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THERE WAS AND THERE WAS NOT

(*BİR VARDI, BİR YOKTU*)

Author: Meline Toumani

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Meline Toumani's *There Was and There Was Not* was published in 2014 and was acknowledged as one of the remarkable books of the year. In this book, Armenian American author Meline Toumani, who grew up in the US, reflects on Turkish and Armenian approaches to the events of 1915. She also questions the attitudes of the Armenian diaspora in five chapters. Toumani emphasizes that what motivated her to write this book was to obtain rational reasons that would enable her to accuse Turkey for the 1915 events (since she considers the 1915 events to be a genocide) and also surpass the perspective of the Armenian diaspora.

The first chapter, titled *Diaspora*, stresses upon the successful impact of summer camps held in Massachusetts (United States) that elaborate upon the memories and convictions of the previous generation Armenians and pass them onto next generation Armenians. Notably, Toumani carefully delves upon the continuous oppressive atmosphere to which she has been exposed to since her childhood by her Armenian community in the US. The author indicates the sense of pressure is also the result of various methods that are akin to brainwashing, and result in a domineering discourse about the "genocide" in the summer camps.

In the rest of the book, Meline Toumani explains the reasons why she became obsessed with the events of 1915. Accordingly, she narrates the protests between Armenians and Turks held in New York and some noteworthy statements made during these protests against Armenians and Turks. For her, this can be considered as the main reason that provoked her to think about the claims of these two groups of people.¹ Furthermore, the diaspora's accusatory attitude towards Turkey has influenced her thinking about the dispute about the 1915 events. It can be seen that this attitude pushes some individuals like Toumani towards seeking of new ways of thinking about long-running disputes.

The following chapters are primarily concerned with Turks' and Armenians' attitudes and views towards the current diplomatic relations. In order to examine realistically this relationship and to observe Turks' approach to the Armenian question, Toumani settled in Turkey in 2006 for some time. Although she felt like a stranger and had feelings of hatred in the first instance, she admitted that she demolished these feelings stemming from the biased attitude of the diaspora. Then, she left Turkey to carry on her studies in Armenia. Toumani indicates fairly that she could not feel a sense of belongingness to Armenia, despite the fact that it is the country of her people. On the other hand, Toumani underlines that some historical facts are deviated by the diaspora, such as the number of Turks killed in 1915. In this way, Toumani tries to shed light on the historical background of the 1915 events.

One of the crucial things provoking Toumani to write this book was Hrant Dink and his assassination. Toumani states that his ideas concerning the relationship between Armenia and Turkey, and Armenians and Turks, are similar and she has often taken inspiration from his opinions. His death has therefore caused a great amount of shock and pain for Toumani.

In the final chapter, titled *Power*, Toumani emphasizes the online petition organized by four Turkish writers and scholars titled "We apologize" (Tr. *Özür Diliyoruz*).² This petition contains a common declaration towards Armenians and is signed by a group of like-minded people in Turkey. It should be noted here that the people who signed this petition showcase a common, peculiar mindset; they have an opposition to Turkish identity and/or to the Turkish state due either to personal or ideological reasons, and dogmatically latch onto the genocide narrative as a way to criticize Turkishness or Turkey. Moving back to the Toumani's narrative; she makes some remarks about the use of the term

1 Meline Toumani, *There Was and There Was Not* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2014), p. 97.

2 Toumani, *There Was and There Was Not*, p. 271.

“Great Catastrophe” instead of “genocide” in this petition. According to her, “Great Catastrophe” is a deliberate usage and is not sufficient to empathize with the feelings and pain of Armenians. The organizers of the petition, meanwhile, have indicated that the use of the term “Great Catastrophe” makes it easier for Turks to recognize the events of 1915 as “genocide”.³

According to the author, one must first become a free-thinking individual by exceeding the approach of the Armenian diaspora and understanding the Turkish public in order to reveal the truth. According to Toumani, this necessitates a change in perspectives of these two groups of people. As a matter of fact, though Toumani defends these views, she uses the terms “we” and “us” when referring to Armenians, which actually conflicts with her point of view, undermining the uniqueness and individualism that she is trying to emphasize throughout her book. Besides these, harshly criticizing the Armenian diaspora’s approach does not prevent her from defining 1915 events as genocide. As Toumani refers in the book, one can easily realize that the Armenian diaspora is mainly organized around the idea of having the 1915 events recognized as a genocide.

Meline Toumani and *There Was and There Was Not* has been both positively and negatively criticized by members of the Armenian diaspora. There have also been some Armenians who have declared Toumani as a traitor. Toumani being branded as a “traitor” should come as no surprise, since she, despite holding the conviction that there was a genocide, has publicly criticized (through her book) the attitude of a diaspora that is completely obsessed with the idea of accusing Turks and Turkey at every turn. The following comments, appraisements, and interviews carried out by various newspapers or writers showcase some of the reaction that Toumani’s book has received:

*Toumani considers beyond national identities and reflects an individualistic approach.*⁴

*Meline Toumani’s brave book provides a different view for the relationship between the Turks and Armenians. While she deals with the Armenian diaspora persisting [that] the genocide should be recognized, the ignoring of Turks [about the “genocide”] is [also] criticized.*⁵

3 Toumani, *There Was and There Was Not*, p. 272.

4 Joanna Scutts, “Review: ‘There Was and There Was Not,’ hate and possibility, by Meline Toumani”, *The Washington Post*, 5 December 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/review-there-was-and-there-was-not-hate-and-possibility-by-meline-toumani/2014/12/05/5c7587e0-5959-11e4-8264-deed989ae9a2_story.html

5 Eric Bogosian, <http://www.melinetoumani.com/>

*Toumani tries to reach a consensus at the human level in spite of Turkish culpability.*⁶

*Armenian obsession with genocide restrains Armenians to progress and reach high potential.*⁷

As can be seen from such comments, despite the fact that she wholeheartedly believes that there was a genocide, her ability to criticize the diaspora's overall attitude was presented as a brand new approach to the Armenian question.

In conclusion, it can be stated that Meline Toumani tries to find concrete and logical answers for the Armenian obsession regarding the claim of genocide. In general, it is often emphasized in her book that habit of acting like an imitator and servant of the diaspora's discourse must be overcome and that Turkey has to acknowledge her "culpability". In *There Was and There Was Not*, Meline Toumani states that reconciliation can be achieved only by the bilateral acknowledgement of differences, the objective examination of historical facts, and self-criticism of the parties subject to these discussions. Taking all of these ideas in, the main importance of this book lies in the fact that, irrespective of her convictions about the 1915 events, Toumani was able to: 1) Overcome the dogmatic attitude that was instilled upon her during childhood, 2) Muster the courage to live among those who are portrayed as the enemy (the Turks), and 3) Muster the courage to publicly criticize her own people's attitude about an extremely sensitive subject such as the 1915 events.

6 Christopher De Bellaigue, "There Was and There Was Not" by Meline Toumani", *The New York Times*, 23 January 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/25/books/review/there-was-and-there-was-not-by-meline-toumani.html?_r=0

7 Neery Melkonian, "Meline Toumani, the Armenian Genocide and the Politics of Appeasement", *Huffington Post*, 28 January 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/christopher-atamian/meline-toumani-the-armeni_b_6548486.html