

The Emperor and the Sultan in Mark Twain: How Innocent were the “Innocents”?

Muhammad Raji Zughoul

In a chartered steamship provided with every necessary comfort, a highly select group of sixty five excursionists including ministers of the gospels, doctors, high ranking officers and professors of various kind embarked on an a “pleasure excursion” to the Holy Land, Europe, Turkey, Egypt and intermediate points of interests. That was back in 1867. Mark Twain (Samuel Langhorne Clemens, 1835-1910) documented this excursion in his reports in the form of observations, descriptions, comments and notes sent in his letters to the daily *San Francisco Alta California*, *The New York Tribune* and *The New York Herald*. These reports were later published in what became a landmark in American literature and travel literature in general in Twain’s best known and most widely read travel narrative entitled *The Innocents Abroad or The New Pilgrims Progress: Being Some Account of the Steamship Quaker City’s Pleasure Excursion to Europe and the Holy Land; With Descriptions of Countries, Nations, Incidents and Adventures as they Appeared to the Author*.^[1] Though claimed to be a “pleasure excursion”, Twain affirms that it was not. Neither it was a scientific expedition. It was a primarily a “pilgrimage” to the Holy Land and a tour of Europe and “intermediate” points of interest.

The Quaker City left its berth on June 8, 1867 and around the 21st of June skirted around and anchored at the Azores Islands which belong to Portugal. In five to six days the ship was in Gibraltar where some of the excursionists opted to go and explore Spain while Twain with some of the company chose to go to Tangier. Twain repeatedly expressed his longing for the ‘second oldest town’ in the world. “Tangier!”, he says “A tribe of stalwart Moors are wading into the sea to carry us ashore on their backs from the small boats”. In a short visit to the city of Tangier, Twain documented in minute details the physical lay out of the city and its history. He recorded his impressions of the people with special focus on the Moors and their ways of living. He also covered marriage, slavery, penal code, women and the quality of living in the city. After the visit, Twain and his companions returned to Gibraltar to join the rest of the party on the ship.^[2]

The Quaker City sailed from Gibraltar to France where it steamed into the artificial harbor of the city of Marseilles. After visiting the landmarks of Marseilles, they went to Paris

through the city of Lyon by rail. On their third day in Paris, the party went to visit the renowned International Exposition (referred to in the original program of the excursion as the Great Exhibition and in the notes as The Paris Universal Exhibition).¹³¹ They stayed there for nearly two hours though it takes weeks even months to have an intelligent idea of this “monstrous establishment”. While Twain was enjoying watching people and exhibition items, he heard martial music and saw an unusual number of soldiers walking hurriedly about. When he inquired, he was told that the Emperor of the French and the Sultan of Turkey were about to review twenty five thousand troops at the Arc de l’Etoile. As Twain learned about the Emperor and the Sultan, he immediately departed the Exhibition grounds for , as he remarks, “I had a greater anxiety to see these men than I could have had to see twenty exhibitions”.

Twain drove away and took a position opposite the American minister’s house to watch this spectacular event and described it in minute detail recording his impressions, attitudes towards the two leaders and their countries numerating the main characteristics of each focusing on the Emperor. The sound of distant music was followed by a moving pillar of dust, then with colors flying , military music, an array of cavalry men, a long line of artillery, more cavalry and then their “imperial majesties” Napoleon III Emperor of the French (1852-1870) and Abdul-Aziz, Sultan of the Ottoman Empire (1861-1876). People in the watching crowd swung their hats while people at the windows and on house tops in the vicinity burst into a “snow storm of waving handkerchiefs”. It was “a stirring spectacle”.

Before getting into how Twain portrayed the Emperor and the Sultan in *The Innocents Abroad*, it is enlightening to sketch a brief historical note about the era and the two leaders in question. After the “Bloody June Days” of 1848, Louis Napoleon Bonaparte was elected by universal suffrage as president of the Second Republic. He was elected again in 1851 for a ten year term , and one year later he proclaimed the Empire and declared himself the Emperor of the French in what has come to be called The Second French Empire, calling himself, for he remembered Napoleon’s son, Napoleon III. Palmer and Colton believe that

The new Napoleon was not at all like his great uncle. He was no soldier, no administrator, and though intelligent enough he had no especial distinction or force of mind. He was a politician... He appealed to the masses by promises and by pageantry; he cultivated, solicited, directed and manufactured popular favor. ... He glorified in modern progress.... He affirmed he stood above classes, and would govern equally in the interest of all. ... The political institutions of the second empire were therefore authoritarian, modeled on those of the Consulate of the first Bonaparte (502-507).

There was serious economic development in the empire. Investment banking was invented, a novel kind of banking institution was found and a land bank for lending funds for farmers was established. Large corporations emerged and the stock exchange boomed. He aspired to do something for the workingman and accomplished a lot on the humanitarian side. It was during the reign of Napoleon III that a French company built the Suez Canal between the years 1859-1869. The 18 year Second Empire ended in 1870 the same way as the First. France was the “eldest daughter of the Church”, a major power in Europe, the protector of Catholics in the Ottoman Empire and, for political reasons chief among which is the rivalry among European powers, France was an ally and a Friend of Turkey.

On the hand the Ottoman Empire was not in the best of conditions. Turkey was called “the sick man of Europe” and its decline and dissolution made up the “Eastern Question” which was the root of all kinds of political intrigues, diplomatic maneuvers and even wars

among European powers who were anticipating the territorial disintegration of the Ottoman Empire and each getting the biggest share possible. In 1861, Sultan Abdul Mejid died after seriously but in vain attempting to carry out the social, political and economic reforms promised in the Hatt-i Humayun (Illustrious Writing) of 1856, “the most far reaching Turkish reform edict of the century”. Abdul Mejid’s brother Abdul Aziz became the Sultan of Turkey. Abdul Aziz inherited an unfulfilled policy of reform and progress, a threatening situation in the Balkan Peninsula and several other spots in the Empire, an exhausted treasury and powerful resistance to reform. Abdul Aziz was the first Sultan to travel in Europe. He visited Vienna, London and Paris in 1867 and his visit to the Paris Universal Exhibition where Mark Twain by chance knew of his visit and planned to watch the spectacular event is well attested in history books (Palmer and Colton 629). Abdul Aziz was , according to Miller (368) deposed on the grounds of his incapacity and extravagance. Four days later, he committed suicide.^[4]

The Emperor and the Sultan claimed Twain’s full attention and his account of the spectacular event came in terms of a lengthy contrast between the two figures starting with their appearance. The Emperor was in military uniform, old, wrinkled, fiercely mustached, half closed eyes with a deep, crafty scheming expressions about them. He was bowing gently to the loud plaudits. He was also watching everything and everybody with his “cat eyes” from under the brim of his hat to see if the cheers were not “heartfelt and cordial”. The Sultan on the other hand, the absolute lord of the Ottoman Empire was in green European clothes which were without ornament or insignia of rank. He wore a red Turkish fez on his head. He was a “stout, dark man black bearded, black eyed, stupid, unprepossessing, - a man whose whole appearance somehow suggested that if he only had a cleaver in his hand and a white apron on, one would not be at all surprised to hear him say “ A mutton roast today or will you have a nice steak ?”

It is surprising to the reader why Mark Twain would be using such harsh and cruel words such as “stupid and unprepossessing” in the description of the Sultan. The reader expects an honest impression of the Sultan not necessarily favorable but definitely not predetermined . Was Twain suggesting that that the Sultan belonged to the low class of chefs or waiters? Has Twain already decided based on his preconceived ideas about the Turk to intentionally distort the image of the Sultan? Let’s go over the next paragraph which is so expressive and revealing of the real attitudes of Twain to the Sultan, the Ottoman Empire, the Turks, and The Muslims. Twain says:

Napoleon III, the representative of the highest modern civilization, progress and refinement; Abdul Aziz, the representative of a people by nature and training filthy, brutish, ignorant, unprogressive, superstitious – and a government whose Three Graces are Tyranny, Rapacity, Blood. Here in brilliant Paris, under this majestic Arch of Triumph, the first century greets the nineteenth! (93).

The quotation above, where Twain categorically brands the Muslim Turks – be they Arabs, Turks, Persians, Serbs, Albanians etc. as “by nature and training filthy, brutish, ignorant, unprogressive and superstitious” reveals bigotry and prejudice on the part of Twain himself. These sweeping generalizations about all these people from different races and geographical regions could not have come by chance⁸. Twain, must have been like many a writer since the eighth Century a champion of anti-Islamic propaganda. Islam generated what

has been recently termed in the literature as “Islamophobia” which has been reflected in English literature throughout the ages. The last Islamic state “Caliphate” in history was the Ottoman Empire and the word “Turk” became synonymous to the word “Muslim” to the extent that the first German translation of the Qur’an from the original Arabic text which was done by David Friedrich Meierlin in 1772 was entitled *Die Türkische Bibel* or the Turkish Bible. The Turk in the Ottoman Empire was threatening to the psyche of the European and was perceived as endangering his being. Said addresses this issue again and again throughout his book. Trying to summarize the western attitudes to Islam and Turkey of which Twain seems to be typical, he maintains that

Not for nothing did Islam come to symbolize terror, devastation, the demonic, hordes of hated barbarians. For example, Islam was a lasting trauma. Until the end of the seventeenth century the “Ottoman peril” lurked alongside Europe to represent for the whole of Christian civilization a constant danger, and in time European civilization incorporated that peril and its lore. Its great events, figures, virtues and vices, as something woven into the fabric of life. In Renaissance England alone, as Samuel Chew recounts in his classic study *The Crescent and the Rose* “a man of average education and intelligence” had at his fingertips, and could watch on the London stage, a relatively large number of detailed events in the history of Ottoman Islam and its encroachments upon Christian Europe. The point is that what remained current about Islam was some necessarily diminished version of those great dangerous forces that it symbolized for Europe (158-9).

Smith very well documents the attitudes towards Islam and the Turks across the different periods of English Literature. In discussing the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, for example, Smith reports attitudes not different at all from those expressed by Twain when he maintains that

During the Renaissance the attitude toward the Muslim varied with a number of factors. In the early period, fear of the Turks and anxiety over their aggression caused a hostile attitude to be maintained, and the Turk was looked upon as a monster of iniquity... Another factor which tended to mitigate the feeling of hatred towards the Turks was the religious conflict at home between Catholics and Protestants. From the very beginning of the Reformation, invidious comparisons were made with Islam, and the tyranny of the Turks was declared more endurable than the tyranny of the opposing Christian sect (70).

Norman Daniel (268) tries to explain “Islamophobia” when he asserts that the attribution of so many crimes to Islam especially those that which “most disgusted” Christendom, was not only a means to discredit a rival religion but it was also an expression of the hostility that “Christendom felt for the civilization at its borders”. Daniel rightly affirms that

It may be that it is a human tendency for men to dislike other people’s thinking differently from themselves. This would explain why a man often attributes to those who think differently from him a version of their opinion that they themselves cannot recognize, but from which his point of view is agreeably repulsive.... When, later, under Ottoman leadership Islam did closely threaten European survival, the sense of Christian political solidarity had become relatively weak. There seems never to have been real fear of military invasion. The sole Christian fear was of Islamic doctrine, of the religion which endorsed pleasure, almost, perhaps as a principle of religion. Yet it does not seem likely that Islam was feared because its Christian doctrine. antinomian heresy was believed seriously to threaten(28).

Twain, though hailed as an American writer who was assumed to have got rid of some of the burdens of cultural biases inherent in the long history of the continent and its continued course of inter and intra continental conflicts, hostilities and rivalries, was mainstream European in his attitudes towards and perception of the East. Fiedler quotes Bret Harte's review of Mark Twain in which he concludes

Yet, with all his independence, Mark Twain seems to have followed his guide and guidebooks with a simple unconscious fidelity. He was quite content to see only that which everybody else sees, even if he was not content to see it with the same eyes (481).

Twain, as one of the two anonymous referees for this paper put it (anonymous 2001) echoed the guidebooks and challenged them. In an extremely interesting article on the Web in a site on *The Innocents Abroad* entitled "Pre-texts for Innocents" (<http://etext.virginia.edu/railton/innocent/iahompag.html>), the author lends strong support for that view when he maintains that Twain was

...as much a re-writer as a writer. He depended heavily on other books –pre-texts –to shape both his humorous and his realist agendas. In many places *Innocents Abroad* burlesques or parodies earlier sentimental or romantic narratives and throughout it is defined as an attempt to revise previous accounts of the Old World, to show American readers Europe and the Holy Land as they really are, and not as various books have depicted them.^[5]

After his harangue about the nature of the Muslim and the Turk quoted earlier, Twain recounts the life story of the Emperor and then that of the Sultan in contrast. In his account on the biography of Napoleon III, Twain very briefly outlines his life story alluding to so many historical events in his life which cannot be easily understood without referring to history books covering the era in which the Emperor lived. First of all he alludes to his recurring dream of the crown and empire, referring to his assumption of the headship of the Bonaparte family in 1832 after the death of Napoleon II, the First Napoleon's son, and his resolution to restore the glories of the Empire. Twain talked about the "miserable fiasco of Strasbourg" referring to Napoleon's trial to seize power in Strasbourg in 1836. He talked about Napoleon III keeping "his faithful watch and walking his weary beat a common policeman of London" referring to his enrollment in Wellington's special constables to oppose the Chartist revolution when he was a refugee in London. Twain also talked about the Emperor "who lay a forgotten captive in the dungeons of Ham" alluding to his sentence to life imprisonment in the fortress of Ham after his failure in seizing power at Strasbourg in 1836 and Boulogne in 1840. The Emperor found himself a "prisoner, the butt of small wits, a mark for the pitiless ridicule of all the world" ; this is in reference to his falling captive in the Franco-Prussian war when the French army was defeated, Paris besieged and an insurrection in Paris proclaimed the Republic. Twain also hails Napoleon III for the *coup d'état* of 1851 when he controlled the army, the bureaucracy and the police by putting his lieutenants in as ministers of War and of the Interior. He dissolved the Assembly and reinstated universal suffrage to be elected President for a term of ten years and then to proclaim the Empire one year later. Twain put it in this interesting way:

President of France at last! A coup d'état, surrounded by applauding armies, welcomed by the thunders of canon. He mounts a throne and waves before an astounded world the scepter of a mighty empire! Who talks of the marvels of fiction? Who speaks of the wonders of romance? Who prates the tame achievements of Aladdin and the Magii of Arabia?^[6]

Twain also alludes to his "sententious burst of eloquence" alluding to Napoleon III's love of public speaking unlike first Napoleon who, as Palmer and Colton pointed out, "never in his life condescended to making a public speech" (502).

Against this picture of Napoleon III focusing on ambition, hard work, charisma, dynamism, and glory, Twain presents a gloomy picture of Abdul Aziz which sharply contrasts with every aspect of the portrait of Napoleon III. Abdul Aziz has been known for his incompetence and extravagance, but the way Mark Twain presents him in contrast to Napoleon III implies that Twain wanted to be aggressive, insolent contemptuous and even flatly disrespectful. While he tried to support what he said about Napoleon III by alluding to exact historical events in his life story, he talked in vague generalizations about Abdul Aziz. Some of these generalizations are well attested in history books but many others are stereotypical. He says:

Abdul Aziz, Sultan of Turkey, Lord of the Ottoman Empire! Born to a throne; weak, stupid, ignorant, almost, as his meanest slave. Chief of a vast royalty, yet the puppet of his premier and the obedient child of a tyrannical mother, a man who sits on upon a throne – the beck of whose finger moves navies and armies- who holds in his hands the power of life and death over millions – yet who sleeps, sleeps, eats, eats, idles with his eight hundred concubines, and when he is surfeited with eating and sleeping and idling, and would rouse up and take the reins of government and threaten to be a sultan, is charmed from his purpose by wary Fuad Pasha with a pretty plan for a new palace or a new ship- charmed away with a new toy like any other restless child , a man who sees his people robbed and oppressed by soulless tax gatherers , but speaks no word to save them...(94).

Twain continues to affirm that Abdul Aziz believes in the gnomes and genii of the Arabian nights but he has small regards to “the magicians of today” and feels nervous in the presence of their “mysterious railroads and steamboats and telegraphs”. Twain makes the point that Abdul Aziz would rather see undone what Mehmet Ali^[7] had done for Egypt than emulate him. Twain is alluding to the fact that what Mehmet Ali had done was accomplished with the aid of the French. Twain then talks about the Ottoman empire as a “blot upon the earth” describing it as “degraded, poverty stricken, miserable, infamous agglomeration of ignorance, crime and brutality” and predicting that Abdul Aziz will “idle away the allotted days of his trivial life and then pass to the dust and the worms and leave it so”(94).

Despite the fact that Abdul Aziz was known for his extravagance, several sources credit him with serious attempts to re-invigorate the Ottoman Empire. Al-Muhami highlights several aspects of the Sultan’s personality which made him different from other Sultans. He was one of the few if not the only Sultan who tried to visit the different parts of his Empire and his best documented visit was that to Egypt in 1863. The trip to France was in response to an invitation from Napoleon III and it lasted for six weeks (June 22 – August 7, 1876) in which the Sultan tried to transfer some of the technological developments to the Empire. Al-Muhami lists among the outstanding achievements of the Sultan the drafting laws for courts, land ownership reforms, and the drafting of a law governing commerce and commercial disputes. Asaaf credits Abdul Aziz with reforms concerned with the court system and the law, interest in education and his keenness on introducing modern European advances in technology to the empire. His visit to France in response to the invitation of the emperor was for the sake of first hand observation of modern ways of European living to be transferred to the Ottoman Empire. Mark Twain failed to see a single positive quality or achievement in the Sultan.

After recounting the life stories of the two leaders in contrast, Twain enumerates the major accomplishments and services to the country rendered by each in contrast. He talks

about the Emperor's augmentation of the commercial prosperity of France, superbly rebuilding Paris and other cities, taking the control of the Empire into his hands and making France a tolerably free land. No other country offers better security to life and property than France in the reign of the Emperor.^[8] When he came to enumerate those of the Sultan, all he could offer was: "As for the Sultan, one could set a trap anywhere and catch a dozen abler men in a night" (95).

In the final section of his description of this spectacular event, Twain sums up the two characters, saying

The bands struck up, and the brilliant adventurer, Napoleon III, the genius of Energy, Persistence, Enterprise, and the feeble Abdul Aziz, the genius of Ignorance, Bigotry and Indolence, prepared for the Forward –March! (95).

Twain gives the impression throughout the description of this encounter that he had been waiting for an opportunity to wage an assault at the Sultan, the Turk, the Ottoman Empire in a cycle of abhorrence, malevolence and intense dislike. It is not easy to understand why Twain, the reputable American writer claimed to have democratized literature, would perceive the Turk, the Sultan and the Ottoman Empire so negatively. Not in one single instance would Twain point to a positive aspect in the Sultan, his people, his Empire or what the Sultan stands for. He described the Sultan and his people as "stupid, unprepossessing, filthy, brutish, ignorant, unprogressive, superstitious, bloody, tyrannical, rapacious, primitive, weak, feeble, indolent bigot, degraded, poverty stricken, and oppressed"(91-95).^[9] On the other hand, despite so many flaws and rough edges in the character of Napoleon III recognized and well attested by historians (e.g. he was a dictator "he made himself a dictator in time of peace ... put a low value on political freedom", he became an emperor by coup d'état, he led France from one unnecessary war to another starting with the Crimean War of 1854-1856, the Italian War of 1859, the Mexican war between 1862-1867 and finally the war with Prussia in 1870. He even tried to interfere in Arabia)^[10], Twain showered the Emperor with a barrage of praise, acclamation and glorification. The same events attested by historians as signs of recklessness and dictatorship were hailed as signs of courage, glory, ambition and hard work. In contrast with the Sultan, the Emperor, his government and his people were described as "representative of the highest modern civilization, progress and refinement; surrounded by military pomp, by the splendor of his capital city and companioned by kings and princes; ambitious, glorious, mighty; brilliant adventurer, genius of Energy, Persistence and Enterprise" (93). The text shows that Twain's perception of the Sultan, the Turks and consequently the Muslims, and the Ottoman Empire were by no means the product of "Innocence". They are culturally loaded, premeditated and represent mainstream West of the East thinking. The Emperor and the Sultan in Mark Twain represent stereotypical European perceptions of the East strongly marked by distrust, condescension, phobia and above all hatred.

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^[1] The *Daily Alta California* paid Mark Twain's fare of \$1250 on The Quaker City tour. The 50 or 51 letters were published as *Innocents Abroad* in 1869 by the American Publishing Company in Hartford, Connecticut. The book sold 70000 copies in the first year, was sold door to door then and remained Mark Twain's best selling book throughout his life. At present, this may not be the case. The place could well be accorded to *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* or *The Adventures of Tom*

Sawyer. (Some more details on the sales of the book can be obtained from the electronic site on the World Wide Web entitled <http://etext.virginia.edu/railton/innocent/iahompag.html>).

^[2] For a detailed analysis of Twain's visit to Tangier and his image of the Moor, see Zughoul 1999.

^[3] The exhibit is referred to variably as the World Exhibit, Paris Universal Exhibition, Great Paris World's Fair and the Great Exhibition.

^[4] Miller (1966) says that the nature of Abdul Aziz's end was much contested. Midhat Pasha and others were tried and convicted of the Sultan's assassination five years later. Miller affirms that Dr. Dickson of Constantinople who saw the dead man's body informed Miller personally that Abdul Aziz committed suicide by cutting his arteries with a pair of scissors.

^[5] In this same article on the World Wide Web (<http://etext.virginia.edu/railton/innocent/iahompag.html>), the author lists the following sources that Twain may have depended on: 1. *Yousef: or the Journey of the Frangi* published by J. Ross Browne, 1853; 2. Charles Farrar Browne better known as Artemus Ward, comic accounts published in the comic magazine *Punch*, 1866; 3. Bayard Taylor, *Views A-Foot*, 1855; 4. *Harper's Handbook for Travelers*, 1860; 5. Appleton's *European Guide Book For English Speaking Travelers*, New York: D. Appleton, 1863; 6. William Prime, *Tent Life in the Holy Land*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1857; 7. William Thomson, *The Land and the Book or Biblical Illustrations Drawn from the Manners and Customs, the Scenes and Scenery of the Holy Land*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1858. These sources came after the two earlier main sources referred to as Muarrays's and Baedeer's.

The writer of the same Web site maintains that in a letter written to the *Alta* but deleted for the book, Mark Twain lists eight "contemporary books about Palestine" the passengers were encouraged to bring along as appropriate guides to the Holy Land. The list included two of the books referred to earlier, namely, Prime's *Tent Life* and Thomson's *The Land and The Book*.

^[6] Magi is the plural of magus and it refers to the priests of ancient Persia.

^[7] Mehmet Ali is Muhammad Ali Pasha (1769-1849) the Ottoman governor of Egypt (1805-1848) who had French officers train his army and sent a good number of Egyptians for training in various fields in France, achieved economic success, built hospitals & clinics and established medical schools under the direction of French doctors (cf. Shaw & Shaw 1978).

^[8] It is interesting to note in this connection that Mark Twain, according to one of the anonymous referees of this paper, (anonymous 2001) may be saying something good about the French for the last time because he developed a "lifelong animosity toward the French to the point where, later in his life, he said that he had no prejudices save one, and it was clear that the 'one' was prejudice towards the French".

^[9] Mordecai Ricchler (1996), in his introduction to *The Innocents Abroad* in the *Oxford Mark Twain* edition, views these comments in the framework of political correctness at the time. Ricchler concludes that

Given today's touchy political climate, I suspect there is sufficient kindling in *The Innocents Abroad* to light a fire of protest under Portuguese, Italians, Moslems, Catholics, Turks, Greeks, feminists, Arabs, American Indians, and other sensitive types. I have no doubt that *The Innocents Abroad*, released today, would be banned in schools, the author condemned as a racist, and possibly, just possibly, finding himself the subject of a fatwa (18).

^[10] Nasir maintains that the English traveler in Arabia, William Gifford Palgrave who is of Jewish ancestry became a Jesuit and assumed the disguise of Salim Abu Mohumud Al-Ays, a Syrian doctor. "...perhaps he was on a secret mission for France, since his travel funds, as he stated, were provided by the Emperor Napoleon III" (93-94). As he returned to England in 1863, he left the Jesuit order and in 1965 published his book *Narrative of a Year's Journey Through Central and Eastern Arabia*.