

Omer Asan: *Niko's Kemence*

Turkish, fiction

Adapted, with some additions, from Erkan Canan's article in Radikal Kitap

Synopsis

Mist and cloud on the Black Sea

In 'Niko's kemence' there are 13 short stories. Most of the stories take place in the Black Sea (Karadeniz) region, a region which was shaped by a dramatic exchange of populations.

The author of this book of short stories, 'Niko's Kemence', is Omer Asan, who has already published two books: a biography of Hasan Izzetin Dinamo, a well-known Turkish author; and 'Pontus Culture', which is the result of his research into the sociological and folkloric features of this Black Sea region. Pontus was the name for the region when Greeks and Turks lived there together. Omer Asan was prosecuted for political reasons by the Turkish authorities after the second edition of this book and the book was banned for about two years. Many of the stories in his new book 'Niko's Kemence' are essentially about Black Sea/Pontus culture.

In 1923, the Turkish and Greek governments agreed to a population exchange between Orthodox Greeks living in Turkey (Pontus Greeks) and Muslim Turks living in Greece. Their intention was to create coherent nation states after the ravages of the war between Greece and Turkey. There was no consultation with the people and those who had to migrate were given no choice. Some stories in the book show the profound effects of this political decision on all the ordinary people involved.

The characters in these stories are the typically cheerful Black Sea people. However under their surface cheerfulness, we can see communities that have been shaped by the traumatic exchange of populations.

The most painful aspect of this forced relocation is the refusal by the authorities, in the interests of creating a national homogeneity, to recognise those aspects of the emigrant community's identity that came from their previous culture; in the case of the Black Sea migrants, it was the Greek authorities' lack of recognition of what the migrants had brought with them from Turkey. In spite of this, the Black Sea migrants have managed to keep their former culture alive. The story that gives its name to the book 'Niko's Kemence' centres on the emotions involved in this. The hero of the story, a Greek called Niko, who was born and brought up in Trabzon, was resettled in Salonica. In this new home, bringing with it new suffering, we witness Niko's longing for Trebizond and Of. Although it was a whole community that was resettled, in the character of Niko we find an individual suffering. The migration was traumatic for him because the decision was made against his wishes; it was decided by outsiders and was forced on him. So we see that Niko was just a tragic victim of politics.

For Greeks like Niko living on the Black Sea, relocation was not tolerable. In fact, in the early days, all those like him who had to migrate wanted to believe that this was not a long-term resettlement; as if it was going to be very short and they were going to return to the region where they were born, where they belonged and which they loved. Niko expresses this common bewilderment "When that damn migration time arrived, we didn't take anything with us. We left everything just as it was. We wouldn't have known: we thought we were only going on a short journey. When we left our houses, we left glasses and bowls on the table. If anyone

dropped in, they could eat and drink as they wished, and keep the hearth warm, so that our house would continue to provide a welcome.' (page 14) But to Niko and to the others like him, however much they pined, cold hard-headed politics made no concessions.

Solidarity and closeness

At the time of the migration, the Greeks took nothing with them because they believed optimistically that they were going to return. To Niko, the only thing that is left from his life in Trabzon is his kemence. In his present emptiness, the only thing that brings comfort in his loneliness is the kemence, the symbol of his life before the migration. The kemence brings back clear memories: the icy cold water of the high pastures of Trabzon, the stream of the Virgin Mary, the horon dance, the folk songs, in short memories that evoke all the images of his life in the past.

The story called 'Gracia's Alavita', seems to be about human evolution. However, the theme of the story, though describing evolution, centres on exposing the conflicts in modern life for modern human beings. The author compares present-day human beings, who have millions of years of evolution behind them, with the first human beings. People who are isolated from their culture as a result of political decisions, he likens to primitive man. According to him, an individual whose language is forbidden, whose culture is not acknowledged, is like a primitive man deprived of his senses, his perceptions, and his intelligence, facing all the dangers of nature. In writing about one individual, the author is writing about any individual in this position.

The author is concerned with individuals and groups whose languages are not acknowledged; in this particular story, he focuses on the sense of loss of Greek experience. Here, language encapsulates the latest phase of evolution for modern man. Whoever is forbidden to use their mother-tongue and who is prevented from living in their own culture finds themselves living under the rule of others. Their background is the same as that of those first human beings who had no developed language or history.

The story called 'Hey Gidi!' is also based in the Black Sea region. Unlike 'Niko's Kemence' which takes place after the migration, the story is set during the course of the migration. The story centres on the closeness between Heva and Yorgia, and so on the closeness of Muslim and Christian. On reading the story, we experience the richness of the Black Sea before the migration, in contrast to the depopulation we see in the present day, after the emigration of the Greek population. Here is summed up the solidarity and closeness at the heart of the community, in spite of the actions of Greek and Turkish gangs.

The impoverishment and depopulation of the Black Sea

The most interesting point made in the story is that, from the Turkish point of view, although the exchange targeted the Greeks, in the long run it also somehow infected the Turks. In reality they were bereft; Heva and Yorgia represent two communities that had a warm relationship but which were victims of political ideology. The exchange did not only separate two very good friends, Heva and Yorgia, but also painfully shaped Heva's life for ever after. We hear in Heva's own words, sixty years after the exchange, what happened to the village of Zisino. Sixty years went by after the exchange, but the promise between Yorgia and Heva trapped Heva in the past, on that day when her dearest friend was made to move away from the village with her family. Both of them went up to the high pastures, the 'yayla', for the first time and on this first time they promised each other that they would never go there separately. Forever after, the tenacity Heva showed in keeping her promise did not speak only for her herself; the promise made to Greeks who were separated from Turkish neighbours was made on behalf of all the villagers who were

deprived of the enrichment of another culture. This tenacity, at the same time, is a stance against a political rule that divides, excludes and does not acknowledge.

'Silent Resistance', the story of Sergeant Ilyas, is about a man who is trying to pick up the thread of his past. He returned to live in a village called Erenkoy, where he had spent most of his former life, but which was deserted because of the economic migration of the inhabitants. One important reason for his wish to return to this deserted place was that it was there that his mother and wife were buried. He wanted to die here, to be buried beside his mother and his wife; he wanted his life to be ended in the same soil where it started. Sergeant Ilyas was coming back from Istanbul, where he had migrated with his children. He called Istanbul the 'Dark City', because he was not born there, he did not spend most of his life there and most of its history was unknown to him, so that he could not identify with it. By returning to the village, he was going to rebuild the relationship between him and his past, a relationship that had been cut off by the general migration. He would return even though the village had been abandoned and in this way the darkness and lostness of this unfortunate place would be overcome.

In this story, Omer Asan draws our attention to the important relationship which exists between nature and human beings. We can say that in 'Silent Resistance' this strong relationship exists. The story is like a lyric folk poem in praise of nature. The migration, for Sergeant Ilyas is an instance of ingratitude, of disloyalty shown towards the soil of one's home. For him, migration is the greatest treason you could commit to your mother earth that feeds you. The abundance of the soil cannot be felt strongly except by those who live on it. Because of this, his anger against people who are alienated from nature is understandable. He is a man who lives close to nature.

In Omer Asan's 'Niko's Kemence', not all of the 13 stories are set in the Black Sea region. Apart from the stories introduced above, there are also the following: stories about modern life and individuals ('Terrorist' and 'Failed. Failed. Failed. '); a story called 'The year 2050' which is science fiction and is based on a vision of Utopia; 'Can you give us your shirt?'; 'See, Idris, See!'; and 'A sense of story', which is about a writer who is himself searching for a topic for a short story.

Sample translation

Here I am in Salonica. So excited I can't keep still. Even at the door we could hear the sounds of the kemence. We went in and sat down round the table which was set aside for us. Suddenly everyone crowded around us. Then came the questions: "Where do you come from?" "What's your name?" "How are things at home?" I was amazed; it was as if we had known each other well for 40 years though we had been out of touch; right in the middle of all this warmth, we found ourselves dancing the horon together. No holding back. I said silently to myself "how well we all dance"; from time to time preening myself in front of those mini-skirted, horon-dancing, girls.

Suddenly I found myself in front of a microphone. I had to sing a folk-song. It was no use saying 'no, no'. I hummed something for the kemence player, assuming he wouldn't know the song. As soon as I sang 'Mountain

Mountain ranges
High mountain ranges
Up there on the heights it snows
Down here snowflakes fall softly
In my casket lay tarnished
The diamond earrings.

And yet everyone knew this song. I was very moved. Oh ... it was all too much. There should be some differences between us.

The next day, I set off to go round Salonica with the friend who was to be my guide. What interested me most were the areas where the Turks had once lived. The houses in this area, preserved in their original condition, were just like Anatolian houses. There, before my eyes, were our grandmothers' houses, just one floor, with a garden, a tiled roof, a patio with colourful flowers and windows looking out over each other. I was so moved. 'I wonder what instrument those people took away with them, when they had to leave their homes,' I asked myself.

Finally we arrived at a community centre set up by Greeks whose origins were in the Black Sea area. We were surrounded by young people. I asked them questions. They responded; 'I'm from Giresun, I'm from Sebinkarahisar, from Ordu, from Samsun, from Bayburt, from Gumushane ...' Whatever next; even in Istanbul you wouldn't find so many people from the Black Sea. We got into deep conversation about this and that. But my mind was on something else. I couldn't find the opportunity to speak and I got restless. But I couldn't wait any longer. I put before them what was troubling me.

'Find someone for me' I said

'Who?'

'The kemence smuggler

'Him...him...him' they pointed to each other, laughing. I was upset. They didn't understand me.

'Let's go, let's carry on with our walk' I said and walked out, together with my guide. He must have sensed that something was not right.

'What's the matter with you?' asked my friend, whose name was Yani.

'You will find him for me, my friend' I said. 'I'm not going anywhere till I find him.'

'Yes, but you don't even know his name.'

'OK but I will recognise him from his voice.'

'How?'

'You find all the records and cassettes that are available and leave the rest to me.'

I had already found out that the Black Sea people had an extensive archive of records and documents. After all, I didn't come to Greece to wander around just like a tourist. What brought me here was that the kemence, which is a symbol of our national honour and identity, was illustrated on a Greek stamp. What I once read in a daily newspaper - 'The Greeks even claim our kemence as their own' - stayed in my mind for years. What had the kemence got to do with them? What was our sacred 3-stringed instrument doing on that stamp? I was in thrall to my suspicions.

Yet the fact of the matter is that this drama hidden in the past, this drama that I had never heard of before, was kept from us Turks for years. When I did hear of it, history smote me between the eyes.

The kemence was smuggled into Greece years ago by the people who had lived together with us on the Black Sea. Then for years, they hugged it to their bosom like an orphaned child with no mother or father. When, in their new home, the exiles began to feel that they belonged to their new country, then they took out their kemence. I heard very sad stories, unbearable for a kind person. I was upset, stressed, I said 'oh no

But in the end, what I really wanted to find out was this: when they were forced to leave their home, in blood and gunfire, stripped of everything, not allowed to take anything with them, and furthermore when they were afraid they might die, who clutched the kemence to his bosom?

I noticed one small detail in Salonika. We dance the horon with a straight back (dik). Here, it was basically the same and the Black Sea people in Salonika call the Turkish horon the Tik. There is a saying 'To the brave will go the spoils' Now I'll hand it to them. They play the kemence better than us. Hundreds of kilometres from Trabzon, the sound of dancing feet takes dancers and watchers out of themselves. And if the kemence player gets caught up in the song, like a joyfully flowing stream, woe betide he who interrupts him.

I am captivated by that sacred melody, that mysterious rhythm ingrained in our blood. My grandmother, I know, used to leave the radio on when she was praying. If there was a song she liked, she would stop in the middle of her prayers to turn the volume up. I see this as a kind of respect shown by our people to the creator.

Our hearts beat to the rhythm of the mountains, the streams and the high pastures. When we listen to a kemence in Istanbul, we hear the bubbling of a stream; we see the slopes of the mountains, like our beloved's breasts, in our mind's eye. The high pastures strike us as our grandmother's arms, warm and compassionate. Are we part of them or are they part of us? God knows; we get carried away by this enchantment. Now here we are in Salonika; there must have been some such driving force to bring us here. I wished my grandmother was alive so that I could tell her that these infidels, too, dance the horon and sing folksongs. And it was as if I could hear the voice of my grandmother, from beyond the grave, replying 'love knows no land and no nation, my lad'. I shivered. I listened for my grandmother's voice in every elderly Black Sea woman that I met.

Well then ... my friend took me to a local Salonika radio station. Impatience was consuming me like a worm gnawing at my insides. The radio played our folk songs for twenty-four hours a day, to an accompaniment of kemence, bagpipe or flute. The head of the radio station came from the Black Sea area. My friend explained to the broadcasters what I was looking for and they offered me access to the whole archive. They didn't neglect the opportunity to mock me, either.

'Come on, Ofli; find that smuggler.'

'I will' I said.

Everybody watched me curiously. As for me, as soon as I sat down at the table, I lost myself in my search for him. For two hours without a break, we kept on changing records and cassettes. At one point they suggested that I should give my ears a rest, but I shook my head. As if I had got on his track and did not want to lose him. Meanwhile, I came across so many folk songs from our area that were sung in the same way in Greek. Who pinched them from who, I wondered. Half-joking, I asked this and they replied 'from each other'.

When it was nearly time to have lunch, I began to be interested in their proposal for a break. When I put on the last 45 rpm record and was about to stand up ... what was that? A familiar voice.

'Be quiet' I shouted.

We are on the road to Trabzon
Money we can't keep our hands on
If there were no lovely girls
However could we carry on?

In the stream so deeply
In the flow so thinly
Listen to its song
Niko, his kemence.

'Oh my God, that's him' I jumped up and said. Everyone in the radio station fell silent. I had found him. I was jumping up and down for joy. I was hugging the man who was showing me round, without even realising it.

'I've found him, Yani, I've found him.' Everybody looked at each other.

'Well, Ofli, Niko is still alive,' Yanis said with a smile

'Stop teasing me now' I said, puzzled.

'I'm telling you the truth. He lives in a village near Salonika, but now he is too old to play the kemence. If you like, we'll go and find him.'

My joy turned to bewilderment. Fortune favours the humble. I carefully observed the people in the room, but they were not joking.

'Well then, let's go' I said 'quickly!'

'Wait a minute, let's eat first' they said, holding me back firmly.

The moment the meal was over, we set off. I had with me my camera and my mini tape-recorder. I was excited and eager to capture a historical moment. I wasn't even hearing my companions' teasing. How easy could it be to find someone like him; he would tell us about Trabzon seventy years ago, and furthermore what he would be telling us he would have seen with his own eyes.

We got to Niko's village. My eyes then sought out our kind of village; well, where were our houses, which we built isolated and far apart from each other on the slopes? the babbling brook and the chorus of jackals we heard at night? the minaret in every area? the people who would say 'selamunaleykum' when they passed us in the street? Where? Here it is so flat. The houses are like town houses, back to back – literally; the roads are asphalt; no shouts echo off a nearby hill. There are well-dressed people in the streets; the beautiful girls and women do not run away from men. You couldn't call these people villagers in a thousand years. On top of all that, I could see no cabbages, no corn, no cucumbers in the fields. The pigs that we used to chase with gun and axe, enemies of our cornfields that they were, have a great life here; they live off the fat of the land.

One of the villagers was asked where Niko's house was. From his directions, we found the house. It was a one-storey house with a garden. My eyes searched the garden for a wild cherry tree, but there wasn't one. So be it. At the door, we were greeted by, as we found out later, his son and daughter-in-law. The purpose of our visit was explained. We were immediately invited inside. My excitement was at its height but I was trying to hide it.

We went in. There, sitting in an arm-chair, elderly, white-haired, with thick black-rimmed glasses resting on an unmistakeable nose, with smooth shaven wrinkled cheeks, was the dear old man we had come to meet. He was puzzled when he saw us. He wanted to stand up. He couldn't stand. He turned to his son with a questioning look, asking who we were. My friends introduced themselves one by one. Finally, it was my turn. After I had approached and told him my name, I said 'I have come from Trabzon'.

'From Trabzon?' he asked, bewildered.

'Yes, from Trabzon'.

With an expression on his face which said 'you must be joking', he looked at the people in the room. I understood that he was looking for confirmation from them. When they said 'Yes, grandfather. He has come from Trabzon,' he stretched out his hands towards me as if to grasp a miracle. Looking into my eyes, he kept hold of my hands.

'Whereabouts are you from?'

'From Of'.

He made me sit beside him, looking first at me and then staring at the others in the room. I would very much have liked to know what was going on in his mind, how far back his memory was taking him, what was coming alive before his eyes.

Everybody was giving us their full attention; they were as curious as I was to know what was going to happen. He broke the silence that had settled on the room.

‘What are you looking for here?’ he asked.

‘I came looking for you. I want you to tell me about the Trabzon that you left behind and to sing me a song, any song you wish. I came all this way just for that.’

The old kemence player slightly straightened up in the armchair where he was reclining. He picked up the cane that was resting beside him, held it in both hands and leaned his chin on his hands. After a few moments staring into space, he raised his head and turned his eyes to the window overlooking the courtyard. It was obvious from the expression on his face that he had forgotten about us and was absorbed in a past which we wouldn’t comprehend even if he described it to us. It was as if he wanted to take us on that journey but he couldn’t decide whether he should. It was his voice that broke the silence again.

‘Ah.....Trebizond’

I felt like catching in the palms of my hands the tears that were streaming down under his thick glasses, to prevent them falling to the ground. We all looked into space. The happy smile that had lit up my face when I found him faded away. I found myself not knowing what to say. While I was wondering if I had done the wrong thing by evoking these bad memories, Niko turned to the people in the room and started to speak:

‘I was 20 years old. One of the girls from our street in Trabzon was going to be a bride in the neighbouring village of Zefanos. They called me to be the kemence player. After the ceremony in the church, people gathered in the village square. The horon dance commenced; I was playing the kemence. After a while, we saw a caravan passing through the outskirts of the village. In front, there were about ten people on horseback, followed by the same number of laden mules. When they saw us, they stopped. One of them started to come towards the horon dancers. He dismounted when he was about fifty metres away. He was armed from head to foot. Stripping off his weapons, he hung them on his horse. Then we realised it was a caravan of tobacco smugglers. The man came to us on foot and greeted us. Learning that it was a wedding celebration, he gave us his good wishes and asked if he could join the horon with his friends. The young men of the village welcomed them. The man beckoned his friends who were waiting some way from him. Leaving their weapons, they all came and joined the dance. They were wearing the same baggy trousers as us. If you looked at the dancers from behind, you couldn’t tell who were Greeks and who were Turks.’

He fell silent for a moment without taking his eyes from the window. It was as though he was waiting for us to say something.

‘Then, sir?’ I asked.

‘Then the dance finished. They thanked us and returned to their caravan. We saw one of them strap on his weapons, and come back to the square on his horse. After leaving in the middle of the square a bale of tobacco from the load behind his saddle, without looking back he went away quickly to catch up with his friends.’

This time it was my turn to look towards the window. I hid my eyes from the people in the room. He was telling the story in such a lively way, as if at that moment he was playing the kemence and we were all dancing the horon, with the bale of tobacco in the middle of the room, and us screwing up our eyes to see the tobacco smugglers who were too far distant to be seen with bare eyes. Niko went on:

‘When that damn migration time arrived, we didn’t take anything with us. We left everything just as it was. We wouldn’t have known: we thought we were only going on a short journey. When we left our houses, we left glasses and bowls on the table. If anyone dropped in, they could eat and drink as they wished, and keep the hearth warm, so that our house would continue to provide a welcome. After living in this land, in our homeland, for thousands of years, who would accept that we were being sent away with no possibility of return.’

Turning off the tape, I turned to Niko. I wanted this to be a living moment, not just one to record. I put to my hero the question that had been nagging at me and that had drawn me all the way here.

‘Grandfather, did you bring anything with you?’

For an instant, there was a glint in his eyes like the reflection of the trout that swims impetuously upstream in the Meryem Ana brook. As if he understood what I meant, he turned his head slightly to look at something and said

‘I did, I did. The kemence that is hanging on that wall.’

Then hearing a sound from Niko, we understood he was clearing his throat. Our attention was completely focussed on him.

Right in the heart of Trabzon

Candle and lantern light up the gloom

And the one who brought us together

May a light shine on his tomb.

I hugged and kissed the cheeks of Niko the kemence player, this old grandfather who had never again seen the land of his birth, who yearned after it in his songs. Without raising my eyes, I asked

‘What can I do for you, grandfather?’

Silently he looked at me. I had the feeling that he was weighing up my sincerity. He gave me no more pause for thought.

‘My son, when you are anywhere up in the high pastures of Trabzon, or on the roads up to the pastures, when you are drinking the icy-cold water flowing through one of the tree-bark water-troughs, you will remember us, the old inhabitants I mean, won’t you.’

Leaving him looking downcast, I stood up. Totally overwhelmed, my feelings upside down, I was about to leave.

‘Hey, young man!’ he shouted in a quavering voice

‘Salute to those days!’

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