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## OTTOMAN STATE AND TURKEY IN ALEV LYTLE CROUTIER'S HISTORICAL NOVELS

*Alev Lytle Croutier'in Tarihi Romanlarında Osmanlı Devleti ve Türkiye*

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Doç. Dr. Fusun Çoban Döşkaya

### Öz

Uluslararası üne sahip Türk-Amerikalı yazar Alev Lytle Croutier, (Alev Aksoy) tarih ile kurguyu karmaşık bir şekilde bir araya getirme yeteneğine sahiptir. Yazarlık kariyeri 1989'da kurgusal olmayan eseri *Harem: Peçenin Ardındaki Dünya*'nın yayımlanmasıyla başlamıştır. Eserin yirmiden fazla dile çevrilmesi ve ülkede yayınlanması onu Türk kökenli en çok eserleri yayınlanan kadın yazarlardan biri haline getirmiştir. Bu çalışma yabancı ülkede yaşamının mekânsızlığının ve mekân genişliğinin nasıl çok-kültürlü mekânın konumu haline geldiğini Alev Lytle Croutier'nin eserlerinde incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Çalışma içerisinde yazarın *Gözyaşı Sarayı* (2000), *Yedi Evin Sırları* (2002), ve *Üçüncü Kadın* (2006) isimli çalışmalarında sürekli tekrarlanan bir tema olan göçmenin yerleştirilmesi, yer değiştirilmesi ve yerinden edilmesi konularına değinilmektedir. *Gözyaşı Sarayı* isimli romanda bu tema bir Fransız şarap üreticisinin İslamiyete geçmesi ve bir Türk efendisi haline dönüşmesinde, *Yedi Evin Sırları* isimli kitapta Türk göçmenin anavatanına yıllar sonra dönüşünde, *Üçüncü Kadın*, isimli romanda iki Fransız karakter Pierre Loti ve Marc Hély's'in Oryantalizasyonunda ve Zinnur ve Nuriye Hanım'ın Avrupalılaşmasında ve aldatıcı yansıtmasında gözlemlenmektedir.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Alev Lytle Croutier, Tarihi Roman, ABD, Osmanlı Devleti, Türkiye, Kadın Çalışmaları, Yabancı Ülkede Yaşayanlar

### Abstract

Internationally acclaimed Turkish-American writer Alev Lytle Croutier (aka Alev Aksoy) has a talent for interweaving history with fiction in a complex way. Her career as a writer began when she published her non-fiction work *Harem: The World Behind the Veil* in 1989. It was translated and published in more than twenty languages and countries, making her one of the most published woman writers of Turkish descent. This study seeks to explore how the spacelessness and spaciousness of expatriatism become the locus of multi-cultural space in the works of Alev Lytle Croutier. It concentrates on the recurring theme of placement, replacement, and displacement of the expatriate in Croutier's works, *The Palace of Tears* (2000), *Seven Houses* (2002), and *Üçüncü Kadın [The Third Woman]* (2006). In *The Palace of Tears*, this theme is manifested in a French winemaker's conversion into Islam and becoming a Turkish gentleman; in *Seven Houses*, it is presented in the return of a Turkish expatriate to her native land after years of cross-culturization; in *Üçüncü Kadın*, it is reflected in the interplay between the two French characters, Pierre Loti and Marc Hely's' Orientalisation and Zennur and Nuriye Hanım's Europeanization and the deceptive mirroring.

**Keywords:** Alev Lytle Croutier, Historical Novel, USA, Ottoman State, Turkey, Women's Studies, Expatriates

## Introduction

Alev Lytle Croutier has been one of the most published women novelists of Turkish origin since her international bestseller and historical study *Harem: The World Behind the Veil*<sup>1</sup> (1989), translated into more than twenty languages. In writing that book, she intended to have a text that describes the harem life and institution as she derived from her ten years of research, which was her thesis. The art used in the book is the antithesis to offset the mostly miserable harem life with the fantasy portrayal by the West, and she deliberately leaves the synthesis to the reader.<sup>2</sup>

She is also an acclaimed Turkish-American screenwriter (*Tell me a Riddle* based on Tillie Olsen's novella) and lectures on women's history and Orientalism. Apart from *Harem*, her other works include *Taking the Waters: Spirit, Art, Sensuality* (1992) and the novels, *The Palace of Tears* (2000), *Seven Houses* (2002), *Leyla: The Black Tulip* (2003), and *Üçüncü Kadın [The Third Woman]* (2006). Except for the non-fiction book *Taking the Waters* (which still has some references to Turkey), all of her works are about Turkey. Turkey is her prime material, and she uses Turkey as her canvas. Croutier uses her Western education in her works and mixes it with the Eastern story-telling tradition. Known as a visual writer who speaks to all senses, she tries to construct worlds her readers can see, feel, and taste.

This study<sup>3</sup> explores how spacelessness and spaciousness of expatriatism become the locus of Alev Lytle Croutier's multi-cultural space and therefore concentrates on the recurring theme of placement, replacement, and displacement in her works *The Palace of Tears* (2000)<sup>4</sup>, *Seven Houses* (2002), and *Üçüncü Kadın [The Third Woman]*<sup>5</sup> (2006).<sup>6</sup>

### 1. Alev Lytle Croutier

Alev Lytle Croutier was born in 1945 in Karataş, Izmir, Turkey as the only child of Sadri and Yümniye Aksoy. Her paternal grandmother, Zehra Barutçu, "was the daughter of a wealthy

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<sup>1</sup> Alev Lytle Croutier, *Harem: The World Behind the Veil*, Abbeville Press, New York 1989.

<sup>2</sup> For more information on the book see: Fusun Coban Doskaya, "Harem Resimlerinde Kadının Temsili: *Harem: Peçenin Ardındaki Dünya*" [Representation of Women in Harem Paintings: *Harem: The World Behind the Veil*], *Akşit Göktürk'ü Anma Toplantısı: Yazında Sanat ve Sanatçı- Sanat ve Çeviri*, Dilita, Istanbul 2007, pp. 67-77.

<sup>3</sup> Alev Lytle Croutier reviewed and made significant contributions to this article, for which I am grateful. The idea of writing this article is formed after joining the conferences given below: "Alev Lytle Croutier's *Seven Houses*: 'If These Walls Could Talk'", 31<sup>st</sup> Annual American Studies Conference (November 1-3, 2006) Patalya Hotel, Golbasi, Ankara, Turkey; "Harem Resimlerinde Kadının Temsili: *Harem: Peçenin Ardındaki Dünya*" [Representation of Women in Harem Paintings: *Harem: The World Behind the Veil*], Akşit Göktürk'ü Anma Toplantısı, (March 8-9, 2007) Istanbul University, Istanbul, Turkey; "The Grand Superchérie: Alev Lytle Croutier's *The Third Woman*", Seventh International Language, Literature and Stylistics Symposium (May 2-5, 2007), Selcuk University, Konya, Turkey; "Deconstructing Alev Lytle Croutier's *The Palace of Tears*", Second International Conference on Nation and Identity in 19th and 20th Century Literature in English, (September 20-21, 2007), San Antonio Catholic University of Murcia, Spain; "Mutant Space between Two Worlds, The Expatriate's Dilemma" 32nd Annual American Studies Conference (November 7-9, 2007) Hacettepe University, Ankara, Turkey; "Harem as a Traditional Space in the Works of Alev Lytle Croutier", Eight International Language, Literature and Stylistics Symposium (May 14-16, 2008) University of Economics, Izmir, Turkey.

<sup>4</sup> Published in Turkey as: Alev Lytle Croutier, *Gözyaşı Sarayı*, Trans, Ayşen Anadol, Oğlak Yayıncılık, Istanbul 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Alev Lytle Croutier's writing language is not Turkish. For that reason, like in her previous books, she has written her fourth novel, *The Third Woman*, in English. The novel was translated into Turkish and published first as *Üçüncü Kadın* in Turkey in 2006. Since the original English version of the book is not yet published, this study follows the pagination of Croutier's manuscript. I am grateful to Alev Lytle Croutier for providing me a copy of her *The Third Woman* manuscript in 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Although not included in this study, Alev Lytle Croutier's *Leyla: The Black Tulip*, a young adult novel narrating a Circassian slave girl's mutation in the Ottoman Court during the tulip era in, suits that theme. In the novel, Leyla's acculturation creates a much stronger self, making it impossible for her to return to her native land when given the opportunity as she has discovered a stronger identity in her new self. This novel in the "Girls of Many Lands" series has been published along with a historical Turkish doll produced by Mattel, one of the largest toy companies in the US.

gunpower maker in Macedonia.”<sup>7</sup> Her great-great-grandmother’s name was Naile. Alev was given the name “Naile (“one endowed with everything”) Alev (“flame, passion”) Aksoy.”<sup>8</sup>

*I do not remember very much of the house in Izmir (Smyrna) where I was born. It faced the sea, was five stories high, and it had a hamam (bath house) where groups of women came to bathe. A giant granite rock behind the house isolated it from the world. It was said that before us, an old pasha, his two wives, and other women occupied the place.*<sup>9</sup>

Two things happened to her as a child that defined Croutier’s trajectory. Her mother taught her how to write when she was around five years old, which she describes as the greatest discovery of her life. She defines her love of writing: “I enjoyed the sense of my hands giving shape to my thoughts, and I suddenly preferred making up stories to jumping rope or hopscotch.”<sup>10</sup>

*I was unable to stop. She [her mother] painstakingly sat with me until I made the connection between those abstract symbols of letters and sounds. It is difficult to remember what I wrote as a child since all has been lost--although my father had meticulously saved every bit of writing I did in a volume of scrapbooks, they mysteriously disappeared after his death. Most likely, my mother threw them out “accidentally,” having felt suffocated by all the papers that filled our house.*<sup>11</sup>

The second event, now that she was able to read, was the discovery of the “atlas.”

*I became obsessed with looking at the maps and memorizing the names of countries, mountains, and seas! There were two sorts of maps: geological and colorful ones with borders separating them. I could not understand these artificial separations. We were all part of the one world, one people.*<sup>12</sup>

Her Ankara years began in 1950.

*In 1950, with my parents and grandmother, I moved to an apartment house in Ankara that was inhabited by assorted family members. We lived as an extended family—two uncles, three aunts, my grandmother, my great-aunt, many cousins, and odalisques (servant girls) who were gifts from my great-uncle, Faik Pasha, and owned by the family.*<sup>13</sup>

“When she was eight, her parents left for a year’s study in Michigan, while she stayed in Izmir”<sup>14</sup> with her maternal grandparents in Karşıyaka.<sup>15</sup> In Ankara, she went to Sarar elementary school in Çankaya.<sup>16</sup> Her parents subscribed her to “Dogan Kardesh,” a children’s magazine,<sup>17</sup> where she started publishing her poems and children’s stories. She recalls that was when she decided to be a writer.

<sup>7</sup> Croutier, *Harem*, p. 9.

<sup>8</sup> Judy Stone, *Not Quite a Memoir: Of Films, Books, the World*, Silman-James Press, Los Angeles 2006, p.178.

<sup>9</sup> Alev Lytle Croutier, “Harem”, *Chronicles Abroad: Istanbul*, Chronicle Books, San Francisco 1995, p. 125-126; Croutier, *Harem*, pp.10-11.

<sup>10</sup> The quotation is taken from Alev Lytle Croutier’s paper, “Losing a Language,” presented at a Dokuz Eylul University conference on October 31, 2007. The title of the conference in which I was the moderator was “Kaybolan Dilin Türküleri.” I am thankful to Ms. Croutier for giving me a copy of her paper.

<sup>11</sup> Croutier, “Losing a Language,” p. 2.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Croutier, “Harem”, p. 125-126; Croutier, *Harem*, pp.10-11.

<sup>14</sup> Stone, *Not Quite a Memoir*, p. 178.

<sup>15</sup> A district of Izmir.

<sup>16</sup> As stated on the school’s web page, (<https://website.robcol.k12.tr/en/about-rc/history>) the school was founded in the 1939-1940 academic year as part of the “Atatürk High School” with the name “Maltepe elementary school”. It was moved to its main building between the years 1943 and 1944. Abdulhalik Renda (the President of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey of that time) and his family were gifted the building land of the school. The name “Sarar” consisted of the letters of their names. [https://sararilkokulu.meb.k12.tr/icerikler/tarihcemiz\\_24613.html](https://sararilkokulu.meb.k12.tr/icerikler/tarihcemiz_24613.html)

<sup>17</sup> In her article “Losing a Language,” Croutier asserts that she read that magazine weekly. The magazine was formed in memory of a boy who died in the Swiss Alps.

*I published my first story at eight. The inspiration came from a postcard that I had found in one of my father's collections. It was one of those hand-colored ones, slightly textured. It showed a child somewhere in the country standing at the edge of a crossroads and seemingly contemplating which one to take. Crossroads intrigued me and so I wrote something about the melancholy one felt of a road not taken. Little did I know then that the crossroads would be a paradigm for my life...From that day on, everything I wrote had an audience. I wrote amusing episodes of school life using metaphors from the Classics and hilarious things that circulated all through the school. I had achieved my identity. People wanted more and I gave them. I had another blessing during this time, a gifted teacher who herself was a writer and a poet. I was greatly impressed by her published books and in turn she encouraged me to infuse poetry into prose. I was full of inspiration until the teacher who told me I should never write arrived in my life.<sup>18</sup>*

Croutier spoke only Turkish until she was a teenager. She began to learn English only when she attended American College for Girls in Istanbul for middle school. She describes her experience of learning another language as such:

*The act of learning a language in a country distant from the one where it is spoken is surreal. We created a microcosm where we practice this artifice and its implements. At first, I sounded like the people in language tapes, controlled, spoken slowly and each word enunciated without humor or harmony, without melody. Like a robot, sort of. I felt the absurdity of it but not knowing how to loosen up. Then came the answers in the shape of comic books and rock'n'roll.<sup>19</sup>*

Croutier writes her works in English. She is viewed as a Turkish writer in the US and an American writer in Turkey and considers herself an international writer. About this issue, she says:

*I am not part of the literary production in the US. Neither am I in Turkey. I come from different experiences, different mythologies. Turkish culture is a highly evolved story-telling tradition. It is not a reflective culture where people spend a lot time pondering on the meaning of life and self-introspection. But they do excel in story-telling. My childhood, too, was full of story-telling, both traditional and modern. My Levantine grandmother from Bornova told Hellenic myths—I knew the Agamemnon trilogy and the house of Atrius at the same time as Cinderella or Snow White. Then came the transcendentals, Leyla ve Mecnun, 1001 Gece Masallari, etc.<sup>20</sup>*

The feeling of being an international person aroused in her in high school after she had acquired more than thirty pen pals spread all over the world. She passionately kept communicating with them and created a network. "The countries were artificial borders that separated us. We were all brothers and sisters. I was a citizen of the world. We should all live in peace,"<sup>21</sup> she recalled.

She attended Robert College in Istanbul for high school, then known as American College for Girls (ACG) in Arnavutköy.<sup>22</sup> In her junior year, the teacher mentioned in the above quotation entered her life, and as she recounts, she was brokenhearted for fifteen years and did not write a

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<sup>18</sup> Croutier, "Losing a Language," p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 5.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p. 8.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 6.

<sup>22</sup> For more information on the history and importance of these schools in Turkey, see: Fusun Coban Doskaya, "Amerikan Board Misyoneri Laura Farnham'ın Osmanlı Devleti'ndeki Faaliyetleri" [Activities of American Board Missionary Laura Farnham in the Ottoman State], Turkish Studies-Historical Analysis, V.15, No. 4, 2020, pp. 1059-1061.

word. “She did not like my wild imagination. I believed her. So I stopped. It is awful how careless criticism can profoundly affect a young mind!”<sup>23</sup>

She graduated from Robert College in 1963.<sup>24</sup> In the write-up in the yearbook Record '63, her friends described her, “You have given yourself to imagination. You imagine, you live, you create...You write endless eternal lines.”<sup>25</sup> At eighteen, she left Turkey with a scholarship to Oberlin College, where she skipped the first two years of college in the United States, a Liberal Arts college where she studied Art History. After graduation in two years, her visa was expiring, and she was expected to return to Turkey, but after college and some years on her, Croutier found herself in a dilemma.

*I felt trepidatious at the thought of going back to Turkey, and I still do. There's always that tightening feeling in my chest, the difficulty of being accepted if you behave outside the prescribed way. It is a function of class, it is a function of society. It is a function of a country which went through a reform instantly (with Kemal Ataturk's decrees for modernization) instead of developing gradually. It is a very schizophrenic country, caught in that state of metamorphosis- of not going East or West and wanting both.*<sup>26</sup>

Just at that point, she was offered work on a film in Hong Kong and Japan by a previous summer employer.<sup>27</sup>

She found herself living in Tokyo for a year, another seminal experience. The film “The Seeing Eye” was invited to the prestigious Berlin Film Festival. So, it was time to leave Asia and head to Europe. This offered an opportunity to take the Trans-Siberian train, which took two weeks of travel through the Soviet Union to reach Berlin.<sup>28</sup>

It was finally time to return to Istanbul. Her search for a job in films proved to be futile. “No one seemed to take an independent young woman seriously in those days. Another unexpected event was meeting the American writer James Baldwin who advised her to return to the U.S.

She moved to New York and worked as a research assistant in PBS (Public Broadcasting Service) (then known as “NET,” National Educational television). She attended graduate school in film at NY University (1967-68) and later at Humboldt State University (1970-71) in California.<sup>29</sup> She began making her short films while living in San Francisco during this period. However, this required writing scripts, and since she could not explain the clarity of her vision to anyone, she was obliged to write them herself during those years. That was how she started writing again.

*When I began to write again, it was not a choice but an accident. Since I had given up being a writer, I had become a filmmaker because I had to express my world. But ultimately, making films required writing scripts, and since I could not explain to anyone the clarity of my vision,*

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. 2.

<sup>24</sup> As stated in school's webpage in 1932, Robert Academy in Bebek campus and *American College for Girls* (ACG) in Arnavutköy campus came under the administration of a single President and in 1959, a single Board of Trustees. In 1971, the two schools merged as Robert College on the Arnavutköy campus as a co-ed high school. For more information on the history of these schools see: Fusun Coban Doskaya, “Amerikan Board Misyoneri Laura Farnham'ın Osmanlı Devleti'ndeki Faaliyetleri” [Activities of American Board Missionary Laura Farnham in the Ottoman State], *Turkish Studies-Historical Analysis*, V.15, No. 4, 2020, pp. 1059-1061.

<sup>25</sup>“The Harem Unveiled”, *RC Quarterly: Robert College Alumni Magazine*, Spring 1990, s. 15. <https://website.robcoll.k12.tr/uploads/file/19526430-0312-46f7-abe6-2cce4760f4cb.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> Stone, *Not Quite a Memoir*, pp. 178-179.

<sup>27</sup> In Japan, she taught English and worked in dubbing films from Japanese to English.

<sup>28</sup> See: Alev Lytle Croutier, “How I Became a Purveyor of Caviar and Champagne on the Trans-Siberian”, *I Should Have Stayed Home: The Worst Trips of Great Writers*, Eds. Roger Rapoport - Marguerita Castanera, Book Passage Press, Berkeley 1994, pp.30-33.

<sup>29</sup> “The Harem Unveiled”, p. 15.

*I was obliged to write them myself. Of course, there was always the consolation that I was not really writing but recording the instructions for scenes.*

*The odd thing was seeing the credits on the screen with my name under "written by." I felt somewhat ashamed that I had conned everyone into thinking I was a writer—even the Writers Guild of America was suddenly asking me for dues. I had become a legitimate, card-carrying member.*

*But I was friends again with the paper and the typewriter and empty rooms where I stayed for days and wrestled with my mind to regurgitate the images and the words. I was like an invalid, straying out of bed for the first time in fifteen years. The atrophy seemed deep, impediments so many, but alas, I could walk. But when I got up, I realized I was in another country and a language that was not mine.*

She returned to Istanbul in 1978 to visit her family "with an expatriate's eye and a self-conscious awareness of art history and of feminist rhetoric."<sup>30</sup> In her trips to Turkey in the following years, she started feeling that she was left without a language. She refrained from using her mother tongue, thinking people would make fun of her. She thought she not only became a social but also a linguistic exile:

*When I picked up books to read, it was a disorienting experience, it was a language I knew, yet it was so foreign. I did not understand this new language and I found a certain resistance in trying to learn it. I could only make sense through approximation and deduction. Because in each, interval of time it had changed. My Turkish was of the past now, it no longer existed except among the old people who had retired from the world. Even they had learned more of a modern language from watching TV and the younger generation. I was left without a language. I had become not only a cultural but also a linguistic exile.*

*When, I talked the way I had learned, people either laughed, "Oh, you sound like someone's grandmother," or snubbed me by deliberately speaking the trendiest new language and watching me struggle to make sense of it. You know the character Rip Van Winkle who sleeps for a hundred years and wakes up to a world in which he has become an ancient relic? That was me.*

*I was terrified of giving interviews, appearing on TV, or giving a public presentation. I know that some felt, "It's shameful to forget one's mother tongue." Or condescend my stutterings. At that point, I thought it best not to give interviews in Turkish because I sounded like an idiot. No tolerance or charity for this trespass."<sup>31</sup>*

In Los Angeles AKM Book Club online meeting on April 04, 2021, one sees that this feeling is still with her as she says, "I cannot write in Turkish for some reason."<sup>32</sup>

*In my adopted country, I was obliged to speak English. I did not speak Turkish except for my weekly phone conversations with my mother, during which we rehashed the same old words. For us, the language had stopped having a voice and existed only as the assurance our love for each other.*

*I taught my son English, and when he was little, he spoke it with the same accent as mine until he got laughed at. That was a sign for me to lose my accent, and I did. Now there, no one could tell I was anything but a native English speaker. Except, every time I was introduced, it was "she is from Turkey," as if this long-ago verity had been sewn on to me like the label on a piece of clothing. Made in Turkey."<sup>33</sup>*

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<sup>30</sup> Croutier, "Harem", p.127; Croutier, *Harem*, p. 11.

<sup>31</sup> Croutier, "Losing a Language," p. 7-8.

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PWQgrkvoe3w> (Date Accessed 20.04.2022)

<sup>33</sup> Croutier, "Losing a Language," p. 8.

In San Francisco in 1979, Croutier founded Mercury House publishing company and was its executive editor for almost a decade. After that, she started working as a freelance writer.<sup>34</sup> She has taught film courses in US universities and made independent films. In 1984, she became “the first person to be awarded a Guggenheim fellowship for screenplay writing.”<sup>35</sup> “She wrote the screenplay for [Tillie Olsen’s novella] *Tell Me a Riddle* and worked in publishing.”<sup>36</sup> She has received many awards, and her articles are published “in literary and mainstream magazines like *Art and Antiques*, *Harper’s*, *London Telegraph*, *Gourment*, *Focus*, *Zyzyva*, and anthologies like *Roots and Branches*, *Istanbul*, *I Should have Stayed Home*.”<sup>37</sup>

The dictionary definition of “expatriate” is “to withdraw (oneself) from residence in or allegiance to one’s native country”<sup>38</sup> or “someone who does not live in their own country.”<sup>39</sup> It is someone excluded from or exiled from one’s own country and culture. In addition, it implies someone on the fringes of the adopted culture. Alev Lytle Croutier, as an ex-pat writer, reflects her fear in the below quotation as follows:

*I noticed before my grandmother died that her accent was changing. She was returning to the language of her childhood. They say that when people get older, this can happen, that they return to their mother tongues. I imagined the loneliness if this were to happen to me. Suddenly, I would have no place where I live. And in Turkey, I would be speaking a language that no one understood any more.*<sup>40</sup>

## 1. Feminist Methodology

This study uses feminist methodology as it puts Alev Lytle Croutier’s experiences, as an expat-writer, at the center of its investigation. It also problematizes Croutier’s diverse situations and emphasizes studying power relations. She finds misrepresentations in the existing knowledge of certain narratives like harem life and defies conventional sexist research, which fails to articulate many aspects of women’s experience.

Feminist research methodology is different from other research in social sciences and distinguishes it from other forms of research as it includes various interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary research methods. While emphasizing women’s experiences and challenging the traditional meanings of gender, it tries to change social inequality and offers an alternative approach. Therefore, it questions power imbalances and aims to transform women’s societal position to reduce power imbalances by challenging male-centric knowledge.

## 2. The Palace of Tears

As Alev Lytle Croutier points out, when she was researching for her book *Harem: The World Behind the Veil*, she read about an old palace near Topkapi where an old Sultan’s harem would be sent to live out the rest of their years.<sup>41</sup> The place was known as “the Palace of the Unwanted Ones” or “the Palace of Tears”. It was a place where the old sultans’ harem was cast away. Alev Lytle Croutier’s *The Palace of Tears* takes its name from this old palace.

<sup>34</sup> For more information about her life story see; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PWQgrkvoe3w>

<sup>35</sup> Roger Rapoport - Marguerita Castanera, eds. *I Should Have Stayed Home: The Worst Trips of Great Writers*, Book Passage Press, Berkeley 1994, p. 240.

<sup>36</sup> Taken from footnote in: Alev Lytle Croutier, “One Big Family”, *Roots and Branches: Contemporary Essays by West Coast Writers*, Ed. Howard Junker, Mercury House, San Francisco 1991, p.38.

<sup>37</sup> Alev Aksoy Croutier, *Yedi Evin Sırları*, Trans. Canan Silay, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Remzi Kitabevi, Istanbul 2006, s.1

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/expatriate> (Date accessed 20.04.2022)

<sup>39</sup> <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english-turkish/expatriate> (Date accessed 25.08.2022)

<sup>40</sup> Croutier, “Losing a Language,” p. 9.

<sup>41</sup> This information is taken from Croutier’s answers to her interview about *The Palace of Tears* with Gamze Akdemir from Cumhuriyet. Croutier kindly sent me the word file of the interview questions and her answers to them when I was working on my presentation entitled “Deconstructing Alev Lytle Croutier’s The Palace of Tears” in 2007.



*The skeleton of Palace of Tears is an east/west love story, based on a tale told to Alev by her grandmother, of a young handsome Frenchman who came to Istanbul in the mid-19th century and fell in love with a beautiful harem girl. To win her heart, he abandoned everything - family, fortune, country, language, religion - and became a Moslem and a Turk. They went to Macedonia together, where she had many children, and he made gunpowder instead of wine. They grew rich and lived happily ever after. These lovers were Alev's great-great-grandparents. For years, the story was a riddle Alev wanted to solve. How could these two have met when it would have been impossible for a woman to have contact with any man other than the members of her own family - especially a foreigner? She never discovered the truth, but her fictionalized version evolved into this novel, *The Palace of Tears*.<sup>42</sup>*

Alev Lytle Croutier narrates that she heard the story of a French man who came to Turkey in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and fell madly in love with a Turkish woman, changed his name, and became a Turk and a Moslem just to marry her. In the acknowledgments of her historical novel<sup>43</sup> *The Palace of Tears*, she writes:

*I thank the Madness of the Frenchman who embraced passion as his fate and the woman who could inspire him so. I'm grateful to my grandmother, Zehra, for spinning their story which fired my child's imagination and grew into dreams for so many years.<sup>44</sup>*

At the beginning of the book, she writes, "This is a work of fiction. Not only the characters and events but also the historical facts have been sacrificed to tell the story. Do not believe a word of it."<sup>45</sup> She introduces an East/West love story with a touch of magical realism and uses historical events and characters in the book. She argues that everything that happens in *The Palace of Tears* happens deliberately in the history of literature:

*Each chapter is like a postcard glimpse of "A Journey to the Orient", the way the West has objectified and packaged the East. My hope was to turn French Orientalism on itself, to ask what would France look like if it went through the same objectification. It becomes an imaginary Occident with intentional clichés, like the winemaking or the decadence of the Second Empire, the cameos by real live characters—Louis Vuitton, Worth, etc.*

*The literary influences come from both Eastern literature—1001 night stories, works of Nizami and Attar, Turkish fables, Persian fairy tales, and Sanskrit myths. For example, the idea of *reve a deux* (simultaneous or double dreaming) is a Sanskrit convention that occurs in tales like *Usha's Dream* and *Vikramaditya*, which in turn has influenced Western writers like Rudyard Kipling in his fabulous story *The Brushwood Boy*, or George du Maurier's *Peter Ibbetson*.*

*I have also been intrigued by Orientalism which I will define as "the way the East is perceived by the West and expressed in literary and artistic forms. For example, the travel literature of Flaubert, Nerval, and Loti. The book is full of hidden and deliberate homages like Shelley's poem "Ozymandias" when the hero trudges along the desert. Or the lovers ride in the carriage in 1860's Istanbul being a total allusion to Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* as Emma and her lover drive along the streets of Paris in one of the most minimalist erotic scenes from any novel."<sup>46</sup>*

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<sup>42</sup> Philippa Scott, "'A Fine Romance' review of *The Palace of Tears* by Alev Lytle Croutier", *Cornucopia*, V. 4, No. 21, 2000, p. 24.

<sup>43</sup> For more information on historical novel see: Yasemin Ulutürk, *Türk Edebiyatında Tarihi Roman (1980-2000)*, (Trakya University, Institute of Social Sciences, Unpublished M.A. Thesis) Edirne 2018; Yasemin Ulutürk Sakarya, "Tarihi Roman Üzerine Kavramsal bir Çerçeve", *Tarihten Romana Malazgirt 4. Tarihi Roman ve Romanda Tarih Bilgi Şöleni Bildirileri*, Ed. Maşallah Nar- Mehmet Tuğrul, Türkiye Yazarlar Birliği Yayınları, Ankara 2020, pp. 33-40.

<sup>44</sup> Alev Lytle Croutier, *The Palace of Tears*, Dell Publishing, New York 2000, p. 175.

<sup>45</sup> Croutier, *The Palace of Tears*, p. i.

<sup>46</sup> This quotation is taken from Croutier's answers to her interview about *The Palace of Tears* with Gamze Akdemir from Cumhuriyet.

It seems from the above-given quotation of Croutier that she did much research in Turkey and France to turn French Orientalism on itself. The book has a cryptic form and is full of hoaxes and riddles, and one can draw multiple meanings from each sentence.<sup>47</sup> In the book, she uses the 19<sup>th</sup>-century French travel literature of Flaubert, Nerval, and Gautier and metaphors<sup>48</sup> about the Orientalist polarities. She strikes back a vision of their world as it would have been seen by an “Occidental” of the nineteenth century. That is why she resorted to clichés like making Casimir a winemaker and playing on the exaggerated decadence of the Second Empire. She attempts to show how the West has objectified the East and examines cultural identities.

In the book, Casimir de Châteauneuf, a wealthy French vintner, represents an expatriate’s dilemma. He abandons his country and family and journeys to chase his other half. He converts to Islam and becomes a Turkish gentleman. He represents the dream of typical 19<sup>th</sup>-century Orientalists who perceive the Orient as having exoticism and mysteries. Croutier uses fate as her dramatic derive rather than the Aristotelian three-act structure.<sup>49</sup> Châteauneuf’s coming to Constantinople represents his displacement, and the loss of his former culture and his new identity, which is neither French nor Turkish, alludes to his replacement.

*He [Casimir de Châteauneuf] dumped his dandy clothes in favor of a Stambouline, a black frock, and a fez with a red tassel. He grew a mustache like a Turkish gentlemen. He frequented cafés where he played backgammon with the locals and smoked a water pipe. Like a skilled actor, he came to reinvent his identity.<sup>50</sup>*

Croutier is an ex-patriot, belonging to both worlds (Turkey and the United States) and neither world at the same time. Casimir de Châteauneuf in *The Palace of Tears* represents this dilemma for her. She, like Châteauneuf, reinvents herself but never loses her former self. She struggles to reconcile the East and the West, as she is composed of both and contains the conflict of each. She struggles to connect the East with the West, both literally and figuratively, as the opening of the Suez Canal, which unites and separates the two halves. It is also represented in the reve a deux, or double dreaming, where the love affair between the Eastern woman and the Western man is the united vision where the two halves combine to complete the gap or the third space/mutant space, healing the conflict.

### 3. Seven Houses

Alev Lytle Croutier’s historical novel *Seven Houses*, which has tales within tales, focuses on Turkey and examines immense changes in Turkish culture as an outsider.<sup>51</sup> Like *The Palace of Tears*, it is full of metaphors. It tells the story of a silk-making Ipekci family between 1918 and 1997 and focuses on the lives of four generations of Turkish women in that family (Esma, Aida, Amber, and Nellie). “The women’s stories are told by the voices of the seven houses they inhabit over the decades.”<sup>52</sup> Each house in the novel represents a specific era in Turkish cultural history, and thus, they reflect the changes that Turkey has undergone throughout the 20th century.

<sup>47</sup> Croutier recommends that *The Palace of Tears* be read slowly and adds that it is a story that likes being read aloud. She tries to achieve a hypnotic effect, like a slow camel ride across a desert.

<sup>48</sup> Some of the metaphors in the book can be listed as such: Casimir and Kukla; Sultan Abdulaziz and Empress Eugenie; La Poupee’s eyes, one blue (European) and the other yellow (Asian); “the Queen of the East and the Queen of the West.”

<sup>49</sup> Croutier constructed *The Palace of Tears* like a feature length film (it is roughly 120 manuscript pages/1 page per each minute on film. Part I ends on page 30 and part II on page 90.

<sup>50</sup> Croutier, *The Palace of Tears*, p. 121.

<sup>51</sup> For detailed analysis of *Seven Houses*, see: Fusun Coban Doskaya, “The Representation of the USA in Alev Lytle Croutier’s *Seven Houses*”, *DEU Journal of Humanities*, V.9, No.2, 2022, pp. 301-319.

<sup>52</sup> <https://www.mysanantonio.com/books/article/A-sixth-sense-through-four-generations-2788387.php> (Date Accessed 04.02.2022) p.1.

The houses within the book store the characters' memories, dreams, secrets, and thoughts. The seven voices of these seven houses, all of which are situated in the biggest cities of Turkey, such as Izmir, Istanbul, Bursa, and Ankara, act as living characters in the form of a grand villa, a silk plantation, an apartment or a family dwelling. Within its historical context, *Seven Houses* narrates the new freedoms Turkish women had gained and thus reveals their changing perspectives. They struggle between their past and future, the western world, the representative of which is America. Therefore, the characters' understanding of America is crucial.

After the proclamation of the Republic of Turkey, the religious ruling institutions of the Ottoman Empire, that is, the sultanate and caliphate abolished. Atatürk concentrated on modernizing the country and made social, political, and economic reforms. Turkish women and houses were used as a token to show the Western world the modernization of Turkey. Women were the most significant symbol of the newly founded Republic of Turkey. Therefore, in Turkish literature, westernization is depicted through the women characters, emphasizing their clothes and houses. In literature, 'the house' has often been used as a cultural symbol reflecting social and historical changes and is often associated with its inhabitants. By putting women characters and the narration of houses at the novel's center, Croutier tries to show the westernization journey of Turkey and the Turkish people. The houses in the *Seven Houses* witness the family members through time and history and narrate the individuals' strengths and weaknesses while revealing the political upheavals in Turkey.

The theme of placement is presented in the return of a Turkish expatriate to her native land after years of cross-culturalization in the writer's *Seven Houses*. Told from the point of view of the houses inhabited by a family over four generations spanning the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the narrative begins in 1918 in Smyrna, "a city as ancient, as infamous as the Olympians," where "you can hear so much — the birth cry of St. Paul, the scratching of St. John's quill as he labors over his Gospel. Through the fog, you can see Anthony and Cleopatra, lost in horrid ecstasy, floating on a golden barge."<sup>53</sup> Seven houses, from a villa in Izmir to a silk plantation in Bursa to an unattractive fifties apartment in Ankara corrupted by Americanization, "listen and peer into the thoughts, prayers, and dreams of the family."<sup>54</sup> The houses are personified, having their own opinions, manipulating situations, feeling love and pain, and keeping the past spirits within their walls. They are the ears, eyes, and soul of the story narrated. This is a literary device Croutier uses to represent the authorial point of view, objectifying her perspective. Croutier has a fascination with houses. Buildings, rooms, gardens, and ruins in archeology ignite her imagination more than anything else. She shows a deep sensitivity to the spirit of a space and its lack. The rooms witness the most important secrets, and we often wonder what would happen if the wall had ears and they could tell stories.

It tells the story of Amber Ipekçi, who has difficulties adjusting to life in Turkey after living in America for 25 years. A critic resembles Croutier to Amber and argues that, like her, she was "a kind of prodigal daughter" who found "a world outside of national boundaries and [was] able to reconcile her own divided allegiances."<sup>55</sup> When Amber returns from America, she realizes that there is not much left to hold on to in the cities of her past. When she left Istanbul, her environment was spacious and green, just like her replaced space in California. In the past, the environment was green; now, it is gray and black. "Girls wearing scarves. Women wearing long coats, their heads covered, moving about the streets like black bundles...and all these bearded men wearing

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<sup>53</sup> Alev Lytle Croutier, *Seven Houses*, Atria Books, New York 2002. p. 5.

<sup>54</sup> <https://www.mysanantonio.com/books/article/A-sixth-sense-through-four-generations-2788387.php> (Date Accessed 04.02.2022) p.2

<sup>55</sup> Stone, *Not Quite a Memoir*, p. 178.

beansies.”<sup>56</sup> She feels as if the place devours her at the beginning. Turkey is a place where “happiness is a source of envy. Misfortune is cause for celebration.”<sup>57</sup>

By ending the story with the same house at the novel’s beginning and taking the story to where it started, Croutier mourns the backlash that shows Turkey’s cultural and religious reversal. She uses a circular structure in her narrative. When Amber returns to Izmir and buys the house she was born in, she will reconstruct the mutant space of her past and the positive space that represents her future. There is a connection between the houses and the women characters in the novel. Once stolen from their homes, no one remembers them, and they become ‘nameless,’ and they have no place to go.

#### 4. The Third Woman

The novel *Üçüncü Kadın* [*The Third Woman*] (2006) is about French writer Pierre Loti, the two Turkish sisters, Zeyneb and Melek Hanoums, and a French journalist, Marie Léra, who performed active roles in the emancipation of women in the last phases of the Ottoman Empire. In *The Third Woman*<sup>58</sup> (2006), Turkish-American writer “Alev Croutier takes reality and turns it into a novel. In the novel, the three women characters try to show the world the difficulties of a segregated harem life.”<sup>59</sup> The harem becomes a site where the memories of Loti and two Turkish sisters clash; for the former, it represents a nostalgic longing for what is about to be lost, and for the latter, it is a place of confined womanhood.

From a general perspective, the novel speaks to those who know Pierre Loti, his works, and writers who wrote about Turkish women’s position in the Ottoman State at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore, from the beginning, the writer challenges the literary knowledge of her readers. As a gift to the readers, Croutier’s historical novel provides primary documents and information about the literary forgery covered in the novel. Journals, notes, and letters enrich the documentary characteristic of the novel, and the writer introduces little-known publications. The segregated lives of Ottoman women and the behind story are exposed through the massive research of the writer.

*The Third Woman* is about a literary mystery set in Istanbul and Paris at the outset of the twentieth century and deals with harem suffragettes known as Zeyneb and Melek Hanoums.<sup>60</sup> “Pierre Loti’s *Disenchanted* (Les Désenchantées) (1906), Grace Ellison’s *An Englishwoman in a Turkish Harem* (1915), Zeyneb Hanoum’s *A Turkish Woman’s European Impressions* (1913), and Marc Hélys’ *Le Secret des ‘Désenchantées’* (The Secret of the ‘Disenchanted’) (1923)”<sup>61</sup> were some of the other books written about those suffragettes during the rapidly changing political and social atmosphere of the Ottoman Empire and Europe. Croutier’s novel *The Third Woman* can be considered the last book in the series.

*The Third Woman* “contains extensive historical evidence of the lives of the two Turkish sisters, Zeyneb and Melek Hanoums...raised in segregated households in the last years of the

<sup>56</sup> Croutier, *Seven Houses*, p. 201.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, p. 226.

<sup>58</sup> For a detailed analysis of *The Third Woman* see: Fusun Coban Doskaya, “The Grand Superchérie: Alev Lytle Croutier’s *The Third Woman*”, Selçuk Üniversitesi 2007 UNESCO Mevlana yılında Uluslararası VII. Dil, Yazın ve Deyişbilim Sempozyumu (02-05 Mayıs 2007) Bildiri Kitabı, 2nd Vol., Eds. Durmuş Bulgur, Hatice Büyükkalaycı, Konya 2007, pp. 535-542.

<sup>59</sup> Fusun Coban Doskaya, “Grace Ellison: An Englishwoman in a Turkish Harem”, *Çağdaş Türkiye Tarihi Araştırmaları Dergisi*, V. 16, No. 33, 2017, p. 95.

<sup>60</sup> For a detailed analysis of Zeyneb and Melek Hanoums see: Fusun Coban Doskaya “Haremden Avrupa’ya Kaçan İki Osmanlı Kadını: Zeynep Hanım ve Melek Hanım”, [Two Ottoman Women Who Escaped from the Harem to Europe: Zeynep Hanoum and Melek Hanoum] *Geçmişten Günümüze Göç*, Ed. Osman Köse, Canik Belediyesi Kültür Yayınları, Samsun, 2017, pp. 1899 -1926.

<sup>61</sup> Coban Doskaya, “The Grand Superchérie”, p. 536.

Ottoman Empire.”<sup>62</sup> When they wrote their books, the Ottoman State, “the sick man of Europe,” “witnessed tumultuous changes... [and] saw its territories decrease and its population alter as it shifted into the modern nation-state that is today’s Turkish Republic.”<sup>63</sup>

Alev Lytle Croutier states that she came across the story while researching her first book, *Harem: The World Behind the Veil* (1989).

*I've been impassioned with this story for twenty years. It has been the most challenging book I've ever worked on, and I came close to giving up several times but somehow managed to push through. I'm glad I persisted because it has been enormously gratifying.... I was so drawn to it that I almost abandoned everything else I was writing in order to concentrate on it. It would not leave me and kept coming back, and I kept researching and coming across additional information that made it more and more mysterious and fascinating. It was like going through a gallery of mirrors without reaching an end.*<sup>64</sup>

The book appeals to an audience interested in Ottoman history, politics, literature, and gender studies. “It is about a true story. The more one knows about it, the less one knows.”<sup>65</sup> The reader dives “into an infinite sea of mirrors”<sup>66</sup> as soon as s/he finishes reading the novel. The story is told as a “confessional novel” with a first-person voice by five different narrators. The novel’s documentary characteristic is enriched using papers, journals, notes, and letters. There is a massive amount of study in the background of the book. “It is made speculative at the end of *The Third Woman* that the third woman helping Zeyneb and Melek Hanoums could very well be the British feminist and writer Grace Ellison.”<sup>67</sup>

In *The Third Woman*, Croutier uses the form of the confessional novel and documents a particular encounter that involves the famous Turcophile French novelist Pierre Loti and three Turkish women still living in early 20<sup>th</sup> century harems. The women recruit the novelist in real life and provide the material for his novel *The Disenchanted* (or *Desenchantees*). The story behind the creation of Loti’s novel is a great event in the history of literature that it is a fabulous literary forgery or “supercherie liteaire” in which a French woman, Marie Lera, pretends to be a Turkish woman taking advantage of concealing of her identity behind the veil provides not only a fictional theatre but also the narrative for *The Disenchanted*. The fallacy in this novel is that Loti comes to define the Turkish woman fictionalized in real life by a French woman adding yet an extra layer to the mutant space.

### Conclusion

Alev Lytle Croutier is considered a natural-born masterful storyteller. She believes every story has a way of being told, and every character has a voice. She enjoys using multiple narrators in her works, as there are seven narrators in *Seven Houses* and five in *The Third Woman*. She has a talent for interweaving history with fiction in a complex way. Her art history and filmmaking background affect her story-telling. The material of her works is drawn from her early and adolescent years in Turkey and she uses elements in literature from all over the World. She uses *One Thousand and One Nights*, Sanskrit myths, Persian fairy tales, and Turkish fables. Her works can be considered products of the period generally labeled as the “third wave feminist movement,” a period of political activism that wanted to expand women's social equality.

This study tries to show that neither the space in the adopted country nor the space in the native land but a phenomenological space somewhere in between, which can be coined as the mutant

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid, p. 536.

<sup>63</sup> Reina Lewis, *Rethinking Orientalism: Women, Travel and the Ottoman Harem*, I. B. Tauris, London 2004, p. 2.

<sup>64</sup> [http://www.toobeautiful.org/waywo\\_alevcrouitier.html](http://www.toobeautiful.org/waywo_alevcrouitier.html) (Date Accessed 24.10.2006)

<sup>65</sup> Croutier, *The Third Woman*, p. 2.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, p. 269.

<sup>67</sup> Coban Doskaya, “Grace Ellison”, p. 96.

space or the third space, is essential for ex-pat writers like Alev Lytle Croutier. There is a contemporary breed of American writers from the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America, such as Isabel Allende, Bharati Mukerjee, and Salman Rushdie, who inhabit this mutant space. Alev Croutier also constitutes an excellent example of this expatriate phenomenon being neither a part of literary production in the States nor Turkey. Although living in the milieu of Western literature and rhetoric since she left her native country, she has always drawn her subject from her roots, creating a world that only exists in her imagination, memory, and myth. It is the ultimate dilemma of an ex-patriot, belonging to both worlds and neither world at the same time.

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