

## BOOK REVIEW

**Marc Sinan: Gleißendes Licht. Roman**  
by Tessa Hofmann, Bremen: Rowohlt, 2023. 273 pp. ISBN: 978-3-498-00314-2

### Abstract

Marc Sinan's debut novel is the latest contribution of German-language post-genocidal memoir prose. This, in turn, is the latest branch of transnational or internationally distributed fictional and non-fictional literature by authors of Armenian descent. On the one hand, they are in the narrative tradition of the languages they each use; on the other hand, they are united thematically by the intergenerational trauma of the genocide against the Armenians of the Ottoman Empire. In terms of genre, this literature belongs to family novels, and in some cases to travel prose.

In Turkey, people of Armenian origin formed a discriminated and socially despised minority until a few years ago. They were virtually invisible. The memoirs of the lawyer and human rights activist Fethiye Cetin ("Anneannem" - My Mother's Mother, 2004) have contributed significantly to the de-tabooing. The author reviewed here writes in German and grew up in Germany, but his clearly autobiographical novel is based on his Turkish-Armenian family history. It is the story of his grandfather Hüseyin Umut, then a 15-year-old boy, who in 1915 observes Armenian children being pushed off his boat into the Black Sea. Later Hüseyin Umut marries Ani, the daughter of a wealthy Armenian. Her grandson Kaan, the author's alter ego, decides as an adult to retaliate and plans to kill the Turkish president.

**Keywords** - Turkey; Armenians; Genocide against Armenians; identity conflict; intergenerational genocide trauma; post-genocidal memory prose; German literature.

Writing about genocide is one of the greatest literary challenges, especially when it involves one's own or family experience. Most often, the crime closes the mouths of the surviving victims for life, especially if the state or society that perpetrated the genocide denies the crime and, conversely, accuses the victims of having been perpetrators, as is still happening 109 years later in the case of the Ottoman genocide of some three million indigenous Christians - Armenians, Greek Orthodox, and Syriacs.

However, this persistent silence and denial of the Turkish state as well as the Turkish majority society has promoted a remarkable literary phenomenon: the post-genocidal memory prose, which has developed in Turkish-language as well as in English- and French-language transnational narrative prose. It confronts readers with the darkest chapter of Turkish Ottoman history in deliberate challenge.

In the vast Armenian and Greek diasporas of the United States, a memoir prose has emerged since the 1980s that is as numerous as it is impressive. German translations such as the memoir *Black Dogs of Fate* (1997) by the U.S. poet and literary scholar Peter Balakian or Micheline Marcom Aharonian's debut novel *Three Apples Fell from Heaven* (2000) embody the range of this post-genocidal prose between factual report and fairy-tale fictionalization of the Ottoman genocide and its psychological

consequences. Internationally known Greek-born authors such as Jeffrey Eugenides (b. 1960, USA; currently Berlin) and Aris Fioretos (b. 1960, Stockholm) also processed the genocidal extermination and uprooting of their ancestors in the late Ottoman Empire in their novels *Middlesex* (2002) and *The Last Greek* (2009).

Four generations after the World War I genocide of the Young Turks, these themes entered German-language prose. Actress and author Katerina Poladjan and journalist Laura Cwiertnia (b. 1987, Bremen) are daughters of Armenian fathers and descendants of genocide survivors. Their novels *Here Are Lions* (2019) and *On the Streets We Are Called Otherwise* (2022) form a peculiar hybrid. For on the one hand, they belong to the genre of the family or generational novel, which was considered a ‘worn-out genre’ after World War II but has experienced a resurgence since the 1990s and is currently arguably the most productive novel genre in European and North American narrative prose. On the other hand, they are also conceived as travelogues. In Marc Sinan’s debut novel *Gleißendes Licht* (“Dazzling Light”, February 2023), the genre hybridity is even more distinct, for it can also be read as both an artist’s novel and a coming-of-age narrative.

At its center is Kaan, growing up in Munich, the son of his German-assimilated Turkish mother, Nur (“Dazzling Light”) and a German father, but they play little or no role in the plot. Above all, Kaan is the grandson of the “*legendary hazelnut magnate of the Black Sea*,” Hüseyin Umut, and the Armenian Ani, who is left behind by her mother in the Black Sea port city of Ordu in 1915, when Ani’s mother flees to Batumi with her son and her husband Artun. Hüseyin, an enterprising “*dede*” (grandfather) from his youth, serves as an auxiliary soldier in 1915, supplying the Ottoman troops with tea and tobacco; later, thanks to his good relations with the republican Kemalists, he takes possession of the lands of Artun, “*the most respected Armenian far and wide*,” and marries Ani, Artun’s heiress, who has since been raised in Islam by an adoptive Muslim family. Bringing heiresses of wealthy Armenians permanently into their possession through (forced) marriage to the often underage girls was a widespread practice among Ottoman Muslims during and after the 1915/6 genocide. Author Sinan, however, interprets the relationship between Hüseyin Umut and Ani/Vahide as a love match. Like the protagonists of his novel, Marc Sinan’s grandparents and mother bear the names Hüseyin, Vahide (“the lonely one”), and Nur.

The birth of their daughter Nur, whose conception Hüseyin forces during a marital rape, coincides with Hüseyin’s economic ruin during World War II. Sinan describes the circumstances and reasons from different, sometimes contradictory points of view. Ambiguity as a design principle in character portrayal pervades his entire work and could be misunderstood as a design weakness.

Growing up in Istanbul, Kaan’s mother, Nur feels that she does not belong, without realizing the reasons. She wants to go to Germany to escape the constant tutelage of women in Turkey. She encourages her egomaniacal son’s musical ambition to the best of her ability. Kaan studies in the USA thanks to a scholarship abroad, his German school friend Susanne (“Zizi”) accompanies him there, but becomes increasingly estranged from the ambitious, arrogant, often empathy-less and aggressive, at the same time depressed young man with suicidal thoughts. Zizi is the first to recognize that Kaan is psychically “ill”, but still accompanies him to the funeral of his grandmother

Vahide in Trabzon (Trapezunta) in 1999. Ten years earlier, Vahide/Ani had already confided to her grandson her story of suffering and the loss of her Mayrik (little mother), whom, despite all her love, she calls a sinner “because she worships a false god.” Ani/Vahide is also not presented as a unambiguous character. As a committed Muslim, she shares the religious prejudices of the majority population against Christians. She demands that her underage grandson be able to slaughter a chicken as evidence of his manhood.

The death of his once-Armenian grandmother does not cause Kaan any grief. It is only decades later that he will explain to Zizi, by now the mother of Kaan’s daughter Aurora, in a telephone conversation that his grandmother “had everything in her luggage, the genocide, the loneliness, the sadness. This unconditional link between self-worth and work.” (232) It is a finding that also fits the grandson and illustrates what is described as the intergenerational impact of genocide trauma.

The night after Vahide’s funeral, Kaan’s mother, Nur abruptly appears at his bedside and presents him with Vahide’s jade dagger, demanding that he avenge her, Nur. Here, too, it remains unclear which crime is to be repaid. In the post-genocide family novels, such heirlooms play a major role, such as a golden bangle in Laura Cwiertnia’s novel or an Armenian family Bible that Katerina Poladjan’s protagonist comes across during her internship in Yerevan. The Armenian father in Cwiertnia’s family novel advises the protagonist against taking up her Armenian heritage: *“Much too heavy to carry!”*

Kaan, on the other hand, reaches for the inherited dagger, albeit decades after his grandmother’s death. He is now a scholarship holder in the villa of the German Academy in Tarabya (Istanbul), where he befriends the supposed gardener in the neighboring property. It is the property of the Turkish president’s official villa. Kaan discusses music and art with the old gardener in the presidential garden and talks himself into a mad frenzy. His remarks are anti-capitalist, anti-Western or anti-American and culminate in the demand for an indiscriminate art for all people, for a music that does not divide but unites.

The Dede accuses him of being a “fascist of the past,” a person who lives in the past and believes in *“the moral superiority of the losers. Free yourself from pain (...)! It means great injustice to future generations if we build our identity on the aberrations and injuries of past decades and centuries.”* (144) At the *iftar* celebration in the presidential garden, Kaan wants to pounce on the president as an avenger with his dagger, but the president turns out to be the nice gardener next door and invites Kaan to contribute music. In his second song, Kaan refers to the Turkish version of the *Song of the Nibelungs*, namely the eighth of twelve stories from the collection *Heroic Tales by Dede Korkut* (mid-15th century): A shepherd of the Turkic people of the Oghuz, the Central Asian ancestors of today’s Turks and Azeris, rapes a nymph in a sacred place. She gives birth to a polyp-like child and curses the Oghuz invaders, for whom the one-eyed revenge monster quickly becomes a threat. At first, they drive him into the solitude of the steppe. In the end, the outcast is killed by his ‘milk brother’ Basat.

Marc Sinan dealt with this theme years ago, which he interprets as an inner-Turkish fratricide. His “Docufictional Music Theater for Orchestra, Voice, Movement and Video Installation” was performed in 2014 at the Gorki Theater in Berlin. However, the ambassadors of Turkey and Azerbaijan, who had been invited to attend, did not attend

the performance and thus the challenging interpretation by the Turkish writer Sema Kaygusuz, who interpreted the figure of Tepegöz as the exemplary Other, who is excluded in order to make people forget their own guilt.

The crucial question is, of course, whether the Tepegöz material is suitable for symbolizing the intergenerational Armenian trauma and deriving future prospects for Turkish-Armenian relations from it. Kaan's song says: "*But we are brothers, your dede is my dede. My forgiveness is your salvation. Your salvation is my salvation.*" The convictions of the Armenian journalist Hrant Dick, who was murdered for this in early 2007, resonate here.

In fact, however, Armenian-Turkish relations were never about a fratricidal war, but about centuries of subjugation and legal and social discrimination against indigenous Ottoman Christians, including Armenians, and their extermination in the course of Turkish nation-building. The novel's constructed antithesis of retribution and forgiveness is a bogus alternative, for retribution four or more generations *post factum* is as absurd as forgiveness is impossible in the face of ongoing official Turkish denial and threat. And even in the Korkut saga, Tepegöz and Basat are by no means blood brothers but just milk brothers.

Sinan seems to have recognized this himself by having his grandmother Vahide appeal to Kaan to look for a third way between forgiveness and retribution: "(...) *don't be a Basat, don't be a Tepegöz. Only if you are not both, you can create a balance in the world, you can solve what happened to my Mayrik, what happened to me. Choose a path other than that of cruelty.*" (186) His Dede recommends therapeutic writing: "*Finally write down the story, Kaan. Write so that you can forget it. For only in forgetting is there a chance to survive (...).*"

Even Kaan must realize that his hope of triggering a nationwide revolution and thus a lasting improvement in the treatment of minorities by assassinating the Turkish president must fail, because "*the paranoia is too strong.*" To overcome mistrust, fear and prejudice, it would take another thousand years. Sinan hints that Armenians could also currently become the victims of Turkish exterminationism with a song that praises the Young Turkish War Minister Enver and the "*martyrs of the great Islamic army*" and threatens the "*Armenian fascists*" at the presidential iftar celebration in 2023 (236).

Sinan's dystopian outlook on the near future in November 2023 matches this grim summary: An imagined tanker accident finally destroys the piano of Komitas, the Armenian clergyman and composer that sank in the Bosphorus in September 1913, through a mishap of the young Hüseyin Umut. Komitas saved him from punishment at the time, and when Hüseyin meets Komitas again in 1915, the Armenian deportee recognizes him and blesses him for Hüseyin's benevolence when the latter hands him water. Thus, a lasting bond is formed between the two.

Sinan's novel does not follow any chronology but spans a plot time of one hundred years with frequent, unmediated changes of place and time. Not only the narrative styles - personal perspective, experienced character speech, inner monologue and auctorial narrator - change in rapid succession, but also the perspectives and evaluations, which lends the content statements an often irritating, dazzling ambiguity. At the beginning of the novel, there is a monstrous crime, which was characteristic for the Black Sea region and especially Trabzon: 15-year-old Hüseyin is hired by soldiers

to row a boat with 14 children into the open sea, where they are pushed into the water one after the other. Hüseyin is surprised that the children do not scream: “*Armenians, that's all.*”(26)

Dede Hüseyin is not only a relatively empathy-free eyewitness to this crime, but also a profiteer from the genocide and his marriage to an Armenian heiress. How does one live as an heir to a family of victims and perpetrators? By drawing characters that are ambiguous and contradictory, neither really good nor bad? By interpreting the same events differently, even contradictorily, like the economic ruin and the death of Hüseyin Umut? Marc Sinan has attempted his literary liberation from the trauma of the genocide of his Armenian ancestors by means of his primary art - music - in which simultaneity, contrariety, and polyphony are possible. His debut novel is a largely successful translation of polyphonic rules into literary forms. However, this design approach also explains some weaknesses in composition and content.