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Reading Kafka in Turkey

An investigation of the reception and appropriation of Kafka in Turkey reveals the ongoing effort to secure freedom of speech in a country that is marked by a long history of Turkification and Islamisation. The strong tradition of Kafka reception in Turkey has sensitised readers to the kinds of literary allusions and rhetorical flourishes that are associated with the Prague author. Characters such as Herr K. and Gregor Samsa, labyrinthine narratives and the motif of estrangement left a lasting imprint on literary texts that openly challenge or circumvent censorship.

The Turkish reception of Kafka is also instructive for research in the field of Turkish-German Studies. There is a long-standing relationship between Turks and Germans dating back to Ottoman times that is marked by imperial and national interests, intellectual exchange, exile, labour migration and economic interests. A dynamic market for Turkish literature has evolved in Germany since the 1980s and vice versa. Since Kafka's work explores ethnic, national, imperial or religious categories, it continues to provoke debate about what it means to belong. The work of the most prominent German authors of Turkish descent, such as Emine Sevgi Özdamar and Zafer Şenocak, applies Kafka in new ways. Şenocak's most recent work, *In deinen Worten: Mutmaßungen über den Glauben meines Vaters* (2016), echoes Kafka's *Brief an den Vater* (*Letter to His Father*), in which the son discusses his father's transmission of religious tradition.¹ Albeit in different fashions, both texts address the transformation of minority religions in the context of migration and assimilation.

This article focuses on the reception of Kafka as a diagnostic means for assessing the status and treatment of ethnic and religious minorities in Turkey. For scholars and writers alike, Kafka remains a dominant figure, one who signifies the possibility of moving beyond nationally defined literary fields. Nurdan Gürbilek, for example, adopts a comparative approach in her analysis titled *Benden Önce Bir Başkası* (*Somebody Else Before Me*), in which she reads literary texts

1 This essay is a shorter version of the article published in "Kafka is among us: Turkey's Transnational and Interlingual Literatures," *Diyâr: Zeitschrift für Osmanistik, Türkei- und Nahostforschung*, Jg.1 (2020): 153–174. The author would like to thank the editors of *Diyâr* for granting permission to reprint a section of the article.

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against each other ('çapraz okuma').² She analyses the evolution of the motif of the monstrous vermin from Dostoevsky to Kafka, arguing that readers' ability to appreciate the significance of Kafka's vermin depends on the literary ground-work laid by Dostoevsky. Likewise, intertextual links between Kafka's *Letter to His Father* and Oğuz Atay's (1934–1977) *Babama Mektup (Letter to My Father)* are explored in a manner that transcends the conventional styles in which Turkish writers' engagement with European literature has been analysed. The strength of Gürbilek's work lies in her comprehensive approach, an approach that moves away from the East-West paradigm. It is perhaps owing to the assertion that progress and the future lie in the West that a sense of belatedness and inadequacy has tended to infuse early Turkish literature. Gürbilek proposes the term 'criticism of lack' to capture the sense of insufficiency, deprivation, and shortage that pervades Turkish literature, which she attempts to overcome in her analysis of intertextual relations.³ An approach that merely conceptualises European literature as a medium of empowerment for Middle Eastern societies would be equally misleading. To invoke the title of Azar Nafisi's 2003 memoir, I am not proposing a 'Reading *The Trial* in Istanbul'. In *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, the author, an Iranian professor of English literature, captures the liberating potential of reading Western literature in Tehran. Nafisi's memoir portrays Iranian women's engagement with Western literature as an act of intellectual freedom and feminist resistance to the theocracy that rules their lives. Although I have strong reservations about this perspective, it is worth noting that Nafisi also shows 'how *Lolita* gave a different color to Tehran and how Tehran helped redefine Nabokov's novel, turning it into this *Lolita*, our *Lolita*'.⁴ Similarly the intention here is not merely to elaborate how Kafka's work plays out in Turkish literature as a way of articulating cultural critique and political resistance, but rather to ask whether Kafka's Turkish reception provides new angles to Kafka criticism generally. By following the traces of Kafka in Turkish literature since the 1950s, this approach provides a model for the study of Turkish literature and culture within a global context.

While only a small circle of writers and critics was aware of Kafka's writing during his lifetime, there are a number of decisive moments that mark the history of the reception of his work. Although his books fell victim to the infamous book burnings perpetrated by the National Socialists, Kafka came to be recognised after the war as one of the most significant authors of European modernism.

2 Gürbilek 2011.

3 Gürbilek 2003, 600.

4 Nafisi 2003, 6.

The reception of his work, however, was divided along strictly ideological lines. With the relaxing of Cold War ideologies, Kafka came to be seen as a transnational writer par excellence and a cornerstone of world literature. Literary critics would henceforth identify the roots of his work at the intersection of the Habsburg monarchy, Jewish identity and European modernism. Today, Kafka's oeuvre is seen to uniquely demonstrate the interrelatedness of ethnic, religious, linguistic, imperial and national affiliations.⁵

Parallels may be drawn between Prague and Istanbul as sites of literary production – both cities underwent fundamental changes during the transition from empire to nation state. In *Prague Territories* Scott Spector argues that in the peripheral spheres of declining German power, language became the most politically charged issue.⁶ The language politics of Prague at the turn of the century and the *Tschechisierung* (Czechisation) of the city finds a parallel in the Turkification of Istanbul in the early 20th century, and both may be understood as a consequence of the kinds of assimilation processes that accompany modernisation. This prompts one to question whether there is a figure like Kafka in the Turkish literary context – an author who is a member of a minority group, writes in Turkish, develops a unique style, and “deterritorialises” the Turkish literary landscape. Is there, in other words, a Kafkaesque author who subverts Turkish national and ethno-religious boundaries? How is the isomorphism between national territory, language and literature that was created in the transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic challenged through literature?

Following Laurent Mignon, Murat Cankara, Hülya Adak, Etienne Charrière and others by expanding research to include the diverse literatures of the Ottoman Empire and Turkey, we can resist the homogenisation enforced by the Turkish state. The language and cultural reforms of the early Republican period suppressed the diversity of Ottoman literatures and territorialised the newly emerging literary narratives. A Turkish Renaissance was invoked as a means to create a homogenous Turkish identity. Comparisons with other countries suggest themselves. Whereas the elevation of the vernacular to a literary language is usually thought to have catalysed the European Renaissance and the Enlightenment, and hence it is mostly regarded in positive terms, in the Ottoman Empire the valence is more ambivalent. On the one hand, elevating the vernacular had a democratising effect during the early decades of the Turkish Republic. The genre *köy edebiyatı* (village literature), for example, provided the means for a literary imagination in Turkish. On the other hand, elevating and standardising vernacular

5 David Suchoff 2007 gives a comprehensive overview of the changing modes in Kafka criticism.

6 Spector 2000, 68–82.

Turkish came at the price of minoritising and suppressing literatures in Ottoman, Armenian, Greek and Kurdish.

Because Turkishness is defined along religious lines (with the Sunni male constituting the norm for Turkishness), non-Muslim writers have historically occupied a precarious position within society. Since articulating affiliation to a religious minority constrains broader recognition as a writer, Turkish authors have developed a variety of strategies in the publishing world. These strategies range from those practiced by atheist poet and essayist Roni Margulies (b. 1955), who writes about Jewish life but prefers not to be referred to as a Jewish writer, to that of novelist Vivet Kanetti (b. 1956), who published her first books under the pseudonym E. Emine, a quintessentially Turkish name. While Margulies keeps the memory of Turkey's diverse past alive, he does not mourn the loss of Ladino, nor does he want to be referred to as a Jewish poet or a representative of a minority literature. Nonetheless, Margulies was invested in making Yehuda Amichai's Hebrew poetry available in Turkish. Other writers have resisted pressure – like that faced by Kanetti – to conceal their Jewish background, turning it instead into a wellspring of creativity. Mario Levi, one of the most important contemporary Turkish writers, for example, has written a number of books explicitly dealing with Jewish life in Turkey. Given both their shared minority status and identification with Jewish heritage, it should come as no surprise that Kafka's literary influence is recognised in Levi's work.⁷

Bilge Karasu (1930–1995), a renowned author of Jewish and Greek Orthodox heritage, engaged even more directly with Kafka's work and developed a narrative style that for many resonates with Kafka's nightmarish plots. *Gece* – translated by Güneli Gün as *Night* – is a lengthy novel in which the author conceives of a society governed exclusively by fear and suspicion. There is no divine revelation, no security, and no coherence that might give meaning to human existence in the fear-driven world of the novel. Owing to the similarities between Karasu's and Kafka's narrative styles, Karasu is often referred to as the Turkish Kafka – an attribution that he himself strongly opposed.⁸ Establishing literary correlations between authors on the basis of their religious and ethnoreligious affiliations is a temptation that ought to be resisted. Rather, it might be asked how Kafka has had a direct impact on literary imagination since the first Turkish translations of his work in the 1950s.⁹ Süreyya İnkılıç provides a comprehensive

⁷ Levi 2005.

⁸ Karasu 2007.

⁹ Within this context it is interesting to see that a Kurdish translation project, which started after the liberalisation of laws related to the Kurdish language, made translating *Die Verwandlung* into Kurmanji Kurdish a priority; Kafka 2010.

account and analysis of the translations and their reception in Turkey, detecting a correlation between them and the political upheaval caused by the military coups.¹⁰ One of the first scholars to recognise the significance of Kafka's reception outside of Western Europe and the United States, however, was Atef Botros. In *Kafka: Ein jüdischer Schriftsteller aus arabischer Sicht* (2010), Botros examines the Arab reception of Kafka, arguing that the question of Kafka's contested Zionist leanings became central to Arab intellectuals after the Six-Day War of 1967. Looking at the Turkish context, there is little evidence that Kafka's stance towards Zionism was central to his popularity in Turkey. For obvious reasons, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has not had comparable political ramifications in Turkey and hence never provoked debate about Kafka's ideological position.

This article argues instead that Kafka became a seminal figure for writers in Turkey whose investment was not necessarily in Kafka's Jewishness but in specific narrative techniques, the adaptation of which allowed them to develop their own literature of resistance. This can be traced in works written from the late 1970s onwards, works that experiment with literary styles from realism to existentialism and postmodernism. Of particular interest to writers, artists and intellectuals are those themes that are readily identified with Kafka's work – alienation in the modern age, proto-existentialism, polyglottism and social subversiveness – themes that reveal society's ills. Kafka was not, as might be assumed, mobilised in Turkey primarily as a representative of Western literature or Jewishness. Rather, he has been received as an exemplar of resistance and alienation. By reflecting on the ways in which Kafka has been received in the Turkish literary landscape, it becomes possible to unravel various discursive threads that undermine the state's homogenising project. Four novels stand out in this regard: Ferit Edgü's *Hakkâri'de bir Mevsim* (1977), Erhan Bener's *Böcek* (1982), Bilge Karasu's *Gece* (1985) and Orhan Pamuk's *Kar* (2004). Reading Turkish literature through the lens of Kafka – be it in terms of reenactment, intertextuality, interlingual relations or reassemblage – yields new insights. Ferit Edgü's reimagination of K.'s arrival in a strange village provides a powerful subtext in a climate of censorship, heightening the awareness that Assyrian and Kurdish were subjugated and forced into oblivion. Erhan Bener, on the other hand, was fascinated by the absurd and the monstrous in Kafka's works, qualities he employed in *Böcek* to portray the fascist mentality of a particular generation. Bilge Karasu's almost puristic, technical approach to language in *Gece* and *Göçmüş Kediler Bahçesi* is reminiscent of Kafka's linguistic style. Karasu articulates the consequences of linguistic assimilationism in subtle ways. Pamuk, on the other hand,

10 İlkılıç 2016, 276.

adopts K. as a figure of exile, creating a narrative that functions like a spectre of the destroyed multilingual and multireligious worlds of the Ottoman Empire.

Reading Turkish literature through Kafka delivers several insights: running the risk of stating the obvious, it is a reminder that there is nothing essentially Turkish about Turkish literature. Turkish literature is inherently transnational not only by virtue of its history of encounters and exchange with European literatures, but also because of its interaction with the indigenous languages and literatures of the Ottoman Empire. Second, there is a strong correlation between sociopolitical conditions and aesthetic developments – including those brought into being by existentialism and postmodernism – that mark the evolution of Turkish literature. In addition to the aesthetic transformations traced in this article, we can observe how Kafka is repeatedly deployed as a figure of resistance against the suppression of free speech and processes of enforced linguistic assimilation. Edgü and Karasu in particular serve as examples of the ways in which Kafka's style evolves into new forms.

The interlingual literature that negotiates and sometimes resists linguistic assimilationism in Turkey sheds new light on the linguistic consciousness triggered by Kafka's oeuvre. Acknowledging and illuminating Turkish literary history from the point of view of minoritised communities does not mean distinguishing authors according to fixed ethnoreligious rubrics and constructing parallel, neatly segregated literary histories, something Mario Levi succinctly referred to as *ada edebiyatı*, 'island literature'.¹¹ It is the diverse, intertwined, and at times interlingual nature of these literary histories that are slowly coming to the fore.¹² Etienne Charrière, Will Stroebel and Laurent Mignon have contributed to the reconceptualisation of literatures in the Ottoman Empire and Turkey, perhaps most notably in Mignon's article on the use of Kurdish expressions in Turkish texts that have the effect of transcending national and linguistic borders.¹³ Reconnecting modern Turkish to its Ottoman heritage while illuminating its continuing exchange with Armenian, Jewish, Greek, Persian, Ladino, Arabic and Kurdish literatures will allow us to transnationalise Turkish Studies from within and construct a more comprehensive picture of Turkey's multicultural and polyglot heritage. This is all the more important at a moment when such plurality is being disavowed and Ottoman history is being co-opted for nationalist and neo-imperialist ends.

¹¹ Sayın 1999, 195.

¹² Roni Margulies' critique and Mehmet Yaşın's intervention in his *Poeturka* – a collection of essays published in the mid-1990s – are early landmarks in this direction; Yaşın 1995.

¹³ Mignon 2014, 199.

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