

# AYLA KUTLU AND BEJAN MATUR: TWO PIONEERING MEDITERRANEAN TURKISH WOMEN WRITERS

Roberta Micallef\*

## *Abstract*

In this article, I examine Ayla Kutlu's "Sen de Gitme Triyandafilis" (Please Don't Go: Triyandafilis), a novella included in the collection of the same title and selected poems by Bejan Matur to gain a deeper understanding of what the label 'Mediterranean' signifies regarding the authors and their work, I apply tools afforded by Area Studies, and Comparative Literature to argue that these two authors provide readers with a deeper understanding of Mediterranean identities and literature. Shaped by the Mediterranean region, Matur and Kutlu write about overlapping themes from different vantage points and think about the past in distinct ways. Kutlu, a generation older and a proud daughter of the Turkish nation-state although of Chechen origins and Matur, a local Kurdish woman, are separated by age, ethnicity, religion, and mother tongue; however, their texts are united in their exploration of women's experiences of the Mediterranean. Examining the texts in their source language with conceptual frames and close reading allows the reader to see that despite Kutlu and Matur's vastly different relationships to the Turkish state, both authors yearn for the days when diverse communities could live side by side on the Turkish Mediterranean coast, in a cosmopolitan milieu.

*Keywords:* Ayla Kutlu, Bejan Matur, Turkey, women writers, novellas

Following extensive debate, the First Geography Congress in Türkiye in 1941, ostensibly based on similarities in climate and geographic characteristics, delineated the nation into seven regions,<sup>1</sup> leaving pioneering and much-celebrated Turkish authors Ayla Kutlu and Bejan Matur's hometowns Antakya and Maraş in the "Mediterranean region." Writing from what is today the Mediterranean periphery, narrating the stories of margin-

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\* Boston University.

1 Yılmaz Çolak, "Language Policy and Official Ideology in Early Republican Turkey." *Middle Eastern Studies* 40, no. 6 (2004), 80-81.

alized people, women, migrants, and minorities from the southern Turkish coast, Kutlu and Matur's work enriches the meaning of the concept of "Mediterranean" while contributing to the conversation about Mediterranean modernism and cosmopolitanism.

In this essay, I will examine Kutlu's "Sen de Gitme Triyandafilis"<sup>2</sup> (*Please Don't Go: Triyandafilis*), a novella included in the collection of the same title and selected poems by Matur to gain a deeper understanding of what the label 'Mediterranean' signifies regarding the authors and their work. Kutlu, whose lyrical prose is deeply rooted in the fabric of Iskenderun, said in an interview, "In every part of the stories in *Sen de Gitme Triyandafilis* there are many features stemming from the structure and nature of Iskenderun. If I had grown up in a different city, not in Iskenderun, these stories might not have emerged."<sup>3</sup> Matur, whose mystical and tragic poetry acknowledges the secrets witnessed by nature and history, describes her origins with a unique blend of identities: "I was born in Maraş, which is on the edge of the Mediterranean. I would call myself a Mediterranean Kurd! My father is a farmer. I grew up between the cotton fields and the snowy mountains, which used to be the land of ancient Hittites."<sup>4</sup> For both authors, the specific geographic locations of their birth and upbringing played a crucial role in their personal and creative development. However, it is not a mere accident of birthplace that allows us to include Kutlu and Matur in the category of Mediterranean writers.

Using a methodology that comparativist C. Ceyhun Arslan refers to as "disciplinary utopia"<sup>5</sup> that allows scholars to combine different approaches that best fit their needs, I will apply tools afforded by area studies and comparative literature to argue that these two authors provide readers with a deeper understanding of Mediterranean identities

2 Kutlu launched her literary career in 1978. She has won many awards, and her texts have been translated into several languages. *Please Don't Go: Triyandafilis* won the prestigious Sait Faik short story award in 1990. Adapted into a screenplay, the novella of the same name earned the author the Golden Boll Award for Best Screenplay. It was made into a film titled "Sen de Gitme" ("Don't Go"), which achieved remarkable success by winning a total of fourteen awards at the Golden Orange and Golden Boll Film Festivals in 1996.

3 Şemsettin Ünlü, "Sen de Gitme Triyandafilis Üzerine Ayla Kutlu ile bir Söyleşi," in *Sen de Gitme Triyandafilis*, by Ayla Kutlu, 2nd ed. (Ankara: Bilgi Yayınevi, 1991), 211.

4 "5Q Interview with Bejan Matur." Writing University. August 2018. <https://writinguniversity.org/news-archive/2018/08/5q-interview-bejan-matur-2018-iwp-resident>.

5 C. Ceyhun Arslan. "Disciplinary Utopias: The Mediterranean as a Context and Artistic Mediations." *Utopian Studies* 35, no. 1 (March 2024), 133.

and literature. Shaped by the Mediterranean region, Matur and Kutlu write about overlapping themes from different vantage points and think about the past in distinct ways. Kutlu, a generation older and a proud daughter of the Turkish nation-state although of Chechen origins and Matur, a local Kurdish woman are separated by age, ethnicity, religion, and mother tongue, however, their texts are united in their exploration of women's experiences of the Mediterranean. Examining the texts in their source language with conceptual frames and close reading allows the reader to see that despite Kutlu and Matur's vastly different relationships to the Turkish state, both authors yearn for the days when diverse communities could live side by side on the Turkish Mediterranean coast, in a cosmopolitan milieu.

*Is Geography Destiny?*<sup>6</sup> *From Triyandafilis to Filiz: Kutlu's Silent Protagonist*

Reflecting on the images conjured by the term 'Mediterranean,' eminent scholar David Abulafia wrote: "Mediterraneans conjure up the history of coexistence – commercial, cultural, religious, political – as well as that of confrontation between neighbors aware of their often powerful ethnic, economic, and, again, religious differences."<sup>7</sup> The dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, the transition from empire to nation-state, a process laden with trauma, alongside the rise of homogenizing nationalism, the impending Second World War, and the persistent conflict and violence on the Turkish Mediterranean coast and borderlands, set the stage for Kutlu and Matur's literary works, which resonate with Abulafia's observations and Ibn Khaldun's ideas about geography influencing the formation of societies and impacting the rise and fall of empires.

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6 In his illustrious text *Muqaddima* Ibn Khaldun argued that the earliest societies were formed by nomadic peoples in the rugged steppes, deserts, and mountains who constructed relations of authority through ties of kinship and "group feeling" (*asabiya*). Groups with pronounced *asabiya* were the most capable of forming expansive dynasties and empires, and stable empires in turn offered the most promising conditions for productive agriculture, prosperous cities, and refined urban life. But every empire bore the seeds of its own demise since the luxuries of rule were all too likely to result in corrupt and tyrannical rulers. New groups from the severe margins would eventually displace the old dynasties, according to Ibn Khaldun, and the cycle of imperial ascent and decline would begin once more.

7 David Abulafia. "Mediterraneans." In *Rethinking the Mediterranean*, edited by W. V. Harris (Oxford University Press, 2005), 92-93.

In their “Introduction” to *Mediterranean Modernism*, Godwyn and Silverman write that modernism in the Mediterranean emerged from broad political, historical, and cultural influences during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.<sup>8</sup> In Kutlu’s novella, we see the depiction of the impact of these global events on a local household. The form that Kutlu chooses for her text, the short story, is evidence of a new modernist aesthetic. The short story is a change from traditional genres and is better suited to capture the events of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Set in the mid-1930s towards the end of the French mandate in what is today Hatay, the reader is introduced to Monsieur Antuvan, a prosperous Greek merchant whose wealth flourished under the French occupation and mandate, who in addition serves as the food steward for the French army. He resides in an opulent mansion with his wife, Teodora, their children, caregivers, and servants. However, if we examine household members’ mobility, we see how fluid and complicated power and hierarchy are within the household. This is a household where Monsieur Antuvan, the patriarch, “the son of a poor fisherman, who grew up in a one-room flat in one of the poor neighborhoods of Mersin,”<sup>9</sup> who then became a wealthy businessman was only allowed to marry Teodora, the daughter of a wealthy Levantine family, on the condition that they remain in her hometown. He travels a great deal and is away from his home and family for extended periods. When we meet Teodora, she is no longer enamored with her husband and is happy to have dinner and conversation with the outstanding men of their entourage. While she does not break her marital vows, she is bored and less than thrilled with her husband. Their oldest child is Aleksiya, a beautiful spoiled, and shallow twenty-one-year-old young woman who has broken off engagements but is soon to be wed. The twelve-year-old twins, Niko and Elenia, are lively and somewhat out of control. The protagonist, Triyandafilis, the fifteen-year-old is daughter, is remarkably beautiful but intellectually challenged. Her cognitive development is fixed at the level of a seven-year-old due to her parents’ RH incompatibility and the era’s limited scientific understanding. She is described as: “Triyandafilis the beloved of the servants, was such a gentle child that she didn’t have any problems with

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8 Adam J. Goldwyn and Renée M. Silverman, eds., *Mediterranean Modernism: Intercultural Exchange and Aesthetic Development* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 1-27.

9 Ayla Kutlu, *Sen de Gitme Triyandafilis (Please Don't Go: Triyandafilis)*, 2nd ed. (Ankara: Bilgi Yayinevi, 1991), 16.

anyone but her siblings.”<sup>10</sup> Triyandafilis is the one that the entire household works to keep within the confines of the estate. “She always wanted to escape. That’s why the front door and the side garden door were always locked. The servants and the members of the household were always checking the doors.”<sup>11</sup> The belief in science and that this young woman’s life might have been radically different had she lived in a time when medical knowledge was more developed is also a modern approach to a problem and a departure from assuming that everything is “God’s will.”

Triyandafilis’ home life is far from trouble-free. Her siblings are unkind to her. The twins relentlessly torment her, seeking to subtly inflict harm. Her parents love her dearly in particular her father has a soft spot for her. They worry about her future, and they feel great sorrow for her, but they do not know how to help her other than imprisoning her in the house to keep her out of harm’s way. The household includes several nameless servants and two caregivers Sultan and her hearing-impaired husband. While Sultan<sup>12</sup> may not be the lady of the mansion, she lives up to her name which came to Turkish from Arabic and means power, strength, or ruler. Sultan is the one who knows exactly what is happening in the house, who is doing what, what is needed, and she has access to the key which allows her freedom to go and come as she pleases or is necessary. She is strong as we see later in the story. The mansion, home to Triyandafilis, her family, and their servants, stands as a symbol of functionality amidst adversity. Within its walls, marital discord and sibling rivalry unfold – commonplace issues that, while distressing, fall within the bounds of normalcy.

Triyandafilis can feel sorrow, love, and desire but she cannot understand what is going on around her and she cannot explain her feelings and thoughts. Although she is growing up in a household where she hears Greek, French, and Turkish she cannot make herself understood in any language. Confined within the estate, her world ends where the high garden wall, crowned with glass shards, begins. Triyandafilis is simple-natured and feels desire but does not understand concepts such as shame. She yearns for freedom, and from her window she sees and becomes enamored with a

10 Ayla Kutlu, *Sen de Gitme Triyandafilis (Please Don't Go: Triyandafilis)*, 2nd ed. (Ankara: Bilgi Yayınevi, 1991), 15.

11 Ayla Kutlu, *Sen de Gitme Triyandafilis (Please Don't Go: Triyandafilis)*, 2nd ed. (Ankara: Bilgi Yayınevi, 1991), 15.

12 Sultan is a girl’s name in Turkish. It was an honorific used by the Ottoman ruler but also used by female members of the Ottoman family. When used for women their first name came before the title for example Hürrem Sultan as opposed to when it was used for the ruler Sultan Süleyman.

French soldier named Pierre. During this time, Iskenderun, teeters on the edge of transfer to Turkish governance. The family starts preparations to move to Beirut. Kutlu captures the chaos of the moment, and the haven provided by the home: “The chaos taking place outside the home was not seeping into the house. The Turks, Arabs, Greeks, and Armenians were in flux about Hatay’s becoming part of Syria, which was under the French mandate, or joining Turkey, or becoming an independent republic. They were trying to make sure that they would survive any of these outcomes.”<sup>13</sup> The impact of this international political moment would be felt for decades by this family and the entire region for decades to come.

Sultan who feels great pity for Triyandafilis facilitates her meeting with Pierre who does not understand that her mental level is that of a young child. He believes that their communication issues are due to language problems. Every time they part, she asks him to “Ne pars pas” or “to not leave.” Triyandafilis utters this phrase whenever she sees a young man in uniform until the end of her life. As the family prepares to relocate to Beirut, Triyandafilis seizes an opportunity to flee during the chaos of moving. She is looking for Pierre.

She vanishes without a trace, and despite an exhaustive search, her distraught family has no option but to leave without her. The family must leave because with the departure of the French from the area they will lose their livelihood, and they may be seen as traitors. The transition and political chaos have a direct impact on the household. This household where people, languages, and religions have coexisted sometimes imperfectly is no longer intact. The fluid and everchanging power dynamics within the web that formed the household have fallen apart. The members of the household are scattered and those who remain in Turkey must fend for themselves. Sultan and her husband lose their livelihood and must take on physically heavy labor to make a living. Triyandafilis has disappeared and the rest of the family has had to move leaving behind their vulnerable daughter. While Teodora and Antuvan leave Hatay physically they have left a piece of their hearts and minds behind.

After running away our protagonist gets lost in the chaotic city. People and soldiers are leaving. There are trucks full of soldiers passing by her. “Their songs, marches, shouts, laughter makes her feel happy.” Thinking that she recognizes Pierre in one of the trucks she chases after it shouting,

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13 Ayla Kutlu, *Sen de Gitme Triyandafilis*, 2nd ed. (Ankara: Bilgi Yayınevi, 1991), 25.

“Ne pars pas Pierre.”<sup>14</sup> This truck passes her by but eventually, a truck full of soldiers slows down and pulls her in but rather than finding Pierre she is met with sexual violence. Her parents have asked the French authorities, the Turkish authorities, and the Greek church for help but to no avail. In a brief time, everyone except for Sultan and her parents forget about her.

When she manages to finally stumble back to her hometown and find Sultan, they learn how much she has at the hands of various men who abused her and sold her. Like the epic heroes, of the distant past, after enduring many challenges and hardships, she has returned home and been given a new name “Filiz.” In this case, rather than earning a name fitting heroic exploits, conquests, and bloodshed, she has earned a name as a survivor of a violent era of transition. This mentally challenged female survivor of sexual violence during an era of grave political turbulence has been cast as a hero. Her two names may be different, but they are related. The name she was given at birth means Rose in Greek. The name she is now called Filiz means sprout, bloom, or blossom. The three form a non-biological family. They happily coexist in a decrepit house and struggle with great poverty as the only one who can earn any money is Sultan and the times are difficult. But they are happy and protective of each other. This still means limiting Filiz’ mobility. When three young men move into their neighborhood once again Filiz decides that she wants love. She escapes from her home. These young men are simply poor young men with good morals from the country who’ve arrived in the city to make a living. This time Filiz enters a relationship with a naive Turkish young man who doesn’t understand her limitations. When Filiz gets pregnant Sultan ends the pregnancy without consulting either parent, or without Filiz even being aware of her pregnancy. Sultan does not believe that Filiz is capable of being a mother or that the young man can take care of both Filiz and a baby. This union is not allowed to be fertile. With time Sultan and her husband die and a new war appears on the horizon. Filiz’s partner is conscripted. She sees him in his uniform and understands that she will never see him again. Filiz is left alone in a crumbling abode, regarded as a specter by those around her. Triyandafilis, who was born to a mansion, is voiceless, her inability to communicate mirroring the silenced history of a region rich in diversity. She becomes akin to a ghost, a spectral presence echoing the lost vibrancy of her homeland repeating time after time “Don’t Leave.” It

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14 Ayla Kutlu, *Sen de Gitme Triyandafilis (Please Don't Go: Triyandafilis)*, 2nd ed. (Ankara: Bilgi Yayinevi, 1991), 32.

is not clear whether she is speaking to her lost loves, her parents, Sultan, or husband?

The Mediterranean has long been a muse for writers. Eminent scholar David Abulafia notes that most classic Mediterranean narratives—the stories of epic heroes, religious figures, lone travelers, or adventurers—are frequently, by and about men.<sup>15</sup> The dominance of male narratives, from *The Odyssey* (725-675 BCE) to *The Epistles of St. Paul* (48-68 AD), or *The Travels of Ibn Jubayr* (1183-1185), persisted into the 20th century with works like Albert Camus' *The Stranger* (1942). As distinguished historian Judith Tucker notes this extensive and renowned collection of Mediterranean literature frequently lacked stories about or by Mediterranean women and girls who were more than mere plot devices, objects of desire, or ornamental figures.<sup>16</sup> Kutlu's narrative provides us with the missing stories of the silenced and silent women of the region.

### *Bejan Matur: Geography Poetry's Muse*

The literary form that Bejan Matur chooses to express herself in, poetry, is an ancient and much-loved genre in Anatolia. However, the number of women poets are far and few in, and women poets who write with a female aesthetic focusing on women's reality are even fewer. Her poetry does not adhere to any traditional forms and points to a clear break with tradition. It is revolutionary in form and content, making it part of the Mediterranean Modernism. It is a new form for a new subject that allows her to voice her reality.

Matur was born in Maraş in 1968 to a large farming family. Matur has fond memories of a strong community and solidarity among women in a large tribal family.

I grew up in a Mediterranean village. My father was a farmer who grew cotton. The earliest scenery I remember from my childhood is the vast cotton fields with reddish soil which were covered with snowy mountains from afar. I grew up in a big tribal family. I remember our big house always full of life

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15 David Abulafia. *The Great Sea: A Human History of the Mediterranean* (New York: Oxford Academic, 2011), 643.

16 Judith E. Turner, "Introduction." In *The Making of the Modern Mediterranean: Views from the South*, edited by Judith E. Tucker, 1st ed., (University of California Press), 2019, 7. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvh1dt10.6>.



with never-ending guests visiting, cotton fields, workers, and three generations of women cooking together in the kitchen.<sup>17</sup>

The very commonalities among Eastern Mediterranean literatures discussed by Hilary Kilpatrick are found in Matur's utterances and poetry: "the loss of a homeland, economic migration, the treatment of modern writers of salient events of the past, and finally their treatment of the ancient past more significantly what is remembered and what is forgotten and how what is remembered is treated."<sup>18</sup> In a recent interview Matur said: "There was no master of my poems, but if a root is to be sought, it can be found in the geography where I was born, in the sorrow that geography has carried throughout history."<sup>19</sup> Like Kutlu for Matur, the region is her muse.

Imagine growing up in a plain, a true transition area between Antep and Maraş, a place where archaeological findings still exist. As children, we played among Neolithic graves. We played among half-finished stone lions, Armenian skulls, or graves; you grow up in a geography connected with the ancient. Naturally, your identity has a claim on you.<sup>20</sup>

In this brief paragraph, we see that in her childhood Matur has seen firsthand the remnants of the destruction of the Armenian community, the ever-present ancient past, and the salient historical events of the past. The idea that nature reveals what people try to hide with their after-the-fact-constructed narratives and claims of ownership of land is a recurring theme in her work.

After completing her middle and high school education in Gaziantep, Matur attended Ankara University. However, rather than receiving a diploma and a job, she was arrested during her second year as a student in the Faculty of Law.

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17 Anahit Poturyan, "Writing Became a Part of My Soul: A Conversation with Bejan Matur," *L.A. Review of Books*, January 31, 2020.

18 Hilary Kilpatrick. "Eastern Mediterranean Literatures for Comparative Study." In *Understanding Near Eastern Literatures: A Spectrum of Interdisciplinary Approaches*, edited by Verena Klemm and Beatrice Gruendler, 84-94. Reichert, 2000.

19 Saadet Saral and Burcu Tokat, "Şiir, Kadın ve Dil: Bejan Matur ile Söyleşi," ("Poetry, Women and Language: A Conversation with Bejan Matur,") *Kültür ve Siyasette Feminist Yaklaşımlar* 5 (June 2008), 138

20 Saadet Saral and Burcu Tokat, "Şiir, Kadın ve Dil: Bejan Matur ile Söyleşi," ("Poetry, Women and Language: A Conversation with Bejan Matur,") *Kültür ve Siyasette Feminist Yaklaşımlar* 5 (June 2008), 140-41

I was 19 years old. The custody lasted almost one month! I was tortured. All these heavy and dark memories. They were trying to find out if I was involved in a political movement or not. The reason it took so long was because I didn't want to speak any word to the police. Although I was under heavy pressure, I stayed strong enough to keep my sanity<sup>21</sup>. Their aim was to paralyze my being. I stayed silent for 28 days in a dark cell.<sup>22</sup>

Matur, who spent a year in prison, started writing again once she recovered her voice. Her first book, *Rüzgar Dolu Konaklar (Winds Howl Through the Mansions)*, was published in 1996 to international acclaim, and in 1997 this collection of poetry won the Halil Kocagöz Poetry Award as well as the Orhan Murat Arıburnu entry award.<sup>23</sup> Matur, whose poetry has been translated into more than twenty-five languages, was an active force in the cultural life of Diyarbakır.<sup>24</sup>

Matur's 18-page 16-section poem, "Winds Howl Through the Mansions," engages in a profound dialogue with the themes of "Please Don't Go: Triyandafilis," albeit through an indirect historical lens. The poem opens with a poignant scene:

When we were born  
 It was our mother  
 Who had caskets made for us  
 And filled them with silver mirrors  
 Dark blue stones  
 And fabrics smuggled from Aleppo  
 Later  
 She would put us in those caskets  
 And whisper in our ears  
 Of roads  
 And winds  
 And mansions.  
 To stop us being lonely in the dark  
 She would add our childhood too  
 To comfort us  
 With that childhood.<sup>25</sup>

21 Anahit Poturyan, "Writing Became a Part of My Soul: A Conversation with Bejan Matur," *L.A. Review of Books*, January 31, 2020.

22 Anahit Poturyan, "Writing Became a Part of My Soul: A Conversation with Bejan Matur," *L.A. Review of Books*, January 31, 2020.

23 "Bejan Matur Kimdir?" ("Who is Bejan Matur?") *Artı Gerçek*, October 26, 2022.

24 "Bejan Matur Kimdir?" ("Who is Bejan Matur?") *Artı Gerçek*, October 26, 2022.

25 Bejan Matur and Ruth Christie. "From Winds Howl through the Mansions." *Grand Street*, no. 70 (2002): 107-107. <https://doi.org/10.2307/25008599>.

In these lines, we encounter children preparing for an inevitable departure from their mother and their homeland. Aleppo, a major trading center between the Mediterranean and the Middle East, is invoked, along with the goods accompanying the children. These concise but rich lines evoke the importance of trade routes that transcend boundaries and connect the loss of innocence and trade. A childhood lost to necessity and trade and the separation from the mother and natal house is likened to death.

The opening section of the poem continues with images of blood and water mingling and children telling the water that they left while the mother was sleeping because she would not have been able to bear watching them leave while awake.

The poem concludes with a reflection on the aftermath of flight:

What's left from that flight  
 Everything, everyone is here.  
 I am here  
 My brothers and sisters are here with their loss  
 My mother with her dresses  
 My brother with his fear of war  
 My father's here, but not awake  
 Around me the world has shrunk  
 All like a dream  
 That hurts the longer it lasts.<sup>26</sup>

Just as Triyandafilis' father was not able to protect her from her siblings or the outside world, in this poem the father figure is also absent and unable to exert power. He is asleep. Neither Matur nor Kutlu writes of the boy who goes to war as going to fight for lofty ideals or to protect the young maiden: "the one worth fighting for,"<sup>27</sup> and neither Kutlu nor Matur has an archetypal "girl" waiting for her soldier lover. The reality of the girl caught up in Kutlu and Matur's war narratives is that she is defenseless against men with guns who freely abuse her, or she is the sister who is unable to help her brother who is afraid of war. The mother is preparing caskets for her children. The children and their mother remain but with their loss. The mother is unable to protect her son, and the sisters are unable to help their brother or protect their mother from her grief. In Matur's verse, as in Kutlu's novella, men don uniforms and depart, often never to return, leaving behind diminished, wounded women.

26 Bejan Matur and Ruth Christie. "From Winds Howl through the Mansions."

27 This archetype was best depicted in Disney's *Mulan* with a song: "Since we went off to war/What do we want? /A girl worth fighting for!

In fact, in the second section of the poem we read that the brother has died.

When our brother  
 Older than all of us  
 And afraid of the distant war  
 Never came home  
 We too feared the war.  
 But it wasn't war that kept him away.  
 On his way back  
 He fell asleep with his horse

The poet tells us that he fell asleep on the mountain across his father's. The patrilineal line is broken. The two men are not even side by side in death but rather across from each other. The mother starts to shrink in the face of these deaths. Like Sultan in "Please Don't Go: Triyandafilis," the mother figure prepares them to part and suffers tremendously when she loses her husband and her son. By the fifth section of the poem their mother has become a rootless oak tree:<sup>28</sup> The oak tree which is native to the Mediterranean region helps against erosion, protects against the wind and provides firewood. The mother who holds the household together has lost her moorings in this poem.

Every night  
 In her black velvet dress  
 Our mother wandered among the mountains  
 She was a rootless oak  
 Silent, now and then weeping

The cycles of poverty, violence, and stolen innocence continue and become the speaker's reality. The poet describes the fate of four sisters in section VIII as being like stones rolling down a mountain, searching for beds that weren't theirs anymore, the distances between them. After 10 years the speaker meets a green-eyed man who leaves her to go to military service but returns. She has two sons one of whom she buries. The speaker describes carrying his body holding up his hair as he was placed on a horse facedown.<sup>29</sup> By section XVI the speaker is an old woman waiting for death and asks that if God is listening, he give her a narrow grave that will let her

28 Bejan Matur, *Rüzgar Dolu Konaklar* (Istanbul: Timaş Yayınları, 1999), 19.

29 Bejan Matur, *Rüzgar Dolu Konaklar (Winds Howl Through Mansions)* (Istanbul: Timaş Yayınları, 1999), 30.

forget the largeness of the mansions through which the winds howled.<sup>30</sup> In both Kutlu's novella and Matur's poems we start with girls who are parts of large households with many members who are then separated from their homes, an ever-present fear of large-scale violence the death of children, and end with lone women waiting for death. Kutlu's novella ends with a frail old woman dressed in white who wanders alone, in Matur's poem the mother is a rootless oak and the daughter asks for a narrow grave once she becomes an old woman. Triyandafilis, Teodora, Sultan and mother and the daughter in Matur's poems have more in common than national, ethnic, or religious ties. At the most fundamental level the transition to the homogenous nation-state has rendered them or their loved ones a "rootless oak." They are not participating in the communities that make up the nation, the imagined communities. They are not participating in the narratives that attempt to make these nation-states natural or eternal. They are finding commonalities with each other.

Matur not only writes about the people inhabiting the shores of the Mid-Sea but also writes about the Mediterranean Sea itself. The lines from her poem "Sea of Fate" echo sentiments raised in "Please Don't Go: Triyandafilis," and the themes of her aforementioned "Winds Howl Through the Mansions." These lines also resonate with the themes of brilliant writer and intellectual Toni Morrison's exhibition, and lecture series at the Louvre titled, "The Foreigner's Home."<sup>31</sup> The Foreigner's Home expresses Morrison's questions about home, inclusion, belonging, estrangement, and "the blatant, violent uses to which foreignness is put."<sup>32</sup> In Matur's poem, the people crossing the sea are part of what Morrison calls the greatest mass movement of peoples excluding the height of the nineteenth-century slave trade.<sup>33</sup> They are all made equal by their journey. Any distinctions based on race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, or gender are erased. As Matur puts it so eloquently the Mediterranean which can be at once a barrier or a bridge between continents and nation-states unites those "divided on land."

30 Bejan Matur, *Rüzgar Dolu Konaklar (Winds Howl Through Mansions)* (Istanbul: Timaş Yayınları, 1999), 31

31 Toni Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019).

32 Liedeke Plate (2022) Portrait of the postcolonial intellectual as a wise old woman: Toni Morrison, word-work, and The Foreigner's Home, *Transnational Screens*, 13:2, 96-110, p. 96 DOI: 10.1080/25785273.2022.2069754

33 Toni Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019), 5.

This encounter  
 An encounter of continents.  
 God's will.  
 God wishes the same death to all.  
 Will summon fate  
 And those divided on land  
 Be merged in the waters.

In the following lines, people are reduced to their lowest common denominator the atoms that form them. When they embark on this journey their identities are negated. They face dangers and obstacles to get to the shore and discover that the main impediment to their journey is those collections of atoms that maintain their status as humans. These humans are those orchestrating what Toni Morrison called the political maneuvers to monitor the journey of the colonized to the seat of the colonizer.<sup>34</sup>

For we  
 are created from atoms  
 divided and set free.  
 Removed from memory  
 from perfection  
 we fell into this desert.  
 Climbing over the mountains  
 we came to the border.  
 It seems the border was human!

The border was human  
 between the angel  
 and death.

The issue with memory raised in these lines is also an important theme in "Please Don't Go: Triyandafilis." Sultan who is the all-knowing servant only knows Turkish and can relay information and discuss the past in Turkish. She is not privy to the private conversations that take place among the family. Her husband misses a lot of information because he is deaf. As Triyandafilis cannot express herself with words while we know that she feels strongly we do not know what she knows or remembers. At the same time as the stones in Matur's two-line poem titled, "Truth," Triyandafilis knows the truth that has not been adulterated with words and narratives constructed by people.

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34 Toni Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019), 5.

## TRUTH

What Stones know  
Humankind Forgets!<sup>35</sup>

What humankind forgets or wants to forget the stones know. Language and the ability to or the inability to express oneself with words and language is important for both authors. The construction and imposition of national languages to create a homogenous citizenship in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century is not unique to Turkey but an ordinary step in creating modern nation-states. For both these authors nationalism gives rise to forced displacement and mute characters. However, there is some knowledge that cannot erase what nature knows and what Triyandafilis who may not have book learning or mental capacity beyond that of a seven-year-old knows. Nature does not forget and Triyandafilis knows how to love, and how to feel sorrow. In some ways, she embodies the purest instincts that are part of being human, rather than adhering to constructed social norms.

Matur's poem "Growing up in Two Dreams" bears witness to her own story regarding language. The stanzas below link the region to cycles of violence and trauma.

History has already opened these wounds.  
Fragile, the scars, thickened  
with anger.

This poem is looking for a language that unites, that is heard and understood. Like the protagonist Triyandafilis, the speaker in this poem is looking for a way to make herself understood.

Our voices are our only shelter in the lit night.  
Who can we turn to?  
What words can we use to speak of pain,  
in what language can we ask to be forgiven?  
We need a clean slate,  
a sunrise of words,  
dawn of the soul.

The speaker is looking for a refuge where silence is not suppression or an inability to speak but rather peace and tranquility.

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35 Bejan Matur with Canan Marasligil and Jan Hadfield, "Truth," Poetry Translation Center, 2017, <https://www.poetrytranslation.org/poem/growing-up-in-two-dreams/#translated-poem>. Accessed 8/2/2024.

We need the gentle home with chimney smoking.  
 To walk by its walls on forgiving soil.  
 We decide this is somewhere  
 we can take refuge  
 and fall quiet  
 we fall quiet<sup>36</sup>

This is what each character in “Please Don’t Go Triyandafilis” and Matur’s poems is looking for. The house that is a home built on forgiving soil not one that reminds the citizens of the prior atrocities. They are searching for a home that is a haven where silence is peaceful and not imposed.

### *Conclusion*

In beautifully written prose or economical and yet moving poetry Bejan Matur and Ayla Kutlu, despite their different vantage points and their differing relationship to the Turkish state, reflect on the experiences of marginalized people whether, women, children, or people with mental and physical challenges trying to survive against the backdrop of large-scale political turmoil and violence. Their texts share the aspects of Eastern Mediterranean literature highlighted by Kilpatrick and resonate with Abulafia’s understanding of the concepts evoked by the term Mediterranean.

Examining the texts in the frames provided by area studies and comparative literature allows us to examine them in their source language while paying attention to the historical and political circumstances unique to the area. The Mediterranean region of Türkiye has a unique history that differs from that of other regions of the country. Hatay joined the nation-state later than the other provinces and the impact of the French mandate and the tragic history of the Armenian genocide have left their traces which are not always evident when we think of Türkiye as a Mediterranean nation-state as a whole. Scholars of Modern Türkiye have referred to the state as the father and the land as the mother *ana vatan* and *baba devlet*. The mother feeds and nourishes, the father taxes and sends him to military service or war. In the Kutlu and Matur texts that we have examined for this essay, the patriarchal bargain is broken. Fathers are unable to protect their children from harm. Mothers are unable to socialize their children to survive and live as productive members of society. The Empire has collap-

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36 Bejan Matur with Canan Marasligil and Jen Hadfield. “Growing Up in Two Dreams.” link. Accessed 8/2/2024.



sed and the nation-state is still in transition. The patrilineal and matrilineal lines are broken. Children and husbands die and old and frail women are left alone to wander. Their Mediterranean is not traversed by a conquering hero. Those wondering the shores of this sea face violence and destruction. Those crossing the sea meet a watery grave or human-made borders to keep them out. Science isn't developed enough to save them and God is like the father figure in Matur's poem, asleep. Matur and Kutlu add the experiences of the subaltern to the layers of discourse by Mediterranean subjects to the available conversation while also making the reader question who the subaltern is. The fluidity of power dynamics is evident in the backdrop of shifting national borders and within the household the mobility of the subjects. While Teodora and Antuvan love Triyandafilis very much, she loves Sultan more than anyone. While she tells her father to go away when he tries to show her love and affection, she calls on Sultan to tell her bedtime stories.

Both authors profess a nostalgia for a time gone by. In Kutlu's novella, we start with a mansion that houses people of different religions, who speak a variety of languages and end up with an old woman who has the mental capacity of a seven-year-old in a decrepit house a reminder of times gone by. In Matur's poem nature which may not have the capacity of human speech remembers and reminds. Both authors are reacting to nationalist efforts that imposed a national language attempting to erase the imperial past in favor of the modern nation. On 1 November [1928] the Grand National Assembly passed Law No. 1353, 'On the Adoption and Application of the New Turkish Letters,' which came into effect two days later (Lewis 37-38). After a hard-fought war of independence, very much due to the initiatives of the central government and emerging bourgeoisies, Turkish was established as the official language of the land in the first constitution of 1924. After the Language Revolution of 1928, the Arabo-Persian alphabet became obsolete and was replaced with Turkish letters in Latin script. By 1934, the "Vatandaş, Türkçe Konuş!" (Citizen, Speak Turkish!) campaign prohibited the use of non-Turkish words in public as well as teaching in other languages with few exceptions.<sup>37</sup> Since then the approach to Kurdish and other minority languages has varied.

In *Istanbul Memories and the City* Orhan Pamuk, the Turkish Nobel Laureate, an Istanbulite par excellence, describes a communal melancholy or

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37 Yılmaz Çolak, "Language Policy and Official Ideology in Early Republican Turkey." *Middle Eastern Studies* 40, no. 6 (2004), 80-81.

“hüzün” shared by the denizens of the city.<sup>38</sup> He writes that being surrounded by the ruins of a once great empire in a former imperial capital encapsulates the city in a melancholy peculiar to Istanbul. Matur and Kutlu’s nostalgia or melancholy is based on the loss of a time when people of different religions, ethnicities, and linguistic backgrounds could live together side by side however imperfectly. Nazım Hikmet another celebrated Turkish poet wrote:

To live, free and single like a tree  
but in brotherhood like a forest –  
this longing is ours.  
Nazım Hikmet, Moscow, 1953

Despite their different backgrounds and perspectives, Kutlu and Matur share a common yearning for a more inclusive and cosmopolitan Mediterranean, where diverse communities can coexist. Their literary contributions not only enrich the concept of ‘Mediterranean’ but also challenge us to re-think the boundaries and possibilities of this vibrant and multifaceted region. They ask us if we can imagine a “gentle house” where we can coexist.

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38 Pamuk mentions this sentiment in several chapters throughout *Istanbul Memories and the City*.

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