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Book Review

The Turkish Lover (1999) by Esmeralda Santiago Available from DeCapo Press, 341pages. ISBN 0-7382-0820-5

Esra Körpez

In Esmeralda Santiago's third memoir *The Turkish Lover* , written as a sequel to *Almost a Woman* (1998) and *When I was Puerto Rican* (1993), Santiago's haunting feelings of homelessness and dispossession continue as she decides to leave her Puerto-Rican barrio, her beloved Mami, grandmother Titi Ana, and ten siblings to be with her Turkish lover, Ulvi Doğan. It is during the final chapters of *Almost a Woman* that the reader first confronts this mysterious and "captivating" man by whom Santiago is offered an audition at a phone booth on 5th Avenue. Ulvi Doğan introduces himself as the film-director of *Susuz Yaz*, a Turkish film that won the 1964 Golden Bear Award at the Berlin International Film Festival and from which Doğan aims to make a big profit. This brief encounter will set in motion the beginning of a seven-year romance which Santiago picks and builds up in *The Turkish Lover*.

As can be easily understood from some of the chapter titles, "That is not good, Chiquita," "Come, Chiquita, this is your job," "This I do not like," "Don't worry, you still have me," "You have many men friends, Chiquita," a very domineering and protective relationship stands at the center of Esmeralda Santiago's last memoir. "Do not concern yourself" is the distant reply Santiago receives whenever she attempts to pry into the past of her Turkish lover, who is at the same time a businessman with "mysterious connections." Even though Doğan has never been the film director of *Susuz Yaz* (only a leading actor and co-producer), he, nevertheless, becomes the director of Santiago's self-narration for seven years. He tries to shape, define, and fashion Santiago's sense of self against the backdrop of his own cultural conventions and male sensibilities. Santiago's very need to give form and content to her Puerto-Rican identity is deferred as she grudgingly consents to Doğan's discipline and regulations and routinely accepts Doğan's control over her life. As she relinquishes her will to his, she becomes an actress on stage responding automatically to this condescending Turkish man's expectations and demands. She is not to pick up the phone at all times, not to speak freely in front of Doğan's friends, and not to have any friends independent from his. Choosing her own clothes and spending her money as she pleases become luxuries she forgets. During her temporary stays in Texas and New York, Santiago not only supports Doğan financially by working in part-time jobs but also becomes his invisible research assistant, typist and language editor. It is due to her commitment

and dedication that Doğan is able to earn degrees in two Master's and a Ph.D program. Santiago uses all her energy, talents and skills for her lover's privilege and never her own; nevertheless, the countless days of exhaustive and strenuous study bring its own rewards. It helps her to recognize her own abilities and accomplishments and gives her the courage and self-confidence to realize her own vocational path. She starts attending community colleges at the places she stays with Doğan and later applies to Harvard, to which she is readily accepted. And it is just before her Harvard graduation that she finds the courage to say no and declare her independence from this man whose protective armor has been suffocating her for seven years.

The Turkish Lover, as a bildungsroman, very vividly and engagingly chronicles Esmeralda Santiago's seven-year struggle to create her own space, to regain her self-integrity and self-respect and to become "visible" once again. However, while efficiently conveying the ferociousness of jealousy and possessiveness that has been at the heart of her relationship, her memoir falls short in providing access and insight into her own true feelings and emotions. It is not Santiago but Ulvi Doğan who has been honest from the very beginning, revealing his real intentions, telling us over and over again that marriage with her Chiquita is out of the question. However, Santiago, in explaining why she felt urged to pursue a seven-year "neurotic" relationship with no future, cannot give us a believable reason other than a "caring" man who just happened to be a "stop along the journey." Thus, as unconvinced readers, we wonder whether it is actually the ambivalence about the value of her Puerto-Rican identity that has led Santiago to grasp this boyfriend, 17 years her senior, as an opportunity.

The Turkish Lover, will also disillusion readers, who from the title expect to gain insight into another culture besides their own. Ulvi Doğan, fails to become more than a sketchy caricature of the exotic Other, in whose critical gaze Santiago gains identity. Santiago may have felt degraded by being called Chiquita, little girl, and may resent the fact that Doğan never tried to get to know the real Esmeralda, but Santiago, with her book title, also replicates the "othering" discourse she bitterly observes in her Turkish lover. Forgetting that she too is an exotic dark-skinned Hispanic woman for many mainstream Americans, Santiago markets her third memoir by a title whose racial undertone caters to the Western popular imagination. Contrary to her previous memoirs, Santiago discloses a Euro-centric positionality by promoting Doğan as the seductive Oriental Turk whose "name sounded so foreign" and who intrigued her with his "silk chiffon veil" souvenirs, his mysterious business schemes and frequent Middle Eastern journeys. Even though Santiago has used Ulvi Doğan's ethnic background as a marketing strategy for her memoir, she, ironically, has been unable to penetrate into this Turk's innermost self, his fears, desires, and passions. Maybe, it is with a feeling of resentment that Santiago writes *The Turkish Lover*. For it seems that after 37 years, this Puerto-Rican American writer still does not know what her Turkish lover, the man her memoir is titled after, was really like underneath it all.