

Promoting cross-cultural understanding through literature: how Turkish tea found its way into German fiction

“Conversations without tea are like a night sky without the moon” (Folk saying from Sivas, Turkey)¹

Listen to me: We will take the hill from my grandparents’ village and put it next to the Rhine (...) then we build a corn-yellow canopy with stars and make it your place. With colourful kilims from Turkey, soft down pillows from Austria and cuddly stuffed animals from Germany, we will build the most beautiful bed on earth (...) In the evening, we will take out some pancakes with bacon and we’ll sip hot black tea. On the weekends we will invite the whole family (...) The songs that we will be singing together won’t be sad. Then we will take the boat across the Rhine to the museum to see the Andy Warhol exhibition. If you don’t like that, we will do everything the other way around: we will carry the Rhine, the cathedral, the old town centre, the museum and the bacon pancakes to my grandparents’ village and read poems by Goethe and Heine on top of the hill on the weekends.²

Thus, the protagonist-cum-narrator of Renan Demirkan’s semi-auto-biographical novel, *Schwarzer Tee mit drei Stück Zucker* (1991) (Black Tea with

¹ www.turkishculture.org (accessed 10.6.2011)

² In a similar vein she fantasizes about a hybrid religion: talking to her unborn child she envisages a new religion with more rights and less obligations: “Then we will wake up with the Christian desire for action, and in a loving, relaxed Muslim way we will live according to clever Jewish wisdom, and in the evening we will fall asleep in Buddha’s lap in the hope of being reborn” (Tee, 46). Having been brought up in two cultures the protagonist is in the privileged position of being able to see the good and the bad by drawing comparisons. Renan Demirkan, *Schwarzer Tee mit drei Stück Zucker* (Berlin: Goldmann, 1991), p120-121. All translations into English are mine. None of Demirkan’s texts have appeared in English. Later references appear in parentheses as *Tee* with pagination. This was one of the first novels by a German-language author of non-German origin to head the German literary bestseller list for several months. Dursan Tan and Hans-Peter Waldhoff cite Akif Pirinci as the other Turkish-German writer, who can make the same claim. “Turkish Everyday Culture in Germany and its Prospects”, in *Turkish Culture in German Society Today*, ed. David Horrocks and Eva Kolinsky (Berghahn: Providence, Oxford, 1996) pp137-156: 150. Demirkan first became well known in Germany as an actress on TV and stage, which she continues to do alongside writing.

Three Sugar Cubes) talks to her baby daughter in her womb, imagining a 'better', 'hybridised' world for her. This German-Turkish mother-to-be fuses together some of the positive cultural aspects of Turkey, Austria and Germany for her daughter, who will be categorised as a third-generation German-Turkish immigrant. As Petra Fachinger points out, "With her mixed heritage as child of a German-Turkish mother and an Austrian father, she will make her home in the borderlands by resorting to the various cultures at her disposal."³

The topic of homeland, identity and integration of immigrants in German society, especially those of Turkish background, once again made the headlines in the autumn of 2010, not only in the German media but also globally. In his speech on the anniversary of German unity, Federal President Wulff, claimed that Islam belonged to Germany and was part of German culture, whilst Chancellor Merkel at a meeting of the youth wing of her Christian Democratic Union party, expressed the belief that multiculturalism in Germany had failed. The recent literature and film of German-Turkish writers tells a different story. The issues around integration and the extent to which it can be described as successful or not will be discussed in relation to Demirkan's debut novel *Black Tea with Three Sugar Cubes* and her memoir *Septembertee oder das geliehene Leben* (Tea in September or a life on loan) of 2008. Of particular interest will be the perspective of the female German-Turkish protagonist-cum-narrator, who refers to herself as having 'two lives in one skin' and reflects on her dual Turkish-German identity, thereby revisiting issues raised in her first novel. Since the author uses 'tea' in the titles of both her works, albeit written 17 years apart, it is worth examining whether or not Turkish tea can be regarded as a symbol of integration into German society.

³ Petra Fachinger, *Rewriting Germany from the Margins: 'Other' German Literature of the 1980s and 1990s* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 2001), p.66.

The tea which Demirhan's texts refer to is Turkish black tea, the national drink of Turkey, which is served in tiny gold-rimmed, tulip-shaped glasses, accompanied by two or three huge lumps of beetroot sugar. According to Brosnahan, this tea which is brewed from leaves, grown on the mountain slopes of Turkey's eastern coast, "oils the wheels of commerce, government and society".⁴ It is more than a beverage, serving as an essential social catalyst, keeping the bonds between family and friends strong. At business meetings, even interviews, significant negotiations start with tea. Today, Turkey is the world's fifth largest producer of tea: it has become fundamental to Turkish social life.⁵ Tea houses and tea gardens are to be found in every corner of cities and villages. Within the 1991 text the narrator-cum-protagonist recalls typical Turkish customs, such as the tea houses and old men sharing their problems over black tea and three sugars. This image is later 'updated' by a modern version, when the protagonist meets by chance a former Turkish friend, who is drinking tea on the intercity train between Frankfurt and Cologne. The traditional black tea has been replaced by a tea bag and concentrated lemon juice from a packet.⁶ This image alone highlights how a custom has been adapted to its new surroundings, where the culture of the country of immigration dominates and time pressures prevail.⁷ In reality,

⁴ Tom Brosnahan, "Not the done thing in Turkey" *Sunday Telegraph*, (1995) available at www.turkeytravelplanner.com/details/Food/TurkishTea.html (accessed 11.6.2011)

⁵ www.turkishculture.org (accessed 10.6.2011) The Dutch were the first European nation to begin drinking tea. In the early 16th century they began exporting Chinese tea through their trade base in Indonesia. Tea soon became the most popular beverage in Holland by around the mid 17th century. See Jane Pettigrew and Bruce Richardson, *Tea Classified: A Tealover's Companion* (London: National Trust, 2008).

⁶ According to Brosnahan, in Turkey tea bags, especially foreign brands, have become a status symbol in recent years. See note 4.

⁷ This concept of a dominant culture is not to be confused with the recent use of the term 'Leitkultur' in political discourse, which suggests that foreigners wishing to live in Germany should adhere to its cultural values. Needless-to-say, the proposal by the CDU party in 2000 sparked a series of controversial debates in the media, including the nature of German national identity per se.

customs are also able to thrive, where there is a strong sense of community, irrespective of country. Visible markers of a Muslim presence in German urban spaces include mosques, Turkish greengrocers, fast-food restaurants, businesses, which specialize in importing amongst other things jewellery, clothes, music CDs and DVDs. The most mundane products, such as teapots, can create familiarity and comfort. The immigrant community is able to maintain lifestyles that they or their families were either familiar with or grew accustomed to in Germany. Turkish tea houses are to be found all over Germany, especially in the big cities with their concentration of Turkish immigrants, as in Berlin where the district of Berlin-Kreuzberg has been renamed in the vernacular 'Little Istanbul'. In her two-year study of one of the major urban centres in the industrial Ruhr conglomeration, Duisburg-Marxloh, where residents with a Turkish passport account for nearly 26% of the population, Patricia Ehrkamp explains the significance of the 25 tea houses there as spaces for socializing, that they are "an extension of people's living rooms at home".⁸ Whilst all the tea houses offer TV, Turkish newspapers, and games, each cater for different groups within the Turkish community. This is due to their different affiliations: some are linked to fan clubs for Turkish football teams; some are connected to particular regions of Turkey; others are for specific age groups. All of them are exclusively male spaces and Germans rarely enter, just as the German-Turks do not visit the local pubs. Whilst these tea houses were originally founded by the first generation of immigrants, the guest workers, in the 1980s when they were reaching retirement age, most appeared in the 1990s when the second generation wanted a meeting-place,

⁸ Patricia Ehrkamp, "Placing Identities: Transnational Practices and Local Attachments of Turkish Immigrants in Germany", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Vol 31: 2. March 2005, pp.345-364: 354. According to the official web pages of the Federal Ministry of the Interior, immigrants account for about 9% of the German population, among which Turkish immigrants and their descendants make up the largest group with almost two million. 34% of the Turkish citizens living in Germany were born there. See www.bmi.bund.de. A report by the European Forum for Migration Studies suggests that by 2050 Germany will be among the countries experiencing the most comprehensive immigration worldwide: www.efms.uni-bamberg.de/dmar09_e.htm (accessed 6.6.2011).

where they could spend hours over their tea, playing cards, discussing politics and supporting each other.⁹ For many of these men, including the third generation, who have grown up with and in this culture, the tea houses continue to offer solidarity, friendship and a sense of belonging far removed from the stresses of everyday German life. They could just as well still be in Turkey. Time and place have not affected the traditions of tea-drinking. In the Turkish tea houses of Germany there is no sign of any desire to integrate into the everyday culture of the country which for the majority has become their permanent home.

In contrast, the most ubiquitous sign of the 'Orientalisation' of Germany could be considered to be the widespread consumption of doner kebabs. It is the most successful fast food, more popular than hamburgers.¹⁰ Is the way to integration through the stomach? Writing in 2003, the journalist Heribert Prantl cynically pointed out that racists do eat kebabs as well and that "integration is not the sum of all kebab snack bars in one street".¹¹ On the other hand, the author of a book on the history of kebabs in Germany, Eberhard Seidel-Pielen, believes the kebab should be seen as an invincible and culinary force.¹² Cem Özdemir, himself a Turkish-German and the first politician of Turkish background to enter mainstream German politics (since 2008 he has been the co-chair of the Alliance '90/The Greens party), also used the metaphor of kebabs to talk about multiculturalism in the title of his 1999

⁹ For a detailed study of the development and role of tea houses and mosques in Germany, see Rauf Ceylan, *Ethnische Kolonien: Entstehung, Funktion und Wandel am Beispiel türkischer Moscheen und Cafés*, (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2008).

¹⁰ An in-depth recent study was carried out by Marlen Mohring, "Doner kebab and West German Consumer (Multi-) Cultures" in *Hybrid Cultures – Nervous States: Britain and Germany in a (Post) Colonial World*, ed. U. Lindner et al, (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2011), pp.151-167.

¹¹ Heribert Prantl, "Reichtum im Gepäck: Geschichtslos, erinnerungslos; die Crux unserer Ausländerpolitik", *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 1 December 2003.

¹² Eberhard Seidel-Pielen, *Aufgespiesst: Wie der Döner über die Deutschen kam* (Hamburg: Rotbuch, 1996).

book : *Currywurst und Döner. Integration in Deutschland*.¹³ Both foods have indeed become quintessential German fast food. Unlike the black tea, however, they are, as Heike Henderson points out, "hybrid products born out of migration and adapted to German tastes".¹⁴ For some the success of supposedly 'ethnic' food has become a signifier of successful reconciliation. Unlike the Turkish black tea, neither food is available in Turkey.

For a second-generation German-Turkish writer, such as Renan Demirkan, the evidence and hope of true integration lies with the next generation. At the start of this paper, the quotation already suggested that in terms of food and drink, her daughter could happily drink black tea with her bacon and pancakes. The combination would not involve making one more palatable for the West (adding milk) or forbidding Muslims to eat pork. As Elizabeth Boa notes, "Crossing borders also means traversing rules, whether in food or language".¹⁵ In the text the Turkish-German family adopts the festivities of a German Christmas and Easter as well as the traditional 'coffee hour' within two years of their arrival in Germany because their two young daughters want to fit in. Both daughters find themselves positioned between two cultures. The younger seems unable to reconcile the two worlds and remains culturally torn: "I feel as if I have been cut in two. The one part of me is left hanging internally somewhere in the yellow (Anatolian) air, the other part is out there in the world I see daily" (*Tee*, 73). The elder daughter rebels against the strict upbringing and is captivated by the liberal lifestyle of the 1960s, the anti-Vietnam demos, the music of the Beatles, the mini-skirt. At the age of 18 she

¹³ Cem Özdemir, *Currywurst und Döner. Integration in Deutschland* (Bergisch Gladbach: Lübbe, 1999). Curried sausage is seen as a signifier for foreignness and Germanness at the same time: the curry powder gives spice to one of the most German dishes.

¹⁴ Heike Henderson, "Beyond Currywurst and Döner: The Role of Food in German Multicultural Literature and Society" *Glossen*, 28.2.2011 available at www.dickinson.edu/glossen/heft20/henderson.html (accessed 10.6.2011)

¹⁵ Elizabeth Boa, "Sprachenverkehr. Hybrides Schreiben in Werken von Özdamar, Özakin und Demirkan" in M. Howard (ed.) *Interkulturelle Konfigurationen. Zur deutschsprachigen Erzählliteratur von Autoren nichtdeutscher Herkunft*, (München: Iudicum, 1997), pp.115-138: p.136.

moves in with her German boyfriend. By bringing such shame on the family, she ends up being ostracised. She does try to seek forgiveness and make amends but a visit to her sick mother in hospital results in the home-baked pancakes being thrown at the door. Reconciliation takes one and a half years during which the protagonist finances her schooling by working weekends as a waitress and succeeds in passing her 'Abitur' (equivalent of 'A'-levels). For this second-generation female immigrant living between two cultures does not evoke a sense of estrangement, instead she has to come to terms with who she is. This search for self-identity is of course true of any teenager, trying to assert themselves, and any daughter, proving her independence as a woman. Conflict in the family is also about generational clashes. The protagonist's situation is worsened in this text on the one hand by her desire to fit in and be accepted by her classmates, but on the other hand she feels drawn to her cultural heritage, the literature and music of Turkish artists. Within the narrative Demirkan provides a possible solution to this dilemma of bi-culturalism. When asked at school about her nationality, the protagonist retorts: "I am a cosmopolitan!" (*Tee*, 57). Exactly the same descriptor is used by Demirkan on her website, where on the home page she has written next to 'Nationalität' (nationality) the word 'Kosmopolitin'.¹⁶ In a number of interviews Demirkan has elaborated on this, commenting: "I don't feel like a migrant".¹⁷ At the same time she is not willing to give up her Turkish passport: "I resist being subsumed by something which excludes a part of me. They will never be able to rub my name, hair colour, and my birthplace out of my life. That's why I'd like to keep this Turkish passport, which does nothing

¹⁶ www.renan-demirkan.de (accessed 10.6.2011)

¹⁷ Renan Demirkan gave a reading at the Goethe-Institute, Manchester, England, 1st December 2000. During 'question-time' she emphasized the fact that she did not wish to reduce her life to just seven years' experience of Turkey

more than confirm that I was born there, and confirms my cultural belonging to this country.¹⁸

Noteworthy, here, is the fact that Demirkan does not set one culture against another; she does not portray Turkey purely as a romantic, exotic country and Germany as arrogant and xenophobic. At the same time she does not disguise her criticism of intolerance and narrow-mindedness in society as a whole. A disastrous holiday in Turkey by the teenage protagonist and her German boyfriend brings to the fore these negative observations. Their car breaks down in Istanbul; a young Turk, with permed hair, dressed in jeans and proudly wearing a T-shirt with a portrait of the footballer Beckenbauer, comes to their aid, brings them food and drink and offers them a roof over their heads for the night. Is this a sign of Turkish hospitality? The words 'You are my guests' (*Tee*, 70) are repeated twice. The three young people, without getting undressed, sleep in three beds which have been pushed together, the German boyfriend positioned between the Turk and the German-Turkish girl. Later that night the protagonist awakens to find the Turkish man lying between her legs, trying to pull her jeans down. What follows is a violent, potential rape scene, yet it is simultaneously a farcical depiction with the girl pinching her boyfriend in his hand, arm and face to wake him up but without success; the Turk becoming more and more angry because he is struggling to remove the tight fitting jeans. As he is about to pull down her underpants she rips out some of his hair and screams so loud that the Turk falls off the bed. At this point the German boyfriend awakens, gets up, fetches their belongings and says "Let's go". In silence the two return to Germany and as might be expected, go their separate ways. The reader might well have expected a fight and the German to be the hero of the day. Instead we see an indifferent,

¹⁸ Pascal Beucker, "Liebe unterm Maulbeerbaum", Interview with Renan Demirkan, *taz*, 10.5.2001, <http://www.beucker.de/interviews/tk01-05-10.htm> (accessed 8.9.2014)

pathetic weakling who does and says nothing; a welcoming Turk who justifies his sexual aggression as being deserved by the Turkish girl since she is together with a German and has therefore forfeited any respect from the Turkish man.¹⁹ It is in fact the violated Turkish-German girl who is the 'heroine', since she is able to defend herself and proves to be 'superior' to both men.²⁰

By dint of the fact that the writer is female and the protagonist-cum-narrator is female, the text does naturally focus on the struggle of first and second generation immigrant women to adjust to their new lifestyle, as well as the prospects for the third generation. The protagonist's mother has no intention of staying permanently in Germany. Feeling more and more alienated from her culture of origin, she clings to the hope of returning to her roots, and therefore makes annual trips back to Turkey, but on her own. Unlike her husband who adapts to regulating their lives according to time by hanging clocks up everywhere in the house and who enjoys German music and literature, the mother is cocooned by feelings of nostalgia for her homeland. This has partly to do with her strong sense of faith: the daughter of a hadei, she tries to continue to live in Germany according to the law of Islam.²¹ Thirty

¹⁹ In his article about the extent to which western societies have tolerated radical Islamists for too long in light of the terrorist attacks of 11th September, Zafer Senocak, a well established Turkish-German writer of novels and essays, notes that the aggression of Muslim extremists is often towards women because a traditional, male-dominated system feels threatened by the emancipated woman. The veil, whether it is regarded as a sign or protection or oppression, symbolizes an intact tradition and a functioning hierarchy. See "Der Feind in unserer Mitte", *Die Welt*, 15.9.2001. Recently, he has pointed out that integration might be achievable if the third generation were not regarded as immigrants since they are after all born in Germany. Any discussion about integration focuses only on the problems, rather than the cultural and social enrichment. See "Deutschsein. Eine Aufklärungsschrift", March 2011.

²⁰ This depiction of a woman who refuses to be a victim does break with convention. In a later scene the narrator is at the local registration office applying for a residence permit. First the clerk ignores her, then tells her to sit down and be quiet, and when she does speak to her, she uses 'Gastarbeiterdeutsch', broken German, assuming that this German-Turkish woman cannot understand German. She thus demeans the narrator, treating her as a foreigner and a child. The twist in the tale is that the narrator talks back by using the German of foreigners, thus inverting the power relationship.

years later the parents' attempt to resettle in Turkey fails. On returning to the neon lights of Germany they can only console themselves with the prospect of passing on traditional Turkish fairy tales to their granddaughter. They have been forced to recognise that they have become estranged from their country of birth. The mother's experience of feeling isolated and uprooted is one that typifies those of first-generation immigrants: "A person should never leave their roots behind. We will always be foreigners here" (*Tee*, 41).²²

In her 2008 memoir *Tea in September or a Life on Loan* Demirkan dedicates one of the five chapters to her mother, who died in September 2005. It was her mother's last wish to be buried back in Turkey in her home village, because for her the family's stay in Germany had always only been temporary, a borrowed existence. Germany was just a bridge between two worlds, between the past and the future. Ironically, the last two years of her life had been on borrowed time, when leukaemia was diagnosed. At the funeral one of the narrator's cousins offers her black tea with three lumps of sugar, commenting that she had read her first novel.²³ Thereafter, September becomes an annual month of reflection and tea drinking in memory of momentous family events: the family had arrived in Germany in September 1962; her mother was laid to rest in Turkey in 2005; and at the end of the memoir the narrator's daughter leaves to study in Canada in September. Whilst the Turkish black tea continues to symbolise familiarity, congeniality, and comfort, be it in the tea houses of Turkish neighbourhoods in German towns and cities or at home with the family, for the narrator the tea has

²¹ After Catholicism and Protestantism, Islam is the third largest religion in Germany with mosques and Muslim graveyards becoming more visible in the last years. See Prof. Faruk Sen's discussion of a multicultural Germany in "Managing the Integration of Foreigners in Germany" www.zft-online.de (accessed 10.6.2011)

²² In her 2008 text there is the tragic realisation by her father that they (the Germans) never wanted us here (in Germany) and they will never want us. (*Septtee*, 71).

²³ Later in the memoir we discover that she now only has one sugar cube with her black tea.

changed: it no longer tastes the same, because she cannot make the tea like her mother did and she is not sharing it with her. For Demirkan the loss of her mother also signals the loss of a world, that of her childhood and part of her identity. In an interview in 2009 she remarks that she had been her child for 50 years, but after her mother's death she had to grow up.²⁴ Her mother had been the link to the past, to Turkey: part of that link was now gone forever.

The link to a future full of optimism is her own daughter, who represents the third generation of German-Turks. For her the question of identity revolves not around "Who am I?" but "Who do I want to be?" which suggests that she is confident about where she belongs. For the second generation, however, the question of "Who am I" is an ongoing process, which in the words of Demirkan began "in discos and Koran schools, teaching in schools and universities, watching mtv and Turkish soaps, consuming tea, döners, schnitzel and beer" (*Septtee*, 137).²⁵ In her opinion, integration subsumes culture and results in cultural quarantines; differences should be celebrated, instead of being seen as a threat. At a reading of her memoir in 2010 she stressed that "Integration is the wrong instrument for different cultures to live together, that we should talk instead about naturalisation".²⁶ In her texts and in the media Demirkan is critical about Germany's treatment of ethnic minorities and challenges the labels of 'German', 'Turkish', 'foreigner', hence her wish to be considered cosmopolitan, a citizen of the world. Her own successes in Germany as a writer and actress have led to her being described as a "prototype of successful integration".²⁷

²⁴ Interview with Cigdem Akyol, *General Anzeiger*, 17.1.2009.

²⁵ Renan Demirkan, *Septembertee oder das geliehene Leben*, (Berlin: Kiepenhauer, 2008).

²⁶ *Aachner Zeitung*, 27.9.2010, p.10.

²⁷ Tom Cheeseman and Deniz Göktürk, "German Titles, Turkish Names: The Cosmopolitan Will", *New Books in German*, Autumn 1999, pp.22-23: p.23.

At the Berlin Film festival last year, there was the premiere of a comedy by two Turkish-German sisters, Yasemin Samdereli (director) and Nessin Samdereli (screenplay). The film, entitled *Almanya – Willkommen in Deutschland* and released in Turkish and German, tells the story of the Yilmaz family, who came to Germany from Turkey in the 1960s. The sisters are in fact the grandchildren of the guest worker number one million and one who arrived in 1964. As in Demirkan's two texts, the film is an optimistic and humorous portrayal of the efforts of immigrants to integrate into a foreign society. The family is shocked, for instance, to see a country populated by blond giants who devour pigs and worship a suffering figure on a cross. In one scene a guest worker seeks to obtain German nationality, the bureaucrat insists he eats pork, holidays in Mallorca and wears a Hitler-like moustache. While making fun of the need to assimilate, the filmmakers, like the author, transcend stereotypical representations of disempowered, voiceless minorities caught between two cultures by deconstructing amongst others, the terms of 'culture clash', 'acculturation', and 'integration', and so they defy recent political declarations by showing that multiculturalism has not failed, that it is in fact still emerging by continuing to address the vexed question of 'Who or what am I: German or Turk?'