion regarding why it is always claimed that the historical trauma or the catastrophic event is unspeakable as if this unspeakability is a universal “fact,” it would be more beneficial, first of all, to elaborate on the concept of the *catastrophe*. In that regard, one might rightfully pose the following questions: Why is the phenomenon of the catastrophe deployed instead of a seemingly more “politically relevant” and well-known term such as “genocide” while trying to understand the nature of mass violence that inflicts inexplicable pain on certain social groups or communities defined by their race, nationality, ethnicity, gender or religion? What differentiates the term catastrophe from genocide? Although it is very much possible to call such events traumatic and explain them in line with the trauma theory, what does employing this profoundly abstruse term—catastrophe—contribute to the studies on mass violence determined to erase the possibility of bearing witness as well as on the narratability of such events?

The concept of the Catastrophe is by and large used to denote what befell the Armenian population in 1911 and 1915 pogroms; therefore it is not a generic concept that can be used to signify the totality of the atrocities inflicted by a perpetrator. Presenting a succinctly exposition of the concept and referring to Zabel Esayan who writes on the Cilician massacres of 1911 in *Among the Ruins*, Marc Nichanian states that the Armenian word for the Catastrophe—*aghed*—was first used by Zabel Esayan without any capitalization and emphasis to depict the 1911 Cilicia pogroms (2002:126). In order to provide a better framework for the term, he traces the word *ansahmaneli*, which Esayan uses to characterize the *aghed*, “*ansahmaneli (...)* *aghétin*.” The root *sahman* means “limit” and “law.” For Esayan, what happened was beyond the limits of the imagination and it was impossible to give an account for it. The event was the limit of representation and image for her (Nichanian, 2002a: 208).

It was impossible to assign a meaning to this beyond-the-limit-of-imagination and infinite event despite Esayan's attempts to do so because, Nichanian argues, the word "law" contained in the adjective *ansahmaneli* implies the loss of law, the law of mourning that is the very foundation of humanity.

Nichanian explains the loss of mourning and its relation to the Catastrophe with an allusion to Sophocles's *Antigone* where the King Creon interdicts Antigone from burying his brother Polyneices who was allegedly disloyal to Creon. For Nichanian, by insisting on giving his brother a proper burial, thus asserting humanity, Antigone tries to act against the interdiction of mourning which constitutes the denial of humanity and the loss of mourning. The Catastrophe, he claims, consists in this denial; it is not only the loss of the mourned, but the interdiction of mourning, i.e., the denial of that loss, that makes the event catastrophic.

Now I repeat: If there is a loss, it can only be the loss of a law. The catastrophic loss is the loss of the law of mourning. And what makes it "catastrophic" is not the loss itself, in itself. There is no recovering from this loss. What makes it catastrophic is the fact that it has to be denied, that it is denied in the very moment when it happens. This is why "Catastrophe" is but the secret name of what happened (Nichanian, 2002: 127).

The massive murder of a group of people on the grounds of their ethnicity, religion, political or any other kind of orientation does not make in itself the act of murder catastrophic in this specific sense. The catastrophic structure of the event lies in the denial of mourning, a ritualistic act that the victim or the survivor wants to perform when faced with the loss. In "Mourning and Melancholia," Sigmund Freud defines mourning as a regular "reaction to the loss of loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on," (1957: 243). However, when mourning is made impossible and *interdicted*, how is it going to be possible to perform mourning and attribute some kind of signification to the loss in order to escape the madness? Mourning is what makes the loss meaningful; makes it possible for the victim to integrate her experience into a rational framework. Yet at the very moment the victim of the crime or the survivor is robbed of the law of mourning, the event becomes catastrophic and the victim loses her ability to assign a meaning to the event. The inability to mourn contains the inability to measure the event and to imagine a representation, which renders it incomprehensible and beyond the limits, infinite and indefinite. In order to understand

the structure of the Catastrophe, it becomes necessary to ask what makes a mass murder a catastrophe for the survivor or the victim. Destroying death, which means the destruction of any human perception of death and mourning, the will to annihilation becomes catastrophic.

It is not the act of collective extermination or annihilation that makes the experience *catastrophic* for the victim; it is the will to exterminate, which makes the experience incomprehensible, unnarratable and unrepresentable as it is this will to annihilation that remains beyond all reason, language and speech. “This thing is not death, it is not murder (...), it is not even extermination. It is the will to extermination. What causes disintegration (...) is therefore not extermination as such (Nichanian, 2002a: 206). The force that causes disintegration is not the extent of the extermination or the number of deaths. Because it is the will to annihilation that cannot be integrated into the rational and psychological integrity of the linguistic structure, it produces disintegration, leaving the victim no possibility for representation of the event. Now following Nichanian’s steps, one can ask if the Catastrophe means the elimination of the capacity to mourn, how does mourning become possible after the Catastrophe? Does the survivor who loses the capacity to narrate the experience does indeed experience this loss, which is the truth of the Catastrophe? Although the catastrophic loss cannot be integrated into any putative linguistic structure, is there any way to establish any form of language for the experience in question?

Before delving into a discussion on the (im)possibilities to narrate the catastrophic experience or on what kind of linguistic platform it can be at least imagined, there remains one more issue to address so as to comprehend the scope of what makes the experience catastrophic and what disintegrates. This exploration begins with one of the questions asked above and it regards the “naming” of the experience. Why do survivors and scholars call this experience of loss the Catastrophe and why do some of them passionately oppose the usage of the word “genocide?” Although it might be clear from the discussion on what catastrophe means above, it becomes necessary to pursue this question to continue the discussion with the question: how to imagine a representational possibility or how to narrate the loss of capacity to utter that loss?

Coined by Raphael Lemkin, a Jewish refugee who emigrated to the United States in 1941 and a legal scholar specializing in international war crime, the word

“genocide”<sup>1</sup> etymologically means the killing of the race, consisting of the Greek *genus* and Latin *caedere* that mean “race” and “killing” respectively. In addition to Lemkin’s efforts to legally categorize “genocide” as a crime to be internationally prosecuted, the word has been used in different political as well as social contexts as a powerful instrument for the political discourse that strives to fight against the political suppression of the memory of mass violence. Yet, the term has been subject to criticisms on many grounds despite many efforts to inhibit critical stances towards it.

Criticizing Lemkin’s definition and conceptualization of genocide, David Kazanjian proposes that Lemkin’s idea of genocide is concentrated on Euro-American civility and disregards violent colonial history by way of making a distinction between civility and uncivility (2011:370). He demonstrates that Lemkin fails to *name* the catastrophic violence of many centuries under colonialism, thus making this violence and the catastrophe it generates alien to Western “civilized man” through a silencing project, leaving the enslaved and colonized peoples outside the border of the “civilized world.” Although Kazanjian never explicitly claims this, such an understanding of history and the concept of genocide reiterates what Lemkin tries to object to with a view to establishing a social, political and judicial platform to lay the foundations of this crime in the Western legal arena: it basically produces the mentality of the genocide by distinguishing civility from uncivility and creating a certain hierarchy of acknowledgement regarding other sorts of mass violence that have occurred in history such as colonial violence. Given its specific contextualization within a legal framework, the term genocide cannot help being a political and legal instrument in the hands of both the groups trying to establish the *factuality* of the event and the executioners or deniers of the crime in question. Accordingly, it has not been utterly welcomed even by the parties who were the victims or descendants of the victims to such violence. Yet, nationalist or humanist parties prohibited the critique of these politics of instrumentalization on the grounds that it may help and abet the deniers and executioners in their incessant actions of disproving the crime.

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<sup>1</sup>The crime of the Reich in wantonly and deliberately wiping out whole peoples is not utterly new in the world. It is only new in the civilized world as we have come to think of it. It is so new in the traditions of civilized man that he has no name for it. It is for this reason that I took the liberty of inventing the word, “genocide.” “Genocide – A Modern Crime” by Raphael Lemkin, 1945. (<http://www.preventgenocide.org/genocide/freeworld.htm>)

What makes objectionable or susceptible to criticisms the instrumentalization of genocide in political, legal and social contexts is the “dogged pursuit of documentary proof of genocide, the dream of finally and fully establishing our own death,” (*ibid*, 371). The pursuit of documentary proof in the “archives” explicitly encompasses the endeavor to prove one’s death in front of the legal mechanism within the law, which is specifically the realm of the sovereign (Agamben, 2005). Each time the survivor is called upon to prove her death, she faces the executioner, obliged to provide an account of her own death, no matter what the platform is--be it a legal mechanism that prosecutes the violation of human rights or an archive that records and makes a depository of witness accounts. Every time the survivor takes the platform and speaks to prove her own “genocide” the logic of the executioner catches her, which entombs the event within a verdict that is to be made by the positive law and positivist history. It is this very moment when the survivor is caught up in this endless pursuit of documentary proof within the logic of positive law that the genocide becomes catastrophic. Such mechanisms never utter anything with regard to what happened to the witness or what happened to the experience of loss. They reduce the experience into a series of temporal logical narrations that are supposed to prove the factuality of the event. They ignore the law of mourning, which cannot be found in modern positive law as we know it today. This is the moment when genocide becomes catastrophic because every time the survivor faces that mechanism, the rooted tradition of denialism of the genocidal logic begins to function through an obstinate claim to name the event and to calculate its extent in the framework of positivist history and law (Nichanian, 2002: 130). Accordingly, it is clear that “catastrophe” and “genocide” cannot be used interchangeably as they belong to different courses or platforms through which a better comprehension of their essence can be attained.

One needs constantly to insist upon the fact that the Catastrophe is not the genocide, so as to be able to explain that the intent to commit genocide becomes catastrophic for those who were submitted to it (...) It contains, as a part of its very nature, in the moment it’s being carried out, its own denial, forcing the victims to enter into *the game of proof*, the game, precisely, of the executioner who denies, the game decided by the executioner, *forcing the victims, thus, to dispossess themselves of their memory and their death, of the very possibility of mourning* (*ibid*, 134; emphasis added).

The genocidal will of the executioner, imprisoning the survivor into a “dogged pursuit of documentary proof,” transforms the memory of the event and death into a repository or archive that is supposed to provide documentary proof of the survivor’s death. At the same time, it operates to deny the same death as the survivor strives to insert her own death into a discourse that civilized humanity can hear. This is why, Nishanian claims, genocide is denial; it denies the memory and mourning. “Catastrophe *stricto sensu* consists in this necessity to provide proof, and certainly not in the barbarity of the crime or the number of victims, and not even in the intention underlying the act,” (*ibid*). Then why and to what purpose does the victim or the survivor of a crime that aims annihilation of the witness feel the need to establish her own death particularly within legal frameworks that are dominated by the executioner of that very crime? Why do the survivors by using the discourse of the “genocide” and by naming the event so enter the game of relentless efforts of proving their own death? How is it going to be possible for the survivor who always encounters a limit of humanity and whose humanity is shattered to escape this paradox? How does the survivor return in order to witness her own death? The discussion on the concept of Catastrophe so far makes it possible to ask these questions and imagine to follow a different course so as to escape the inhuman structure of the denialist genocide rooted in modern historiography. At this point of discussion, it is better to state that for the purposes of this study, however, the concept of the catastrophe is not used as a proper name, as once Hagop Oshagan used to name the experience the Armenian population went through after 1915 because this study aims to first understand why it is necessary to distinguish the concept of the catastrophe from genocide to continue with an inquiry into the literary representations or literary accounts of the former.

The general attitude or purpose in the campaigns aiming at legally, politically as well as socially establishing the *factuality* of genocide may be grounded in the will to write the history from the perspective of the survivor and victim so that the event will “never occur again.” In the contexts of both the Armenian Genocide and the Holocaust, the idea of “Never Again,” has been prevalently put into circulation with pedagogical and a political responsibility so that the catastrophic event will never happen again. Such discursive practices that have generally assumed a role of documentary proof of the event are backed up by archival studies oriented towards proving that the event actually took place. Yet, the recent studies on the theory of catastrophe and memory have questioned the advisability of reliance on archives as

probative documents and started to question the “nature” of the archive itself. A more elaborate discussion on the archive will be carried out below; the archive’s conspiracy with the genocidal will, or the will to eliminate, that operates every time the survivor is asked to refer to archives to prove her own death, constitutes the inquiry of this discussion. Because the archive entombs memory into an almost sacred dwelling, it does not allow memory to be passed down by stories or epics. It claims its own “sovereignty” or rule on the memory of the event, collaborating in the denialism of genocide. Moreover, now in the age of archives, *remembrance* does not take place through a narration of stories and epics. Writing on the decline of storytelling in his article “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov,” Walter Benjamin laments the fact that storytelling is dying out in the modern age. “The art of storytelling is reaching its end because the epic side of truth, wisdom, is dying out,” he writes and sees this decline as a symptom of the secular productive forces of history that gradually removed narrative from the realm of living speech (1968: 86). One of the reasons for this dying out, Benjamin argues, is the fact that there is no more communicability of experience, which is ruled out by information. Although he presents a critical attitude towards the novel, he adopts a more critical stance towards information. For him, information only aims to convey the essence of things or experiences in a distilled discourse. While storytelling borrows from the epic and miraculous, information demands plausibility and conformity to the laws of external reality.

The storytelling that thrives for a long time in the milieu of work—the rural, the maritime, and the urban—is itself an artisan form of communication, as it were. It does not aim to convey the pure essence of the thing, like information or a report. It sinks the thing into the life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again. Thus traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel (*ibid*, 91-92).

As opposed to the storytelling that brings out the truth of the storyteller’s experience, information erases the traces of the storyteller and imprisons experience. Does it reduce experience to the mere combination of facts? It is not possible to say that from what Benjamin wrote. But it is possible to make a certain connection between what Benjamin calls information and archive because the logic of the archive works in the same way as information does. It erases the truth of the experience and

impoverishes the survivor's ability to narrate her experience by imposing a game of proof and limiting the experience of loss to mere facts. It erases the event; with regard to archive, there is no event to narrate. Only facts to present. Memory, as the Muse-derived element of epic art, no longer belongs to storytelling. The survivor is ripped of every memory of the experience. It is a process of dispossession. If the experience of loss cannot be contained in the archives, if the catastrophe is continuously repeated in the archives, then how is it possible to utter the loss of the capacity to narrate the loss of mourning?

Elaborating on the essential relationship between the catastrophe and literature, Nichanian asks, "In what scene, then, is the modern Catastrophe representable?" (2002: 110). Imagining a representation of the catastrophe is not to the same as imagining the suffering and pain of the each survivor. As previously stated, the catastrophe is not the depiction of atrocities befallen survivors. The experience requires, however, an imagination of the totality of the catastrophe. Yet, the *ansahmaneli*, the-beyond-the-limits-of-the-imagination character of the catastrophe, makes the sum of sufferings unimaginable as a totality while at the same time forcing the survivor to imagine more than the brutality of the death. When faced with the force of writing, the survivor is repetitiously trampled with the question: How to say the unimaginable or the unnarratable? Does the limit forced upon the imagination project itself on the writing of the catastrophe? This is a question of literature whereby a literary problem must be addressed by anyone who opposes the injunction of History, which imposes an inquisitorial demand for an account in the form of (archival) testimonies. But why does the catastrophe is a narrativity concern of literature? Literature in fact explores the force of writing when faced with a narrative problem. It records the limits of imagination and narration. "Literature I the sense it is usually given avoids the interdiction of mourning. Consequently, it necessarily avoids those hazardous regions where representation encounters its limit in human language," (Nichanian, 2002a: 205-206). The catastrophic experience is such that it remains beyond all the speech. It can only be narrated in bits and pieces, it does, however, demand a totality of event despite the fact that the language is shattered. To the question of how the event shatters the language, Nichanian replies,

By the fact that the event never passed. It is still in the present. This presence in the present of the past event, which is also what is proper to trauma (...) it

is because their [the survivors'] speech, inhibited by the totality of the event, is shattered, reduced to pieces, reduced to a fragmentary state, that the survivors are here 'the stricken.' They are stricken in language. (*ibid*, 206).

The here-and-now effect of the experience shatters the relation to language. It destroys the relation established with the linguistic temporality. Moreover, the etymology of the word catastrophe might be explored to understand this shattering. It comes from the Greek word *katastrophé* which consists of the words *kata*, meaning "down, against" and *strephein*, meaning overturn. The meaning of the word might be analyzed in two aspects: First, it overturns the linguistic relations and laws one is attached. As discussed, the experienced cannot be uttered or written within the established and conventional structures of the language. Second, it also overturns and rejects the law of mourning. But it might be said that the language of the sovereign, the speech of the sovereign, imposes the interdiction of mourning.

The language of civilized humanity that the survivor today resorts to every time she faces the mechanism of the archive or testimonial organizations is not and cannot be the language in which the catastrophe can be narrated because the language of the witness must verbalize or declare the interdiction of mourning which is the basis of the catastrophic experience. The language of civilized humanity does not take into account the genocidal will. It does not declare what Creon's decision does to Antigone and it neither discloses the limits of representation nor represents unimaginability or unnarratability, hence the shattered language. But the matter is not to question whether the catastrophic experience which is qualified as "incomprehensible," "unnarratable," and "unimaginable" can or should be represented. As Thoman Trezise claims in his article "Unspeakable," it is a question of *how* it should be represented (2001: 42). "Within the realm of language, the artist of atrocity had to devise new means for dealing with the unparalleled catastrophes, find new ways for bringing the inconceivable and inexplicable into his own world of imagination, in order to make the catastrophe communicable in art," (Peroomian, 1993:218). Rubina Peroomian draws attention to the inadequacy of traditional ways of responding to catastrophe and the necessity felt by the artist to explore the limits of language to be able to talk about the catastrophe because a phenomenon one cannot experience limits the act of writing itself. As Nichanian cites, Hagop Oshagan stresses the same necessity to invent new categories when writing enters into the realm of the interdiction of mourning and the catastrophe. How does writing enter into that realm,

through which medium? As it has already been stated, the question of enunciating the loss of the law of mourning or at least acknowledging the capacity to declare it is a question of literature.

Yes, only literature can say something about the Catastrophe, however, it can narrate what it will say only through a negative language. The only way to say something appropriate about the Catastrophe is to explore the limits of literature or through literature, to state in clearer terms, to explore to borders of language through a literary attempt in order to represent the Catastrophe (...) In short, no other way than the failure of the literature provides us with a result regarding the Catastrophe (Nichanian, 2011, 155-156).<sup>2</sup>

Nichanian discusses the possibilities or impossibilities of representing and expressing the catastrophe in literature. Distinguishing it from the “fact” which concerns the historian, he provides different approaches to the reading of influential literary works which attempt to represent a cataclysmic violence or to draw attention to the impossibility of the task. However, the idea that only literature can say something about the catastrophe does not mean that any literary narrative on catastrophe is a compilation of cruelties and atrocities befallen humanity. For Nichanian, the only way to say something concerning the catastrophe is to experience the limits of language because the will to exterminate and the loss of mourning cannot be narrativized within the frameworks formulated through facts of history and materialized in the archival repositories. The archive cannot provide an epic truth of the catastrophic experience. Perfectly powerless when faced with the interdiction of mourning, it only renders the experience null and void, working to destroy itself. It is nothing but the catastrophic suspension of all meaning because it hinders the survivor from narrativizing the event and attempting to assign a meaning to experience so that mourning can occur. The archive thus remains as the storm that drags the survivor into madness.

## **1.2 The archive that works against its own grain**

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<sup>2</sup>“Evet, yalnızca edebiyat Felaket hakkında bir şeyler söyleyebilir, ne var ki söyleyeceklerini ancak ve ancak olumsuz bir dille ifade edebilir. Felaket hakkında uygun bir şeyler söylemenin tek yolu edebiyatın sınırlarını keşfetmektir ya da edebiyat aracılığıyla, yani daha açık bir deyişle Felaket’in gösterimi için edebiyat girişimi aracılığıyla dilin sınırlarını keşfetmektir. (...) Kısacası, edebiyatın başarısızlığından başka hiçbir yol Felaket hakkında herhangi bir sonuç elde etmemizi sağlayamaz.”

“The archive is the transmutation of the black bile of melancholia into ink,” writes Rebecca Comay in the introduction of *Lost in the Archives* (2002:15). With an urge to compensate for the loss of the capacity to bear witness to the traumatic experience and for its dispossession, everyone assumes that traumatic or catastrophic experience calls for archivization, which would establish the event as historical fact. With regard to the boom in archival production and the belief in the potential of archive as demanded by history, Comay says, “The archive presents itself as the ultimate horizon of experience,” (*ibid*, 12). Therefore, there has been an increasing trend to produce archives. This trend has given rise to a belief in the possibility of a sort of historiography of a unique experience as a sequential, temporal and logical order, aiming to provide a total image of the event. But how does such a tradition of archivization establish a testimonial account with a view to proving the event as a historical fact while serving the temporal and logical structure of the historiography? Can it escape the storm of history in its pursuit of reestablishing the witness and redeeming the traumatic experience while conserving it within the realm of history? Despite the fact that these are difficult questions to answer, they call for a deeper analysis of the archive and the drive for archivization?

Before delving into a theoretical discussion, it is necessary to touch upon the tradition of archiving in Turkey since the subject of this thesis is based on the two novels written in the Turkish context. Meltem Ahıska discusses that in Turkish context the failures in archiving is generally addressed as technical problem, however this argument, she argues, does not account for the fact that significant portions of archives are censored or destroyed. In Turkey, archives particularly on the Armenian Genocide and other political conflicts which victimized thousands of people are never accessible. In order to analyze the indifferent attitude towards archives in Turkey, she discusses two registers of truth. The first of these registers regards the destruction of archives, thus rejecting any promise for the future while transmitting them to the present. The second register contains the excessive stories of repression and destruction of archives, which are transmitted through memory. Yet, they also fail to dealt with the future as their ways of telling the truth does not match the truth of the official history. They remain as the specters, as phantoms haunting the memory of the present. From Ahıska’s discussion, it is clear that there is an opposition between

history and memory in the Turkish context. Neither the guardian of history nor the memory, the archives in Turkey do not play a significant role in the construction of Turkish national modernity as well as presents a social insignificance in Turkish modern history, which she defines as “missing archives.” However, by the term “missing archives,” she does not refer to the literal and material absence of archives as there are many state archives. She points to the social and political indifference towards them and their easily dismissible nature.

It is therefore not easy to discuss any archiving tradition especially for the political conflicts, massacres or any kind of victimizing suppression. However, in order to understand why the archive fails to provide an account for traumatic events, it is important to carry out a philosophical inquiry of the phenomenon itself. The fact that the Turkish archiving tradition, especially in the Republican period, fails to become a source for historiography does not mean that any question of archive should be dismissed. Moreover, considering the fact that there are excessive literary production on the political conflicts of 1960s, 70’s and 80’s as well as the increasing literature on the Kurdish conflict, it might be argued that the absence of archives on such matters opens up another realm for any account. From the very beginning, it is not already possible to resort to archives for writing the history of state violence that occurred in 1980’s or 1990s. Therefore, literature emerges as the ground where memory of such events are passed and oriented towards future without engaging any national fantasy. Rather than archives, it is literature that brings the specters and phantoms of past into the present in Turkish context.

Discussing the concept of archive from a deconstructionist perspective, Jacques Derrida in his seminal work entitled *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* traces the etymology of the word “archive.” He demonstrates both the nomological and topological characteristics of the archive, which is embedded in the Greek root *arkhē*. In Greek, it means “the first, the principal, the commencement.” Derrida also draws attention to the archive’s connection with the Greek word *arkheion*, meaning “the house, the domicile, the residence of the magistrates, the *archons*,” who are the guardians of all documents (Derrida, 1995:9). This line of analysis clearly exhibits how the word archive consists in *commencement* and *commandment* (*ibid*). That is, the concept includes where the archive first comes into existence as well as in who has the right to command it. The emphasis on the principality and the association with the ruling group with regard to archive postulates that these archives are subject to a

process of sovereign decision-making. The archons who hold the power to rule have a hermeneutic right. The hermeneutic right encapsulates the power to interpret the archives, a political decision-making process marking particular documents as archives. Carrying out an elaborated discussion on Derrida's article, David Bell says,

Gatekeepers make decisions about what crosses those borders to be stored inside, but they also construct a system out of the documents they control through a labor of *interpretation* that renders all parts of the archive present to all others. A political and social tradition of respect and veneration makes the constitution and preservation of the archive a function of a *ruling group*, whoever they may be (emphasis added).

For Derrida, as Bell also shows, the right to govern is also a right to interpret; they do not mutually exclude one another. Therefore, the hermeneutic right, the right to assign meaning to such documents lays the foundation and justification for the law, which again refers to the archive's relations to commencement and commandment. Derrida asserts that these documents affect the state of law, recalling and imposing the law; in that sense, the archives incorporate a nomological principle. Furthermore, to the act of collecting, storing, preserving and interpreting the law, Derrida adds the act of *consignation*. In his conceptualization, consignation means amalgamating the documents into a coherent and meaningful body. The assemblage of documents is not only predicated upon gathering them; it brings about an interpretive function that requires founding a relationality between documents, resulting in the constitution of meaningful corpora of archives.

Demonstrating that the archive shelters political power in itself, Derrida discloses the sovereign's control over the archive. "There is no political power without the control of the archive, if not memory," he says (1995:11). In addition to gathering and conserving the documents through which the political body establishes the archive, it also attributes the quality of archivability to these documents. The assemblage of archives incorporates a process of decision-making, which results in marking certain documents as *archivable*. To state in clearer terms, the political power that holds the right to decide what is archivable also produces the event in addition to recording it. "...archive also determines the structure of the archivable content even in its very coming to existence and in its relationship to the future. The archivization produces as much as it records the event," (*ibid*, 17). The fact that archivization is an act of production implies that the production is always to take place. In other words, although the archive produces the *past* event with a view to

establishing it as a fact, the archivization is also oriented towards the future, a memory for the future. However, it should be stated that the archive's relation to the future is not predicated on a will to preserve and transmit the factuality of the event to future generations, particularly in the context of past calamities, so that the generations to come do not undergo the same experience. As Derrida discusses, the futuristic quality of the archive first stems from the fact that archivization includes an iterative production. On the futuristic quality of the archive, Derrida writes,

The archivist produces more archive, and that is why the archive is never closed. It opens out of the *future*. How can we think about this fatal repetition, about repetition in general its relationship to memory and the archive? It is easy to perceive, if not to interpret, the necessity of such a relationship, at least if one associates the archive, as naturally one is always tempted to do, with repetition, and repetition with the past. But it is the future which is at issue here, and the archive as an irreducible experience of the future, (*ibid*, 45).

As can be inferred from the passage quoted above, the iterative quality of the archive implies a production oriented towards the future, opening to the future. The archive does not essentially and necessarily function to store the past as required by an injunction to remember it. Derrida argues that the archive should question the coming of the future. Yet at this point in the discussion, it becomes necessary to ask what Derrida means by the *future*. He attributes a messianic quality to the concept of archive while building a relationship between the concept and the future. The messianicity refers to a very unique kind of experience of the promise. In this context, messianicity signifies the openness to the possibility in which anything might occur any time. Such a conceptualization of messianicity keeps the archive always open, ready for reinterpretation and reconfiguration. Never closed and marked by the promise of something to come, the archive remains oriented towards the future. However, the sort of future discussed here is not a far point in a time zone that is yet to come. Rather, it refers to a temporal zone in which future is positioned as a promise whose presence never gets lost. Therefore, it is possible to say that the future marked by spectral messianicity does never leave the present, constituting a memory of the future.

The iterative production of the archive harboring the future as promise works to destroy the archive itself. Derrida explains this self-destructive nature of the archive by making use of the terminological space of psychoanalysis because the

theoretical framework of psychoanalysis provides an understanding of the archive by struggling with the claims of the history and historiography. Observing the repetitive archive production, Derrida claims that this trend does not aim to save the memory of the past, namely, the memory of a catastrophic or traumatic event. It is driven by a motive to return to the origin of that which the archive loses by a repetition compulsion, “an irrepressible desire to return to the origin (...), a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement,” (*ibid*, 57). He mainly analysis this desire within the framework of the death drive as he suggests that the death drive Freud outlines is “anarchivic” and even “archivolithic.” (*ibid*, 14). He writes,

But the point must be stressed, this archivolithic force leaves nothing of its own behind. As the death drive is also (...) an aggression and a destruction drive, it not only incites forgetfulness, amnesia, the annihilation of memory, (...) but also commands the radical effacement, in truth the eradication, of that which never be reduced to *mnēmē* or to *anamnēsis* (...). Because the archive, if this work or this figure can be stabilized so as to take on a signification, will never be either memory or *anamnesis* as spontaneous, alive and internal experience. On the contrary: the archive takes place at the place of originary and structural breakdown of the said memory (emphasis belongs to the author; *ibid*, 14)

Derrida claims that the archive is hypomnesic, which means that the act of remembering is predicated on an external memory created and remembered through an external medium such as writing. This externality of the archive, according to Derrida, assures the possibility of repetition, the logic of which is inseparable from the death drive. He explicitly states that this repetition compulsion only reveals the destruction and the archive always works *a priori* against itself. At this point in the course of the discussion, he claims that this working-against-its-own-grain nature that aims *a priori* forgetfulness and threatens the principality and every archontic commencement is called *mal d'archive* (*ibid*, 14).

Although Derrida never explicitly builds the connection, writing on this abstruse discussion on archive, Marc Nichanian claims that the repetitive compulsion bringing out the originary destruction embedded in the archival desire, the iterative production of the event which is recorded in the archive through the death drive, “has the same structure as the catastrophic event which is the product of the genocidal will” (2013: 37). He continues,

It erases the conditions of possibility for the event of a destruction to become a (historical) fact. There is no other definition, no other explanation, for the death drive, no other condition or destination. In sum, it is with the catastrophic event and with the genocidal will (that is also with the discourse of proof, the proliferation of archives in which are poured the testimonies of survivors, finally, the insult of historiographic realism) that the archive exposes its law and its logic to the open air, exhibited to the gaze of all (*ibid*).

What the archive erases is the condition of possibility for a destruction or catastrophic event to become a historical fact, Nichanian claims. The archive as a probative document cannot establish the historical factuality of an event because the archive functions to destroy itself; it negates the very act it performs. The exteriority of the archive and the hypomnesiac characteristic of the archive which constantly produces the survivor testimonies with a claim to save and to conserve the memory of the cataclysmic event discloses an absolute refutation and negationism, which Nichanian calls nothing but “historiographic perversion” that is a game of the genocidal will, the perpetrator of the very same act that the archive claims to prove. This complicated paradox of the archive, which is embedded in the destruction of the conditions of possibility for the event to become a historical fact, indeed is the elimination of the witness. This elimination of the witness, according to Nichanian, is what defines the genocidal negation, constituting the very primary act of genocidal will. Yet how does the archive that takes the form of survivor testimonies claiming to present a true account of the facts, thus establishing a witness account of the event in question, result in collaborating with the genocidal negation and eliminates the witness?

### **1.3 Is there a witness yet?**

“I had to acknowledge that I was not capable of forming a story out of these events. I had lost the sense of history; that happens in a good many illnesses. But this explanation only made them more insistent. Then I noticed for the first time that there were two of them and that this distortion of the traditional method, even though it was explained by the fact that one of them was an eye doctor, the other a specialist in mental illness, constantly

gave our conversation the character of an authoritarian interrogation, overseen and controlled by a strict set of rules. Of course neither of them was the chief of police. But because there were two of them, there were three, and this third remained firmly convinced, I am sure, that a writer, a man who speaks and who reasons with distinction, is always capable of recounting the facts that he remembers.

A story? No. No stories, never again.” (Maurice Blanchot, “Madness of the Day)

When asked to “get down to the facts” of the story he tells, the narrator in “Madness of the Day” declares that the story was over and he announces his incapacity to form a story of the events and his loss of the sense of history because what the doctors in the institution want was the *facts*. The institution knows that the narrator is a writer, thus demandingly assumes that the narrator, as a writer, must always be capable of recounting the facts of the event. The narrator, however, rejects this institutional demand; he does not partake in the institutional elimination of the event. Because the institutional demand for a narrative fails to establish what establishes the event as an event, it erases the truth of the catastrophic experience of the survivor. Although the survivor of “Madness of the Day” complies with the institutional demand for a narrative account of the event, he is not the survivor who submits himself to the injunction of the history; he is not the witness of history. On the contrary he emerges as the dead witness, announcing his own death as witness.

The question posed at the very end of the section above is a very difficult one to answer; this study does not dare to provide a crystal clear and elaborate answer. Yet, with a view to coming closer to a glimpse through that highly paradoxical window of the archive and the survivor’s relentless collaboration in the archive in order to understand the testimonial nature of literary narratives, an attempt to understand how the play of witness works or what the death of the witness means necessitates a brief discussion.

In her article, “The Witness in History,” Annette Wiewiorka claims that the Eichmann trial brought about a crucial moment in the memory history of the Holocaust. For her, this trial marks the emergence of the “witness” and she also emphasizes the fact that for the first time in history the memory of Holocaust was associated with cultural transmission and education, which resulted in the transference

of the testimony to the public sphere at a larger scale. Moreover, she succinctly observes that it was also a time when the definition of Jewish identity began to be defined on the basis of the memory of the genocide. “With the Eichman trial, the memory of genocide becomes central to the way many define Jewish identity, even as the Holocaust begins to demand admission to the public sphere,” she writes (2006: 389). The emphasis on identity is important in the sense that it sheds light on the new role assigned to the witnesses, the role of the survivors, which transforms them into bearers of history and memory. “The Eichmann trial changes matters. At the heart of this newly recognized identity of survivor was a new function, to be the bearer of the history. With the Eichmann trial, the witness becomes an embodiment of memory, attesting to the past and to the continuing presence of the past,” (*ibid*, 391). With the global acknowledgment of the social identity of the survivor as “survivor bearing history,” the emphasis turns towards the victim. On the matter of the survivor’s recognition as witness, Geoffrey Hartman, the co-founder of the Yale Testimony Project, writes in *The Longest Shadow*:

Oral memoirs (...) do not try to *turn survivors into historians but value them as witnesses* to a dehumanizing situation. We cannot allow only images made by the perpetrators to inhabit memory. The records we are gathering intend to “open the book” of the survivor’s mind: they are, at once, formal depositions, informal chronicles, expressive memoirs, and testimonies that look toward the establishment of a legacy (emphasis added; 1996:36; cited in Jennifer Ballangee’s interview with Hartman, 2001:219).

Hartman here does not seem to question the conditions of bearing witness to a crime with which the survivor can do nothing but collaborate every time she complies to the injunction of history to testify to this crime. Does the survivor’s telling the event really make her a witness to the event? How do the conditions for the emergence of the witness as the true figure of the catastrophic experience materialize? Similar to Hartman’s point, Dori Laub, another co-founder of the project, expresses that many survivors interviewed at the Yale Video Archive “realize that they [the survivors] have only begun the long process of witnessing now, forty years after the event,” (1992:79). Discussing the issue of witnessing within the context of Holocaust, Dori Laub claims that the event which he refers to the Holocaust abolished the possibility of interpellation for the victim, ripping the victim her humanity and thus rendering her world into the one where no one could bear witness to her loss and

where the event is incommunicable (Felman & Laub, 1992:82). What he means by interpellation is that there is no longer an “other” to address “you” in the hope of being heard, to be recognized as a subject. But the Holocaust even abolished the possibility of appealing to oneself, thus creating a world in which one could not bear witness even to herself or himself. “This loss of capacity to be a witness to oneself and thus to witness from the inside is perhaps the true meaning of annihilation, for when one’s history is abolished, one’s identity ceases to exist as well,” (*ibid*, 82). In a similar fashion, Nichanian also evaluates the impossibility of witnessing to oneself within the scope of the catastrophe. “The fundamental consequence of the Catastrophe is the exclusion of the witness. No testimony in the language of the victim and of the survivor can bear witness to the annihilation of the witness” (2011:39). Both in Laub and Nichanian, it is possible to see the glimpses of impossibility to bear witness to the catastrophe. But one might pose the following question: Why is it impossible? There might be several ways of trying to answer this question. Such catastrophic events are often qualified to be incomprehensible, unspeakable, unimaginable or indefinable. One might very well see all these adjectives and their adverbial forms in every sort of account that tries to tell a cataclysmic event.

The catastrophe or the traumatic event rips all the representational signifying means in order for the survivor to assign a meaning to what happened. In other words, the catastrophe shatters, destroys the language as the survivor used to know. There remains no referential language for the witness to comprehend, to imagine and to grasp the totality of the event. In many witness accounts or in many fictional works that try to tell the catastrophe, it is possible to observe the shattered language or narrative which most of the time consists of bits and pieces, silences and even of fragmented images or scenes because catastrophe itself encompasses or incorporates a failure to imagine the totality of what happened as discussed in the above section, and thus cannot be uttered in its wholeness and cannot be integrated into a whole narrative. Yet the imperative to narrate one’s own account, even in the form of writing, as well as a claim to being the witness of the event has prevailed. For instance, Elie Wiesel suggests that the imperative to bear witness and testify is accompanied by an injunction against the fabrication of the truth of the experience and he writes, “If someone else could have written my stories, I would not have written them. I have written them in order to testify. My role is the role of the witness

(...) Not to tell, or to tell another story, is (...) to commit perjury.<sup>3</sup> In writing, he claims his position as the witness. He is the sole witness of his own experience and it is the only role he can undertake as the survivor. “The only role I sought was that of witness. I believed that, having survived by chance, I was duty-bound to give meaning to my survival, to justify each moment of my life. I knew the story had to be told. Not to transmit an experience is to betray it.” Recognizing the imperative to tell as a debt and duty, Wiesel believes that in writing he can be the witness to the event. In the same vein, Primo Levi ceaselessly recounting his experience to everyone after returning home, cannot resist what he defines “the need to tell.”

I felt an unrestrainable need to tell my story to anyone and to everyone!.. Every situation was an occasion to tell my story to anyone and to everyone: to tell it to the factory director as well as to the worker, even if they had other things to do (...) Then I began to write on my typewriter at night... every night I would write, and this was considered even crazier! (...) Then I wrote... I acquired the vice of writing. In my latest book, *La Chiave a stella*, I stripped myself completely of my status as witness... This is not to deny anything: I have not ceased to be an ex-deportee, a witness (Levi, 1997: 224-25; Giorgio Agamben, 1999: 16).

Levi is the epitome of the survivor who urges himself to write in order to testify or bear witness to the horror of the unspeakable. Despite the irresistible imperative to talk, the impossibility of bearing witness is a widely discussed phenomenon. In *Remnants of Auschwitz*, Giorgio Agamben addresses the impossibility of bearing witness. For him, the true witness is the Musselmann, the one who “touched the bottom,” (1999:34). He claims that survivors speak in their stead, by proxy, as pseudo-witnesses, bearing witness to the missing testimony. The survivor who bears witness in the name of those who cannot, knows, he argues, that she bears witness to the impossibility of doing so (*ibid.*) The imperative to narrate and the impossibility of the witness constitute a paradox for the witness. “The witness is that subject who signs over the reality of an inconceivable real to the extent that he extracts his paradoxical authority by speaking in the name of a living being who no longer speaks, by testifying in the name of an incapacity to speak,” alleges Alain

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<sup>3</sup> Elie Wiesel, quoted in Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992; p. 204).

Brossat (2000:130). The witness position in Levi's and Wiesel's writing in fact bears witness to the loss of the capacity to speak, to communicate the experience. It bears witness to the death of the witness. Through writing, either fictional or non-fictional, these writers feeling the obligation to write as a duty or a debt only bear witness to the incommunicability of the event.

The witness of the Holocaust is the survivor of an event which put catastrophe beyond the field of the imaginable, thereby constituting the final vestige of that event. The witness is obliged to speak of what only occurred for him or her, in circumstances in which that singularity was exposed to a limitless threat. The one who bears witness to horror must therefore stand in relation to that without which there is no relation: *an act which consists of producing the very conditions of possibility of one's own speech, but at the interior of a representational universe which death has surpassed* (Victoriano; 2003:214; emphasis added).

The survivor is the one who has survived a limit experience reflected in a crisis of the singularity through which only the witness can bear witness. Although the survivors submit themselves to the obligation to say something about this limit experience, the representational universe through which they bear witness is preponderated by death. It is the condition of the witness who is limited by death. As the "listeners" or "readers" of what the witness tells us, we will never be able to hear, comprehend and share this experience with the survivor who claims his position as the witness out of debt because there is no memory of the event. Everything is buried with the death of the witness. As much as there is no possibility of interpellation to the survivor as Laub claims, there is also no interpellation for the survivor, as well. In other words, there is no "other" for the survivor to interpellate in order to communicate her experience because the survivor does not share the common representational sphere with the other. Hers is surpassed by death and by the death of the witness, and the secret or the "truth" of the experience that the witness has will also die, either. In his short piece entitled "The Witness" Jorge Luis Borges remarkably problematized this status of the witness:

Things, events, that occupy space yet come to an end when someone dies may make us stop in wonder—and yet one thing, or an infinite number of things, *dies with every man's or woman's death, unless the universe itself has a memory*, as theosophists have suggested. In the course of time there was one day that closed the last eyes that had looked on Christ; the Battle of Jun'ín and

the love of Helen died with the death of one man (emphasis added).

What will die when this man, the last eye-witness, die? For Borges, the narration which is the act of preserving experience will disappear with the death of the witness who is the singularity that attempts to form a narration while detaining a condition in which death surpasses the universe of that narration. Victoriano writes, “(...) the witness operates where fiction finds its pre-formative, virtual function, because fiction is an activity which acknowledges the symbolic wound inflicted by death on the horizon of representation,” (2003:215). Borges presents the aporia of the witness. But how does the death of the witness as witness find a representation in language? Nichanian articulates this question as follows: “*How to really bear witness to the impossibility of bearing witness?*”<sup>4</sup> (2011:33) No witness account can tell the death of the witness. He alleges that a linguistic performance beyond pure testimony can bear witness to this impossibility. This linguistic performance should be situated on the edges of language or putative representational conventions (*ibid*). Bearing in mind Borges’s story and Blanchot’s short récit quoted at the beginning of this section, the question can be asked again: How to formulate a narrative account in which the witness communicates the singularity of the experience of death? Blanchot writes in *The Writing of Disaster*,

I will not believe it. As Lewental, whose notes were found buried near a crematorium, wrote to us, ‘the truth was always more atrocious, more tragic than what will be said about it’. Saved in the last minute, *the young man of whom I speak was forced to live that last instant again and each time to live it once more, frustrated every time of his own death and made to exchange it every time for the death of all.* [. . .] (emphasis added; 1995:82)

In this quotation, Blanchot presents the aporia of the witness. He talks about the young man in Auschwitz who was saved in the last minute, in the instant of death. However, this last instant is always in repetition. He is the survivor of the death experience who is forced to communicate it every time not only for himself, but for all. This is the moment where the impossibility of bearing witness to such experience becomes crystal clear: There is a lack attesting to the death which was going to take place but did not. How does the witness narrate this non-occurrence of death? She cannot communicate an experience of the unnarratable. Since she cannot die in place of another, someone else dies. With every death, the secret of the witness’s own death

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<sup>4</sup> “Gerçekten de, tanıklık etmenin imkansızlığına nasıl tanıklık edilir?”

dies away because the instant of the witness's death lies in the death of the other. "As if the death outside of him could only henceforth collide with the death inside in him. 'I am alive. No, you are dead,'" writes Blanchot in "The Instant of My Death" where he tells the story of a man who escapes death at the last moment (1994:9). He continues, "What does it matter. All that remains is the feeling of lightness that is death itself or, to put it more precisely, the instant of my death henceforth is always in abeyance," (*ibid*, 11). That is the only thing that the witness can testify: the instant and deferral of death. The experience is always deferred and repeated. The "truth" of the witness, hence, will never be true. There will be no account which presents the truth of the event because anything that the witness testifies to will always come to this deferred instance of death. In *Demeure*, Derrida says, "One cannot testify for the witness who testifies to his death, but, inversely, I cannot, I should not be able to, testify to my own death, only to the imminence of my death, to its *instance as deferred imminence* (1994:46, italics in original). In the same vein, Dori Laub claims that the very concept of truth in which "bearing witness" acquires some sort of meaning has been destroyed (1992: 82). The destruction of the truth occurs because no one can testify to a crime for which no truth exists; it excludes any possibility of witnessing.

Considering the narrator in Blanchot's "Madness of the Day," who refuses to provide "facts" on the event as well as Philomela, who is excluded from the realm of the representational, it is possible to envisage different forms of witnessing. Fiction has been one of the platforms in which different survivors and victims engage, to some extent, in a linguistic performance whereby they can explore the limits of the language from which they are barred and through which they have tried to bear witness to the impossibility of doing so. Because no witness account in the form of testimony could present any idea about the catastrophe, about the death experience, fiction is the realm where they relived again and again the instant of death, the death experience that threatens even though it has never taken place. It is in fiction or in literature that the witness bears witness to her death as witness. One of the issues that this study raises is the literary imagination of witness via which a "monument to witness" can be erected. Beyond testimonial literature, it asks: Can the novel be a form of monumentalizing the figure of the witness and save her from being a servant to archivization or testimonial accounts which are bound by the limits of the legal truth?

#### 1.4 The failure of testimony

“Suppose that an earthquake destroys not only lives, buildings and objects but also instruments used to measure earthquakes,” attests Lyotard in *Le Differend*. This statement reflects the “truth” of testimony after the catastrophe. Lyotard claims that with Auschwitz something new took place in history and that new thing can only be a sign; it cannot be formulated in facts. The facts, the testimonies which carry the traces of the 'here's and 'now's of what has taken place, the documents that convey a sense with regard to the facts and all those phrases that aim to relate to reality; all has been destroyed. In other words, there is no testimony in which a relation to the facts and reality can be established and through which historiography could be possible after any catastrophic experience. In *Memory History, Forgetting* Paul Ricœur claims that testimony, based on memory and fulfilling the function of documentary proof, conducts a historiographical operation.

Testimony takes us with one bound to the formal conditions of the “things of the past” (*praeterita*), the conditions of possibility of the actual process of the historiographical operation. With testimony opens an epistemological process that departs from declared memory, passes through the archive and documents, and finds its fulfillment in documentary proof (Ricœur, 2004:161).

Testimony as an act of speech presupposes a certain kind of speaker. It assumes that the victim, the survivor, reacquires his voice and reveals the listener inside him, creating an address or an account of facts specifically oriented towards the historical “truth.” The age of testimony in which we are living proved the approach that conceptualizes the testimony as a document of proof. The prolific amount of testimonial accounts that can be found at the storages of many institutions in the form of archive aspire to attach a probative value to testimonies. Although survivor testimonies have undertaken a role to present the true account as required by the injunction of history and believed to contribute to writing historical facts of such catastrophic events, Geoffrey Hartman does not necessarily attaches a single purpose to testimonies. He even stresses that the historical potential of such testimonies does not constitute their first and foremost quality.

The testimony project directs itself toward educational, historical, pedagogical purposes (...) What is particularly important, in my estimation, is the educational or pedagogical potential. I am not so sure about the historical potential, except in the expanded sense of historical we have talked about. The historical memory needed to be expanded. So that the first thing to say is that the archive does not serve one purpose (...) Of course, you could legitimately ask, "Still, if you had to choose one purpose, what would you choose?" I would probably choose the pedagogical. I think that motivated me more than the other reasons (Jennifer Ballangee's interview with Hartman, 2001:219).

As opposed to Ricœur who sanctions testimony with a documentary proof sealed at the archive, Hartman is skeptical about the historical function of the testimonies. Yet, he goes one step beyond Ricœur and assigns a pedagogical and educational value to testimonies. Despite the fact that testimony has always undertaken a probative function, reverting into archive, it does not function as proof of the facts. Nor can it serve a pedagogical purpose or fulfill a legal function because testimony from the very beginning is destined to be sealed by the archive. The age of testimony has also highlighted or features survivor testimonies, testimonies of witnesses, which have been believed to establish the factuality of the event at courts as a living record of real historical events. At this point, the following question should be posed: What has happened afterwards? Why have the survivors claiming to be the real witnesses surged to the courts or legal mechanisms to testify? Do they seek justice for this crime without truth? Or is there any possible way to establish and secure justice?

Yet these testimonies collected are only transformed into archives that nobody reads. "They exist only to be placed on a shelf. They have no more than a potential, never real, existence," (Nichanian, 2009: 122). Nichanian alleges that testimony cannot prove genocide; it only validates archive because the survivor testimonies are only uttered as a response to the injunction of history, never speaking about the catastrophic event. The injunction of history obliges the survivor to speak before, leaving her as a vestige of the past and confining what is told into the dusty archives. Against the archivization and the function of documentary proof before legal mechanism and history, Nichanian proposes to save testimony. But what does it mean to save history from the archive?

Agamben tries to reformulate the concept of testimony, trying to save it from the archive. "Testimony thus guarantees not the factual truth of the statement

safeguarded in the archive, but rather its un-archivability, its exteriority with respect to the archive,” (1999:) He introduces a change to the concept of testimony, through which we can understand the fact that the witness who agrees to testify can only testify to the incapacity to speak; she cannot provide the truth of the historical event as facts. Although Agamben’s conceptualization, which does not take the utterances of the witness as the true account of events, brings another level to testimony, it does not provide an insight with regard to how to read these testimonies. Are they still documents? It is not possible to know.

Against the documentalization and archivization of testimony, he suggests that testimony be read as a monument. What does it mean to read testimony as a monument? How does it help saving testimony from instrumentalization as documentary proofs? Contrary to a document which is always instrumentalized, exterior to the witness, a monument exists in itself, not claiming to have any probative value as assigned by law or historiography (2009: 94). The dilemma between the testimony as document and testimony as monument creates a tension in terms of representation through art. Testimony as document does not allow for any resort to art or for any change in the concept of testimony. In line with Nichanian’s arguments, it can be said that testimony as monument inversely welcomes a recourse to art, for instance, literary treatment of testimonies. It creates a possibility for signifying the un-representability or incapacity to speak with regard to the catastrophic experience. Again, one might rightfully ask: What does the concept of testimony as document imply? Does it provide a potential for literarization of testimonies? If so, what kind of liberation it brings? Nichanian, indeed, uses the concept of testimony as monument within the context of monument of (to) mourning. It is difficult to present the relationship between art and mourning, at least, how art, through various representation experiments and different linguistic experiences, enables one to narrate or utter the interdiction of mourning or the loss of the law of mourning, which is exactly what Sophocles does in *Antigone*.

Elaborately discussing the Trauerspiel in early modernity, Walter Benjamin presents the relationship between mourning and literature. The mourning play, which presents the catastrophe of human language in an era where tragedy is no longer possible since the Oedipal law can no longer contain the representative potential of language because of the loss of mourning, generates a potentiality for mourning according to Benjamin, and he associates art with mourning. He claims that

Trauerspiel is found at the art of mourning, which

is the state of mind in which feeling revives the empty world in the form of a mask, and derives an enigmatic satisfaction in contemplating it. . . . If the laws which govern the *Trauerspiel* are to be found, partly explicit, partly implicit, at the heart of mourning, the representation of these laws does not concern itself with the emotional condition of the poet or his public, but with a feeling which is released from any empirical subject and is intimately bound to the fullness of an object. (Benjamin, 1998:39).

As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, the law of mourning is not contained in the human law. The artistic representation of the law of mourning or the interdiction of mourning has nothing do to with the truthful account of facts when faced with catastrophe. Therefore, testimony as monument worked through and through in artistic representations is not determined by the historical truth and a rhetoric of proof and persuasion. Testimony of literature, or testimony as woven through artistic representations, is bound by artistic truth. The practice of narrativization in testimony of literature, however, does not require any artistic embellishment. Rather, it should create an internal structure, presenting the testimony as a text in itself. It does not necessarily aim to establish a truthful account of the event. On the contrary, testimony as monument testifies to the failure of testimony or the failure of testifying through which the witness tries to claim her authority.

In *Demeure*, Derrida maintains that literature serves as real testimony. He suggests that without the inherent possibility of fiction in testimony no truthful testimony would be possible; it is fiction that presents a possibility for truthful testimony (2000:71-72). Truthful testimony does not claim the truth based on the historical facts of the event; rather, it announces the incapacity to speak the truth. Therefore, Derrida argues that testimony can only exist as a fiction, as an allegory narrating the story of a failure, the failure to testify or to speak the truth. The creative potentiality of fiction for providing and constituting a Derridian truthful testimony, which also announces the tear in the language, is realized in fiction, yet only through failure. Although Derrida does not explicitly discuss how to narrate the catastrophic experience bound by the interdiction of mourning, he claims that the tear in language, which may be seen as the result of the loss of mourning and materialized in the break between the I –unable to maintain its position in the instance of death as Blanchot beautifully demonstrates– and experience, testimony returns to fiction with a view to

finding the loss. To state in Nichanian's terms, testimony returns to fiction to bear witness to its own failure. It is thus fiction that lays bare the failure to say something against the interdiction of mourning and erect a monument to testimony and mourning. Yet again, only through failure.

## CHAPTER TWO: SONUS EST, QUI VIVIT IN ILLA

“If what I am about to tell will not horrify you and you will listen to me till the end, I must first and foremost say that, what you are about to listen is a narrative of the forgotten. The voice you are going to here now, the voice of the people long forgotten, and the voice of a person who is himself forgotten.” (Uzun, *The Scream of the Tigris*, 14).<sup>5</sup>

Not marble, nor the gilded monuments  
Of princes, shall outlive this powerful rhyme;  
But you shall shine more bright in these contents  
Than unswept stone, besmear'd with sluttish time.  
When wasteful war shall statues overturn,  
And broils root out the work of masonry,  
Nor Mars his sword nor war's quick fire shall burn  
The living record of your memory.  
'Gainst death and all-oblivious enmity  
Shall you pace forth; your praise shall still find room  
Even in the eyes of all posterity  
That wear this world out to the ending doom.  
So, till the judgment that yourself arise,  
You live in this, and dwell in lovers' eyes.

William Shakespeare, Sonnet LV

“One of the concepts of authorship is to defy forgetting. And of course literature should have a mission against forgetting,”<sup>6</sup> writes Mehmed Uzun in *Bir Dil Yaratmak*,” (2001:93). What concerns him as a person of letters is the emotions, pain,

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<sup>5</sup> “Eğer anlatacaklarım size korkutmaz da beni sonuna kadar dinlerseniz, her şeyden önce şunu belirtmeliyim ki, şimdi dinleyecekleriniz, unutulmuşların anlatısıdır. Şimdi duyacağınız ses, zamanında unutulmuş insanların ses, kendisi de unutulmuş bir insanın sesidir.”

<sup>6</sup> “Yazarlığın konseptlerinden biri de; unutkanlığa karşı durmaktır. Ve tabii ki edebiyat unutkanlığa karşı misyon sahibi olabilmeli.”

grief and melancholia that humanity experiences and particularly the Kurdish people. He undertakes a mission to be the voice of the silenced, oppressed and the forgotten who cannot be even a “footnote” either in history or in literature against the sword of Mars. He aims to leave the living record of memory because, as Shakespeare beautifully once said in Sonnet LV quoted above, no monument of princes “shall outlive this powerful rhyme.” What is this powerful rhyme? It is the literary word against death and oblivion. Seeing it as almost a political duty and undertaking a Shakespearean mission, he sees a lost voice through the literary word in the form of the novel because as an author he believes that narrative is a need of the human being. When the word is lost, then comes the true annihilation of humanity. In that regard, this study asks? How is the voice or word re-gained, when the word is already lost, when the humanity is almost annihilated through the atrocious violence of the other?

## **2.1. A *Dengbej* in Relentless Pursuit of Voice(s)**

The narrator in *The Voice of the Tigris*, a two-volume novel consisting of *The Scream of the Tigris* and *The Exiles of the Tigris* and written by Mehmed Uzun, is a *dengbej*, which is a compound word. It contains “deng” which means “voice” in Kurdish and “bej” which means “say or tell.” In Kurdish oral literature a *dengbej* literally meaning “voice teller,” is someone who sings epics called *stran* and poems called *kilam*. The narrator in this novel as the one who tells the voice strives to break the silence of an entire people by establishing a literary narrative through which he claims to pass on the memory of a particular moment of violence in history. In his endeavor to address the other to communicate his individual experience and the collective experience of the Kurds, Biro –the *dengbej* and the narrator– starts his narrative with an interpellative voice; that is to say, the narrative voice in this novel utilizes the second person narrative mode. “You asked for it and I am going to tell. Light the lamp and lend your ears to the voice of the forgotten. (...) I shall tell you who the forgotten are before you ask,” (*The Scream of the Tigris*, 13). As can be seen, at first he seems to directly address the reader as it is not clear whom he calls by saying “you.”

The reader, however, later finds out that he in fact has an audience. Towards

the end of his life in exile, he sends for seven ethnically and religiously different young people. “Seven young men who fed on the veins of the country’s soil and who are able to water the roads of the country’s soil like Tigris and Euphrates with the power of the literary word,” Biro describes them (*The Exiles of The Tigris*, 458). Although he narrates the before and after of Mir Badr Khan’s rebellion of the 1840s, the war and the exile to these seven young men, the narrative voice suggests that he also addresses the reader, which blurs the distinction between the author and the narrator in this particular novel. Accordingly, he assumes that his narrative will be communicated to others and the voice of the forgotten will be heard via his narrative. With a view to realizing his ambition to compose the narrative of the disaster, he seeks to accommodate all the voices of his land Jazira Bohtan, including the silence that he conceptualizes as one of the “voices.” Even the opening page of the novel starts with a Latin saying that reads, “Sonus est, qui vivit in illa...” (Only a voice, a voice is left of him). This sentence provides a cue to what the reader is about to encounter: a narrative of voices or a narrative claiming voices.

The “multiplicity” of voices may not be surprising given that the narrator is a *dengbej*. But it becomes crucial to ask how the “multiplicity” of voices in Biro’s narrative gains materiality at the textual and narratological level. Throughout the whole narrative, everything appears to have a voice: the river Tigris, the library, each character and element in the story, the historical characters mentioned in the narrative, even the silence. Writing on the voice in the novel, Mihail Bakhtin defines the novel as a diversity of social speech types and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized (1981:262). He writes,

authorial speeches, the speeches of narrators, inserted genres, the speech of characters are merely those fundamental compositional unities with whose help *heteroglossia* can enter the novel, each of them permits a *multiplicity* of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships (*ibid*, 263; emphasis added).

For Bakhtin, what differentiates novel from other genres is the diversity of voices and heteroglossia that enter the novel and organize themselves within it into a structured artistic universe, which yields a unity in diversity (*ibid*, 300). By heteroglossia, Bakhtin refers to a social phenomenon whereby multiple speech genres and dialogues form an artistic discourse in the novel in addition creating a verbal-

ideological universe in the novelistic narrative. In that regard, heteroglossia in Bakhtinian terminology is subject to an artistic reworking. Moreover, the multiplicity of social voices and languages, a phenomenon Bakhtin does not consider unitary but always in evolution and working, creates a dialogical imagination (orientation) of “a word among other words of all kinds and degrees revealing new and significant artistic potential in discourse which finds its fullest and deepest realization and expression in the form of the novel (*ibid*, 276). Taking this Bakhtinian analysis of voice in the novel into consideration, one might re-approach the claim on voice in Uzun’s novel and ask: Does the fact that the narrator as a voice-teller tries to incorporate all the voices in his literary narrative make the novel or his narrative the one where a multiplicity of voices finds representation as social speeches and forms the verbal-ideological universe of the novel in question?

Despite the ambitious claim of Dengbej Biro to voice every social, political, historical and even natural characters and elements in his narrative, the reader easily observes that all these voices are narrated through Dengbej Biro; they are not their own narrators. All these heteroglot elements are unified and filtered through only a single narrative voice and point of view. Therefore, the narrative voice never seems to change. That is to say, the narrative reaches the reader through Biro’s perspective, the only voice that is heard among the “multiplicity” of the voices belonging to him. Yet again, is there any way this unilinear characteristic of the narrative voice can be subverted? One might argue that the multiplicity of voices, or rather the claim to multiplicity, cannot be reduced to the narrative voice. If the voices in the novel should be separated from the narrative voice, how does the narrator do it? The narrator already asserts that he is the only one giving voice to the calamitous events, to the oppressed, and to the dead.

They [the owners of the all voices of the past] are gone, I have survived. Yet all of them together with their experiences, fates and lives have been transformed today into my voice and wrapped themselves up with a personality. They have become Dengbej Biro the useless, who is of no use in anything but voices, who had the strength neither to save them at the time nor to go with them, (*The Scream of The Tigris*, 38-39)<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> “Onlar gitti, ben kaldım, ancak onların hepsi, tecrübe, keder ve tekmil hayatlarıyla birlikte bugün sesime dönüştüler, bir kişiliğe büründüler; seslerden başka hiçbir işe yaramayan, zamanında ne onlar

He accepts that he is the only voice of what he is going to narrate. Even though there are many voices in the account, he has incorporated them all in his voice or all those voices have come together and been united in his voice. But in what sense does he talk about voice? It seems that voice signifies the ability to narrate and to speak about the past violence. He conceptualizes voice as the narrative of those who are forgotten and oppressed: "...what you are going to listen to now is the narrative of the forgotten. The voice you are going to hear now is the voice of the people who were forgotten at the time and the voice of a human being who is forgotten,"<sup>8</sup> (13). At the very beginning of his narrative, he defines the meaning of voice within the context of his narrative: "My narrative belongs to them [the oppressed and the forgotten], my voice is their voice,"<sup>9</sup> (16). It seems that he emphasizes voice as the channel of speech and of oral narrative and as the ability to narrate on behalf of those who cannot narrate. He almost equates voice with his position as witness. As those who are dead, oppressed and forgotten cannot speak of the violence on their behalf, Biro as a dengbêj emerges as the witness of the catastrophe, believing that his narrative can give voice to those who have gone to the land of the dead.

Today, I have only a single goal. To reach the deep valley of voice, phantasies and dreams, to bring all of these to the present. To make them the voices of the new eras and new generations, maybe in a shattered and scattered mode. Now, I want to live a little longer for this goal<sup>10</sup>(87).

Dengbêj Biro, like Orpheus, who tries to bring back his beloved Eurydice from the land of the dead with his lyre, attempts to write the song of Tigris in which he would voice all the other voices, even the voices of the dead, even the silenced voice of her beloved Ester, who lost her tongue during the massacre of Nestorians, which was executed by Badr Khan, who was himself exposed to massacre by the Ottomans. Biro's quixotic endeavor reverberates in his claim that his voice relays the truth, the truth of the disaster:

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kurtarmaya gücü yeten, ne de onlarla birlikte gidebilecek gücü olan, işe yaramaz Dengbêj Biro olup çıktılar."

<sup>8</sup> Şimdi duyacağınız ses, zamanında unutulmuş insanların sesi, kendisi de unutulmuş bir insanın sesidir.

<sup>9</sup> "Anlatım onların anlatısı, sesim onların sesidir."

<sup>10</sup> "Bugün sadece tek hedefim var benim; geçmiş zamanların ses, hayal ve düşlerin derin vadisine uzanabilmek, bütün onları bugüne ulaştırabilmek, belki de dağınık, paramparça halde onları size; yeni dönemlerin, yeni kuşakların seslerine ait sesler haline getirebilmek. Şimdi sadece bunun için biraz daha yaşamak istiyorum."

My voice is the voice of the truth, yet that is not the truth of swords and daggers, of canons and rifles, of aghas and begs, of sheikhs and sayyids, of fools and state chroniclers, of mirs and pashas, of sultans and emperors. The truth of my voice is the truth of the Tigris incorporating eras and times, figures and humans, of the Tigris that has been flowing like eras and times, humanity and people<sup>11</sup> (27).

Resisting the history of the victorious and the perpetrator, Biro assumes the role of bringing back historical truth as it manifests itself in literary narrative through his voice or voices. Yet it is worth discussing why he explicitly states that he does not voice the rulers, chroniclers and others who side with them. The reason why the narrator highlights the associates of his voice lies in the fact that he does not want his narrative to become the material of History. But why does it matter if his testimonial narrative becomes a material of History?

That night, I learned that a truth can transform into another truth; that memories, human catastrophes, historical events can be uttered in many different forms; that experiences may conduce to praises, encomia as well as to swear and enmities. The reality we had experienced shortly before the days we spent at the stables in Sivas were then becoming the truth of the victorious in the mouth of a soldier, with the gaze of the state and pashas. What about the truth of victims, their voice, their language, their narratives and songs? Where were they? (...) Where was the history of the defeated and those who were silently destroyed? (...) I have to repeat what I have said at the beginning of our *şevbuhêrks*: I am the voice of the forgotten; my voice is the outcry of what befell the destroyed. (...) The voices of cannons and rifles that paved the ways for the triumph claimed sovereignty over the word and declared its victory upon the word. Not only do the triumphant forces defeat the enemy, but also they defeat the power of the word that belongs to the defeated. In this case, not only humans do fall captive, but their words do as well<sup>12</sup> (*The Exiles of the Tigris*, 258-59).

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<sup>11</sup> “Sesim gerçeğin sesidir, ancak kılıçların ve hançerlerin, topların ve tüfeklerin, ağaların ve beylerin, şeyh ve seyitlerin, soytarıların ve vakavünislerin, mirlerin ve paşaların, sultan ve imparatorların gerçeği değil. Sesimin gerçeği, Dicle’nin gerçeğidir, içinde devir ve devranların, şahsiyet ve insanların olduğu gibi; tıpkı devir ve devranlar, insanlık ve insanlar gibi akıp duran Dicle’nin gerçeği.”

<sup>12</sup> “O gece orada, bir gerçeğin başka bir gerçeğe dönüşebileceğini, anıların, insani felaketlerin, tarihi olayların birçok biçimde dillendirilebileceğini, yaşanmışlıkların bir yandan övgü ve methiyelere, bir yandan da küfür ve düşmanlıklara vesile olabileceğini öğrendim. Sivas’taki ahırlarda geçirdiğimiz o günlerden kısa bir süre önce yaşadığımız gerçek, şimdi bir askerın ağzında, devlet ve paşaların bakışıyla dile gelip, kazananların gerçekliği haline geliyordu. Peki mağlupların gerçeği, onların sesi, onların dili, onların anlatı ve türküleri? Hani neredeydi onlar? (...) *Şevbuhêrlerimiz*in başında söylediğim şeyi şimdi tekrarlamak zorundayım; ben unutulmuşların sesiyim, sesim, yıkılmışların başına gelenlerin avazıdır (...) Zafere yol açan top ve tüfek sesleri, aynı zamanda sözü de egemenliği altına alıyor ve sözün üzerinde de zaferini ilan ediyordu. Kazanan güçler, sadece düşman güçleri yenilgiye uğratmakla kalmıyor, aynı zamanda mağluplara ait sözün gücünü de yenilgiye uğratiyordu.”

“Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger. That danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling class,” writes Walter Benjamin in “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (1969:255). Composing his own narrative account qualified as literary, Bıro defies the demand of History for a testimony of the past. He does not agree to narrate for the sake of History so that what happened would not be missed from its pages. On the contrary, he does not conspire with History.

The night requires me, Dengbej Bıro, to enter their eras and times, to seek their words, voices, emotions, movements, songs and memories, (...) to find their agony and melancholy, and to direct our emotions and consciousness in order to revive the past, bring the lost voices to the present day and to give new knowledge and memory to the present day that is utterly under the hegemony of Ottoman pashas<sup>13</sup> (*The Scream of The Tigris*, 39).

As can be inferred from his statement, Bıro—who is useless in anything but narrating and creating a new narrative—wants to excavate the past violence, agony, and mourning together with the voices that are lost from memory and to inscribe them on and through his narrative as well as on the present day without submitting his narrative to History empathizing with rulers and perpetrators. He defies the injunction of history even before it makes its demand for an account of the catastrophe.

Despite his claim and aspiration to revive the memory of violence, agony, and catastrophic experience, the narrator poses questions regarding how he could narrate the story because he realizes that it is not easy to put such calamitous events into words. He questions the ways through which he can tell the catastrophe.

And another difficulty following me like a shadow is this: how, in what form, and through which voices can a person transform yesterday’s voices into those of today, create living people from yesterday’s voices and open a small but warm space within humans’ spirit, mind and heart for those people? Every time after you put out the oil lamp and left and every time before you lit the oil lamp and lent your ears to the voice of Bıro who brings yesterday’s voices to you, I kept thinking, my cigarette between my lips, my hand on my wounds or

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<sup>13</sup> “Gece benden, Dengbêj Bıro’dan (...) onların devir ve devranlarının içine girmemi, sözlerini, seslerini, duygularını, hareketlerini, türkülerini ve anılarını aramamı, insani izlerinin ardına düşmemi, isteklerini ve umutlarını, keder ve hüznelerini bulmamı istiyor (...) geçmişi yeniden canlandırmak, kaybolan sesleri bugüne ulaştırmak ve artık tümüyle Osmanlı paşalarının egemenliğinde olan bugüne yeni bir duygu, bilgi ve hafıza vermek için.

on my Melek Taus-embroidered necklace: what, how, through which way?!<sup>14</sup>  
(*The Exiles of the Tigris*, 12).

The quotation above taken from the second volume of *Hawara Dicleye* substantiates the theoretical discussions revolving around how to bring back the lost voice, how to represent the cataclysmic violence through literary narrative, how to construct a literary narrative that captures the severity of the lost lives; in other words, it can be said that the author conveys his authorial concerns via the narrator, locating them at the center of the narrative he forms. He explicitly problematizes the speakability or narratability of the event by asking questions about how to narrate what is impossible to express through words. In addition to how and through what ways he can tell the violent history, the narrator problematizes his addressee as well: “To whom could I tell that my heart weeps in sorrow and that every silence is the sign for an unnarratable voice?” (*The Scream of the Tigris*, 193). As much as there is no one left to narrate the disasters inflicted on an entire population, there is also neither an addressee nor a public to whom Biro can tell his story because the catastrophic experience abolishes the possibility of interpellation.

In his article “An Event Without a Witness,” Dori Laub discusses how the historical reality of the Holocaust philosophically extinguished the possibility of addressing and appealing (1992:82). The catastrophic experience thus shapes the world of the survivor in which there is no possibility of witnessing for her. Even the survivor cannot bear witness to her own experience since there is no one to call “you” and she cannot address “you” to herself, which is the true meaning of the catastrophic experience for Laub. Dengbej Biro, as the sole narrator of the disaster, discusses this difficulty or impossibility of addressing any outside witness because he cannot even address himself and put the event into words; he does not know how to tell it. Despite these inquiries and hesitations, he addresses his audience confidently and composes his narrative to the extent that he even claims that the silence also has a voice. As discussed at the beginning of this section, the narrative mode in which the narrator

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<sup>14</sup> “Ve beni hep gölgem gibi takip eden bir başka zorluk ise şudur; insan nasıl, hangi biçimde, hangi seslerle, dünün seslerini bugünün seslerine dönüştürebilir; dünün seslerinden yeniden yaşayan insanlar yaratabilir ve insanın ruhunda, beyinde ve yüreğinde onlar için, küçük ama sıcak bir mekan açabilir? Her defasında siz kandili söndürüp gittikten sonra ve her defasında siz tekrar kandili yakıp dünün seslerini size ulaştırın yaralı Biro’nun sesine kulak kesilmeden önce, dudaklarımın arasında sigaram, elim kah yaralarımın, kah Melek Tavus işlemeli kolyemin üstünde, şunu düşündüm durdum; ne, nasıl, hangi yolla?!”

reports the story even reinforces his claim to interpellate the other in order to communicate the account of the event.

In addition to the voices Biro embodies in his voice, he claims that even silence has a voice itself. “Size, sessizliğin de bir sesi olduğunu söylemişim. Şimdi susuyor ve sessizliğin sesine kulak veriyorum,” (33). The narrator considers it one of the voices of his own life, though.

*THE VOICE OF SILENCE is also one of the voices of life. Whenever the word comes to ancestors, to Lalish and Yezidis, the sword wound on my face hurts, as it does now; a heat that takes my breath diffuses into my body, my voice trails away and the voice of silence dominates all voices, suffocates them all. The voice of silence cannot be heard, but felt. Soul and heart hear that voice, not ears. Because the voice of silence is the manifestation of Ottoman sword, the sword strikes of those whose eyes are blinded by blood and of the blood of the victims (...) The silence which is the voice of shame and tristesse is now the sovereign of all the voices<sup>15</sup> (63-64; italics in original).*

It is striking that when the narrator talks about the voice of silence, the very writing, namely the letters that the reader materially sees, are italicized. One would like to think that the voice of silence must be distinguished and an emphasis on the impossibility of its narration is demonstrated in this way. In the italicized passages in which Dengbej Biro seeks the voice of silence, he says that whenever he forgets the voice of silence and attempts to replace it with the voices of life that surround a dengbej, his blind eye and wounded face remind him of the voice of silence (*The Scream of the Tigris*, 193). According to Biro, the voice of silence is embedded in the unspeakable; therefore, whenever he forgets, he is reminded by his bodily wounds that are the artifacts of painful memories of the past because for him the voice of silence “revives the memory, awakens the conscious and flies the human to the forgotten times and eras,” (*The Exiles of the Tigris*, 129-30).

Speculating on why he has dedicated himself to the word, he says he has probably made himself a slave to the word in order to find a voice for silence. He envisions this word and narrative as the one in which silence is one of the voices his

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<sup>15</sup> “**SESSİZLİĞİN SESİ** de hayatımın sayısız seslerinden biridir. Ne zaman söz, atalara, Laleş ve Yezidilere gelse, şimdi olduğu gibi yüzümdeki kılıç yarası sızlamaya başlar, nefesimi kesen bir sıcaklık yayılır vücuduma, sesim kesilir ve sessizliğin sesi bütün seslere baskın gelir, hepsini boğar. Sessizliğin sesi duyulmaz, hissedilir; kulaklar değil, ruh ve Yürek duyar onu. Çünkü sessizliğin sesi, Osmanlı kılıcı, gözlerini kan bürümüşlerin kılıç darbeleri ve mazlumların kanından müteşekkildir. (...) Utancın ve hüznün sesi olan sessizlik, artık bütün seslere egemen.”

narrative embodies. Moreover, when discussing silence, he also reflexively discusses why he has become a dengbej:

Maybe I have become a dengbej because of the voice of silence and its wuthering and made the word a partner of my life. Maybe because of the voice of silence, I am talking to you about a wretched history and destroyed lives until morning despite the pain of my wounds that gradually bring me to the grave. A wretched history and destroyed lives filled with agony, longing, sorrow, melancholy and desperation that are the basis of silence... <sup>16</sup> (*The Exiles of the Tigris*, 129).

He deliberates on his position as a dengbej, as the narrator of the wretched past, and tries to give meaning to why he has become a dengbej. But what does his becoming dengbej imply in this novel? His endeavor throughout the narrative is to become a dengbej who does not kowtow to anyone, who does not praise anyone and who does not sing to flatter begs, aghas or mirs but who wants to narrate the story of the oppressed, reveal the voice of the forgotten, as he puts it. Therefore, it is possible to say that Biro's becoming a dengbej can be thought in accordance with being the witness; throughout the narrative, he ceaselessly reiterates his aim to witness the agony, pain and violence in his land and to account for them through the literary word: "What was I doing when everything turned upside down? I was watching, *witnessing* the events. I was gathering what happened in my mind, weaving them through the literary word and transforming them into literary stories and songs I could not tell anyone," (emphasis added; 234). Even during the heat of the war, rather than fighting in it, Biro becomes the witness, and he narrates the event through the "literary word."

## 2.2. Oral vs. Written Narrative

As a dengbêj who is formed on the foundation of oral narrative, the narrator Biro relies on the tradition of Kurdish literature, which harbors a very long and established oral literature. In his aspiration to form literary account of the catastrophic events, he pursues the literary word, which for Biro lies in the song of the Tigris that he strives to compose. But how does he plan to reach this literary word?

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He comparatively discusses oral and written narratives. While the former relies on human memory and encapsulates voice, the latter has the word but not the voice. “One finds voice for written narrative at their pleasure, yet oral narrative is first and foremost voice; after the voice gets out of one’s mouth, it turns into the word,” (*The Scream of the Tigris*, 98). He claims that the written narrative is readily available and one may record it in her memory, nevertheless the oral narrative is absent, one carves it out of her memory through the help of voice (98-99). Dengbêj Bîro, like Socrates in his dialogue with Phaedrus, seems to privilege oral narrative over the written one; it is possible to observe that speech becomes oral narrative in Bîro’s account:

**THE VOICE OF WRITTEN NARRATIVE AND THE VOICE OF ORAL NARRATIVE** are very different from another. There is word in the voice of the written narrative scattered through inanimate, yellow and white pages, there is no voice. The voice of the oral narrative which can only be found in the human memory contains voices, there is no word. One finds voice for the written narrative at his will, but the oral narrative is first and foremost the voice (...) Apart from voice, everything else is opposite to one another in these two types of narrative. Only voice can bring them closer because everything depends on voice. One is born with a voice similar to scream and leaves the world with a voice similar to moaning<sup>17</sup> (98-99).

His emphasis on the voice and the creation of oral narrative echoes the long-standing claim that highlights the immediacy and proximity of voice and speech to the mind. However, Bîro does not deliberate on the voice as the immediate channel of speech and acoustic image, rather he discourses about the voice as the conduit of creation. The act of creating, for him, means literary production of an oral narrative. That is why he pursues all the voices in his land and he has heard throughout his life as the man who is telling voices.

Despite the fact that he seems to privilege oral narrative over written narrative when he says, “Books do not have any voice, they only narrate history. The history that we need most when the Ottomans and our region our going through the chaos they fall within,” (111) he still wants to hear the voices of books: “I want to hear the voices of books; I know that books have infinite voices, among those pages, there is

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<sup>17</sup> **YAZILI ANLATININ SESİ İLE SÖZLÜ ANLATININ SESİ** birbirinden çok farklıdır. Cansız sarı, beyaz sayfalara yayılan yazılı anlatının sesinde söz var, ses yok; sadece insanın belleğinde olan sözlü anlatının sesinde ise ses var, söz yok. İnsan kendi isteğine göre yazılı anlatıya bir ses bulur, ancak sözlü anlatı önce sestir (...) Bu iki tür anlatıda, ses hariç her şey birbirinin tersidir. Onları sadece ses birbirine yaklaştırır. Çünkü insan hayatında her şey sese bağlıdır; çığlığa benzer bir sesle dünyaya gelirsiniz, inlemeye benzer bir sesle de dünyadan geçersiniz.

every kind of voice.” These two different utterances seem contradictory, yet they reveal a tension with regard to composing a narrative account claiming to find a voice for an experience of loss. What does this contradictory position of the narrator vis-à-vis the written and oral narrative reveal? Does it disclose the contradictions and conflicts that are embedded in the feeling of urge and duty to form a narrative account on the basis of the literary word and voicing the unnarratable experience? Does it reflect anything concerning the lacuna or the aporia that dominates the authorial concerns in the face of the narratability of catastrophic experience? By making his narrator a man of voice, a dengbej, Uzun already undertakes a difficult task. In his novel, the tension between oral and written literature is very evident and imminent at the very beginning, filtered through and woven onto Biro’s narrative. Uzun accepts that he very much relies on the tradition of oral literature in his novels, particularly in *Hawara Dicleye*, although he still believes that he has to find another form and style in order to write in a genre that does not exist in Kurdish literature with a view to contributing to the emergence of a national Kurdish literature. Ideologically motivated to contribute to the foundation of a national literature under colonial rule as an exiled author, Uzun believes that the sagas, songs and epic stories of Kurdish oral literature cannot provide him with enough material to achieve his goal (2001:167). Therefore, he resorts to the novel, the genre which he considers revolutionary. “The revolutionary, humane, libertarian concepts of the novel are powerful enough to defy each and every negative event. New developments have created new opportunities in addition to new traps. The summary of the new opportunities is as follows: now the novel can be more interwoven with other genres,” (59). In this novel, therefore, by making his narrator a dengbej –a man of oral literature– Uzun unravels the conflicts and contradictions of constructing a narrative for an experience of loss whereby the word and the voice is lost by weaving that experience in the novel, a genre of written literature which has been considered devoid of voice.

Biro so much believes in the power of the word, especially the literary word that for him, the literary word can heal the wounds (293). But the word can serve both truth and life. It is not always in the service of the truth. Yet he says,

I learned from the experiences in my life that the word should always serve humans and salve the wounds of humans who can never heal their wounds. If an artist of the word can heal the wounds of only one person throughout his

whole life with the help of his word, then he accomplishes something<sup>18</sup> (292).

As a person of word and voice, Biro passionately believes in the healing power of the word. Telling the word and grasping the voice is the true meaning of life because, he claims, the word saves him from the darkness and brings light to his world (*The Exiles of the Tigris*, 153). “Everything can die, everything can vanish, but the voice and the word,” he says (185). Why does he so much believe in the power and eternity of the literary word? Does he reckon that it is only the literary word that can only say something about the unspeakable?

### 2.3. The River, The Witness

“I am the Tigris, the tongue of the mute,  
the voice of the voiceless.”<sup>19</sup>

Throughout Biro’s narrative, the emphasis on the natural elements such as mountains, caves and rivers, all of which have voice, is striking. Even the whole narrative is weaved around one goal: from the very beginning Biro as a dengbej wants to compose the song of the Tigris because he thinks that the river bears witness to the catastrophe which brings agony, pain, and wretchedness to the Kurdish people. “O! The scream of humanity/The voice of the human scream/Lend your ear to me; I am the Tigris/The voice of the Tigris song/The tongue of the mute, the voice of the voiceless,” (*The Scream of the Tigris*, 134). These lines are taken from the part where Biro tries to compose the song of the Tigris.

Biro, the mad man of the word and heart, you should finish composing the song of the Tigris before you die, you should find new words for the new era, grow and weave them and create new songs that narrate the agony, troubles and pain of the new era, the fears and doubts as well as the despair and disappointment of the dark periods; you should tear up the curtain of silence

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<sup>18</sup> Hayatımın ders ve tecrübelerinden öğrenmişim ki söz, insanın hizmetinde olmalıydı ve hiçbir zaman yaralardan kurtulamayan insanların yaralarına merhem olmalıydı. Bir söz sanatçısı bütün hayatı boyunca, sözünün yardımıyla, bir insanın, sadece bir insanın yaralarını iyileştirmeyi becerbilse, o zaman söz ve sözün sahibi başarmış demektir.

<sup>19</sup> “Dicleyim ben, dilsizlerin dili, sessizlerin sesi.”

that covers the death, murders and massacres.<sup>20</sup> (*The Exiles of the Tigris*, 94).

Composing the song of the Tigris is almost a duty for Biro because he believes that since he is a dengbej, this song can be the only narrative in which he can tell the catastrophe. He tells himself to weave the voices and words that the dead left him like embroidery and compose this song. However, despite his entire endeavor to become a dengbej who tells the truth, the people's truth, he says that he could not become one. Towards the end of the narrative, detached from his country and living in exile, he explicitly tells Badr Khan that he could not become a dengbej because the word has been lost. Does this acceptance of failure mean that he could not become a witness to the war, pain and agony? On the contrary, during his conversation with Mir Badr Khan, Biro tells him that he could not do anything in the war but witness, that all he could do was to witness the calamity of war. However, given his inability to become a dengbej, how could he form his witnessing? How does he formulate bearing witness to the violence? How does he weave the voice and the literary word he seeks? In spite of his failure as a dengbej, at the end he writes the song of the Tigris upon Badr Khan's request. The narrator in this poem/song is not Dengbej Biro, it is not Biro's voice the reader hears; the river sings its own song, emerging as the witness.

I am the Tigris  
The voice of Tigris  
In far away lands, a moaning in the land of exile  
A moaning under the foreign sun,  
Under the light of foreign stars, the foreign moon  
Thinks of you.  
You, the shepherd's pipe that I forgot long ago,  
The run of a horse, like Maghreb's wind in far away,  
A mulberry tree, the branches, the leaves, the berries of which I forgot,  
A basil seed of whose smell I cannot get enough, a fleur-de-lis  
A flock of crane that I cannot hear from anymore.  
You, my forgotten fate,  
You, my lost mind, my lost memory.<sup>21</sup> (430).

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<sup>20</sup> "Biro, sözün ve yüreğin delisi, ölmeden önce Dicle Türküsü'nü bitirmelisin, yeni döneme ait yeni sözler bulmalı, onları olgunlaştırıp örmeli ve onlarla yeni dönemin yaralarının acısını, dert ve elemelerini, karanlık dönemin korku ve kuşkularını, çaresizlik ve kırıklıklarını dile getiren yeni türküler yaratmalısın; ölümlerin, cinayetlerin ve katliamların üstünü örten sessizlik perdesini yırtmalısın."

<sup>21</sup> "Dicleyim ben/Dicle'nin sesi/Çok uzaklarda, sürgün ülkesinde bir inilti/Bir inilti yabancı bir güneşin altında/Şavkının altında yabancı yıldızların, yabancı bir ayın/Seni düşünüyor/Sen, çoktandır unuttuğum bir çobanın kavalı/Bir atın koşusu, uzaklarda kalmış bir Mağrip rüzgârı misali/Dallarını, yapraklarını,

Considering the fact that Dengbej Biro is the only narrator in this novel with an unchanging narrative voice as well as his explicit acceptance that he could not become a dengbej because there is no word to tell what happened, it becomes crucial to ask how this song of the Tigris functions in the whole narrative. It is possible to regard this song as another level of Biro's narrative, almost constituting a metadiegetic narrative. While the whole narrative takes place at the first level, which Gérard Genette identifies as the intradiegetic narrative reported through a character who participates in the narrative such as Biro, the song seems to create another level of narrative within the first narrative level. This secondary level occurs as an intervention in the narrative, as the moment of narratability of the catastrophic experience. What is more, although Dengbej Biro fails as a dengbej, the song of the Tigris emerges as the witness to Biro's failure in bearing witness, demonstrating the contradictions in the whole narrative as well as the impossibility to create a unified one. However, after this song, Dengbej Biro continues to tell the stories of voices and ends his account with a sort of will to the seven young people of the literary world, telling them to narrate his story in the future. Here, at the very end of the novel, Biro's claim with regard to speakability or narratability is still visible despite his iterative questions on how and in what ways to narrate the event when the word and voice are lost.

When it comes to me, everything is over on my hand now, there is no more word nor voice; neither story nor dengbej, neither the desire to narrate nor goals. Those voices that I have kept incessantly telling are still by my side like the voices of past memories and they will be buried with me. But I also believe that they will reach the new eras and times, the generations and people with your help. That is what I hope (...) There is no more voice, there is no more word. Both the voice and the word are yours now.<sup>22</sup> (456).

Why does Biro say "there is no more voice, there is no more word?" Defining being a dengbej as the desire of his entire life, he claims that that desire has never been fulfilled because of the conditions under which they live?. But it is rather the

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tanelerini unuttuğum bir dut ağacı/Kokularına doymadığım bir reyhan dalı, zambak çiçeği/Artık haber alamadığım bir turna sürüsü/Sen unutulmuş kaderim/Sen, yitirilmiş aklım, hafızam."

<sup>22</sup> "Bana gelince, benim tarafımda artık her şey bitti, artık ne ses ve söz kaldı, ne hikâye ve *dengbej*'lik, ne de arzu ve hedefler. Durmadan anlattığım o sesleri geçmiş hatıraların sesleri gibi hâlâ yanımdalar ve onlar benimle birlikte mezara gidecekler. Fakat onların, ayın zamanda sizinle birlikte gelecek devir ve devranlara, yen kuşak ve insanlara ulaşacaklarına inanıyorum; umudum bu (...) Ses bitti, söz bitti artık. Ses de, söz de sizindir artık, buyrun.

conditions of the catastrophic experience that prevent the fulfillment of that desire, yet Biro never explicitly utters this. These last sentences which can be regarded as his narrative imply that the desire to narrate or voice the loss encompasses an impossible-to-fill void. The voice is already lost. The survivor can only desire to find it. The voice is now an objet petit à, a desire never to be satisfied. A void never to be fulfilled. That is the true meaning of catastrophe.

### CHAPTER THREE: THE MONUMENT TO WITNESS

“Though children might not understand what’s going on, and might be unable to be involved in the scene, they have certain advantages as observers –like cameras, they might see things from a new angle and might be ignored by the protagonists,” (Tim Love).

The catastrophe or the traumatic event rips all the representational signifying means necessary for the survivor to assign a meaning to what happened. In other words, the catastrophe shatters, destroys language as the survivor used to know it. There remains no referential language for the witness to comprehend, to imagine and to grasp the totality of the event. In many witness accounts or in many fictional works that try to tell the catastrophe, it is possible to observe the shattered language or narrative which most of the time composes of bits and pieces, silences and even of fragmented images or scenes because catastrophe itself encompasses or incorporates a failure to imagine the totality of what happened, thus cannot be uttered in its wholeness and cannot be integrated into a whole narrative. Therefore, we encounter different attempts to create a different form of language, maybe a non-language or non-narrative diverting from the traditional ways of narrating an event, traditional structures and literary media to expose that failure to imagine. That is why, the unimaginability as well as unspeakability of the event and hence impossibility of witnessing find a ground where different imaginations of witnessing or different ways of failing to imagine a form of witnessing or testifying can be revealed through various breaks within the language and narrative. That ground this time is literature.

Set in a post-massacre environment of Dersim 1938, *Perperik-a Söe* (*The Nocturnal Butterfly*) narrates the lives of the people of a certain ethno-religious

community who are left over from a vicious political violence inflicted upon them. These people's struggle to survive is portrayed almost as the catastrophe itself, given the unbearable conditions into which they were led. Faced with the difficulty of narrating that struggle and given the impossibility to mourn and to bear witness to their own losses, the author is compelled to subvert the long-standing traditions of the novel. *Perperik-a Söe* by Haydar Karataş is an example where the author seems to concern himself with touching the limits of literature through the deployment of certain narrative techniques and motifs, giving rise to uncanny scenes that help the author to erect a monument to witness and make the loss and catastrophe visible. Therefore, within the limits of this study the focus will remain on the narrativization of the witness through particular narrative strategies and the investigation will pursue the question of monumentalizing the witness in literature.

### 3.1 The silence of the child narrator

First of all, the author engages in a cunning play with the narrator; he establishes his narrator as a mute child whose muteness the reader finds out at the end of the narrative. Still, the fact that the narrator Gülüzar never talks throughout the narrative draws the reader's attention because the reader never sees or hears her speak; not a single utterance by her catches the reader's eye until the very end of the novel. Gülüzar as the narrator only communicates the wretched lives of women who have gone mad or become desperate, the lives of children who get sick or die and the lives of very few men who ceaselessly talk in desperation. "She spoke, Fecire Hatun, she spoke at last. She looked into my eyes. You know, I told you. This child can speak. I told you, some people talk to themselves. Only they can hear their voice, no one else. I told you. Hece, come here, woman, Gülüzar spoke,"<sup>23</sup> says Kolsuz Musa, one of the few male characters in *Perperik-a Söe* (Karataş, 2012: 249). "My mother knew that I could speak, so did Perhan's daughters. Or today I assume they did. They told me that I did not use to speak, that I could not speak after seeing my father's

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<sup>23</sup> "Konuştı Fecire Hatun, konuştu. Böyle gözlerimin içine baktı. Yani ben dedim. Bu çocuk konuşuyor. Dedim, kimi insan kendi kendisine söyler. Sesini bir kendisi duyar. Ben dedim, Hece, kız gel, Gülüzar konuştu,"

severed head. But I don't recall that at all,"<sup>24</sup> says the narrator (*ibid*). Gülüzâr's statement here is noteworthy because it has several implications about the question of the narrator and language in literary narratives of catastrophe, as well as being related to the more general question of bearing witness to catastrophe.

Gülüzâr's statement that she does not remember becoming mute after seeing her father's severed head and that her mother as well as Perihan's daughters knew that she could speak reflects the complicated nature of bearing witness. Her situation in the literary narrative can be analyzed in relation to the situation of the witness in the audio-visual testimonies. As discussed before, the survivor in the testimonies bears witness in the name of those who cannot, those who are drowned. In a similar vein, one can notice, Gülüzâr as a mute child and as the literary witness, bears witness in the name of "those who touched the bottom," slaughtered people, mad women, sick children, women who committed suicide and men who could not hold onto life. In that regard, her muteness – maybe and probably metaphoric – is very telling because only in literature this ambivalent and complicated situation of the witness, as seen in Gülüzâr's statements, could be demonstrated. In order to bear witness to the catastrophe, Gülüzâr had to utter those seemingly contradictory statements with regard to her muteness, namely her silence.

The silence stemming from the incommunicability and unspeakability of the event is an issue that is at the center of many writings, which tackle the witness and her silence. However, as it is clear, language and more importantly a particular form of language – literary – is manifest as the sole way to reveal that muteness and silence of the survivor. Consequently, one can notice that the author cannot show the narrator's silence without language. "But without language, nothing can be shown. And to be silent is still to speak. Silence is impossible that is why we desire it. Writing (or Telling, as distinct from anything written or told) precedes every phenomenon, every manifestation or show; all appearing," writes Blanchot (1995:11). For Blanchot, it is clear that even silence needs language in order to be shown. The reader recognizes Gülüzâr's muteness through literary language and writing; in fact, "there is no silence if not written," as Blanchot says (8). The language points out the silence of the child narrator throughout the narrative; however, the reader hears

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<sup>24</sup> "Annem benim konuştuğumu biliyordu, Perhan'ın kızları da biliyordu. Ya da bugün ben öyle sanıyorum. Benim konuşmadığımı, babamın kesilmiş başını gördükten sonra bir daha konuşmadığımı söylüyorlardı. Ancak ben bunu hiç hatırlamıyorum,"

Gülüzar speak. The narrative then can be said to point out the impossibility of an absolute silence and of fulfilling the imperative to narrate the event in the form of writing.

In addition to being mute, the fact that the narrator is a child is another issue to investigate. One might rightfully ask why the narrator was not Fecire, Gülüzar's mother. Only a child, a child who cannot share the adults' "symbolic order" could grasp those moments where the glimpses of disaster could be manifest. The child who does not immediately recognize what is happening and who does not fully comprehend the vehemence of what is going on might provide a more subtle and untainted framework on the event. Only a child could so meticulously narrate the hopeless and desperate lives that a disastrous event made unbearable and incommunicable; the lives of children, women and men who are in search of a life and a home could be grasped and collected in the narrative world of a mute child. But, the inevitable question arises: how could a child be the embodiment of the witness? How could the author show the child-narrator as not occupying the adult's symbolic order?

One of the ways through which the readers understand the importance of the child-narrator in terms of the attempt to assign signification to the catastrophe as well as in terms of the question of witness is the series of questions Gülüzar poses throughout the narrative. In other words, Gülüzar, constantly watching the lives of children who cry, get sick and die, the lives of women who mourn their husbands and children, who lament their losses, the lives of hopeless men who ceaselessly talk, collects them in her memory without an immediate attempt to make sense out of those lives, but she constantly asks questions.

Whenever we were alone, my mother used to tell me this tale. We were desperate. Everything we put our hands on, everything we touch turns into a desert without one drop of water. Where have all those helpful people gone, where were all those people who come over the mountains even when they heard a foreign voice?<sup>25</sup> (Karataş, 2012: 56). "What about God? Where was Khzir, whom we call Düzgün Baba, who used to come for help all the time? Why was not he coming, the savior behind the Sultan Baba Mountain?"<sup>26</sup> [

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<sup>25</sup> "Eskiden ne zaman yalnız kalsak başlardı bana bu masalı anlatmaya. Umutsuzduk. Elimizi attığımız her yer susuz bir çöle dönüyordu. Nereye gitmişti o yardımsever insanlar, tanımadık bir ses duyduklarında dahi dağları aşip giden o güzel insanlar neredeydi?"

<sup>26</sup> Ya Tanrı, Hızır denen o her imdada yetişen Düzgün Baba neredeydi? Neden çıkıp gelmiyordu Sultan Baba dağındaki kurtarıcı?"

(58) “If I could let Perhan know and if my mother could drink our sheep’s milk, she would recover. But who will let her know? Why were we, the whole village, waiting for my mother to die, shutting our ears and sitting in such enormity of silence? What did we do to those people, why did this woman not send news to Perhan?”<sup>27</sup> (59). “The children, lost in astonishment, looked at the women who cry; Infact, why were they crying? What happened? How could she find the rope?”<sup>28</sup> (173) “Why does my aunts voice coming from the other side of the village sound so desperate? And the snowstorm brought everything it swept from Sincik Mountain, from Balkan Mountains. Will this ruthless storm never stop? Will it ever stop and will we ever able to hear what my aunt was saying?”<sup>29</sup> (192)

As can be inferred from those questions, the child narrator does not seek an immediate answer or a meaning to the poverty, hopelessness and grief that surrounds the people of Dersim; rather, she asks questions as if she were revealing the meaninglessness and the vain search for a meaning embedded in the catastrophic event. On the one hand these series of questions may indicate the supreme difficulty of representation and signification of catastrophe; on the other hand, they may point out the attempt to give meaning to the event. Nichanian, analyzing Zabel Esayan’s *Amid the Ruins*, observes Esayan’s aspiration to give a meaning to the Cilician Massacre of 1911 in order to be able to mourn (Nichanian, 2011:48). Nichanian claims that when faced with the Catastrophe, one needs to find a meaning so as to mourn. That is why, according to him, Esayan tries to find a reason that could explain why the people of Cilicia were slaughtered, which would make the event meaningful and mourning possible. Gülüzar as a child has no such concern about mourning for all those people because she lacks the capacity to comprehend the nature of the event that made their lives unbearable, hence she keeps asking questions. Gülüzar even emphasizes her lack of comprehension of what is going on. “Still, I could not understand that every bird, every stone has a story. I did not understand why Sultan Mountain threw bombs and suddenly illuminate everywhere at night, as the planes

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<sup>27</sup> Perhan’a haber verebilseydim ve annem içseydi koyunumuzun sütünü iyileşirdi. Ama kim haber verecekti? Neden tüm bu köy kulaklarını tıkamış, böyle büyük bir sessizlik içerisinde annemin ölmesini bekliyorduk? Biz ne yapmıştık onlara, neden bu kadın Perhan’a haber vermiyordu?”

<sup>28</sup> Çocuklar ağlayan kadınlara hayretler içerisinde bakıyordu, sahi neden ağlıyorlardı ki? Ne olmuştu? İpi nereden bulmuştu?”

<sup>29</sup> ) “Ve halamın karşı kıyıda gelen sesi neden bu kadar çaresizdi? Ve tipi Sincik Dağı’ndan, Balkan Dağı’ndan önüne kattığı her şeyi alıp bize getiriyordu. Bu amansız rüzgâr dinmeyecek miydi, dinip de halamın ne dediği anlaşılacak mıydı?”

threw bombs onto villages”<sup>30</sup> (119). That is why, it is important to note that there is a reason why the narrator of *Perperik-a Söe*, a narrative of a catastrophe that renders the lives of the survivors incommunicable and unbearable, is a child.

In addition to excavating the difficulty of representation and signification of the catastrophe, those questions also point out the issue of witness in the sense that through these questions the literary narrative approaches testimony and renders the narrator’s position visible as the literary witness. To put it more clearly, those series of questions rupturing the affirmative narrative of the novel challenge the communicability and comprehensibility of the event and liberate the witness. Shohana Felman in her article titled “The Return of the Voice,” outlines how Claude Lanzmann in *Shoah* liberates testimony and challenges the unspeakability of the witness. She writes, “It is the silence of the witness’s death which Lanzmann must historically here challenge, in order to revive the Holocaust and rewrite the *event-without-a-witness* into witnessing, and to history,” (Felman and Laub, 1992: 219; emphasis by the author). She continues attesting that what must be broken and transgressed is “the silence of the witness’s death and the silence of the witness’s deadness,” (ibid). In *Perperik-a Söe*, by making her narrator a child and making her ask a series of questions concerning what is happening and thus challenging conventional narratological devices, particularly the reliability of the ? narrator, the author constructs the witness through an art form, which might be called “literary witness.”

### 3.2. The Uncanny

Through presentation of “uncanny” scenes in the narrative, Karataş seems to create moments in which glimpses of catastrophe can be caught, thus a possibility of literary witness and testimony arises. One such uncanny moment can be observed in the relationship between Gülüzar and her doll that her mother Fecire weaves for her out of willow leaves and they name “Perperik-a Söe,” (Karataş, 2012:18). Although

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<sup>30</sup> “Ama gene de her kuşun, her taşın bir hikâyesinin olmasını kafam almıyordu. Sultan Dağı’nın, uçakların köylere bomba attığı gibi bombalar atmasını, gece birden etrafı aydınlatmasını anlamıyordum,”

she has her doll, she confesses that she has never seen any toy in her life. “Even my new doll is not a confidant to my dreams, but a fellow sufferer of my fears. Besides, what could a child dream of, a toy? How could I dream of toys that I had never seen in my life? Being by my mother’s side, that was enough for me,”<sup>31</sup> (95). Upon that statement, one might ask the following question: what is the function of the doll in the narrative, if Gülüzar has no concept of toy?

The name they gave to the doll is quite important and how Fecire treats the doll is important in the sense that it reveals almost an identification of Gülüzar with the doll. “My mother talked to our doll as if she had been talking to me (...) She told all the tales she used to tell me to Perperik-a Söe,”<sup>32</sup> (18). “My mother said all the words she was supposed to tell to this doll, as she had been telling a tale,”<sup>33</sup> (19). Moreover, Fecire sometimes calls Gülüzar “perperikem” or “kelebeğim,” which means “my butterfly.” “My butterfly, this path goes to our door...”<sup>34</sup> (43). “My beautiful daughter, my butterfly, I wish we had some salt...”<sup>35</sup> (96). Taking those sentences in consideration, it is possible to argue that an identification between Gülüzar and her doll Perperik-a is quite realizable. In effect, rather than identification, the doll Perperik-a is almost like a double for Gülüzar; both are mute and both are incognizant concerning the vehement circumstances. The doubleness, again, is very much manifest in Fecire’s treatment towards the doll Perperik-a and her calling Gülüzar “perperikem.” Sigmund Freud in his article “Uncanny,” qualifies “doubleness” as a source of uncanniness.

“These themes are all concerned with the phenomenon of the ‘double’, which appears in every shape and in every degree of development. Thus we have characters who are to be considered identical because they look alike. This relation is accentuated by mental processes leaping from one of these characters to another—by what we should call telepathy—, so that the one possesses knowledge, feelings and experience in common with the other. *Or it is marked by the fact that the subject identifies himself with someone else*, so that he is in doubt as to which his self is, or substitutes the extraneous self for his own. In other words, there is a *doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self*. And finally there is the constant recurrence of the same thing—the

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<sup>31</sup>“Yeni bebeğim dahi hayallerimin değil, korkularımın dert ortağıydı benim için. Hem bir çocuk neyi hayal ederdi ki, oyuncak mı? Hayatımda hiç görmediğim oyuncakları nasıl hayal edecektim? Annemin yanında olmak yetiyordu bana.”

<sup>32</sup> “Annem benimle konuşur gibi bebeğimle konuşuyordu. (...) Annem bana anlattığı tüm masalları, artık Perperik-a Söe’ye anlatıyordu.”

<sup>33</sup> “Annem bana söylemesi gereken sözleri bir masal anlatıyormuş gibi, bu bebeğe anlatıyordu,”

<sup>34</sup> “Kelebeğim, bu yol bizim kapının önünden geçer...”

<sup>35</sup> “Güzel kızım, perperikem , bir de tuz olsaydı...”

repetition of the same features or character-traits or vicissitudes, of the same crimes, or *even the same names* through several consecutive generations (emphases added; 1919:8).

Considering Freud's conceptualization, it is possible to regard this relationship of doubleness between Gülüzar and the inanimate doll as one of the sources of uncanny recits in *Perperik-a Söe* because it is clear that Fecire is inclined to identify Gülüzar with the doll Perperik-a and even occasionally calls her daughter by the same name, which Freud considers an uncanny element of doubleness. Yet this relationship between Gülüzar and the doll, which is based on doubleness as reflected in Fecire's treatment towards the doll and her daughter, plays out the narrator's position, hence the position of the witness in this particular narrative. The doubleness blurs Gülüzar's position as witness because she does not seem to be the direct recipient of the utterances in her dialogues with Fecire. When Gülüzar as the narrator says, "My mother talked to our doll as if she had been talking to me (...) She told all the tales she used to tell me to Perperik-a Söe," the narrative undermines the claim to bear witness to the event. The reader can no longer identify the witness in the narrative. This doubleness therefore might be said to unravel the failures and conflicts in *Perperik-a Söe*.

Gülüzar's relation to her inanimate doll is not the only uncanny motif in the narrative; the placement of the *ghouls* or *ghoul-like* phantomic creatures epitomizes the uncanny moments in the narrative. When they go to Bend village in search of a new home, they encounter a being which cannot describe at all. "With the lowing of the cow, one of the doors opened, almost tumbling down, and a dark shadow something similar to human flew towards us. The dark figure was hissing, instead of shouting. It was attacking Kolsuz Musa, his wife Hece or my mother, as if it wanted to grasp one of us, one of the children,"<sup>36</sup> (109). When talking about Bend village, Hece – Kolsu Musa's wife in the novel – says, "They say that the dead sleep and breath over there,"<sup>37</sup> (*ibid*, 111). Moreover, Fecire calls that phantom-like being they saw in Bend village as "ghoul" (*ibid*, 150). The existence of such beings and their descriptions as phantoms or ghouls can be described as uncanny scenes in the narrative. However, what is more noteworthy is to question their function in the

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<sup>36</sup> "İneğin böğürmesiyle kapılardan biri adeta devrilerek açıldı ve insan kılığında bir karaltı bağırtılar arasında üstümüze atıldı. Karaltı bağırmak yerine adeta tıslıyor, bir Kolsuz Musa'nın, bir karısı Hece'nin, bir annemin üstüne saldırıyor, sanki biz çocuklardan birini kapmak istiyordu."

<sup>37</sup> "Orada ölüler yatıp kalkıyor dediler."

narrative. It is possible to consider those beings in effect as Muselmann, as the drowned and as the one who touched the bottom, to state in Agamben's terms. They are the true witnesses and their uncanny existence in *Perperik-a Söe* indicates the novel's testimonial quality and how the narrator in mentioning their existence, thus bearing witnessing in their stead is framed as the literary witness.

Although these ghoul-like creatures can be thought as the drowned or the last survivor, the haunting atmosphere that they create bears some implications with regard to writing. Their existence in the narrative points out the fact that Gülüzar as the narrator cannot be the witness, hence her account does and will always fail. "In this outcry and commotion, the dark figure passed through us and disappeared among the oak trees,"<sup>38</sup> says Gülüzar (109). The dark figure can only be asserted as an ephemeral element in the narrative. It cannot speak for itself, but someone else who assumes the witness position can observe and say something about it. Furthermore, in this scene where they meet the ghoul, the phantomic creature haunts the whole narrative, disrupting its flow. The fact that this ghoul is never able to speak undermines the narrator's voicelessness. In that regard, this is the very moment in which the narrative undermines the authority of its own narrator and its testimony.

As stated above, Gülüzar, Fecire and others encounter this phantomic being during the course of their search for home, which is a recurrent theme throughout the narrative. This time what prevents them from having a home is the existence of these creatures as they haunt their potential home. Immediately after the massacre, Gülüzar and her mother leave their home and go to her uncle's home. Although they try to settle there, this home fails to become a permanent residence for them. "I got used to that house. But one evening my mother put me on his back and took me to a small wood of oak trees behind a hill towards Hozat, passing through fields and the stream bed where my father was shot,"<sup>39</sup> (17). There they find shelter and home among willow trees, where Fecire weaves the first doll for Gülüzar. After finding no security, they go to Werozlar, a village where Gülüzar's aunt lives and Fecire claims property. However, engaging in a fight and conflict with Gülüzar's aunt, Fecire has to leave that village in search of a new home. After some struggles in other villages, they try to settle in Dervişler, where they meet Kolsuz Musa, his family, Perhan and her

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<sup>38</sup> "Bu bağırtı ve karmaşa içerisinde karaltı aramızdan geçip yandaki meşe çalılarının içinde gözden kayboldu."

<sup>39</sup> "O evimize alışmışım. Ancak annem bir akşam beni sırtına alıp, tarlaların arasından babamın vurulduğu dere yatağından, Hozat'a doğru bir tepenin arkasındaki meşeliğe götürdü."

daughters. After living in Dervişler for a while, Fecire decides to go to Bend village, where they meet the ghoul and immediately return to Dervişler in horror. Again, one more time they go back to Werozlar and build a home. They lead a very difficult life, only trying to survive. Gülüzar and Fecire are never able to find a home to settle permanently.

The iterative search for a home functions as a repetition-compulsion. In “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” Freud defines repetition compulsion as the desire to return to the organic state of things and arrives its concept death drive (2003). He argues that the survivor feels an urge to repeat the original trauma, which Freud explains as a death drive. In the context of *Perperik-a Söe*, the search for a home is almost a repetition compulsion. Although it can be said that the search for a home is an urge to restore the earlier state of having a home which they lost through a very traumatic event, it also implies a lot with regard to text and narrative. By repeating these scenes, the narrative manifests its own failures and moves towards a death drive. It seeks to destroy itself, laying bare its own incapacity and failures. As there is no permanent home for Fecire and her daughter, there can be no stability in this narrative because the narration of catastrophic situation forces the literary account to devour itself.

### **3.3 The Fictional (Literary) Witness**

The survivors of the disasters have fulfilled their imperative or urge to speak about the unimaginable, unspeakable and incomprehensible through narrating it in various platforms; sometimes through writing diaries, through interviews and sometimes through literary works. Despite different motives behind this urge to narrate, a common point was prevailing in most of the narratives: to bear witness to history. With the emergence and proliferation of the audio-visual testimonies, the claim to bear witness, particularly to bear witness in the name of those who cannot, has become more visible with an emphasis on their quality as proof and archived document. Such a standing frames witnessing as “the bearer of history” and limits the

possibility of imagining other conceptualizations of the witness. However, the display of audio-visual testimonies in museums such as Yad Vashem and LA Museum of the Holocaust allows imagining a “museal-witness” that could be regarded as the memorialization of the witness, remarkably recognizable in the latter institution. Despite such efforts of saving the witness from archive, the museal witness is very much loaded with the discourse of transmitting history to the future generations as the bearers of history; she is still the signifier of a particular event, of a certain higher sign. It is, however, important that the ritualistic aspect that these audio-visual witnesses embody still differentiates them from the archival witness.

The novel *Perperik-a Söe* by Haydar Karataş, through various narratological techniques such as voice and narrator as well as through the creation of particular affective moments such as uncanniness, makes witnessing possible and visible. Moreover, it erects a monument to the witness, which promises a different conceptualization of witness than the sign as observed in the case of the witness in the museum and in the video testimonies. At least, it provides the opportunity to ask the following: Can literature offer a different idea of witness and bearing witness? Acknowledging the very fact that one can literally witness the phenomenon which accommodates her frame of reference – that dwells on her symbolic order – and writing on Albert Camus’s *The Plague*, Shohana Felman argues that Camus’s novel testifies to the Holocaust “as an event whose specificity resides, precisely, in the fact that *it cannot, historically be witnessed*” (Felman, 1992:104) because for Felman literature is and provides for the imaginative medium so as to grasp the imaginative possibility of the historical reality. In a very similar vein, Marc Nichanian claims that only literature can say something about the catastrophe. The only way for literature to say something about the catastrophic event is to explore its own limits. No other way than the failure of literature can give us any conclusion regarding the catastrophe. How does literature fail in the case of this novel? He basically argues that faced with the catastrophe and encountering its own limits, literature will also face its own limits and its failure in imagination of the catastrophe.

Taking the point regarding how the novel acquires a testimonial feature and how the narrator is constructed as the literary witness, it is possible to argue that *Perperik-a Söe* as a particular art form may be a monument to witness because the witness is not represented as the embodiment of violent history, hence not as the instrumentalized and archived being, but considered and read as the monument

challenging the vocation to transmit the history that is assigned to her. The notion of “monument to witness” in this study designates a concept of the witness not as an instrumentalized one with a call or duty to remember, to bear witness and to act as transmitter of the history as the carrier of the historical truth or facts. Rather, the concept denotes an idea of witness as a subject in itself, that is, standing as the embodiment of the impossibility of bearing witness, as the failure to represent the catastrophe. Additionally, such a perspective tries to re-conceptualize the witness not as the signifier but as the sign to be read and interpreted as it is well-framed and woven in the literary narratives such as *Perperik-a Söe*.

Marc Nichanian in *Historiographic Perversion* proposes to read testimonies as the texts but not as the “silent vestiges of history,” (2009:94). Against the archive and the documentalization of the testimony, he basically proposes the “literature as monument.” As a specific art form, literature emerges as a monument to mourning and as a monument of mourning and as a monument to mourning. But his idea of monument is obviously not the same as the traditional understanding of the monument. “The monument has always already been corrupted by the document,” he writes (*ibid*, 123). Nonetheless, literature as monument, the monument of writing, saves the testimony from the archive, the document and its function as the proof. In line with his proposition, it becomes feasible to imagine a monument to witness which provides a possibility of an act of witnessing that does not framed to serve for archival purposes and for transmitting history. *Perperik-a Söe* is a rare work of fiction that promises the mentioned imagination by rupturing the impossibility to mourn and revealing the moments in which the impossibility of bearing witness to the disaster made manifest, thus it monumentalizes the witness allowing her to interpret the disaster.

## CONCLUSION

“I call myself the last-philosopher, because I am the last man. No one speaks with me but myself, and my voice comes to me like the voice of a dying man! Let me associate for but one hour more with you, dear voice, with you, the last trace of memory,” writes Nietzsche in *Notebooks of the Early 1870s*. Why does he call himself the last man? What does he mean by the last man? Is it possible to think what he describes in line with the conditions of witnessing? About an experience of loss. The loss of voice, “the last trace of memory.” Why does he regard the voice as the last trace of memory? If there is no memory, no possibility of memory and narrative for the event, how can the voice or the endeavor to find a voice for that particular experience work and on what grounds? This is one of the main questions that this study poses.

When the loss of mourning, the catastrophic loss, annihilates the possibility of speaking, interpellating and witnessing from inside, it also eliminates the conditions of possibility for a narrative account. The search for voice thus is an endless pursuit. By analyzing two novels where the narratives of catastrophic experience is weaved around voice and silence, this study exposes different claims to witnessing. In Uzun’s two-volume novel *The Voice of the Tigris*, the narrator almost tries to give a voice to the dead, claiming that he is the voice of all those who were gone. The narrator in this novel as a dengbej and as a dying man reminds the man who speaks in Nietzsche’s writing. He is about to die, yet he spares his last couple of days and final breathes and the last bits of voice to give a voice to the dead, to an experience of loss. But unlike the man, the last man whose voice can only be heard by himself, he passionately believes that he will bequeath the voices he narrates. Like the last man in Nietzsche, however, he seems to believe that the voice is the trace of memory. He believes that voice is the medium of both memory and artistic creation of it in the form of a literary narrative. “Dengbej should believe in the moaning of a wounded person. The storyteller should believe in the broken gaze of a desperate person. The audience

should believe in the literary word and the narrative,” Biro says (*The Scream of the Tigris*, 221). There is no question of why in these utterances. There is no doubt about the possibility. Strongly emphasizing that the truth is in the literary word, he almost demands that the audience should believe in the truth of a literary testimony.

Although the narrator as a *dengbej* questions the ways to weave a narrative, the strong urge he feels overwhelms him and prevents him from asking a very fundamental question: Is it possible to even narrate that experience of death in a world where even the words die? Because the violence is inflicted through those same words, just as Creon declares that he forbids the burial of Antigone’s brother. Isn’t it the same medium that he uses to execute his sovereign violence? Despite the word’s potential to collaborate with the sovereign genocidal will, it seems that the Biro’s narrative make us ask a question: Can literature be the voice or at least an echo for those who have lost their voices? Because the literature is the only linguistic experience that explores its own impossibility and despair, only can literature demonstrates the failure of witnessing and narrative.

Making his narrator a mute child who is unable to talk and from whom the readers learns the memory of a catastrophic experience, Karataş in *Perperik-a Söe* refers to an unconventional way of narrating a catastrophic experience. The story is in fact is based on what the author’s mother experienced as a child. Gülüzar is his mother, who told him the story when she was an old woman. The fact that he does not position the witness as his old mother who remembers the past is interesting. It is not possible to read the intentions of the author with regard to his narrator choice. However, he must know that only Gülüzar as a mute child could at least demonstrate the lacuna of the witnessing.

The child narrators are considered unreliable because of the lack their perceptive and cognitive skills in such situations. To what extent does a child rely on fantasy and truth? Never will we know that. But we do not have to. However, the child narrators also narrate what they observe in an unbiased and non-ambitious manner. In Gülüzar’s narrative, the reader does not any claim to witness nor an ambition or imperative to tell what took place. As a child with no ability to speak, she already slips the linguistic performance. At the moment, she regains her ability to speak, she no longer is the child narrator. The narrative voice shifts from the first person autobiographical voice to a heterodiegetic and omnipresent narrator about whom the reader has no information. The position of Gülüzar as witness is wavered

and compromised. Does this compromise imply the impossibility of a constructed witnessing or witness account? Does this compromise in the narrative voice refer to any failure of literature or literature as an experience of failure in the sense Nichanian talks?

Something very strange and attention-grabbing happens at the very end of the narrative. Accompanied by her bridal procession, Gülüzar calls everyone to halt. She remembers that when she was a child right after the Dersim Massacre, she was walking the same road with her mother in search of a home, escaping the bandit or the state officials. Walking among the rocks, she hears her mother's voice among the rocks and she finds something, a rotten weed, under a crimson rock. It is never revealed, but the reader knows or understands that that rotten weed is the doll that Gülüzar's mother Fecire weaves for her and the same doll she later loses. After years, now she finds it in a rotten state. Considering that this doll functions almost as a double of Gülüzar, it says something about Gülüzar's position as the narrator and the witness or her failure to become one. The fact that Gülüzar is not the recipient or addressee of her mother's utterances but the doll is, the lost and rotten doll undermines Gülüzar's silence and her bearing witness at the moment she becomes and adult who has regained her ability to speak, thus her voice. Accordingly, this reunion may signify the rupture between Gülüzar and doll and the fact that Gülüzar is no longer the child witness. She remained in the past and a monument is erected for that witness who remains in her childhood.

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