

A Woman Full of Life: Pembe Marmara¹

(Yaşamın taa İçindeki Kadın: Pembe Marmara)

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(Taranslation: Mine Kanol)

Pembe Marmara was born on 25th December 1925 in a house on Abdi Çavuş Street, number 12. In her own words, Pembe Marmara describes her birth story as follows:

I'm Pembe Marmara, the third child of my mother, the seventh child and third daughter of my father. When I was born, everybody was buried in complete silence. I was expected to be a boy and a replacement for my brother, who was only seven months old when he died. The silence was so encompassing that I was not even registered. When I was old enough to go to school, I remember my parents fabricating a made-up birth date (25th December 1925) for me by making guesses based on dialogues that went like "She was this much younger than this neighbour's son and that much older than that neighbour's daughter" and I finally received my birth certificate. According to these calculations I am now 54 years old. I'm sick, I have no time and I'm really in a hurry. (Unfortunately, after only a few pages she deserted writing down her memories, which she had began to do so in 1980).

I have begun to learn about her life only after she passed away on 31st January 1984. While trying to connect the dots, I have made use of an interview I have conducted with her sister Selma Yusuf (Saygın), also a poet who has posthumously published Pembe Marmara's poetry, thereby fulfilling a long desired dream of her sister.

Her family, who had arrived to the island from Anatolia and whose roots went back to the 1571 conquest, was known as "Sanaçlar". Her father, Yusuf Saraç Hüseyin, who was known as "Bakkal Yusuf" (Grocer Yusuf), came from a wealthy family, was in love with nature and constantly planted trees.

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Pembe Marmara studied in Yeni Cami Preschool, Ayasofya Girls' Primary School, Viktorya Girls' High School respectively and afterwards enrolled in Teachers College, becoming a "Primary School Teacher". I first got to know her when she was teaching in Ayasofya Primary School. At the time, I was studying in Teachers College and every time we had a "teaching internship" programme, I begged my teachers to send me to her class. I was fortunate enough to sit in her class a few times and this gave me the chance to observe her and get acquainted with her. I still recall those memories and exemplary experiences with affection.

She did not prefer to talk much about either herself or her poems and her writings. And even though I was very enthusiastic to hear all about them, I had neither the courage nor the experience to get her to start talking. I would only begin to understand later on that her silence was not only due to her modesty but also due to the norms, values and especially the constraints that were imposed upon a "woman" in those days. During such times, where being a writer, a poet, basically being involved in the arts was associated with frivolity, looseness and moral decline even for men, was an incomprehensible pursuit for a woman.

Consequently, during the interviews conducted with Selma Yusuf years later, she mentioned that Pembe used various pseudonyms including "Nevin Nale, Gülen Gaye, Lafazan, Meçhul, Funda, and Fırtına". However, even hiding behind such pseudonyms was not adequate to ease her fears and concerns. In addition to the fears she had associated with her father and her entourage, she was also apprehended by the fact that under British Colonial Administration there was a writing ban on public servants, which meant that if they found out, she could be dismissed from her post immediately. Nevertheless, despite all, she could not refrain herself from writing. This was an astoundingly courageous thing to do during that era (Unfortunately, this ban was still being implemented even in our time).

Regarding this issue, Selma Hanım also shared an anecdote with me: One day, their father came back from the local coffeehouse filled with rage. Immediately, he began to vent: "What have we come to! The world is coming to an end! Today they read aloud a poem, which was written by a woman. I could not believe it! I was mortified; I could hardly contain my anger. Our women no longer have any decency, any morals, they are shameless..." As their father continued to scream, Selma and Pembe ran to their rooms so as to refrain themselves from laughing out loud when they caught each other's eye: the poem their father was talking about was one of the poems published by Pembe Marmara using a pseudonym.

Her Poetry

Pembe Marmara was one of the first and most prominent poets of the 1940s. She was amongst the four pioneer women of poetry, who were known as "Hececi Şairler" (Poets using the Syllabic Meter) and "Kadın Şairler" (Women Poets). The others were Urkiye Mine Balman; who was our first woman poet, Emine Oktan and Necla Salih Suphi.

Amongst this group, which is also known as '*40 Kuşağı Şairleri*' (Poets of the 1940s Generation), an element of Cypriotness can be felt most in Pembe Marmara's

poetry. She began to make a name for herself after her poems had been published in *I. ve II. Demet Şiir Seçkinleri* and with the urgings of Nihat Sami Banarlı, her poems began to be published in Turkey, especially in the periodical named *Yedigün*.

She corresponded with Turkish writers, and new friendships developed through these exchanges. Amongst these correspondences, a romantic involvement blossomed between her and Ümit Yaşar Oğuzcan², which led up all the way to an engagement.

Here is one of the poems written by Ümit Yaşar Oğuzcan under the name of ‘Kalender’, with the title “Gülen Gaye’ye ithaf” (Dedicated to Gülen Gaye) and subtitle “Bir Şair Gördüm” (I Saw a Poet):[†]

İsmi sordum evden, dediler “Gülen Gaye”
 Dedim “İşte Kalender”, çok güzel bir sermaye
 yazmak için şiir, kalemi aldım ele
 dediler, şaire yaz, çok güzel bir mersiye.
 Yapmam bunu dedim, çünkü o benden üstün
 Gücenir belki bana yeşil yurdun şairi...
 Ümit Yaşar Oğuzcan

Istanbul...Aşyan.. From A. V. Bingöl:

23 Nisan 1957...
 Yeşil Ada'nın Pembe Kızına:
 Dostlar çiçekli hatıralarsa
 Sen de o bahçede bir “pembe gül’sün
 Dilerim her zaman bahtına gülsün
 Ne kadar mutluluk ve sevgi varsa

Ümit Yaşar Oğuzcan

Of course one can find many other examples, but let us offer you these two poems, as a confirmation of the immense and pure love Pembe Marmara and Ümit Yaşar shared, which had began through the letters and poems they had written, without setting eyes on each other even once.

YAŞAMAK NE TATLI !

“Ümit Yaşar Oğuzcan’a”

.....
 Bahar kokuyor her yan oh! ne tatlı yaşamak!
 Derdim yok tasasızım kuşlarla kardeşim bak
 Bugün dünden neş’eli yarın hergünden tatlı

[†] Once I asked one of my colleagues from England to have a look at the translated poetry of a Turkish Cypriot friend and perhaps help me with ‘fine-tuning’. “I’m sure you’ve put a lot of effort into this, but I’d rather learn Turkish and read them myself, which would be much easier and more sensible” she replied. Since then, I found translating poetry extremely demanding and an utterly risky endeavor. Inevitably the translated poetry is the transformed or the distorted poetry, if lucky, or even a total deconstruction, and usually an absolute deception. Hoping that, you appreciate our decision to keep the poetry in the original version (Fatma Güven Lisaniler, Editor).

Bahar kokuyor her yan oh! ne tatlı yaşamak!... (s.80)

From time to time she was filled with despair, resenting the distance between them:

SEVGİLİ'YE

Günler yine öyle geçmekte sensiz
Ömrüm beklemekle geçecek belki

.....

Yılları yıllara bağlasan bile
Derdimle sarmaşıp çağlasam bile
Bir ömür boyunca ağlasam bile
Seni hayal etmek öyle güzel ki..
Ömrüm beklemekle geçecek belki!... (s.69)

They were experiencing their love to the fullest. And this love was being nourished by the letters and poems of Ümit Yaşar Oğuzcan:

YAŞAYAN ÖLÜ..

Bir ölü gelecek evine yarın!
Gözlerinde yarım kalmış arzular,
Dalıp hayaline hatıraların
Duracak kapıda sabaha kadar
Siyahlar giyin de, pencereye çık
Aç kapıyı, korkma yabancı değil
Bir ölü ki, yaşıyor, gözleri açık!

Ölüm seni sevmekten acı değil
Aradı bu ölü hayatı sende
Öldü artık. Sevsen de sevmesen de...

Ümit Yaşar Oğuzcan

This poem was accompanied with a note, which read: 'This poem is for you. I haven't forgotten you. If you are alive, write to me regardless of the circumstances.'

Indeed, the woman he loved was devastated. As Selma Yusuf told me years later, in those days travelling to Turkey was a very difficult undertaking. However, it was equally hard for a man to travel from Turkey to Cyprus to see the woman he loved. Nevertheless, even without seeing each other, the lovers continued to foster their love, and with a ring that came from Ümit Yaşar hidden in a hollow book, this love led up all the way to an engagement. As soon as Pembe's father finds out about the engagement, all hell breaks loose. At first he makes her life a living hell, however realizing how uncharacteristically tormented her daughter has become, he sends her older brother to Istanbul to find Ümit Yaşar and to see whether this man is a worthy match for Pembe. However, Pembe's hopes regarding this trip were soon shattered to

pieces. The family made up its mind; Pembe could not marry Ümit Yaşar because he was not good enough for her. Ümit Yaşar was a very short man who stuttered!...

Pembe Marmara was inconsolable. She became grief-stricken and cried her eyes out for days. However the decision made was final and nothing, not even Pembe's situation, could change it. In the following days, Pembe Marmara makes a decision of her own: she stops writing letters to Ümit Yaşar. According to Selma Hanım, rather than explaining him the values her family beholds as sacred, she prefers to bear her sorrows and keep silent. Despite all, Ümit Yaşar continues to send her letters, the one we see written above is one of the last ones he has written. Gradually, both of them learn to live with a broken heart.

And in the end, Pembe Marmara's life journey comes to an end with cancer. However, during her lifetime she is also forced to endure further pain, when Dr. Sedat Baker, whom she marries year later, falls victim to a murder. At the time of her death, Pembe Marmara was 58. One can only imagine how much more of her work she could have shared with us...

I believe that her biggest happiness was her only son, Ulus. However, I cannot even bring myself to say that she was lucky enough not to experience his early demise, because both died at such an early age.

Here is a poem Ulus wrote for her mother, when he was still a little child:

Benim güzel anneciğim.
Beni sen büyüttün
Ben seni hep sevdim, seveceğim
Şimdi büyüdüm, eskiden çok küçüktüm...

She Was Full of Life...

Pembe Yusuf Marmara lived her life to the fullest, with the good and the bad. She experienced both sorrow and happiness...

It was due to this fact that her poems contained elements of both victory, irony, satire, as well as a will to live, warmth, empathy and love.

DÜN.. BUGÜN !..

Dün bir kuştum neşeli
Hatta deli
Düşüncem yoktu
Her şey benimdi o zaman ... (S.48)

She was one of our first poets to explore both individuality, as well as societal factors in her poems:

BİZİM EV

Anam Çarşamba karısına benzer
evin içinde

Babam iki karış boyu bir markuddi
 Çocuklar sümüklü alına sanki
 Ablam alık
 Ben tımarhanelik! (s.38)

Her poems had elements of varying emotions, from affection to fear and pain, but one could always sense the sensibility in her poetry.

BEN DELİYİM !

Haberiniz varmı?
 Ben deliyim!
 İnanınız dostlar
 Ben deliyim!
 Deli olmasam
 Yaşayamam
 Ne onun kara gözü
 Ne de tatlı canım için yaşıyorum
 Ben deliyim! Ben deliyim! (s.22)

At first, to escape the rules and the societal values that she could not internalize, she chose to feign madness and make fun of them, but gradually we observe that she move away from society and crowded groups to observe the individual and lonely people.

And the mischievous and wise attitude she had in life finally faded away with the pains she encountered in her life. At the time of her death, she had distanced herself from even her most immediate friends and family.

ŞİKAYETLERİM I

Doğdum
 Anam
 Babam
 Kardeşlerin öldüler
 Belki yüzüm güler
 diye
 Sevdim
 Sevdiğimi elimden aldılar... (s.12)

She had settled in Turkey when she had married Dr. Sedat Baker. However, when she got ill, she decided to move back to her beloved land. It is here that she said goodbye once and for all to this world. Indeed, the poems she wrote while she was sick expressed the longing and yearning she felt for her country:

GİDERİM !

...

Ufuklar kapkara dünya bana dar
 Ömrümde bulmadım hiç gönlüme yar
 Vatanım, al be beni kollarına sar
 Yıllar var seninçün ağlar giderim!. (s.107)

And her last farewell poem:

MERDİVENLER

Rüyalarım giren
 Hüyalarımı saran
 Işıkları pırıl pırıl yanan
 Bir aleme ulaşmak
 Sokaklarında dolaşmak
 Parklarında gezmeştir gayem
 Hem
 Öldükten sonra da
 Yaşarım belki...
 Siz söyleyiniz beni sevenler... (s.5)

Indeed, on 8th March 2007, at the Women's Day organized jointly by Famagusta Municipality and Eastern Mediterranean University (EMU) –Centre for Women's Studies, for the cause of "Keeping Alive the Memory of Pembe Marmara", a portrait of Pembe Marmara was placed in the Books on Cyprus corner of the EMU Library.

She Was So Different...

As I do with the other poets and artists that are dear to me, I've asked myself over and over again what was it that made me consider Pembe Marmara to be so special? And the answer to that question is, every time I read a poem of hers, I feel the same thing: A chill down my spine. And as a person who was lucky enough to have met her personally, I think to myself, if it isn't "love", more than "understanding and being understood", that makes a real relationship last forever, be it between family members or society at large?

And when women like Pembe Marmara truly love; or in fact, when the creature known as human truly loves, that will be a revolution in human relations.

I still believe that women are far more daring than men when falling in love. And as a woman, Pembe Marmara had courage. She was brave in her love, in her writings as well as in her life. Few people had as much courage as she did.

If someone asked me to summarize Pembe Marmara's life, I would say that she was strong, shy, but brave. You can find traces of her life in her work, which is something very few writers or poets succeed in doing.

She might not have been fully aware of it, but with her insight and poetry she was attempting to eliminate the taboos furnished by the weaknesses of the society and the people. She was among the pioneers of the opposition to the 'culture of idolization' that has been prevailing in our country.

In the privacy of her own emotional world, she was the sort of woman who would not hesitate to break down any emotional idols that might have emerged either due to her or otherwise.

Her father, her first love Ümit Yaşar Oğuzcan, her husband Dr. Sedat Baker and her son Ulus were the four most significant male figures in her life.

Always

She always had a longing for humanity. She incessantly tried to understand the human nature and the world around her through her belief that the world was created for the human-beings and it needs to be recreated constantly in order to be a liveable space. She wasn't understood. In fact, 'getting along' didn't suffice for people to understand each other.

She was heartbroken, offended, and finally gave in to the flow of life that she relentlessly tried to revert. And she silently bid farewell.

She departed rather prematurely. But even those who never got to know her are left with her poems that are full of love, forever young, lively, mischievous, and still reaching to the heart.

Final Remarks

I consider her my relative of poetry. I always feel content thinking about the poets, which I regard as my relatives. Because we share a kinship; similar to the one shared by the trees, flowers and bees, which feed off from nature. Therefore, just like Feride Hikmet, Nilgün Marmara and Virginia Wolf, I consider Pembe Marmara a close relative of mine.

We are indeed different. And we will be...

Because how can there be "change" without differences? The important thing is to love despite of those differences and to open up ourselves to each other, in order to create that perfect "unity"...

Notes

¹ This is the text of Neriman Cahit's speech on Pembe Marmara, which was given in the "Kıbrıslı Şair Kadınlarla Buluşma Paneli" (Gathering of Turkish Cypriot Women Poets Panel) during the 3-8 March Women's Week Events titled "Yine Her Yerdeyiz" (Once Again We Are Everywhere). EMU- Centre for Women's Studies and Famagusta Municipality, 6th March 2008, Famagusta, North Cyprus.

² A famous Turkish poet (1926-1984).

References

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