

In Search of Silenced Grandparents: Ottoman Armenian Survivors and Their (Muslim) Grandchildren

Ayşe Gül Altınay

- “– *What would you say to the author of this book if she were here right now?*
 – *I would apologize.*
 – *What would you say to the author’s grandmother?*
 – *(After a pause and with tears in her eyes) I would not be able to talk.*”

Sometimes silences speak loudest. The silence of this middle-aged Kemalist woman from Izmir in her imagined encounter with a converted Armenian survivor of 1915 is, at least partially, the outcome of her empathy with the long, painful silence of this survivor. The author’s grandmother, whose story we learn from the book, was born in a small Armenian village in southeastern Anatolia at the turn of the century. During the death march of 1915, the little Heranush lost part of her family and was adopted by an Ottoman corporal from Çermik.¹ Fethiye Çetin was an adult woman when her grandmother Seher started talking to her about her life as Heranush. This initial moment of shock (“my grandmother is originally Armenian”) was followed by years of painstaking sharing. The grandmother had opened the Pandora’s box to tell her granddaughter things that she had not shared with *anyone*. Fethiye Çetin believes that her grandmother had kept her “inner voice” alive for all those decades of silence, speaking only to herself. “She must have,” Fethiye suggests, “otherwise, how could she remember all the names of people and places from 70–80 years ago?” Now it was her granddaughter’s turn to recite this story in her own inner voice, until she was ready to share it with friends, and finally, to write it down for the whole world. It was no easy task to make this decision, and certainly no easy move to start writing. In 2003, almost 30 years after Fethiye had started her slow and painful discovery into the “other life” of her grandmother, the book *Anneannem* (My Grandmother) finally materialized. It took Fethiye Çetin a month to finish the book, but another nine months to share it with her closest friends. A year and four months after it was finished, the book appeared in print, brought out by Metis Publishers.²

This was in November 2004. The book *Anneannem* had come out just in time for the 90th anniversary of the tragedy of 1915. As April 2005 drew close, Turkish television channels, radios, and newspapers were becoming more and more interested in questions that had to do with the historical and political debate over 1915 and its

implications for Turkey at the turn of the 21st century. As I will explain below, the debate on 1915 in the Turkish mainstream media has been dominated by a “war of theses.” In early 2005, due to growing anxieties about its 90th anniversary, this war-mimicking discourse was at its peak. At the same time as the Turkish public was presented with arguments about how “our thesis” (which regards 1915 as a “relocation measure” that was necessitated by war and the actions of rebellious Armenian nationalists) would ultimately impose itself over against the “Armenian genocide thesis,” the book *Anneannem* contributed to the opening up of an alternative channel for what I call “critical reconciliation”. This article will first introduce the book and the predominant debate on 1915 in Turkey, and then discuss the possibilities for critical reconciliation made possible by the book *Anneannem* and other stories of Armenian-Muslim grandparents.

The Book: from Heranush to Seher

Anneannem moves between three different storylines. First is the narrative of Heranush/Seher, as conveyed by her granddaughter, on Armenian life in a small Ottoman village before 1915, on the death march of 1915, and on Heranush’s journey to become Seher, first as the adopted daughter of an Ottoman corporal (whom she remembers with great respect and love), and then as the wife of a man from Maden, with whom she had five children. The second storyline is that of the author telling us about her grandmother’s life and relations with different members of the family. Because Fethiye Çetin lost her father at an early age, she and her family lived with the grandparents for many years. From Fethiye Çetin’s account, we learn that the grandmother was a strong woman who established a loving family. “There were times when money was scarce in our home”, writes Çetin, “but we never missed two things. One was love, and the other was food” (Çetin 2004, 17). Çetin depicts her grandmother as a clean, hard-working, and generous woman who had good relations with almost everyone she knew. The third storyline is Fethiye Çetin’s own struggle with the story of her grandmother, her unsuccessful efforts to establish a relationship with her grandmother’s Armenian family in the US while Heranush/Seher is alive, her protest at the funeral regarding the names by which her grandmother and her grandmother’s parents were referred to, and finally, her trip to New Jersey to visit the graves of her grandmother’s parents and to meet the American members of the Gadarian family.

For the purposes of this paper, I will go over the first storyline (Heranush/Seher’s story as conveyed by Fethiye Çetin) and the third storyline (Çetin’s story of discovery) in some detail, before discussing the implications of this book for the debate in Turkey.

Grandmother Heranush/Seher was born in the small Armenian village of Habab (Palu) in southeastern Anatolia at the turn of the century. At age 10, during the death march of 1915, she was separated from the rest of her family and adopted by an Ottoman corporal in Çermik against the wishes of her mother Esquhe. Her brother Horen was also adopted by a different family. Heranush remembered her grandmother intervening and asking Esquhe to give Heranush and Horen away: "My daughter, the children are dying one by one. No-one will survive this march. If you give them away, their lives will be saved, if not, they will die. We will all die. Let them go, so that at least they can live" (Çetin 2004, 47). Indeed, Esquhe would be the only surviving member of her extended family by the end of the long, dreadful march to Aleppo.

Heranush herself saw men being taken away and stories of their massacre by the river being told by the few survivors. She witnessed the kidnapping of her youngest aunt Siranush and, most dramatically, watched two of her cousins being drowned in the river by their own grandmother (Heranush's paternal grandmother) who then threw herself into the river and died. Heranush/Seher spent most of her 95-year-long life in the town of Maden, where this incident took place in 1915, watching that river flow day and night. Each time she told this story to her granddaughter (and she told it several times), a long silence would follow (p. 54).

Before getting married and moving to Maden, Heranush lived in the neighboring town, Çermik, with her new parents, Corporal Hüseyin and his wife Esma. "God bless him (*Allah gani gani rahmet eylesin, toprağı bol olsun*)", Hüseyin was a good man" (p. 56) remembered Heranush/Seher, adding that he treated her very well, as if she were his own daughter. She told Fethiye that Hüseyin was known to be a "soft-hearted man" because he had refused to participate in the killing of Armenian women and children in 1915. Fethiye Çetin was not persuaded: "But grandmother, didn't his soft heart ache even a bit when he was cutting off the heads of the [Armenian] men to throw into the well?" In her response, Heranush/Seher was evasive: "I don't know" (p. 56). From this response and others, Fethiye Çetin concluded that her grandmother did not want to question her stepfather Hüseyin, whom she liked very much (p. 57). The rest of her stories about Corporal Hüseyin had to do with him being very happy to be called "father," being proud of his daughter, and treating her well. On the other hand, Heranush/Seher remembered her stepmother, Esma, as being jealous and aggressive towards her (p. 57–58). Because Hüseyin died very early, Heranush/Seher's life in Çermik was largely shaped by her stepmother.

Heranush/Seher married the nephew of her stepmother, Fikri, who had lost both of his parents before he was 15. In the meantime, Heranush's brother Horen (renamed Ahmet) lived in a nearby village, and the two siblings started meeting regularly after Horen/Ahmet found out about his sister's whereabouts. They had learned that their mother had survived and managed to reach Aleppo, but they had little information

about the rest of the family. One big surprise was their kidnapped aunt Siranush finding Heranush in Çermik: “As I was sweeping the front of our house one day, a woman stopped at the entrance and I looked up. She collapsed right there and started crying. This was my little Aunt Siranush, in the colorful clothes of local Kurdish women” (p. 59). She had married a Kurdish man in Siverek (Urfa) and was “doing well.” Heranush and Siranush met often after Heranush got married and settled in Maden, but fell out after Heranush refused to marry her daughter to Siranush’s son, saying “I won’t let my children marry their kin” (p. 60). Fethiye Çetin vaguely remembered the visits of this woman, who was never introduced to them as a great aunt, to their home in Maden.

After Heranush/Seher had her second child (Fethiye’s mother), Horen/Ahmet brought a surprise letter from their father, who had been trying to locate them for years. Finally, he was able to reach them and send some money to help them join the Gadarian family in Syria. Although Heranush/Seher’s husband Fikri agreed to this move initially, his family persuaded him not to move. Horen ended up joining his family in Aleppo and finally relocating to the US with them, while Heranush stayed behind.

Years later, another contact was established between Heranush and Horen. This time Horen sent money and an invitation to Heranush to visit the family in the US, but because Heranush did not have an ID or a passport,³ she sent her son instead. After staying in the US for a few months, her son came back saying that he had lost all information enabling contact to be made with the Gadarian family. This incident ended all contact between Heranush and her family. Years later, another contact was established by Fethiye’s friend Ayşe, which did not get far, either. By the time Ayşe was able to reach Horen’s daughter in New York, Horen was on his deathbed at the hospital. Nevertheless, he had learned that his sister was looking for him. After he died, his children did not want to continue contact with their aunt Heranush, and Heranush died without having seen anybody from her Armenian family in the US. When she learned, through Ayşe and Fethiye, that Horen had named one of her daughters Heranush, her eyes lit up and she said: “So, they have not forgotten me” (p. 69).

Fethiye Çetin shares her own responses to her grandmother’s story throughout the book. In the first chapter on her grandmother’s funeral, we read about her bursting out when her grandmother’s parents are named as Hüseyin and Esma: “But this is not right!.. Her mother’s name is not Esma; it is Esquhe. Her father is not Hüseyin; he is Ovannes!..” (p. 8). Later during the funeral, she speaks out once again when she says, “May she forgive you, us, all of us!” (p. 42). Throughout their years of intense sharing, Fethiye Çetin goes through shock, disappointment, anger, and shame, sometimes finding it hard to sleep at night (p. 52–55). The kinds of stories she hears from her grandmother go against everything that she knows about history (p. 55).

When she confronts her mother and aunts about these stories, she realizes that her grandmother has spared her children the most “inhuman details” of what she had gone through and witnessed (p. 63). It is only with Fethiye that she has shared her most painful memories.

When Heranush/Seher died, Fethiye Çetin wrote an obituary for the Armenian-Turkish newspaper *Agos*, where she narrated the story of Heranush and expressed this wish: “With this obituary, we hope to reach my grandmother’s (our) relatives, whom we could not reach while she was alive, and share [our] pain” (p. 77). The obituary ended with Grandmother Heranush’s words, “May those days be over, never to be repeated again” (p. 77). The obituary found its way to an Armenian-French newspaper, where a family friend of the Gadarians read it and informed the family of Heranush’s death. Soon Heranush’s sister Margaret, born in the US after the reunion of Esquhe and Ovannes, and her children started communicating with Fethiye, exchanging photographs and family stories across the Atlantic. One important document Fethiye Çetin received from Margaret was a letter written in Armenian by Heranush to her father Ovannes. In this letter, having recently learned how to read and write, the little Heranush lets her father know that everyone in their family is fine, and that she regularly goes to school and works very hard (p. 86). Margaret had found this letter in her father Ovannes’s wallet after his death. After these emotional exchanges, Margaret’s children invited Fethiye to the US, as a present for Margaret’s 80th birthday.

The book ends with photographs of both parts of the family, as well as of the reunion itself. The last photograph, which is also the cover of the book, portrays the graves of Ovannes and Esquhe Gadarian with the pink roses brought them by Fethiye Çetin. “As I put the roses by their joint grave”, writes Çetin, “I asked them, my grandmother, all of them for forgiveness in my name and in the name of all those who had caused this incredible suffering” (p. 115).

The debate: the war of theses

In order to better contextualize the book *Anneannem*, let us look at the nature of the Turkish debate about 1915 on its 90th anniversary.

The first important characteristic of the year 2005 was that, for the first time since the 1920s, there *was* a public debate about what had happened in 1915 and how it should be approached. Until the last months of 2004 and early 2005, there had only been individual attempts at challenging the official discourse that the *tehcir* (deportation) of Armenians to the Syrian desert in 1915 was a necessary war measure. The two books published by historian Taner Akçam in the 1990s (Akçam 1992 and 1999) and the Turkish translation of Vahakn N. Dadrian’s and Yves Ternon’s books by Belge International Publishers (Ternon 1993, Dadrian 1995) provided alternative

historical material to understand what had taken place, but these publications were hardly discussed in the media or in public.⁴ The first large-scale public debate took place after the groundbreaking interview of journalist Neşe Düzel with historian Halil Berktaş in the daily *Radikal* on 9 October 2000 and much of it was in the form of “attacks” on Berktaş.

In November 2004, four years after his interview in *Radikal*, Halil Berktaş was approached this time by a mainstream weekly news magazine, *Nokta*. Based on a long interview with Berktaş, *Nokta* published a special supplement entitled: “The Armenian Tragedy: What happened in 1915? What remains from the past?” (Berktaş 2004).⁵ In the 32-page *Nokta* special supplement, Berktaş provided a narrative of 1915 which fundamentally challenged the official line and suggested focusing on the “human side” of this tragedy, with a view of the past as a “foreign country”. As the introductory remarks by the magazine suggested, Berktaş’s interview was following a heated debate on the minority question in Turkey, which had begun with the report of the Prime Minister’s Office’s Advisory Council on Human Rights (ACHR), prepared by Professors Baskın Oran and İbrahim Kaboğlu. This report suggested a new formulation of national identity, one based on “constitutional citizenship”. It replaced the term “Turk” with the term “*Türkiyeli*” (of/from Turkey), articulating a difference between ethnic sub-identities (*alt kimlik*) such as Turkish, Kurdish, Jewish or Armenian, and the supra-identity (*üst kimlik*) of being a citizen of Turkey.⁶ Berktaş’s interview in *Nokta* came out in the midst of the heated debate on this report. Four weeks after the publication of the interview, an anonymous editorial in *Nokta* announced the departure of the editor Mustafa Sönmez and apologized for Berktaş’s interview, which had “displayed the one-sided view of Diaspora Armenians”. The note of apology assured the readers that *Nokta* certainly stood for “the indivisible unity of the Turkish Republic with its state and nation.”⁷

The supplement by *Nokta* and the editorial apology that followed it would mark the two main approaches in the debate on 1915 in the months to come. One approach, exemplified by Berktaş, would follow a question of curiosity: “what happened in 1915?”,⁸ while the second approach sought to engage in a “war” of pre-defined positions. This was a “war of theses”, where Diaspora Armenians (with a strong “lobby” particularly in USA and France) were the main “enemy.” In this war, there were two clear sides/theses: the Turkish thesis and the Armenian thesis. Those “Turks”, like Halil Berktaş, who challenged the Turkish thesis were, by definition, the spokespersons of the Armenian thesis, and hence “the enemy”. The climax of this approach would be the parliamentary speech of the Ministry of Justice, Cemil Çiçek on 24 May 2005, declaring that the organizers and would-be-participants of the first critical academic conference on 1915 were “stabbing the Turkish nation in the back.”⁹ The metaphor of war was marked by such statements and by the choice of terms such as “glory”, “traitor”, “heroism”, “the other side”, and so on.

The central point of this war was the term “genocide”, or, as it is often phrased in Turkey, “the alleged genocide.” The spokespersons of the Turkish State, such as the President of the Turkish Historical Society Yusuf Halaçoğlu, agreed that what happened in 1915 was a “tragedy” (Kaplan 2005: 94)¹⁰, but argued that it was impossible to call it “genocide”. Even terms such as “ethnic cleansing” were vehemently opposed by Halaçoğlu and others (Kaplan 2005: 91). The proper term was “*tehcir*” which, according to Halaçoğlu, should be translated as “relocation”, not “deportation” because it had taken place within the boundaries of one and the same state. Halaçoğlu considered *tehcir* to be along the same lines as the “necessary war measures” that the US had undertaken when it “relocated” its Japanese population living along the Pacific coast to the Midwest during World War II (Kaplan 2005: 91–92). In other words, the war of theses was at the same time a war of terms: genocide/ethnic cleansing vs. *tehcir*.

Let us briefly go over some of the other characteristic of the war of theses, as it escalated towards April 2005. Most significantly, this approach was based on a fetishization of “the nation” with concepts such as “pride”, “heroism”, “unity”, and “treason” gaining extra weight. For instance, historian İlber Ortaylı (the Director of the Topkapı Palace Museum), complained about “the attempts to put blame on and sentence a whole tribe’s [i.e. the Turks’] history and future” by people who “had no knowledge of history.” According to Ortaylı, the most primitive versions of the “propaganda techniques” used against the Turks were coming from other Turks and their “baseless” speeches should not be considered in the context of freedom. He defined these speeches and the organization of panels on this issue as “irresponsible” acts that should not be tolerated (*Milliyet*, 20 March 2005).

As Ortaylı’s commentary reveals, there was a parallel fetishization of history as a science of “the archives”. Revealing new documents and discrediting the documents used by the other side have been central components of the war of theses. Yusuf Halaçoğlu would go so far as to say: “Let us not talk about anything else but documents and let us document everything” (Kaplan 2005: 99). His main criticism of Taner Akçam and Halil Berktaş was that neither of them had done research in the Ottoman archives (Kaplan 2005: 99). In this perspective, it is only historians who have the authority to say anything about what happened in 1915 and what should be done about it today; and only those historians who have direct access to the documents. Various proposals by the Turkish government to resolve this conflict reflect the bias towards a positivist understanding of history.¹¹

What were the main arguments of “the Turkish thesis” as it was discussed in the media in 2005? As I have already suggested, the main argument was that *tehcir* was a legitimate measure of war, necessitated by the actions of the rebellious Armenian gangs (*Ermeni çeteleri*) who joined up with the Russian Army and attacked Muslim villages in 1914 and 1915. A significant component of this argument is the thesis

of “mutuality”; if Armenians were killed, so were the Turks and Kurds and other Muslims. In 2005, the week before April 24 was particularly dense with publications of new “documents” that testified to the “massacres by Armenians”. All newspapers ran stories on April 15 and 16 about a new report issued by the Chief of Staff, “Arşiv Belgeleriyle Ermeni Faaliyetleri” (Armenian Activities Based on Archival Documents), which provided documentation of the killings of civilians by Armenian gangs. The title of the news story in the daily *Tercüman* was “They burned children in ovens” (*Tercüman*, 16 April 2005).¹² Two days later, this time a report by the Prime Ministry State Archives suggested that between 1910 and 1922 more than 523,000 Turks were killed by Armenians (see *Hürriyet*, 17 April 2005 and 18 April 2005).¹³ On April 16, one newspaper published reports of elderly people in the Van area who recited the stories of Armenian massacres of their family members in 1915 (*Sabah*, 18 April 2005).¹⁴ In other words, as April 24 came close, the thesis of mutuality became central to the debate on 1915. The main conclusion was that “this was a tragedy that had two sides to it” (Kaplan 2005: 50 and 94).

Another significant aspect of the war of theses was number crunching. What was the Armenian population in Anatolia at that time? And how many of them died on the way to Syria? For instance, Yusuf Halaçoğlu was reported as having said the following: “Those who keep talking about the nonsense of 1.5 million dead are politicizing this issue. Can you imagine where one would bury 1.5 million people? If you put 300 in the same grave, that would make 5,000 mass graves” (*Zaman*, 16 April 2005).¹⁵ In his interviews, Halaçoğlu claimed the number of Armenian casualties to be at most 300,000 (Kaplan 2005: 94). Other authors writing in the name of the Turkish thesis would take number crunching even further. For instance, columnist Yalçın Pekşen, after recounting the numbers of Turks and Armenians who were killed by each other, concludes: “it is possible that in the course of the next century, as more documents are revealed, we [Turks] may move ahead. Who knows, perhaps in the 22nd century, the Armenians will be talking about the ‘alleged Turkish genocide’.” (*Akşam*, 19 April 2005).¹⁶

Apart from the argument of mutuality and number crunching, another issue central to the Turkish thesis as it was portrayed in the media was the question of “intent”. In the words of Şükrü Elekdağ, a Member of Parliament from the social democratic Republican People’s Party (CHP), “There is no way one can deny the Armenian loss of life. During *tehcir*, famine, disease and banditry (*eşkıyalık*), as well as hostility between communities resulted in severe loss of life among both the Armenians and the Turkish and Muslim population” (Kaplan 2005: 86). Halaçoğlu’s list is not very different: war conditions, famine, disease (the major cause of Armenian deaths, according to him), the attacks of Kurdish bandits,¹⁷ and to some extent “abuse” (*süistimal*) of power among those responsible for carrying out the *tehcir* (Kaplan 2005: 89–95). Halaçoğlu goes so far as to suggest that there is an asymmetry between the

Armenians and the Turks who died during this time period: “Most Armenians who died, died of disease, whereas most Muslims who died were killed by Armenian gangs” (Kaplan 2005: 94). In sum, it has been claimed as part of the Turkish thesis that the Ottoman State did not “intend” to eradicate the Armenians; the death of around 300,000 Armenians was an unintended consequence.¹⁸

Last, but not least, it was argued that not all Armenians subjected to *tehcir*. It was pointed out over and over that the Armenians of Istanbul were not relocated. According to Halaçoğlu, Catholic and Protestant Armenians were not subjected to *tehcir* either, at least not initially. It was only when they participated in the “rebellion” that they were sent away. He also claimed that widowed women and orphan children were left behind, children being put in orphanages and some of the women being taken in by “rich families” or married to Muslims (Kaplan 2005: 91). To summarize, the predominant course of debate on the 90th anniversary of 1915 in Turkey was the war of theses, where “we” represented objectivity, “what really happened,” as well as the historical and moral high ground. Despite “our great losses” during World War I (some at the hands of Armenian gangs), “we” had become victims of Armenian lobbying activities based on lies. The war in 2005 was about exposing those lies and revealing the “truth”. While this war was being fought on television, in radio programs, and in the newspapers, the arguments of “the other side” (i.e. Diaspora Armenians) were often paraphrased (and often misrepresented) by the local participants in the debate.

As I outlined earlier, the war of theses was not the only available approach to 1915 in the 2005 debates, although it was the predominant one. An increasing number of academics, intellectuals, and journalists used the occasion of the 90th anniversary to ask a series of questions (What happened in 1915? Who was responsible? Where should we stand in relation to these atrocities? and so on) and to challenge the above arguments that made up the Turkish thesis. Newspapers and magazines ran interviews with critical scholars in this field, such as Taner Akçam, Halil Berktaş, Stefanos Yerasimos, and others. The weekly *Express* issued a 130-page supplement titled *Büyük Felaket* (The Great Calamity), which included the narratives of Armenian survivors alongside interviews with historians, and asked for this “great pain” to be recognized.¹⁹ Famous writers such as Orhan Pamuk and Elif Shafak talked about historical responsibility and the need to share pain.²⁰ And, perhaps most notably, the first critical academic conference on 1915 was organized by a prominent group of scholars from a number of different universities in Turkey and abroad.

Although its full title was “Ottoman Armenians during the Demise of the Empire: Responsible Scholarship and Issues of Democracy”, the conference was referred to, in the mainstream media, as the Genocide Conference. Much to everyone’s surprise, it hosted more than 60 speakers and chairs, representing nine universities in Turkey and seven universities in Europe and North America. Among the speakers were prominent writers and journalists, as well as former diplomats and politicians.

Although this high profile conference was initially scheduled to begin on 25 May, Boğaziçi University (the host institution) decided to postpone it after the above-mentioned speech of the Minister of Justice Cemil Çiçek (blaming the participants for “stabbing the Turkish nation in the back”). This speech and the decision to postpone the conference resulted in a national crisis in the days and weeks that followed. Some claimed that the conference should not take place because it was one-sided in its approach, and hence unscientific.²¹ However, many others treated this issue as a case of academic freedom and supported the right to hold a conference (often making it clear that they themselves did not view the events of 1915 as genocide). The Prime Minister, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and the Speaker of the Parliament made statements suggesting that the conference should take place. Finally, the conference did take place on 24 and 25 September 2005, at Bilgi University.²²

In conclusion, it is possible to suggest that the year 2005 was a year of intense debate and confrontation between those who were engaged in a war of theses and those who sought to inquire about and publicly discuss what had happened before, during, and after 1915. What I would like to do in the rest of the paper is to discuss the unique contributions of the book *Anneannem* to this debate.

From denial to critical reconciliation

In recent years, the statements by Halil Berktaş, the controversial Armenian Conference and the comments on the Armenian tehcir by Orhan Pamuk all backfired on me and resulted in an ever stronger belief in Turkish nationalism. I had questions regarding the intentions of these people. But now, to realize that the Armenian genocide may indeed have happened, to suddenly be confronted with facts that stand in front of me like a cold wall, to gain an objective perspective after the lifting of the cloud of Turkish nationalism and patriotism... perhaps these did not all happen with one book, but it was the possibility that what was written in this book could have happened that created the first spark.

These reflections come from a university student in Istanbul who read *Anneannem* more than fifteen months after it was first published, in its sixth edition. What is it about this book that made this university student question her reactionary defensiveness? What, in other words, is responsible for the “spark” that makes a self-acclaimed “Turkish nationalist and patriot” question what she has learned about 1915?

One answer to this question was given by columnist Tuba Akyol in March 2006. In her weekly column in the Sunday supplement of the daily *Milliyet*, Tuba Akyol dedicated a whole page to a review of *Anneannem* and Elif Shafak’s recent book *Baba ve Piç* (Father and Bastard) and entitled her essay “I apologize”. Extending an

apology for what had happened to Armenians in 1915, Akyol observed that “stories can do what large numbers or convoluted concepts cannot do... Concepts are cold, stories can touch you inside.”²³

Akyol’s approach to storytelling echoes Hannah Arendt’s. In the words of the political theorist Lisa Disch, “under certain conditions, a story can be a more powerful critical force than a theoretical analysis.”²⁴ According to Disch, there are two aspects to Hannah Arendt’s discussion of the power and significance of storytelling. First, there is the power of storytelling as “critical thinking”: “Tragic storytelling serves not to settle questions but to *unsettle* them and to inspire spontaneous critical thinking in its audience” (Disch 1993: 670)²⁵. As opposed to the search for closure in polemic, critical discussion is something shaped by curiosity. Second, Hannah Arendt’s discussion of storytelling introduces an alternative understanding of objectivity, one that is close to Donna Haraway’s notion of “situated knowledges” (Disch 1993: 666).²⁶ Challenging a perception of objectivity as detached reasoning in an impersonal voice (“the voice from nowhere”), this alternative view suggests that “objectivity is not abstract neutral description but explicitly moral storytelling, situated in the ‘personal experience’ of the theorist.” (Disch 1993: 679). Objectivity is achieved when a text enables the reader to entertain a multiplicity of perspectives and “to look upon the same world from one another’s standpoint” (Disch 1993: 681).

What I would like to do in the rest of this article is to discuss how *Anneannem* uses Arendtian storytelling to open up a creative space for historical critique and reconciliation. I will focus on four characteristics of this alternative space:

1. *Curiosity*: *Anneannem* invites its readers to be curious about their family stories and to ask questions, such as: Who were my grandparents? What kind of life did they have? Why did my grandmother not have any relatives? It challenges the hegemonic debate that privileges archival documents, “national interests”, “national honor”, and “national history”. During her September 2005 visit to Diyarbakır (in southeastern Turkey) for a talk on the book, Fethiye Çetin was stopped in the middle of the street by a young man who had recognized her from her photograph in the book. “Are you the lawyer who wrote *Anneannem*?” he asked. After having her identity confirmed, he first congratulated Çetin on writing the book and then asked her this question: “How come my grandmother did not have any relatives?” *Anneannem* had made him curious and he was now doing research into the life story of his (dead) grandmother. He was not alone. Since the publication of the book, Fethiye Çetin has received numerous phone calls, letters, and emails from others who have started acting on their new curiosities about the life (and silences) of their grandparents.²⁷

2. *Deconstructing the predominant discourses of ‘war’*. *Anneannem* blurs the distinctions between two clear sides (Armenians and Turks), two opposing theses, and such concepts as honorable vs. disgraceful nationhood, heroism vs. treason, friend vs. enemy, and glory/victory vs. defeat. In Fethiye Çetin’s presentation of the story of her grand-

mother and the story of her own discovery, we observe a disappearance of “sides” and a blurring of “friend” and “enemy”. The “rebel Armenians” becomes transformed into the mother and sisters of “my grandmother”. This has its implications for the “Armenian side” as well. The “barbaric Turk/Kurd” may well turn out to be a relative.

Certain aspects of the stories conveyed in *Anneannem* result in a disillusionment with the official version of history. Contradicting Halaçoğlu’s above-mentioned narrative about a benevolent process of *tehcir*, particularly for women and children, *Anneannem* narrates the desperate plight, kidnapping, and killing or suicide of Armenian women and children. For instance, a reader from Istanbul called Fethiye Çetin on the phone to say: “I know that they formed gangs and rebelled against the Ottoman Empire, but of course the women and children had nothing to do with that, did they?”²⁸ The discourse according to which *tehcir* was a necessary war measure starts falling apart as the readers identify with the story of the 10-year-old Heranush on the death march.

Another important challenge that *Anneannem* brings to the discourses of war is the breakdown of the nationalist, homogeneous “we”. In a way, *Anneannem* responds to Taner Akçam’s call from 1999 to take seriously the story of Hacı Halil from Urfa, who had saved a family by hiding them in his attic and risking his life in the process, and to add more stories to it.²⁹ People had different responses to what they were witnessing. Some participated in the crimes, others took risks to save lives.

3. *Redefinition of the self as “melez” (hybrid, not pure)*. As opposed to the essentialist, nationalist self-narrative, *Anneannem* emphasizes historical interaction and transformation (as well as loss) in the ongoing debate. This is important in the sense that the reader is not only presented with a deconstructionist critique, but is able to envisage an alternative sense of self and community. As one reader of *Anneannem* suggests: “The possibility of being *melez* makes one hopeful. The more we have mixed, the more difficult it will be to become enemies.” When confronted with a question about how she identifies herself, Fethiye Çetin, the author of *Anneannem*, says: “*Melez*. Sometimes I feel like an Armenian, sometimes like a Kurd, a Turk when I am in Germany, and a Native American when I am in the US.”³⁰

4. *Empathy and Reconciliation*. Perhaps the most fundamental contribution of *Anneannem* has been the creation of a new space for empathy and reconciliation through a redefinition of the “other” and her experiences. In her talks, Fethiye Çetin emphasizes something that her friend (and prominent academic) Büşra Ersanlı said after reading the book: “In order to laugh together, we first need to cry together.” According to Çetin, it is all about “empathy. We first need to cry for each other’s pain. And then we will be laughing together. I am optimistic about this.”³¹ The concepts of crying together, feeling together and reconciliation come out often in the discussions about *Anneannem*. What kind of reconciliation does it inspire?

In the first place, it encourages reconciliation *with the past*. Directly or indirectly, *Anneannem* responds to what Hans-Lukas Kieser has called “the need to bury the

dead of World War I".³² One of the readers of *Anneannem* says: "We had missed the fact that in order to look into the future, we first needed to reconcile with the past." For scholar Ayşe Ağış, who read the book before it was published, "Turkey is finding it hard to live its present and future precisely because it has not been able to live its past. That is why these tears are very important. When we run out of tears, we will start talking."³³ The underlying suggestion in both remarks is that *Anneannem* responds to our need to reconcile ourselves with the past.

Yet, at the same time, *Anneannem* challenges the perception of history as being reduced to 1915. First, it highlights the "before" and "after", hence exciting curiosity about both the "context" of 1915 (to use historian Halil Berktaş's term), and its aftermath. Second, it invokes an alternative perception of history (alternative to the hegemonic perception in Turkish debates), where history is not simply "what happened in the past". In *Anneannem*, history is in the present; "pastness is a position"³⁴ in relation to the present; it is in our relationships to ourselves, to each other, and to our surroundings *today*.

In the second place, it encourages reconciliation *with ourselves*. One evening, Fethiye Çetin visited an old acquaintance whose mother was also an Armenian survivor of 1915. After a long night of sharing, which was a first for this old man, he saw his visitors off, saying: "Tonight, I will be able to have a good sleep", signaling a lifetime of not being able to sleep well.³⁵

In the third place, it encourages reconciliation *with each other*. *Anneannem* has facilitated a sharing of pain across various borders. First, it has brought Fethiye Çetin together with Armenians in Turkey. At a talk organized by the Armenian feminist group Hay Gin, Çetin remembers a hall full of people crying together as they chanted her grandmother's favorite song; other Armenians have telephoned her and cried over the phone. Second, Fethiye Çetin has come together and shared stories and tears with other children and grandchildren of Armenian survivors. Many have gotten in touch with her to tell her how much they cried over the book, and simultaneously, how empowered they felt after reading it. Some of the most interesting meetings in this category have been between Fethiye and the grandchildren of her grandmother's aunt Siranush. Finding the story of their grandmother in this book, they contacted Fethiye Çetin to share their own stories. Third, *Anneannem* has opened up channels for reconciliation with Armenians in Armenia and the diaspora. In the book, Çetin recites the words of her cousin Richard at her farewell dinner in New Jersey: "I first heard stories of the genocide when I was four or five years old. I was always afraid of the Turks. I deeply hated the Turks. The denial of the genocide has made everything worse. And then I learned that you are Turkish, yet a member of our family. Now, I like this big family with all its parts and I look forward to meeting my other cousins and making music with them. But I continue to hate the negationists and I will never forgive them."

In a similar vein, a European Armenian intellectual remarked to Çetin's publisher after reading the book: "It is now that I understand what reconciliation means." As Elif Shafak said in a recent interview: "The responsibility to remember is first and foremost our responsibility. We expect the Armenians to forget, but in order for them to forget, first we have to remember. This is our responsibility not only towards the Armenians, but towards history..."³⁶ By remembering a silenced history, *Anneannem* opens up a new space for sharing. Finally, *Anneannem* opens up a space of historical critique and reconciliation among Turkey's citizens who are not Armenian. As one reader notes: "I now realize that I have been fed with lies until this age... I cried and cried all night, because there was a bit of humanity left somewhere in me."³⁷

Where have all the grandmothers gone?

With at least 13,000 readers³⁸ in 18 months, *Anneannem* continues to be the most popular book of a new genre of writing about 1915 – that of personal storytelling, in the form of an autobiography or biography. This small book (of 114 pages) confronts the ongoing debate in the Turkish public space on whether 1915 was genocide or not, where human beings are often reduced to numbers and the "archival documents" are fetishized, with human stories that present particular persons with their names, photographs, places where they live(d), as well as with their pain and other emotions. As such, the book introduces personal narrative, family stories, photographs and letters as new kinds of "documents" into this debate, reminding the reader that they do not need to go to the "archives" in search of documents to understand what took place before, during and after 1915.

Since *Anneannem*'s publication, a number of other books have come out depicting the experience of the death march, either directly based on survivors' narratives³⁹ or through the eyes of their children and grandchildren.⁴⁰ Several questions await further research and discussion. Why is it that these narratives are coming out *today*? What motivates their authors? What is behind the increasing interest in such stories?

These anthropological/sociological questions need to be complemented with a set of historiographical questions. How can one read the story of Heranush/Seher in the context of existing Turkish and Armenian histories of 1915? Where *is* Heranush/Seher in those histories? What accounts for the significant silence about stories like hers?⁴¹ How would those histories change if Heranush/Seher's story of loss and survival is given due consideration?

Underlying most of these questions is a subtle political (and academic) question: How can one make sense of Heranush/Seher's multilayered story and Fethiye Çetin's Arendtian storytelling without reproducing the dead silences and war-mimicking discourses of most Turkish and Armenian nationalist historiographies?

Acknowledgments

Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the conference *Ottoman Armenians during the Demise of the Empire: Responsible Scholarship and Issues of Democracy* at Istanbul Bilgi University on 24 September 2005, and at the workshop *Wanted for the Future – Historical Clarification! Armenians, Turks, and Europe in the Shadow of World War I* in Basel on 12 November 2005. I am grateful to Fethiye Çetin and Müge Sökmen for their support, and valuable comments, and to Sevgi Adak and Nazan Maksudyan for their excellent research assistance. Critical comments from Hakan Altınay, Yektan Türkyılmaz and Sevgi Adak have greatly enriched this paper, even if I have not been able to incorporate all of their suggestions. My special thanks to Hans-Lukas Kieser for his encouragement and patience!

Notes

- 1 Çermik is today a small town in the province of Diyarbakır.
- 2 Çetin, Fethiye. 2004. *Anneannem*. Istanbul: Metis Yayınları.
- 3 When Fethiye Çetin asks her grandmother: “You did not need anyone to get an ID and a passport issued to your name. If you wanted to do it, you could have done it yourself, grandma. Why didn’t you do it?”, her grandmother’s response is “I don’t know.” Fethiye Çetin continues her query in the book: “Why did this woman, who had overcome unthinkable challenges throughout her life and had struggled against the obstacles faced by her children and loved ones, feel so disempowered when it came to her real identity? Why could she not stand up for her family, her identity, and her own wishes?” (p. 62).
- 4 Akçam, Taner. 1999. *İnsan Hakları ve Ermeni Sorunu: İttihat ve Terakki’den Kurtuluş Savaşına*. Ankara: İmge Kitabevi. Akçam, Taner. 1992. *Türk Ulusal Kimliği ve Ermeni Sorunu*. Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları; Dadrian, Vahakn N. 1995. *Ulusal ve Uluslararası Hukuk Sorunu Olarak Jenosid*. Istanbul: Belge Yayınları; Ternon, Yves. 1993. *Ermeni Tabusu*. Istanbul: Belge Yayınları.
- 5 Berktaş, Halil. 2004. “The Armenian Tragedy: What happened in 1915? What remains from the past?” *Derin Nokta*, Complimentary Supplement of *Nokta*, no. 1116, 22–28 November.
- 6 Cf. http://www.bianet.org/2004/12/01_eng/news47344.htm (9 October 2006).
- 7 “Nokta’dan” *Nokta*, no. 1120, 19–25 December 2004.
- 8 One of the best examples of this approach was a series of interviews published by journalist Sefa Kaplan in the most popular daily newspaper *Hürriyet*, which were later compiled into a book with the title *1915’te Ne Oldu? – What happened in 1915?* (2005, Doğan Kitapçılık), with a large question mark dominating the cover.
- 9 <http://www.tbmm.gov.tr/tutanak/donem22/yil3/ham/b10101h.htm> (9 October 2006).
- 10 See fn. 8.
- 11 In April 2005, Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan wrote a letter to the Armenian President Kocharian asking for “a joint commission of historians” to be formed to investigate the events of 1915, although his offer was met with a refusal.
- 12 <http://www.tercuman.com/v1/haber.asp?id=21885&baslik=%C7ocuklar%FD%20tand%FDrda%20yakt%FDlar&katid=7> (9 October 2006).
- 13 <http://www.hurriyetim.com.tr/haber/0,,sid~1@w~2@tarikh~2005-04-17-m@nvid~564574,00.asp> (9 October 2006).
- 14 <http://arsiv.sabah.com.tr/2005/04/18/gnd99.html> (9 October 2006).

- 15 <http://www.zaman.com.tr/?hn=164024&bl=haberler&trh=20050416> (9 October 2006).
- 16 <http://www.aksam.com.tr/arsiv/aksam/2005/04/19/yazarlar/yazarlar13.html> (9 October 2006).
- 17 This issue of putting the blame on “Kurdish bandits” needs to be explored at greater length. Let me just note that this is a recent twist in the Turkish thesis and that this ethnicized differentiation is only utilized when the atrocities against the Armenians are discussed, not when the “Muslim deaths” are recounted.
- 18 Gündüz Aktan made additional points, claiming that the absence of “racism” in Ottoman state and society at that time was another argument against the genocide thesis (Kaplan 2005: 47–48).
- 19 *Büyük Felaket: 1915 Katliamı ve Ermeni Sorunu*, Re Yayıncılık, İstanbul, April 2005.
- 20 Orhan Pamuk was later taken to court for “publicly denigrating Turkish identity” for his claim that “Thirty thousand Kurds and a million Armenians were killed in these lands and almost nobody but me dares to talk about it.” The case was closed on 22 January 2006. For Pamuk’s own account of this trial see Pamuk, Orhan. 2005. “On Trial,” *The New Yorker*, 19 December 2005.
- 21 The main allegation here was that the conference did not include any speaker who would convey the “Turkish thesis” to the audience.
- 22 The venue had to be changed due to a local court order issued against Boğaziçi University, based on a complaint from a group of lawyers.
- 23 Akyol, Tuba. 2005. “Özür Dilerim” *Milliyet Pazar*, 19 March.
- 24 Disch, Lisa J. 1993. “More Truth Than Fact: Storytelling as Critical Understanding in the Writings of Hannah Arendt” *Political Theory*, 21(4): 665–694, here 665.
- 25 See fn. 24.
- 26 Cf. Haraway, Donna. 1991. “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective” *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* içinde, s. 183–201, New York: Routledge.
- 27 Personal communication.
- 28 Personal communication with Fethiye Çetin.
- 29 Akçam 1999: 11–14 (see fn. 4).
- 30 Talk at Sabancı University, 13 April 2005.
- 31 Author’s interview with Fethiye Çetin, 19 May 2005.
- 32 Kieser, Hans-Lukas. 2005. “Dünya Savaşı’nın Ölümlerini Gömmeye Zamanı: Geç Osmanlı’nın Kardeş Katli” *Birikim*, Mayıs-Haziran (193–194): 117–121.
- 33 Author’s interview with Ayşe Ağış, 19 May 2005.
- 34 Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. 1995. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- 35 Author’s interview with Fethiye Çetin, 19 May 2005.
- 36 Tayman, Enis. 2005. “Ermenilerin Acısını Paylaşıyorum”, Elif Şafak ile Röportaj, *Tempo*, 26 Haziran-5 Temmuz (916): 26–28, here 28.
- 37 This reader’s response is posted on the publisher’s website: <http://www.metiskitap.com/Scripts/Catalog/Book.asp?ID=1874> (9 October 2006).
- 38 This number is likely to be much higher, considering the fact that this tiny book circulates widely among friends and family members. In a recent interview, a reader told me that nine people in her family had read the book and more were in line to do so.
- 39 E. g. Oran, Baskın. ed. 2005. “M.K.” *Adlı Çocuğun Tehcir Yayınları: 1915 ve Sonrası*. İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları.
- 40 E. g. Palalı, İrfan. 2005. *Tehcir Çocukları: Nenem bir Ermeni’ymiş...* İstanbul: Su Yayınevi.
- 41 Preliminary research into the converted survivors of 1915 suggests that the great majority of them were women. This may be due to several factors. First, many young men were killed during 1915. Second, the boys who were adopted into Muslim families, like Horen/Ahmet, were able to re-unite with other survivors in their families in the years afterwards, whereas the women’s mobility was restricted after marriage.