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A SURVEY OF SCHOLARSHIP ON OTTOMAN SLAVERY*

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Özet

İnsanlık tarihinin gerçeklerinden biri olan kölelik değişik coğrafya ve toplumlarda farklı şekil ve uygulamalar ile tezahür etmiştir. Bu makalenin amacı İslam toplumlarında kölelik meselesi üzerine kısa bir giriş ile Osmanlıda kölelik konusunda var olan çalışmaların genel bir değerlendirmesini yapmaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Kölelik, İslam, Osmanlı İmparatorluğu, Tarih Yazımı, Kaynakça.*

Abstract

Slavery is one of the realities of the history of humanity. The emergence and the practice of this reality had shown diverse character in different societies. The aim of this short essay is to provide a bibliographical overview of the scholarship on Ottoman slavery with an introduction to this reality in Islamic societies.

Key Words: *Slavery, Islam, the Ottoman Empire, Historiography, Bibliography.*

Slavery in Islam and in Islamic societies is a research area that scholars have recently focused on in their studies. Why the research on slavery, a significant social, economic and political matter of discussion, was postponed so far by historians and other members of the social sciences is a question has not been convincingly answered yet. Bernard Lewis, a famous scholar of

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Islamic and Ottoman studies, tried to give an answer to this question in the introduction part of his work on race and slavery in the Middle East: He stated, “Perhaps, the main reason for the lack of scholarly research on Islamic slavery is the extreme sensitivity of the subject. This makes it difficult, and sometimes professionally dangerous, for a young scholar to turn his attention in this direction... to discuss this unhappy chapter in their own past.”¹This is not a satisfactory explanation either. The idea and the practice of slavery had not begun with Islam and it is not, as we will try to show, “an unhappy chapter” in the history of Islam. Slavery is one of the oldest labors in human history. It is possible to trace its history back to the Shang dynasty (18th –12th century BC) in China. The Hammurabi Code (ca. 1760 BC) was referring it as an established institution while Aristotle (d. 322 BC) in his *Politics* written in 350 BC discussed the connections between master and slave as one of the fundamental social expressions of the relationship between ruler and the ruled in any organized society.

Islam, in fact, as a religion, accepts the reality of slavery and puts some orders to improve the conditions of slaves. Manumission, as Alan Fisher showed, is one of these orders in the theology of Islam which aims to decrease the number of slave population in the Islamic societies. Mouradgea d’Ohsson, to whom we owe so much of our information on the structure of the Ottoman Empire in the 18th century, declared, “There is perhaps no nation where the captives, the slaves, the very toilers in the galleys are better provided for or treated with more kindness than among the Mohammedans.”² Madeline Zilfi, a modern scholar of the Ottoman studies, also directed us to think about the Ottoman slavery in the system of “open slavery” by emphasizing its urbane character. The conditions of the slaves in the American continent were difficult since they were under “closed slavery” which mainly agricultural peculiarity.³ Such accounts provide a ground for us to perceive the slavery in Islamic societies in a more positive manner, not in the way Lewis argued at least.

¹ Bernard Lewis, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East: An Historical Enquiry*. (Oxford: 1990), p. vi.

² Mouradgea d’Ohsson, *Tableau general de l’empire othoman*, IV/1, p. 381.

³ Madeline C. Zilfi, “Osmanlıda K lelik ve Erken Modern Zamanda Kadın K leler”, *Osmanlı Ansiklopedisi* v.5, 2000, p. 475.

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There is a bulk of literature for those who like to have an overview of the slavery in the Islamic and, more particularly, in the Ottoman state and society. Brunshvig's article "Abd" in *Encyclopedia of Islam* (the 2nd edition), is a good introduction to the subject of slavery in Islamic and Ottoman laws and their applications. A Ph.D. dissertation completed by Gülnihal Bozkurt in 1981 at Ankara University provides, again, a comprehensive study of the slavery from judicial point of view. Two institutions in the classical period, *Kapıkulu* (Sultan's servants) and *Harem* (Seraglio), had significant features for us to understand the Ottoman practice of slavery in the heyday of the empire. Uzunçarşılı, Kunt and İnalçık's writings on Kapıkulu institution are important. Leslie Pierce's seminal work on Ottoman harem, *The Imperial Harem: Woman and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* and Çağatay Uluçay's book, *Harem*, on the other hand, are the main sources for the conditions of the female-slaves (*cariyes*) in the Ottoman palace. Besides these works, Madeline Zilfi discussed the role of race in the female-slavery in her article in *Osmanlı Ansiklopedisi* and argued that having a Caucasian-origin white female-slave in their houses was regarded as an element of prestige for the Ottoman elite.

The 19th century is regarded as a turning point in the history of slavery. Abolitionist movements, supported by the British government, led to the demise of slave trade in Europe, the continental America and the Ottoman lands. Ehud Toledano and Hakan Erdem intensively wrote the effects of the abolitionist policies in the Ottoman politics and economy in this period. Toledano penned the first comprehensive scholarly work on the Ottoman slave trade under the title of *The Ottoman Slave Trade and Its Suppression, 1840- 1890*. This was a revised version of his Ph.D. thesis completed in 1979 under the supervision of Bernard Lewis. Toledano, using both Turkish and Western sources, demonstrated an established slave-trade network in the empire. The first in its kind, *The Ottoman Slave Trade and Its Suppression* is highly appreciated by the students of the Ottoman history. Hakan Erdem also examined the phenomenon of slavery and its effects on the politics and the economy of the late Ottoman history. He published his well-documented dissertation under the title of *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire and Its Demise, 1800-1909*.

Halil Sahillioğlu studied on Bursa *kadı sijils*, the court registers, and published two articles on the early period of slavery in the city. İzzet Sak who wrote his dissertation on the slavery in Konya in 17th and 18th centuries displayed the position of slaves in a central Anatolian city.

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Like other socio-cultural issues, the Ottoman literary men wrote about slavery during and post-Tanzimat periods. Based upon his examination of these literary works İsmail Parlatır published a book on the slavery in Tanzimat literature in 1989. According to Parlatır, the idea of freedom, *hürriyet*, was one of the vital problems in the minds of the intellectuals of the Tanzimat and therefore it is not surprising to see a large amount of works criticizing the slavery in the society. It is important to note that mothers of the many leading figures in Tanzimât literature, such as Ahmet Mithat Efendi, Abdülhak Hamid and Sami Pařa-zade Sezaî, were former slaves and this may affect their severe critiques.

It was Pertev Naili Boratav, a leading name in Turkish folkloric studies, who discussed *zenci*, black, theme in Turkish folklore for the first time in an article published in 1982. Güneř Güner chose the African-origin Turks living in İzmir as a case study for his article in *Türkiye Kùltürleri* (Turkey’s Cultures) on “Dana Bayramı”, calf holiday, a long-lived tradition among these people. Esmâ Durugöl focused on the Afro-Turks in Mediterranean region. Her article, “The Invisibility of Turks of African Origin and the Construction of Turkish Cultural Identity: The Need for a New Historiography”, in *Journal of Black Studies* is an interesting reading.

The following bibliography is a list of scholarly, literary, and popular works written on the Islamic and Ottoman slavery from political, judicial and socio-economic point of views. It is not a full list but rather a compilation of the works for those students who would like to examine the slavery. It is true that the scholarly works on the subject is not sufficient enough to draw a multi-dimensional picture. A need for comparative studies on the subject is apparent and, therefore, students and researchers should be encouraged.

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