



**‘Sameness’ in Disguise of ‘Difference’?**

**Gender and National Identity in Fatih Akin’s *Gegen die Wand* and *Auf der anderen Seite***

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## **‘Sameness’ in Disguise of ‘Difference’? Gender and National Identity in Fatih Akin’s *Gegen die Wand* and *Auf der anderen Seite***

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Leslie Adelson argues that the rhetoric of „in-betweenness“ is the most common argument in migrant literatures and in that, it is not yielding. In this essay, I will explore how Akin challenges the long held rhetoric of cultural discrepancy in bringing the two poles together in his *Gegen die Wand* (2004) and *Auf der anderen Seite* (2007). I will search how he both subverts and resettles the sexual and cultural difference by revealing how gender, like nationality, is performed. I argue that in *Gegen die Wand* the characters have flexible identities that dissolve the clear-cut stereotypical representations, however this well-meaning, universalist discourse he follows in *Auf der anderen Seite* rasps the „difference“ in order to highlight the sameness and thus Akin follows the reductivist discourse of nationalism.

### **1. Introduction**

Fatih Akin is often characterized in media through his national identity. Born in Germany to Turkish parents, he is described as a German-Turkish filmmaker. He is a „hyphenated identity“ as Hamid Naficy puts it and this hyphen challenges the identification of subjects and the category of the nation as a homogenizing structure (2001: 15). Concepts like „hybridity“, „multiculturalism“, „transculturality“ and „globalism“ have proved that the nation as a homogeneous, solid and fixed community is a misfigured ideal. Benedict Anderson’s famous idea of nations as „imagines communities“ discloses the nation as a construction that is preserved by territorializing an assumed common identity (1998). Migrants as „hyphenated“ identities reveal the ambivalence in nationalism’s discourse of homogeneity by blurring the grids of the nationalities as categories and thus they deterritorialize them. Migrants by deterritorializing the cultural identity offer contemplation on the construction of cultural differences as the space they occupy is neither side of the binary but the space in between. Thus, they perform both sides of the binary and become the personalization of difference.

The construction of nations and cultural difference is remarkably similar to the construction of sexual difference. Both are designed to „discipline“ and identify the

society's subjects by placing them on one side of binary and both essentialize the identities as authentic to the nature of the subjects. Foucault argues in *The History of Sexuality Vol. I* that the human body is the site of cultural inscription (1990). Genders are constructed to control the society's subjects through their sexuality and thus, as Judith Butler explains, „the category of sex“ is a „regulatory ideal“ (1993: 1). According to Foucault, „the notion of sex made it possible to group together in an artificial unity... and it enabled one to make use of this fictitious unity as a causal principle“ (1990: 154). Thus, Foucault's designation of sex also considers genders as „imagined communities“, just as the essentialization of the national belonging, genders organize subjects in binary groups and assume that they automatically group according to pre-given anatomical elements.

Early examples of Turkish migrant cinema in Germany depict the cultural conflict that first generation migrants face in a completely different cultural setting than their „home“. The films of Tevfik Baser: *40 Quadratmeter Deutschland* (1986) and *Abschied vom falschen Paradies* (1988) portray the cultural conflict that the guest workers suffered from: fundamentalist Turkish men victimizing Turkish women to protect them from the „moral corruption“ of the West. The Turkish stereotype depicted in those films traced back the essentialized cultural differences. A decade later, Fatih Akin depicted the migrant experience in a fresh way. Akin was born in 1973 in Hamburg to Turkish parents who were among the first party of guest workers in Germany and he belongs to the second generation immigrants. Having grown up in a very different setting than the previous generation, he depicts the cultural difference in his films, in a novel way. By bringing stereotypes with more dimensional characters together in his films, he offers contemplation on the ambivalence in the discourse of cultural difference.

In *Gegen die Wand* (2004) and *Auf der anderen Seite* (2008) the characters negotiate for a liminal stance, a „third space“ between the two polarized cultures (Rutherford 1990). Bhabha, in his interview with Jonathan Rutherford criticizes Multiculturalism for constructing judgments from a „normative“ and „universalist“ stance and introduces a new concept: „a third space“ (ibid. 209). Third space, according to Bhabha is a space between two cultures which offers a productive process of cultural hybridity (ibid. 211). Hybridity is a stage rather than a state, it is a „becoming“ in Deleuze and Guattari's terms, „the only way to get outside the dualisms“, a proximity, „a block of coexistence“ (2004: 305, 322). The third space offers an alternative to essentialized notions of

cultural difference. In this paper, I will explore how Akin deploys the cultural and sexual difference in *Gegen die Wand* and *Auf der anderen Seite*. In the first part, I will focus on *Gegen die Wand* to explore how Akin articulates the sexual and cultural difference through characters' intercultural intimacies and relations to their own materiality. In the second part, I will look into *Auf der anderen Seite* to see how the characters perform their identities and locate their positions in opposition to the identities of others' through political sub-plots.

## 2. *Gegen die Wand*

Akin's fourth feature film *Gegen die Wand* (2004) became the first German film to win the Golden Bear award at the Berlin International Film Festival in seventeen years since Reinhard Hauff's *Stammheim* (1986). The film was considered as a big success in Turkey as well as in Germany, as it depicted the Turkish migrant experience in Germany. As Akin states in an interview, the film was aimed at three major audiences, German, Turkish and German-Turkish diaspora and it was very well-received by the first two (Mitchell 2005). The latter community, having long been represented as stereotypes, had resentments over the issue of domestic violence attributed to the Turkish family in the film. Yet Akin had stated earlier in an interview that he decided to make films after getting dissatisfied with acting as the „stereotypical Turk“ in many German films (Burns 2007: 11).

*Gegen die Wand* opens with an orientalist shot of an orchestra playing a traditional Turkish song, sung by a traditionally dressed woman (Idil Üner) in front of a „kitschy postcard“ view of Istanbul (Mitchell 2005). Cahit (Birol Ünel), a German-Turk, having lost his beloved wife, lives in a trashy apartment in Hamburg and seeks comfort in drugs and alcohol. After getting thrown out of a bar for causing trouble, he attempts to kill himself by driving his car at full-speed against a wall. At the psychiatry clinic, he meets Sibel (Sibel Kekilli), another German-Turk who had also attempted to commit suicide, seeking release from her family's oppression. She offers Cahit to marry her out of formality in order to be liberated - sexually above all. Sibel cuts her wrists once again to persuade Cahit, who eventually agrees to marry her. They carry out the plan for six months when they discover that they have fallen in love. Cahit accidentally kills one of Sibel's one-night-stands and goes in jail as Sibel escapes to Istanbul from her family's

revenge plans to save their “honour”. She moves in with her cousin Selma (Meltem Cumbul), yet turned off by her dull life of financial ambitions: she moves out and gets raped, abused and fatally beaten on the streets of Istanbul after a series of self-destructive acts. After being released from the prison, Cahit comes to Istanbul to find Sibel and finds out that she has moved on and now lives with her boyfriend and has a daughter. They meet at a hotel and Cahit offers Sibel to come with him to his “fatherland” Mersin. Sibel does not show up at the bus station and Cahit leaves with an empty seat next to him.

Despite reservations from the Turkish community in Germany, Akin strives to break the conventional characterization of the Turkish stereotype from the very first moment of introduction of the male protagonist. Cahit, after collecting glass and bottles from the emptied venue’s floor, goes to the bar and orders alcohol while his stereotypical Turkish *Gästarbeiter* colleague Seref (Güven Kirac) orders coke. Placed in the same frame, the two Turkish-Germans: Cahit and Seref stand in contrast, with Seref, a chubby, moustached oriental type. Cahit is a loss-ridden character whose communication with others is limited to misunderstandings and a lack of empathy. His first sentence in the film is a twice repeated, barely audible “I am not an animal” in a heavily accented Turkish. Thus we become aware that of Cahit’s ineffective stance in the „Symbolic Order“ which, in Lacan’s terms is the core of the identity discourse. He is ineffective in using language in which, according to Felix Guattari, „the law, as the culmination of sexual, ethnic, and class struggles etc. crystallizes“ (1996: 144). After his suicide attempt, Cahit’s first encounter with the psychiatrist is equally ineffective. Over learning that Cahit is a Turkish name, the German doctor asks what it means. Cahit answers “I have no idea” and the doctor goes on to say “The names always have such a nice meaning in Turkey”. Cahit is ignorant towards his subjectivity, enough to never wonder what his own name means. He acts indifferent towards his Turkish identity as well, over learning an interesting fact about Turkish names from the doctor. In the end of this sequence, Cahit says “You are nuts” to the doctor, who clearly represents zero degree of insanity in the society, revealing Cahit’s misplacedness and estrangedness.

After leaving the doctor’s office Sibel, the female protagonist of the film runs after Cahit and after asking if he is Turkish, she proposes to him. Similar to Cahit’s first introduction to the audience, Sibel’s first appearance hints at her deviant position, which problematizes her identification as a stereotypical Turkish girl. Unlike the passive

victimized Turkish woman of the diasporic cinema tradition, Sibel makes her first entry with an act and an enunciation. She reverses the binary of active men/passive woman by running after Cahit and asking him to marry her as an enunciation of her will to power. Yet, in the next scene we see Sibel in the cafeteria with her family. Her father tells her how sinful it is to try to end one's own life as it is the greatest gift granted to her by God. She keeps her head down and listens to her father as he speaks as do her mother and brother. Sibel's family is another stereotypical patriarchal family where each member listens to the word of the father obediently. After the father leaves, her brother threatens Sibel as she risks her father's life by causing him so much pain. As both male members of the family leaves the café, Sibel holds her head up, lets her hair down and lights a cigarette as her mother follows her. Like the protagonist in Hark Bohm's *Yasemin* (1988) who transforms her clothing according to the German or Turkish environment she's entering, Sibel performs the same ritual. The repression coming from the mere presence of the males in the family causes solidarity between the female members.

The generational difference is not as distinct between the first and second generation Turks. Sibel's brother Yilmaz (Cem Akin) speaks to Sibel in German unlike his parents, which suggests that he has lived a different life than his parents growing up in Germany, yet he performs the „patriarchal tradition“ both verbally and actively. It is Sibel, the youngest female member of the family, who is defiant against the patriarchal system of her assumed culture that represses her desire. Yet Cahit, who is a peer of Yilmaz considering the location and political milieu he grew up to, is unfashionably indifferent to his Turkish identity. As Cahit and Seref goes to ask permission from Sibel's parents for their marriage, Yilmaz asks what Cahit had done to his Turkish as he speaks terrible Turkish. Cahit answers “I threw it away” with a smirk which immediately strikes Yilmaz as an offense. Cahit, with his statement becomes the embodiment of the migrant's fears of loss of identity – of the western threat against the family and tradition and thus Yilmaz is confronted with the becoming „metaphor“ of the idea of home, and the impossibility of imagining a homogenous community (Bhabha 2008: 200). Yilmaz and Cahit, being both second generation Turks in Germany share no common ground, values or tradition unlike what their supposed national identities suggest.

*Gegen die Wand* revolves around two marginalized figures who suffer the constraints and repressions of cultural norms, be it the modern Western society or the patriarchal

Turkish society. Cahit is lost in an allegorical Western nihilism after his wife's death, seeking comfort in drugs and alcohol yet suffering from a deep meaninglessness and dissolution of identity. Sibel, on the other hand, wants to release her desire, enjoy sexual freedom yet she is confronted by her brother's violent restrictions those are justified by the rules that govern his patriarchal culture. They are both agonized by discourses of sexual and cultural difference yet the suffering is not only on a spiritual level. Their bodies are hurt, cut, abjected, weighed down, transformed and healed in the process of time. Akin portrays that, as Foucault argues in "The History of Sexuality", body is not merely a site of cultural inscription but „a site of the operation and exercise of power“, as well (McLaren 2002: 81). Butler claims in "Bodies that Matter", „bodies live and die, eat and sleep, feel pain, pleasure, endure illness and violence and these "facts," one might skeptically proclaim, cannot be dismissed as mere construction" (1993: xi). The body, which turns a material excess in the discourse of difference is in the center of *Gegen die Wand*. The strong emphasis on the materiality of the bodies is enhanced by the materiality of the moving image with its special effects. As Martine Beugnet argues in her book "Cinema and Sensation", these effects emphasize the materiality of the bodies on screen by stimulating the viewer's senses (2007: 3). She argues that cinema has a „tactile quality“ with „variations in movement and in light, in colour and sound tonalities that make up the film's endlessly shifting compositions“ (ibid. 3). *Gegen die Wand* opens with the close up images of flashing spotlights with a heavy sound in the venue where Cahit works. Through the first half of the film, the hitting sound is remarkably enhanced from smashing doors to cracking bottles. The stimulating sound and lights create a sensual experience and an awareness of corporeality in the viewer. These qualities distinguish *Gegen die Wand* from a majority of „minor“ films with a certain will to political immediacy as they „run against the long-held belief that valuable experience and knowledge must necessarily come as a process of enlightenment that distances us from the unreliable input of sensual perception“, as Beugnet puts it (ibid. 6). Akin transgresses the Cartesian body/mind dualism by placing the bodies' materiality in the center of the discourse and adding body politics to his narrative on the politics of difference.

Bodily transfigurations of Cahit and Sibel throughout the film are essential to the narrative. Cahit wears a neck collar after his suicide attempt whereas Sibel has bandages on her wrists. After the marriage, Sibel gets a haircut, a navel piercing and a tattoo and

after Cahit goes to prison she cuts her wrists again and she „gets“ her face unrecognizable and abjectified after getting fatally beaten and stabbed in Istanbul. In the last quarter of the film, she has a different, very short haircut and wears glasses. Cahit also has shorter hair after his release from prison. The transformations on their bodies mirror the alteration that goes inside, they, in a way materialize their subjectivity. Sibel and Cahit, having both attempted to commit suicide, are taken to the psychiatry clinic to be treated. We see that the Oriental and Occidental methods to cure suicidal individuals and the prohibition of death are practiced differently by different institutions. The doctor at the clinic advises Cahit to change his life by making a quote from the rock group *The-Who* in English: “if you can’t change the world, change your world.” In this way, the doctor attempts to call forth a humanistic ideal, urging him to take the authority of his own life. Yet right after this advice, he suggests Cahit to go to Africa and help the people there as a Christian ideal of self-sacrifice to cure the purposelessness and decadence of the Western individual and save him from nihilism. The psychiatry clinic as an institution offers alternative Western methods of Humanism and Christianity to cure Cahit, whereas we see Sibel being lectured by her father. In Sibel’s case, the curing institution is family and religion. Her father condemns Sibel for attempting to take away the greatest gift granted to her by God and tells her to pray to God everyday that she did not die. He refers to the Muslim notion of „life as the greatest gift“ and the prohibition of suicide in Islam. After the father leaves, Yilmaz ironically threatens to kill Sibel if something happens to her father because the grief she causes to him. Both Cahit and Sibel are treated by different mechanisms of society or with Cahit performing the Western individual and Sibel the Eastern. Though through different means and different cultures, the institutions operate in the same way to foster and „administer“ life.

Suicide, according to Foucault is an absolute defiance of the power exerted over the body (1990: 140). According to him suicide, „testified to the individual and private right to die, at the borders and in the interstices of power that was exercised over life“ (ibid.). Sibel attempts to commit suicide four times throughout the film, both directly and indirectly. Cahit, seeing the horizontal stitches on her wrists, tells her that she should cut them vertically next time, if she wants to die. Suicide is what brings Cahit and Sibel together in the first place. She explains the reason for her suicide attempt to Cahit later in the clinic first asking him to “feel her breasts” to reveal her desire, then she asks him



to feel her nose, the crack on her nose that her brother caused after seeing her hand in hand with a “stranger”. With repression being „the fundamental link between power, knowledge and sexuality“ as Foucault explains, Sibel expresses her frustration over the repression of desire by her patriarchal family not only as a discourse but by making Cahit touch her body and feel the material damage rather than the spiritual one. She defies the power exerted on her body by attempting to commit suicide. Later as she explains to Cahit, “I want to live, I want to dance, I want to fuck... and not with just one guy”, we become aware that she does not actually wish to die. Choking on her repressed desire, she performs acts of self-mutilation. Both Cahit and Sibel tend to cause self-harmful acts: Cahit with drugs and alcohol whereas Sibel by cutting her body. John Fiske argues that the body is „the site of struggle between power and evasion, discipline and liberation“ and „though the body may appear to be where we are most individual, it is also the material form of the body politic, the class body, the racial body and the body of gender“ (1990: 65-66). Sibel, by cutting her body, resists the body politics that she is subjected to, exerted to her by the institution of the patriarchal family. She renounces her body’s position as an object, a site of exertion of power. By exercising self-mutilation, she becomes the subject on her own body, to gain back control over her selfness. In this way, she transgresses the body politics by cutting and abjectifying the female body that is supposed to be „clean“, „healthy“ and by moving away from the body politics, she comes closer to death, the ultimate renunciation of power, „the moment that escapes it, death becomes the most secret aspect of existence, the most private“, as Foucault argues (1990: 138). Her last suicide attempt is after a series of self-harming behaviour in Istanbul, after smoking opium and fainting and having been raped at a bar. She gets verbally insulted by a group of men in a dark quirky alleyway and she returns the insult, appealing to the most “sensitive” spot of the patriarchal Turkish mind by insulting the mother. By doing this, she disavows the mother/whore binary and the “honour” discourse. This sequence is her ultimate outbreak against the repression and gender politics exerted to her material body and she counter-attacks the discourse by miming the patriarchal discourse, only to get violently beaten and stabbed by one of the men after calling him a “homo”. The attacker immediately regrets having committed a horrific crime and shouts at her “is that what you wanted?” By not keeping quiet, returning the insult and provoking the masculine sensitivities of the Turkish men, Sibel parodies the patriarchal discourse and performs it by adopting the masculine insulting language, turning the self-harm into a spectacle revealing the ambiguity of gender

relations that confine her to subordination. Yet, she survives the attack and in the next sequence, we see her years later, with short hair and glasses, looking serenely outside the window as a mother of a young girl. She has transformed and settled down in Istanbul into a „regulated“ family life. Favazza distinguishes suicide and self-mutilation and self-harmful behaviour claiming that self-mutilation is „anti-suicide“ since it is „a way of coming back to life“ (1996: 270). With reference to theological practices of self-mutilation, he argues that self-harm is an act to acquire wisdom and „heal oneself and others“ (ibid. 2). Sibel’s actual transformation commences after this ultimate act of self-harm as a will to release her body from the patriarchal control and power. Next time we see her, she looks wiser, serene, calm and „docile“ in this new system that she has adapted to (Foucault 1991: 135). The series of self-harmful acts that she has committed have altered her relation to her corporeality and her identity.

Akin portrays his characters as oppositions and thus offers to reveal how identities are performed in a comparative way. Cahit, Seref and Yilmaz are three different representations of a Turkish-German immigrant. Unlike Cahit and Yilmaz, Seref has not been brought up in Germany, he cannot speak German and has made a fake marriage arrangement to be able to live and work in Germany. With the language barrier, he is a stereotypical Turkish *Gästarbeiter*, a „seventh man“ as John Berger names, a silent, mute figure who either rejects or is rejected to integrate to the host society (1989). With the actor playing him being a famous actor of comedy characters in New Turkish Cinema, Seref is a light-hearted, depoliticized version of the stereotypical Turk in Germany. Akin breaks a convention by depoliticizing the minor identity, the Turkish immigrant, by representing not the marginal but the stereotype as a laughable figure. He offers a new layer to the two dimensional stereotype by making him a parody of himself. At the wedding ceremony of Sibel and Cahit, Selma asks if Seref speaks German and he mocks the German language in Turkish. Under Selma’s arrogant smirk, Seref becomes a likeable figure which is an unlikely representation of the stereotype in the canonical films on Turkish immigrants in Germany. Yilmaz, on one hand, a second generation Turk having been brought up in Germany, speaks accentless German and Turkish yet retains a „molar“ identity as Deleuze terms it, which allows few intervention to a pre-established subjectivity of clear-cut definitions and a self that is defined on his separation from the „Other“. Cahit, on the other hand, is also a second generation immigrant who is an Occidental representation of the Western identity, that is, a re-

application of Said's famous concept of Orientalism to the West, „Orientalism's reverse other“ as Tamara Wagner puts it (2006: 147). In that, he is devoid of the traditionalist values affiliated to the opposite Oriental identity. He is „German“ enough to sneer at the ex-immigrant Turkish taxi driver from Munich, adopting the German prejudice against Bavarians.

Another significant opposition is constructed between the characters of Maren and Selma, a German and a Turkish woman, both of whom Sibel admires as role models in the beginning. Maren is a German woman who leads a marginalized life close to the life of Cahit's. She is single, yet has a casual relationship with Cahit and she owns a hairdresser's salon. She is independent both economically and sexually. When Sibel starts to work in her hairdresser's salon, she quickly starts to imitate Maren's looks with her hair and make-up and tells Cahit that she is “the coolest woman”. Maren is the embodiment of what Sibel has always wanted to acquire: the freedom to choose a partner and an economical independence. In the 2006 research on Turkish women living in Germany held by TISK [Turkish Confederation of Employer Associations], the majority of Turkish women who joined the survey stated an urgent need for a change in the politics of sexuality (2006). According to this aim, TISK asks if German women could set a model for the Turkish women. They come to four generalized notions about German women, two of which Turkish women see as positive and wish to adapt to their own lives. According to this, Turkish women admire German women's freedom in choosing a partner and determining their own lives. Whereas they also state that German women have loose family ties and they have double responsibility in the family and in the work place. Maren clearly presents an idol for Sibel in her quest for sexual liberty, as a German woman.

Selma, on the other hand, is also a role model for Sibel during the first half of the film as she is divorced, she also has sexual and economical liberty. She works as an assistant manager at a hotel in Istanbul where she aims to become the manager one day. She is the stereotypical workaholic: a cosmopolitan woman with financial ambitions who represents quite a distinct model than the Turkish woman figure in Germany. She disapproves of Sibel's choice of Cahit as a husband, finding him “too punk” for her. She is quite distinct from the essentialist notion of Turkish woman, yet, a stereotypical „modern“ Turkish woman of Westernization ideals at the same time. After fleeing to Istanbul from her parents, Selma quickly loses her place as an idol for Sibel as she is

repulsed by Selma's financial ambitions. What is significant in the comparison between Maren and Selma is, though both women are financially self-sufficient and independent, Maren is represented more as a sexually independent woman, that is, her liberty is more sexually charged whereas Selma has no sexual life. The economical liberty in two distinct cultures has different outcomes in the individuals. Selma mimes the Western model in an asexualized way.

Luce Irigaray in her seminal book "This Sex Which is not one" argues that language is a male centered construction that defines female sexuality on „masculine parameters“ (1996: 23). Therefore women mimic the roles assigned to them by male codifications intentionally to „locate the place of [her] exploitation by discourse“ (ibid. 76). She explains that mimesis is „to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it“ (ibid.). Throughout the film, Sibel mimes hysterically the role assigned to her by her traditionalist cultural discourse, oscillating between the assumed „female“ and „male“ positions in order to negotiate her identity and defend it from constant subordination. She performs the feminine role according to the „heterosexual imperative“ of the Western discourse of sexual difference (Butler 2006: 2). However, failing to mime the feminine role in the Western discourse under fundamentalist repression coming from her family, she plays out the masculine role assigned to women in the traditionalist discourse. After moving to Istanbul, she gets a masculine haircut and starts wearing baggy trousers, retires from the attributed feminine role in search of a new identity. She performs the wising up process clearly forsaking the female sexuality and adopting the masculine „a-sexuality“. Gönül Dönmez-Colin defines the female stereotypes in the Turkish Cinema Tradition as „a-sexual“ (2008: 143). According to her, in the Turkish films of 1960s and 1970s „sexuality was reserved for “bad women”“ (ibid.). The female protagonists and stars had to adopt a masculine look and perform a detachment from sexuality in order to look wise and admirable, traces of which still remain in the essentialized notion of „good woman“ in Turkey. Wisdom and rationality being reserved to males in the binary of genders in both cultures, women mimed masculinity to gain credibility and power. In the last part of the film, we see that Sibel has transformed into a rational, wise young mother. She unsettles and resettles the cultural and sexual binaries by performing both sides of the opposition, constantly negotiating the subordinate position assigned to her. Yet in the end she makes the decisions in her own life by choosing to stay.

### 3. *Auf der anderen Seite*

Akin's fifth feature film *Auf der anderen Seite* opens with a familiar scene that Thomas Elsaesser calls as „Akin's signature situation: a man in a car, going somewhere“ (2008). In the first part of the film titled *Yeter's Death*, we meet the man driving the car: Nejat (Baki Davrak), one of the six main characters. Nejat is a second generation Turk living in Germany, working as a professor of German literature at a Hamburg university. His father Ali (Tuncel Kurtiz) is a retired *Gastarbeiter* in his sixties, living alone after two marriages in his flat in Bremen. He meets Yeter (Nursel Köse), a prostitute of Kurdish descent, who works at a brothel in order to finance the university education of her daughter in Istanbul. Ali asks Yeter to quit her infamous job and marry him. Yeter, having been threatened by Muslim fundamentalists, accepts his offer and moves in with Ali, no sooner than which he accidentally kills her with a single blow after a quarrel about her infidelity. Nejat denies his father for having killed Yeter and goes to Istanbul to find her daughter and pay for her education. In the second part of the film titled „Lotte's Death“, we meet Yeter's daughter Ayten (Nurgül Yesilcay), a political activist in her late twenties who runs off to Germany with a fake passport after a police snatch on May Day demonstrations. Hungry and broke, she meets Lotte (Patrycia Ziolkowska), a German student at the university where Nejat teaches, who agrees to shelter her at the house that she shares with her mother Susanne (Hanna Schygulla), despite her resentments. Their unanticipated friendship quickly turns into a love relationship under Susanne's disapproval and Lotte joins Ayten on her quest to find her mother, however Ayten gets caught as an illegal immigrant and her plea for asylum gets rejected. Lotte follows Ayten to Istanbul where she accidentally gets killed by street children while she was trying to help Ayten and get her out of prison. In the last part of the film, „On the Other Side“ which is a direct translation of the German title of the film, Susanne flies to Istanbul and moves in with Nejat who manages a German-Turkish bookshop in Istanbul, where he had come to find Yeter's daughter in the first place. Susanne decides to follow her daughter's cause and helps release Ayten out of prison. Moved by Susanne's maternal love, Nejat decides to go to the Black Sea coast of Turkey to find his father Ali, who spends his time fishing in his fatherland after being sent out to Turkey from the German prison. We turn back to the first scene of the film, this time knowing the man driving the car and where he is driving to. The film ends with Nejat's wait for his father's return from the sea.

The film's multi-locational and multi-charactered subplots which are joined by a non-linear structure brought to critics' minds other films like Krzysztof Kieslowski's *Three Colours Trilogy* (1993, 1994), Paul Haggis' *Crash* (2004) and Alejandro Gonzalez Innaritu's *Babel* (2006) (Keough 2008; Brunette 2007). What these films have in common is not just their complex structure, coincidences and missed chances but also their political ambitions. *Auf der anderen Seite* in that sense shares the characteristics of Deleuze and Guattari's „minor literature“: „the deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual to a political immediacy and the collective assemblage of enunciation“ (1986: 18). The film overtly strives to carry a political immediacy and make a collective statement with the universality of the bonds (mother-daughter and father-son relationship) that tie its characters. In *Fatih Akin – Tagebuch eines Filmreisenden* (2007) – a documentary about the „making of“ story of *Auf der anderen Seite* made by Akin's wife Monique Akin – Akin explains the pressure of the expectations for his new film after the success of *Gegen die Wand*. In the interview, he states that he wanted to make a film which would make a good follow-up to *Gegen die Wand*, and he goes on to say “by good, I mean more political and more serious”. With this ambition in his mind, Akin centers his story on minor identities: a first and a second generation Turkish immigrant living in Germany: a Kurdish prostitute living in Germany and her rebel daughter in Turkey and a German mother and daughter who cross borders to help a Kurdish rebel without knowing much about her or of her cause. Nations, borders and cultural differences are essential to Akin's story once again, in that, he sets forth with the ideal to undo the politics of difference in creating unificatory narratives of universal values such as love, death, maternal love and an oedipal father and son relationship. He shifts the positions of the subjects of essentialized binaries like woman/man, eastern/western. Nevertheless, the pieces go back to their essentialized position again only to undisturb the territorialities and identities established on a politics of difference and to naturalize the complementary position of the binaries. The minor identities of *Auf der anderen Seite*, unlike Cahit and Sibel in *Gegen die Wand*, are driven to leave their liminal positions to be able to occupy a molar, predefined existence.

The first part “Yeter's Death” begins with Ali walking in the streets of Bremen on a sunny May Day among the crowds demonstrating peacefully. He goes to a brothel where he bargains with Yeter in German and as she puts on Turkish music, he asks if

Yeter is Turkish. Yeter first ignores the question, then, answers to him in Turkish and Ali says that he is embarrassed. This moment maps the oedipal shame into the Turkish fundamentalist discourse of sexual difference. Ali experiences a moment of oedipal guilt, ashamed to desire a Turkish woman who is associated with maternal virtue and honour. Akin declares his aim to make a shift in the representation of the migrant woman by casting Nursel Köse as Yeter. He says in the *Tagebuch eines Filmreisenden* referring to Nursel Köse's role in *Anam*, that the Turkish woman with a scarf on her hair has been a cliché and that she was "too sexy" to play this long-established role. Akin thus thwarts the allocation of the Turkish female migrant figure into an asexual maternal figure by the contrast in Yeter's looks in the tram and in the brothel. He dissolves the mother/whore binary by mapping Yeter into both sides of the assumed opposition.

After Yeter agrees to marry Ali, his neurotic guilt continues to haunt him and in a drunken moment he projects his shame to his son, Nejat. He accuses Yeter of sleeping with Nejat, her „stepson“ and overcome with his own guilt in disguise of infidelity, he hits Yeter who dies immediately having hit her head. This accidental, sudden death is also a „signature situation“ of Akin, yet it does not come as a surprise since the title announces the tragedy from the beginning. Akin's characters, in this way, become tragic heroes who are doomed to their destruction for committing a vice. Yet the vice is reserved for the Oriental subject as he occupies the nature part of the nature/culture binary and however he negotiates his identity to become „cultivated“ as the Western, there is a barbarian residing in him. Akin thus reterritorializes the dominant discourse by resettling the subjects into the binary divisions.

Nejat, brought up by his father alone since he was six years old, displays the „third space“, in Bhabha's terms (Rutherford 1990). Being a second generation Turk, he has a liminal identity that dissolves the molar Turkish/German identities. He is so in peace with his background that at times, it seems that he was not even meant to be a character. He is in a constant state of flux: in trains, buses, trams and transit places such as airports, gas stations. Nejat teaches German literature at a university in Hamburg which designates his novel stance as an immigrant of Turkish descent. He is surrounded by books in his apartment and culturally invested enough to teach Goethe to German native speakers at a German university. He deterritorializes the German language and challenges the identification of the Turkish migrant as powerless over language. He is the personalization of the counter-arguments about the extinction of fixed assumptions

and judgments such as „the migrant is divided from other migrants and from indigenous workers by a language barrier“ and „the migrant is always liable to victimization“ (Berger 1989: 146). In this sense, he is the quintessence of the well-integrated migrant.

Akin also displays a stark contrast between Nejat and Ali: the second and first generation migrant by showing the difference in the organization of their masculinities. After the father and son spend a day together in Bremen, Ali asks Nejat “who are you screwing at the moment?” Nejat scolds his father for his lewdness and says to him: “gentlemen don’t ask such questions, dad”. Nejat is thus, a cultivated immigrant detached from the excess masculinity of his cultural antecedents. Ali defines his role as a single parent saying that he has been both “a mother and a father to the boy”. Nejat is thus freed from the oedipal triangle that imposes the sexual difference as the first knowledge to acquire. Yet, Akin reterritorializes the oedipal structure with Yeter’s repositioning as a mother figure for Nejat. As Yeter and Nejat sit in the garden of Ali’s house, Yeter tells Nejat that she prostitutes herself to finance her daughter’s education, who thinks that her mother works at a shoe shop. Nejat is immediately moved by the maternal altruism of Yeter and devotes himself to find her daughter after her death and flies to Istanbul with an oedipal love for her, undertakes her maternal responsibility and starts his journey to trace Ayten.

The second part of the film, “Lotte’s Death” centers around the homosexual love between Lotte, a German university student and Ayten, Yeter’s activist and rebellious daughter. Akin presents another remarkable contrast between Turkey and Germany in the beginning of the second part. The second part starts the same day as the first part: with May Day demonstrations. However, this time the location is Istanbul, Turkey and unlike the peaceful celebrations in Bremen, Istanbul’s demonstrations are chaotic and tense. The streets are packed with protestors demanding rights for Kurds. Istanbul, which is often presented as the bridge between East and West is thus introduced as a site of conflict. And in the center of the conflicts we see a masked protestor who steals a gun that falls from a policeman in disguise and runs away. We later learn that the masked protestor is Ayten, Yeter’s daughter and that she is a member of an illegal political organization. She hides the gun on the rooftop of an apartment building yet her telephone is captured by the police and this causes many of the group members’ arrests. We see the members shouting out their names as they are being taken from their flat. This scene refers to the death cases in detention in Turkey as a crucial political issue.



Akin's and producer Andreas Thiel's overemphasis on the political aspect of the *Auf der anderen Seite* tangles from the second part of the film and focuses on the Kurdish-Turkish conflict. However, Akin abstains from naming the issue directly and instead prefers to hint at it. Turkey has been notorious for its record of human rights violations, in particular the rights of ethnic minorities. Kurds, being the largest minority with the 17.8% of the total population in Turkey stand the most violated among these groups (Sirkeci 2006: 118). Turkey, since being founded as a nation had the „Westernization“ ideal and therefore the civil and state policy has carried out a project of „a civilizing mission on a supposedly backward and traditional Anatolian society enslaved by the retrograde influence of Islam“ (Zeydanlioglu 2008: 160). Kurds, being considered as „backward, violent, tribal and criminal“ could not be assimilated as Turks, with a distinct cultural difference and they have long been stigmatized and victimized in the assimilation project (ibid. 161). Many of human rights violation cases that resulted against Turkey in the European Court of Human Rights „concern the security police's treatment of the PKK“, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Matlary 2002: 127). Akin first covertly refers to the Kurdish-Turkish conflict in the first part of the film when Yeter says that her husband was killed in Maras in 1978. Akin hints at the massacre of Alevi Kurds by nationalist Sunnis in 1978 and thus implies Yeter's Kurdish identity. Yet she does not acknowledge this neither when Ali asks her if she is Turkish, nor when the fundamentalists impose a Turkish and Muslim identity on her. Thus her Kurdish identity remains implied yet suppressed.

Her daughter Ayten does not acknowledge her Kurdish identity either when Lotte asks her where she is from. She answers “I am from Istanbul” which leaves her national identity as ambiguous. However, she is a member of a Kurdish nationalist and separatist movement. This is implied with the protests in the May Day demonstrations scene, yet remains unclear to the spectator as it is not acknowledged throughout the film. As her fellow organization members get arrested, she flees to Germany with a fake name and passport where she is greeted by a member of her organization. The fellow member gives her place to stay and some money which she fails to pay back the other day and this causes a dispute between them. She leaves the house and the group with a growing disillusionment with the organization. After Lotte explains her situation to Susanne, she asks Ayten what her political cause is. She says that she is fighting for “100% human rights and 100% freedom of speech and 100% social education”. Once again Akin holds

back from acknowledging the Turkish-Kurdish conflict and presents the issue of human rights in Turkey in a socio-economic framework. He refrains from naming the ethno-cultural subordination as the core of the organization's cause which is problematic in failing to acknowledge the colonial mentality behind the reality of the conflict. As Bhabha puts it: „cultural difference ...is not the acquisition or accumulation of additional cultural knowledge; it is the momentous, if momentary, extinction of the recognizable object of culture in the disturbed artifice of its signification“ (2008: 184). Akin presents his film with a political cadence yet his political enunciation is problematic since he rasps the „difference“ in his well-meaning quest to enhance the sameness. Yet what is paradoxical is that this assertion of “sameness” is also the core of the nationalist assimilation discourse. Thus the cultural difference of the Kurd remains a taboo and disappears in the Turkish side of the Turkish/German binary.

Akin, in the documentary film states that Nurgul Yesilcay, the actress who plays the part of Ayten in *Auf der anderen Seite*. Being a famous figure in Turkey, it was a challenge for her to play a homosexual activist. Akin highlights the risk in the reception of homosexuality in Turkey yet Nurgul Yesilcay states that she had concerns about playing a PKK „militant“ rather than playing a lesbian. The censorship lies in the heart of colonialism and nationalism as a concept as Bhabha notes: „There is a conspiracy of silence in the colonial truth“ (2008: 178). The Kurdish/Turkish conflict remains a taboo in the public discourse as well as cinema as Kevin Robins and Asu Aksoy put it: „Turkish censorship spoke the language of nationalism“ (2000: 212). According to Robins and Aksoy, silence is one of the two mechanisms that hold the nation together as a group (ibid. 205). They argue that „the group comes into existence as a collection of people who are resolved to stay silent about the same thing – to protect that thing, and to protect themselves from it“ (ibid.). Akin explains in the Spiegel interview that he strives not to portray „Turkey in a bad light... like Orhan Pamuk did“ (Beier 2007). He refers to Orhan Pamuk's stigmatization in Turkish public discourse and media for commenting on the massacre of the Kurds in Turkey and the Armenian genocide to a Swiss newspaper. He thus speaks „the language of nationalism“ by censoring the Kurdish identity of his protagonist.

Fatih Akin sets forth with a political message that there is sameness in difference, that conflicts can be worked by dialogue, yet by conditioning the conflict into this discourse, he disavows the cultural difference and follows the nationalist reductivist process.

Slavoj Žižek in his article "Passion in the Era of Decaffeinated Belief" argues that today's liberal multiculturalism seeks out to create a political-correctness by dispelling the „malignant“ from the „other“ (2005). He argues,

On today's market, we find a whole series of products deprived of their malignant property: coffee without caffeine, cream without fat, beer without alcohol... And the list goes on: what about virtual sex as sex without sex, the Colin Powell doctrine of warfare with no casualties (on our side, of course) as warfare without warfare, the contemporary redefinition of politics as the art of expert administration as politics without politics, up to today's tolerant liberal multiculturalism as an experience of Other deprived of its Otherness (ibid.)

Akin's political ideal thus deploys the „other“ to his story without its „otherness“; Ayten is a militant but an „acceptable“ one, she wants human rights but not rights for the Kurds, she is a PKK member but without ever acknowledging it. Akin portrays the political milieu of today's Turkey of „human rights violations“ to the European spectator, yet first he conditions it for the Turkish eye. By this re-conditioning and subtracting the Kurdish identity, he acknowledges the colonial „silence“ and nationalist homogeneity.

Lotte is again a sufferer of Occidental purposelessness that is often linked to the „consumed“ Western humanism (Carroll 1993). She is quickly drawn to Ayten's passionate determination and her needy circumstances. Once again two opposites fit perfectly together: the Westerner that has lost cause and the Easterner that depends on her. Yet she is also driven to the Easterner's troublesome world without even knowing what cause she is fighting for. Ayten and Lotte's mutual need for each other turns into a lesbian love relationship. This is a new area of representation for Fatih Akin, since, though he had always sketched „institutionalized“ and marginalized figures in his films, a homosexual love is new to his troubled subjects. With the subversion of gender roles, Akin also subverts the canonical issue of the victimized Eastern woman and offers a third space. Ayten's victimization roots from the repression coming from her culture, yet this time the oppressor is not the male members of her family but the Turkish state as the „father figure“ of a patrimonial regime (Kaplan 2006: 14). Ayten performs the masculine in her relationship with Lotte. She is tough and masculine in her gestures, attitude and clothing. She is verbally aggressive to Susanne in her argument which transgresses the roles attributed to the category of woman. By deliberately not assuming these roles and parodying the masculine, she does not directly eschew the binary. As Judith Butler argues in *Gender Trouble*, the role she plays „is not the figure of the

androgynous nor some hypothetical third gender, nor is it a transcendence of the binary.” (2006: 173). As she puts it her parody is an „internal subversion in which the binary is both presupposed and proliferated to the point where it makes no sense“ (ibid.). In her relationship with Lotte, the roles in the binary are interchangeable, in that, Ayten plays the masculine, yet she is in no way superior in the hierarchical structure of gender roles. Instead, Akin reverses the canonical structure of the subordinate victimized Turkish woman saved by the Western man by blurring the constructed gender roles. Akin by reconfiguring the construction of gender roles in their relationship with the dualism of cultural roles, reveals their ambivalent character and thus subverts the presuppositions that map the gender binary to the cultural binary.

When Ayten is expelled to Istanbul where she is put in the prison for political convicts, Lotte crosses to „the other side“ following her. Lotte becomes hysterical in her quest to release her lover from prison. She does not know the political cause of Ayten but believes that the Western humanism and capital can save her from the Eastern institutions“ barbarism. She gets frustrated as she learns that those values do not apply on the other side. She hires a solicitor in Turkey, with whom she can communicate only through a translator. Yet there is no translation for the “law” of the „other“ to the Western rationality, she asks “What kind of a law is this?” frantically. The solicitor answers “This is Turkey”: different rules and values apply in this side of the world. Once again the boundaries are set: reason cannot solve problems there but emotion does, as the solicitor agrees to find a way to help Lotte after seeing her tears. Death is also there where the reason cannot reach, and in this way Lotte loses her life in an orientalist setting, where children play with guns in an eastern „any-space-whatever“: „an empty or a disconnected space“ where „individuals become depersonalized“ (Deleuze 2005: 267; Bell 1997). The children are depersonalized in the slum setting of Istanbul – which becomes a cinematic signifier of the Eastern irrationality and accidentality.

Akin, in the last part of the film, reconstructs difference, yet through empathy and an ethical common ground seeks a „third space“ of universalized familial affection. Susanne comes to Istanbul and rents a room in Nejat“s house where Lotte stayed in her last days. Nejat, while looking for a girl who has lost her mother finds a woman who has lost her daughter and he is once again moved with maternal love“s „lack“ of object in a self reflective way – maternal love being a lack of object for him. Nejat and

Susanne watch the Muslim men going to the mosque on the first day of *Bayram*, a Muslim religious holiday, through the window. Susanne asks the significance of this day and Nejat explains the myth of sacrifice in Quran with the story of Abraham: seeing that Abraham is ready to sacrifice his son for him, Allah forgives him and sends him a sheep to sacrifice, instead of his son. Susanne is surprised over hearing that it is a different versioning of the same story in the New Testament. Nejat saves himself from the oedipal triangle by rediscovering his love for his father. The affection for the familial ties is thus universalized and Akin concludes his story by deploying a quiet optimism. Both Nejat and Ayten restart their lives by looking at the sea which is a “third space” in between, Ayten watches the Bosphorus on the ferry after her release from prison – the sea which divides and connects Europe to Asia, her new life to the old. Akin makes a political statement by depoliticizing his discourse by choosing to portray the government officers more agreeable than the Kurdish militants. He thus repeats nationalism’s imperative of homogeneity and relocates the liminal subjects to essentialized identities. The „third space“ is, for Akin a place of transit where his subjects only pass through yet cannot occupy.

#### 4. Conclusion

In *Gegen die Wand*, Sibel and Cahit, both second generation Turks in Germany come from different micro communities yet both deviate from their communities. They are minor subjectivities in that they negotiate to blur the grids of their designed identities. Sibel comes from a traditional paternalistic Turkish family and Cahit is a decadent German of Turkish descent – the pattern of the victimized Turkish woman and the purposeless Westerner to save her is repeated though with a major difference in its configuration which renders the national identities dysfunctional. The protagonists constantly struggle against the objectification process and are repeatedly reterritorialized into the positioning of the „other“. Akin portrays how cultural and sexual differences are constructed in order to render the subjects easily identifiable and controllable.

In *Auf der anderen Seite*, Akin constructs a more complex and multi layered story of six characters. Once again Akin’s characters negotiate their identities but this time Akin blurs the differences in order to create a universalist discourse. The characters cross to

the other side of the binaries thus reveal the performativity of the categories yet Akin, through values and norms such as maternal love and familial bonds which he claims to be universal, tries to bond the two cultures. He thus omits the multiplicities inside the fixed binary categories and portrays a complementary and reductionist framework in the expense of differences. Rather than creating a „third space“, he reconfigures the differences that come together „too easily“ as Elsaesser puts it: where the subordinate is happy to be subordinate and ready to deny the differences and the superior is ready to empathize (2008).

Both *Gegen die Wand* and *Auf der anderen Seite* explore the cultural and sexual difference, offering a comparative portrayal of German and Turkish identities: both deviants and stereotypes and thus reveal the ambivalent process of their construction. In *Gegen die Wand*, Akin portrays the migrants as hybrid identities negotiating for a third space, thus offering a sidestep from the binary system that confines the subjects to fixed identities. Whereas, in *Auf der anderen Seite*, he traces back the multiplicities that make up the hybrid identities and suggests an even more reductive model than the binary by a universalist framework, showing the two sides of the binary as a complementary and harmonious union. He thus ignores multiculturalism's failure in overcoming xenophobia and racism by removing the otherness from the „Other“ and repeating nationalism's discourse of homogeneity. Akin portrays a utopic vision of multiculturalism, which in reality remains problematic.

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### **Biodata**

In 2009, Gözde Naiboğlu completed her MA in Film Studies at Anglia Ruskin University in Cambridge with a first class dissertation. Shortly afterwards, she embarked on a PhD project at the University of Manchester.



**Keywords**

German migrant cinema, Fatih Akin, *Gegen die Wand*, *Auf der anderen Seite*, gender, national identity