

The Turkish-Armenian Survivors of the Genocide of 1915 through the Lens of Modern Turkish Literature

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In the atmosphere of the precariousness of minority rights in Turkey, the Armenian collective suffering of the past was buried in silence. In a deliberate move to foil the formal transmission of historical memory, the memory of atrocities against Armenians in the pre-Republican era, governments banned any reference to Armenian history and other sensitive subjects within the Armenian communities and educational institutions. In pursuit of that same policy and persistence in denying the existence of the Armenian issue in Turkey through selective approach to history, reference to Armenians, their presence in Turkey or atrocities against them became almost nonexistent in Turkish history books and artistic literature. This was a calculated effort in the Republican Turkey to reinforce a prescribed Turkish national identity which as James Wertsch would put it, was “textually mediated;” in other words, it was based on the official narrative and covered all ethnic groups. This paper will trace the scant references to Armenians and their past in Turkish literature of the Republican era and will proceed to the modern times to trace the breach of silence.

Indeed, as a result of recent political developments, the situation is changed and is changing. The events of 1915 and the plight of the Armenian survivors in Turkey—whether Christians, converted Muslims, or those pretending Islam—are taken up and fictionalized in Turkish literature. This paper will show how artistic expressions echo the continuing trauma in the life of these “rejects of the sword,” the Turkish moniker referring to Armenians who have undeservedly escaped from death. The stories which Turkish writers, such as Kemal Yalcin, Elif Shafak, Orhan Pamuk, Mehmed Uzun, and others unearth and the daring memoirs of Turkish citizens with an Armenian in their ancestry like Fethiye Cetin and Ahmet Onal, as well as obscured references to these same stories and events in recent Turkish Armenian literature, have unveiled an enigmatic past for the Turks. Especially important for the focus of this paper, however, is that my close reading of this newly emerged literature has revealed the full picture of survival and the everlasting impact of a torturing memory of not only that of the lost ones but also of forced conversion, of nurturing the “enemy” in the bosom, of suffering dehumanization, and of torture involving sex organs on women and men. The collective memory has persisted and continues to be transmitted in various degrees of intensity affecting the social psyche of Turks and Armenians alike.