



An Examination of Old Age Through Mina Urgan's Eyes: Indicators of Gerotranscendence in "Memories of A Dinosaur" and "Travels of A Dinosaur"

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ABSTRACT

Narratives about life are significant for understanding and evaluating the aging process. Biographical narratives of famous thinkers and writers appear as materials that provide essential resources in this respect. Mina Urgan was a Turkish professor of English Literature, writer, philologist, and translator. She was born in 1915, in the last period of the Ottoman Empire, and witnessed the founding process of the Republic of Türkiye. In addition to her professional works, her autobiographical books titled "Memories of a

Dinosaur" (Urgan, 1998) and "Travels of a Dinosaur" (Urgan, 1999) have become extremely popular in Türkiye. This study examined signs of gerotranscendence in these two autobiographical sources. In addition to Urgan's statements accepting that she has transcended the cosmic time she lives in and is a temporary bridge between generations, her social functionality and transcultural perspective, and how this perspective is reflected in her psychological well-being, appear as examples of gerotranscendence.

KEYWORDS: Mina Urgan; Autobiography; Gerotranscendence; Positive Aging; Narrative Gerontology.

KEY PRACTITIONER MESSAGE

1. This study supports Lars Tornstam's (2005, 2011) idea regarding signs of gerotranscendence in older people's experiences and the universality of gerotranscendence development.
2. Mina Urgan's two autobiographical books are both popular and valuable resources for gerontological education and the inner side of aging, particularly focusing on positive aging and gerotranscendence. This paper underscores their practical relevance, providing a tangible application of gerontological theories.

INTRODUCTION

Gerontologists who study biography focus on the internal dimension of aging. It deals with how the life story of individuals goes through, changes, and transforms over the years and how it is revealed from

the individual's imagination through participation in reminiscence, life review, and other autobiographical reflections (Kenyon & Randall, 2018, p. 5). Biographical elements such as autobiographies or life stories are subjective, reflecting individual development (Ruth & Kenyon, 1996). Tufan (2020, p. 8) stressed the urgency of looking at the biographies of today's older people to prevent today's young people from sharing a similar fate with their grandparents and to provide a better aging opportunity. Therefore, it is imperative to focus on the individual's autobiography to understand the aging process and the developmental stages of this process. Biographical narratives of famous thinkers and writers appear as materials that provide essential resources in this respect (Erucar, 2018).

Mina Urgan was a Turkish professor of English Literature, author, philologist, and translator. Since she was born in 1915, the last period of the Ottoman Empire, she was also an alive source for Türkiye's history (Inal, 2022, p.36). She satisfactorily completed a degree in French Philology at Istanbul University. Upon obtaining her PhD in English literature, she did post-doctoral research in the English Philology School at the same university. Her dissertation, submitted in 1949, was entitled "Harlequins in the Theater of Elizabeth I of England." This dissertation facilitated her promotion to the role of associate professor. She was designated as a professor at the university in 1960. Besides her professional works,

her two autobiographical books "Memoirs of a Dinosaur" (Urgan, 1998) and "Travels of a Dinosaur" (Urgan, 1999), became immensely popular in a noticeably abbreviated time (Altan-Olcay, 2009, p.168). This study aims to analyze these books as gerontological sources for gerotranscendence and positive aging. Mina Urgan's consideration in terms of gerotranscendence stems from the fact that she is an important figure and example in this regard, as well as her literary identity. Urgan, who has experienced authenticity and unique aging processes throughout her life, can be compared to a client whose works as a gerontologist can be interpreted with a superior level of transparency, as she reflects this to us with her literary professionalism.

Gerotranscendence

The theory of Gerotranscendence indicates a new perspective and reorientation in experiences toward understanding life as a spiritual transition rather than simply withdrawing from life (Dalby, 2006; George & Dixon, 2018). For this reason, it is claimed that there is a spiritual and existential change in the aging process. Additionally, it is the final stage in the progression towards maturity and wisdom and highlights the different structuring of reality commonly accepted in middle age (Tornstam, 1999). This structuring is seen as a spontaneous process of self-transcendence. It indicates a decrease in the importance of self-definition based on society for the

individual, increased interiority, and a greater sense of connection with past and future generations (George & Dixon, 2018; Levenson, et al. 2005).

Lars Tornstam defines three dimensions of Gerotranscendence: cosmic, self, and social (Tornstam, 2005). These three dimensions also have subdimensions. Table-1 shows the subdimensions of each central dimension were abstracted. Tornstam also emphasized that not every individual must show all the signs of gerotranscendence and that it is related to the aging process (Hyse & Tornstam, 2009; Tornstam, 2005, 2011). Turning points and crises in the life course would affect the time of occurrence of any signs of gerotranscendence.

Signs of Gerotranscendence in Mina Urgan's Autobiographical Writings

She starts her first section, named "Old Age" in *Memories of a Dinosaur*, with her motivation for life writing:

"What do older people do? They write their memories. That is what I am doing... As I started writing my memoirs, I turned eighty-two. I do not know if I will live to complete this task, but I will definitely try. To prevent us from becoming a memoryless society, I find it useful for everyone to write their memories. However, I cannot deny that a small amount of selfishness engages in this work that I consider my duty. Because a person like me,

who does not believe in the immortality of the soul or the afterlife, wants to leave a trace, even if it is tiny, before disappearing into a dark void..." (*Memories of a Dinosaur*, p. 9).

She believes that leaving memory is helpful for society's collective memory and could also be used as a tool for the immortality of oneself. This perspective aligns with the views of narrative and existentialist gerontologists about the function of reminiscence and life story writing as a tool for reaching ego integrity (Butler, 1981) and authenticity (Laceulle, 2018). Lars Tornstam (1999) also mentioned that reminiscence and gerotranscendence are intertwined. In the following sections, Mina Urgan also discussed how people's perceptions of the aging process change with age.

"As I begin my memoirs, first of all, I want to destroy the myth that youth is a period of happiness and old age is a period of unhappiness. Youthful happiness is a big lie that almost everyone believes except the young people themselves. No young person has heard the saying, "Oh, how happy I am to be young." However, for some reason, the old people said, 'Ah! "How happy I was when I was young!" They keep deceiving themselves by saying" (*Memories of a Dinosaur*, p. 10).

She challenges the general point of view regarding

Table-1. Subdimensions of Gerotranscendence

Cosmic Transcendence	Self-Transcendence	Social Transcendence
Change in time perception and vitality of childhood memories	Self-confrontation/discovering the hidden aspects of self	Changed meaning of social relationships
Connection to earlier generations	Decrease in self-centeredness	Changed meaning of roles/ social masks
Decreased fear of death, accepting the death.	Self-transcendence from egoism to altruism	Emancipated innocence
Accepting the mysteries of life	Body transcendence	Modern asceticism/ decrease in interest in material assets
Rejoicing the source of happiness/ transcendental sources of happiness	Ego integrity	Everyday wisdom

aging and youthfulness. In the coming sections of “The Travels of a Dinosaur,” she says that young people have much to do in their lives with limited opportunities, contrary to older people who mostly believe that their lives are at the end because of illnesses and other age-related factors. Therefore, while being aware of the possible returns of the aging process, she does not hold a pessimistic point of view. This perception aligns with the view expressed by Lars Tornstam (2005) in the opening chapter of his book. He suggests that people often anticipate their experiences worsening ten years later. However, when they actually reach that age, they find that reality is not as bleak as they had expected.

Cosmic Transcendence Signs

It is possible to see the signs of cosmic transcendence in Mina Urgan’s autobiographical writings. The first sign is regarded to change on time perspective:

“Until forty, every event we experience has a place, importance, and meaning. After forty,

the tempo accelerates incredibly. You may find out that something you thought happened yesterday has already happened fifteen years ago.” (Memories of a Dinosaur, p. 82).

In the process of gerotranscendence, the definition of time may change, and the past and present may appear simultaneously in the person’s mind. The borderline between now and then can become transcendental, and it also marks a return to childhood and a reinterpretation of previous years (Tornstam, 2011). The second example of a cosmic transcendence sign is about being happy with small things and feeling closer to nature or art. In the Memories of a Dinosaur’s first chapter, Mina Urgan mentions the importance of “small happiness in life “as:

“If you know how to evaluate the so-called small happiness properly, you will understand that these are big and very big happiness.” (The Travels of a Dinosaur, p. 9).

Her definition of small happiness is similar to

the transcendental sources of happiness sub-dimension of Cosmic Transcendence in Tornstam's Theory (Tornstam, 2005, 2011). In *Memories of a Dinosaur*, she mentions her slangy speech style, and for casualization, she finds herself similar to her scurrilous grandfather.

"...I would like to point out that my swearing like this is a genetic phenomenon; that is, I swear uncontrollably (...). My father never swears. However, my grandfather, whom I never knew, was so foul-mouthed that he became famous in the army as 'swearing Asaf..'" (Memories of a Dinosaur, p. 20).

This quote shows the feeling of *being part of a coiling genetic chain and the closeness to the previous generations'* dimension of cosmic transcendence (Tornstam, 1997). However, she also shows the *connection with the next generations*, showing the similarity of attitudes towards the sea between self and grandson:

"When he was little, my grandson Yunus, who acted like me about the sea when we took him out of the water, used to say, "Grandma, let me kiss the water again," and he wanted to drink the salt water. Probably, I would have done the same thing when I was a kid." (The Travels of a Dinosaur, p. 29).

Self-Transcendence Signs

Her opinions about mistakes show the *ego integrity*

since she is aware of them but not regrets:

"I have made many mistakes throughout my life. I made mistakes that caused me much pain. I do not regret any of it because these mistakes must be made. Only after making those mistakes could I get rid of them.."
(Memories of a Dinosaur, p. 47).

Her *body transcendence* occurred related to eating and smoking habits. After she turned seventy, she realized that she had to control her eating habits; in addition, she was aware of the adverse effects of smoking but did not choose to quit. This is also parallel to Tornstam's (2005) definition.

She mentions that she always wanted to write poems but could never manage it. However, after her eighties, she realized she had written about the time between sleep and awakesness. This is an example of *self-confrontation* of Tornstam's Theory of Gerotranscendence. One of her beliefs on behavioral change in old age is about *decreasing egocentrism*:

"Over time, older people begin to shed their ego, which is the main source of their unrest and unhappiness. Their main concern is not themselves but others." (Memories of a Dinosaur, p. 58).

Tornstam (2005, 2011) defines this change as self-transcendence.

Social Transcendence Signs

Although she had an extensive network of social

relations, Urgan's opinion about solitude is positive. With the following quote, we see the sign of a *positive perception of solitude*:

"Since I have always enjoyed solitude, I do not consider being alone one of the disasters of old age." (Memories of a Dinosaur, p. 67).

Atchley (2009, p.34), in her study introducing the Gerotranscendence Theory, exemplified the change brought about by explaining that the responsibility of parenthood turns into a more existential situation with more knowledge and experience sharing with the birth of grandchildren. Urgan's perception of parenthood and grandparenthood is similar to this example, as the *change in role perception* is a sign of gerotranscendence:

"An older person's relationship with his/her grandchildren is much more comfortable than his/her relationship with his/her children when he/she was younger. The tension experienced with children does not be experienced with grandchildren (...). Grandmothers and grandfathers do not interfere with their grandchildren much because they leave their responsibilities to their mothers and fathers. They just love..." (Memories of a Dinosaur, p. 24).

Urgan's observations related to the perception of older people within society, considering them like children, so she decides to act more playfully and

use this perception for her own benefit (Urgan, 1998, p. 57). This is the sign of *emancipated innocence* subdimensions of social transcendence:

"I was not very spoiled in my youth and middle age. But I realized that, in my old age, when I kept saying, "I want to do this, I want to do this, I want to eat this..." my relatives fulfilled the wishes of this octogenarian, just as they would fulfill the wishes of an eight-year-old child. I am exploiting this situation as much as I can, without any shame..." (Memories of a Dinosaur, p. 13).

Although her views on tolerance extend to many areas, from same-gender attraction to a spouse who has cheated on once to an alcoholic friend, Urgan thinks that the racism and discrimination of individuals who are considered "mature" after the age of 40 should not be tolerated (Urgan, 1998, p. 59-60). As Tornstam (2005) remarked, this view may also be seen as a manifestation of common knowledge.

DISCUSSION

This paper aimed to analyze the meaning of old age through the eyes of Mina Urgan with the perspective of Gerotranscendence Theory. Hyse and Tornstam (2009, p. 4) stated that when the Gerotranscendence Theory is introduced to older adults, they commonly realize their dimensions and their development within the theory spontaneously. Therefore, the validity of

the theory is directly confirmed by themselves rather than by the theory testing procedure. These two autobiographical books by Mina Urgan prove this opinion of Tornstam. Besides providing information about the period she lived in, her autobiographical writings also provide an overview of how an aging individual would positively change their mindset about the world and self. As a result, she presents a profile that not only fulfills her existential homework (Randall, 2019; Schacter-Shalomi & Miller, 1995) and contributes to society by writing her autobiography during the aging process but also shows that with advancing age, changes appeared in her perception of time, intergenerational relations, relationship with nature, perspective on social life, and ego integrity, just as Tornstam (2005, 2011) stated. These two books have not yet been translated into other languages than Turkish. However, they could be valuable sources as autobiographical material and an example of understanding the Gerotranscendence perspective in Gerontology education.

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