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## Political Philosophy and Oriental Polemics on the Ottoman Form of Government in 18<sup>th</sup> Century English Literature

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### Abstract

The source and justification of the power and authority of the king have been subject for the discussion in state philosophy. There are two terms employed to explain such relation in the history of thoughts going back to ancient Greek texts; tranny and despotism. The term tyranny is first used to refer to the rulers who overthrown the priest-kings whose ancestors are thought to be gods. The new rulers are from human origin; thus, this revolution is taken as the first step for the democracy. Aristotle use despotism to refer the authority in the family. The two terms have been discussed by the Renaissance and Enlightenment writers when referring to the philosophy of the government. Niccolo Machievalli, Thomas More, Thomas Hobbes, David Hume, Baron de Montesquieu and John Locke referred to such terms in their works. The argument of the nature and limit of power have been subject for 18<sup>th</sup> century English writers as well. In particular, the two terms have been frequently used by the writers when referring to the nature of oriental government. The present study aims to explore the context of the "Ottoman absolutism" in the 18<sup>th</sup> century literary texts of the British writers.

**Keywords:** Absolutism, Tyranny, Despotism, Ottoman State, Enlightenment.

### Siyaset Felsefesi ve On Sekizinci Yüzyıl İngiliz Edebiyat Metinlerinde Osmanlı Devleti Hakkında Şarkiyatçı Polemikler

#### Öz

Siyaset felsefesindeki önemli tartışma konularından bir tanesi iktidar sahibi idarecinin gücü ve otoritesinin kaynağı olmuştur. Antik dönem Yunan kaynaklarına kadar uzanan bu tartışmada kullanılan iki önemli terim vardır. Bunlardan bir tanesi tiranlık, diğeri de despotluktur. Her iki terim de iktidar sahibinin mutlak ve sorgulanamayan gücünü çağrıştırmaktadır. Terminolojinin tarihi ve teolojik kaynakları da bir diğerinden farklıdır. Tiran teriminin ilk defa Tanrıların soyundan geldiğine inanılan kralların iktidarına son vererek, onların yerine geçen Yunanlı idareciler için kullanıldığını biliyoruz. Bu dönüşüm toplumdan bir insanın iktidar sahibi olmasına izin verdiği için demokrasinin ilk adımı olarak da kabul edilir. Despot kelimesinin Aristotle tarafından "aile reisi" anlamında kullanıldığı kaynaklarda geçmektedir. Avrupa kaynaklı her iki terim Rönesans ve Aydınlanma dönemi aydınları tarafından da tartışılmıştır. Niccolo Machievalli, Thomas More, David Hume, Thomas Hobbes, Montesquieu, John Locke gibi aydınlar iktidarın sınırlarını tartışırken bu terimleri kullanmışlardır. Bu tartışma edebiyat metinlerine de yansımıştır. Özellikle, 18. yüzyıl İngiliz edebiyatında şarkiyatçılık söz konusu olduğunda bu iki terim Osmanlı-Türk devletinin yapısını ve bu yapıyı oluşturan düşünceyi yansıtmak için kullanılmıştır. Bu makalede 18. yüzyıl İngiliz edebiyat metinlerinde "mutlakiyetçilik" [absolutism] düşüncesinin Osmanlı Devleti ile ilgili tartışmalarda nasıl kullanıldığı açıklanacaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Mutlakiyetçilik, Tiranlık, Despotluk, Osmanlı Devleti, Aydınlanma Düşüncesi

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## Introduction

“Book VIII” of *The Republic* [Plato] discusses five types of government: Aristocracy, Timocracy, Oligarchy, Democracy, and Tyranny. There are basically three classes in the Aristocratic form of government. The head is philosopher-king who has the soul of God. The second group consists of soldiers who keep the order. The last group is people who own property but produce under the control and policy of the rulers. Plato takes the Aristocracy as the ideal form of government. Due to degeneration aristocracy is replaced by Timocracy which is subject to the same fate. Oligarchy is replaced by democracy and democracy is replaced by tyranny. The tyranny is the worst form of government because the ruler is unjust and act lawless. He assumes power unquestionable, thus freely does murder and plunders. Tyranny is rejected because it is a great threat to justice. Plato explores the relation between ethics and politics: “the center of Plato’s Republic is a contribution to ethics: a discussion of what the virtue justice is and why a person should be just”<sup>3</sup>. Aristotle takes Plato’s argument further to make the idea of justice clear and more practical. He believes that politics is practical knowledge and a legislative science. The art of politics should maintain the justice via legal constitutional authority. He discusses this in *Nicomachean Ethics* book V. Distinguishing “two different but related senses of “justice” — universal and particular —”, Aristotle believes that “*justice* means *lawfulness* which altogether aim the “the common advantage” of community”<sup>4</sup>. Authority takes all its power and right from the constitutional order based on philosophy of good and justice. Aristotle emphasizes and predicates the law in the philosophy of politics. The law justifies the authority. The ancient philosophy and form of government are embodied by Medieval authority. The origin of law and sense of justice are related to Scriptures (The Bible) by Saint Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, who transformed and re-interpreted Aristotelian and Platonist philosophy. St. Augustine modulates the order of the community with reference to the idea of Trinity: “The Holy Spirit has magnificently and wholesomely modulated the Holy Scriptures”<sup>5</sup>. Augustine suggests that “The Lord” is the creator and law-giver instructing the truth of faith. The divine message and order are maintained via the authority of Catholic Churches. Aquinas, like Augustine, takes the Holy Scripture as the true words of God who signifies the power and truth. The Apostles re-figures the “Old Law” and make them “New Law”<sup>6</sup>. The literal and metaphorical operation of the Scriptures via ecclesiastical authorities are taken the source and natural end of order in the world here and hereafter.

The shift from Biblical to more secular idea of government begins with the Renaissance. Reviving the ancient idea of government, the Renaissance scholar like Machiavelli rejected the divine idea of universal order. He writes that the order is settled by man on the earth; God does not intervene the human politics. The authority of the state is responsible for the present and future fate of the nation. The ruler should know about physical-geographical-economical characters of the country as well as history, culture and people’s characters under the rule. Machiavelli claims that the character of the Prince is of primary significance for the security of the state. The mercy, generosity, kindness, benevolence, love, obedience are all good qualities, yet they may all cause misery of the Prince. Therefore, “it is far safer to be feared than loved if you cannot be both” because “Men worry less about doing an injury to one who makes himself loved than to one who makes himself

<sup>3</sup> <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato-ethics-politics/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-politics/>

<sup>5</sup> Saint Augustine, *On Christain Doctrine, Book One*, 112.

<sup>6</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *The Nature and Domain of Sacred Doctrine*, 119.

feared”.<sup>7</sup> Machiavelli has very pragmatic philosophy of government which emphasizes the security and order of the country. The freedom and wealth of the people can be sacrificed to the order of state. It is necessary for a Prince to practice cruelty when needed. The absolute obedience, respect and victory in the war depend on certain imperatives like cruelty. Machiavelli compares [Hannibal](#) and [Scipio Africanus](#). Hannibal lead a huge army of various races. The soldiers never rebel because they feared Hannibal who controls them with “inhuman cruelty”. Scipio’s men were known for their dissension due to Scipio’s” mercy” which in the end caused the disintegration of the republic<sup>8</sup>. Hobbes, like Machiavelli, believes that absolute power is necessary to keep the order and justice in the country in his work *Leviathan*. His belief in the absolute form of monarchy is stemmed from his belief in selfish nature of human being as creatures. Hobbes relates the authority of the sovereign king to the God: “The monarch or the sovereign assembly only hath immediate authority from God ... no man but the sovereign receiveth his power Dei gratia simply; that is to say, from the favour of none but God”<sup>9</sup>. Hobbes believes that the absolute power and sovereignty of the monarch prevent the ongoing war between men and keep the order on the earth. Locke, on the other hand, rejects the Hobbes idea of human nature. In his work *Two Treatises of Government*, Locke argues that men are condemned to freedom because they are born free. Rejecting the necessity of sovereign power and the idea that God had made all people naturally subject to a monarch, Locke people have rights, such as the right to life, liberty, and property which must be secured by the government<sup>10</sup>. The government is a result of social contract between the rulers and free people who willingly forsake their rights to the selected to settle stable, comfortable, wealthy and just conditions in the country: “Since governments exist by the consent of the people in order to protect the rights of the people and promote the public good, governments that fail to do so can be resisted and replaced with new governments”.<sup>11</sup> The idea of absolute power and justice is one of the high debates in the Ancient, Medieval and the Renaissance European thought. The argument on justice and form of government is transformed into comparative context by the Enlightenment European philosophers. In such comparison binary is created between European form of Government and the Ottoman model. The celebration of the sovereignty and absolutism as suggested by Plato, Augustine, Machiavelli and Hobbes is deconstructed in the comparative arguments. For instance, Enlightenment English writers embody the imperial desire when comparing the European and Ottoman model of governments. The polarity is created: the Europe is the ideal place with true and justifiable form of system of government. The Ottoman, on the other hand, keeps the oriental form of government that is controlled by tyrants and despots with absolute power. Thus, the Ottoman Empire is not a legal state. The binary opposition created by the enlightenment writers between the European and Ottoman model of government imply the late phase of the imperial envy and early stage of colonial desire of the Europeans to dominate the other. This paper aims to explore the 18<sup>th</sup> century English writers’ idea of tyranny and despotism in the Ottoman Empire.

### Background of Tyrannical Government

Cypselus, a ruler of Corinth, refused to obey the mythological and sanctioned authority of the priest-kings; by the support of common people he overturned the established order and became a popular ruler. He

<sup>7</sup> Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 17.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, xxiii.

<sup>10</sup> J. Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988. Citations are to *Two Treatises* then treatise and section.

<sup>11</sup> <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/locke-political/>

was identified as a tyrant, which, then, referred to anyone who overturned the established government and made himself a single ruler. Like Cypselus, the early tyrants were those who were supported by common people in rebellion against the priest-kings. The modern meaning of *tyranny* is different. It is a form of government in which a single leader exercises absolute power over common people and interfere with every aspect of their lives. Tyrant, in a modern political agenda means an absolute and oppressive ruler<sup>12</sup>. *Despot* has a similar meaning; it means a head of family and a master of slaves with full power and no binding laws or customs. Despotism was identified by Aristotle as the master's exercise of his power upon his slaves. Aristotle distinguished despotic and just political systems. In the despotic government slaves, females and common people occupied the same position and did not have a free class. The Greek was not a despotic state because it had a free class who ought to rule over the barbarians. Aristotle, like the 18<sup>th</sup> century writers, agreed that Asian nature and climate make people deficient, thus, slaves; the European, on the other hand, were full of spirit and endowed with skills and intelligence, thus, by nature the Europeans could be a legitimate ruler of other people<sup>13</sup>. Despotism, as the exercise of power over the slaves, identified Oriental kings in the ancient Greek political thought. The same idea reappeared during different periods to identify the Oriental states. Hegel, for instance, argued that 'Orientals have a fixed character, and the essence of the Oriental mind is force. The narrowness of the Oriental minds does not admit love; hence people of the Oriental country must be bound by law that was external to them' (qtd. in the *Dictionary of Ideas*).

There were three basic types of government: *republic*, *monarchy* and *tyranny* [despotism]. The Europeans identified republic and monarchy as primarily European types of government because power of the European state depended upon the mutual agreement and pact between the king and his free subjects. The Asian states were identified as despotic because the power of the Asian king was arbitrary and did not originate from the mutual agreement between the king and his free subjects. Thus, despotism, as the natural form of oriental government, pre-conditioned Eastern people to slavery and the Asian kings to tyranny<sup>14</sup>.

### 1. Ottoman Tyranny and Despotism in 18<sup>th</sup> century Literary Thought

The Medieval Europe interpreted the Ottoman political system in the same way. The Ottoman state was identified with an abuse of sultans who had a total domination. The debate on despotism became particularly popular in France during the 18<sup>th</sup> century due to the aristocratic opposition to the crown and search for a better model of the monarchy<sup>15</sup>. Tyranny of the French king over the state, parliament and nobility was compared to the absolute rule of the Ottoman Sultans. In 1712 Saint-Simon compared the authority of Louis XIV to the great Seigneur<sup>16</sup>. Tyranny and Despotism, as the popular political terms of the early modern Europe<sup>17</sup>, were

<sup>12</sup> [www.answers.com](http://www.answers.com)

<sup>13</sup> Dictionary of Ideas, [www.lib.virginia.edu](http://www.lib.virginia.edu)

<sup>14</sup> Nicaean Emperor Vatatses complained about the subjects and was envious for the oriental tyrants who fear neither the dagger of the rebel nor the superstitions invented by the priests (.)

<sup>15</sup> Dictionary of Ideas, [www.lib.virginia.edu](http://www.lib.virginia.edu)

<sup>16</sup> Dictionary of Ideas, [www.lib.virginia.edu](http://www.lib.virginia.edu)

<sup>17</sup> There is a succession of similar ideas from ancient Greek to present Europe. Aristotle considered the Eastern as deficient and argued that the Greeks, who were intellectual and spiritually superior, have right to rule over the Orient. Montesquieu had a similar idea in the 18th century. He identified the Eastern states as despotic and thought that the European expansion would bring them freedom. Hegel and Karl Marx, in the 20th century, identified the Eastern political system as static and never changing. They thought that European invasion might change the structure of the eastern states.

associated with the Ottoman Sultan for several reasons. Firstly, the Ottoman attack and conquest in Europe increased the fear and terror<sup>18</sup>. The Ottomans were regarded as the terror which might overtake the control of Europe any moment. For instance, French poet Ronsard proposed in 1555 to abandon Europe to the Ottomans and migrate to the New World [America] to save and resume their values<sup>19</sup>. Busbaq, a Venetian ambassador in Constantinople, interpreted the Ottoman and Persian conflict as advantageous to the Europeans in that the Ottoman march into the inner territory of the Europe was delayed. The powerful Empire in the East, and Turks' control of almost all the East and part of the West was a great concern for the Europeans. They were not safe at home due to new and 'glorious Empire of the Turks, the present terror of the world'<sup>20</sup>. The Ottoman power was interpreted by Luther as follows: 'the Pope and Turks' are Antichrist, 'the spirit and soul of Antichrist is the Pope, his flesh and body is the Turk ... The Turks are the people of the wrath of God'<sup>21</sup>.

According to the Europeans, the Ottoman power was arbitrary, and the sultans looked upon the world as his possession. Tyranny and lust of the sultans were emphasized. The Ottoman sultans were painted as enthroned either upon the magnificent throne or on the luxurious bed with naked concubines in service, and all men and women as slaves. It was a common assumption that the sultans were not constrained by law and could behead the innocents<sup>22</sup>. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, this attitude came into view as the recurrent idea to identify the absolutism of the sultans. For instance, nineteenth century English writer William Beckford, in the description of the hall of Eblis in his oriental tale *Vathek*, resonated the Ottoman Seraglio as follows:

She [Vathek's mother] resorted to a gallery where, under the guard of fifty female negroes, mute and blind of the right eye, were preserved the oil of the most venomous serpents, rhinoceros' horns, and wood of a subtle and penetrating odors procured from the interior of the Indies, together with a thousand other horrible rarities<sup>23</sup>.

Eblis and Vathek were comparable to the sultan. Like the sultan, they kept the Negroes, the mutes, the blinds and the concubines. The hall and the Seraglio collected horrible and most precious rarities. Caliph's mother, Carathis, like the Caliph himself, had absolute power and cooperation with the Powers of Darkness<sup>24</sup>. She selected the fairest and most delicate girls of the cities to entertain herself. She left the serpents and scorpions to bite the girls<sup>25</sup>. Beckford in *Vathek*<sup>26</sup> described the caliph's palace after Rycaut's description of the Ottoman Seraglio. Rycaut's remark that obedience to the authority was taught as a principle of religion at the Seraglio<sup>27</sup> appeared in *Vathek*. The Caliph was the commander of the believers who obeyed him with the Angelic mission and pious zeal. The dwarfs stood before the Caliph with hands crossed upon their bosoms in a

<sup>18</sup> D'ohsson, 185.

<sup>19</sup> Coles, 148.

<sup>20</sup> Lewis, 72.

<sup>21</sup> Lewis, 73.

<sup>22</sup> Kabbani, 75.

<sup>23</sup> Beckford, W. *Vathek*, 21.

<sup>24</sup> The Ottomans were also associated with Devil, who was the king of darkness

<sup>25</sup> Beckford, 25.

<sup>26</sup> There are two different readings of the work; positive and negative. Beckford is fascinated with the extra-ordinary and fantastic world of the oriental tales. He is a dissenter. He rejects the common Christian values and social norms. The oriental tales is a means to end. He creates a fantastic oriental world to challenge the social norms. In this sense, *Vathek* reflects the author's ideas in contrast to the common European perception of the Orient. On the other hand, Beckford works with the fantastic image of the Orient by drawing extraordinary world.

<sup>27</sup> P. S. Rycaut, 8.

respectful silence<sup>28</sup>. The Caliph prepared five tables. The first one was covered with the most exquisite dainties; the second one pleased the Caliph with the music of the skilful musicians. Caliph Vathek collected rarities of the world, most pleasing perfumes and omitted nothing that might gratify the curiosity of the inhabitants. In the palace, *Retray of Joy*, he kept the troops of young and most beautiful girls apart from women inhabited in a separate palace; flocks of slaves, eunuchs and officers attended him wherever he went. He was presented as a sovereign of the world<sup>29</sup>. He had irresistible power to 'bring desolation and horror'<sup>30</sup>. There was no law or rule which bound Vathek. He had homosexual disposition towards Gulchenraz, Nourinnihar's fiancé. He took pleasure to spend time with him<sup>31</sup>.

The absolutism of the Ottoman sultan was compared to the tyranny of the Caliph who looked at visible and invisible worlds as his own property. He made a contact with the Devil to challenge any visible or invisible power. He accepted the Giaour's guidance to the hall of Eblis, which symbolically reflected the European belief in the cooperation of Muslims and Devil. The Caliph followed the Devil's instructions. The whole multitude, even camels, knelt down before him. He directed all his subjects to the destination Eblis chose<sup>32</sup>. The scene which described the sports and plays of the fifty innocent children who were sacrificed was very tragic and touching. He exercised an absolute plunder upon the subjects. The readers of *Vathek* in 18<sup>th</sup> century England must have thought of parallels between Ottomans' practice of fractitude and Vathek's murder of the most beautiful sons of the great men to strengthen his authority<sup>33</sup>.

Montesquieu's in the *Persian Letters* also creates polemics on the tyranny and absolutism of the oriental monarchs. A letter from the Persian Seraglio interpreted the power of the Sultan and fear of the subjects: 'Return, then, magnificent Lord, return to this abode, and impress throughout it your authority. Come and alleviate despairing passions: come and remove every pretext to go astray: come to pacify complaining love and to make duty pleasant'<sup>34</sup>. Montesquieu compared Europe to the East and claimed that Europe had the ancient Greek and Roman political heritage. Royal families of the European courts kept the ancient virtues therefore all the nations of Europe had natural bounds and orders in everyday life and in the form of governments<sup>35</sup>. In particular, liberty and equality reigned in France<sup>36</sup>. He thought that the rise of the Roman Empire would have been of immense benefit to the world if there were not unjust distinction between Roman citizen and nations ruled<sup>37</sup>. On the other hand, Asia and Africa were oppressed by despots. They had no notion of what the republican government meant since they were unable to conceive the possibility of there being any other form of government than despotism. An oriental citizen, therefore, could not save himself from death if he acted against the will of sultans. The slightest fault caused him death. The Ottomans inherited the Oriental despotism and preserved the absolutism. After the succession of one prince to the throne, all the children of the royal family were murdered: 'The entire princesses are murdered, except for the one who succeed the throne due to their

<sup>28</sup> Beckford, 40.

<sup>29</sup> Beckford, 41.

<sup>30</sup> Beckford, 43.

<sup>31</sup> Rycaut argues that a beautiful young child is the most welcome gift for the Ottoman Sultan.

<sup>32</sup> Beckford, 28.

<sup>33</sup> Beckford, 15-7

<sup>34</sup> Montesquieu, 97.

<sup>35</sup> Montesquieu, 96.

<sup>36</sup> Montesquieu, 89.

<sup>37</sup> Montesquieu, 131.

terrible tyranny<sup>38</sup>. The living prince similarly misused his power to oppress people<sup>39</sup> because the absolute power of Sublime Sultan produced monstrosity and injustice<sup>40</sup>. According to Montesquieu, it was the destiny of Asia and other parts of the world to be ruled by tyrants until the Greeks and Romans introduced republicanism and civilization to the barbarians.

Elizabeth Craven travelled the Constantinople in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. She stood upon the hill overlooking the Sultan's palace and "viewed" the inside to witness the tyranny of the Ottoman Sultan. She employed a large telescope in the house to observe 'the Ottoman splendor very distinctly'<sup>41</sup>. She saw the Sultan through the glass in the Seraglio on a silver sofa from her telescope in Pera. The Sultan had a livid and pale face and dyed his beard black to look young and strong<sup>42</sup>. The Sultan by walking with few attendants in the town wanted to make people believe that he had no fears. She compared it to the children's habit of whistling in the dark to make the nurses believe that they were not afraid<sup>43</sup>. She noticed that the ministers of the Ottoman court consisted of unqualified people. The Vizier was a water carrier to Hassan Bey, the captain Pasha who was only a servant in Algiers. Offices and official status are obtained and replaced by intrigues. Each Sultan had supporters; when a Sultan changed, the ministers and staffs changed too. There was also no confidence at the court; even the Sultan's confidence could not help one:

There is a recent example here, proving that the confidence of the Sultan is not the surest way to escape a sudden and unexpected death. One Petraki, a Greek, a kind of banker to the court, by his frequent access to Achmet, raised the jealousy of the ministry, who, upon various pretences, one day in council, desired Petraki's head might fall<sup>44</sup>.

The Petraki was the secret agent of the Sultan. He kept the accounts of services but Sultan's confidence did not save the Petraki's head. The Captain Pasha and his supporters desired the head of Petraki, which Sultan Achmet could not resist<sup>45</sup>. Craven thought that revolt, idleness and perpetual disposition of the empire brought discomfort and chaos to the country. People were not happy with the present situation. They looked for peace and comfort in dull moments of rest at home and in remote places like baths and coffee-houses<sup>46</sup>. Elizabeth Craven compared the absolutism of the Sultan to the corruption of the government.

The so-called tyrannical rule which eventually leads to corruption of the Ottoman state was represented in the *Strange Adventure of Cont de Vinevil*. Penelope Aubin, like her contemporaries, develops her polemical argument with reference to the arbitrary power of sultans and officers. Women from at least ten different nations were located at the House of Pleasure. The Ottoman ministers practiced lawless force to enslave, use, exchange and poison women. A Venetian lady, Violetta, was the only child of a noble Venetian family whose life became catastrophic by the attack of the Ottoman pirates to the Coast. She was captivated and spared for the Grand Signior who gave her to the Sultan's favorite commander, Osmin. She became his mistress for two

<sup>38</sup> Montesquieu, 105.

<sup>39</sup> Montesquieu, 106.

<sup>40</sup> Montesquieu, 95.

<sup>41</sup> E. S. Craven, 268.

<sup>42</sup> The Ottomans believed that it is necessary to have a young, brave and grandeur appearance in the war. They dye their hairs and beard for this reason. It was not only to look younger, as stated by Craven.

<sup>43</sup> Craven, 300.

<sup>44</sup> Craven, 274.

<sup>45</sup> Craven, 275.

<sup>46</sup> Craven, 414.

years until she was saved and taken home by Ardelissa<sup>47</sup>. In the story the Turkish Sultan was described as a villain and tyrant who practiced an arbitrary power. The Ottoman political system was corrupted; the officers were not safe. In the *Adventure* Osmin's body was left to the street with the order of the Sultan because he was not pleased with him. The Grand Vizier deposed the Sultan and set up the younger Prince<sup>48</sup>.

Tyranny, war, incursion and lawless force were presented as the general condition of the Ottoman Empire in the eighteenth century English literature. Samuel Johnson was the popular figure of the English enlightenment. He produced oriental tales. In his famous oriental fiction *Rasselas* describes the Ottoman empire as lawless force from the eyes of eastern characters. The Arab Chief of the novel identified the Eastern countries as a natural territory of low-born tyrants. He says:

The purpose of my incursion is to increase my riches, or more properly to gather tribute. The sons of Ishmael are natural hereditary lords of this part of the continent, which is usurped by late invaders, and low-born tyrants, from whom we are compelled to take by the sword what is denied to justice<sup>49</sup>.

People were not safe in the Ottoman Egypt. Pakuah was abducted by the robbers and savages. There was no reason to suppose that the pity of the Easterners was more than their justice. They could gratify any desire and practice cruelty. They ranged the country merely to collect wealth. The Chief admitted that his occupation was war; he deliberately chose the 'obscure' desert to be safe from the authority<sup>50</sup>. He considered the Ottomans as late invaders and low-born tyrants and it was his duty as hereditary lords of the desert to fight against the Ottomans. That the Ottoman state was despotic was exhibited by the story *The Dangers of Prosperity* in chapter 20. The Prince and Imlac were well accepted in a Kiosk inside the forest by a wealthy merchant. They envied for the luxury and prosperity of the merchant. However, he says:

My condition has indeed the appearance of happiness, but appearances are delusive. My prosperity puts my life in danger; the Bassa of Egypt is my enemy, incensed only by my wealth and popularity. I have been hitherto protected against him by the princes of the country; but, as the favour of the great is uncertain, I know not how soon my defenders may be persuaded to share the plunder with the Bassa. I have sent my treasures into a distant country, and, upon the first alarm, am prepared to follow them. Then will my enemies riot in my mansion, and enjoy the gardens which I have planted<sup>51</sup>.

The tyranny of the state changed the general condition of people in Egypt. Almost every man hated all the rest and was hated by them. People's lives were in a continual escapes, faction and treachery. The dwellers of Bassa were not happy with the ruler: 'every tongue was muttering censure and every eye was searching for a fault<sup>52</sup>. At last, the Bassa was evocated by the Sultan and sent to Constantinople in chains. The Prince noticed among the Orientals that power of the tyranny had no efficacy, safety and glory. The Sultan was subject to torments, suspicion and dread of enemies. Therefore, there was a continual succession and deposition because each Sultan had different favorites. The tyranny of the Ottomans was a general character of the state which created unhappy condition for people.

<sup>47</sup> P. Aubin, 16.

<sup>48</sup> Aubin, 26.

<sup>49</sup> S. Johnson, *Rasselas*, 47.

<sup>50</sup> Johnson, 48.

<sup>51</sup> Johnson, 79.

<sup>52</sup> Johnson, 30.



The Ottoman Sultans were depicted by the 18<sup>th</sup> century writers as a despotic ruler. The absolutism and tyranny were presented as a universal image of the Ottomans. Niccolo Machiavelli compared the Sultan and French King on this term and stated that monarchy was governed by one Lord who selected, appointed and changed all his Vassals as he pleased. The king of French king, on the other hand, was controlled and acknowledged by preeminent lords without whose assistance he could not rule<sup>53</sup>. Two dominant characters were presented as convincing proofs for the tyrannical and despotic nature of the Turkish government.

Firstly, the Ottomans were strong foreign enemy to Europe. They had a different but more stable state-monarchy which was interpreted as despotic and tyrannical to emphasize the absolutism, misrule and lawlessness. The Sultan was imagined to be served by flocks of captives, slaves, eunuchs, young girls and boys of Christian origin. European kings were subject to public control while Sultan's affairs were kept as secret. There was a continual state of chaos, instability and violence in the country due to the absolute ruler who owned the lands and people as his property. Bodin, a French writer, argued that the Sultans ruled over the subjects with a total power, considered themselves as the legal owner of the subjects [slave] and lands<sup>54</sup>. Paul Rycout interpreted the Ottoman state system to emphasize the benefits of the English political system. The Ottoman despotism, as the worst-case, was compared to the democratic and just monarchy of the European states in certain ways; English and French kings ruled by law, the sultans ruled with absolutism. The sultans' absolutism was also employed as a polemical argument to mask the deeper criticism of the European kings and monarchies, which safely survived under the steady and influential threat of the "despotic" Turks. For instance, Louis XIV was accused of turning the French court into Turkish Seraglio by his politics. Secondly, the Ottoman political system was also referred as despotic and tyrannical due to lack of efficient knowledge and understanding. The ambassadors, travelers and merchants communicated with the Ottoman authorities through dragomans who were mediators. Very few travelers and writers were interested in Turkish language and civilization. Despotism, tyranny and absolute power were applied as political terms in the context of power struggle between Europe and Ottoman Empire.

The Oriental tyranny and sultans' absolutism were re-interpreted by travelers who refused the general perception. A few noblemen left Europe to learn about the political system of the Asian states. For example, Anquetil, a French nobleman, decided to go India. He lived there from 1755 to 1761. He learnt Indian language and culture and read the Indian sacred book. He argued that the European minds were filled by writer like Montesquieu with the old-fashioned ideas and stereotypes. Anquetil regarded despotism as a violation of monarchy and its constitutional principles. He stated that there was no real basis in Turkey to justify the despotism. The private property existed, and rulers were bound by laws in the Ottoman Empire. According to Anquetil, Montesquieu dwelled on selections which suited his arguments to distort the image of the Orient so that France and England could confiscate Eastern lands and wealth<sup>55</sup>. Jean Thevenot, another French nobleman, refused the idea that Turks were devils and barbarians without faith. He visited Ottoman Empire and witnessed that Turks were good people with virtue and admirable civilization. David Hume praised the

<sup>53</sup> Machievalli, 4. Bölüm; <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1232/1232-h/1232-h.htm>

<sup>54</sup> BODIN, Jean, Les Six livres de la Republique de I. daha fazla bilgi için bakınız: Ergin Ergül, "Jean Bodin'in Devlet Teorisi Üzerindeki Osmanlı Etkisi", *Gazi Üniversitesi Hukuk Fakültesi Dergisi* XX 2016, 1.

<sup>55</sup> Quoted in the Dictionary of Ideas, [www.lib.virginia.edu](http://www.lib.virginia.edu)

administration of justice in the Turkish Empire<sup>56</sup>. The changing face of the political relations between Ottoman, France and England reshaped the image of the Ottomans. For instance, the Ottoman ambassador's arrival in France with almost two hundred retainers was an extraordinary event which reflected the changing face of relation. The French press wrote this extraordinary event with sympathy and keen interest. It was written in the French press that Turks were more than barbarians after which Turkish clothing was re-popularized and the French associated themselves with Turks<sup>57</sup>. The 16<sup>th</sup> century political realism was restaged; negotiation and alliance between France and the Ottomans were restated. As usual, the present shift was political because the Ottomans were no longer a threat to Europe. They were transformed into an old friend who had to be protected from the hostile enemies and so-called new despotic powers like Russia and Prussia.

## 2. The Ottoman Model Reversed

The Ottoman political context was not intelligible within the limit of certain stereotypes and images. The Ottomans inherited a synthesis of Central Asian, Islamic, Persian and Byzantium political culture. The Ottomans received and 'cobbled' state-structures from different cultures and re-appropriated them to establish ever-lasting empire<sup>58</sup>. The Ottoman Sultans preferred flexible foreign policy to enhance multiple alliances abroad. The law of fratricide [deposition] secured the heir. The structure evolved with the state and in a short time the Ottomans constructed 'polylingual, polyethnic, and polyreligious [empire] that existed in a striking contrast to non-Ottoman cities in the Mediterranean and European cities'<sup>59</sup>. The Ottomans' political ambition was to be the only ruling power of the world therefore the state was organized with the ambition to rule over the East and West. Mehmed II compared the state to the sun and declared that order and peace in the world could only be achieved under the rule of a single empire<sup>60</sup>. After he conquered Constantinople, it became ambition for him to change the flow of history and to be the just ruler of the East and West, which later became the general ambition of the Ottoman Sultans. The Ottomans organized the state to achieve this ambition, and rules were made to keep the control in one hand. The Ottomans had a rapid growth in the ancient territory of the Byzantium, which created fear and concern in Europe. The Ottoman *devşirme* system was developed to keep the official positions under the control and to prevent the interruption of any strong nobility. For example, the law of fratricide was made to hold the power in one hand, which was considered as strong proof for the tyranny and absolutism of the sultans. The law of fratricide relied upon the precision that it was better for one or few men to die than the world's disorder. In the succession of each Sultan the surviving brothers were strangled with silken bowstring, a form of execution whose blood could not otherwise be shed. The present practice was thought to have prevented the Ottoman dynasty from the dispersal but had a tragic end for many newborn members of the dynasty. For instance, Sultan Mehmet III ordered the execution of his nineteen brothers after he succeeded the throne. The law was first constitutionalized by Mehmet II but the practice was not new. Byzantium Emperor John VI Cantacuzenus made this practice as an established rule. The law was practiced until the reign of Ahmet I. The law of fratricide was replaced by new constitutional rule which regulated the succession of

<sup>56</sup> D. Hume, Dictionary of Ideas, [www.lib.virginia.edu](http://www.lib.virginia.edu)

<sup>57</sup> Kraiser, 5.

<sup>58</sup> D. Goffman, 41.

<sup>59</sup> Goffman, 54.

<sup>60</sup> İ. Ortaylı, 76.

sultans to the throne. The new law gave right to the eldest son of the royal family to succeed<sup>61</sup>. Then, the Princes were kept in *kafes* as imprisoned until they died or succeeded the throne.

The Ottoman household had a particular significance in the state organization. The social and military relations were intertwined, and both served the political ambitions of the state which was represented by the Sultan whom was given an absolute power. In practice, however, he was not exempted from the law and had to share his power with the members of Divan which occupied the center of the Ottoman government. Divan consisted of state officers from chancery, finance, law, religion, and military services. There were also well-organized staffs of civil servants in the Empire's court and each was divided into departments with separate centers. For instance, financial and religious affairs were independent and other state offices were depended on the Grand Vizier. The Divan met regularly to decide on significant state matters and implemented the decisions. There was also a particular system of family inheritance in the Ottoman Empire. Some official positions were inherited by a member of the family. A member of Candarli family, for instance, inherited administrative and military positions in the Ottoman government for a long time.

In the political structure of the state the Sultan was given a greater power than many of the European monarchs, but he was not a tyrant. Members of Divan and *scholars* could sometime unite their power to dethrone the Sultan. Failure in economic policy, inability to control the military administration, insanity and ignorance were valid to deposit a Sultan, which proved that 'the Sultans were limited in their absolutism to a much greater extent than any other European monarch'<sup>62</sup>. There were also few instances of bloodless deposition. The military administrators and army forces were not pleased with Bayezid's desire to leave the throne to Prince Ahmet: 'The Janissaries cried out 'Our Padişah is old and sick; we want Selim Şah in his place ... the old Sultan was forced into retirement and died within a month'<sup>63</sup>. Then, Prince Selim I, upon the demand of the janissaries succeeded the throne. There were seventeen depositions and thirty-seven Sultans in the 650 years of dynastic history.

The Ottoman Sultans could not be a despot since they were subject to laws no less than the humblest of the slaves. For instance, the Ottoman historian described Suleiman I as free from the 'robe of pride' and with no vanity and arrogance (Goffman, 107). The present situation was written by a few travelers who witnessed the condition. In 1786 Choisseul-Gouffier, French ambassador, suggested military reforms in the Ottoman army but complained that 'Things are not as in France, where the king is sole master' in the Ottoman Empire. Men who occupied high offices had to 'be convinced to the benefits of the reforms'<sup>64</sup>. Mehmed II and Suleiman I made the *justice* the basic and the constant law of the State Constitution. Kraiser also admitted that Turkish Sultans did not rule arbitrarily. The constitutional law bound Sultans and every subject<sup>65</sup>. There should be a legitimate reason for Sultan to execute someone. Bendy wrote that everyday the Sultan went out disguised, and if he saw any injustice he immediately chopped off the head. He witnessed Sultan to order the execution of the tax collector due to bribing<sup>66</sup>. The Sultan was not the owner of the lands, and he did not have a free will to

<sup>61</sup> B. Lewis, 47-8.

<sup>62</sup> İ. Ortaylı, 135-42.

<sup>63</sup> D. Goffmann, 63.

<sup>64</sup> B. S. Lewis, 82.

<sup>65</sup> Kraiser, 6.

<sup>66</sup> D. Goffman, 222.

take any one's private property: 'The Great Signor, though general heir to his people, never presumes to touch their lands and money, which go in an uninterrupted succession to children'<sup>67</sup>. If the Sultan ever confiscated the private estate of someone, he had to assign it to other agents. He could not reserve it for him: 'in Turkey the [sultan] has scarcely any more rights over the inheritances than do the sovereign of Europe'<sup>68</sup>. The Ottoman provisions were ruled under the particular system of land-owning. The *Sipahi* was the formal owner of the land and was responsible for the collection of taxes and troops during the war season. But he was not the sole ruler in the provisions. He shared his power with *Sancaqbeyi* and kadi who were also responsible for the order. The central government could not restrain or interrupt the general flow of life in the Empire:

... [D]espotic Ottoman state resembled nothing so much as a "democracy", in which conflict among sultans, viziers, pashas, and janissaries that proponents of the standard model pointed as proof of despotism served in reality as a restraint on rulers, thereby insuring adherence to law. The very instability of the Turkish political system, represented in the standard model as the necessary result of its violation of nature and as a precondition of its ultimate demise, was now ingeniously represented as proof that system's capacity for self-correction and, thereby, for a long-term self-maintenance'<sup>69</sup>.

The Ottoman government was comparatively more liberal and modern than many European states until the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The European governments and people could not develop tolerance to foreigners until the 18<sup>th</sup> century. For instance, in 1602 citizens of Venice conditioned a proposal against the establishment of institutions which would provide the Ottoman merchants to make trade with Europe. The Venetian argued that Turks' residence would inevitably lead to the introduction of their "immoral" religion to the Christendom, which would be the greatest scandal ever happened in Europe. The Venetians associated the Ottoman merchants with heretics and Jews and argued that such an establishment could do more harm to Venice than Jews. However, unlike the intolerant practice of the Venetians, the Turks did not impose their doctrines or prevented foreigners to establish trade centers in Turkey. The subjects of the Ottoman Empire were free to follow and practice whatever religions they wanted on condition that they respected the supremacy of Turks and paid the taxes. Constantinople, for instance, was the only city in the world until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century where Christians, Jews and heretics could live in peace and security.

## Conclusion

The Majority of the 18<sup>th</sup> century literary narratives depicted the Ottoman sultan as a tyrant and despot living in seclusion at the Seraglio. Yet, it was an Ottoman state custom for a Sultan show himself to people in certain occasions. Every Friday he used to salute people from *Cuma-Selamlığı*<sup>70</sup>. People who had a complaint or trouble could submit letter to the sultan. In religious festivals Sultans had to give money and gifts to common people. Circumcision celebrations were also public occasions. The festival was arranged in the honor of several princes. Prince Ahmet and Prince Mustafa were circumcised with impressive celebrations. In 1720 there was another occasion in which entertainments were prepared to please common people; meat, soup, rice and *baklava* [sweet] were served for fifteen days. Only for *Baklava* 12,088 kilograms of honey were used in this festival. Sultan and his subjects used to exchange gifts. Faroqhi states this as follows:

<sup>67</sup> L. Montagu, xxviii.

<sup>68</sup> Kraiser, 8.

<sup>69</sup> Kraiser, 8.

<sup>70</sup> The Sultan goes from the Seraglio to the mosque on the hoarse and salutes the subjects who were allowed to submit their wish and complaints by letter.

In the festivals ordered by the sultan, the exchange of gifts was an important element. Most of our information relates to gifts presented by senior officials and foreign envoys. However, there was also a similar exchange between the sultan and his subjects. In the accounts relating to the festival of 1720, the gifts from various guilds are enumerated. These were of substantial material value and must have placed a considerable burden on the artisans, who were often quite poor. Unfortunately, few documents have yet been found which reflect inter-guild disputes about the apportionment of costs. For his part, the sultan gave the guilds presents of money to express his satisfaction with their offerings<sup>71</sup>.

Festivals were public occasions where sultan and common people met and trade guilds and spiritual organizations took special roles. So, sultans were not in seclusion.

In conclusion, order, flexibility, balance and justice were the overwhelming characters of the Ottomans who were careful not to interfere with the historical and political order. The Ottomans preserved for a long-time diversity of cultures, and stood for centuries in a more liberal direction than Europe<sup>72</sup>. The secret of the longevity and order in the Ottoman Empire depended on the flexible and just administration of the sultans who had to consider and keep the justice as the backbone of the state. The Sultans' ability to rule over the vast majority of regions and people; the bureaucracy, competent rulers, peculiar land system and taxation of the Empire was part of this system. The concepts of constitutionality, the citizenship and establishment of legal codes that granted each subject equal right did not exist in Europe until the early modern period.

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<sup>71</sup> S. Faroqhi, 181.

<sup>72</sup> D. Goffman, 92.

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