



## Leaving the Body, Leaving the Country

### Narrating the Feminist Politics of Cancer and Migration

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#### ABSTRACT

In this article, I focus on a woman's experience with migration from Turkey to Japan for Ph.D. studies and the journey she continues after the breast cancer diagnosis upon return to Turkey. I try to narrate both experiences with a view to collective feminist story-telling, not only as a form of writing but also as a means for healing.

#### KEYWORDS

*Women's migration, breast cancer, autoethnography, autobiography, academia and illness, ablism*



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## LEAVING THE BODY, LEAVING THE COUNTRY: NARRATING THE FEMINIST POLITICS OF CANCER AND MIGRATION

*When one is diagnosed with cancer she looks back to her past. The sounds from the past ring in her ears. In order to hear what they tell one needs to turn inside, to look her path and journeys, dig into herself... This article originates from such digging.*

*Illness is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place. (Sontag, 2003, p.3)*

*So this fall I met cancer, as it were, from a considered position, but it still knocked me for a hell of a loop, having to deal with the pain and the fear and the death I thought I had come to terms with once before. I did not recognize then how many faces those terms had, nor how many forces were aligned within our daily structures against them, nor how often I would have to redefine the terms because other experiences kept presenting themselves. The acceptance of death as a fact, rather than desire to die, can empower my energies with a forcefulness and vigor not always possible when one eye is out unconsciously for eternity. (Lorde, 1980, p. 19)*

*The word cancer, seems to be multiplied. It is, as if, started to be used much frequently. Now, is it that I will pick this word all the time, among so many words? Is it that the sound waves will splash on my ears mostly with the word, cancer? As a selfish fool; a state of incapacity to comprehend other names and meanings around me. How many cancer cases around me that escape my attention? Apart from those worldwide. I had no interest in the war against cancer, waged by life and science—that there were wars, which I thought more canny and meaningful. War against cancer is relatively less significant with narrower frontiers. But the disdain of all and less significant and narrower wars does not render one a warrior of broader frontier. Believing in grand and meaningful wars pushes those who are not in the fight for real to such a lingering trap that you suddenly realize that the deadpoint where you stand, the stalemate that takes you nowhere but to the oblivion have consumed you as a wicked virus. In the face of an underestimated foe you lose before stepping into the war. Let the cancer, which I fed as a turkey out of nothing, joke with me. They cut it off, from inside, like a turkey. I am so pleased as if I won immortality in the life lottery. As if it is not possible to erode by foeful attacks. Stopping. The reason for my illness, for all frustrations. A minor trip by the grand LIFE that prolongs without deserving it, that needs to be prolonged... (Soysal, 1976, pp. 154-155).*

### Introduction

I was diagnosed with cancer in June 2023. I had treatment for one and half years. From the moment of my diagnosis I already knew that I would be talking and writing on it. As someone who understands what happens to her in writing, and who talks to what happens to her I offer a part of my conservations in this autoethnographic narrative. Before the diagnosis the story for me included going to Japan for Ph.D. studies at its core. It was my own educational migration and my experiences in this process. As I was diagnosed, all stories inside started to talk to each other. Perhaps, they started talking from where I silenced them. I felt as if words from inside and from my soul were rising to the sky, and that I would betray my own path if I ignore them. Therefore, I caught the words one by one, and started to write them on my computer, and sometimes in my countless and messy notebooks. I had to write down everything; everything which I promised not to die before writing them down. There was no other way for me to continue.

Perhaps, one has cancer from where she keeps silent. I opened my heart to each and every word that revealed itself to me, I let them talk. This article is an outcome of these expressions.

In my conversations after the diagnosis, I talked not only with cancer but also with my migration. Moreover, I uncovered the points which I had difficulty in talking about and thus, which I covered; and I let them all in air, and look at me.

All the feelings I experienced with cancer recalled the feelings of migration. Migration. Leaving the country behind.

Cancer. Leaving the healthy body behind.

Cancer. Migrating from the healthy body...

In the host country, you always wonder when you will return to your country. When you are diagnosed with cancer, you wonder when you will get well.

Getting well, a healthy body is like returning to one's country...

Cancer... Migration...

As the conversation between cancer and migration continues in my mind, penning this conservation is a matter of taking a break with the pace of life out of necessity. It is about cancer harshly commanding stop the rush that dominated me since when I was trying to get away from my native city despite that I had already returned there.

It is about understanding that I need to focus on listening to the polyphonic choir of my experience and refrain from adding new voices in order to write those that I could not in the midst of encountering them, or better still, those which I cannot write to share/publish. (My notes are not restricted with time, and I am constantly in a 'writing' state; but writing to publish involves a different type of effort). It is about knowing that I cannot stay in İzmir, even if cancer does not command stop, and I will be on the road, pursuing another problem, and realizing that I will be struggling with a lacking state of mind in my story as a result of such knowledge, and deciding to take a break from living with cancer, and to write. In other words, it is, in fact, about the awareness that if I do not write the meaning of my efforts for living and my struggle will wither away. It is about feeling that illness has the power to nullify life experiences all at once, and seeing that although I have a story and those whom I touch when my story unfolds leave me with stories worth to tell. If I do not write my story I will vanish in a state of selfhood that fails in integrating all these to life. It is, in essence, about the eyes of cancer.

In this sense, in this article, I go back further in the past, looking at the milestones that have made me as I am, in my education and worklife, i.e., the experiences with which I appear as a feminist killjoy. In other words, I look at the ways I shape my road and my journey as a killjoy when I met these milestones—just because I am myself. For, these became clearer in my mind as I encountered illness.

### Long long before going to Japan...

### Some time between 1992 and 1998...

In the best times of childhood...

While I was a student in İzmir, at Ödemiş Hulusi Uçaçelik Anadolu Highschool we most frequently visited Efes and Bergama. We go mostly to these sites in our school trips, every year. We say 'oh no, again?', on the one hand, and love to visit these touristic sites. For, we meet foreigners with whom we can talk in English. I studied English a lot. For me, it is a door to faraway places... To the extent that one can learn [English] in state schools... But I am good... In that period, even admission to Anadolu Highschool is a door to a bright future in education. Hence, I am on that path. A moment during the visit to Bergama-Asklepion. We meet Japanese tourists. They are so friendly; so energetic. Such lively conversation. We speak English; but this is the first time that I hear Japanese. Konnichiwa! Ogenki des ka? First Japanese words that I learn... I am dreamer child. One, who always wants to go far away. And Japan is now included in my dreams. I have this nice photograph with five Japanese women, waving hands at the camera. I do not know yet that the girl will work heartily to make her dreams come true.

## 2003.

As a family we go to Ankara from İzmir, in haste. My family always wanted me to attend to a university in İzmir (Faculty of Law, Dokuz Eylül University). They wanted me to become an attorney and live in İzmir. We read Cumhuriyet. I, on my part, also like to read the memories that women journalists leave on this earth. I dream of becoming a journalist like Zeynep Oral. Oral's *My Far East (Uzak Doğu'm)* (2000) is my treasure for some time. I date on her book, still in my room: May 18, 2000. That must be some time around my first year in high school. At a point, I am attracted to her *Being A Woman (Kadın Olmak)* (1985). She writes about Africa. Ah! I, too, will travel around the world. I, too, will write as she does. In the high school I write in the school newspaper. Everyone tells that I am a good writer. Then, my job must have something to do with writing... Journalism is still the one that I think most fit for myself. But I do not want to stay in İzmir. It is difficult to open to the world from İzmir. I have to go to Ankara or İstanbul. But, again, no one lets me go for journalism. Great trouble at home. Do you want to be jobless? My cousin who is a political science student in İstanbul barely convinces me to opt for 'International Relations' department. I think on it. If I will be a journalist, certainly, I have to grasp politics. As the girl who was curious about far away as a child was searching for ways how to turn this into a target and which roads she should take, International Relations seem to be door to abroad. METU is my preference. And I succeed.

## 2007-2008. Ankara.

After five years, in METU, full of with novelties, I am an International Relations graduate. Fifth year in Ankara. During my undergraduate years I work as an intern at UNHCR, and Cumhuriyet. My intention to be a journalist or writer is still in place. In METU we meet with Young Writers Society, and in turn, with societies of literature... In morning meetings in Ankara Office of Cumhuriyet I dream about bringing news from far away countries. I am always interested in news about social issues. The 'male' news director scolds me because a news about disability is too long. That annoys me. I start to think that fast journalism may not be good for me. Perhaps, I have to conduct long-term research and write long texts. I start making news for the newspaper... I quit after a short while, regardless of the news director's promises for a job after the internship. My first killjoy experience (but I do not know the concept, then). I do not like the boss men. And I am not interested in offers if they do not fit to my values.

## 2007-2008. Ankara.

With these ideas in my mind I start graduate studies in Social Policy. I have already been attending sociology courses from my third year in the university; as if a minor degree in sociology. I am also accepted to MA programs in Women's Studies and Sociology at METU. But since I will researching gender my thesis advisor orients me to the new department; I register... Three more years at METU. My dear canteen at the Humanities. I grow up and be myself at METU. My family expects me to return to İzmir after graduation; but I want to stay in Ankara. I find a job opportunity, in my first search. Domestic Violence Research at Hacettepe University. I will be writing about women; love of research also in my spirit... I think I make the right choice. In this turn, I want to be like Ayşe Kudat.

## 2007-2008. Ankara.

I start to outgrow Ankara. I feel life going away. I have not yet started writing my thesis. I go to Vienna within the scope of Erasmus program. I live close to the 8th Street in Ankara. I might stay in Vienna. Perhaps, another MA, perhaps a Ph.D... I want to cancel the contract. "No", says my family, keep it; you will also buy your return ticket, do your research, improve your German, come back." I still remember the date of my return. June 20, 2010. I go to Vienna in February; come back in June. Returning, always a must... But my mind is in going away and doing other research in other places... In Vienna I conduct research on migrants from Turkey;

since I do not need to take courses I research as an Erasmus student. Then I return back to Ankara.

## 2011. Ankara.

After Vienna, I am writing my MA thesis on marriage migration, based on my field study with migrants in Germany. I graduate. My family calls me, 'come on, return to İzmir, look for jobs'. I want to stay in Ankara. I feel like if I return to İzmir I will never be able to go anywhere. I rush to work in civil society organizations. When my family asks, I say, "but I found a job; I will start Ph.D." Then, one of my professors orient me to Population Studies Ph.D. program at Hacettepe University: "Your research experience will improve." This sounds rational. I already worked there; a prominent research institution in Turkey. I am admitted to the program and I start to work in the research project. It is as if quantitative research does not feed me but learning demographics is good. Besides, I do not quite know what I will do. But I do not want pursue a theoretical line; there has to be research. It seems as if I do not have that many options.

## 2013. Ankara.

11th year of my departure from İzmir to Ankara... Many years passed after my graduation. MA is done, too. I started Ph.D. studies at Hacettepe University; but Ankara is not enough for me. Institute is small. After so many years at METU I only want to go. My family always want me back in İzmir. I am drown in this place. I do not want to go back to İzmir. İzmir is as if you live in yourself. It is as if in order to be yourself you need to get out of the place you were born and mix into life. This is how I always think. And I feel that if stay in Ankara it will be forever. I say 'no' to all offers, and start to make applications. I will be going. I have to go somewhere. I certainly have to leave Ankara behind.

*I swim from one island to another; that one is yours, this one is mine... A fish passes by, a bird flies over my head... Is it me, the fish that I thought passed by me? Is it me, growing wings and flying, and I have no idea about it? I swim towards my windy memories... I flap my wings towards what I have not yet experienced... Have I gone crazy out of pleasure? I swim in emerald waters, swim and sim. I run, and run in water on white silk sand, run... I shout out how beautiful it is to live, and I gush, gush, and gush. (Oral, 2000, p. 206)*

## On the road to Japan.

## 2014.

A friend from METU goes to Japan. She talks so much about there, I think 'why not?' The little girl, who once wanted to go to Japan starts to prepare applications. I do not apply for the USA. I do not apply for Canada. I am accepted by a couple of universities in Germany and England; but I do not dare to go without funding. Japan accepts me. Moreover, as the only person that year receiving MEXT scholarship in social sciences. I am proud of myself; very excited. I am keen on fulfilling all the required procedure; numerous papers, documents, and written correspondence which seem never ending. As I am preparing the documents I wink at the little girl who wants to go to Japan. This is not merely joy out of academic achievement. I feel to have the power to explore the world and write about it. I mean, during my undergraduate studies I learned quite a lot about diplomacy, Turkish-Japanese relations. The things I learned then, Turkish-Japanese society, which I attended for one term, and three to four years of social research, who else, but I should go? I am not going as a journalist, I might be a bit distanced to my undergraduate field. No problem; I am so happy to be accepted to the Department of Sociology at Kyoto University. I am going to the most beautiful city in the world. I will be studying family and

elderly policies.

My mother comes to Ankara to vacate the house. I give my books to my cousin and a couple of friends in Ankara, and my closest friend in Muğla. My father and elder brother stay in İzmir. What a desire I have to travel; I do not go to İzmir to say "goodbye" to them. I fly to Japan from Ankara. The passion for self-realization is all over me. My flight is to Osaka. I am overly excited.

## 2014-2016.

Dreamlike two years. I am learning Japan; I talk about Turkey. I start to give English language courses as the other foreign students. I make quite a lot inter-city travels. We also go to other cities, then to other countries. It is as if I found my essence. Now, I make that little girl, who outgrows the place she was born, happy. Each time I leave I feel as if I am travelling the world. It is as if there is a little girl inside, who cannot believe this is happening. I constantly have to remind myself about myself. We occasionally meet with other researchers from Turkey. We have a research subject. We are here to work on it. I am the first and only person in the Department of Sociology from Turkey. I certainly find it hard to learn Japanese. But I am determined. I came here to return in 2016; I think I will leave after completing my research. But my advisor suggests that I stay: "Take the exams again." I am so happy. Years pass; I get older and the Ph.D. studies keep prolonging. This makes me a bit concerned. But no problem. I take a difficult exam in my university. And—I pass. I cannot believe. My Japanese is still not enough; but they accept me.

## 2015. Ankara.

We attend the Gender Conference at METU. My advisor is then at sabbatical in France, and comes to Ankara. I introduce him with my professor at METU. My professor is already in Japan, and wants to include Turkey to the research, on "comparative family and aging quantitative survey" in Japan and other Asian countries. I am positive. I introduce him to the faculty, and as I was registered at HUNEE at that time he also meets the Institute. The Institute does not accept. But one of the professor accepts. A male professor.

## 2016. Ankara.

I come to Ankara for field research. Turkey is a part of this international research. Actually, I am not that willing. My responsibility in this research gets heavier. I am not comfortable about the dynamics that characterize the way the supervising professor relate to me and another woman student. But I cannot say, "I am leaving" freely. I am increasingly uncomfortable with the authority of a professor having the final say in everything. I feel as a minor assistant of the research. I say, "God, what a minor role". But, in fact, this is an international research. I do not yet know that my advisor would be expecting me to write all my Ph.D. articles with data from this research. I start to draft my stories, which I will put together in my book, *Rotten Horses Dumpster* (Çürük Atlar Çöplüğü). I feel uneasy.

## 2016. Kyoto.

I return to Kyoto. The professor heading the research is in full charge. There is further change in the dynamics of our communication. I feel obliged to conform to these dynamics so long as I continue with this research. But I am certain that I clearly observe the dynamics about the professor and his relations with the students. Long after, I have the courage to pen a narrative on this topic (Bayraktar, 2023). How surprising it could be for a male professor establishing ridiculous relations with his students through the construction of consent, forcing and keeping them in these relations by means of academic connections, and while these relations are kept in private, lecturing on gender in public, winning awards and receiving invitations from the parliament, promoting? There might be a big mass around him which continue to produce in his shadow, relying on this external

positionings. But I do not want to write the thesis in which I will draw my story in patriarchal shadow. I am not interested in writing the thesis and receiving the Ph.D. title while I accept the emotional pressure in the process. I want to write a feminist Ph.D. thesis; just as it is impossible to have a feminist thesis, written under the supervision of an academic who makes you feel his patriarchal shadow it also feels inconsistent with the feminist ethics to stay in the thesis by ignoring what I have seen. I want to take a different path.

## 2017.

Then, I decided to distance myself from the nationwide comparative family and aging survey. I rejected the articles and conferences I participated in while in Japan and during my two years at Hacettepe University Institute of Population Studies. I removed them from my CV and chose not to include them on my academic page. Although I am still tagged in some of those works, I do not consider them representative of my own contributions. I want to be recognized with my own work, not with the ones produced under the influence of others.

I confronted my authentic self along the way, refusing to build my career on someone else's legacy. I embraced my role as a killjoy, and this is my story. It includes the time when I was a naive feminist, unaware of the manipulation happening around me. I perceived leaving as a way of resistance inspiring from Sara Ahmed (2016) and I eventually left that research due to ethical and ideological conflicts. This decision prompted me to turn toward art-based research methods, using creative writing as a form of intellectual resistance. Writing my story collection *Rotten Horses Dumpster* (Bayraktar, 2017) and one more story (Bayraktar, 2018) became an artistic rebellion against the academic hierarchies that I encountered. The experience of leaving a research project that clashed with my feminist standpoint allowed me to discover my authentic voice as a researcher and writer. I started writing my novel *Yanık Ruhların Işığı* [*The Light of Burnt Souls*] (Bayraktar, 2019) at that time, between 2017-2019. In this book, the character tells the story of an educated woman who tries to erase the harassment she experienced in her work life from her own story. And also her friendship with a woman who was married at an early age. The pattern of early marriage that I observed in the women I encountered in the Kurdish diaspora research I was conducting at that time in Saitama (2018) and my attempt on changing my research topic, abroad made me write such a novella.

During my fieldworks and after my publications appeared, these male interventions in my identity as a woman and in my work, ideologically and politically that I come up with, left me feeling as though my identity was destroyed and my intellectual labor was being stolen or co-opted. I liken an episode described by Milner (2014) in her book *A Life of One's Own* to what I felt:

The teeth of death. What did this mean? At first I saw it only as death in the literal sense, forgetting that the ideas of my automatic self are almost always metaphorical. Then I began to see it as the fear that my personal identity would be swallowed up, and as time went on I came to realize that it was this fear that drove me to constantly pursue goals. I was constantly preoccupied with a life and death situation, and I had a constant desire to do something to prove to myself that I existed as a person. I rarely felt safe enough to stop trying, especially when the enemy was actually within my own gates. This desire to let go and let the sea in (in my dreams I was always in a town threatened by a tsunami), which I found when I first discovered myself, seemed to be constantly pushing me towards inevitable death. But I had not yet seen the true meaning of this death, and until I did, I would not be able to get rid of this fear (p. 132).

The interference in my research and writing made me feel as if my personal and academic voice was being taken from me, as Milner describes, and I felt that only by doing a new study, I could cope with all this.

When I was diagnosed with cancer in 2023, my research period and struggles became even more visible to me. I questioned whether the patriarchal pressures I had faced during my Ph.D. research journey had contributed to my illness. Because they made me too deeply fall into the depression for unpredicted years and struggle in writing. And not being able to write made

me feel that I could not realize myself, as this was the path of doctoral journey which ends with finalizing a dissertation. However, I needed to stop in the middle of everything and it was painful to see that. As I was having deep pain because I needed to return my country and needed to give a break for my Ph.D. I realized the deepness of this pain with cancer diagnosis. I was feeling that part of my life story left in Japan and my identity splinted into two. And the only way to combine my pieces in two countries and my ill and healthy version is writing. This realization reinforced my commitment to storytelling as a means of self-empowerment and academic contribution. Instead of merely writing a PhD thesis, I sought to craft a narrative that authentically represented my research and life experiences and all creative writings which were written mostly during these periods. Through art-based research methods, I not only documented the migration experiences of others but also narrated my own journey as a migrant scholar, ultimately affirming the significance of autoethnographic storytelling. Other art-based research methods I used and creative writing I applied during my Ph.D. journey were a way of resistance and creating myself through my own writings in the middle of research struggles.

Below, I am adding a very short chapter from the novella I wrote, *The Lights of Burnt Souls* (*Yanık Ruhların Işıkları*), which paved the way for me to do another research. I felt strength of conducting any other qualitative research (on high-skilled women migration) through my own writings. As I finished this text I felt for Woolf's deep relaxation and feeling peace when she finished the *Three Guines*, feeling to be relieved of the poison and euphoria (Carroll, 1978). Besides, I was disposing of the poison about the previous research, perhaps, by writing all these texts and by using the art-based research as a method. In other words, as creating a new literature in which I imbed my struggle helps me to find the strength for researching about myself again, writing a text portraying the impetus behind my walk on this road is a way to dispose of this poison – if it is still there; if it is not disposed of with cancer. As Marcus (1978) in *Art and Anger*, points at the expression hatred and anger as a distinctive feature of Woolf's madness my anger was the voice behind *The Light of Burnt Souls*. I appreciate my anger for not letting me down, for enabling me to create a self that pursues her own research and writings. Besides, as Milner's desire as a person to do something in order to prove herself, I, too, want to create a world of my own texts, composed of feminist materials (Ahmed, 2017, p. 29).

## Stories from the Light of Burnt Souls

### I am a Killjoy

*I was looking at the whiteness that I threw in the waves. In this whiteness was my rebellion, my stubbornness and my playfulness. Even though I thought I had left everything behind, I knew that I would carry my sadness in that whiteness. But now it was not a sadness that turned me into a dark and dark ball. Now I was able to see that new road, to enter that new road and to move forward on that new road. I felt as if my life was split in two. It was as if this professional accident had divided me into moles and caused me to look at myself in layers, and in the middle of these layers, I was embracing the me in that brave person to whom my true self stretched out his hand. I was throwing my strokes now. Every day, I was throwing more and more, I wanted to go further than before. But I wasn't interested in where I was going, I was interested in how I was going. I knew that the furthest corners were owned by dirty spirits. I could always swim on my own course at a certain level to live without touching them.*

*Would the sea be any other kind of blue?*

*Would the sky be bluer?*

*I was feeling my happiness without being interested in my happiness. Even if I was unhappy at the time, I knew that this realization would make me happy. My happiness was my right decisions. No matter what price I paid, it was to find myself.*

*I could hear people's voices in the distance.*

*I thought that if I stretched my hands into the air, I would catch a familiar sound, and I believed that these familiar sounds would evolve me into a familiar self. Could the sounds of one city be carried to the sounds of another*

*city?*

*I suddenly wanted to carry them. I wanted to fill all the voices in my rucksack, in my pockets, to integrate with the voices, to be filled with the voices. I wanted to be so full that when I took myself away, I wanted to take my voices with me. As a matter of fact, because I was able to take myself away, I was able to face myself, I was able to find myself.*

*Now here I was in the middle of a loud music! Every music seemed to be playing my melody too. I found myself in a seaside town with the music rising between the sunbeds.*

*The wind howled, the waves whispered in my face and the music caressed my ears. The rhythm of the music was moving my shoulders and my feet were tapping on the floor and my salty hair from the sea was walking towards my mouth. It was as if there was a color, a harmony in the air.*

*There was joy in the sky, a chirp in the sun, life in life, and even the dead in the cemetery around the corner were shouting for life, not death.*

*I shouted towards the sky – the name of life was to find yourself even if you lost yourself.*

*Actually, I had nothing at the moment. If you asked my friends, I was a person who said no to very strange offers and positions. It was true that I had nothing. But it was also wrong. I felt as light as a bird, as if the weight of the world had been lifted off my left shoulder. It was true that I had nothing worldly. But it was also wrong. Because I was holding myself in my hands. I was holding myself firmly and steadfastly.*

*In another chapter, I included the dialogue of Sinem, a lawyer who chose her own path, with her friend. The character I created in this chapter was pleased that she was able to create her own time, but her internal questioning continued:*

### Time of Self

*Maybe I was very angry with myself, I said it shouldn't have been like that, it shouldn't have been like that. In fact, this thought was not because I was professionally ambitious, of course, I wanted to progress in my profession and do whatever I could do for life, but I also knew that I had to stop behaving as if life had stolen this time from me. How could life have stolen this time from me when it had taught me so much? Was it not me who said that I had a professional accident yesterday, and compared it with other professions?*

*All kinds of accidents are for human beings, and yes, I had a professional accident, it had happened, and it was over, and in my mind the instruments of time, and time, well time were playing, and I knew that if I continued to play these instruments, I would never be able to control time and I would always talk about the place-whatever it was-that I would be late. But I was a whole with my stories of falling. Elif was the one who reminded me of these every time. Sinem, she would say to me, do you think life is only your profession? Do you think life is only the professional goals you plan and want to reach? Come on, for God's sake, life is a whole, a huge whole. Can you take your own experiences out of your life? Can you postpone your experiences from yourself by saying that they are not a part of your life? Your experiences are the ones that strengthen your bond with that profession, think about it, before that you looked at that job, and that profession completely differently. Yes, maybe you felt as if your profession had been taken away from you and you felt as if you had given up on many things that you had put on for so many years, you felt as if you had been forced to give up, as if you had been abandoned, as if you had been left without a family, without friends, without friends... But you are the one who left him, Sinem, it were you. Moreover, you allowed this whole process to take your time, to spoil your mood, to make you think about what is right and what is wrong. But how bad could the place you have reached be, the place you are heading to now, Sinem? The time you thought was taken from you did not have your values in it, if you had stayed in that*

time, you would have searched for yourself in values that did not belong to you and you would never have found yourself, whereas now you are trying to reach to yourself by purging yourself from this time. f. Who has reached themselves easily? You will answer this question by pointing to a few people, and I will say to you, take care of yourself, my friend, take care of yourself. Everyone's story is special and precious in itself. We choose our story, we walk in that direction, but sometimes we don't know who will be involved in our story, and where our role will be drawn in our story. No matter how hard the steel armor we wear, a violent storm will blow our armor into the wind, and we will be blown away in the armor with the wind. As we go, the armor may come off us and its pieces may scatter on the ground and we are so scattered that we cannot even see where the armor is scattered. But do you know what the point is, Sinem, the point is to know, to foresee that the armor is temporary. No matter what armor you put on your consciousness, no matter what mask you put on or what cover you wrap your consciousness with, when it is stripped off, you will be naked and your consciousness will just look at you. I will not say that this is what happened to you, because you were never such a naked woman-you were always protecting yourself with your consciousness, and this was what covered you, what separated you-and you never felt the need to take shelter in an armor, imagine that if you had, you would have asked the people you bought the armor with, maybe you would have asked them which armor would protect you better... However, later you would realize that you had to protect yourself from the person you asked, and this would be even heavier for you. Our story is ours, Sinem, but it also strengthens us to know that we can be resistant to these fierce winds that insistently want to be inside. You didn't know that the wind would blow towards you like that, you didn't know that the wind that was blowing so sweetly would blow towards you so violently. Then would you have surrendered to the mourning of not knowing and not seeing? Were you going to spend another time mourning not knowing and not seeing? Another time... A time when you couldn't do anything and you just stood there and tried to understand what was going on and you were buried in mourning...

If you had stayed in that moment of mourning instead of implementing the decision you have made now, if you had let the story end in mourning, and in that state of mourning, whether you had completed the old case or entered into a brand new case and completed everything but everything in that ideal time in your mind, believe me, you would be an incomplete person. I am telling you this as your friend of 25 years. You would come to me, you would have your case in your hands, you would say Elif, you would try to hide the twisted joy in your eyes, you would say, I finished it, I finished it. Now with this step I have taken, I will do this and that in my life... I used to look at you so bitterly, I used to look at you as if to say what does it matter, have you really become Sinem now that you have completed this? Have you reached the pieces of Sinem? Maybe you would be at such a point that you wouldn't even understand what I mean, you would be so far away from yourself. So wild, so alienated. But you would say Elif, I've finished, I've finished, I've finished what I started, look, my life is on its way... Now, I mean, how bad can it be after this... You would look at my face, your voice would become weak when you looked at my face, but you couldn't put your voice together and make another sentence. There would be something in your voice that didn't belong to you, but even you couldn't admit it to yourself...

Elif... I told her... Please...

No, I'm not saying that now, Sinem... If you hadn't come to me and said, "I've left everything and I'm moving to Yatağan, I'm

going to continue my profession as a lawyer there, I'm leaving this other company," it would have been yes...

But it didn't...

Now you are the heroine of this story that you did not plan, that you never thought you would live, now you are not independent from this story, but Sinem, who exists together with this story, is now going to look after women's cases in Yatağan. Wasn't this what you always wanted, but couldn't do by freeing yourself from the hustle and bustle of the other city? Can you now say that the time taken from you was time stolen from your profession? Now there is only one thing you need to see, and that is the time that you add to yourself, the time when you become yourself, and the time when the skin burns while you become yourself, and the time that makes you shed that skin while bringing you to yourself. If you had continued to practice your profession with that burnt skin, you would have been a lawyer who never reached herself, who ran from success to success-and considered it part of success to ignore other people with burnt skin during these successes-but never became herself. Willing to go to the grave with many medallions, but not with your own self.

Whereas you have removed and thrown away any self, you have removed and thrown away that burnt skin and now you are returning to your profession with a renewed depth. Now the people you touch will see the you that has become you when they talk to you, and when they look at you they will see your/self in your eyes, because you will no longer have a look to hide, you will not want to hide and you will shout with your voice and, your shining self-I shattered those who attacked me, and I constructed a new self, and yes, I paid the price for it. You will say that I had to pay; and I paid the price.

Your story will be the crown jewel of your profession now, Sinem; if your story does not exist, you would only be a lawyer who went where the way takes her to, now there is someone who takes herself where she chooses and she is not late, because this is the time of your season, and it was incomplete without you in it, and it took you this long to get there. Instead of blaming that time you will be grateful to your story and you will even name the story... The time of your/self... Now you have this time in your profession and that's why you are stronger than ever.

I cried my eyes out on Elif's neck, then we put the reddest lipstick on our lips, and went to celebrate my me-time.

## 2017-2018. Kyoto.

Then I shifted my focus to migrant women from the Middle East and North Africa, redesigning my research on migration. This was not a foreign topic to me, as I had studied migration during my master's program, and it has always been my favorite subject. However, I hadn't come to Japan specifically to research this subject; it evolved along the way. My experience as a killjoy led me to pursue my own research rather than act as a shadow in a nationwide quantitative survey influenced by patriarchal structures in Turkey.

I shared my research plans with my advisor in Japan, who confirmed and supported my decision. Initially, I decided to conduct an ethnographic study on the Kurdish community in Saitama, who were currently in the news due to their refugee status. I traveled to Saitama to conduct field research with Kurdish women who had sought refuge in Japan after arriving from Antep, Turkey. I organized everything in Tokyo and Saitama and spent almost two months in the field, visiting many households, participating in their daily lives, and conducting interviews.

However, as our conversations deepened, I was invited to participate

in Kurdish events while wearing traditional Kurdish dress. I found it challenging to explain my positionality as an outsider and my objective stance as a PhD candidate in Japan. My focus was not on politics; instead, I aimed to understand their migration journeys and lifestyles in Japan, including their integration into Japanese society, marriage patterns, language issues, and the use of Turkish, Kurdish, and Japanese within Kurdish households. Despite this, the interviews often veered into political discussions, and my objective position was frequently questioned given the political context surrounding my fieldwork.

I was an international Ph.D. candidate, supported by the Japanese government, from İzmir, studying in Kyoto—these aspects formed the core of my identity. Receiving continuous support from the head of the Japan Kurdish Cultural Association complicated matters further as there was the risk of protecting my positionality and target on independently working in the field during research process, as this support had tendency to direct my research process. Although I conducted ethnographic research with Kurdish women in Saitama, I did not write on them at that time, as my research was questioned more than I thought. Soon, I wrote about a film on Kurdish refugees in Saitama, integrating some of my research findings, published in Bianet news platform (Bayraktar, 2022). And hopefully my article in which I discuss the methodological challenges while doing research on Kurdish communities in Japan will be published this year.

Driven by curiosity, we often discussed our experiences in Japan with other international researchers, which motivated me and provided resilience amid challenges. For instance, a common struggle among international researchers who did not specialize in Japanese language studies in their home countries was the difficulty of progressing in Japanese language. Moreover, as we shared our stories, women from Middle Eastern countries spoke about their struggles, both in their home countries and in Japan, often linked to their identities—sometimes related to gender, and other times to religious identity. This realization prompted me to shift my focus entirely to the migration of high-skilled women from the MENA region.

I identified as a *feminist killjoy*, and my experiences led me to redefine my research topic to best reflect my identity as a feminist researcher. Engaging in conversations and interviews with women like myself became a form of feminist collective activism against the challenges we faced during migration and throughout our research journeys. I understood that I was not alone; this was my story, and other women were navigating similar difficulties. Choosing to come to Japan as a high-skilled researcher was not an easy decision for any of us, and all the women I interviewed were eager to share their stories.

Rather than being the shadow researcher in a quantitative research who has no place for voice under male dominance, and trying to write about women's voices in diaspora where I feel the pressure of political curiosity about my writing I chose to be a killjoy by research with high-skilled migrant women as a woman who has encountered all these experiences during her Ph.D. studies, and to challenge the effects of all these processes on myself; thus, I found myself again. If I could not write a feminist Ph.D. thesis, then there was no point in writing it. And succeeding in coming out of these processes behind was itself a feminist struggle on my part.

## 2017-2019. Kyoto.

Every day, I woke up with joy, hopped on my bicycle, and headed out to interview women who had come to Japan to study or work. I employed snowball sampling technique, starting with my own network. After interviewing one woman from a specific country, I would ask her to connect me with others from the same background. This approach allowed me to reach many women from Iran, Egypt, Lebanon, and other countries from Middle East and North Africa.

I felt confident and empowered again, having rediscovered my strength after everything I had been through. Over the course of my research, I interviewed 35 women from the Middle East and North Africa in various locations across Kyoto, Osaka, and Kobe. Sometimes I visited their universities, where we would sit on campus or in their labs; other times, we chose a nearby cafe by the river. Meeting these women for research became a way for me to raise collective migrant voices, a journey I continued for two years, from 2017 to 2019.

As a feminist researcher doing field research in my own migration process with migrant women in the same process, discussing and talking about Japan empowers my voice. It enriches me. I construct the goal of opening a space for expression for migrant women from the Middle East with an increasing responsibility and feminist consciousness. I pursue my research on migration with feminist methodology.

But... How does living in Japan for so many years affect me? The developments in Turkey's academia, my friends, affiliates who are purged from their positions in universities... I start to feel as a person who is in a different country for her own academic concerns, and who does nothing for her country. The sense of guilt as a scholar, funded by Japan's government despite that my knowledge of Japanese has not yet reached the academic level that I want, as well as the fact that the department is rather difficult increases. I do not know the reasons behind the sense of guilt that I feel in almost every instance. But this feeling, especially for not being in Turkey grows (Bayraktar, 2016). I also feel guilty since I do not consider myself diligent enough. My family, too, ask frequently "when will you receive the degree?" I think, I also feel guilty for choosing to be away...

## Japan - pause...

### 2019.

My scholarship, part-time works, visa have terminated. I have to renew all. I feel as if taking break with everything would be good. Foreign students in the department can generally return back to their countries. I think that I am returning back to Turkey for some time. I suspend my Ph.D. for a year. I return back to İzmir, directly to my family. My family who want to keep 18 years old Işıl by their side, say, "Wish you do not go back to Japan. We miss you a lot." That little girl, who always wants to go far away, with Can Dündar's *Faraway (Uzaklar)*, Zeynep Oral's *My Middle East (Uzak Doğu'm)* as her treasure stops for a moment; she looks at herself. In fact, she also missed them a lot. Besides, in a country so far as Japan she misses many developments in her family—illness, accidents... Then, she asks, "why didn't you tell me?" The response is the same all the time: "Not to make you worry". She remembers her Mexican friend, who could not make it to her father's funeral. It was sad to observe her. Ph.D. process is long in my university. If I had chosen a less difficult university I might have already completed my studies. That is my regret. But Ph.D. takes much longer years in the Kyoto University. This time, I, too, find it difficult to stay in Japan until I get the degree. And, living in İzmir after so many years does not look that scary. Thinking that I have already gone through a sufficient self-realization process, I stay in İzmir—I do not yet know that I will stay there much longer than I assume.

### 2020.

First, I live with my family for a couple of months, and mix my tiredness with depression, and then, my desire to be part of everything that happens in Turkey takes over. I start working in İzmir as the coordinator of a project that aims at empowering Syrian women, supported—again—by the government of Japan, with UN Women partnership. The place where I left the research, which I did not want to continue, and found my voice by researching with migrant women in Japan is the same in İzmir. I work both for myself and for women

from the Middle East. I rent a house in Alsancak. Our office is in Konak. Every day, I go to work and come back home by tram. Easy. At a certain point, I visit a medical center in Konak for health check. They see something on the left breast; but it is too small. They suggest another visit after six months. OK, I say. Then I forget about it. I am deep down in work.

But again, things that I cannot foresee. I cannot get along with the men in the management of the civil society organization that I work. I am the coordinator, but I do not have much say. They take the major decisions. And as I try to make myself heard I am scolded. Then, I encounter a weird mobbing experience. I receive a notice, designed in an extremely professional and planned way. Apart from that the employees note that I am not a sufficient manager since I thank them in our communication. I always share with them the experience with my elegant supervisor in Japan who offered me tea in fine tea glasses. I tell them that I am trying to do what I learned. But, no progress. I understand that I cannot continue; so, I resign. I do not explain this state of affairs to the international institution that heads the project. After I returned to the country, this is my first experience with the fact that everything is under guise in CSO project works. Living in Japan for so many years teaches me goodness, beauty, humility, and I return back to Turkey with all the naiveties that are added to my already fragile personality; I cannot comprehend the shenanigans. Thus, I chose to do what I know best, leaving the place where my soul loses its peace. And COVID-19 pandemic enters the scene. I return back to the family home. Again, I am thinking of going back to Kyoto; but the pandemic is all around; doors, borders are closed. My friends cannot return back to the countries.

My supervisor says, "stay in İzmir; you can send your thesis, articles". "OK", I say.

After a while, İzmir is hit by earthquake. Its center is close to where my niece and her mother live. I am deeply worried both for my family and for everyone. I try to participate in the earthquake solidarity process as much as I can.

I have no energy to write about Japan when so much is happening in my country. I live every second with the day-to-day events. The feeling of guilt for my thesis. is hidden somewhere inside; but I have no heart for that.

## 2021.

I decide to be on the field in order not to feel distant to the social issues in Turkey. Besides, I cannot feel settled in İzmir; and as the pandemic is in place, regardless of my family's objections I go to Nevşehir with UNFPA. Embarrassment for the women with whom I walked together in the asylum project that I left lingers inside. Nevertheless, I am pleased that I could find another way to work for women, again. I am happy that I could fill in the gaps of my sadness and disappointment by another work.

I will be the field coordinator of a study about early marriages; the same as I had done years ago in Ankara (Bayraktar, 2012) This is my choice. Alas, the dynamics of Central Anatolia are too harsh for me. I am overwhelmed on the field. Time to time, I ask myself: "What am I doing here; aren't I supposed to be in Kyoto?" My mind is in my thesis. My heart is in Kyoto. But then, who will be on the field? I tend to multiple selves from inside and pursue multiple tasks simultaneously. It is as if, I live life in layers. On each layer, a different version of mine works for the same goal. But as the space and time change I pass from one segment to another without fulfilling my/self in the former

time period. Different periods, spaces, works, countries and cities are mixed together. Trying to deal with the dynamics of the field wears me out. I find myself questioning myself as I observe Turkey and changing socio-cultural structure, and doing field research in the midst of the dynamics of Central Anatolia. I finally accept that I am overwhelmed in the field, and return back to İzmir, this time willingly.

## 2022.

İzmir, again. The life in my birth city is slow for me. I start to participate in local organizations-as if I had never gone to Japan. I contribute to gender works of different institutions. I think on what I can do in this city. Alas, for me İzmir is too inward-looking. That little girl with her overflowing soul who returned back to her birth city floods. As the Ph.D. waits there I cannot stop thinking about what to do in my country. I remember thinking of becoming an academic upon my return to İzmir. Moments when I feel I could not reach the target in my life journey gets more frequent. My depression that surfaces time to time gets severer. Returning to the country does not bring in the peace that I seek. Yet, it seems that my inner chaos is more dominant than the unrest of those who never leave the country. Hence, I have returned. But I do not live the life I want. I cannot.

## 2023.

The February 2023 earthquake deeply affected me; like everyone. I lost eight kilos and struggled to eat. To cope, I sought to address the crisis directly. I knew being part of relief work lessens my pain and guilt. However, I needed a professional role within an organization to contribute effectively and collaborate with other NGOs. I recalled volunteering with an NGO in Kyoto after the Kumamoto earthquake while I was in Japan. Had I still been at the university, I likely would have joined colleagues. I persistently applied for jobs and interviewed until UNFPA accepted me as a coordinator for a role related to women's sexual and reproductive health in Adıyaman. Despite warnings about harsh accommodation (container housing or daily travel from Gaziantep), I accepted. Humanitarian work inevitably meant difficult conditions, and I was driven by a desire to participate in the emerging earthquake solidarity, even though I felt emotionally and psychologically fragile. Prior to the earthquake, a lump in my breast required a biopsy, which I had initially refused, influenced by a book (Özdemir, 2013). However, the UNFPA position required a health check, so I scheduled the biopsy immediately upon acceptance.

## *And – Breast Cancer ... Really?*

And–invasive carcinoma. Estrogen positive tumor. Breast cancer. Too many medical terms. What is happening? Am I going to die? So, this is all? All of sudden, all those years that I lived away from my family loom large. The little girl inside returns. I start to talk to the cancer. No, no, n. This cannot be happening. This cannot be. Are you here because I am confused? Are you here because my focus has shifted from Japan? Ok mama; ok papa. I am in İzmir. Something called cancer arrived. How will I tell this to you? You used to tell me that I tire myself a lot. Did I really do so? Did I worry about everything?

When people get cancer they tend to think: where did I go wrong? Where did I fail in my life that this illness chose me? Or, did I choose it?



In the past, I had times when my depression was deepened. I am thinking. I have a tendency to become depressed. This might arise both due to individual and social reasons. When I experience depression due to social reasons I happen to be more tolerant to myself. Wars, earthquakes, illnesses, migration, violence, murders, death, political climate of the country... Certainly, everything hurts. I am not saddened when I am hurt. I can tolerate the pain. I know that my strength to overcome this pain comes from my sensitivity and I work in the field as such. But when depression comes out of my own darkness, as in Sylvia Plath, Virginia Woolf, Tezer Özlü, William Styron, Charlotte Perkins Gilman... In such instances, another one comes from inside. Someone close to madness. Depression on the edge of madness pushes to write dark; for, I feel dark. (The stories in my book were mostly written either when I was researching, or experiencing anxiety and depression due to being a migrant in Japan.) This might, however, lead me to retreat from participating in social works. As I think, the reason behind the deepest depressions that I experienced was related to my migrant status. Could I adapt to Japan as much as needed? Could I perform well as a researcher in Japan? Or did I fail? I have not written my experiences yet. Does this mean that I am not performing well as a researcher? Do I need to have written for this? Don't I? Then why haven't I written? As researcher from Turkey I conducted research with other migrant women, and wrote stories about my migration experiences. These include belongingness, identity, relating to home, adaptation. Besides, after the ethnographic research I conducted with migrant women I wrote both life stories/narratives as well as a story of a queer friendship and love. In fact, I wrote the most part of my Ph.D. thesis in Kyoto.

However, returning to Turkey, I set aside migration and migrants [in Japan], and focused on the problems of my country. I continued to work on migration, and early marriages. These are still women's issues. But they were in Turkey. I was confused. Have I failed to be in two countries?

I could not fit into my small house in Japan—I had lived in five different houses in five years. Perhaps, as I tell in my stories of the house (Bayraktar 2024) I could not fit into just one place with my ever-moving mind, my writings and life. I could not write while living. Perhaps, accepting my own reality was the best.

I am aware that as I am trying to write about cancer I am writing on migration. And as I am writing on migration I talk about depression. But cancer was the biggest of all...

Like getting cancer. Getting cancer. Really, can anyone think about the possibility of getting cancer? Even in the worst scenario I would think for myself, this was impossible. I mean, I might have a traffic accident. I might fall off a horse. I might be drowned. I might fall off a cliff. I might also plummet to the earth when paragliding. Even when travelling on a balloon in Cappadocia I might also fall. I mean, I am capable of writing all types of horror scenarios. I could do so about myself and my life. But I could never think of getting cancer diagnosis, going under cancer treatment, and questioning the life I leave behind in this process.

Cancer visited me exactly four years after I was blown off course by the pandemic-when I thought that I returned to Turkey temporarily, when I was still in Turkey and working in civil society organizations, and in a period when I was constantly postponing to submit my Ph.D. thesis. With the diagnosis, I first thought of my family, then of Japan. All of sudden, the time I spent in Turkey was nullified; and

the whole past was written in the images of Japan in my mind. Cancer was like a voice, saying, "finish your story. You are about to run out of time. Claim your words that put traces on the roads you travel". In such a serious illness – regardless of the improvements in treatment – the first thing that comes to mind is the word, death. I was no exception. I remember looking at the mirror, and asking, "so, this is all?" This thinking spring from emotions, forceful to the extent that they erase all types of depression.

The world might not be a livable place. There might be numerous evils in the world. I might be locked into a deep darkness, visiting different instances of depression. But I also have hopes for the world and life. I want to work to make the world a better place. I have been as such since the time that I first became aware of myself. I was the same in Japan, too. I was participating in community works, volunteering for the elderly who live in senior centers, visiting the earthquake region Kumamoto, teaching English to Japanese children. Yes, time to time I was angry with myself for not being able to improve my Japanese as much as I wanted, and I compared myself with everyone who graduated from Japanese language departments and came to Japan for research. I postponed academic writing, telling myself that I am not good enough. When I returned back to Turkey I did the same, again. But there was something lacking. It was as if I left my part that lived in Japan back in that country. The works I did in Turkey had nothing to do with Japan, and this made me feel I left a part of me in another country. This perspective might seem strange to everyone. Perhaps, we cannot expect that every path we follow in life overlap and complement each other. One day, we might be in one country, and the following day in another. And, in another country we might pursue a totally different activity. Yes, I agree with all these. However, I do not know why, but I wanted to integrate with all parts of my story. And this is was telling my studies in Japan in another part of the world. This was, for the time being, my own country. Perhaps because I did not do so the feeling of gap was such deep - as if one side of my body was paralyzed. It seemed as if I could not meet life with all my cells, and that I was living with a deficient self. This, in turn, caused unrest on my part-as if the unrest that springs from being unable to be complete; as if the unrest of failing to get Turkey and Japan together. And, is it not that cancer comes out of the incompatibility among body, mind and soul? I do not know whether it is possible to call this scientific knowledge. Yet, my mind and dreams were left in the country, I left behind. If I was asked to draw a picture of my state of mind I would draw a woman whose upper side body is in Japan, and the rest, her feet and legs are in Turkey; whose half bodies are in two different countries. I assume as a drawing it looks horrible. And thus, it is such horrible in reality that not being able to return there caused cancer in me. Perhaps, these inferences were absurd; but the time I spent in Turkey did not make me feel that time was passing. For, the past in my thoughts was about Japan, Kyoto, mostly my supervisor whom I loved, my bicycle and my friends whom I left there. In fact, I always wanted to go back again. All these years I observed the country not only within the scope of my research but also in totally different sociological contexts. And I did not publish the texts that I wrote on these contexts. This weird impostor syndrome dominated me. I could not appreciate myself despite that I was the only researcher from Turkey in my department, the only social scientist from Turkey in the year that I was selected to the program. I did not find myself academically successful and hence, I could not publicize my writings. In fact, today I think that the patriarchal shadows, which were integrated into

my research and writings caused me to suppress my voice inside (Russ, 2022).

Likewise, my book, *Rotten Horses Dumpster*, also met with patriarchal shadows. This book was my response to patriarchal shadows that I met in my academic works, to show them that I can create without supervisors. It contains my writings where I used storytelling method, which I use within the scope of art-based research. A very famous male writer praised my book in his critique (I chose not to cite him), and thereafter started to write letters to me. As I responded to his letters he started to declare his love. This was like the experience of dear Nazlı Karabıyıköğlu's disclosure in the world of literature (Karabıyıköğlu, 2020). I wanted to exist with my own academic works and literary writing. But I was encountering patriarchal shadows with their ugly and deviated teeth. Alas, I have not written on this, either. I was concerned with coming up with a new work that springs from my efforts to stand up despite the interventions every time I tried to create. It was for this reason that I was reluctant for disclosures. I took on the responsibility for writing endlessly for disclosure. However, I preferred to be in the field in accordance with where I positioned myself due to many reasons-individual, economic and social. Perhaps, I was not yet aware of the fact that all these were "imprinted under my skin" (Karabıyıköğlu, 2020).

Cancer was like an alarm bell. Din-dong! Din-dong! What are you doing?

I do nothing, dear cancer.

No, you are resisting to write. You are afraid of telling.

It is true that I have this strange fear of being visible. I am hesitant when I step up to the public. I thought that the hesitancy of Han Kang, this year's Nobel Prize winner, seems a bit like my hesitancy. In the interviews, in the TVs she had this hesitant stand, as if saying read me, but I do not have to be that visible. I felt the same. But I acted as if I was afraid of even being read. I mean, if the part of reason that I could not write was the patriarchal shadows, perhaps, the other part was that I had this fear of becoming visible.

What did cancer say to me? Cancer prevented me from going to the earthquake sites. It said: "Enough for cutting yourself into pieces; it is time to know that you cannot be everywhere, and respond to every issue; if you could write you'd get well."

Then, I started to write. I started to bring together the texts that I wrote in Japan; and this time I was writing with fear. Would I be able to talk about Japan before I die? Did my journey and struggles have a meaning for life? They were meaningful for me. That was certain. But in order to fulfil and express this meaning I had to write, right?

I could not write from within the field. This was clear. Or, I could not write about Japan, I left behind, when I was conducting another research, in another region. My ADHD mind was composed of multiple segments; this was certain, but it could get confused in a moment. Its attention was quickly lost. It could linger between different writings, and between different readings. (I got this diagnosis one year before the cancer diagnosis. Then, I felt that I found the reason behind my fluctuating soul and the shifts in my interests.)

So, I should not be in a different place. Besides I constantly mumbled about Japan with flashbacks in my mind. I longed for Turkey when in Japan, and upon my return I longed for Japan.

With the cancer diagnosis I was worried about not being able to go back to Japan, to travel again, and to work in another country. In Kyoto, I read Kenzaburo Oe's *A Personal Matter (Kojinteki na taiken)*, a novel about his choice of his son over his dream of Africa. I felt the story deep down to my bones. Then, I thought that the worst experience is being stuck to a place because of a certain problem. I had similar dreams for Africa which had for long been part of my ideals. I also wanted to be like my professor of anthropology in METU who knew Swahili. I was dreaming of working in different countries after completing my studies in Japan. Especially, working on gender projects in Kenya was among top ones.

However, with the cancer diagnosis I felt as if I was in the shoes of Kenzaburo Oe. Now, I had to prioritize my health in the city I was living, in the city that I was born, rather than living in another country. But, would it be impossible to go there if I was cured?

## Writing the Illness: The Bridge between Two Countries

My illness turned out to be a bridge. It turned out to be a bridge that surfaced between distances to get my selves in two different places closer, while I was relentlessly trying to connect my journey between the two countries. I could arrive in Japan again only by passing that bridge. I could unite with the other form of myself by walking on that bridge. In this sense, the illness offered me a view to look at my life, and turned into a bridge to unite my different parts at a moment when I could not follow the passing of time. With every word that I write I take another step on the bridge. Hence, I reach to the country once more; the country where I left part of my self.

I convinced myself that the tumor on my breast was formed by my unpublished writings. This is the reason for the birth of this article. In the past, I used to set post-Ph.D. goals. Now, I am focused on the present, rather than what is next. I am thankful that I can write now; I sincerely believe that I will heal to the extent that I can write.

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Is illness a kind of exile? What is exile? Starting a life in a place that you do not prefer to be, and when you are unable to return to your country. Or merely not being able to return. Staying in that limited space. Since illness arrives suddenly it is also a kind of exile. It is a space of entrapment since you cannot get your health back at a certain moment and start to be healthy again. But, at the same time, it is a space of struggle to turn this state of affairs upside down.

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Going to another country for education is certainly not a form of exile. But the moments when you miss and when you are filled with nostalgia might recall exile. Linger between returning back and staying is much like worrying about healing and not healing. Every day you check your body and state of mind: "Am I good, or not? How good am I today? Will I be able to take steps towards the community of healthy people? Will I be able to go back to my own home?"

Migration. Leaving the country behind.

Cancer. Leaving the healthy body behind.

Retaking your healthy body is like returning back to your home. It is like reuniting with yourself. It is like returning back to the place you know. I returned back to the place I know by returning to the place I was born. Now, I am trying to return back to my healthy body. Is it that

cancer tells me, "stay in İzmir, the city that you were born, the place that is most familiar to you"? Does it tell me that I will recover at home? On the other hand, I was diagnosed in the city that I was born... Is it possible that reuniting with my healthy body will mean that I will be able to take to the roads again? I believe that I will reunite with my healthy body by writing for the day to come when I will go back to Kyoto.

I know that I will not be completely healed without writing these thoughts, beliefs and feelings. In fact, I write in order to integrate with all the states of my being. Words, what use do they have if not forming bridges? The stories we live remain in the places they are lived. Illness, too, stays there. In a new encounter people might say that "you are well". Of course, all my efforts are for being well. But, what about our lacking parts? What about the stories of our lacking parts and the roads we travelled? If lived experiences are not meant to be told, then what use do they have? Telling is the major meaning; is it not? If my migration and illness have such a big share in my story, what use my life has, if I do not share how they made the person that I am, how I travelled through them, and how I hold onto life?

### Illness in the Dichotomy of Writing and Living

Cancer showed me that I spared no time for myself. I could balance the time for writing when I was a migrant. To put it more correctly, then, I could write all the time. In fact, in my small Japanese house(s) writing was my only shelter. Perhaps, I could not handle splitting between tasks. Therefore, I had to stop. Perhaps, I would not be able to write this article if I worked in the earthquake region for a year; perhaps, I would have forgotten Japan or the texts that I wanted to write about my migrant experiences and migration would fall behind the issue in Turkey. (If I worked in the earthquake region cancer would have developed into the third or fourth phase.) Above all, I came to understand that one cannot rest without giving the lived time its due. For me giving the time that I live its due is to note it down. To write about those times. It was probably a mistake to rush into other segments of life without writing the lived ones.

I do not want to look back to my past with regret. Because when I returned back to Turkey I was somewhat tired of trying to learn Japanese, and everything I lived was in that language. I wanted to speak in my native language and to work in civil society organizations rather than teaching—five years of teaching in Japan was enough. Thus, I lived my own choices. Although I thought that my return was temporary, I stayed in Turkey, pursued my Ph.D. studies in distance. But because of the dynamics in Turkey I could not relate to Japan. Afterwards, with the longing for Japan that grew inside I watched my stay in the city that I was born with disappointment. And, as I was trying to understand cancer I was much more convinced that the sentences I could not write and the unpublished articles and writings would turn into tumor, growing inside. In order to fill in the blanks left by the cells that were ripped out of me by mastectomy I, once again, held onto the words. Certainly, breast cancer was different; now, the treatments were in place and that I considered myself cured-my chemotherapy was over; I had surgery. But as I am writing this article, I have two more months to go under treatment. And the fact that I had cancer would remain in my life. As Susan Sontag notes, I would be a student of cancer and design my life accordingly. There were scars on the side of my breasts. Besides, I felt fear inside. I got tired when I was thinking on my migration. I certainly got tired when thinking on cancer; but from then on, I would take steps to internalize whatever it said to me and to listen to it.

### What is really important if you have cancer?

What is the significance of Ph.D. when you have cancer? Is it important where you live, what you have done in life, which career stage you are at when you have cancer? Isn't it that cancer is some kind of a knife that cuts the life into two? Before and after...

Before, I used to overthink about which country, which life, which career, which language, which partner is fit for me? I did not favor any, and I considered that continuing the search is the most fit lifestyle for my nomadic soul. Hence, behind the decision to pursue Ph.D. studies in Japan was my aspiration to construct an international career. What use would living in just one country, one city have?

But after the cancer diagnosis I decided what is important once again. Perhaps, the questions above had no meaning; it was only the life that we live that mattered. Thus, it was our journey and struggles that made us ourselves.

With the cancer diagnosis, aside from the ones that I love, my thesis was the first to come to my mind. I could not die before submitting my thesis. I could not die before I publish my writings on Japan. By changing the reason behind going to another country, doing research there and overcoming the problems that no one witnessed and knew only with my ethical values might have caused me time. But it also showed me that I chose my own path. On the road, I met with myself once more. I could see my choices. And I am proud of my story. My struggle is both living a feminist life and writing a feminist Ph.D. thesis. And, this is conditioned by the choices that we encounter. As the false brain tumor diagnosis led Burgess to write a novel, when I could not believe that the diagnosis was there I, too, was convinced that it was there to make me leave the field in Turkey and complete my thesis in Kyoto as soon as possible. Hence, I wrote more. I thought that cancer would not have any other significance. Or, I was more horrified by dying without leaving more writing about Japan where I lived for five years than the idea of having cancer. Was this the point that Lorde mentions as the point of immortality? Perhaps, I could not yet go beyond my aspiration in this respect. For, I have always wanted to be remembered by my writings, and suddenly, I realized that my writings were behind my doings. My publications did not picture my whole story. I have conducted so much research; I have come a long way. Besides, this path involved quite a lot of struggles. My path was worth telling. In fact, I had written many texts; my problem was to do with my pace in publication. As soon as a new research came by, I instantly forgot to publish what I wrote. In Turkey, field study dominated the balance between writing and living. This made me feel that I could not see the remaining part of the road as I changed my route. That is the reason why with the cancer diagnosis I remembered the road that I once walked. I would not further prolong the break I had taken. If something bad happened, would people refer to my research with migrant women? Now, I was happy to be able to tell the struggles behind that research. Would the queer migration story be recalled (Bayraktar, 2025)? Certainly, if I do not publish no one would know. Thereafter, these feelings made me write and publish. I will be completing and submitting my Ph.D. thesis after finishing this article. And then-I will not die; I will continue to write. And cancer will leave, and, it will not re-visit me so long as I write.

### Talking to Cancer Cells...

I started writing my cancer notes with these feelings. When one gets cancer, she starts to write about it in a crazy fashion. This was the case for me, at least. I felt as if I would be talking to the challenges in

my past and on my journey, and find the cancer cells with the help of the hardest dialogue I had: "so, you had cancer here". And, as I found them I would talk to them and hence, recover. If I did not talk to cancer, and continued my life as if nothing had happened the cancer might have re-visited me. But if I could unblock the points of blockage inside me by means of inward digging into myself, cancer would look at me and say, "you dismantled the parts, which made you sick; now, I'm leaving."

Perhaps, I did not let myself to live the migration trauma and mourning under the responsibilities that I felt as a researcher, selected for a difficult position in a difficult country. Likewise, upon my return I did not let the trauma and mourning to talk to me although it was quite deep and strong. Besides, I had to stay in Turkey not only out of my choices but also numerous social dynamics. But instead of listening to my mourning I took steps towards becoming a part of this social existence.

Knowing that I was not the only one whom cancer visited provided me to involve in other women's support and solidarity networks, and to observe inequalities in cancer treatment process according to different social categories. This let me to write all these at the very beginning of cancer process which led me to receive Şirin Tekeli research award. At that time turning cancer into a research topic was for me the method to struggle with cancer. Most probably, I could not write such a research proposal with a calm state of mind. I wrote in a state of mind just like I wrote my stories with madness in Kyoto, just like I changed my research topic, and all other writings about Japan. My madness was interwoven with my killjoy existence. I prolonged my doctoral studies in another country due to the patriarchal challenges I faced. I tried to overcome the due depression by taking shelter in social works in Turkey. After working on such topics as asylum seeking, early marriages, autism, as I was just about to go to the earthquake region and work for women there I had to stop. Something, called cancer appeared. And I felt defeat. It was as if this illness was the end of my feminist struggle. But my story could not be that short. I have not yet told all of it. My research proposal that involved the empowerment of women by telling their stories to each other around cancer and how I was empowered by writing all my fragilities was my shelter. (Certainly, we did not need to read this as power. But for me expressing fragilities is power on my part.) It was saying every challenge that I encountered, "you cannot erase my struggle by making me sick". It was saying that "I would write in any case, even if I am dying". And it was listening to cancer with the idea that it wants me to do so, that it wants me to write my struggles with patriarchy in my journey, imprinted under my skin. It was meant to show that no challenge would be able to take my power to write.

Around cancer, women are uniting with sharing their stories with each other and this is where I find refugee during cancer treatment. And this made me feel that, I should have the power of recovering myself with the support of these woman. At the same time, I heal myself through writing, accepting my fragilities and my struggles but also my power to change the direction of my story. I hoped to change the direction of cancer by writing about it and telling our stories.

Based on all these reasons, my asylum in my research topics emerged as representation of feminist politics. I find asylum in studying high-skilled woman migration in my sociology department in Japan, not because I went to Japan to study this topic, but it emerged as a rebellion to my challenges in the different faces of patriarchal intervention in my identity and research process.

Similarly, I did not choose to have cancer; but perhaps my difficulties made me so much stressed as I refused to be unsuccessful researcher based on these difficulties and struggled to create my own research topic and my own way in the country where I was selected as a social science candidate from Turkey to Japan. And I can proudly say that I have achieved this. My Ph.D. thesis is an example of feminist writing not only in terms of its topic and methodology but also because it includes my feminist struggles. I lived a feminist life as Ahmed portrays.

## Feminist Politics of Cancer and Migration

I did not chose to have cancer, but I could choose to unite around cancer stories as a collective feminist rebellion, and while writing all of these is a way of resistance and feminist politics, listening to myself and sharing the stories of other women from all classes, groups, ages, in their difficulties in life, mostly related with patriarchal intervention to their identity, marriage, relation, work is also my way of continuation on resisting the illness as a feminist approach (As talking about illness brings talking about our struggles with patriarchal structures in our lives which may have the biggest role in the emergence of the illness other than reasons told by doctors). I believe telling the narratives of illness would empower us just as writing all these finally empowered my soul.

With cancer, I felt like I had left/have migrated from my body as Sontag says. Just like I left Turkey; from Ankara to go to Japan.

After experiencing hormone-sensitive breast cancer, medical menopause due to chemotherapy, and a bilateral mastectomy, my body will never return to its previous state.

I left the country for Ph.D. studies, I needed to come back and stayed longer than I thought and postponed writing my thesis while working in gender projects in Turkey, cancer visited me like an alarm bell to remind how time is limited in our lives and it made me to stop searching for other ways to contribute gender equality instead; it made me to fully concentrate on writing my thesis through mentioning my struggles on my way and dreaming to reunite with my school in Kyoto, as I believe completing my unfinished study in Japan will enable me to connect my body before and after cancer. That's why I believe, writing everyday will heal my body.

Reflecting on my time at METU in Ankara, where I transitioned from the mountaineering club to the diving club, I realized that my years in Kyoto as a Ph.D. candidate were among my most active years. I was in peak health, trekking every week, climbing Mount Fuji, cycling daily for 60 to 70 kilometers, and jogging along the Kamogawa River with Japanese people during sleepless nights, fully immersing myself in Japanese life. Perhaps that's why I correlate my Japan journey with the healthy body and that's why, being able to travel again and targeting this will make me heal.

During the challenges that I faced in writing my doctoral thesis, I turned to collective feminist research topics and embraced the role of a feminist killjoy in confronting patriarchal obstacles. I found healing through the voices of migrant women in Japan, including writing about mine, and I continue to heal by sharing time, experiences, and knowledge with other women who have experienced cancer. I aim to illuminate not just my own cancer story but also the collective narratives of others who have faced similar battles. This is how I navigate my life as a feminist. Should one day I succumb to cancer or another cause, I wish to be remembered as someone who shared her stories—her feminist struggles, her journey in Japan, her research on

migrant women in addition to her migration story, her resistance through feminist methodology and art-based research methodology, her experience with breast cancer—and who transformed these struggles into narratives of empowerment and solidarity in migration and cancer processes.

## Conclusion: Resistance, Solidarity, Hope

In this article, I offer a self-reflexive account of my illness with a view to the places that I happened to step into throughout my journey, and where I continued with my resistance. I believe that "we become feminists as we understand ourselves" and our journey, and "we understand ourselves as we become feminists" (Erdoğan, Gündoğdu, 2019, p. 33). I do not know the reason behind the illness. But I always thought that I need to write in order to absorb them when I could not refrain from thinking on the reasons. Hence, as one meets cancer she thinks not only the illness but also her journey, in total, her struggles. This is how I told my migration story when talking about cancer. Cancer strips you off the cover that you form with your efforts for perfection. It leaves your resistance in its naked form where you fight with swords.

The point that I integrate feminist method to my life, to research subjects and our struggle with what we encountered, unfolds on the axis of "difference, togetherness and hope" (Erdoğan; Gündoğdu, 2019, p. 32). I embrace the idea that "it is the attitude of the research that makes its method feminist" (Erdoğan; Gündoğdu, 2019, p. 33). Likewise, this feminist attitude in my case has evolved from leaving behind the research subject that was shaped on the road towards determining my own method and using art-based research as a means for empowerment through which I could dismantle the supervisor – student hierarchy, imposed in the academia and hence, to continue with my position in a study, which I was conducting at the international level. In parallel, it was about pursuing my Ph.D. thesis with migrant women in the country to which I migrated, considering the differences, and focusing on togetherness through our similarities. It was about multiplying our voices in Japan, a country where I was living for educational purposes.

And it was about to continue with this attitude when I was diagnosed with breast cancer. Autoethnography and reflexivity helps me to construct the narration that enables me to include my feminist attitude to the process. The friendship ties that I formed in my migration and cancer experiences help me to raise hope, carry my struggle in illness at the heart, and keep standing in this sad world.

It makes me say that if we migrate and go away again, we will certainly come back to home; and when we return we go away again. And it makes me say if we migrate to illness from our healthy bodies we recover again. But illness gives us the opportunity to promise ourselves – that we will not postpone to write our stories, narrating the political in the personal. It enables us to reach balance between life and writing, lowering all the bars and hence, noticing the empowering effect of writing as much as we can do rather than doing all the more.

I dedicate this article to all cancer patients who migrated from their countries and from their bodies, continuing in their struggle to claim back their health, and to hope and friendship.

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