

Europeanness versus Turkishness in a Turkish TV Sitcom: The Case of *Avrupa Avrupa*

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Juxtaposing Europeanness and Turkishness has always been a recurring theme in Turkish literature and media. In this study, an analysis of a Turkish sitcom entitled *Avrupa Avrupa* that was broadcast on Turkey's only state-run TV channel is provided, focusing on how Turkishness and Europeanness are portrayed. It is found that the sitcom portrays Europeans and Turks through traditionally well-known, coarse stereotypes. It is inferred from the sitcom's latent ideological messages that the EU may accept Turkey, although it is by no means a European country.

Introduction

The Media provides a source of information that allows a nation's citizens to make their own educated choices, after which individual choices become collective decisions.¹ Television, in particular, fosters national culture by promoting a 'sense of citizenship [and] social identities and creating and representing a common cultural and political core.'² In this sense, although television claims to report reality, it actually creates its own reality, as it 'enjoys a *de facto* monopoly on what goes into the heads of a significant part of the population and what they think'.³ For instance, the media propose certain models of what it means to be male or female, rich or poor, Turkish or Austrian, Muslim or Christian. Narratives broadcast through media are fundamental to the construction of a collective European identity as an imagined community.⁴ It is illustrated by the fact that 'TV is children's most important media source on Europe and the EU'; and that Bulgarian children see their country as inferior when compared with the rest of Europe. As one boy put it, 'Europeans were much more developed before; now we are catching up. That's what they said on the news'.⁵

Europeanness and/or Turkishness

In his writing, Francis Bacon referred to Europeans as a community: ‘nos Europai’, ‘we the Europeans,’ as early as 1623.⁶ Halecki restricted this idea of a European community to encompass only certain European groups, excluding ‘the Ottoman Empire because of Islam, Russia after 1917 because of communism and possibly also the Jews, who are simply absent from his arguments’.⁷ Thus, although the term *European* has been in use for centuries, the foundations of European identity are built on paradox.⁶

German sociologists Jens Alber and Jürgen Gerhards compared the values of the Turkish people with those of others living in the European Union and found that Turkish people are characterised by a stronger adherence to traditional values particularly in relation to marriage and family (cited in Ref. 8, p. 329). However, the overall difference is not very large, as in member states of the EU such as Bulgaria and Romania, there are similar or even more pronounced traditional and authoritarian values than those held in Turkey. The Turkish-European relationship cannot be separated easily and Turkish historical writing and political propaganda have attempted to invalidate Western stereotypes that accentuate the ‘otherness’ of the Ottoman Turk through measures that include showing ‘the Ottoman past in a positive light, such as the sultan offering shelter to the Jews expelled from Spain after 1492, François I’s alliance with Süleyman the Magnificent in the 1530s, or the admission of the Ottoman Empire into the Concert of Europe in 1856.’⁹

A closer look at the specific case of Turkey within Europe shows that the two share a symbiotic existence that is also paradoxical in nature. While the Republic of Turkey has always been put forward as a European country, from the European perspective Turks and Islam have always been regarded as synonymous entities.¹⁰ Although there are few empirical studies on the perception of Turkey and the Turks in Europe, the negative image of the Turk may stem from the experience of immigrants, as well as from the work of writers and publishers. Turkey’s Muslim character has been represented through press coverage as being significantly different from European culture, although the relations between Turkey and the EU do not necessarily represent a clash of Muslim-Christian identities, but rather ‘a product of a complex structure which includes all political, economic, geographical, and cultural aspects.’¹¹ Of course, this representation is not new. The Catholic Church was effective in portraying Turks in negative terms as early as the time of the Crusades.¹² There is ‘generally a negative image of the Turk as arch-enemy’ in Balkan countries.¹³ The word ‘türken’ in German is literally translated as ‘to diddle,’ and the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* went so far as to print ‘Türken, türkte, getürkt’ (a vulgar saying) on 29 May 2009.¹⁴ Such representations may have a negative effect on the opinions of German readers concerning Turks. Furthermore, a study of the *corpora* may show that nearly all terms related to the word ‘Turk’ have negative connotations in languages spoken throughout Europe. Regardless of such discourse, ‘whether Turkey’s history and predominately Muslim culture are sufficiently European’ has been a major topic of discussion in Europe.¹⁵

For many Turks, Turkishness is characterised by two important aspects of culture: close family ties and hospitality. The Turkish family has been explored and theorised

in many research studies, additionally becoming one of the major themes in the arts. The Turkish family, characterised by the hearth, permeates Turkish art, film, and literature as a prominent social unit of togetherness, unity, and solidarity, without which individuals are doomed to fail. The Turkish family is often portrayed through the emphasis on close family ties and mothers' close relationships with their sons, which mothers retain even after their sons are married.

Although the ways that Turks and Turkishness are represented in Europe have been investigated to some degree in the existing literature, there is a lack of analysis concerning how Turks themselves have visualised Turkishness, as well as Europeaness, in media artefacts. To address this gap, this study provides an analysis of a Turkish sitcom entitled *Avrupa Avrupa* which was broadcast on Turkey's only state-run TV channel. It focuses on how Turkishness and Europeaness are portrayed. A single episode (the first in the series) has been selected as the unit of study in order to present a detailed understanding of the subject. During the analysis, the episode was exposed to multiple viewings, and all of the scenes that exemplified Turkishness and Europeaness were transcribed *verbatim*. An external researcher viewed the episode twice and pointed out the scenes that related to the aims of the study. In addition, she reviewed and validated the results reached by the author of this article in order to articulate the extent to which his results exemplified the topic of the study.

Avrupa Avrupa

The sitcom is summarised as follows.

After years of waiting at the doorstep of the EU, Turkey is to become a member state at midnight. To celebrate this historic moment, the Turkish Minister of the European Union, Egemen Bağış, will visit the household of the Family Koparan to announce the good news (as can be seen in the analysis, the Minister actually acted and spoke in this episode of the sitcom). The lady of the house, Gülbahar Koparan, is cleaning and cooking for the Minister, but this is not an easy task, because she has to endure the problems created by her husband (Ferdi); her daughter; her neighbour Nermin, who is a living example of an aspiring European; and her apartment's janitor, Mehmet Ali, who is planning to have as many children as possible so as to receive a stipend from the EU for each child.¹⁶

Avrupa Avrupa is a direct example of popular culture's take on the process of Turkey's continuing negotiations with the European Union to become a member state. Significant to this role is the juxtaposing of Turkish and European characters as a means to extrapolate what might happen if and when Turkey is admitted to the EU. In this manner, viewers are invited to fantasise about being a European by considering themselves as citizens of Europe, yet without the sociocultural characteristics and habits thought to be compatible with those of the existing Europeans.

It may seem obvious that Family Koparan symbolises the traditional Turkish family, while Family Beceren (their neighbours) represents their Europeanised antithesis. For example, in one scene, Ferdi inserts banknotes into a folder in a state office as a bribe in order to have some paperwork completed. However, he learns that

the old manager is in prison for charges of bribery. Upon hearing this, he inserts more banknotes into the folder, unaware that the new manager is Nermin Beceren, a person who identifies herself as European and who is thus opposed to bribery and many other typically Turkish behaviours considered as misconduct by Europeans.

Results

In *Avrupa Avrupa*, Gülbahar Koparan represents the traditional Turkish mother, and Nermin Beceren stands for the Europeanised Turkish mother, although they are conflicting mothers-in-law. Nermin's continual dissatisfaction with the changes occurring in the apartment building, along with her perceptions of how her neighbours think, feel and act, reinforces the view that the EU is never satisfied with Turkey's progress.

Analysis of the scenes reveals three major themes emerging from the sitcom: Turkishness, Europeanness and the EU. It should also be underlined that the single most important characteristic that regulates all of the action and diction related to these themes is Nermin's constant comparison of Turkey and Europe (although her incorrect pronunciation of words derived from European languages shows that she is not 'that European' at all). Apart from this, the major themes and scenes resulting from the analysis as follows.

Theme 1: Turkishness

Turkishness is labelled by Nermin as having an 'Eastern mentality'. Ferdi's attempts to bribe her after his wife's pouring of garbage over Nermin's head are portrayed in the following scene, in which Nermin bursts out:

It's still that Eastern mentality. He's still bribing. Bribing me! That bear. Oh, I smell awful. [Yells] Can you please send this elevator? Apartment block called 'Avrupa', huh? Block of mad people. Look at that apartment block called 'Avrupa'. You shut the door, don't you? It feels as though we are in Thailand.

Although Nermin criticises her neighbours for having an Eastern mentality, her neighbours use other historical or national references to describe their social and cultural world. Tekin, in love with Mademoiselle, compares his fight for her love with the war of the Ottomans against Vienna:

Have a good day Mademoiselle. [She shuts the door] I know you are into me, too, but that French priggery of yours! We, the Turks, are used to waiting in front of the doorsteps of Europe. The Vienna that I could not capture!

Another reference to history is made by Muhtar, who connects 'cleanliness' with history through words comprising nostalgia and boastfulness:

Mehmet Ali: I wiped the stairs four times.

Muhtar: From now on, cleaning will never end. Apartment block 'Avrupa' will even set an example for the EU. We taught cleanliness to Europeans, but we forgot it ourselves. How could that be possible? We will become so clean that Europeans will be ashamed of their Europeanness!

Theme 2: Europeanness

Interestingly, no one but Nermin talks about Europeans as a means to criticise their Turkish lifestyle. Although the characters are openly questioning the possible negative effects of Turkey's entry to the EU on their own culture, they are in fact oblivious to Europe and its social and cultural landscape. Although none of the characters have ever been to Europe, they can easily talk about Europeans, as can be seen in the following scene:

Mehmet Ali: Mademoiselle! Why did you let my mother-in-law out without informing me first? She caught me in my undies.
 Mademoiselle: Oh, mon Dieu!
 Mehmet Ali: Mademoiselle! You yourself are European; you must understand me. Now why don't you go out and take some fresh air and leave your home to me and my wife. We have the determination, will, but no facility, Mademoiselle. You Europeans are flexible people. Why are you surprised?
 Mademoiselle: Oh! You Turks say rightly: you demand too much!
 Mehmet Ali: Ah Mehmet Ali! There are tons of French people on the face of the earth, and you came across the most conservative one! And you! Take Sarkozy as an example to yourself.

Speaking of Europeans, Nermin differentiates between real Europeans and Turks, as can be seen in the following scene:

Mademoiselle: Oh la la! You are so kind, but I am not the Minister. Sorry for that.
 Tekin: Welcome Mademoiselle.
 Nermin: Mademoiselle? Is there a real European living in the 'Avrupa' apartment block?
 Mademoiselle: Oui, Madame.
 Nermin: Anjante, [Trying to say, Enchantée], Mademoiselle!

Apart from such differentiation, Nermin idealises Europe and Europeans not only to show her appreciation of the European lifestyle, but also to put down the habits of the Turks around her:

Nermin: You talked about football games and adana kebab to an Italian noble man who played the vionin [violin] all night long! One could think that you are not a fruit and vegetable exporter, but a kebab maker.
 Mahir: That's true. I am a vendor.
 Nermin: Not a vendor! A fruit and vegetable exporter.

Theme 3: The European Union

The sitcom is based on the fantasy that the EU accepts Turkey as a member state. For Nermin, the EU has accepted Turkey 'out of politeness', since Turkey does not deserve it due to its many weaknesses and shortcomings:

Nermin: If you wiped the floors, why didn't you put a sign on the floor? There is no rising platform for the disabled, either!
 Mehmet Ali: Thank God each of our occupants in our building is as healthy as a horse.
 Nermin: You know, Europe has accepted us knowing that we are actually this way; their acceptance is all out of their politeness.

Most characters believe that Turkey's membership to the EU is a threat to Turkish culture. For Ferdi, neighbourliness is a quality that will diminish in the near future:

[TV is on. The speaker says that the Turkish Minister of the European Union will visit a common household at midnight to celebrate Turkey's entry to the EU. Gülbahar starts vacuuming in panic. Her husband comes and throws the vacuum cleaner out the window.]

Gülbahar: How am I going to clean the house, huh? By blowing?

Ferdi: I must have forgotten because of my anger. Don't worry about it. You will ask a neighbour to lend her vacuum cleaner to you. Just because we entered the EU does not mean that our neighbourliness will die away. It will be in throes of death for some time before it dies altogether.

Unlike Ferdi, some other characters argue that Turkey's membership is for their benefit, so they try to use this for their purposes.

Daughter: Mom, You know what? What you're doing is against the laws of the EU.

Gülbahar: How so?

Son: You can't make children work like this.

Daughter: If we make a complaint, you will be put into prison.

Gülbahar: My hands are greasy. Otherwise, I would throw my slipper at you. Stop this nonsense talk. Well, wait a second.

Daughter: Throwing slippers is also against the criteria.

Gülbahar: Talking back to mothers is also against the criteria and traditions of ours. Rather than raising you bad-mannered, I would prefer being put into prison. Don't let me start with their criteria.

In opposition to her children's eagerness to use EU membership for their benefit, their mother, Gülbahar, obviously sees the EU as a threat to their family's unity and continuity. The Turkish family emerges as an important part of the characters' discussion, although the EU is also used by some characters as a way to alter how Turks see their families:

Yeşim: You know our situation. I always wanted to have a child, but this one never wanted to have one. Once in a blue moon, he became horny. You know me well. Would I do something like this otherwise?

Gülbahar: She is telling the truth. This poor girl has been asking for a child for many years. If someone is to be fired; that should be her husband.

Mehmet Ali: Would I do something like this if it wasn't urgent?

Nermin: How would making a child be urgent? ... Wait a second... Now I got it. We are entering the EU.

Mahir: Nermin, you connected this with the EU, too.

Nermin: Hush, Mahir! Everything we have in this country is directly related to the EU these days.

Muhtar: How could there be such a relationship to what they did?

Nermin: Let me explain. This shrewd man obviously learned that he will get a child subsidy as soon as he has a child. That's why he couldn't hold his... [looks at his pelvic area] self.

Yeşim: Is she telling the truth? [She slaps her husband on the face]

Nermin: You go out, too. You're fired.

What is the state's (government's) view on Turkey's membership in the EU? The official view of the state is given by the Minister himself, as follows:

I hope our membership in the EU brings happiness and well-being to all of us. We are on the threshold of a new phase in our history. The sick man of the nineteenth century is reaching his good health today by carrying our ancestors' trust to the twenty-first century, as it deserves.

Conclusion

In this study, I looked at how Turkishness and Europeaness are portrayed in a popular TV series. However, this attempt may only be one side of the coin because 'empirical audience research has demonstrated that actual readings are more complex than' what we imagine.¹⁷ Hence, despite the fact that our studies of the representation of Turkish and European identities in TV series (or in any medium) may mean much to us, how audiences decode such media messages should be dealt with in future research.

As a medium, TV makes various audience responses possible.¹⁸ Hence, if we agree on the premise that media representations help shape our collective identities, then it can easily be claimed that TV series such as *Avrupa Avrupa* foster and enhance the invisible wall separating European and Turkish identities, inserting conflicting realities in the mind-sets of Turkish viewers with its rigid and stereotypical representation of Turkish and European themes and characters. Furthermore, because *Avrupa Avrupa* appears on Turkey's only state-owned TV channel, and as a Minister of the Cabinet appears in one part of the series, this may point at the fact that such representations reflect the views of the stakeholders (power groups) concerning these identities. Last but not least, it can be seen that *Avrupa Avrupa*'s latent ideological message is that even if Turkey is accepted as a member state, despite all its differences, then – in Nermin's words – the EU will accept it 'out of politeness', since Turkey is not compatible with Europe, either culturally or structurally.

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