LITERARY ARTICLES & ESSAYS

On the Possibility of Multiculturalism: Birds Without Wings by Louis de Berniéres

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Abstract

At the beginning of the twentieth century a great number of non-Muslim population were driven out of the newly defined borders of the Turkish Republic. In *Birds Without Wings,* Louis de Berniéres questions the validity of the concepts like race, religion and language as the criteria for nation-building, and laments the loss of an Edenic life-style in an Anatolian town, when its Greek and Armenian inhabitants left. What made life there so good was the long-established multicultural relations, which the writer recreates for us. Hence, this article claims that at the heart of *Birds Without Wings* lies the concept of "multiculturalism" and points out to the way the dynamic relations connoted by the term are reflected through the novel's formal and narrative aspects, such as chapter design, changing point of view, mixing genres and languages, and the symbolic use of names.

Keywords

Birds Without Wings, Louis de Berniéres, multiculturalism, population exchange Kayakoy.

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Introduction

There are many reasons to celebrate the European Union project as a giant step towards realizing the dream of a peaceful global community freed of its prejudices. And yet, it is a pity that in recent past Denmark decided to reintroduce passport check at their borders to Germany and Sweden, the prime ministers of Germany and France confessed the failure of the multicultural experiment, and Great Britain cancelled its membership in the EU, which raises the question once more in human history, if the scheme of a world where people of all seeds and creeds live together without major disputes is doomed to remain a utopia (Alexander, 2012). However, if Heraclitus is mistaken and if it is indeed possible to bathe in the same river twice, there is no reason to be pessimistic, as in his 2004 novel, *Birds Without Wings*[1], the British writer Louis de Berniéres reminds us of the existence, in the past, of such a harmonious multicultural society in Anatolia.

The story covers the last decade of the Ottoman empire when the enmity aroused by The Great War draws the borders between countries in bold, re-defining citizenship by religion and race. Consequently, a great number of non-Muslims are driven out of the new national borders. They have no power to resist or fly away from the wind that sweeps them away as they are like birds without wings. The book reads like an elegy to the loss of an idyllic life-style based on mutual understanding, tolerance and cooperation. Berniéres came to Istanbul as a guest of the 2012 "Tanpınar Literature Festival" and I had a chance to interview him at the lobby of the Germir Palace hotel, in Taksim. During our talk, Bernierés made the point that he objected to the word "multiculturalism" as it is used in England these days to mean "people living with their own rules", instead he would use it to mean "people living along each other and enjoying each other". And it is the aim of this article to show that at the heart of *Birds Without Wings* lies this understanding of multiculturalism made alive to the reader through the narrative device of mixing different texts, disciplines, genres and languages.

Multicultural life in an Anatolian village

The setting of the novel is a coastal town looking over the Aegean Sea. Among its inhabitants are Plotheia, the Greek girl, who has to cover her face with a veil because she is too beautiful; her close friend Drosoula the Ugly; Ibrahim the Mad, who is in love with Plotheia; a pair of Greek and Turkish boys nicknamed Mehmetcik and Karatavuk; Karatavuk's father Iskender the Potter, the local lord, Rustem Aga; his disloyal wife, Tamara; his mistress Leyla; the enlightened Imam and the equally understanding and tolerant Christian priest; the bitter Greek teacher, who is a fanatic nationalist, and the Armenian pharmacist. Berniéres tells all their stories, but not in one single plot. Instead, in Gibb's words, it is a rich mixture of "subplots that weave and complement each other in such a way that the town itself might be the central character." Ibrahim loses his mind, when by accident, he causes Plotheia to fall from the mountaintop; Drosoula sails to the Greek lands with her husband; Mehmetcik and Karatavuk have to split up because of the war; Tamara dies in a brothel and Leyla leaves Rustem Aga for her native soil. What enwraps the stories of these "simple folks whose lives have more in common with 1500 rather than 1950" as Ron Charles

observes, is the tumultuous flow of events in the bigger world, represented along the biography of Mustafa Kemal, the founder of the Turkish Republic. The Greek population in the empire could be grouped at the time into three categories: Those who believed in the nationalist Greek cause and were ready to die for it, those upper-class people who did not want to lose their wealth and stood closer to the Sultan, and the plain Greek peasants who wanted nothing but a quiet life. They were living in the villages of Western Anatolia. (Akgönul, 2007, p. 41)

The plot develops in an imaginary location based on the writer's impressions of a visit to Kayaköy, a ghost town near Fethiye. Just like the writer, one of the characters, the Smyrnian merchant Georgio P. Theodorou visits it many years after the deportation and refers to it as "that forsaken paradise" (de Berniéres, 2005, p. 269). The name of the town itself also indicates the same feature. It is called Eskibahce, meaning "the ancient garden", alluding directly to the Garden of Eden. Juliette Hughes makes the following comment about the name: "Such a name presages a certain fate - edens are lovely but fragile, existing in their exquisite, balanced way only when not invaded by malevolence. Lions may lie down with lambs in a biblical Eden, but in Eskibahce Christians and Muslims are more like lions and tigers living in patchy but workable amity" (Hughes, 2004). Not surprisingly, this is such a distinct location that with its marvelous design made by "an ancient genius whose name has been lost," it looks like no other place "in all of Lydia, Caria or Lycia" (de Berniéres, 2005, p.30). As it is in utopia writings, *Birds Without Wings* tells, in length, about the streets and the houses and presents a detailed picture of the habitation of both men and their animals. The following words describe the town as a most ideal abode in all respects:

> "When the town was alive, the walls of the houses were rendered with mortar and painted jauntily in dark shades of pink. Its streets were so narrow as to be more like alleyways, but there was no oppressive sense of enclosure, since the buildings were stacked up one slope of a valley, so that every dwelling received light and air" (de Berniéres, 2005, p. 29).

Apart from their physical make up, the lining of the houses also implies the equal sharing of nature's benefits by all the residents, a theme that lies at the heart of the novel which describes the horrors of war for land along many chapters. The fact that the *"dark and tranquil interiors [...] had the effect of diminishing one's sense of*

time" (de Berniéres, 2005, p.30) also points to the town's peculiar existence, with a time of its own, which, as it later becomes clear, owes a great deal to its mixing of various cultures: it is built upon some Roman and Byzantine ruins and presently is inhabited by Turks, Greeks and Armenians, who make their own contributions to the general outlook. The unworldly nature of the place finds expression in Iskender the Potter's following words:

> "I stayed up there for a while….marveling at the view of the town. To see such a place from above, particularly if it has a fine mosque and a church is to be reminded that there is something miraculous in the falling out of things" (de Berniéres, 2005, p.15).

The village's multicultural aspect, marked by the coexistence of a mosque and a church, becomes most pronounced in the passages where the townsfolk are depicted in their daily interchange. Iskender the Potter remembers how the light-hearted Christian traditions added joy to the more ascetic Muslim life. "Our religion makes us grave and thoughtful, dignified and melancholy, whereas theirs did not exact much discipline. Perhaps it was something to do with the wine" (de Berniéres, 2005, p.1).

The benefits of such a mixed lifestyle is not limited to this, as the two communities provide for each other a mirror, in which to see themselves and form an image of their identity. Hence, Iskender says, "Without [the Christians] … we are forgetting how to look at others and see ourselves" (de Berniéres, 2005, p.5). Especially when the distant and isolated geographical location of the town is considered, the function of such mirroring becomes all the more important. Iskender confirms that in this town they lived in harmony with Christians and gives the example of the Imam's visit to the house when the beautiful Plotheia was born. Abdulhamid Hodja takes a present to the baby and recites some verses from the Koran. Holding the baby in his arms, he kisses her palm, where, later the people observe a red mark. Upon this even the Christians believe that the Imam is a saint (de Berniéres, 2005, p.13). This readiness to embrace the other is also observed in the relations of the Abdulhamid Hodja and Father Kristoforos, who always

> "enjoyed the pleasantry of greeting each other jokingly as 'Infidel efendi', the one in Turkish and the other in Greek but ended their talk one or the other of them saying 'well, after all we are both peoples of the book'" (de Berniéres, 2005, p. 38).

Following the leaders, the people shape their lives on a similar openness: "There was a small group of people who had turned Turk because they had got fed up

with the exactions of Lent, and it wasn't uncommon for Turks to go to churches and light candles" (de Berniéres, 2005, p. 265). Or "Christians lit their candles and placed them in the sandbox as you might expect, but then knelt down and prayed whilst making Muslim prostrations" (de Berniéres, 2005, p. 266). People have this practice because they are not slaves to their beliefs, but instead, they put their religion to the service of their practical needs. Hence, Lydia the Barren goes both to the church to pray for a baby and to Ayse, the wife of Abduhamid Hodja, to "beg her for some tiny slips of paper upon which Abdulhamid daily wrote verses of the Koran for the sick to eat" (de Berniéres, 2005, p. 65). Also, when Tamara, who is wounded and humiliated on charges of disloyalty comes to stay in their home, for fear that she might lose her husband to this new woman, Ayse asks Polixeni to light a candle for her in the church praying that she gets well soon and leaves the house (de Berniéres, 2005, p.123). Similarly, when Karatavuk is at the front, his mother asks Polixeni to kiss the icon and ask [her] Panagia to watch over her son (de Berniéres, 2005, p. 302).

Adrian Hastings says, "Once a particular ethnicity has hardened with its own characteristics and written literature, it may almost be impossible for it to fuse ethnically with a neighbor." (Hastings, 2007, p. 180) This certainly is not the case for the inhabitants of Eskibahce, where, besides the religious borders, the ethnic ones are not allowed to limit the daily exchange of the people either. The people are not blind to the racial divisions but they simply don't see them as a problem, and what is more, they entertain themselves by playing on terms or phrases that define ethnic origins: "We knew that our Christians were sometimes called 'Greeks', although we often called them 'dogs' or 'infidels', but in a manner that was a formality, or said with a smile, just as were their deprecatory terms for us" (de Berniéres, 2005, p. 4).

In fact, people in small communities have no luxury to hold each other in low esteem because there, everyone's skill is needed. This is pointed in the passages telling how the town died after the minorities had been deported:

> "There had been such clear division of labor between the former inhabitants that when the Christians left, the Muslims were reduced to temporary helplessness. There was no pharmacist now, no doctor, no banker, no blacksmith, no shoemaker…The race that had preoccupied itself solely with ruling, tilling and soldiering now found itself bulked and perplexed" (de Berniéres, 2005, p. 608).

The existence of people in complementary support with each other becomes manifest in the pairing of friends like Karatavuk and Mehmetcik or Plotheia and Drasula. Especially these girls, one very beautiful and the other very ugly, are like mirror images. About them, Iskender says: "I often thought that too was a metaphor for something, but I never decided what that was" (de Berniéres, 2005, p. 271), probably alluding to the idea that God created the world large enough for everyone to find a place in it in a web of interdependent relations.

However, a remote village presents too small a scale to represent a rich mixture. Hence, the cosmopolitan and multicultural life finds its best praise in the description of a street in Istanbul, where Rustem Aga goes to find a mistress for himself:

> "A mixed party of Muslims and Christians took their first steps towards Ephesus, making pilgrimage together to the house of Virgin Mary. Two gypsy women with babies at their backs walked hand in hand with two capuchin monkeys. A portly Orthodox priest sweated behind a party of Bedouins draped with white cloaks, and after them a golden-vested Greek merchant rode side by side with a merchant from Italy discussing prices in French" (de Berniéres, 2005, p. 172).

For the loss of these colorful streets, Berniéres blames the radical nationalistic and religious endeavors:

> "The triple contagions of nationalism, utopianism and religious absolutism [which] effervesce together into an acid that corrodes the moral metal of a race, and it shamelessly and even proudly performs deeds that it would deem vile if they were done by any other" (de Berniéres, 2005, p. 286).

The Symirnian merchant expresses the same idea in his own style: "now it's Turkey for the Turks, and let's redeem Asia Minor from the cruel and barbarous infidel Greek. Well, what can I do, except doff my hat, make my salaams, and say, 'Gentelmen, fuck you all!" (de Berniéres, 2005, p. 514).

Nationhood has been described in various ways, but blood, religion, and language have almost always been part of the criteria. We have seen how one common religion is not indispensable to create solidarity in a community. Thinking of all the atrocities done in the name of building a pure nation, Berniéres then attempts to undermine the national identity markers one by one. It is meaningful that in the first chapter devoted to Mustafa Kemal, one of the most skillful nation builders, he questions the possibility of defining oneself in terms of ethnicity:

> "Stirred up by Austria-Hungary and by Russia, the various peoples of the Balkans and the near East are abrogating their long coexistence and codependence. Their hotheads and ideologues are propounding doctrines of separateness and superiority. The slogans are 'Serbia for the Serbs, Bulgaria for the Bulgarians, Greece for the Greeks, Turks and Jews out!' but no one stops to ask what exactly a Serb or a Macedonian or a Bulgarian or a Greek actually is" (de Berniéres, 2005, p. 16).

Indeed, it is not as easy as it looks to classify people under such ethnic groupings. Bruce Clark explains that only twenty years before the Lausanne Treaty, if asked about their nationality, the peasants in the Balkans would not understand the question. (Clark, 2007, p. 16). The following lines by the Ottoman sergeant, who is in charge of the deportation of the non-Muslims are quite revealing about the fictiveness of national identity. After explaining that he is actually of Serbian descent, he says: "From now on you are Greek, not Ottomans. And we are not Ottomans any more either, we are Turks… and tomorrow, who knows? We might be something else, and you might be negros, and rabbits will become cats" (de Berniéres, 2005, p. 528).

Since millions of people lived on these lands so far, who can claim any pure genealogy? This is made clear in the character of Abdul Chrysostomos, who "is like a Jew crossed with a Greek, crossed with an Armenian, crossed with an Arab, crossed with a Bulgarian, crossed with a Negro and a mad dog too" (de Berniéres, 2005, p. 143).

There are some more subtle examples of how Berniéres problematizes identity: The Turkish boy Abdul and the Greek boy Nico grow up together. They take the nicknames Karatavuk and Mehmetcik after the two whistles Iskender the Potter makes for them: Abdul's whistle sounds like Karatavuk [blackbird] and Nico's like a Mehmetcik [fire nightingale]. For the modern reader the fact that Nico takes a Turkish name would be less important, if that weren't the generic name for the Turkish soldier, which is indeed quite fitting to Nico, who volunteers to fight against the Christian armies though himself is one. This play with identity is taken further, when later Mehmetcik's life is threatened by the gendarme forces behind him, but he saves his life by exchanging shirts with Karatavuk (de Berniéres, 2005, p. 586). These shirts, one red like a fire nightingale and one black like a blackbird had by then become their trademarks, just like the whistles. When he hears that Mehmetcik broke his whistle, Karatavuk gives him his own as well (de Berniéres, 2005, p. 587). Yet the

play of fluid personalities does not stop here. The fact that Karatavuk continues to change into somebody else points to the ever-rolling feature of identity. Toward the end of the novel, Karatavuk educates himself well and becomes the letter-writer of the town. He moves to the house of the school teacher and studies on his desk, uses his writing tools and his oil lamp, and, like him, keeps "a singing finch in the same wire cage outside the front door," sometimes even wondering "if he [is] growing into the same irritable and cantankerous character" (de Berniéres, 2005, p. 588). Another character with an unstable personality is Rustem Aga's mistress Leyla, who pretends to be a Circassian girl, hiding her Greek origin and her Greek name. The scene where Rustem Aga is bargaining with the woman who is providing girls to wealthy men is like a warning about what we daily accept as identity signs:

> "(Ionna soon to be renamed Leyla, but still naked, had by now rejoined the two girls who were observing these proceedings, and the Arabess put her hand to Leyla's ear and whispered, 'Guess what? You are a virgin again!' Ionna bit her lower lip and wagged her head. 'Again!' she exclaimed. 'Our dear Kardelen works so many miracles with chicken blood')" (de Berniéres, 2005, p. 186).

And referring to her new age, as told to the Aga "You've got young again!' whispers the same girl (de Berniéres, 2005, p. 187). In fact, the book abounds in such warnings against being misled by appearances: When teaching Drosoula and Plotheia about beauty, Leyla says:

> "If I tore the skin of my face to the thickness of a piece of paper, I would be the ugliest and most horrible thing in the world, and everyone who used to think they wanted to know me would put their hands over their eyes and run away" (de Berniéres, 2005, p. 218).

Turkish soldiers learn the untrustable nature of apperances when they see the Indian soldiers fighting alongside the British and think they must be Muslim, which turns out to be wrong (de Berniéres, 2005, p. 372). Nor can clothes be trusted as signs showing identity. As the Smyrnian merchant points out, the Greek population in Izmir expects that the fez will disappear when the Greek army comes, and they are shocked when they see the Greek soldiers with a fez on their head (de Berniéres, 2005, p. 513). The coming of the Muslim immigrants from the Island of Crete as part of the exchange program complicates the issue of identity more. Ayse comments:

> "And these Cretan Muslims are rather like the Christians we lost, so that we wonder why it was necessary to exchange them, because these Cretans dance and sing as our Christians used to… A few of the Cretans speak only Greek. At least all of our Christians knew how to speak Turk" (de Berniéres, 2005, p. 560).

In a similar way, Drosoula remembers how the natives did not welcome them in their new country, because they were still identified with the place they came from: "The thoughtless ones call you a filthy Turk, and spit at you, and tell you to go to the devil, and 'Piss off back to Turkey'" (de Berniéres, 2005, p. 567-8). Her experience shared by all the immigrants on both sides stands as another proof that, contrary to the expectations of the authorities, religious attributes are not effective enough to homogenize the nation state.

Formal aspects that reflect multiculturalism

Berniéres' preference for a multicultural life style is also reflected in the formal aspects of his novel such as its language and its structure. Language is one of the founding principles of a nation. Yet, Berniéres points to a striking complementarity of the two languages used by the townspeople: among them the difference of languages is not a defining and a dividing factor, but something that brings the two people together as all the residents in the town speak Turkish, but when it comes to writing, the very few who can write use the Greek letters. Therefore, when the Muslim boy Karatavuk sends a letter to her mother, she cannot read it, but has to ask the Greek teacher, who is indeed a hardcore Greek nationalist. As we read on, we find out that, though interesting, this is not a unique case in Anatolia, where there are other towns whose folk write in Greek and speak in Turkish, "albeit it is larded with odd offcuts of Persian, Arabic and Greek" (de Berniéres, 2005, p. 81). As Karatavuk's commander, lieutenant Orhan explains: "I have heard that it is quite common on the west coast, and in particular in the south-west […] The people are sometimes called Karamanlids" (de Berniéres, 2005, p. 340). Berniéres seems so much overjoyed with this mixture of languages that he cannot help sprinkle throughout the novel some Turkish expressions, not always taking the trouble to explain them, just as in: "The fine lips moved again, even though the eyes were dull with nausea of approaching death: 'Cehenneme git, Kerata" (de Berniéres, 2005, p. 101). When the two men take Tamara to Ayse hanım, they say : "We have brought you the zina işleyen kadın" (de Berniéres, 2005, p. 112). Similarly, no paraphrase or translation is provided when Rustem Aga is speaking to the Italian officer in French (de Berniéres, 2005, p. 445).

Or sometimes, Berniéres gives a direct translation of a Turkish proverb or an idiom, rather than providing its counterpart in English: "Shrouds don't have pockets" said the priest sententiously […] And you know what they say: the ink of the learned is equal in merit to the blood of the martyrs" (de Berniéres, 2005, p. 64).

When confronted with such unknown words and expressions, the reader is likely to experience shock and frustration, which might parallel the feeling of someone who has to live in a foreign culture. Such an experience may serve to teach the readers the virtues of patience and tolerance toward what is called "the other", thus educating them in the way of a multicultural life.

Every character lives the trauma of the war and immigration in their own ways, and it would not be just to tell their unique experiences by a single authoritative narrator. Accordingly, de Berniéres gives voice to several of his characters. The novel is composed of ninety-five short chapters followed by an epilogue. There is also a an omniscient narrator who intervenes from time to time to make general comments but the reader often hears the voice of the characters, who take turns in separate chapters to tell their personal stories. Some of these stories like Rustem Aga's or Karatavuk and Mehmetcik's are more dominant but never to the degree of threatening the polyphonic structure of the book, which itself seems to aspire to turn into a multicultural community.

How de Berniéres mixes Turkish and English to this end has already been mentioned. Another factor that serves the same purpose is his employment of various genres: Eskibahce is described by the Symirnian merchant just like a town from a utopia, where not only the physical look of the town, but also the traditions of its inhabitants are presented in minute detail. Rustem Aga's journey to Istanbul is obviously a parody of *The Canterbury Tales* by Chaucer. Like Chaucer's pilgrims, the group set off in the month of April, and they also hold a story contest, again with a prize at the end. Not surprisingly, the winner happens to be the one who tells the bawdiest tale about women's perfidy. The prose already made fun to read by its dispersal of humorous elements among the most poignant scenes is further sweetened by the interjection of songs and lyrics. The writer also makes use of the epistolary novel technique, as we are told about Karatavuk's adventures at the front through the letters he sends to his mother. Citing the story of a camel that became a cigarette

addict as an example, Rebecca Wigod reports that Berniéres' readings of old travel narratives found their way into his work. (de Berniéres, 2005b)

Apart from these, the book has the air of an epic, as it tells the dramas of the little individuals whose fates are determined by forces beyond their power. Talking about the accident that killed Pilothea, Iskender says:

> "I say this not because her death was an accident, but because there would have been no accident if it were not for the great world. It was the great world that went to war with us and attempted to divide us up, and then it was the Greeks who invaded us after the war with the great world, when we were weak and they thought it would be easy to beat us. We won that war, and Greeks lost it, but it was because of that the pashas of the great world decided to take away the Muslims from the Greek land, and deliver them to us, and to take away the Christians from this land and deliver them to the Greeks, and it was because of this decision that Philothei ran to find Ibrahim and suffered the accident that killed her" (de Berniéres, 2005, pp. 600-601).

The journey of Drousula and her husband to Cephalonia is likened to the journey of Odysseus:

> "Gerasimos got the nickname 'Odysseus' from the other fishermen, and he was very proud of that. He was more of a sailor than all of them put together. He was greatly admired for sailing such a little fishing boat all the way from Turkey" (de Berniéres, 2005, p. 571).

The plate Rustem Aga orders the tinsman of the town with animal figures carved on it is reminiscent of the shield Hephaistos makes for Achilles:

> "it had come out even better than he had dreamed of it. Around the rim, in Arabic text that he could not read, there was a line from the Koran. In the center, set amid swirling acanthus leaves, were five beasts. One was an eagle with two heads growing out of one body, each head looking in opposite directions" (de Berniéres, 2005, pp. 613-614).

The chapters devoted to Mustafa Kemal adopt the language of official history books with an objective and detached voice. These parts are told in simple present tense probably to imply the ever powerful flood of events in the bigger world. Finally, the vaguely drawn character of the Dog, a miserable looking man, who says he comes from Hell and prefers to live in an ancient grave, adds to the novel a tinge of the mystery and horror writing. (de Berniéres, 2005, p. 38) But of course, the greatest influence is Tolstoy. Berniéres himself tells Wigod that he was trying to emulate *War and Peace*, from which he seems to have borrowed the vast scope of his novel and the idea of the futility of all human endeavors against the chaotic unfolding of history. de

Berniéres is reported to say: "I'm one of those writers who's always going to be trying to write *War and Peace*, failing, obviously, but trying" (de Berniéres, 2005b).

In his interview with Simriti Daniel Berniéres says:

> "I was trying to write a book that was about as many things as I could think of. I think that great literature is full of polarities – love and hate, shame and honor, courage and cowardice – which is what literature and therefore life is also about" (de Berniéres, 2010).

The carnivalesque juxtaposition of humor and seriousness or violence and compassion also appear as fitting narrative devices to praise the colorful life of Eskibahce. We laugh when Ibrahim imitates the bleating of the goat who has nothing to say (de Berniéres, 2005, p. 2) and we feel sad when a day comes and all the Christians are driven out of their homeland (de Berniéres, 2005, p. 527). If we are shocked when the otherwise caring townsfolk begin throwing stones and kicking the disloyal wife, Tamara, (de Berniéres, 2005, pp. 102-103) we are also touched by the gesture of Ali the Snowbringer offering his donkey, the only source of his income, to Polixeni's great grandfather, when they are leaving the town for good (de Berniéres, 2005, p. 205). The two enemy sides' exchange of food at the front during the bloodshed of the war is also part of the same capacious world built upon dialectical relations (de Berniéres, 2005, p. 364).

When Liza Cooperman asks if his "intention, through *Birds Without Wings*, [was] to reflect on what is happening in the world today, namely the conflict that continues to result from nationalism" de Berniéres replies: "Yes, when I started to write the book Yugoslavia was collapsing and committing fratricide. That was very much on my mind." At such a time when the willingness to live together eroded among the people of different races and religions he remembers an earlier period of disintegration that took place again in the Balkans between 1912 and 1913 and gave an end to "Ottoman empire's greatest achievement, the millet system that guaranteed religious liberty for all" (de Berniéres, 2005, p. 288). Yıldız explains: Unlike today, the word "millet" rather had religious connotations and meant a religious community. In the 19th century the word "nation" was translated as "ummet". It seems that these two Turkish words replaced each other. (51) The millet system initiated by Mehmet II (1451-1481) (Yıldız 50) was based on the internal sovereignty of millets and the state avoided interfering into the running of everyday life (57). Still, the system of tolerance survived in some parts of the country until the Lausanne Treaty, signed in

1923 following Turkey's War of Independence. The treaty required the removal of almost all Turkish Christians to Greece and all Greek Muslims to Turkey. Accordingly, about two million people from both sides were subjected to forced migration (Iğsız, 2008, p. 454). *Birds Without Wings* focuses on one of those Anatolian towns whose Christian population, regardless of their race or language, fell victims to this mass mobilization. de Berniéres reveals to Robert Birnbaum that the novel was inspired by some human bones that he saw while he was travelling around southwest Turkey. In Kayakoy, he comes across an ossuary and finds out that when the Greeks had to leave, they took the bones with them. That means, he first conceived in his mind the scene of deportation, which in the novel, comes at the end. In the meantime, he had to describe the previous life in the town, based on harmonious cultural plurality.

Conclusion

In his first chapter, where the title asks, "Is Multiculturalism Appropriate for the Twenty-first Century?" Tariq Modood gives an affirmative answer, he says: "it is the most timely and necessary and we need more not less" of multiculturalism, which he describes as "the form of integration that best meets the normative implications of equal citizenship" (Modood, 2007, pp. 9-14). Among the few examples where this system worked really well in the past, he cites the Ottoman Empire too. It shows that de Berniéres's book which draws upon the same experience might carry some messages for our own world today, when the humanity is about to give up one of its most fascinating dreams. In his article on Berniéres's more famous previous novel *Captain Corelli's Mandolin,* Shephard points at the co-existence of two different concepts of history: the catastrophic (Benjaminian) vision of history, in which disasters follow one after another and the angelic vision which develops a more optimistic view. (Shephard, 2002, p. 51) Although there does not seem to be much space for optimism in this story of a lost Eden, (*Birds Without Wings*) there is no reason why the book itself should not turn into a beacon showing what humanity must look for in its *Great Odyssey*.

Notes on the contributor

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Endnotes

[1]The first addition of the book came out in 2004 and was printed by Secker and Warbung, but all the references to the book in this article are to Louis de Berniéres. *Birds Without Wings*. London: Vintage, 2005

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