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Minor not Marginal: Contemporary Jewish Memory Writing in Turkey

Turkish occupies a peculiar space in the world republic of letters (Casanova 1999). With the foundation of the Turkish Republic and ensuing reforms in language, imperial polyglossia was reduced to monolingualism. The twenty – first century witnessed a resurfacing of multilingualism, with languages and cultures of minorities occupying public space and shaping the literary. The visibility of the minor, however, has not reduced questions of hierarchy, marginality or precarity. Minor contexts map the multilingualism of the cultural landscape, emphasise the marginal positions, and question the power dynamics and the paradoxes within world literary space. Reconsidering the role of the ‘minor’ in debates on the poetics and politics of language, this paper introduces minor representations in the Turkish context, to think through and beyond the binaries of centre and periphery, native and foreign. Its particular focus is contemporary Jewish memory writing.

Recent work on the Jewish experience in Turkey place emphasis on memory writing as a collective process with political and practical implications (Behmoaras 1997, Ender 2016, Kuryel 2018, Margulies 2006, 2018). Jewish memory writing conjoins the contrasting experiences associated with the minority position, ranging from inclusion to exclusion, from belonging to alienation, with inflections of Ladino, the language of the Sephardi and a language of intimacy, familiar but not mastered. Ladino has a peculiar status, minor and marginal, but also transnational. A language with a worldwide network, Ladino may work as a lens to reconsider totalities of Turkish and Jewish identities, and thereby question and debunk hierarchies between guest and host, centre and periphery. Reconsidering Ladino within the Turkish context provides a lens to reassess the relationality of size and space in minority questions and on the poetics and politics of language.