

## Kitabiyat/Book Review

# ***Istanbul-Kushta-Constantinople: Narratives of Identity in the Ottoman Capital, 1830-1930***

ed. by Christoph Herzog, and Richard Wittmann. New York: Taylor & Francis, 2019. 312 pp. ISBN 978-1-138-63131-1; ISBN: 978-1-315-20896-1.

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*Istanbul-Kushta-Constantinople: Narratives of Identity in the Ottoman Capital* is an outcome of the conference held in Orient-Institut Istanbul in 2010. It is an edited volume composed of the extended versions of the selected papers with some contributions also from authors who did not participate in the conference. The first part of the book's title, *Istanbul-Kushta-Constantinople* is emblematic of the aims and the content of the book as being three names used by Muslims, Jews, and Christians respectively. By putting a certain geography, the city of Istanbul at the center, the book aims to contrib-

ute to academic publications on the diversity of identities and cosmopolitanism in the late Ottoman period through personal narratives of the time.

In the last decades, autobiographical narratives found a significant place in Ottoman studies naming a few: the diary of Niyazi Mısri, the dream book of a Sufi woman Asiye Hatun, the memoirs of a Sufi Aşçı Dede, the journal of a Kadı from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and recent edited volume titled *The Other Faces of the Empire: Ordinary Lives Against Social Order and Hierarchy*.<sup>1</sup> These studies questioned the definition and boundaries of a narrative to be an autobiography alongside the individual, social, and cultural context in which a narrative was produced and circulated. This book contributes to this literature with a differentiating approach firstly by discussing the narratives written in languages other than Turkish such as German, English, Spanish, Arabic, Armenian, and Judezmo/Ladino. In the Introduction, the editors highlight this power of the book by saying “While publications of personal narratives and biographical writings in Ottoman studies have tended to have a mono-lingual focus and context, usually presenting sources in Ottoman Turkish, the language of the state, the present volume goes a step further by including primary narrative sources originally composed in almost a dozen different languages.” (p. 2) This diversity in the language of primary sources under study allows the book to recognize the authors of autobiographies not just as subjects of the state or certain ideologies but also as agents in their own linguistic, social, and cultural zones.

Other than the language, twelve articles in the book present a wide range of identities in the religions and nations of the autobiography writers. By drawing on the voices of its permanent residents and foreign visitors, *Istanbul-Kushta-Constantinople: Narratives of Identity in the Ottoman Capital* introduces the reader to the wealth of narrative sources on the late Ottoman Istanbul’s diverse population with a focus on non-Muslim authors of life narratives. An Arab teenager from Beirut, a Christian Bulgarian doctor, a German-speaking Austrian woman writer, a Caucasian woman in the im-

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1 Aşçı İbrahim Dede, *Aşçı Dede'nin Hatıraları: Çok Yönlü Bir Süfînin Gözüyle Son Dönem Osmanlı Hayatı*, ed. Yücel Dağlı (İstanbul: Kitabevi Yayınları, 2006); Cemal Kafadar, *Kim Var İmiş Biz Burada Yoğ İken* (İstanbul: Metis Yayınları, 2009); Derin Terzioğlu, “Man in the Image of God in the image of Times: Sufi self-narratives and the Diary of Niyazî Mısri (1618-94),” *Studia Islamica* 94 (2022): 139-165; Selim Karahasanoğlu, *Kadı ve Günlüğü: Sadreddinzade Telhisi Mustafa Efendi Günlüğü (1711-1735) Üstüne Bir İnceleme* (İstanbul: Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2013); *The Other Faces of the Empire: Ordinary Lives against Social Order and Hierarchy*, ed. Fırat Yaşa, trans. Esra Taşdelen (İstanbul: Koç University Press, 2023).

perial palace, an American diplomat, or a Judezmo journalist of Istanbul all exist with their multifaceted identities in terms of their hometowns, genders, occupations, religions, and nations.

The authors subjected to this study share a common geography which is the Ottoman capital Istanbul whether as a hometown, a residence, or a crossing point of the travels. In this way, not the nations, religions, languages, or genders, the only parameter in defining ‘the insider’ and ‘the outsider’ becomes their relationships with the city. For example, a Muslim woman in the palace would be more secluded from the social and political realities of the period compared to a Judezmo journalist who urges the Jews of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic to adopt Turkish and assimilate into Turkish culture. The theme or rather motto of ‘Istanbul as an amalgamation’ appears in the book many times enabling us to transcend the dichotomies such as the male and the female, Muslim and non-Muslim, or the elite and the non-elite. At the same time, the political context, and the ideological burden on the individuals during a period of huge transformation and turmoil (1830-1930) are softened, humanized, and democratized with the introduction of diversified strategies, approaches, and ideas of the authors.

In its structure, the book consists of four main parts organized according to the identities of autobiography owners as female writers (Part I), outside observers (Part II), Jewish communities (Part III), and Armenian and Bulgarian Christian communities (Part IV). In the first part, Gudrun Wedel surveys German-speaking women’s autobiographies selected from the encyclopedia *Autobiographien von Frauen* [*Autobiographies of Women*] who stayed in Constantinople for one week up to six weeks as wives of state functionaries or professionals such as nurses or writers, between the years 1800 and 1900. The article shows different subjects in the autobiographies such as the appearance of Istanbulites or the dervishes and feasts and different experiences of women in the city for whom all about Istanbul remained a mystery or who felt at home whose hearts opened to its people. While the women in Wedel’s article are from overwhelmingly upper and upper-middle class, Malte Fuhrmann rather focuses on a single travelogue of a female writer, Anna Forneris, seeking survival for her thirty years in Constantinople and Levant. The crackdown of Janissaries, disappointing business initiatives and marriages, cholera, and loss of eyesight were some of

the issues for which she urges other females to restrain from *wanderlust*. The contradictions of her perception of the Orient are a mixture of missing the Orient and Islamophobia with Eurocentricity, thus Wedel argues "her narrative shows the limits in trying to recreate lower-class orientations and identities from travelogues, memoirs, and other explicitly narrative texts." (p. 41). The last article of this part written by BÖrte Sagaster focuses on texts written by six different authors, women who engaged with the Palace in varying degrees. These women wrote between the 1850s and 1922 informed their Turkish Republican readers of their lives in the recent Ottoman past and drew a dichotomy between the city people and the palace people as an important characteristic of the harem women's self-perception.

Part II of the book is dedicated to the outsider observers of Istanbul starting with the Americans who visited the 19<sup>th</sup> century Constantinople as discussed by Kent F. Schull. All five American authors of travel volumes were accomplished, educated Americans whose books sold very well. By having Protestant Christian backgrounds and with their classical education in Latin, Greek, and ancient history, they romanticized the city with its ties to Greco-Roman and Christian history and advocated the Noble Savage of the Turk could be saved only through the enlightened tutoring of true Protestant Christianity. In the next article, Malak Sharif discussed the unpublished memoirs of 'Abd Allāh Dabbūs who was raised in Beirut. 'Abd Allāh Dabbūs who was amazed with the beauty of Istanbul in his first visit decided to be a cadet in the military academy in Istanbul during the years 1916 and 1917. However, he claims he was met with disdain and racial discrimination in the city although he knew Turkish better than his Anatolian colleagues and he expected acknowledgment for his talents that he never received because the self-indulgent politicians lacked any virtue. In the next article, Pablo Martin Asuero surveys the Hispanic observers of Istanbul which is divided into two categories, those who toured on an official mission as diplomats or soldiers, and those who traveled independently of the Spanish authorities such as tourists and journalists.

Part III consists of the articles on the autobiographies written by the Jewish communities in Istanbul. The autobiographical writings of the Judezmo journalist David Fresco as studied in detail by David M. Bunis are striking for saying Judezmo is a corrupt Spanish and Jews of Turkey should

adopt Turkish and assimilate to Turkish culture. From his larger 24-page newspaper format publication published in a special issue of *El Tyempo* we learn that Freco has been exposed to Haskalah ideology and to maskilic Hebrew Press since his childhood. Being a supporter of the Hebrew language at first, then he rejected it related to his opposition to the Zionist movement and the establishment of a Jewish political entity in the Land of Israel. The persona of Fresco as a proponent of Ottomanism as a *homo ottomanicus* depicts the changing sides of a Jew in front of the introduction of new ideologies. The last article of Part III is on the autobiographical work of Dr. Ludwig August Frankl (1810-94), an Austrian-Jewish poet and intellectual (*maskil*) born in today's Czech Republic who then left Vienna for the Sephardic community in Smyrna. In his work, he gives the number of Jewish households in different districts of Istanbul, the Jewish engagement in economic life, communal organization and institutions, expenditures, social welfare, synagogues, and miscellaneous topics such as cemeteries, popular beliefs and folk tales and the impact of reform on the Jewish community.

The last part of the book which consists of four articles discusses the autobiographical narratives written within the Armenian and Bulgarian Christian communities. Rachel Goshgarian deals with the work *A Stroll through the Quarters of Constantinople* penned by the Armenian satirist Hagop Baronian who offers a comedic critique of the Ottoman capital's institutions, personalities, and prejudices over sketches of 35 Istanbul neighborhoods. According to Goshgarian, Baronian, who places himself firmly within the circle of the non-elite crucible of the Ottoman citizenry, formed a text that is primarily Istanbulite in nature, even more so than it is specifically Armenian. As one of the main arguments of the overall book, this article also argues that "ultimately, the texts themselves tell us that identity, as experienced under the Ottomans, was not only by means of faith groupings but encompassed other significant distinctions such as class, education level, spatiality and the ways within which these different features overlapped, reinforced and engaged with one another." (p.216) The text investigated in the next article written by Aylin Koçunyan is Misak Koçunyan's *Life Landscapes*. This text published as short stories in Tiflis in 1897 illustrates a satirical style a large spectrum of social problems of the Armenian community of 19<sup>th</sup> century Istanbul, from public instruction to Westernization, gender relations to familial issues. Koçunyan emphasizes the motto that 'Istan-

bul was an amalgamation' by taking attention to the name of the newspaper founded by Kasım Koçunyan which is *Jamanak: Journal Politique et Littteraire* although the entire newspaper was published in Armenian it also bore a French subtitle. The last two articles are on the narratives written by authors from the Bulgarian community of 19th-century Istanbul. The first article by Darin Stephanov starts with an anecdote in Hristo Stambolski's memoir in the summer of 1858 in which a group of Istanbul Bulgarians petitioned the grand vizier to have 15-20 Bulgarian students admitted to the Imperial Medical School in Istanbul. The crucial point is that although the council did not see a problem, they could not comprehend the meaning of *Bulgar milleti* and how it was different from *Rum milleti*. Johann Strauss's article presents a detailed reading of the life and autobiography of the same Hristo Stambolski of Kazanlık (1843-1932). Stambolski was a prominent character by gaining high positions in the medical system and institutions and by producing the only published work ever rendered in Ottoman Turkish by a non-Muslim Bulgarian, *Miftah-ı Teşrih [The Key to Anatomy]*. Stambolski was one of the figures of the period known in Bulgarian historiography as the 'National Revival (*vuzrazhdane*). His active participation in the struggle for an autonomous Bulgarian church, his conservative and moderate political viewpoint according to the criteria of Bulgarian historiography, his accusation of Young Turks for their idea that all nations should be united under the common designation of Osmanlı, his multilingualism as a part of his display of characteristics of a typical *homo ottomanicus* of the Tanzimat are some of the issues carefully discussed by Johann Strauss in the last article of the book.

As presented until now, the success of this book mainly stems from the variety of voices it includes from women to men, Jews to Christians, or palace residents to urban folks. However, there are some groups who seemed to be more appreciated while the others remained in the shadows. For example, while Part III allocates articles dedicated to the Ottoman Jewish community, there is no narrative written by someone from the Greek (*Rum*) community. Or, the European voices only echo through the narratives of German women, and other Muslim communities such as Persians and Arabs are also excluded. Thinking practically, one may argue the realistic boundary of an edited volume could be transcended by an attempt to include members of all socio-economic and gender communities, besides, the edi-

tors do not assert to cover all the groups of Istanbul in the intended period. But still, any reader who engaged with the book would certainly search for a study dedicated to a narrative by a Greek or a Muslim individual.

The second criticism might be towards the lack of an exhaustive discussion of the narratives presented in the book. The six-page long introduction written by the editors touches upon some main motivations and essential issues of the book. However, these motivations and issues should have been thoroughly discussed with the outings of the book with a meticulous conclusion part. Admittedly, this structure enables the reader to hear the individual voices directly and transparently as probably the reason for the lack of an external discussion. However, some themes common to many articles, and issues such as overlapping or differentiating concerns of members according to their communities are suspended for a never-coming conclusion part. Some interesting remarks of the articles such as the similarities of a non-Muslim with a Muslim member regarding moral issues, or the juxtaposition of a Jew who believed in *homo ottomanicus* with the Muslim selection community of the Ottoman Medical School people who were ignorant of the Bulgarian nation could be highlighted in such a separate chapter. Again, this should be a conscious decision of the editors but the reader should still be informed about the approach of the book in this regard.

All in all, *Istanbul-Kushta-Constantinople* makes the last century of Ottoman Istanbul's urban social and cultural landscape more diversified with the voices of women, Americans, Bulgarians, Armenians, Jews, and many others. The book will certainly inspire new studies with its approach that focuses on individual lives, identities, and ideas other than a nation or group-based approach. In this way, starting with the nationalization, the book shows the variety of approaches and ideas of individuals towards the authorities, processes, and transformations even in a specific community who were resilient or in conflict in an evolving manner. The narratives written in many languages by the insiders and outsiders who are defined according to their relation to the city are worth reading for people of many academic fields by having great details on Ottoman social, cultural, and political life.