

"TV Across the Aegean: The Greek Love Affair with a Turkish Serial" by Penelope Papailias



Nazli's and Nikos's family in the audience of a talk show on Greek-Turkish relationships

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The Turkish serial *Yabancı Damat* (Foreign Groom) was the unquestionable hit of the 2005 Greek summer television season. The series tells the story of the trans-Aegean love affair of Turkish Nazli and Greek Nikos, the family diplomacy involved in bringing them to the altar and the supposedly "real world" bilateral politics hinging on their marriage.

Upon returning from summer holiday, I found that I was hardly the only one to have synchronized my weekday evenings around the serial's episodes. *Ta Sinora tis Agapis* (The Borders of Love), as the show was called in Greece, charmed Greek audiences across a broad generational and social spectrum. Giving the lie to the belief that no one watches television during the summer, the show proved that if something better than reruns is available, Greeks, who along with the Italians are the champion television watchers of Europe, were willing to be home by 11pm (and, for the final episodes, 10:40 pm) or, in some cases, to wait until it was over to go out. Mixing a seemingly perfect cocktail of veteran theater actresses and actors with the "cute boy" of the Turkish Istanbul Academy (a *Fame Story*/American Idol-type reality show) and other pretty young faces, the series also had been a big success in Turkey during the winter.

But, of course, rebroadcast, subtitled, and aired to Greek audiences, the series was not simply a "repeat" of the original, but a media happening of a new kind. The sheer curiosity it aroused demonstrated how infrequently Greeks come into contact with Turkish media products. With the exception of Turkish news reports related to matters of major significance to Greece or Cyprus (usually, of course, subjects of acrimony and discord, such as the conflict over the border islet of Imia, the referendum on the unification of Cyprus, etc.), Greek television re-presents remarkably little Turkish television. Given contemporary tracks in the flow of global media, Greek television programming includes plenty of American serials (*Friends*, *Sex and the City*, *ER*, etc.), European and American movies and documentaries, and a good dash of Latin American romantic serials. By contrast, movements of media products within the Balkan region (at least toward the Greek market) are relatively few.

As many were quick to point out, the premise of the series—namely, a culturally and religiously "forbidden" love—was a tried-and-true, if not hackneyed, formula of Greek television drama: there were no less than two Christian-Muslim love stories on Greek television this past season. If anything, the Turkish serial takes fewer risks in challenging social taboos than similar Greek programs. (This is a heterosexual courtship with marriage and children as its goal; even premarital sex is a no-no. There is no age

difference between the lovers, and though the income gap separating the families causes some friction, serious class conflict is not an issue).

Nonetheless, *Ta Sinora tis Agapis* felt refreshingly different from other series about cross-cultural romance. For one, its approach to this theme was comic (but also sweet), not melodramatic or slapstick (like *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*). The pompous Greek translation of the series title as *Ta Sinora tis Agapis*, rather than the simpler, less apocalyptic, not to mention more literal *Xenos Gambros*, is indicative of Greek expectations for this genre. But the serial resisted its repackaging by MEGA channel. In the papers, journalists commenting on the popularity of the series among Greek viewers likened the "innocence" of the acting to the old Greek cinema. They also noted with relief that the Turkish father, a baklava maker, upon learning of his daughter's Greek lover, ate a whole tray of baklava, rather than, say, driving himself off the cliff (as he would have in an analogous Greek serial). In *Ta Sinora tis Agapis*, the Greek-Turkish rivalry itself is often treated as nothing more than a joke. The Greek mother, for instance, deliberately annoys the Turkish father by insisting on referring to Istanbul as Constantinople. The serial also scores big laughs when the two fathers quarrel over the origin of backgammon ("it is 100% Greek," "it is 100% Turkish") only to be interrupted by a bystander's piping in that backgammon is a Persian import.

Still, in my opinion what really made the serial feel new was the fact that it portrayed the taboo relationships of Turk and Greek, Orthodox and Muslim, through Turkish eyes. The serial offered Greek viewers the rare opportunity to peek into Turkish homes, to overhear their conversations, to glimpse their, perhaps unexpected, nostalgias, insecurities, and desires, and, above all, to find out how they imagine and remember "us Greeks."

On an "ethnological" level, then, viewers were drawn into a delightful nightly comparison of "us" and "them." They enjoyed listening to the Turkish language and picking out Turkish words used in Greek and vice-versa (lists of such words were even compiled in the newspapers). People commented on certain intimate gestures that "we" also do (or remembered that we also once did)?the rocking of babies to sleep on outstretched legs, the childish knocking together of fists to rub in (and relish) a triumph over a competitor, and the pouring of water on the ground before a departing relative to ensure a smooth trip. They found perfectly familiar the scenes of the extended family living under the same roof, as well as the way that the Turkish wife tiptoed around her husband's angry outbursts, coaxing him to accept the children's point of view, which he, of course, usually did. Accustomed to watching characters in *Friends* or *Sex and the City* pick over a container of day-old Chinese food or snack while standing up in the kitchen, Greek viewers also were clearly mesmerized by a drama set around a dining table chock full at breakfast, lunch and dinner, always laden with an array of tasty looking, home-cooked meze and complete with cooking pot, at hand to serve out seconds. The Greek audience also could not but be touched that an employee would consider treating his extended family to homemade rice pudding (*rizogalo*) an appropriate gesture of reconciliation. Was this us "as we used to be"? The part we lost when left? What we expect them to be? What we still "really" are? It hardly matters. With much of the drama taking place in the baklava shop owned by Nazli's father (and much of the dialogue delivered with *fylo* dough in hand), sales of Turkish baklava (imported to Athens and Thessaloniki by a Greek entrepreneur) skyrocketed, even though baklava is not usually considered a summer sweet. Of course, we cannot rule out the possibility that baklava sales also were up in Turkey: the setting of the show in faraway Gaziantep, a small city near the Syrian border considered the "home" of baklava, might mean that we are seeing an urban Istanbul's image of a remembered Turkey, filtered through the fantasy of an authentic "Eastern" homeland.

On a more sensitive "political" level, the serial let the Greek viewer in on Turkish anxiety over entry into the European Union. The serial reflected that anxiety while spoofing it at the same time. Thus, Nazli and Nikos's relationship itself cleverly (and prophetically) becomes a media item within the show, as tabloids, television and diplomats from both countries use their romance to promote "Greek-Turkish friendship." As the local Turkish mayor reminds Nazli's father: "the eyes of all Europe are on us." Paparazzi follow Nikos and Nazli everywhere. They become so famous that they are featured on magazine covers, written about in the newspapers, pose for an advertisement and appear on television talk shows. All this shuffling

across media formats, of course, is a nod to the inevitable?to the seemingly interminable articles and programs that have filled Greek media space in the past months featuring the "real life" of the show's stars and the "movie-like" love stories of real Greeks and Turks.

In making Nazli's grandfather and Nikos's grandmother the most insistent opponents of their match, the serial suggests that the nationalisms of the "old Turkey" and the "old Greece" are the problem that must be overcome to bring a civilized "European" peace to the region. The grandfather, who at one point protests the marriage by chaining himself to the local Atatürk monument, is portrayed as capable, in the words of the Turkish family's maid, of breaking apart "Europe" and its "Union." In what can only be described as wishful thinking, modern youth, through "love" and as "individuals with a right to love," are portrayed as beyond the passions of nationalism and capable of healing the scars left by the divisive politics of their states. In this spirit, during Nazli's grandfather's operation, Nikos, the only one "in the family" with a compatible blood type, donates blood to give to the grandfather. When the grandfather finds out about this unwanted transfusion, he is enraged and tries to extract the "Greek blood" from his body with leeches! This scene incidentally echoes a similar episode in one of last season's Greek serials about an Orthodox-Muslim love affair. Unsurprisingly, just as after the 1999 earthquakes in Greece and Turkey, when offers of blood were both accepted and denied across national borders, fantasies of reconciliation and performances of political rivalry were mediated through bodily metaphors, especially those of blood.

Fine and good, then, this recognition of "common humanity" against the grandfather's anachronistic hysterics, but the question is: how did we come to think in terms of "Greek blood" and "Turkish blood" in the first place? What citizenship and immigration policies, discourses on Greece's low birthrate and so-called "demographic problem," and nationalist, militaristic rhetoric make people continue to think in those terms? (We shouldn't forget that the Albanian student whose right to carry the Greek flag in the October 28th national parade was contested by fellow students and their parents was constantly asked which nation he would fight for?for which nation he was prepared to shed his blood.) Maybe, after all, these serials, to the extent that they turn attention away from the policies of states and their institutionalized racisms while promoting the "love" of "people" as peace-making force, are the best thing that happened to Greek and Turkish politicians.

Aside from seeing contemporary Greece portrayed, jokingly or not, as the "passport" into the E.U., the serial also portrays the former ethnic Greek minorities in a surprisingly nostalgic way. Surprising, I should say, for a Greek viewer, not necessarily a Turkish one. As we know from U-M comparative literature student Asli Igsiz's dissertation research, this nostalgia for the "Greek" is not an isolated phenomenon but has manifested itself in many other contemporary Turkish cultural products. As she has shown, this longing for the lost Greek cannot be understood on its own, but only in relation to Turkish representations of (or silences about) other minority groups in the Ottoman past and Turkish present. Nonetheless, for a Greek viewer, the openness with which this sensitive issue is discussed in a television serial seems remarkable.

Nikos's family is from the "Rum millet," former ethnic Greeks of Istanbul, who fled to Greece after the pogrom of 6-7 September 1955. Nikos and Nazli's love affair is meant to heal the traumatic dislocation of the Greeks' expulsion from the city by rewriting the doomed love affair between Nikos's aunt and a Turkish man. This new love gives the aunt, who never married after the forced break up of this relationship, occasion to return to her old house on the Princess Islands. She searches for and finds her old love, whom she had thought dead all these years. Although he ends up dying a few episodes later, she has enough time with him to learn that she was never forgotten. In another remarkable scene of return and recognition, Nikos's father gives Nazli's father a "tour" of the Fener district. With a famous old Greek school (I Megali tou Genous Scholi) looming in the background, the Greek shows his Turkish in-law-to-be a tree in which he and his wife had carved their initials when young. Moved, the Turkish father remarks on what a difficult thing it must be to lose one's home. And the Greek father replies, Yes, and you probably live in the same house in which you grew up. Yes, answers the other man, yes.

The serial thus made clear that the "Greek" remains a salient category of the Turkish (or at least the Istanbul) imagination. Although ethnic Greeks number fewer than 2,000 today, at the turn of the

nineteenth century there were approximately 250,000 Orthodox Christians living in Istanbul: given that the city's total population at that time was probably around a million, their presence was indeed pronounced. As the scene of the two fathers strolling in Fener suggests, the Rum can still claim to be the "real" Istanbul in a city of newcomers. Even when the serial ostensibly depicts the Greeks of Greece (or "Yunanistan"), there were moments which could be characterized as the "return of the repressed." For instance, in one scene, after flashing an image of the Acropolis, the Greek grandmother is shown going into an orthodox church. From the architecture, though, it is clear that the church is in Istanbul (perhaps Agia Triahda in Beyoglu). For the Turkish viewer, the serial clearly opened some of the many mysterious, usually closed doors of buildings once owned and frequented by the Rum.

In the serial, the stereotype of the Istanbul Greek, as represented by Nikos's family?fabulously wealthy ship owners who travel with a private jet and run their company through a diasporic family network (the grandmother manages her end of the business from New York)?is that of an Onassis-like figure. In one quip, the Turkish father accuses his Greek in-laws that "their only god is money." This claim seems to be confirmed a few episodes later when the fierce grandmother, after finding out that Nazli's family owns a mere baklava shop (not even a chain), accuses her family of wanting her to marry Nikos for his money. Although this rapacity and guile is associated primarily with the grandmother?i.e. the Greek past?it nonetheless evokes, in however light a version, the very stereotype used to justify the pogrom of 1955 (they have all the money, we are poor; a Turkish (i.e., Muslim) bourgeoisie must be established in their place; etc.). Meanwhile Nikos's reluctance to go along with the circumcision that Nazli's grandfather demands is presented as having more to do with his fear of the pain than with his concern about religious alienation. The serial, thus, places the "Greek Other" on the side of the "modern," as willing to change religion to join a more "traditional," more patriarchal, poorer, but bigger, happier, and more honorable family. (In this respect, compare Nikos's "conversion" to the forced baptism of the Anglo groom in My Big Fat Greek Wedding in which the Greek occupies the role of not-yet-modern ethnic Other. Note, though, that Nikos's circumcision is faked to trick the grandfather and Nikos and Nazli are married in a civil ceremony, with no word about a mosque; the Anglo groom does not get off that easily).

By contrast with that of the Rum, the stereotype of the non-Ottoman Greek, the "Yunanli," is not as developed and can be summarized as mixture of sirtaki and Eurovision (the only Greek-speaking character in the serial is a Paparizou-like pop singer who in real life grew up in London). The serial locates neohellenic sociality in the unbearable lightness of the frappé, which the Turkish in-laws hilariously attempt to drink during their visit to Athens, lifting up the glass with the plate underneath it as if it were hot Turkish tea. But from the few Greek words tossed into dialogues by the supposedly Greek-speaking characters (mostly ohi and paidi mou), the scenes showing the grandmother intently watching folk dancing (broadcast on Kalymnos TV), and the elementary Greek dialogues practiced by the adorable Mustafa Can, Nazli's little brother, it seems that at this moment in time, culturally speaking, Athens is as far from Istanbul as Istanbul from Athens.

So it will be interesting to see what happens this fall when the second part of the series is broadcast (almost) simultaneously on both sides of the Aegean.

--Oct. 1, 2005

P.S. As I send off this brief essay, there are some early signs that the Greek love affair with Yabancı Damat might cool in the serial's second season. Hackles appear to have been raised by the news that Nazli's and Nikos's son is to be named "Aegean"?

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