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The Image of the Turkish Women in Orientalists' Travelbooks From the "Others" Point of View

Abstract

Social prejudices are generally effective at the perception of an alien culture. It's believed that the domestic culture is superior. According to the most of the orientalists there are two basic differences between the West and the East. The first one is that the East is the home of vener; the other aspect is the barbarism of the East. In travelbooks written by European sojourners the Ottoman country is represented like the countries in *Elf Leile ve Leile*. The major theme of many works and travelbooks written by Europeans about the East is the erotic image and queer sexuality of the East. According to European travellers, Eastern women are enticing, mysterious, and deceptive. They represent the woman as a "source of vener" and not as the number of a family. After a brief discussion about the historical and scholarly value of travelbooks, the orientalists' views on the Eastern women especially the Turkish women are analyzed in this study.

Key Terms

Orientalists, Travelbooks, Turkey, Turkish, Turkish Woman.

Ötekiler Bağlamında Oryantalist Seyahatnamelerinde Türk Kadını İmajı

Özet

Yabancı bir kültürün algılanmasında genellikle toplumsal önyargılar etkili olmaktadır. Bu algılamada da yerli kültürün üstünlüğüne inanılmaktadır. Oryantalistlerin büyük bir çoğunluğuna göre Doğu'yu Batı'dan ayıran iki temel özellik vardır. Bunlardan ilki Doğu'nun şehvetin kaynağı olmasıdır. Diğeri ise Doğu'nun barbarlığıdır. Avrupalıların yazdığı

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seyahatnamelerde; genellikle Osmanlı ülkesi binbir gece masallarındaki gibi yansıtılmaktadır. Avrupalıların yüzyıllar boyunca Şark hakkında yazdıkları kitapların ve seyahatnamelerin büyük kısmının konusu, Doğu'nun erotik yönü ve cinselliğidir. Avrupalı seyyahlara göre, Doğulu kadınlar baştan çıkarıcı, esrarengiz ve aldattıcıdır. Kadını ailenin bir ferdi olarak değil de “şehvetin kaynağı” olarak ele almaktadırlar. Bu çalışmada seyahatnamelerin tarihi ve ilmi değeri üzerinde durulduktan sonra oryantalistlerin başta Türk kadını olmak üzere doğulu kadınlara bakışları değerlendirilmiştir.

Anahtar Terimler

Oryantalistler, Seyahatnameler, Türkiye, Türk, Türk Kadını

1. The Historical and Scholarly Value of Travel Books

The concept of ‘other’ or the East for the West has evolved as the working of the Western subject. In order to establish its hegemony and domination over rest of the world, the western subject labeled all those who were different as the ‘other’. This labeling enables the West to watch itself in the face of the other. In other words, the attempt of the West to identify and document the East serves to identify and document itself in a comparative way (Kabbani 1993: 19). Besides this, the East is always compared with something else than the West itself, that is, with things that the West can easily possess, and thus becomes the reverse image of the West. In fact, the distinction between the East and the West comes out as a result of the label put on the East by the West (Mutman 1999: 44).

The image of the East in the mind of the West turns into a passive object that one can go and take it. The resistance of the East to the West is something unimaginable. Thus, the East has been introduced to the West as being largely different from what it really was. In this introduction, non-Europeans are represented as elusive and powerless. The perception of alien cultures is already shaped by estimates, social prejudices, generalizations as well as by various historical expectations. The image of the Turk, for example, has been created by the impressions of travelers who visited Ottoman Empire at different times and the characteristic thoughts of their ages about this foreign country (Spohn 1996: 87). As a matter of fact, realities about Turkey and the Turks as well as the Turkish identity do not overlap the impressions reflected in travel books or other foreign sources. Every society places itself at the center of the world and accords ‘others’ inferior positions in this hierarchy. This ethnocentric orientation, no doubt, shapes the image of other countries (Şahin 2007: 20-21).

For the Orientalists, every region of the East is the same. The East is characterized by such unique labels as Oriental despotism, Oriental splendor, Oriental cruelty, Oriental salacity, Oriental desperation, Oriental fatalism and Oriental spiritualism. In this sense, Turkey and Iran or Indonesia and Algeria are no different from one another (Bulut 2002: 25). Likewise, Europeans in the 19th century did not use

to see the Eastern man as an individual. Instead, they identified the peoples of the East either with mob categories such as Orientals, Asians, Turks and Arabs or with abstract generalizations like Muslims, mentalities, and races (Said 1999: 205-206).

The concept of the 'other' is not only limited to colonialist perspective but it is also a discourse established in all cultural realms. In this context, we observe that the discourse of the 'other' had existed during much of history but, parallel to technological advances; it became more pervasive in the 19th century (Findley 1999: 1-3). In that century, the differences of the East relative to the West were deliberately emphasized as the irrevocable aspects of the West's opposite. Two of such aspects are quite notable: the first one is that the East is the home of vengence; the other aspect is the violence and barbarism that the Orientals inherited from their ancestors (Kabbani: 10).

The East-West divide has taken centuries to come into existence, during which myriad travels of exploration were made; contacts were established by way of trade and wars. During the 18th century two major themes came to the foreground in the relationship between the East and the West. The first one is the increase of systematic knowledge in Europe about the East. This increase of knowledge was ignited by the curiosity felt toward the alien and the extraordinary as much as by colonialism. This knowledge was being created as well as utilized by a number of scientific disciplines like ethnology, philology, and comparative anatomy that were on the rise at the time. Novelists, poets, translators and talented sojourners contributed to this body of knowledge. The second major theme characterizing the East-West relationship is Europe's perennial perception of itself in an incomparably stronger position against the East that enabled it to judge its political, cultural and religious relations with the East as those between a strong and a weak partner (Said: 60-61).

The images of the West about Turks have been constructed on the impressions of merchants who were only concerned with their transactions or on those of travelers who stayed very short in Turkey or passed by it for farther destinations. After such initial activities of exploration, a tremendous body of literature has emerged over time in the forms of travel books, stories, narratives, reports, and collections of fiction, cereal publications and other themes of interest. Thus, the Europeans have started to learn about the Ottomans and the Orient in their own countries without any visit or other forms of mutual contact (Hazard: 1981: 28-29).

We had better mention here two notable elements that shaped the European perspective about Turks. The first one is Orientalism or the Eastern question. The second one is colonialism or imperialism. Especially the Eastern question has constituted the basis of European policies toward Turks whereas colonialism has supplied policies toward the Oriental world including Turks (Kodaman 1993: 20-26). Orientalism is, in general, a Western system of thought aimed at dominating the East. In this sense, it is a system that enabled post-Enlightenment Western culture to administer or even to reproduce the East (Findley: x).

In travel books written by European sojourners the Ottoman country is represented like the countries in *Elf Leile ve Leile*. The basic questions asked about the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century are: "how do people live in cities?" "How are they being ruined by epidemics?" "How shall the Turkish race extinguish due to sexual promiscuity stemming from polygamy?" (Ortaylı 1987: 116-117).

From the outset, travelers have visited the Ottoman Empire with a number of different purposes such as pilgrimage, missionary work, adventure, scholarship and tourism. Some of them have been engaged in acts of espionage for their own countries, aiming at drawing out the maps of strategic regions in the Ottoman Empire. Scholars, on the other hand, have been motivated to collect rare objects and useful information in their fields of interest. They have purchased valuable MSS, medicines, antique medals and coins; they copied inscriptions; they made detailed measurements about places of worship and monuments. Furthermore, travelers have brought different devices as gifts to the Ottoman country and served the exchange of information especially during the earlier encounters (Berentjes 2002: 251).

Travel books have, no doubt, great historical value. However, one should not forget that their authors may have presuppositions. That is why what is said in them may not always be completely true. Such a likelihood as well as the conjecture of the period in which travel books were written and the level of education or cultural accumulation of the sojourner should all be taken into account in judging the scientific value of these works. As a matter of fact, it is observed that many travelers have made misrepresentations and incorrect judgments in their books about Turks. Such misjudgments may stem from the ignorance of travelers as well as from their exaggerations and distortions of reality for the sake of being interesting and exotic to their readers (Lewis 1984: 248). Another factor that influenced the content of travel books is the obligation felt by sojourners to ratify the ideas and stories into which their co-citizens had been socialized since their childhood. A Spanish proverb clearly shows this: "one who goes for long journeys returns home with oversize lies" (Robins 1999: 37).

In this context, it should not be forgotten that sometimes travelers described places that they had never seen as though they really had seen. The Turkish home and the seraglio are two striking examples to such places. In fact, it is quite difficult to explore the East and the seraglio without observing them for long and in detail. It was equally difficult to go beyond obtaining superficial knowledge about Turks and Turkish manners even when good intimacy and acquaintance was established with them. As a result of such difficulties, we observe that travel books that had been written in the same period give contradictory accounts and impressions about the Ottoman life probably due to well-established prejudices of their authors concerning their subjects of narrative (Celkan 1989: 839).

In a similar vein, among the factors determining the reliability of travel books, former works written about the religious and administrative traditions of the Ottoman state, which were used by travelers as one of their major sources of information, play a significant part. Some of these works, written by "desk Orientalists" who had never visited the East, could sometimes be extremely biased. As a result, the pre-established knowledge about the East produced in ways that are similar to the activities of absentee landlordism, shaped the contents, methods and reliability of later travel books (Lewis: 249).

Among the early travelers, there are some such as Sherley who describes Turks as "utterly ignorant, barbarian, haughty, timid, tyrant, homosexual, violent, abominable unbelievers, permanent drunkards and liars" (Evin 1975: 174-176). In fact, when

travelers were coming home with ideas deemed to be new, they had already started their journeys with those ideas. However, the ideas of travelers could be more influential after the journey even though they were quite wrong (Hazard: 28-30). Travelers used to write about what they had seen and sometimes what they had already known about the lands they were visiting. They thus used to make generalizations about the East. For example, Thomas Dallam, an English traveler who was a musician specialized in playing the organ, described a treatment he had received on the Rhodes island during his journey to Turkey as an indicator of “how the dog-tempered and barbarian Turks were cruel and villainous” (Şahin: 27). Travelers who had overcome many difficulties and returned their homes were seen as experienced, cultured and knowledgeable persons and accepted with respect in their own countries. These figures could lead to the opening of new horizons and establishing new contacts with the rest of the world by returning from their journey with new ideas. What is more, journeys and travel books could help the elimination of prejudices, and encounters of populations and cultures in peace and friendship (Löschburg 1998: 8).

In the works written about Turkey during the 14th and 15th centuries Turkey is dealt with superficially. The aim of the journeys made in that period was not in essence to describe Turkey. Travelers passed by Turkey during their expeditions to farther lands and wrote down what they had seen *en route*. Sojourners did not only write about the size of the countries they had seen, their climate, vegetation, landscapes and the materials produced in them, but also about their laws, systems of government and their rulers (Hazard: 29). However, the extreme forms of reproach and defects attached to the religious beliefs of Muslims have been gradually replaced by rationality and worldly affairs. Yet, it must be noted that stereotypical ideas have not entirely disappeared (Davison 1993: 34-38).

Some nineteenth-century traveling scholars such as Albert Smith approach most travel books with great suspicion. He observes that Orientalist stories have been formed by their traditional authors with various changes, frauds and additions. He thus criticizes the descriptions of the East by many sojourners with absurd, incorrect and extremely colorful exaggerations. Nevertheless, such criticisms seem to be superficial and formal rather than substantive. When the modernist travelers, like Smith, came to Turkey, they were not impressed by the Topkapı Palace, and could not see around the imaginary concubines described in *Elf Leile ve Leile* and Sultan's favorites. Besides this, modernist travelers represent Istanbul in their narrative accounts as monotonous and ugly (Kabbani: 121-122).

Another aspect that shaped the knowledge, opinions and images of travelers about the East is their personal status and qualifications. In addition, it can be observed that the fields of interest of travelers as well as their sponsors and nationalities have shaped their opinions. The contents of travel books were further determined by the ideas of travelers about what could or should be the East like, their rejection of other accounts of the East, the requirements of Orientalism at the time and the cultural, professional, national, economic and political exigencies of the particular period in question (Şahin: 32).

Cultural factors are also among the forces that have shaped the works of travelers. The positive evaluation of one's own culture also entails a negative evaluation

of alien cultures. When this mechanism works in a reverse direction, the negative evaluation of one's own culture brings about a positive evaluation of other cultures, at least some of them. On the other hand, one may tend to settle up his or her identity problems with reference to his or her native culture and the one assigned as the opposite of it by reviving the similarities and differences between the two cultures (Spohn: 89). Therefore, we need to find out reality by evaluating and comparing different aspects of travel books. The most objective accounts have been written, no doubt, by those who had visited Anatolia without any particular interests or expectations.

2. The Image of the Turkish Women in Travel Books

The word 'image' has a number of meanings that constitute an abstract category of perception about reality or constructions of reality. These meanings include imagination, picture, dream, statue, vision, far-sight, far-sight, view and the like. Apart from these meanings, the term image refers to using the act of seeing with the force of imagination, dreaming and mystical vision (Robins: 21).

The major theme of many works and travel books written by Europeans about the East is its erotic image and queer sexuality (Findley 2000: 83-87). These images have also been used at great lengths in describing Ottoman women. Nevertheless, we also find positive narratives about Ottoman women in the works of some sixteenth-century sojourners. Postel is an example of this category. He presents politeness, plainness and chastity as the primary qualifications of the typical Ottoman woman (Şahin: 299). Similarly, de Tott who visited the Ottoman Empire in the 18th century contends that the Ottoman women were quite chaste. He adds that they could be extremely relentless when an alien man attempted to covet their honor (Tott 1976: 83).

The identification of women with sexuality has persisted for long. Madden, who visited Turkey in the first quarter of the 18th century, states that women were generally viewed in society as associated with sexuality (Şahin: 299). In this context, the Eastern women are represented as "having enchanting and exotic beauties but living together with rich but ugly Oriental men in feelings of inequality, as the desperate creatures being kept by force by eunuchs with horrible appearances in the seraglios of rude, lazy, immoral and barbarian Oriental men" (Bulut: 25). As before, in the narratives of the nineteenth-century travelers, too, there are passages representing Turkish women in seraglio or *hamam* (public bath) and describing the 'sexual attractiveness of the East'. Such passages represent Turkish men as attending coffee-houses and making picnics in their spare times. They also amply emphasize the 'laziness' and mysticism of the Orient as well as the 'indifference of Oriental people' (Raczynski 1980: 25).

The mode of dressing and manners of the Oriental woman makes her an irresistible subject of curiosity in the eyes of Western travelers. Travelers have had generally confused feelings about Eastern women. According to Western sojourners who are loaded with feelings of desire, pity, scorn and atrocity, the Eastern women are enticing, mysterious, and deceptive. Furthermore, the Eastern women are described either as 'erotic victims' or as "intriguing witches, the most mischievous women of the world, puffed up, haughty, treacherous, trickster, relentless and unchaste". Their lives revolve around the orbit of sex. They are voluptuous and lazy (Kabbani: 38; 64). In

other words, “East is equal to debauchery, fertility and unlimited sensual desire”, according to Westerners. On the whole, it represents the non-Western culture ‘othered’ by the West and it is described in feminine terms in the eyes of Europeans (Yeğenoğlu 1999: 120). This is quite revealing for femininity has historically been believed to be inferior and subordinate to masculinity since the ancient Greece, and has been reconfirmed by Christian leaders during the Roman and medieval periods. Masculinity has been associated with rationality, morality and virtue whereas femininity has been done so with irrationality extreme emotionality, lack of sexual and moral control, and incontinence.

This state of vengery pervades all over the East and it is the most striking quality of Oriental world. Vengery is the cement or the bridge that holds together the objects of this colorful landscape (Ünlü 1982: 153). In this vein, the Europeans approach the East with the response that a man shows toward a woman. Lane, for example, reveals that, when he was about to enter Egypt, he feels like an Oriental bridegroom ‘who is to lift up the tulle of the bride’. He feels likely to see everything that will enchant, astonish or frustrate himself (Kabbani: 85).

The impressions of Enlightenment travelers in the 18th century which started to represent the woman as a ‘source of vengery’ and not as the basis of family, persisted during the 19th century, too (Heppner 1987: 112). Most of these impressions, whose impacts persisted for long, can be seen as the representations of the fears, desires, ‘a formidable self-discovery’ and fantasies occupying the subconscious of Western travelers rather than as those of reality (Keyman: 9). In the 19th century Europe, which was increasingly becoming richer and richer, sex was a highly institutionalized phenomenon. On the one hand, there was nothing called as ‘free sex’, but sex in Western society could entail some legal, moral and even political or economic responsibilities (Şahin: 301).

In this sense, the East “is the place to which vagabond descendants, criminals, the poor and other persona-nongrata are banished” as well as “a highly demanded land where the Westerners can satisfy their lust which they could not do so in their own countries” or “where the sex trade is carried out, passions of the flesh are thoroughly fulfilled” (Kabbani: 26). No Western author, who traveled to or wrote about the East, did not or could not exclude himself from this search (Said: 245). A striking fact is that Ahmed Midhat Efendi, who went to Europe in 1889 to participate in the Congress of Orientalists and see the World Exhibition opened in the same year, sees the West as feminine and lustful just in the same way as the Westerners saw the East. According to him, the most dangerous quality of the West for the East is its ‘lustfulness’ (Findley: ix). This shows that prejudice, misunderstanding and exaggeration are not the workings of only Orientalists. Scholars of any nation could forge false descriptions of the societies which they do not know adequately. Moreover, they could deliberately sling mud at those nations with which they had already confronted due to some historical controversies (Schcik 2001).

Travelers grown up in such a cultural climate have been influenced by these ideas. Naturally, as can be observed in every subject, the personality of the traveler and the people he had met in the Ottoman Empire have shaped his accounts. Busbecq, for example, describes Ottoman women to be of a higher morality. In his opinion, “the

chastity of their women is so important for Turkish men that no other nation accords so much care to it. In order to protect the chastity of their women, they keep them closed in the house where even the sun-light cannot enter". According to Busbecq, when women have to go out as a matter of necessity, they resemble a ghost with their covered and veiled bodies (Busbecq 1974: 100-101). Contrary to his exaggerated narrative representations, the Ottoman women were not at all so closed into houses like prisoners, as the studies on Ottoman society, which are based on first-hand original documents like the shari'a court registers, clearly show. On the contrary, they were able to participate in almost every realm of social life. They could at times run a workshop like a patron (Gerber 1998: 336), defend their rights as litigants and even represent their husbands or fathers by proxy at the court. There are many individual court cases where a woman could submit a complaint to the court about her husband claiming that he didn't take care of her and her children (Bursa Court Records B 112 91a '1678'); she could complain about her husband's impotence and ask about her future status (Bursa Court Records B 112 26a '1679'); or she could blame her husband for attempting to exercise anal penetration during their sexual contact (Bursa Court Records A 72 142a '1560').

Naturally, some travelers, particularly male travelers, were not allowed to enter the seraglio and women's public bath, but Lady Marie Montagu did enter such places. She praises the physical beauty and moral chastity of the women she observed there. Montagu describes the women she encountered at the hamam as "chaste, staid and honest". She even finds some of them to be "tall, well-developed and beautiful like the portraits of goddesses produced by the painting brushes of Git or Titen" (1973: 37). Nevertheless, these descriptions do not fit the ideas of Europeans about the hamam and Turkish woman. For them, what Montagu says does not reflect reality, because the life of the Oriental woman ought to pass in "an idle luxury", and her "*raison d'être* is to share her master's bed" (Schiffer 1987: 53).

While giving these positive accounts of Turkish women, Montagu, on the other hand, argues that they are as sinful as Europeans by saying "women's manners are just like those of us". She points out that life is very comfortable for Ottoman woman, that she spends handful of money which is earned by her husband. Montagu states that the Ottoman women can act much more freely than assumed by Europeans, even to the extent that which makes them the freest women of Europe. In this sense, she receives with amazement the European authors who talks about the simplicity and ingenuousness of Ottoman women with whom she experienced long durations of close encounters (1973: 53).

According to British traveler Burnaby, on the other hand, Ottoman women used to live to pass away from this world, only wasting their lives and were dragging themselves after mean pleasures of the flesh. The same author describes the Turkish family life as unhappy and desperate. The reason for this, according to him, is that older wives, when they lose respect with the arrival of young and beautiful spouses at the seraglio of their husband, feel deadly hatred towards the new favorites. Being deprived of the privileges enjoyed by the new wife who is younger and more charming than herself suffices to make the middle-aged spouse crazy. As a result, an extremely troubled life pervades the family and the household (2000: 62). These representations of the Ottoman family life are of course highly exaggerated because studies conducted on

the structure of the Ottoman family show that polygamy was not common as assumed. The rates of polygyny in Bursa between 1670 and 1698 are as follows: marriage with only one woman %91.8, marriage with two wives at the same time %7.8, marriage with three wives %0.1 and marriage with four wives %0.3 (Düzbakar, 2003: 171).

Burnaby also gives a detailed account of women in Ankara referring to an Italian doctor living in the city as his source information. He conveys doctor Gasparini's impressions that point to pervasion of immorality among the women living in Ankara. According to Burnaby, women in Ankara are never faithful to their husbands, but their adulterous acts always remain all the more secret (Şahin: 302-303). His reference to another foreigner concerning his accounts of women's manners invokes suspicion about their truth.

Raczynski, on the other hand, states that Turkish women were quite chaste, that they rarely abused the freedom of movement given to them, and that the fear of death in the mind of woman who had the intention of committing adultery contributed greatly to keep her behaviors in decency. According to him, women's chastity and continence is rather associated with their being grown up as entirely trustworthy persons in their families and with their religious beliefs (1980: 52-53).

Spry argues that Turkish women were in general ignorant. However, he adds that exceptions could be found if examined objectively and impartially. He notes that Turkish women were conversational though in limited measures. He finds their conversations to be lovely and lyrical, their forms of rendition to be quite nice, lively and rife with quick repartees and comfortable. According to him, the conversations of Turkish women were attractive and pleasing for the English society that was accustomed to listening to conversations based on a limited amount of information (Şahin: 306).

Not all travelers hold this opinion. There are some, such as Dallaway and Thorton, who note that Turkish women used to receive a painstaking education. Others such as Montagu and Craven contend that the seraglio was not the place only for carnal pleasures but, on the contrary, it was a domain where women gained a number of qualifications like diligence, far-sightedness and thriftiness (Schiffer 1987: 304).

Ubicini represents Turkish women as respectable and dutiful persons who were entitled to legal and religious rights. He notes that Turkish women were able to perform the role of an *imam* (prayer leader) in their same-sex communities, and could go on war against the attacks of the enemy even though their husbands had not given their consent. Especially in well-educated families it was an established fact, Ubicini suggests that women were generally much more occupied with reading activities than men (1975: 480-481).

3. Conclusion

The main logic behind the representation of the East as feminine, immoral and wild is the idea hidden in the subconscious of the Europeans that they, as the masculine, virtuous and civilized agents, could and should penetrate it, return it to moral norms and domesticate or civilize it. The imagery visualizing the relationships between the East

and the West is thus established on the basis of political, religious, cultural, and moral inequalities that amount to an absolutist hierarchy. This kind of hierarchical division between the two worlds, imbued with the ethnocentrism of the West, attributes all negative qualifications to the East as the identifiable opposites of the West.

As we pointed out earlier, alteritism and defamation of the rival is a two-way process between the East and the West. In other words, not only did the Europeans misrepresent the values, norms, public morals and even the sacred symbols of the East, but also the Easterners did the same thing for the fundamental qualities of the West. However, while an important number of misrepresentations produced by Western culturalists of the East have become classics and masterpieces of world art and literature, similar works produced by scholars of the East could not reach and enjoy the same degree of popularity.

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