

## FROM THE 19TH CENTURY UP TO PRESENT DAY THE SCRIVENERS PARALLEL TO ORIENTALIST PAINTINGS: ITS HISTORICAL AND SOCIOLOGICAL BACKGROUND\*

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### ABSTRACT

*The paper written by a single person or a group of people to the government bodies about declarations, demands, complaints is called “arzuhal” (petition). For illiterate people or the ones who don’t know the proper style of a petition, these are written by an “arzuhalci” (scrivener) who makes his living by this way. So they are supposed to know law and rules, legible in writings, have a fluent, correct and strong expression, and also be honest and reliable as a person. Besides, personal letters to the parents, spouses, brothers and sisters, friends and lovers are also written by scriveners. Looking at the scriveners in orientalist paintings, we observe that they are especially visualised with their women clients in most cases. By pointing at these paintings I will be trying to reach to the conclusion that the reason for these painters interests in the subject is attributable not only to their interest in showing men and women together in the same painting but also their wishes to point out the low literacy rate in the community, the women’s role in public and their desires to have their private letters scribed. Even though the scriveners are observed a lot in the Turkish stories, novels, poems, and songs, their appearance in Turkish paintings are not very many. After the declaration of Turkish Republic, with the acceptance of Latin alphabet in 1928 and the great advances in*

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education of the people, the works and the importance of the scribes are started to decline.

**Key Words:** *Scrivener, petition, orientalist painting, education, women.*

## ÖZET

### 19. Yüzyıldan Günümüze Arzuhalçiler: Oryantalist Resimler Paralelinde Tarih ve Sosyolojik Arka Plan

*Arzuhal, halktan kişilerin padişaha, devlet dairelerine yönelik yazdığı istek ya da şikayet mektupları; arzuhalci de, okuma yazma oranının düşük olduğu dönemde bu mektupları yazarak para kazanan kişidir. Dolayısıyla arzuhalçilerin, kanunları ve kuralları iyi bilmesi, doğru, akıcı ve kuvvetli bir ifadeye sahip olması, güvenilir bir insan olması gerekmektedir. Arzuhalçilerin, bu tür resmi arzuhaller dışında özel mektupları da kaleme aldıkları görülmektedir. Batılı gezginlerin anılarında, günlüklerinde ve seyahatnamelerinde sözü geçen arzuhalçiler, Oryantalist resimde de karşımıza çıkmaktadır. Tüm bunlarda, kadınların ön planda olması dikkat çekicidir ve kadınların eğitim konusunu, toplumsal yaşamdaki yerini ve bir anlamda estetik görünümünü akla getirmektedir. Diğer taraftan Türk edebiyatında, şarkılarında ve resminde de arzuhalçiler görülmektedir. 1928’de Latin alfabesine geçilmesi ve eğitimin yaygınlaşması ile arzuhalçilere duyulan gereksinim gittikçe azalmıştır; ama günümüzde özellikle adliye binaları yakınında varlıklarını sürdürmektedirler.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Arzuhalci, arzuhal, oryantalist resim, eğitim, kadın.*

The phrase “arz-ı hal” being a Persian term, has the meaning of “expressing one’s state of mind or condition”. The term have changed from “arz-ı hal, to “arzuhal” in time and and started to be used to describe the petitions of requests or complaints to be addressed to either to the sultans or the ruling officials. And the authors or scribes of these petitions for a fee are called “the scribes” (Arzuhalci)<sup>1</sup>. But they are not only the scribes of these official letters but also the authors of special letters between children and parents, sisters and brothers, lovers or letters to and from soldiers.

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<sup>1</sup> The word “katip” means “the scribe” and “arzuhalci” is used to describe the scrivener. Even though the two words have different meanings in Turkish in some of the pictures I have selected not only the words scribe and scrivener were used but also some other words such as the letter-writer, public letter-writer, public writer, public scribe, petition writer have been used as well. The word is translated to French as “ecrivain public”; to Italian as “scrivano pubblico” and to German as “schreiber”. The word scrivener later was also used to describe the notary public which means “Noter” in Turkish. When the duties assigned to a scrivener and their job descriptions are examined, their similarities to the duties and rules of the notary public are noticed.

At this point I think it will be appropriate to give more information about the development phases of the “scribe writing” at the Ottoman Empire ruling era. It is known that petitions were submitted either individually or by groups of people at the Turkish-muslim states. Though individual petitions were called arz-ı hal whereas the group petitions were called as arz-ı mahzar by Halil İnalçık (1988: 41), I prefer to continue calling both types as “arzuhal”. From the establishment days of the Ottoman Empire, the public residents had the right to present petitions to the emperor himself as well as the lower rank government officials. The most appropriate instances to present petitions to the emperor were considered to be the times of his visits to the prayer houses on Fridays, or during holiday prayers, his visits to tombs and turbehs, hunting periods, or at his routine ceremonies (İnalçık, 1988: 41; İpşirli, 1991: 447).

From the 14<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the scribes organised to have a headmaster and a local club. All the head scribes are organised under these clubs which report to the head sergeants “Çavuşbaşı” who are the masters of the sergeants in the state council “divan”. No scribe can do his job without getting a private license from the council sergeants, therefore they can only operate under the control of the head sergeants, that’s the state. The scribes operations were officially organised for first time in 1660 with the order of the “sadrazam” the Grand vizier. This first order specified the qualities required from the scribes, their obligations to meet prior to applying for the job, the necessity for prior permission from the state, work conditions, the places where they can do their jobs, etc. (Çelik, 2002). According to a source written in 1773 (Ahmet Refik, 1930: 207) the scribes would take a test in front of a jury whose members were the head scribe, the sergeants commander and a scribe “katip”. If satisfactory he would start his job with their written permission. It is expected from the candidate to know all writing types and the grammar rules, presentation rules, the governing laws and to be able to write fluently and correct, to be reliable and honest. It is important both for the scribe and his customer to have the petition addressed to the correct official, and have the correct and effective expressions used to describe their points of view. Because, not only the inhabitants of İstanbul but also the people coming from its outskirts or other towns and villages would inquire to find out the best person who would write the best petition to defend them in their cases (Anonym, 1955: 19; Sakaoğlu, 1993: 335). Accordingly, we observe that some scribes such as Ali Efendi (Koçu, 1959: 646), and Gedayi (İvgin, 2005: 291) were the most preferred ones. Looking at from this side an example to a scribe who would be compared to today’s advocates (lawyers) is Kobakizade İsmail Hakkı (1882-1953). “*I have placed a desk at one of the corners of my*

*Merchant uncle Mümin Efendi's dreparry store at Kavala. First I started to write petitions and after a while I continued to take attorneyship and started to represent my clients in front of the judges, then I opened my personal Office putting up a sign saying "Kobakoğlu İsmail Hakkı's Office". I met the most reputable attorneys in time. I used to work so hard that I always got what I wanted. I would do absolutely anything necessary to defend and win a case, I won a big reputation and the lawyers became jealous of me but I did not worry at all and continued in the same manner."* (Kobakizade, 2008: 22). On the other hand, the scribes had to hang up signboards for their current fees since some of the customers only consulted them as advisors and left without paying for their services. The signs would say "Consultation services provided against fees, no petitions scribed free of charge" (Acar, 1939: 4).

The archive documents reveals us the reasons and ways of punishments for the scribes; A scribe named Hasan who was drinking and talking nonsense day and night was exiled from Midilli to Limni island<sup>2</sup>, another scribe called Abdülkerim was exiled to Bursa for writing bad words in his petitions<sup>3</sup>.

Scribe İsmail was exiled to Bursa for preparing fake documents for Esirci Bayram who was able to sell black slaves which were forbidden to trade at those days<sup>4</sup>, Scribe İsmail was exiled to Bursa for forgery<sup>5</sup>, Serif Maili was condemned for life sentence in the castle of Trablusgarp (Tripoli) for having sworn to religious values in front of the audience<sup>6</sup>. Also there are other examples such as; Emin Zihni Efendi, a resident scribe in Bursa who refused to get back on duty after permission of leave for a period was granted to him<sup>7</sup>, the request of Hüseyin Bey asking for release from İskilip where he was exiled for misconduct when he was working as a scribe in the Yeni Cami mosque's courtyard<sup>8</sup>, another request for release by İbrahim, the scribe resident in İstanbul Mahmutpaşa district, expressing that he was the victim of some slanderers and was mistakenly exiled to his hometown Diyarbakır due to their lies, indicating how he suffered<sup>9</sup>. It is

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<sup>2</sup> BOA, C.ZB-41-2049 / 20 Za 1282

<sup>3</sup> BOA,, C.ZB-86-4257 / 29 Z 1255

<sup>4</sup> BOA,, A}A.MD-56-53 /1271

<sup>5</sup> BOA, A}MKT.NZD-244-53 / 15 R 1274

<sup>6</sup> BOA, A}MKT.MHM-410-41 / 20 S 1285

<sup>7</sup> BOA, DH.EUM.MTK-18-25 / 22 Ca 1332

<sup>8</sup> BOA, DH.EUM-1.Şb-8-26 / 06 S 1336

<sup>9</sup> BOA, C.ZB-68-3378 / 30 Ra 1175

understood from all of these examples that the letter writing of the scribes had to be taken as a very serious occupation and the scribes themselves had to strictly obey to the rules set forth by their controllers.

Also found within the archives are some documents describing the occupation of scribes as follows; The scribes located in Dersaadet ve Bilad-ı Selase were asked to be controlled<sup>10</sup>, the scribes have complained to have insufficient paper stocks, noted that they were not provided any paper even though they had money to pay<sup>11</sup>, the scribes have introduced a memorandum asking for paper for letter writing<sup>12</sup>, the scribes have claimed to be granted with a certificate each year, in order to ensure that petition scribing could not be performed by anybody<sup>13</sup>, asked for the petitions to be written on only specially designed papers or forms<sup>14</sup>, from then on all the petitions to be accepted by the petition council within envelopes and the replies to be written at the bottom as declared to the Ministry of Education<sup>15</sup>, it was asked to have all the petitions addressed to the Ministry of Exteriors to have clear indications of open addresses and residence information within<sup>16</sup>, the petition of the head scribe asking for forbidding of any scribe who had no proper legal formation and literature qualifications from performing his duties<sup>17</sup>, such documents not only emphasises the importance of the duty but also shows us how the rules were set forth for scribing a petition properly.

All petitions are written in accordance with some special formats whether they are for official or private uses. Even some scribes having these formatted letters in their hands or minds, scribe the petitions only by changing the information such as the date, the addressee or the undersigned (Çapanoğlu, 1942: 15). After the completion of the “Elkab” (the addressing) and the prayer wishes part the holder of the petition describes himself, specifies his request and after the completion part he puts down his signature. The development scheme is nearly the same for the private letters as well; the addressing then the preying part, followed by the part where the

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<sup>10</sup> BOA, İ.MVL-318-13449 / 14 S 1271

<sup>11</sup> BOA, A}MKT.NZD-1-33 / 12 M 1266

<sup>12</sup> BOA, A}MKT.DV-69-82 / 13 Ca 1269

<sup>13</sup> BOA, A}MKT.MVL-69-24 / 28 S 1271

<sup>14</sup> BOA, A}MKT.NZD-307-85 / 14 Ş 1276

<sup>15</sup> BOA, MF.MKT-1128-13 / 23 Ca 1327

<sup>16</sup> BOA, DH.EUM.VRK-15-55 / 12 L 1333

<sup>16</sup> BOA, C.DH-302-15099 / 29 Z 1255

<sup>17</sup> BOA, İ.MVL-318-13449 / 14 S 1271

feelings and faithfulness to the addressee is expressed, then the subject of the letter, the ending part and finally the signature and stamp section completes the letter (Gökbilgin, 1979: 105-108). Taking a look at the examples of some private letters which I think is supporting our subject; for instance a love letter (muhabbetname)<sup>18</sup> begins as “a soul in my body; my rose blossom, my spiritual comfort (ruhu revanım) my cypress figured one, my beloved lover” ; and ends as: “(şifail kulup) this letter is written with my teardrops” (Çapanoğlu, 1942: 14; 1951: 1174; 1962: 25). The beginning format for a love letter example given by Koçu is as follows: “My angel faced soul, my coral lips (lebi mercanım), my good souled, my rose faced sultan, my curly haired lover (zülfi kemendim), my cypress heighted (servi bülendim), my fairy faced (peri ruhsarım), my sweet reticent (şeker güftarım), my idiomatic lover (şiveli yarım), my boredom healer (def’i melalim), my only possession (mali menalim), my imagination (fikri hayalim), my smiling rose (gülü handanım), my trouble solver (derde dermanım), taze fidanım (my slender sapling), my talking parakeet (tuti dillim), my flimsy waisted (ince bellim), my black eyed (kara gözlüm), my cute talker (şirin sözlüm), my smiling faced (gülür yüzlüm), my heavens plague (afeti devranım), my violin eyebrowed (kaşı kemanım)” (1959: 1085). Such formats were even used by the Ottoman ruling ladies such as Hürrem Sultan in her letters to Kanuni Sultan Süleyman, and by Hatice Sultan in her letters to İbrahim Pasha<sup>19</sup>.

As understood from a source dating back to 1773 (Ahmet Refik, 1930: 207); the scribes used to have mobile offices at points where the public can find them easily such as the corners of the shops, coffee houses, madressahs and mosque courtyards. In connection with this, they were more common in İstanbul especially around the environs of Sultanahmet and Beyazıt squares, Yeni Mosque, Tophane and Üsküdar port (Sabit, 1940: 5; Anonym, 1955: 19; Anonym, 1949: 431; Sakaoğlu, 1993: 335). The courtyards of the Sultanahmet, Ayasofya, Tophane, Nusretiye, Kılıç Ali Paşa, Beyazıt mosques were also among their preferred grounds. The places we come across in the archives are also collateral with the places observed in the paintings and the books; Yeni Mosque courtyard, Yeni Mosque post office, Arnavud Mahmud Ağa’s coffeehouse around Yeni Mosque, Mısır Çarşısı market place, Fatih Mosque, Beyazıt Mosque, Tophane Mosque, Kılıç Ali Paşa Mosque (Pic.8), Babıali, Üsküdar Yeni Mosque, etc. One of these places was told by H.von Moltke (1999: 38): “....*Located just close to*

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<sup>18</sup> “In those days, two mecdiyes worth a lot of money, the scribes wrote a good loveletter just for 5 kuruş, a poem of 8 verse is worth 50 kuruş at most” (R.E. Koçu, Yangın Var!, 1981: 193)

<sup>19</sup> See Uluçay (2001).

*it is the big Kılıç Ali Mosque... Beneath one of the arches is a Turkish letter writer seated with a bunch of papers on top of his knees, with a reed pen in hand. Women in yellow shoes, bodies all covered up in huge overcoats but only the eyes visible, passionately explaining him their intentions with hand signs and the Turk listens to all their secrets without any mimic change on his face, and scribes the secrets of the "harem" or a petition to the sultan, or a problem case of court, or a mournful news to be announced, bending the paper with ease, wrapping it up with a piece of muslin cloth, putting on top the seal and stamp with red wax, collecting 20 coins for each one, whether they are good news or mournful ones."*

Hans Barth wrote while describing İzmir at the end of 19th century: *"In a Turkish Coffeeshouse... the scrivener was sitting on his chair in front of his table just outside the coffeeshouse, waiting for a customer to write letters or petitions for authorities in Turkish, Persian and Arabic languages."* (Pınar, 2001: 297) (Pic.1). Edmondo de Amicis, who also came to İstanbul in the same period (1993: 113-114) wrote about a scribes' market near Beyazıt Square. Another writer who also visited İstanbul during his Oriental voyage is Gustave Flaubert said: *"My friend Stephany, walked through the letter writers (scribblers) who are sitting at the door of Sultanahmet (Blue Mosque), and talked with them, she also read some letters from their alphabets."* (Güngör, 1996: 138)

At these places, they would usually seated cross-legged, on top of a canework stool, behind a desk with some paper, ink, ink-pot and ink holder, reed and bamboo pen and some other tools, with some extra stools for their customers. (Anonym, 1955: 19; Anonym, 1949: 431)<sup>20</sup> (Pic.5,6,10). As indicated, some of the scribes used orange or lemon cases in lieu of stools or desks, even some others trying to write petitions on their knees instead of a desk, whereas some rare scribes who were privileged to own a store, would have some precious possessions such as lime or walnut desks, satin covers, chairs covered with hereke clothes and other more precious tools. (Anonym, 1955: 19; Çapanoğlu, 1942: 12, 14; 1951: 1174; 1962: 25, 29) (Pic.7,8). In one other source, it is described that on Sundays some scribes who were obliged to visit the military quarters would carry their mattresses under their armpits and lay them on the grounds to work on top of them (Sabit, 1940: 5) (Pic.4).

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<sup>20</sup> "The courtyard is full of portable shops, that's small stands on which rosaries and other religious articles are sold; in a corner a scrivener is sitting on his low stools with his sparklink ink pot and pencil box; he helps everyone, literate or illiterate, with his superior skill on writing letters, contracts, petitions" (Lewis, 1973: 66)

Some documents derived from the Ottoman archives point out that the mass presence of the scribes in common open or closed areas either mobile or resident, created some problems asked to be corrected by the state officers. The refusal of the demand of the street peddlers around Yeni Mosque who took the scribes practice as a support for their cases<sup>21</sup>, the practice of having a barrack constructed for the scribes and the engrave craftsmen working around Yeni Mosque<sup>22</sup>, and having the scribes rent those barracks constructed around Yeni Mosque, at the direction of Mısır Çarşısı marketplace, during an auction sale<sup>23</sup>, the claim of the military officials to have the shops constructed inside the castle within the grounds of the military base to be demolished<sup>24</sup>, the written correspondence of Kosova district mayor giving consent to reconstruction of the work places of the scribes and other craftsmen at the side of the Üsküb government's main street due to their poor conditions<sup>25</sup>, the postponing of the transfer of craftsmen at around Fatih Mosque whereas the prompt replacement granted to all the craftsmen around Yeni camii to a different district except for the scribes, the book sellers and bead sellers<sup>26</sup>, the alteration of the privilege granted to the scribes seated in front of the Yeni Mosque and the post Office due to their disrupting the running traffic<sup>27</sup>, the presentation of the scribes a petition claiming settlement of their grievances due to being prohibited from residing around the Yeni Cami post office, and the scribes and other craftsmen laying themselves in the tents and barracks at around Yeni and Fatih Mosques, altering the spot to a marketplace which may be a danger for fire and for some other reasons they should have to be removed<sup>28</sup>, it would be appropriate to have barracks constructed for the scribes and other craftsmen<sup>29</sup> etc.

In parallel with all of the described above, we can say that quite a realistic approach was taken for the scribes in Orientalist painting. The orientalist painters accurately reflected the venues, customers, writing materials and other objects in their paintings. There are three major categories describing the scribes in the orientalist paintings;

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<sup>21</sup> BOA, DH.MKT-2261-40 / 20 C 1317

<sup>22</sup> BOA, DH.MKT-158-5 / 5 R 1311

<sup>23</sup> BOA, İ.EV-4-1311 Ra 26 / 30 Ra 1311

<sup>24</sup> BOA, DH.MKT-1101-48 / 26 Ca 1324

<sup>25</sup> BOA, TFR.I.KV-142-14104 / 08 Ş 1324

<sup>26</sup> BOA, ZB-373-103 / 12 H 1322

<sup>27</sup> BOA, DH.EUM.THR-93-2 / 22 Za 1327

<sup>28</sup> BOA, DH.MKT-2732-85 / 16 M 1327

<sup>29</sup> BOA, DH.EUM.THR-20-2 / 20 Z 1327



1- Those illustrating the scrivener alone: C.Haag (1825-1915)<sup>30</sup>, A.Preziosi (1816-82)<sup>31</sup> (Pic.1), L.Deutsch (1855-1935)<sup>32</sup>, Raphael von Ambros (1855-95)<sup>33</sup>, H.John van Lennep (1815-89)<sup>34</sup> (Pic.2), etc



**Pic.1-** A.Preziosi, Scrivano pubblico turco, watercolor (*Amadeo Preziosi Sergi Katalogu*, Yapı Kredi Yayınları, İstanbul 2007)

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- <sup>30</sup> German Painter; Taking trip to the East in 1858, visiting Greece,Turkey, Egypt and the sacred lands.
- <sup>31</sup> Painter from Malta assumed to have visited İstanbul in 1842, also visited Egypt in 1862. Preziosi was the Painter of the palace during the ruling period of II.Abdülhamid and died in İstanbul. His grave is still in İstanbul.
- <sup>32</sup> A french painter with Austrian origin.
- <sup>33</sup> Austrian painter.
- <sup>34</sup> An American missionary and an instructor,born in İzmir; travelled back and forth between the USA and Turkey. Van Lennep was also interested in painting, he prepared an Oriental album in 1862.



**Pic.2-** H.J.van Lennep, Turkish Letter Writer, 1862 (H.J.van Lennep; *The Oriental Album*, NY, 1862).

2- Those illustrating the scrivener together with male clients: E.Delacroix (1798-1863)<sup>35</sup>, A.Preziosi (1816-82) (Pic.3), G.J.Brindesi (1826-88)<sup>36</sup>, C.Wilda (1854-1907)<sup>37</sup>, A.-L.Castellan 1772-1838)<sup>38</sup>, etc.

3- Those illustrating the scrivener together with female clients: J.J.A.Lecomte du Nouy (1842-1923)<sup>39</sup>, D.Roberts (1796-1864)<sup>40</sup> (Pic.4), A.Preziosi (1816-82) (Pic.5), Antonio de Dominici (1734-94)<sup>41</sup>, C.Biseo (1843-1909)<sup>42</sup>, T.Willis (still living)<sup>43</sup>, D.Wilkie(1785-1841)<sup>44</sup> (Pic.6),

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<sup>35</sup> French painter who visited North Africa in 1832.

<sup>36</sup> Italian painter who worked in İstanbul between the years 1850-77.

<sup>37</sup> Austrian painter.

<sup>38</sup> French painter who stayed in İstanbul for a few months in 1797.

<sup>39</sup> French painter who visited İstanbul in 1875.

<sup>40</sup> A schotish painter who visited Tanca in 1832; followed by a trip to East in 1838.

<sup>41</sup> Italian painter.

<sup>42</sup> Italian painter. who lived in İstanbul in 1877-78

<sup>43</sup> A British painter.

<sup>44</sup> A British painter who arrived at İstanbul in 1840.

J.F.Lewis (1805-76)<sup>45</sup> (Pic.7), Martinus Rorbye (1803-48)<sup>46</sup> (Pic.8), J.J.Gaspard Starck (1814-84)<sup>47</sup>, W.Gould (1829-93)<sup>48</sup> (Pic.9), F.Zonaro (1854-1929)<sup>49</sup> (Pic.10), T.Allom (1804-72)<sup>50</sup>, Haydar Hatemi (1945- ....)<sup>51</sup>, Heinrich von Angeli (1840-1925)<sup>52</sup>, etc.



**Pic.3-** A.Preziosi, Letter Writer, mixed technique on paper, 35 x 25 cm., Hayati Gürel Collection (*Amadeo Preziosi Sergi Katalogu*, Yapı Kredi Yayınları, İstanbul 2007)

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- <sup>45</sup> A British painter. Visits İzmir, Bursa, İstanbul in 1840-41 but lives in Egypt for 11 years.  
<sup>46</sup> Danish painter. Takes the Grand Tour during 1834-37; comes to İstanbul in 1836.  
<sup>47</sup> Belgian painter. Paints in İstanbul and Algeria  
<sup>48</sup> American painter visits İstanbul in 1851.  
<sup>49</sup> Italian painter lives in İstanbul between 1891-1911.  
<sup>50</sup> A British painter takes a tour to the East during 1836-38.  
<sup>51</sup> Azerbaijan painter who has been living in Turkey for many years.  
<sup>52</sup> Austrian painter.



**Pic.4-** D.Roberts, Letter Writer, 1838  
([http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:David\\_Roberts\\_letter\\_writer\\_Cairo.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:David_Roberts_letter_writer_Cairo.jpg))



**Pic.5-** A.Preziosi, Letter Writer (*Amadeo Preziosi Sergi Katalogu*, Yapı Kredi Yayınları, İstanbul 2007)



**Pic.6-** D.Wilkie, Letter Writer, Constantinople (S.Germaner, Z.İnankur; *Oryantalistlerin İstanbulu*, İstanbul 2002)



**Pic. 7-** J.F.Lewis, The Arab Scribe-Cairo, 1852, water color, 46.3 x 60.9 cm.  
(S.Germaner, Z.İnankur; *Oryantalistlerin İstanbulu*, İstanbul 2002)





**Pic.8-** M.Rorbye, Letter Writer in front of the Kılıç Ali Paşa Mosque at Tophane, 1837, oil on canvas, 95 x 130 cm., London Christie's (S.Germaner, Z.İnankur; *Oryantalistlerin İstanbulu*, İstanbul 2002)



**Pic.9-** W.Gould, The Public Scribe, 1869, oil on canvas, 109.2 x 139.1 cm., New York Christie's (G.M.Ackerman; *American Orientalists*, Paris 1994)



**Pic.10-** F.Zonaro, *Scrivani Publici İstanbul*, 1900, oil on canvas, 38 x 61 cm., Private Collection (O.Öndeş, E.Makzume; *Osmanlı Saray Ressamı Fausto Zonaro*, İstanbul 2003)



**Pic.11-** Martimer Fox, photograph, İstanbul 1915, National Geographic Society Image Collection (*Bak Bir Varmış Bir Yokmuş- İmparatorluk'tan Cumhuriyet'e İstanbul- National Geographic Fotoğraflarıyla*, İstanbul 2000)



**Pic.12-** Photograph, Bursa 2009 (Elvan Topallı)

All of these painters belong to various different European countries and the most common ones are from Austria, Italy and England. Most of these painters have been to the Ottoman Empire grounds and have especially visited İstanbul. It is observed that the examples in the third category of paintings namely, the scribes painted together with female clients – likewise in literary works of art- are much more when compared to the other categories. It is also understood from the hand and body movements of these women paintings that they were shy and reserved. This may be described as the women’s general attitude but it also brings in mind the fact that these women used to have their private letters scribed by the scribes (Pic.6,7,10). The scribes were described by Malik Aksel as follows; “*The scribes were located below the offices of the Ministry of Finance in Vezneciler with their small desk and an umbrella protecting them; and a small chair across them for their clients. From time to time they were visited by veiled and covered women, young ladies who appear to have petitions or letters scribed. But most of the times they were love letters. Their faces were all covered up and all the scribe writing tasks were done in secret. Since the scribes were aware of their interests, they had previously scribed sample love letters...At those times, young girls couldn’t write love letters of their own but rather have the scribes scribe for themselves, besides they were full of mystery. They would usually include some special thing within the*



*envelope, such as a dry leaf, a piece of hair, a photograph etc.*” (Aksel, 2000: 33-34).

Women also would have their petitions scribed by the scriveners expressing their desires to divorce their husbands as well (Anonym, 1955: 20). The customers of the scriveners are usually from every segment of the public, in a way they enter into their private lives and almost begin to act as their secret repositories: “*Once I have seen two young women sitting on a desk in front of the scrivener and invisibly moving their lips and murmuring while the scrivener was nodding slowly his head as if he was saying yes (accepting) and unnoticeably scribing the words on the piece of paper in front of him.*” (Canetti, 1990: 82). Mostly they share the secrets of women clients and due to that reason they are visited by women more often and as a result asked to scribe a divorce petition (Acar, 1939: 13). Later they come back to have the resulting answer interpreted or read to them by the scriveners. There are some comic instances when coincidentally the husband who was complained about in the petition apply to the same scrivener to defend his case as well (Acar, 1939: 4).

Turning back to the orientalist painters, what was the significance of the scriveners and their women clients especially which made them subject to their artistic paintings (as well as their photographs and literature)? When looked up from the eyes of an orientalist painter, a scrivener is an interesting snapshot reflecting the eastern life style. The artist has the opportunity to perform his painting in open air within a “specified period”. The woman is on the foreground of the painting aesthetically. In the ottoman community especially the women are strikingly colourful. In 1862 a Peruvian named Pedro Paz Soldan who visited İstanbul, when coming across the women in pink, green and blue silk whaled costumes couldn’t stop asking to himself whether the chorus of angels have fallen down from the skies to the earth. According to him, the women being in isolation in the East, make them more mysterious and poetic (Şahin, 2007: 306). They are very much attractive and mysterious within their clothes covering them all up (Şahin, 2007: 307).

At the other hand what would be the opportunity of a painter living in the Ottoman ruling days to paint an Ottoman woman with eye contact? Even, would it be possible to paint an ottoman man and woman at the same picture?<sup>53</sup> The most common examples of an Ottoman women paintings-

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<sup>53</sup> For gender in orientalism, see: J.M. MacKenzie, *Orientalism-History, Theory and the Arts*, Great Britain 1996; B.Melman, *Women’s Orients: English Women and the Middle East 1718-1918, Sexuality, Religion and Work*, USA 1995; L.Thornton, *Women as Portrayed in Orientalist Painting*, Paris 1985; P.Jullian, *The Orientalists*, Oxford 1977; R.Lewis, *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Fertility and Representation*, London 1996;

which are generally imaginary- are either performed in the “Harem”, female public baths “hamam” or the slave markets. Examining the scrivener paintings from the societal and social points of view, we can attribute women’s more common presence in these paintings going parallel with their increased physical appearance on the streets and also point out the low literacy rate among Ottoman women. As Marion-Crawford (2007: 54) said: “... *At around the big post Office, the scriveners are ready under the shade, waiting all day seriously and patiently like sphinx, to demonstrate their writing skills by renting themselves to the illiterates. Their clients are mostly the women. Secretly dictating in a lower tone of voice the words that they can not narrate, they usually keep their whales firmly close as compared to the other times when they are at ease.*” (Res.5,6,8,10,11)

Women in the Ottoman society started to socialize and started to go out together with the declaration of the improvement reforms called “Tazminat Fermanı” in 1839 (Dulum, 2006: 18). From the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards women started to appear more often in the public areas. Until that period women who spent most of their times in their houses, would only go out on special occasions such as visiting the local baths, cemeteries, shopping or for attending other events like holidays, birth and wedding ceremonies. Usually having followed with an escort, a woman’s appearance in the streets together with man was not considered agreeable. There were restrictions to the way the women would dress up, as well as her behavior in the streets at certain periods (Özer, 2005: 247); for example they would not leave unattended on the same store with the salesman alone, they would not be allowed to shop from cream sellers (Ahmet Refik, 1987: 60), or they would not be sailing on the same boat alone with the sailors (Kafadar, 1993: 204) as announced with sultans declarations.

Until 1859, there were no opportunities for the girls to have education other than the “sıbyan” naive juvenile female classes. At the same year the first school for the mature girls was opened in İstanbul. The girls were not granted to attend higher levels of education at schools until the announcement of the “II. Meşrutiyet”, 2<sup>nd</sup> constitution (Alkan, 2000: 5-6). With the declaration of the second constitution the girls were granted the right to continue with higher education after they finish “idadi” and “sultani” levels and the primary education was made free of charge (Alkan, 2000: 9-10). Up to this period there was no need for the girls to attend classes, even, parents had the fear that if instructed to read and write, the girls would start

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R.Lewis, *Rethinking Orientalism: Women, Travel and the Ottoman Harem*, London 2004,  
I.Grewal, *Home and Harem: Nation, Gender, Empire and the Cultures of Travel*, Great Britain 1996.

writing love letters to the boys. It was possible to come across women who could read but could not write. On the 20<sup>th</sup> century Halil Halit was talking about this case in his autobiography with the example of his mother (Davis, 1986: 49). Even though there are no clear information as to the literacy rates among the public at the Ottoman era, it is thought that the rate would not be exceeding 10% during the years between 1914-18 (Koroğlu, 2004: 78). We can quote these rates for the republican era; literacy rate in 1935 was %19.25, in 2000 it was %87.32 and in 2005 it was %88.3 (Yaşar, 2007: 5).

If shortly summarized, the sources in which we come across the scribes in the written sources or literature, is as follows; The travel books and the memories of the authors who visited the Ottoman Empire lands talked about the scribes; for example Moltke (1999:38), who visited İstanbul in 1835; Bareilles, who visited İstanbul in 1910, Hans Barth (Pınar, 2001: 296), who came to İzmir at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Marion-Crawford (2007: 54), who visited İstanbul many times and married in İstanbul at 1884 e.t.c. E. Canetti, in his book named “The Voices of Marrakesh: A Record of a Visit” mentioned about the scribes (1990: 81-82), we also come across a painting of a scribe-painted by C.Biseo- in E.de Amicis’ book named “İstanbul (1874)”. Other examples are the book of Tahar Ben Jelloun named “L’Ecrivain Public” and the book of H.Melville called “Bartleby-The Scribe”.

The scribes who expressed in writing the demands and complaints of the public, were mentioned a lot in the Turkish literature especially in the realistic social novels and the public poetry or “mani”. Among them are the public poets from the past who are also reputable in our days as follows; Şair Kudusi (1760-1848), Aşık Veli (? -1853), Aşık Haydar Öztürk (? -?), Aşık Veysel (1894-1973), Pir Sultan Abdal (16.yy.), Zileli Fedai (19.yy.), Feyzi Halıcı (1924-...), Kul Sabri (1851-1931), Serdari (1834-1921), Nimri Dede (1940-2001)?, Aşık Mehmet Hicrani (1908-70)?, Bayburtlu Zihni (1795-1859), Erzurumlu Emrah (....-1854), Ali Coşkun, Aşık Ruhsati (1834-1911), Aşık Dildari (19.yy.başı), Yüksel Yıldız (1948-...), Yusuf Yaylacı (1954-...), Sabri Şimşekoğlu (1948-...), Aşık Hakkı Köseli (? - ?), İbrahim Şahinoğlu (1962-...)

The examples among Turkish novel or short story authors are; Yaşar Kemal (1923-...)<sup>54</sup>; Kemal Tahir (1910-73)<sup>55</sup>, Sait Faik (1906-54)<sup>56</sup>, Fakir

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<sup>54</sup> İnce Memed, Yusufçuk Yusuf, Baldaki Tuz

<sup>55</sup> Esir Şehrin İnsanları, Rahmet Yolları Kesti

<sup>56</sup> Mahkeme Kapısı

Baykurt (1929-99)<sup>57</sup>, Aziz Nesin (1915-95)<sup>58</sup>, Refik Halit Karay (1888-1965)<sup>59</sup>, Ahmet Rasim (1865-1932)<sup>60</sup>, Reşat Nuri Güntekin (1889-1956)<sup>61</sup>, Oğuz Atay (1934-77)<sup>62</sup>, Necati Cumalı (1921-2001)<sup>63</sup>, Tayfun Pirselimioğlu (1959-....)<sup>64</sup> in all of them we come across the scribes. In addition to them, we observe descriptions of the scribes in the stories of Cenap Şehabettin'in (1870- 1934) called "Arzuhalci" and other writers such as Refik Halit Karay (1888-1965) and Ahmet Mithat Efendi (1844-1912). A theatre act called "Arzuhalci Mehmet Efendi" written by İ.Galip Arcan and Refik Nuri is about the life of a scribe and is another notable example. On the other hand among all of these authors is a candidate of Nobel literature awards Yaşar Kemal'in (1923-....) and a poet Hasan Hüseyin Korkmazgil'in (1927-84) who were both known to be scribes in their earlier days.

Even though the scribes are observed a lot in the Turkish stories, novels, poems, and songs, their appearance in Turkish paintings are not very many. A few Turkish painters have painted the scribes such as Osman Hamdi Bey (1842-1910), Ali Cemal Ben'im (1881-1941), İbrahim Çallı (1882-1960) - and on top of all, Çallı had provided his living by working as a scribe when he first came to İstanbul<sup>65</sup> - and the scribes were drawn a lot in the Turkish caricatures<sup>66</sup>.

The Latin alphabet was accepted in 1928 in Turkey, and the literacy rate has started to improve from that time onwards which ended up with decreased number of scribes but the occupation still exists to date.

The modern script writers continuing the tasks of the scribes in today's circumstances can still be observed at around public offices (Sabit, 1940: 27; Anonym, 1955: 19; Sakaoğlu, 1993: 336). For example, in 1939 according to an article published in newspaper called Vakit, due to the fire incidence at Sultanahmet Courthouse, the scribes have suffered in terms of finding a proper place to work and have started to decrease in number and were obliged to change their places to nearby stores (Acar, 1939:4).Even,

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<sup>57</sup> Keklik, Karın Ağrısı, Onuncu Köy, Anadolu Garajı, Efendilik Savaşı, Cüce Muhammet

<sup>58</sup> Yokuş Yukarı, Damda Deli Var, Böyle Gelmiş Böyle Gitmez

<sup>59</sup> Memleket Hikayeleri, Bugünün Saraylısı

<sup>60</sup> Fuş-i Atik ve Hamamcı Ülfet

<sup>61</sup> Miskinler Tekkesi

<sup>62</sup> Korkuyu Beklerken

<sup>63</sup> Acı Tütün

<sup>64</sup> Malihulya

<sup>65</sup> K.Giray, Çallı ve Atölyesi, 2000, s.29-30.

<sup>66</sup> For example: Cemil Cem, Kalem, 18.6.1909, sayı 42, s.9.

they were placed in a dead-ended street where a barker “çığırtkan” would announce loudly their presence therein to attract clients (Acar, 1939: 4). Today, most of the scribes are in possession of small offices whereas a small minority still work mobile with their typewriters or personal computers<sup>67</sup> (Pic.11,12).

The scribes existing today are found not only in the Ottoman Empire or today’s Turkey, as I progressed with my research I also noticed the presence of the scribes in miscellaneous other countries in the past and today as well. For example Marion-Crawford (2007: 54) told that: “..*The Greeks and the Italians are also familiar with this system which is exercised in most of the eastern countries. But it is worth wondering around a little bit to be able to observe partially the exiting faces bending upon the scribe’s desk and watching the fast movements of his reed pen. The Turkish is written with a reed pen and the hook is made out of a small sponge.*”

Therefore the Ottoman Empire scribes of the 19<sup>th</sup> century are a piece of the whole, On the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the existence of scribes in Europe (in Italy, Spain etc), North Africa (Egypt, Morocco etc) in Asia (Iran, India, Pakistan, China, Russia etc) in South America (Mexico, Bolivia, Peru etc) are revealed with photographs and paintings<sup>68</sup>. In most of these countries, we can observe that there are still tasks to be assigned to the scribes, the majority of their clients are still the women, the literacy rate is still below a special standard in these countries as well indicating that the dimensions of the subject is universal and worth further researching in another project.

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<sup>67</sup> “How can I forget the engravers and the scribes of the Üsküdar region which are not existing these days and have disappeared in history. The scribes used to wait in a line in front of the walls of the Yeni Camii mosque or inside its courtyard. In front of them were the rarely found or instinct Remington branded typewriters, giving service to those illiterates for their petition applications to the official bodies or helping them to write letters to their relatives, lovers far away in their hometowns.” (Ahmet Yüksel Özemre, Hasretini Çektiğim Üsküdar, 2007: 37-38).

<sup>68</sup> Francesco Coleman (1851-1918): Scrivano Pubblico, Rome – Museo di Roma; John Phillip (1817-67): Letter Writer, Seville – Royal Collections UK; Henry O’Neill (1798-1880): Letter Writer – Private Collection; C.Wilhelm Hübner (1814-79): Beim Schreiber – Museumsstiftung Post und Telekommunikation; Keeley Halswelle (1832-91): Letter Writer – Guildhall Art Gallery; G.Emanuel Opitz (1775-1841): Public Writer – [www.allposters.com](http://www.allposters.com) ; Belisario Gioja (1829-1906), Z.Carabin (aktif 1880-90): Public Letter Writer- [www.1st-art-gallery.com](http://www.1st-art-gallery.com) ; Pierre-Alexander Wille (1748-1821): Public Writer- [www.1st-art-gallery.com](http://www.1st-art-gallery.com), etc.

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