

Migrational identity and memory in perilous kinship



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In *Perilous Kinship* by Zafer Şenocak, the protagonist Sascha grapples with his intersecting German-Jewish and Turkish identities in the wake of the German reunification. Coming from a family of migrants, coupled with his own nomadic character, Sascha appears culturally dislocated and alienated throughout the novel. After his parents pass away, he inherits a series of journals from his paternal Turkish grandfather which he believes will provide him with the answers to understanding his familial past, and perhaps help him pinpoint his cultural and national identity. The novel explores these issues through the lens of multiculturalism, as Sascha continuously questions if he truly belongs to any one nation or culture, often citing his migrant status as the reason for his perpetual confusion and searching. In the process of untangling his family lineage, Sascha draws the conclusion that he must construct a historical narrative, rather than reconstruct it, in order to find closure. He eventually embraces this unknowing, and finds acceptance in his lack of belonging, treating it like a blank slate that he can alter, build upon, and erase. Thus memory, alongside identity, can be seen as wavering, malleable constructs in *Perilous Kinship* rather than fixed aspects of the narrator's history.

Throughout the course of the narrative, Sascha demonstrates a detachedness from both his German-Jewish and Turkish heritage, despite harnessing a desire to situate himself and understand his origins. Adelson summarizes this in *The Turkish Turn In Contemporary German Literature* when she says that “*Perilous Kinship* defies various taboos and unsettles multiple cultures of memory from the vantage point of Turkish migration to Germany” (Adelson 105). Sascha's identity is “unsettled” by the clashing of

his dual heritage, caused by the exclusivity and homogenization of the German culture. He specifically discloses how “ a situation has emerged which corresponds to my personal origin and situation. In Germany now, a triologue is developing among Germans, Jews, and Turks...I live in a void which offers me nothing to which to attach the fraying threads which are meant to connect me to the three parts of my self. Three bucking, blocking parts” (Şenocak 69). These incompatible parts lead Sascha down a path of research, longing, and discovery, as he searches for his individual and group identity. He refers distinctly to the Germans, the Jews, and the Turks using pronouns such as “ they” or “ their” when providing historical accounts, never associating himself with any nationality. Eventually this exclusion and isolation causes Sasha to invent his own identity and rewrite his history, allowing his fragmented self to become whole. He describes: “ I am not wholly anything. There is a half I am lacking, in order to be seen as whole. To make up for the missing half, I have an identity like an artificial limb, a borrowed thing that I can change depending when and where I am” (Şenocak 92). Sascha’s lack of the knowledge surrounding his cultural and geographical ancestry splinters his identity, which in turn causes major ripples in the way he perceives himself and outwardly views the world. To make up for it, he adopts a migratory mindset in which his identity can change and mold to his current environment.

The nomadic nature of Sascha’s life, as well as his ambiguous lineage, contribute to his identity crisis in crucial ways. For example, after moving to Berlin from America with Marie, Sascha feels misplaced in the city having not been present for the fall of the wall. He observes, “ When I came back to

Germany, Germany had been re-united...So I had missed the historic event. Did I still belong here?" (Şenocak 91). The fact that " Sascha comes either too late or simply " later" to everything that matters in this story" (Adelson 114) only exacerbates the problem. Sascha views himself as an outsider to German culture, and thus constantly searches for insight into where he might feel at home. Upon his return to Munich, his birthplace, he notes, " how melancholy Berlin was, compared to this gay city in the south. Childhood feelings welled up. This was the city where my mother had given birth to me. Though I had been conceived somewhere quite different. In a far bigger and older city, in the south east, on the edge of Europe" (Şenocak 8). This is where Sascha's concept of home begins to reveal itself. The memories of his childhood allow him to identify Munich as a place of familiarity and comfort, opposite to his feelings toward Berlin. Moreover, he enforces that " to be at home in a place I must have left it at least once" (Şenocak 35), which reveals his deeply-rooted tendency to shift his identity through relocation. This statement also displays the extent to which Sascha's migratory history impacts his perception of belonging. He feels lost in Germany, unable to acclimate to a life where he is culturally a foreigner. He mimics this sentiment further, expressing that " Ever since I had left my parents' home I had been without a centre. I was a vagabond, one for whom the world was not wide enough, a vagabond in language" (Şenocak 19). Sascha not only feels largely distanced from German culture, but the Turkish culture as well. His failed attempt at learning the Turkish language further inhibits him from understanding his Turkish cultural background. For Sascha, the alienation from these two cultures goes hand in hand. With no cultural

orientation or permanent homeland, he is left to create his own concept of home which remains with him despite his migrant identity.

Sascha's construction of memory and identity starts and ends with defining a unique version of community and personal history. Starting off, he acknowledges of his past that, " I wanted to come to grips with my origins... That mean not avoiding...not averting my gaze from the past. Remembering is painful. Memory is the only wound in a person that never fully closes" (Şenocak 38) His grandfather's journals were a means to an end in this process. As Moray McGowan writes in *The Novel in German since 1990*, " His goal in eventually narrating his grandfather's biological circumstances is neither to reveal nor conceal, but to construct and imaginative and imaginary history" (McGowan 82). In this sense, Sascha is able to close the gaps in his obscure background. Using his creativity as the source of this narrative, he explains, " History always has a used-up side and an un-used-up side...I wanted to work on the un-used-up side...My task was to construct what could not be reconstructed..." I had his diary which I could not read. What did I need the archives for? What were they but an impersonal memory? There was nothing for me to remember. I had to extract my material from that secret place which had supplied my literary production so far" (Şenocak 42). Sascha thus forms his cultural identity and origins from within, meaning they are essentially hidden and non-existent in worldly contexts.

Yet this non-existence is exactly how Sascha constructs the idea of a cultural community for himself. He states: I had no identity...Without the wall one felt suddenly unprotected. Identity has become a surrogate concept for feeling

<https://assignbuster.com/migrational-identity-and-memory-in-perilous-kinship/>

protected. One gets a fix on oneself, the other, his origin...Before...the Wall afforded protection from the abyss. Nowadays everyone watched their every step, the very next encounter might trip them up. So my path would lead me inexorably into the past...Suddenly I was no longer a stranger in Berlin. I was not just at home here. I belonged here too. I was one of many moles in the city. We ensures that the ground on which the new capital was to be built always remained loose... (Şenocak 39)Here, Sascha captures the perspective of a multicultural migrant, in that their sense of belonging and identity is fluid and fragile. Later on, he confirms that the world he created in his mind is a product of his migrant identity, disclosing, “ In the world I have to describe, instincts are everything. It is the world of the migrants, the marginals” (Şenocak 73). Ultimately, Sascha’s inaccessibility of his cultural origins result in his formation of a new, secret identity within him, one that disguises itself to the outer world.

Perilous Kinship offers the reader an important narrative on migrational identity, belonging and unbelonging, inclusion and exclusion. Sascha, the narrator, struggles throughout the novel in uncovering his familial origins and coming to terms with an invisible history. Through the German-Turkish context, parts of Sascha inherently clash with one another, that being his mother and father’s heritage. Post reunification, the German culture had no room for multilingual or multicultural migrants. This novel depicts the journey through which one migrant confronts this issue. Sascha, despite being a foreigner to both cultures that define him, finds a way to create a new definition of identity within himself, one that can change and grow and disappear.