

Divergent Narratives: Greek and Turkish Literary Responses to the 1923 Population Exchange

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(An addition to my DYCP experience in 2024-25.)

Author's Note:

This comparative analysis emerged from my reflections during an Arts Council Funded DYCP (develop Your Creative Practice) residency in Istanbul and the months spent developing a body of work concerned with migration, identity, and memory. I approached the research with the inherited perspective of a Greek family displaced from Asia Minor-an outlook shaped by personal and communal narratives of trauma and loss. However, through conversations, readings, and visual responses, I came to recognise that what I had assumed was a shared historical catastrophe between Greeks and Turks was, in fact, perceived very differently depending on national context. This realisation revealed how historical events are refracted through distinct interpretive frameworks, often challenging assumptions carried by those of us shaped by one side of the story.

Abstract

This article explores the contrasting portrayals of the 1923 Greco-Turkish population exchange in Greek and Turkish literature. Through a comparative analysis of major novels, historical texts, and scholarly studies, it reveals how national trauma, identity, and state narratives shape literary expression. Particular attention is paid to emotional tone, characterization, historical framing, and the intergenerational transmission of memory. The study demonstrates how literature in both countries has served to reinforce or challenge official narratives, creating spaces of mourning, resistance, or national pride. It also considers the role of literary silence, gender, and evolving memory in shaping these divergent perspectives.

Introduction

The 1923 population exchange between Greece and Turkey forcibly relocated approximately 1.5 million Anatolian Greeks and 500,000 Muslims from Greece under the Treaty of Lausanne. It was an unprecedented effort to create ethnically homogeneous nation-states through compulsory, state-sanctioned migration. While framed as a political solution to ethnic tensions, the human cost was

immense. This study focuses on how that cost is remembered and represented in Greek and Turkish novels. Literature, more than official history, conveys the psychological and emotional reverberations of this trauma and becomes a vehicle for either reconciliation or division.

Historical Background

The collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the early 20th century brought interethnic violence, wars, and shifting borders. The Greco-Turkish War (1919–1922), culminating in the burning of Smyrna and the defeat of Greek forces, set the stage for the Lausanne Convention, which formalized the population exchange. For Greeks, the event is remembered as "the Catastrophe," symbolizing the end of the centuries-old Greek presence in Asia Minor. For Turks, it was part of a broader process of nation-building and homogenization following the founding of the Republic. As Stephen Ladas observed, "The compulsory exchange of populations... was a measure of last resort, imposed by the international community to bring peace, but at great human cost."^[1]

Greek Literary Perspective

Greek authors consistently portray the exchange as a cultural and personal disaster. Dido Sotiriou's *Farewell to Anatolia* is perhaps the most iconic example. The narrator, a Greek peasant from Asia Minor, recounts the destruction of his village, the betrayal by international powers, and his eventual expulsion. The tone is intimate, melancholic, and accusatory-toward both the Turkish state and the Greek leadership. As Sotiriou writes, "They chased after a dream which was so heavily reliant on the promises of the Great Powers who abandoned them to their fate. Anguish and remorse were the dominant feelings..."^[2]

Elias Venezis's *Number 31328*, a semi-autobiographical novel, offers a harrowing account of life in Turkish labour battalions, where captured Greeks were forced to march under brutal conditions. The novel avoids polemic, instead invoking a sense of shared suffering and humanity amidst atrocity. Kosmas Politis' *At Hatzifrangou* commemorates cosmopolitan Smyrna, depicting intercommunal harmony that was shattered by nationalism and war. "The novels were filled with regret and yearning but also reflected the heavy burden of forced migration as the incomparable price they paid for their wrongdoings. The longing for homeland was prevalent..."^[2]

These texts express a sense of exile not just from place but from identity—a rupture with the ancestral land that remains spiritually unresolved. The homeland becomes an object of memory and mourning, shaping

post-exchange Greek identity. As Asli Emine Comu notes, Greek novels often “end with exile, death, or spiritual fragmentation,” reflecting a collective trauma that resists closure.^[2]

Diversity and Gendered Voices:

While trauma and loss dominate, Greek literature is not monolithic. Later generations and female authors, such as Ioanna Karystiani, have introduced more nuanced or reconciliatory tones, sometimes depicting Turkish characters with empathy or exploring the specific burdens faced by women and the working class during displacement. Gülen Gökürk Baltas’ ethnographic research, for example, highlights how “the refugee women’s place of origin, place of residence, social class, and cultural capital” shaped their adaptation and memory, adding a crucial gendered dimension to the literary record.^[3]

Turkish Literary Perspective

In Turkish literature, the exchange is positioned within a longer history of Muslim suffering and exile from the Balkans and Caucasus. It is less frequently centered as a singular trauma and more often portrayed as one episode in a narrative of migration, resilience, and republican consolidation.

Yilmaz Karakoyunlu’s *Mor Kaftanlı Selanik* explores the psychological state of Muslims arriving from Thessaloniki. The Greek characters are sympathetic but marginal. The main focus is on Turkish refugee adaptation and the bureaucratic process of integration. The tone is ultimately hopeful, portraying the exchange as difficult but necessary: “Even though they were devastated about leaving their former homes behind, they were optimistic about their new life and had a sense of hope for the future.”^[2]

Fügen Ünal Şen’s *Bir Avuç Mazi* presents intercommunal relationships prior to the exchange, including interfaith marriages and efforts to avoid expulsion. Yet it also follows the success stories of Turkish families resettling in Anatolia, highlighting resilience, national pride, and state intervention as positive forces. “In these novels hope was a more dominant feeling than despair, longing and regret... migrants grieved the loss of their hometowns, they adjusted themselves relatively easily to the change and quickly adapted to their new lives.”^[2]

Silence and State Narrative:

Turkish literary engagement with the exchange was muted until the 1980s, a silence attributed by Hercules Millas and others to state censorship and the dominance of a homogenizing national narrative. “In Turkish literature the predominant sense is that of belonging to a strong and sovereign central state. This contrasts with Greek literature in which the sense of a motherland-closely associated with a family home, personal memories and the ‘space’ of a small local community-is more keenly expressed.”^[1] Early

works tended to frame the departure of Greeks as necessary for national unity, while more recent novels offer greater psychological depth and sometimes acknowledge the pain of uprooting.

Comparative Analysis

The divergence in literary tone is stark. Greek novels focus on irreversible loss and victimhood, often ending in exile, death, or spiritual fragmentation. Turkish novels, particularly those written after 1980, tend to emphasize healing and national regeneration, typically resolving with adaptation, unity, or stoic endurance. As Bruce Clark notes, “The novels are filling in the sparse discourse on issues related to the misery and distress of migrants especially in Turkey where they remained silent for years. These literary works also played a major role in creating a distinct identity for these migrants by identifying them with Greek ones who also endured the same journey of forced migration.”^[2]

These tendencies reflect broader historiographies. In Greece, the exchange is associated with mourning and the trauma of imperial collapse. In Turkey, it is part of the victory narrative of Atatürk’s republic—painful, yes, but ultimately justified and successful. These interpretations are embedded in character development, plot structure, and the roles assigned to minorities or outsiders. As Onur Yıldırım writes, “Both sides, Turkey and Greece, were inclined to the idea of compulsory population transfer for their own reasons... The Great Powers were also in favor of the population transfer...”^[2]

Literary Silence and Its Breaking:

The late emergence of Turkish novels on the exchange is itself significant, reflecting the political sensitivities and the prioritization of state-building over minority memory. When Turkish literature did begin to engage with the exchange, it often did so through the lens of adaptation and national pride, but newer works increasingly question the costs of homogenization.

Intergenerational Memory

Later generations of writers shift the lens further. In both countries, recent works attempt to re-humanize the Other. Greek writers like Ioanna Karystiani incorporate Turkish characters with greater nuance. Turkish writers, including Ayşe Kulin, depict minorities with empathy. However, the legacy of the exchange remains foundational in both national imaginaries, with the trauma and memory of forced migration continuing to shape collective identity and interethnic perceptions. As Aslı Iğsız observes, “Humanism in Ruins... debunks the myth that it was a win-win solution and a clear achievement once and for all...”^[4]

Sociological Embedding

Literary trends correspond to real social dynamics. In Greece, refugee integration was difficult but largely successful by the 2000s, with high rates of intermarriage and civic participation: "By 2001 refugees display a high rate of intermarriage, with close to 50 percent of refugee women being married with a Greek native. Second generation refugees also report levels of trust in others and in institutions similar to natives, do not perceive to be discriminated against, and are more likely than natives to engage in political activism and to participate in voluntary associations."^[2] In Turkey, the Muslim arrivals faced linguistic and cultural alienation-many spoke Greek, not Turkish, and were perceived as outsiders. Turkish novels acknowledge this, but often resolve it through assimilation narratives, reflecting the state's emphasis on unity and conformity.

Conclusion

The population exchange of 1923 remains one of the most significant acts of state-directed ethnic reengineering in modern history. Its literary representations continue to influence collective memory, national identity, and interethnic perceptions. Greek literature preserves the trauma and sacred memory of lost homelands. Turkish literature, while acknowledging hardship, celebrates survival and renewal. These divergent narratives underscore the complexity of forced migration and the enduring power of literature to frame history. The gradual emergence of more nuanced, empathetic voices in both traditions signals the possibility of literary spaces that challenge official narratives and foster dialogue across historical divides.

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Note: Quotes are drawn from both primary literary texts and secondary scholarly analysis, as indicated in the references. For further detail, see the works cited, especially the comparative studies by Comu, Millas, and Hirschon.

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