

The West *versus* the East: Samuel Johnson's Cultural Solipsism in *Rasselas* (1759)*

Batıya Karşı Doğu: *Rasselas* (1759)'ta Samuel Johnson'ın Kültürel Bencilliği

Alev KARADUMAN**

Abstract

The eighteenth century in England was a period when there was a growing literary and academic interest in Oriental culture, geography, and thought. In fact, as Said has argued in his influential and academically popular work *Orientalism*, this was in fact a general trend in Europe among the literary and the learned. Specifically in England, such travel writings as, for example, William Biddulph's *Travels* (1609), Henry Blount's *A Voyage into the Levant* (1636), George Sandys's *A Relation of A Journey* (1615), Lady Montagu's *Letters* (1763) and Richard Chandler's *Travels in Asia Minor* (1764-65), in all of which were given detailed and extensive accounts of Oriental peoples, cultures, civilizations, and geographies, contributed greatly to the increase of interest in the Orient. Moreover, Oriental stories, such as *The Arabian Nights*, were popular and stimulated the reading public's imagination. Hence, in fiction, fabulations about the Orient were also made, and Johnson's picaresque novel *Rasselas* is a fabulation as such. Although Johnson wrote *Rasselas* as a philosophical and satirical novel on happiness, very much like Voltaire's *Candide*, which was written as a satire on optimism, he situated it in an Oriental context and inserted in it lengthy descriptive and comparative discourses in which he posited the West and the East against each other. In fact, throughout *Rasselas*, he displays a colonial and imperial mentality and adopts a hegemonic attitude, whereby he others the Orient and Oriental culture and solipsistically presents the West and Western civilization as superior. Therefore, the main concern of this paper is to dwell upon Johnson's cultural solipsism in *Rasselas* within the larger context of eighteenth-century Orientalism in England and demonstrate how his cultural solipsism was closely related to the colonial and imperial ideology and politics of the time.

Keywords:The west, the east, Samuel Johnson, cultural solipsism, *rasselas*

Öz

İngiltere'de 18. Yüzyıl, Şark kültürüne, coğrafyasına ve düşüncesine olan edebi ve akademik ilginin arttığı bir dönemdir. Aslında, Said'in etkili ve akademik alanda popüler çalışması olan *Orientalism*'de öne sürdüğü üzere, bu durum Avrupa edebiyatçıları ve bilginleri arasında yaygın bir eğilimdir. Özellikle İngiltere'de her birinde Şark insanlarına, kültürüne, medeniyetlerine ve coğrafyalarına dair detaylı ve kapsamlı açıklamaların bulunduğu William Biddulph'un *Travels*(1609), Henry Blount'ın *A Voyage into the Levant* (1636), George Sandys' in *A Relation of A Journey* (1615) Lady Montagu'nun *Letters* (1763) ve Richard Chandler'ın *Travels in Asia Minor* (1764-65) gibi gezi yazıları, Şark'a olan ilginin artmasına fazlasıyla katkıda bulunmuştur. Dahası, *The Arabian Nights* gibi Şark öyküleri yaygınlaşmış ve okuyan toplumun hayal gücünü canlandırmıştır. Dolayısı ile Şark hakkında hikâyelerin de üretildiği kurmaca yazınında Johnson'ın *Rasselas* romanı bu duruma örnek bir hikâye niteliğindedir. Johnson, *Rasselas*'ı mutluluk üzerine felsefik ve hicivsel bir roman olarak yazmış olmasına rağmen,

* This paper is extended version of the paper published in 4th International IDEA Conference.

** Yrd. Doç. Dr., Hacettepe Üniversitesi, Edebiyat Fakültesi, İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı Bölümü, karaduman@hacettepe.edu.tr

Voltaire'nin iyimserlik hakkında yazılmış hicvi olan *Candide*'sine çok benzer şekilde, eserini Şark bağlamında ele almış ve içerisine Batı ve Doğu'yu birbirlerine karşıt olarak varsaydığı uzun açıklamalı ve karşılaştırmalı söylemleri dâhil etmiştir. Aslında, *Rasselas* tamamında sömürgeci ve emperyal zihniyeti sergiler ve yaygın yaklaşımı benimser; bu yolla, Şark ve Şark kültürünü ötekileştirir ve Batı ve Batı medeniyetini bencilce üstün olarak sunar. Bu nedenle, bu çalışmanın temel amacı, İngiltere'de 18. Yüzyıl Doğubilimciliği çerçevesinde Johnson'ın *Rasselas*'taki kültürel bencilliği üzerinde durmak ve onun kültürel bencilliğinin, sömürgecilik ve emperyal ideoloji ve dönemin politikası ile nasıl bir ilişkili içinde olduğunu ortaya koymaktır.

Anahtar sözcükler: Batı, doğu, Samuel Johnson, kültürel bencilik, rasselas

The East versus West: Samuel Johnson's Cultural Solipsism in *Rasselas* (1759)

Dr. Johnson (1709-1784) who was one of the prolific figures of the 18th century literary arena and famous with his *Dictionary* (1755) dealt not only with lexicography but also with history in general, but specifically with social and political issues. As a literary figure, he was a poet, an essayist, a biographer, a literary critic, an editor and a novelist. Thus, as a popular and witty intellectual of his time, it was inevitable for him not to deal with "orientalism", which was one of the most popular and intriguing topics among the elite at the time.

Although there is no substantial reference in his letters that he exchanged with Lady Montague, it is certain that he discussed ideas with her on orientalism. In fact, Lady Montague had lived in Turkey from 1716 to 1718 and depicted in her *Embassy Letters* (May 1763) an oriental picture of Ottoman Turkey, it is certain that, like her, Johnson had a growing interest in Oriental peoples and cultures. It is known from Lady Montague's *Embassy Letters* that she challenged and disowned the contemporary Western prejudices against, and solipsistic attitudes towards, the Orient mainly represented by the Ottoman Empire; this western solipsism was culturally inspired by fictionalized fantasies, exotic paintings and sensual poems in the West about the Harem (pp. 122-145). Therefore, it may be asserted with reference to Johnson's letters that there was a good friendship between him and Lady Montague. He was invited by her to dinner several times, and they shared ideas on various topics. In one of his letters, dated 21 December 1775, Johnson states (1992, p. 93) how he was pleased with the invitation Lady Montague extended to him for a dinner:

I know not when any letter has given me so much pleasure or vexation, as that which I had yesterday the honour of receiving. That you, Madam, should wish my company, is surely a sufficient reason for being pleased; You have kindly allowed me to name a day. Will you be pleased, Madam to accept of me any day after Tuesday?

Thus, it is highly possible that Johnson and Lady Montague may have discussed serious literary and social topics, including orientalism which was a very popular topic at the time. He may have heard a great deal from her about life and society in Ottoman Turkey. However, "Father Lobo's *A Voyage to Abyssinia*" (1729) seems to be the more obvious source of Johnson's orientalism, since he translated it from French to English (Bronson, 1970, p.156). Besides Lobo's book, as Kaminski (1987, p.211) has pointed out, he also read "Hiob Ludolph's *New History of Ethiopia* (1681), and [...] a 17th century travel book, *Purchas: His Pilgrimage*" which gave detailed descriptions of the oriental world, including Ethiopia or "Abyssinia" as Johnson would call it. It is evident that these two books formed the principal Abyssinian features of *Rasselas* with the

character names, settings and atmosphere (Hardy, 1971, p.29). Critics generally agree on the fact that, due to his accurate geographical and historical remarks, Johnson, before composing *Rasselas*, must have not only examined the Abyssinian royal family and Egypt but also read widely in European travel and geography books dealing with Egypt and the Near East (Hudson, 1988, p.32). Therefore, his *Rasselas* was the outcome of his general interest in Orientalism. In fact, before *Rasselas*, he had published in 1736 a play called *Irene*, in which, as Wain (1988, p.10) has explained, he reflected “the vogue of Orientalism in the day. The play has much in common with Massinger’s *Renegado* and Dryden’s *Don Sebastian* with its Oriental despotism”. However, different from these writers, Johnson did not present a hostile attitude towards Islam and Muslim. His main misrepresentation was geographical in that he located the Prophet’s tomb in Mecca rather than in Medina (DeMaria, 1997, p.48). This inaccuracy may show either Dr. Johnson’s inefficient research, and lack of interest or the solipsistic ideas on Islam religion. So the main concern of this paper is to discuss Johnson’s concept of orientalism and his solipsistic attitude towards oriental typology and peoples by focusing mostly on his picaresque novel *Rasselas* first published in 1759. *Rasselas* became so popular after its publication that it “was translated into French in 1760, into Italian in 1764, into German in 1785, and into Russian in 1795” (Wain, 1988, p.216), though Johnson himself stated that the novel was written “in the evenings of a week” to meet the expenses of his seriously ill mother (Boswell, 1980, p.344). Bronson (1970, p.16) has stated that, apart from the circumstances of its production, *Rasselas* “is important in relation to Johnson’s philosophy of life but also the eighteenth- century taste of [orientalism]”. Although *Rasselas* was written in the form of the picaresque novel, in which the journeys and adventures of Rasselas’s philosophical and moral adviser Imlac, in the oriental world are described, the main focus of the novel is placed on the differences between the Orient and Occident, presented through a moral tale.

Historically, the 18th century in England was the period of Orientalism as an academic and lay interest came to the fore with the growing number of travel writings and the European scholars’ academic concerns with oriental languages and cultures. What one may call *the matter of the Orient* became a leading cultural and intellectual concern among the writers of the time. So Johnson followed the same fashion. It was by travel that Europe learned more about the Orient, and English travel literature provides significant clues about the Orient and its culture and peoples. As Kaminski (1987, pp.2-3) has stated,

In the Middle Ages there had been little traffic between England and the Orient, but with the establishment of the Levant company in 1581 the volume increased considerably. Trade links and diplomatic missions gave rise to a steady flow of visitors, of the leading figures being Sir Henry Blount, George Sandys and William Lithgow. That the travelling gentlemen then gradually replaced the traveller indicates that the Orient was becoming more and easily accessible. Some of the commentators... regarded those people as remnants of a primitive race, full of innocence and simplicity.

A serious interest in the Orient is reflected also in the appearance of scholarly volumes on Oriental history, replacing the “medieval polemical writings which contain little fact but much fiction about the Orient” (Wain, 1988, p.89). Moreover, As Kaminski (1987, p.4) has shown,

Richard Knolles's *History of the Turk's* (1603), and Simon Ockley's *History of the Saracens* (1708-1718) established the history as an academic discipline. Other notable examples are Pierre Bayle's *An Historical and Critical Dictionary* (1734-1741), Richard Pococke's *A Description of the East* (1743-1745), and Alexander Russel's *The Natural History of Aleppo* (1756).

Before the academic studies of orientalism in the 18th century, there had been a tradition in the West of oriental studies which mainly focused on the Turkish language, culture, institutions and Islam. For instance, even back in the Middle Ages, English romances made references to the Orient and Islam as the religion of the Orient. William Langland's (1330-1386) *Piers the Plowman* and Chaucer's (1340-1400) *Canterbury Tales* "appear to have been swayed by the prejudices in portraying [Islam] and [the Prophet]" (Hudson, 1988, pp.44-45). A common expression was used frequently by Shakespeare in the early 17th century literature "mainly pouring scorn and contempt" (Kaminski, 1987, pp.5-6) on Turks who represented the Eastern life. The Oriental life and world was also recounted in Marlowe's *Jew of Malta* and *Tamburlaine*, John Fletcher's *Bloody Brother* and Ben Jonson's *Alchemist*. Congreve's *Way of the World* and Goldsmith's *Citizen of the World* were the examples which were full of contrasts between Christianity and Islam, and it is undeniable that they were in favour of Christianity and in opposition to Islamic laws and the Prophet. In the late 17th century, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Dryden's *Don Sabastian*, Pope's *The Dunciad* were the works which showed great affinity with the former ones (Clingham, 1997, p.48). This traditional prejudiced and biased attitude towards orientalism and Islam which was reverted to some extent with Gibbon's fairly objective and historical account of Islam in his classic *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-1788), and George Sale's translation of the Quran in 1734. Besides these studies, William Jones's "scholarly translations of Oriental works, mainly literary ones" (Hardy, 1971, p.109) paved the way for a better view of the Orient. The translation of one of the most famous Oriental tales *Arabian Nights* into English in 1706 brought about the "blooming of this genre" (Tomarken, 1994, p.167).

In accordance with the explanations above, when Johnson's *Rasselas* is analyzed within the context of these Oriental studies and fictions, it is noticed right away that Johnson fell within the same tradition. *Rasselas* is the narration of the travels and adventures of Imlac, Rasselas and Rasselas's sister Nakeyah, which they undertook within the Middle Eastern geography with Cairo as the centre. However, Imlac, on his own, had travelled earlier to the West and observed the industrial and technological developments there. Actually, Johnson's oriental discourse in the novel is primarily given in the first part where Imlac compares the East and West. As a philosophical and moral discourse set in an oriental context and presented in the form of a picaresque story, *Rasselas* becomes Johnson's expression of his solipsistic view that the West is far superior to the East in many respects. For this reason, Johnson uses Imlac, as the mouth piece of the West, putting him in the position of "an old instructor, a scholar," who "acquainted himself with the disease of mind" (1984, p.8) that was intellect, and "devoted his life to knowledge" (1984, p.25). As an intellectual of the East, he explains the meaning of life for a scholar as: "to talk in publick, to think in solitude, to read and to hear, to inquire and answer inquiries, is the business of a scholar" (1984, p.25). Imlac, being discontented with the "idle", "ignorant" and "lazy" life of the "Happy Valley", Abissinia, explores life outside. It is the general fact that ignorance, idleness and laziness are the qualities associated with the Orient

itself. Imlac describes ignorance as: "Ignorance is mere privation (hardship), by which nothing can be produced. It is a vacuity (blankness, emptiness) in which the soul sits motionless and torpid (lazy) for want of attraction;..." (1984, p.39). Thus, the royal life in Abissinia is such a life that move people away from rational thinking, make life easier and more comfortable with the idle attractions that turn them into lazy indiscreet and blunted individuals who are imprisoned behind the iron gates. In the depiction of Abissinian royal life in which Rasselas lives as member of it, Johnson might have affected by the descriptions of the Ottoman Harem life, which he might have learned from their intimate friendship with Lady Mary Montague. He writes:

The valley, wide and fruitful, supplied its inhabitants with the necessaries of life, and all delights and superfluities were added at the annual visit which the [emperour] paid his children, when the iron gate was opened to the sound of musick; and during eight days every one that resided in the valley was required to propose whatever might contribute make seclusion pleasant, to fill up the vacancies of attention, and lessen the tediousness of the time. Every desire was immediately granted. All the artificers of pleasure were called to gladden the festivity; the musicians exerted the power of harmony, and the dancers [shewed] their activity before the princes, in hope that they should pass their lives in this blissful captivity, to which those only were admitted whose performance was thought to add novelty to luxury.... (1984, pp.2-3,5).

The major difference in evaluating the East between Lady Montague and Johnson was their attitude. While Lady Montague respected and tried to understand the authentic values and traditions of the East, Johnson criticized and called it uncivilized. Until the publication of Montague's *Embassy Letters*, Ottoman Harem was resembled to a "prison" by the European travellers who visited the Empire. Thus, Johnson's depiction of the imprisonment of the Abissinian princes can be associated with the imprisonment of the "cariyes" in the Harem. Music and dance were the primary activities or performances to pass time easily for the cariyes just like the princes enjoyed in Abissinia. In the palace,

the sons and daughters of Abbissinia lived only to know the soft vicissitudes of pleasure and response, attended by all that were skilful to delight and gratified with whatever the senses can enjoy... To heighten their opinion of their own felicity, they were daily entertained with songs, ... (1984, p.5).

From Johnson's solipsistic perspective, Cariyes and princes were the prisoners of the idleness, laziness and luxury which were the symbols of the Eastern world. In order to emphasize these similarities, Johnson made even the architecture of the royal palace quite similar to the architecture of the Harem in Seraglio.

The palace ... was divided into many squares or courts, built with greater or less magnificence, according to the rank of those for whom they were designed. The roofs were turned into arches of massy stone, joined by a cement that grew harder by time; and the building stood from century to century, ... (1984, p.3).

In the Seraglio, there were many different kinds of rooms designed for the Cariyes according to their ranks. Hence, at this point it can be claimed that in *Rasselas* “the characters, the setting, and some of the incidents all relate the narrative to the tradition, especially strong in the eighteenth century, of the “oriental” or “eastern tale” (Kawai 34). Thus, according to Johnson’s solipsistic view in the novel, the intelligence, hardworking and superiority of the West must be shown to *Rasselas*, the prince of Abissinia, “the fourth son of the mighty [emperour]” (1984, p.1). This is achieved through Imlac, the intelligent poet and the son of “a wealthy merchant, who traded between the inland countries of Africk and the ports of the Red Sea” (1984, p.25). His father sent [Imlac] to school; but when he [had] once found the delight of knowledge, and felt the pleasure of intelligence and the pride of invention, ...” (1984, p.27), he “resolved to the opportunity of learning sciences unknown in Abissinia” (1984, p.28). Here, Johnson underlines his solipsistic attitude once more and puts emphasis on the importance of knowledge and formal education of the West which are replaced by laziness and idles of the East. Imlac had the chance of visiting several places in the Eastern world due to his father’s job. According to him, the Eastern world is the place of deterioration, indolence, immorality to some extent, and simplicity. He enlightens his student *Rasselas* about his travels in the Eastern countries and depicted the primitiveness of them being an Eastern man who received Western education. Here, Johnson uses Imlac, “a master of true wisdom” (1984 26), as a vehicle to represent the Western prejudice to the East. Through their conversation with *Rasselas*, Imlac talked about his experiences about the places he visited: Agra, Persia, Arabia, Syria, Palestine, and Egypt. For him, “Agra, the capital of Indostan, is the city in which he learned the meaning of “a bribe” (1984, p.30) that injured him very much. In Persia, he saw the “remains of ancient magnificence”. But Persians could do nothing new. They stayed still in the past. He says “the Persians are a nation eminently social, and their afforded him daily opportunities of remaking characters and manners (1984, p.31). For him, Arabia is a nation pastoral and warlike; who live without any settled habitation, ... and who have yet carried on through all ages an hereditary war with all mankind, ...” (1984, p.31). Syria, and Palestine, whose armies were irresistible, ... (1984, p.37) are also savage and primitive. Egypt, just like Persia, is the place of (contemplation of its) ancient magnificence, and inquiries after the remains of its ancient learning. He found Cairo a mixture of all nations; some brought thither by the love of knowledge, some by the hope of gain, and many by the desire of living after their manner without observation, and of lying hid in the obscurity of multitudes: (1984, p.42). With these thoughts, Imlac tries to show the crudeness of the Eastern nations which lacks the scientific knowledge that “predominates over ignorance” (1984, p.38). Thus, learning and knowledge are the vehicles which make the minds grow “wider range” (1984, p.39). All through this deep conversation with Imlac, *Rasselas* deduces that

In enumerating the particular comforts of life, we shall find many advantages on the side of the Europeans. They cure wounds and disease with which we languish and perish.... They have engines of the dispatch of many laborious works, which we must perform by manual industry. There is such communication between distant places, ... (1984, p.40).

Rasselas’s remark is the sharp depiction of Johnson’s solipsism which emphasizes the superiority of the West over the East. Because, Europe or in other words the West has always been considered as the place of unlimited opportunities, the great place, centre of the world and place of order. When

Rasselas visits the Eastern countries with his sister Nekeyah, he has also the chance of observing the “second-rate” Eastern lives when compared to the West. Johnson’s letting Rasselas experience quite the same issues with Imlac from different perspectives can be considered as the double checking of the inferiority of the East. His surveillance about the government of the East is quite striking. He says: “Every tongue was muttering censure, and every eye was searching for a fault” (1984, p.79). Here what Rasselas criticizes is the autocratic regimes of the many Eastern countries which eliminate the thinking power and creativity of people, restrict the power of knowledge and force people to obey the rules implemented by the authority. The other important issue he examines with a solipsistic attitude is the marriage institution. The Western countries different from the Eastern ones are monogamists rather than polygamists. Johnson uses Nekeyah as the representative of the Western women, in a way mouth piece of them in the light of his solipsism. Through her “insinuation herself into many families,” (1984, p.80) she has the chance of observing the position of women within the marriage institution in Arabia. She questions whether marriage is more than one of the innumerable modes of human misery” (1984, p.90). With this remark, Johnson wants to elaborate on the patriarchal tradition of the east which disregards the identity of women and puts them into the position of servant. Women are seen as instruments to make the males happy.

As a conclusion,

The princess thought, that of all sublunary things, knowledge was the best: She desired first to learn all sciences, and then purposed to found a college of learned women, in which she would preside, that, by conversing with the old, and educating the young, she might divide her time between the acquisition and communication of wisdom, and raise up for the next age models of prudence, and patterns of piety.

The prince desired a little kingdom, in which and he might administer justice in his own person and see all the parts of government with his own eyes; but he could never fix the limits of his dominion, was adding to the number of his subjects (1984, pp.167-168).

References

- Boswell, J. (1980). *Life of Johnson*. Oxford; OUP.
- Bronson, W. (1970). *English essays*. New York; Books for Libraries P.
- Clingham, G. (1997). *The Cambridge companion to Samuel Johnson*. New York: CUP.
- Demaria, R (1997). *Samuel Johnson and the Life of Reading*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP.
- Hardy, J. (1971). *Samuel Johnson. A critical study*. London: Routledge.
- Hudson, N. (1988). *Samuel Johnson and the Eighteenth century thought*. Oxford: Clarendon P.
- Johnson, S. (1984). *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Johnson, S., and Redford, B. (1992). *The Letters of Samuel Johnson*. Oxford. Clarendon P.
- Kaminski, T. (1987). *The Early Career of Samuel Johnson*. New York: OUP.

Montagu, L. M. (1965). *The complete letters: 1708-1726. Volume I*. Robert Halsband (Ed.). Oxford: Oxford UP.

Tomarken, E. (1994). *A History of the commentary on selected writings of Samuel Johnson*. Colombia: Camden House UP.

Wain, J. (1988). *Samuel Johnson*. London: Papermac.