

Araştırma Makalesi-Research Article

LIVES AMIDST RUINS: GREEK NATIONALISM IN LOUIS DE BERNIÈRES'S *BIRDS WITHOUT WINGS**

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ABSTRACT: Louis de Bernières's *Birds Without Wings* offers an account of a fictional Ottoman town on the brink of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Among the inhabitants of the town is Daskalos Leonidas, an irredentist Greek teacher, whose purpose is to promote Greek nationalism among the Greek inhabitants of the town. The novel is set amidst the Ly-cian, Hellenic and Roman ruins, allowing the reader to engage diachronically with the setting. By positioning an irredentist character in such a multi-layered and ever-changing setting, de Bernières is able to question the legitimacy of nationalist and irredentist ideologies. In this article, the legitimacy of Greek irredentism is analysed through the examination of the concepts of civilisation, ancestral land and nationalism. By debating the construction of Greek nationalist notions within this framework, this article sheds some light on de Bernières's criticism of the exploitation of historical knowledge for nationalist gains. Ultimately, the sense of community is delineated as a deliberate feeling in the novel as well as the desire for civilisational hierarchies.

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KALINTILAR ARASINDAKİ YAŞAMLAR: LOUIS DE BERNIÈRES'İN KANATSIZ KUŞLAR ROMANINDA YUNAN MİLLİYETÇİLİĞİ

ÖZ: Louis de Bernières'in *Kanatsız Kuşlar* adlı romanı, Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nun yıkılmanın eşiğine geldiği dönemlerde kurgusal bir köyde geçen hayat hikayelerini ele almaktadır. Romanda, köy sakinleri içerisinde, amacı Yunan milliyetçiliğini yaymak olan, Yunan öğretmen Daskalos Leonidas da bulunmaktadır. Roman, Likya, Helen ve Roma kalıntılarının arasında kurgulandığı için, okuyucuya mekanla zamansal bir ilişki kurmasına olanak tanımaktadır. Yayılmacı milliyetçi bir roman karakterini, böylesi çok katmanlı ve tarihsel açıdan dinamik bir ortamda kurgulayarak, de Bernières, milliyetçi ve yayılmacı ideolojilerin meşruluğunu sorgulamaktadır. Bu makalede, Yunan yayılmacılığının meşruluğu, medeniyet, ata toprağı ve milliyetçilik kavramlarının incelenmesi yoluyla analiz edilmektedir. Bu makale, Yunan milliyetçiliğine dair inançların inşasını bu çerçeveden ele alarak, aynı zamanda, de Bernières'in milliyetçi çıkarlar adına tarihin kötüye kullanımına dair getirdiği eleştirisine de bir ışık tutmaktadır. Sonuç olarak, romanda, toplumsallık bilinci, medeniyetler arasında hiyerarşi beklentisinde olduğu gibi, kasıtlı bir duygu olarak betimlenmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yunan, Milliyetçilik, Yayılmacı Milliyetçilik, Osmanlı İmparatorluğu, Medeniyet.

INTRODUCTION

Birds Without Wings (2004) by Louis de Bernières is set in the early twentieth century in a bustling town composed of people from Greek, Turkish and Armenian communities. The setting of the historical novel is inspired by the ghost-town of Kayaköy, *Village of Rock* in Turkish, located near contemporary Fethiye, Turkey. Throughout its history, this region has come under Lycian, Greek, Byzantine, Ottoman, and finally republican Turkish rule before it was eventually destroyed by an earthquake in 1957. The novel recounts a story of the dying days of the Ottoman Empire, followed by the impoverishing and unmerciful years of the First World War,

and also shares a glimpse of the early years of the Republic of Turkey at the end. In the book, the town is called Eskibağçe, Old Garden, which is described as being located close to “the vivid waters where the Aegean merges into the Mediterranean Sea”.¹

When Leyla Hanım enters the town after her journey from Constantinople, she thinks that “[s]he is back where she belongs, amid the softness of civilisation”.² The description of Eskibağçe includes a leech gatherer catching leeches in the vicinity, amidst “the ruins of a temple that once was sacred to Leto, Artemis and Apollo”³; a vagabond man called “the Dog” by the villagers who is “tak[ing] up residence in the Lycian tombs”⁴; townspeople still gathering at “the almost intact ruins of a Roman theatre [...] for big meetings and celebrations”⁵; “the cries of the vendors and artisans” at the forefront of “the white minarets of the mosque and the golden dome of the Church of St Nicholas”.⁶

Expanding from this concurrence of history, this paper looks at the ways in which Louis de Bernières represents coming-togetherness of various civilisations in an Aegean town and happy moments as well as the struggles of the townspeople to continue to co-exist despite and because of their differences, if any, especially during the increasingly hostile conditions of war. Particularly with the declaration of Greek independence in 1821 and the final establishment of the Kingdom of Greece across the Aegean Sea in 1832, the Greeks of the Ottoman Empire had already found themselves in a peculiar position at the start of the twentieth century in terms of their sense of communal and national identities. De Bernières's novel hosts several types of reactions of Ottoman Greeks to their unique situation at the start of the twentieth century. As the slippery nature of history turns the characters of the novel into agents of living history of nationalism, their sense of belonging crumbles under

¹ Louis de Bernières, *Birds Without Wings*, Secker and Warburg, London 2004, p. 31.

² De Bernières, *Birds Without Wings*, p. 199.

³ De Bernières, *Birds Without Wings*, p. 221.

⁴ De Bernières, *Birds Without Wings*, p. 44.

⁵ De Bernières, *Birds Without Wings*, p. 32.

⁶ De Bernières, *Birds Without Wings*, p. 199.

the weight of the antagonistic forces that challenge and run counter to their Ottoman identities.

1. CIVILISATION

Louis de Bernières, by setting his novel amidst the remains of earlier great civilisations, invites the reader to visualise the townspeople's relationship with the land in relation to the historical remnants scattered around them. The townspeople can be viewed as outlanders, with little or no interest about the archaeological artefacts around them, as heirs, preserving their perennial links with their predecessors, and as builders of the town's rich character for posterity as the representatives of their present community. The historical use of the word *civilisation* can shed light on the ways townspeople's relationship with their surroundings can be interpreted.

Before the word evolved into denoting "being civilized" and "not being barbarian" with the spread of the rationalist ideas of Enlightenment, *civilisation* had been mentioned in Western literature⁷ from a jurisprudential perspective, in which civil law, instead of military law, was seen as the marker of the society.⁸ According to Bruce Mazlish, the earliest change in the meaning of the word is detected in Victor Riqueti's *L'Ami des Hommes* which was published in 1756.⁹ The neologism of the word in Riqueti's work harks back to the origins of civilisation in agriculture as opposed to its "roots in the city and its future in increased industrialization": In Ancient Greece, the polis, the city-state, was "based on an agricultural hinterland" but "[i]t was only in the city that one spoke 'in public,' in a civilized manner, rather than babbling in an uncouth and impolitic

⁷ As Bruce Mazlish puts it, its example is found in the Universal French-Latin Dictionary (my translation) ("*Dictionnaire universel François et latin* (or *Dictionnaire de Trévoux*") published in 1743. Bruce Mazlish, *Civilization and Its Contents*, Stanford University Press, California 2004, p. 7.

⁸ Mazlish, *Civilization and Its Contents*, p. 7.

⁹ Mazlish, *Civilization and Its Contents*, p. 5.

tongue"¹⁰ which is the language of the outsider.¹¹ For Riqueti, Marquis de Mirabeau, the word later came to refer to "a group of people who were polished, refined, and mannered, as well as virtuous in their social existence".¹²

Following the publication of Riqueti's book, the word regained popularity and stripped of its original religious standards, it was embedded by European thinkers into their emerging Enlightenment thought. The concept, since then, has come to carry with it the notions of "increased population, liberty, and justice" that are lodged in "a particular form of sociability"¹³; and by way of its reification, *civilisation* has started to serve as an important component of the idea of *progress* that would become, in Mazlish's words, "the third phase in conjectural history, signalling the last stage in the movement of humanity from savagery to barbarism and then to civilization".¹⁴ Consequently, by classifying societies into three main stages of technical development, social evolutionists of the nineteenth century also created hierarchies among them.

The representation and characterisation of the Ottomans in *Birds Without Wings* extensively harbour undertones of the criticism of the concept *civilisation* and its change as a notion that denotes linear evolutionary stages in societies, which is, then, just like the Western use of the concept of progress, used as an excuse to act against less *civilised* peoples and their lands and possessions. In *Birds Without Wings*, *civilisation* is not projected as commensurate with linear historical development but envisaged by Leyla Hanım

¹⁰ According to Mazlish, it was Homer who first spoke of the word *bar-bar* to describe the way ancient Carians sounded to him, although he didn't use the term barbarian. On that account, the Greeks were influential in the generation of a distinction thereafter of *barbarian* and *civilized*. Mazlish, *Civilization and Its Contents*, p. 2.

¹¹ Claiming themselves superior to others, societies have always distinguished themselves from the *outsider*, or *barbarians*. Mazlish, *Civilization and Its Contents*, p. 1-2.

¹² Mazlish, *Civilization and Its Contents*, p. 7.

¹³ Mazlish, *Civilization and Its Contents*, p. 5.

¹⁴ Mazlish, *Civilization and Its Contents*, p. 7-8.

in a way seemingly analogous to that of Victor Riqueti in its emphasis on community life in the rural. For Daskalos Leonidas, on the other hand, this is not a town inhabited by, in Mazlish's words, "a group of people who [are] polished, refined, and mannered, as well as virtuous", in other words, for him, it is not civilised.¹⁵

Daskalos Leonidas is a Greek nationalist who comes to Eskibahçe from Smyrna (İzmir) as a teacher for the Rum school children of the town. He views the Muslim inhabitants as his nemesis while he himself is seen as a figure of discontentment and a source of mockery by the inhabitants of Eskibahçe. He is resentful of the rule of the Ottomans and disdains the Turkish language because he sees Greek as the ultimate language of humanity – by misguided righteousness he claims that "even the Romans spoke Greek".¹⁶ He also complains about Christian people's inability to speak Greek at all since Turkish is spoken as the main language in the town. Leonidas is evidently a propagandist of the *Megali Idea* – the ideal of Greek irredentism. He is a member of *Philiki Etaireia* – a "secret societ[y] formed to bring about the reunification of [historical] Greece".¹⁷ Articulating Leonidas's irredentist dreams, the narrator of the novel upholds that the teacher's big dreams for the Greek nation go hand in hand with his feelings of Greek superiority, particularly defined in opposition to Turks. The narrator offers this stance as a specific kind of human weakness:

He [Leonidas] was possessed by beautiful visions of Constantinople restored to its place as capital of the Greek world, and, like all who have such beautiful visions, his were predicated on the absolute belief that his own people and his own religion and his own way of life were superior to others and should therefore have their own way. Such people, even those as insignificant as Leonidas, are the motor of history, which

¹⁵ Mazlish, *Civilization and Its Contents*, p. 7.

¹⁶ De Bernières, *Birds Without Wings*, p. 260.

¹⁷ De Bernières, *Birds Without Wings*, p. 258. De Bernières mentions *Philiki Etaireia* (founded in 1814) in the novel instead of *Ethniki Etaireia* (founded in 1894). While *Filiki Etaireia* aimed "to overthrow Ottoman rule and establish an independent Greek state", the purpose of *Ethniki Etaireia* was to "advocat[e] and facilitat[e] the aims of the Megali Idea". Stefanos Katsikas and Anna Krinaki, "Reflections on an 'Ignominious Defeat': Reappraising the Effects of the Greco-Ottoman War of 1897 on Greek Politics", *Journal of Modern Greek Studies*, 38 (2020), p. 115.

is finally nothing, but a sorry edifice constructed from hacked flesh in the name of great ideas.¹⁸

In this dramatic passage, the narrator reflects on three key components: feelings of national and racial superiority, the contorted and questionable source of this tendency (*hacked flesh*) and the peculiarly feeble causes of revolutionary changes in history. Leonidas's dream about a far-reaching Greek rule and his perception of Greek superiority signal and foreshadow the coming of a tragedy of one's own making.

Leonidas's feeling of superiority to Ottoman Turks actually runs parallel to the European concept of civilisation, and it is used as a marker of identity that is defined and driven from an angle of exclusionism. Poignantly, Greece's gaining a place and prominence in the ranks of Western civilisations was the result of European nations competing amongst themselves to be world actors if not powers. Especially following an upsurge of interest in antiquity owing to the accounts of French and British travellers who visited ancient sites during the eighteenth century, the image of "classical antiquity" was increasingly embedded into the discourse of Western Enlightenment.

In the eighteenth century, in pursuit of their newly found source of inspiration, French and British travellers toured the ruins of the ancient Greece while the Society of Dilettanti (founded in 1733–36 in London) financed such expeditions and works related to the antiquities of Rome and Greece. The publication of books such as *Antiquities of Athens* (1762-1816) by James Stuart and Nicholas Revett was the outcome of such initiatives and enthusiasm. Such publications served the function to instil an inquisitive passion for the ancient Greece and became the precursors of the Neoclassicist and Greek revival movements. Readings of history from this renewed

¹⁸ De Bernières, *Birds Without Wings*, p. 131.

light also helped Western thinkers to interpret history as the “unraveling of human progress”.¹⁹ As a result, the (discourse of) Western Enlightenment was construed alongside the image of “classical antiquity”, and it is within this context that Europe saw the Hellenic²⁰ as the source of its “originary *topoi*” for the purposes of self-definition.²¹

It is a common assertion that European states gained power by re-evaluating their own past through the achievements of ancient Greece. This fact also gave European continent the tools for its own legitimisation as the universal authority:

The concept of civilization, developed at the time of Enlightenment as part of the European imaginary, claimed to offer a universal measuring rod: a civilization had certain material characteristics and it behaved and thought in a certain spiritual manner. (Needless to say, one man’s civilization could be another’s barbarism.) Certainly, this was the case in the past. Was there anything more substantial, however, to the European version of civilization, carrying with it a claim to universality? Or

¹⁹ Victor Roudometof, “From *Rum Millet* to Greek Nation: Enlightenment, Secularization, and National Identity in Ottoman Balkan Society, 1453–1821”, *Journal of Modern Greek Studies*, 16 (1998), p. 23–24.

²⁰ The choice of word *Hellenic* is important in the sense that during the revival years of Greece, the word “Hellen” was preferred instead of “Greece” as it referred to the era before the annexation of Greek states by the Roman Empire and had irredentist connotations as after the end of the rule of Alexander the Great, the Hellenistic Greece spanned to a large geographical scope. It is in a way situated in the genesis of “the concept of civilization” as opposed to the more generic term *Greek*. As a result, the provisional Greek state that was established during the Greek War of Independence against the Ottoman Empire had first been called the First Hellenic Republic, only to be named the Kingdom of Greece after the independence.

²¹ Roudometof, “From *Rum Millet* to Greek Nation”, p. 23–24; Umut Özkırmılı and Spyros A. Sofos, *Tormented by History: Nationalism in Greece and Turkey*, Hurst Publishers, London 2008, p. 22; This statement is true for Orientalist studies in general. Travellers tended to take up ideas from where they had been left off by earlier writers in what Said calls a system of citationality. As Said observes, even “[w]hen a learned Orientalist traveled in the country of his specialization, it was always with unshakable abstract maxims about the “civilization” he had studied; rarely were Orientalists interested in anything except proving the validity of these musty “truths” by applying them, without great success, to uncomprehending, hence degenerate, natives”. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, Penguin, London 2003, p. 52.

was it a simple expression of domination, to be overthrown in the name of relativism or multiculturalism?²²

Such limited universality, however, would espouse certain attributes assigned to Ancient Greek civilisations which allowed them to be considered as civilised. These would be widely ranging from “[r]eason, philosophy, and freedom to shape one’s personal destiny” to “historical awareness, agriculture, the polis, a more refined treatment of women”.²³ These qualities were meant to echo Europe’s vision of itself, and also to pronounce a sense of superiority deriving from historical progress attributed to the West.

In the Greek nationalist imagination, this line of thought - the acceptance that Greece was the originator of the higher Western civilisation - was encouraged and disseminated in the eighteenth century and carried through to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries from two main notions that occasionally feed each other even today: One of them is the claims of the Greek to the “originary *topoi*” or *topos*, which will be explored in the next section, and the other is the backwardness of the Ottomans. These standpoints have undeniably become sources of inspiration for Greek nationalist and irredentist engagements of the likes of Leonidas as represented by de Bernières.

Similarly, Edward Said cites Paul Valéry’s work in his *Orientalism* to show how the East is seen by Europe in antagonistic terms with an intention to prove the superiority of *European* civilisation.²⁴ In Valéry’s work, the “role” of the West is seen as appropriating the sources it chooses to use in order to postulate its own standards, the result of which is the empowerment of the West, which is, needless to say, learnt from the Greeks and Romans. Further, the Mediterranean is perceived by some early scholars as the bottleneck that prevents threats from the East. As Paul Valéry suggests in his article *Puissance de choix de l'Europe*:

²² Mazlish, *Civilization and Its Contents*, p. xiii-xiv.

²³ Roudometof, “From *Rum Millet* to Greek Nation”, p.23; Mazlish, *Civilization and Its Contents*, p. 3.

²⁴ Said, *Orientalism*, p. 250-251.

From the cultural point of view, I do not think that we have much to fear *now* from the Oriental influence. It is not unknown to us. We owe to the Orient all the beginnings of our arts and of a great deal of our knowledge. We can very well welcome what now comes out of the Orient if something new is coming out of there – which I very much doubt. This doubt is precisely our guarantee and our European weapon.

Besides, the real question in such matters is to *digest*. But that has always been, just as precisely, the great specialty of the European mind through the ages. Our role is therefore to maintain this power of choice, of universal comprehension, of the transformation of everything into our own substance, powers which have made us what we are. The Greeks and Romans showed us how to deal with the monsters of Asia, how to treat them by analysis, how to extract from their quintessence. [...] The Mediterranean basin seems to me to be like a closed vessel where the essences of the vast Orient have always come in order to be condensed.²⁵

Early twentieth-century essayist Paul Valéry believed in the power of the intellect, and he was sceptical of civilisations but a determinist of European history. He was aware of the transient nature of civilisations, yet this did not cause him to forsake his belief in the future of Europe. Although he recognised the greatness of every civilisation in history and acknowledged their contributions in the *progress* of humankind, in the above passage from “Puissance de choix de l'Europe” (Europe’s Power of Choice), he was using a Eurocentric terminology when he described a dichotomy between “the monsters of Asia” and “powers” of “the Greeks and Romans”.²⁶

The Ottoman Empire has been envisaged and represented generously as part of Europe’s Orientalist and Eurocentric imagination through commensurate modes of literary works. In an attempt to counter such essentialist and ahistorical discourses, many later works, including that of Louis de Bernières, promoted the opposite of such representations. In fiction, for example, stereotypically Hellenophile characters generally appear in contemporary fiction to remind readers of the need to question the bias of the founders of

²⁵ Paul Valéry, “Puissance de choix de l'Europe”, *Cahiers du mois*, 9-10 (February-March 1925), p. 16-17.

²⁶ Jan Ifversen, “The Crisis of European Civilization: An Inter-War Diagnosis”, *Globalization and Civilizations*, ed. Mehdi Mozaffari, Routledge, London and New York 2002, p. 157.

Greece as opposed to their comparative indifference to other new states. Arnold Toynbee admonishes, in his 1922 book *The Western Question in Greece and Turkey*, the tendency of Westerners to be drawn into the domestic politics of countries like Turkey or Greece: "The fact that I am neither a Greek nor a Turk perhaps creates little presumption of my being fair-minded, for Western partisans of non-Western peoples are often more fanatical than their favourites".²⁷ As Toynbee suggests, Westerners, in his own terms, can be more fervent and determined about the destiny of non-Western civilisations than the non-Westerners themselves. Edward Said demanded, as Fatih Çalışır puts it, that historians "abandon the Eurocentric views that contributed essentially to the self-identification of the West, and [...] make an effort to establish new paradigms to understand the historical developments regarding the Middle East".²⁸ Louis de Bernières's novel does exactly that as it is invested in providing a multi-layered portal to help us understand the complexity of national ideology with an approach that can accommodate different perspectives. It informs the reader of different forms of historical consciousness and formulation of sense of belonging. The following section will explore one of these forms.

2. ORIGINARY TOPOI

In *Birds Without Wings*, as a separatist nationalist person, the Greek character Leonidas exemplifies de Bernières's idea of mental alienation from historical authenticity experienced during national insurgencies in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The novel character Leonidas offers a glimpse into the nationalist and irredentist mind-set²⁹ that, following the Great War, led Greece to wage war between 1919 and 1922 against the Ottoman Empire, in which they had coexisted for almost half a millennium. In his words, as a member of "the greatest race in the world", Leonidas

²⁷ Arnold J. Toynbee, *The Western Question in Greece and Turkey: A Study in the Contact of Civilisations*, Constable and Company, London 1922, p. xxxi.

²⁸ Fatih Çalışır, "Decline of a 'Myth': Perspectives on the Ottoman 'Decline'", *The History School*, 9 (January-April 2011), p.42.

²⁹ Contemporary nationalist thought is discussed further later.

believes in the restoration of the Byzantium.³⁰ The following lines from the novel demonstrate the narrator's contempt for Leonidas's undertaking:

Britain no longer mourns the throne of France, Spain has no project to reclaim the Netherlands, and Portugal has no ambitions on Brazil, but there are those who are incapable of letting the past pass on, among them the Serbs who will always be obsessed by the loss of Kosovo, and the Greeks who will always be obsessed by the fall of Byzantium.³¹

The irony in the process of Greek nation-building was that before the conquest of Constantinople by the Ottomans, the pagan Hellenic was not directly followed by the Orthodox Greek establishment. Therefore, although the image of the Hellenic is always at the core of Greek nationalist thinking, during the Greek independence movements, under the intellectual leadership of the likes of Adamantios Korais, there came a point of realisation that "the linear past of the nation was invariably disrupted" by the Christian Roman establishment in the city.³² As a result, "Korais and his disciples could not account for the severing of modern Greece's link to classical antiquity".³³ Since the Ecumenical patriarchate of Constantinople being not only spiritual, but also the administrative and legal leader of Christians of Eastern Europe, including Bulgarian, Serbian, Albanian, and Greek communities, the *Rum millet*³⁴ of the Ottoman Empire had often been claimed to be "unnational" in terms of the "conduct of the Church, the clergy and other elites that dominated".³⁵ In other words, the narrative of nationalism that upholds "the classicist hegemony over the Greek past" had brought many inconsistencies with it.³⁶

³⁰ De Bernières, *Birds Without Wings*, p. 260.

³¹ De Bernières, *Birds Without Wings*, p. 131.

³² Özkırmılı and Sofos, *Tormented by History*, p. 82.

³³ Özkırmılı and Sofos, *Tormented by History*, p. 82.

³⁴ *Rum* is the word used for the Greeks of the Ottoman Empire. The word originates from the designation for the territories of the former Roman Empire.

³⁵ Özkırmılı and Sofos, *Tormented by History*, p. 82.

³⁶ Özkırmılı and Sofos, *Tormented by History*, p. 82.

In his 1964 inaugural lecture as the Koraes Professor at King's College London, Cyril Mango mentions that the definitions of Hellenism and Greek identity purport to be complementary, which results in the preclusion of an alternative understanding of Greek identity:

Much of the claim of modern Greece upon the sympathy of western Europe has been based on the assumption of a direct historical continuity reaching back three thousand years: from modern Greece to Byzantium, from Byzantium to the Hellenistic world and thence to ancient Greece. Whoever asserts this continuity is classed as a philhellene; whoever denies it runs the risk of being labelled a mishellene or hater of the Greeks.³⁷

This statement by Mango epitomises the unwillingness of historians to admit the Ottoman heritage of Greeks even in the middle of the twentieth century. However, to the dismay of the Greek irredentist world, as Umut Özkırmılı and Spyros A. Sofos point out, Ancient Greece's "most tangible and material remnants were the ruins scattered throughout the Ottoman territories".³⁸

In *Birds*, Louis de Bernières portrays Eskibahçe with a wealth of ancient ruins, where Leonidas's philhellenism is received with cynicism and therefore counterchallenged. What is seen by Leonidas as the disruption of linearity imposed by the Ottomans is seen by Iskander, the potter, a sympathetic character in the novel, as the continuation of civilisations. Leonidas's obsession with the idea of *originary topoi*, his feelings of hostility, and his wish for vengeance of the Ottomans are challenged by Iskander, who understands the impossibility of preserving a territorial original identity and explains this to the reader:

[Leonidas] stirred up resentment in them [the townsmen] with stories about how we Osmanlis had taken the land from the Greeks, and that the land was rightly theirs. I have heard it said that this place belonged once to a people called Lycians, and that the Greeks took it from them,

³⁷ Cyril Mango, "Byzantinism and Romantic Hellenism", *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 28 (1965), p. 29.

³⁸ Özkırmılı and Sofos, *Tormented by History*, p. 82-83.

so why did this teacher not tell the children that all land is originally stolen? Why did he not say, "Let us find the Lycians, and give it back?"³⁹

Lycian tombs are one of the recurrent images in the novel used primarily to juxtapose with and challenge the discourse of linear Greek civilisation. Leonidas Daskalos's belief that the Greeks were the true owners of Anatolia and the feeling of superiority this notion gives to him make him oblivious to the contemporary reality of the life and diversity in the Ottoman town that came about as a result of centuries-long historical progression.

The narrator remarks, "if one traced it back far enough, there was no one in that town who was not in some way a relation of everybody else".⁴⁰ What connects local people of Eskibahçe to one another is not their ancestral definition of who they are, but their shared experiences and customs. In this town, as in many other towns of the Empire, Muslims ask their Christian friends to burn candles for them in the church and to ask their Mary Mother of Jesus to do them favours. The Christians, on the other hand, ask their Muslim friends to tie rags to the tekke of their saint, or give them verses of the Qur'an to be written on slips of paper by the Imam of the town's mosque.⁴¹ To the mind of an orthodox Muslim, not asking what the white meat is when sharing a meal with Christian neighbours and drinking wine with them either overtly or in secret, getting converted when getting married, and being buried with a silver cross wrapped in a scrap of the Qur'an enfolded in the hands of the deceased might be all outrageous acts, but these are the common modes of behaviour in Eskibahçe.⁴² Sharing, and in Karen Berkey's terms, mixing of the cross and the crescent, becomes a practice that's produced over time.⁴³ De Bernières's mongrel town

³⁹ De Bernières, *Birds Without Wings*, p. 8.

⁴⁰ De Bernières, *Birds Without Wings*, p. 33.

⁴¹ De Bernières, *Birds Without Wings*, p. 65.

⁴² De Bernières, *Birds Without Wings*, p. 151.

⁴³ Karen Barkey, "Sharing Sacred Sites: The Ottoman Past and Transcultural Memories", paper presented at *Ottoman Pasts, Present Cities: Cosmopolitanism and Transcultural Memories AHRC Research Network; International Two-Day Conference* (26-27 June 2014). Accessed 23 February 2018. <https://ottomancosmopolitanism.wordpress.com/conference-podcasts>.

embodies the unique character of the transcultural customs and practices that make up the Ottoman identity.

3. NATIONALISM

With respect to nationalism, besides rising nationalisms within the Empire, the Ottoman failure to prevail as a nation constitutes the plot line of *Birds Without Wings*. For the Ottoman nationalism to prosper, there was no common fatherland to speak of, to begin with. Moreover, Özkırmılı and Sofos mention that the use of “[e]thnic designations such as ‘Serbs’, ‘Bulgarians’, ‘Greeks’ or ‘Turks’” during the rule of the Empire was also frequently devoid of “ethnic connotations” even if these identifications carried “reference to linguistic groups or ethnicity”.⁴⁴ The reason for this is that “[f]or many, locality remained a strong anchor of identity throughout the nineteenth century and even in the twentieth”.⁴⁵ Accordingly, the Ottomans found their loyalty in their “immediate locality, be it a town or a village, or a religious community”; therefore, “the concept of a fatherland” represented little to their identification.⁴⁶

Louis de Bernières, throughout his novel, advocates the understanding that nationalism is an overriding and corrosive power: after nation-building starts, it arrives at the expense of other peoples and nations. Among contemporary theories that set out the phenomenon of nationalism, *Ethnosymbolism* stands out as the closest explanation for the Greek teacher’s search for a larger meaning and cause for his social existence. Anthony Smith provides a groundwork for the definition of *nationalism* through his rendition of nucleus formations and affinities of nations called *ethnies* – “a named community of shared origin myths, memories and one or more element(s) of common culture, including an association with a specific territory”.⁴⁷ Anthony Smith sees *ethnie* as the bedrock of a *nation*, which he defines, similarly to *ethnie*, as “a named community pos-

⁴⁴ Özkırmılı and Sofos, *Tormented by History*, p. 16-17.

⁴⁵ Özkırmılı and Sofos, *Tormented by History*, p. 16-17.

⁴⁶ Özkırmılı and Sofos, *Tormented by History*, p. 44.

⁴⁷ Anthony D. Smith, “When is a Nation”, *Geopolitics*, 7.2 (2002), p.15.

sessing an historic territory, shared myths and memories, a common public culture and [exclusive to the definition of *nation*] common laws and customs".⁴⁸ While Leonidas celebrates *ethnies* (to use Smith's term), nations and nationalism, Louis de Bernières's chapters on the biography of Mustafa Kemal portray a sceptical, and even a hostile, image of the true essence of nationalism:

The child is born into a world where the seeds of Nazism have been long sewn and are waiting only for the dark rain. 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!" There has been interbreeding for centuries, but no one stops to ask what exactly a Serb or a Macedonian or a Bulgarian or a Greek actually is. It is enough that there are sufficient opportunists calling themselves freedom fighters and liberators, who will exploit these ideas in order to become bandits and local heroes in the war of all against all. Mustafa is born into a world where law and order are fast collapsing, where looting has become more profitable than working, where the arts of peace are becoming more and more unpracticable, and personal tolerance makes less and less difference.⁴⁹

The political climate in the above paragraph hints at the cataclysmic nature of nationalism, which is nurtured by the perennialist rhetoric. As the Serbian, Macedonian, Bulgarian, or Greek identities are consolidated, freedoms are won by pursuing nationalist movements, and the empire is also stripped of its identity as the "empire of difference".⁵⁰

For ethnosymbolists like Anthony Smith, nationalism is explained through "the 'recurrence of nations' throughout history".⁵¹ In this approach, recurrence is ascribed a special purpose through the entity of *ethnies* since Smith sees *ethnies* as being subject to "conflicts" and "discontinuities", rather than to evolutionary processes

⁴⁸ Anthony Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, Blackwell Publishing, Cornwall 1986, repr. 1988; Smith, "When is a Nation", p. 15.

⁴⁹ De Bernières, *Birds Without Wings*, p. 16-17.

⁵⁰ Karen Barkey, *Empire of Difference: The Ottomans in Comparative Perspective*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2009.

⁵¹ Smith, "When is a Nation", p. 13-14.

of “ascending [...] inclusiveness of the resident designated populations”.⁵² Since the longevity of nations and empires can be explained from this vantage point, the essence of the Ottoman Empire, which would merely depend on the evolutionary variation of land and peoples, would therefore act as a “prison of nations”.⁵³ This thesis of nationalism does not conform to inclusive population policies and oftentimes finds its footing in the gaps within the life cycle of states. The focus of Ethnosymbolism is therefore rather directed at “the relationship between modern nations and premodern *ethnies*” which would be possible through the “recurring nature of ethno-symbolic ties”.⁵⁴ These national bonds are embedded in the (antecedent) ethnic symbols, memories, myths and values and the (sacred) traditions that are acquired from earlier ages and peoples.⁵⁵ According to Smith, one needs to look at these links in terms of *la longue durée*: “a time span which covers many centuries” with “older layers [...] are not wholly erased” and are tangible in the contemporary society.⁵⁶ In this approach, “the history of large collective cultural identities” is viewed as one belonging to a nation which “continually form[s] and dissolve[s] over different periods and continents”.⁵⁷

For this formulation of continuity to work, such national formations over a *longue durée* based on the assumption that nations rest on certain core units called *ethnies* unavoidably begets amnesia regarding certain historical periods that these *ethnies* may have undergone. The idea of “discontinuities” that interrupts an otherwise seamless perpetuation of an ethnic group requires such nationalist

⁵² Smith, “When is a Nation”, p. 14.

⁵³ Michelle U. Campos, *Ottoman Brothers: Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Early Twentieth-Century Palestine*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California 2011, p. 5.

⁵⁴ Özkırımlı and Sofos, *Tormented by History*, p. 7; Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism: A Critical Survey of Recent Theories of Nations and Nationalism*, Routledge, London 1998, p. 6.

⁵⁵ Özkırımlı and Sofos, *Tormented by History*, p. 7; Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism*, p. 6.

⁵⁶ Özkırımlı and Sofos, *Tormented by History*, p. 7; Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism*, p. 6.

⁵⁷ Smith, “When is a Nation”, p. 13-14.

histories to disregard the very existence of certain historical periods, and by doing so, reject many of the characteristic changes these periods may have brought to the so-called *ethnies*. De Bernières explores this point by focusing on the character Leonidas, who disregards his Ottoman identity, considers the Ottomans as oppressors, and ignores the fact that the Empire had for many years succeeded in maintaining the cultural heritage of various civilisations and traditions that it contained while at the same time embedding the new ones through the *millet* system. Leonidas's rejection of the Ottoman identity could be seen as a matter of wholesale denial of Ottoman history as playing a big part on the nationalist Greek history. Leonidas's approach not only illustrates the nationalist thesis of *longue durée*, but also shows how it disregards specific phases of history and the dynamic nature of national character, embracing only certain facts and episodes and eliminating others in line with the nationalist discourse in question.

The critique of Ethnosymbolism adheres to the idea that *ethnies* are essentially social constructs, and similar to nations, they are invented or conceived by "cultural practices established over time" by politicians or other actors involved in nation-building practices.⁵⁸ As scholars of modern nationalism agree, "[n]ationalist projects always look back in time, seeking to demonstrate the 'linear time of the nation', its undisputed diachronic presence".⁵⁹ Anthony Smith investigates such linearity and asks whether there's "a measure of continuity between medieval (or ancient) ethnic or regnal formations and modern nations in at least some cases", and finds his answer in the formulation of "*longue durée*" of nations.⁶⁰ According to Özkırmılı and Sofos, however, the problem with Ethnosymbolism is that it promotes "retrospective ethnicization" by "ethniz[ing] the past, a past that is much more complex, contradictory and ambiguous than we are led to believe".⁶¹ They believe that the nationalists make use of the past through such expedients to the

⁵⁸ Özkırmılı and Sofos, *Tormented by History*, p. 10.

⁵⁹ Özkırmılı and Sofos, *Tormented by History*, p. 77.

⁶⁰ Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism*, p. 175.

⁶¹ Özkırmılı and Sofos, *Tormented by History*, p. 10.

benefit of “their struggle to define the nation” in order to make nationalist notions “intelligible to the reader” or “to the consumer of the ethnosymbolist discourse”.⁶² Furthermore, the two also maintain that, “[n]ames such as ‘Hellenes’ or ‘Turks’ may exist for many centuries, but their meanings and the social realities behind them undergo rapid and sometimes quite radical transformations in time”.⁶³

The modern discourse of nationalism holds that enduring past traditions, memories and symbols are given political significance by nationalist politicians and intellectuals for nationalist projects. Such an arrangement also receives support from social and economic groups that benefit from such developments. For Hobsbawm, from a nationalist perspective, this construction process requires that the “nation” is recognized “prospectively” by allowing the creation of nations based on a nationalist programme that “exists prior to the formation of the nation”.⁶⁴ In the modern view of nationalism, it is maintained that “nationalism selects, re-configures and sometimes recreates older traditions and identities in accordance with present concerns”.⁶⁵ Such modern theories of nation are suggested in opposition to primordialist views that find “nations as objective, durable phenomena, the origins of which typically can be traced back to remote antiquity”.⁶⁶ Their socially constructed character is the common denominator of modern currents of theories of nationalism. The advocates of the modern interpretation of nationalism uphold that “human actors” are not only capable of nationalist thought, but they also have the “compulsion to turn even non-purposeful action into purposive action, that is, to reflect on and rationalize it”. In this way, nationalist actions are

⁶² Özkırmımlı and Sofos, *Tormented by History*, p. 9.

⁶³ Özkırmımlı and Sofos, *Tormented by History*, p. 10.

⁶⁴ Philip L. Kohl, “Nationalism and Archaeology: On the Constructions of Nations and the Reconstructions of the Remote Past”, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 27 (1998), p. 226; Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1990, repr. 2012, p. 9-13.

⁶⁵ Özkırmımlı and Sofos, *Tormented by History*, p. 10.

⁶⁶ Kohl, “Nationalism and Archaeology”, p. 225.

given purpose, “a meaning and a direction within particular (and purposeful) hegemonic projects”.⁶⁷

It is common in the studies of modern nationalism to address the narratives of the past which are refashioned by the views and interests of nation builders. Anthony Smith takes a different approach from the modernists by assigning authority to certain cultural imprints and symbols and claims that the only way to “understand the power exerted by such pasts” is to make “an analysis of collective cultural identities over *la longue durée*”.⁶⁸ However, in this way of thinking, claim Özkırmılı and Sofos, when societies are seen as “collective cultural identities over *la longue durée*” and, similarly, when “ethnic pasts” are allowed to “help to shape present concerns”, it becomes difficult to avoid presentism.⁶⁹ In modern theories of nationalism, as Hobsbawm says, “the real ‘nation’ can only be recognized a posteriori”, which means that nation cannot be before nation.⁷⁰ In other words, in this way of thinking, it is accepted that in order to create some sense of continuity of a nation, there arises a need to omit or merge some histories, facts and findings. The ethnosymbolic approach, on the other hand, makes it possible to claim that a Greek nation “exist[ed] in the later Byzantine Empire, as well as in the subsequent Orthodox *millet* which was led by Greeks and a Greek-speaking clergy”.⁷¹ Such selectiveness of the past narratives and archives prohibits an Ottoman identity from being a part of this linearity; it is seen as disruptive, as having no consequence for Greek identity. The controversy between modernists, such as Gellner and Breuilly, and ethnosymbolists is, then, about “dating the emergence of the nation” and the relationship of the nation “to pre-modern ethnic communities”.⁷² On the other hand, as Malešević puts it, these two approaches also “clash over the question of whether – as ethno-symbolists argue – common values, ideas

⁶⁷ Özkırmılı and Sofos, *Tormented by History*, p. 10.

⁶⁸ Özkırmılı and Sofos, *Tormented by History*, p. 8.

⁶⁹ Özkırmılı and Sofos, *Tormented by History*, p. 8.

⁷⁰ Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, p. 9.

⁷¹ Özkırmılı and Sofos, *Tormented by History* p. 8.

⁷² Siniša Malešević, *Identity as Ideology: Understanding Ethnicity and Nationalism*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, Hampshire 2006, p. 118.

and beliefs or – as modernists claim – political and economic interests had the upper hand in shaping the direction and intensity of nationalism”.⁷³

Furthermore, in *Birds Without Wings*, Leonidas's self-identification with an extraneous motherland can be identified as a typical example of elitist nation-building based on the notion of a *national homeland*. In this type of national engagement, the commitment shown for the non-core groups by the *co-ethnics abroad* and their corresponding demands, in turn, are “targeted with exclusionary policies by the state whose sovereignty they challenge”, which results in radicalising those who already feel excluded.⁷⁴ A counterargument to this approach, which reveals the “shortcomings” of “the homeland argument” supported by Leonidas, is exhibited by Leonidas's father in the novel. He not only sets out to prove that he and his family are well-off and respected people within the Ottoman rule (“Don't tell me we are governed by Turks, when the evidence to the contrary is right in front of your eyes”), but also says that the historical figures Leonidas looks up to have many defects (“How many weeping widows and raped virgins went and thanked [Alexander] for his culture, do you suppose?”).⁷⁵ The emphasised “ethnic affinity between the external power and the non-core group” is also deemed to be unreliable because of “the inability to account for the variation in the behavior of the ‘homeland’ over time”.⁷⁶

CONCLUSION

Birds Without Wings demonstrates the deliberateness of the act of construction of nationhood. Leonidas's nationalism that idolizes the Byzantine Empire can be mapped on Smith's discourse of *longue durée*. Nevertheless, in his writing, Louis de Bernières views civilisation from a conciliatory lens, and presents instances of both disruptions and complications created through past events in an effort

⁷³ Malešević, *Identity as Ideology*, p. 118.

⁷⁴ Harris Mylonas, *The Politics of Nation-Building: Making Co-Nationals, Refugees, and Minorities*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2012, p. 4-5.

⁷⁵ De Bernières, *Birds Without Wings*, p. 259-260.

⁷⁶ Mylonas, *The Politics of Nation-Building*, p. 4-5.

to communicate a sense of harmony across numerous communities that came to exist in an Aegean town throughout history. As such, by repeatedly overlaying his descriptions of the Lycian tombs and the ruins of the Roman theatre with the accounts of relatively more recent constructions in the town such as the Muslim graveyard or a fountain erected by a Rum philanthropist just before the First World War broke out, de Bernières is able to create a powerful sense of continuity, harmony and balance across various past and present inhabitants. Recurrent mention of the Lycian tombs and the artefacts of ancient Greece serves as an affirmation of the existence of the Greek heritage and gives a notion of intricate continuity between past and present, but at the same time acts as a reminder of the transient nature of civilizations, which continually transform and change. By debating the construction of nationalism, de Bernières critiques the abuses of history, and urges us to reconsider the function of the history as a critical tool to learn from. He employs the images of the town to prove the work of civilisation in progress, with its faults, but also with its strengths. After all, “the softness of civilisation” Leyla Hanım recognises in Eskibahçe is the culmination of the diversity and harmony that an old garden, *eski bahçe*, can host.⁷⁷ By encapsulating a sense of community in the town, Louis De Bernières encourages us to look beyond nationalist ideologies and the civilisational hierarchies that are embedded in them.

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⁷⁷ De Bernières, *Birds Without Wings*, p. 199.

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