

# In the mirror of Özdamar's Caravanserai

The story opens with a girl waiting to be born in a train in Eastern Anatolia sometime in the 1950s.

"First I saw the soldiers, I was standing there in my mother's belly between the bars of ice. I wanted to hold on and grabbed the ice and slipped and landed in the same spot..."

It ends with the same girl, now a young woman, leaving Istanbul on a train to become a migrant worker in Germany.

The book, *Life Is A Caravanserai - Has Two Doors - I Came In One - Went Out The Other* was written by Sevgi Özdamar, not in her own Turkish language, but in the foreign German language she learnt later. It nevertheless won prestigious literary prizes in Germany. Eight years after its first publication, it was published in England in a World Literature Series, promoted here by the Goethe Institute!

It would seem that, not only life, but also this literary work is a caravanserai. As its full title suggests, this is a book, such as most of us have never read before. A work of fiction which has very little to do with European novels -even the more experimental ones. It refers to itself as being like a carpet. It's laid out like a symbolic garden, not a road, even though it is continually talking about "black trains" and travelling.

In this garden the dead are more numerous than the living. Far more

since, theoretically at least, all the dead are there and they are at least as lively as the living. Maybe the whole story is addressed to them, maybe all its jokes are being whispered to make Death laugh. "Ah! There's no village, except death in this world of lies."

The main story and its offspring stories are all told by women, and in the center of each story is the human body, surrounded by Allah, by the stars, by God.

"There were stars outside. Grandmother said, "Everybody has a star, when your star slips, you die." I saw a very large star. It was alone, I said to myself, that is my star, that is me. The only voice I could hear on the dusty road was the voice of my taffeta dress."

The book chops up -as if they were parsley and coriander- most of the preconceived Western ideas about women and Islam. Its language is bawdy, full of appetites, Rabelaisian (particularly in its love of lists and repetitions) and insolent. Here Özdamar describes a visit to a Turkish bath.

"And so, after many years, I re-entered the planet of pussy. All the women were naked, walking around on platform shoes, above the wet marble, sitting over the water, washing.... When Aunt Sidika saw me naked, she burst into laughter, hid her breasts from me and closed her legs

and said., "Makarios". Makarios was the Greek Orthodox priest of Cyprus and he had a long black beard. What Aunt Sidika meant was that my little box had grown hair."

More important, the book is hilariously, poignantly and universally subversive. It upsets all hierarchies, and it does this in a strange way by displacing every habitual order. The narration works - often at night - like a poltergeist of genius, and its agent, of course, it's heroine, is the young and then adolescent girl.

The narration displaces and mixes up onions and politics, little "boxes" and paradise, prayers and obscenities, national Presidents and electric lamps, donkeys and men, disease and laughter, *raki* and lion's milk, kerosene and tears, birds and words, the dead and the alive.

"If you see a blind person, go over to him, stand near him, close one eye, that way you will feel close. If you meet someone in the street who can't speak, pick up a stone and put it on your tongue."

When I put this book down I was not quite the same person who had picked it up. I felt more modest and, without any shame, I felt naked. Because the storyteller has seen everything.

**John Berger** is a novelist, storyteller, poet, screenwriter and art critic. His latest book of essays, *The Shape of A Pocket*, was published last year.