



DRAMA, MINORITIES AND THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

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Abstract: The birth of ‘Turkic Drama’ within the dramatic rise of nationalist eulogy is, as opposed to popular belief, principally grounded on the theatric activities of ethnic and religious minorities in a non-Western society, the late nineteenth-and early twentieth century Ottoman Empire. The origin of the crisis in terms of the making of national Turkish drama, which has been based almost entirely on the practices of Ottoman minority groups (specifically those of Greeks, Armenians who were under Christian and Judaic beliefs) during three differing phases of late Ottoman period, *Tanzimat, Istibdat and Meşrutiyet Eras*, is the focus of this paper. Centering on the role played by ethnicity and religion in the Ottoman socio-cultural life, this paper argues that Ottoman ethnic and religious minorities, though divided by Ottoman Islamic ideology of millet system, produced a highly cultural and literary upshot: the groundwork for ‘Turkish drama’.²

Keywords: *Ottoman minorities, Turkic drama, ethnicity, religion*

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Makale gönderim tarihi: 08 Ağustos 2016; Kabul tarihi: 10 Ekim 2016

² This paper was partly presented in the 10th IDEA Conference held by Boğaziçi University, İstanbul, Turkey.

DRAMA, AZINLIKLAR VE OSMANLI İMPARATORLUĞU

Öz: Genel kanının aksine Türk tiyatrosunun doğuşu o yoğun milliyetçi methiyelerin arasında on dokuzuncu yüzyıl sonu yirminci yüzyıl başında temelde Batılı olmayan Osmanlı İmparatorluğu içindeki etnik ve dini azınlıkların tiyatral etkinliklerine dayanır. Bu çalışma, Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nun son üç aşaması olan Tanzimat, İstibdat ve Meşrutiyet dönemleri boyunca neredeyse tamamıyla Osmanlı azınlıklarının (özellikle de Hıristiyan ve Yahudi Rumların ve Ermenilerin) faaliyetleri üzerine inşa edilmiş bir milli Türk tiyatrosunun yaratılmasının kökenindeki krize odaklanmaktadır. Osmanlı sosyo-kültürel hayatında etnisite ve dinin oynadığı rol üzerinde yoğunlaşan bu çalışma, Osmanlı etnik ve dini azınlıklarının bir Osmanlı-İslam ideolojisi olan *millet* sistemiyle bölünmesine rağmen Türk Tiyatrosu'nun temelini atacak ciddiyette kültürel ve edebi ürünler ortaya koyduğunu savunmaktadır.

Anahtar sözcükler: *Osmanlı azınlıkları, Türk tiyatrosu, etnisite, din*

1. INTRODUCTION

The 19th and early 20th centuries, during which the Ottoman Empire practiced her last rays, were periods of pregnancy to the formation of several happenings at the same time. It was an exceedingly multifarious era in which major social, cultural, political, ideological and literary ups and downs were to the front. The key happenings encompassed the *Tanzimat Edict* (1839) which “exemplified a general inclination toward a more secular conception of the state” (Hanioglu, 2008, p. 74), bringing down the panegyric perception of *millet*³ system with a “significant first step toward the transformation of hitherto Muslim, Christian and Jewish subjects into *Ottomans*”

³ Kemal H. Karpat explains this phenomenon as follows: “The *millet* system was a socio-cultural and communal framework based, firstly, on religion, and secondly, on ethnicity [...which...] emerged gradually as an answer to the efforts of the Ottoman administration to take into account the organization and culture of the various ethnic-religious groups. The system provided, on the one hand, a degree of religious, cultural, and ethnic continuity within these communities, while on the other; it permitted their incorporation into the Ottoman administrative, economic and political system. (Kemal H. Karpat, *Studies on Ottoman Social and Political History*, Brill NV, Leiden, 2002, pp. 611-12.)

(Hanioglu, 2008, p. 74). Being a diktat “generally accepted as the beginning of constitutional and institutional reform in the Ottoman Empire” (Deringil, 2004, p. 108), the *Tanzimat Edict* gave the Ottoman minorities a lead to a reverence for their ethnic and religious equality guaranteeing “before the law to all subjects of the Ottoman Empire, Muslim and non-Muslim alike” (Deringil, 2004, p. 108). The ends of that edict were not merely limited to the ostensible reforms of identity egalitarianisms; they also instigated a vitalization of ‘super-Westernization’ (Hanioglu, 2012, p. 21) and an intro to secularism (Berkes, 1998, p. 155) by an initial departure of Islamic autonomy in the Ottoman reign.

From now on, many scholars and intelligentsia sought to benefit from the originality of this new order. As a contra, Ottomanism was embraced as “the ‘official ideology’ based on the idea of the Ottoman citizenship” (Ardiç, 2012, p. 44). Nevertheless, Nazan Çiçek corroborates:

This patronizing Western treatment of the Tanzimat epoch almost completely eliminated the role of native agents in the Ottoman modernization process by reducing them either to mere enthusiastic reformist collaborators of European powers in the Ottoman Empire or to less enthusiastic but equally pusillanimous political characters who agreed to carry out the reform plans devised in London or Paris imposed upon them. (Çiçek, 2010, p. 16).

However, the egalitarianism the Tanzimat Epoch pioneered was not squeezed into the year of 1839; it was strengthened through “the most important step along the road to the rule of law [...] with the introduction of the 1876 ‘Kanun-i Esasiye,’ or Constitution, which also started the period known as the *First Meşrutiyet*, or First Constitutional Period” (Alexander et al., 2008, p. 38). The First Meşrutiyet was also a scheme that was on the Ottoman life through “the conjunction between the men of the Tanzimat, the Young Ottomans and an increasing European pressure to introduce reforms prioritising non-Muslim elements of the Empire” (Taglia, 2015, pp. 3-4). As a consequence, there came into sight a more egalitarian law in the Ottoman socio-cultural being following all these originalities; however, within a couple of years, Sultan Abdülhamid II disbanded

the legislature and put an end to the constitution (Ardıç, 2012, p. 54). From 1878 till 1908, Abdülhamid II “established himself as the absolute ruler” (Ardıç, 2012, p. 54) which shaped an environment of absolute monarch or autocracy, or absolutism named as *Istibdat*⁴. During *Istibdat Era*, Abdulhamid II “had a clear and realistic view about the nationality problem in the Ottoman state, but aside from a few economic and cultural incentives, he failed to produce any lasting solution to that problem” (Karpas, 2001, p. 172). Kemal H. Karpas (2001, p. 172) observes that “Obviously, his increasingly autocratic stance provided no remedy but, on the contrary, worsened the already tense intraethnic national conflicts, and he became the target of attacks by non-Muslim groups, notably by Armenians” (Karpas, 2001, p. 172). In order to find some solutions to such problems, oddly enough Abdulhamid II “actually granted them considerable economic incentives, autonomy, and cultural freedom which they used to strengthen their control of the community—which, ultimately, they turned against the political center” (Karpas, 2001, p. 172).

This deterioration was another dynamic that prompted an urgent call for a pioneering uncensored law. In 1908, with the utmost protests and politics of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) (*İttihad ve Terakki Cemiyeti*), the Second Meşrutiyet (*İkinci Meşrutiyet*), or Second Constitutional Period began (Kapucu & Palabıyık, 2008, p. 71) and the constitution was “amended by the ruling CUP in 1909 by adding a new sentence to the Article 3 requiring an oath by the sultan that he be loyal to the ‘blessed *sharia* and the rules of the Basic Law [the constitution]’” (Ardıç, 2012, p. 54). Thus, launching a limitation to the doings of the Sultan, the Second Meşrutiyet was an additional momentous march towards the egalitarianism in the Ottoman Empire. However, at the very beginning of this fresh constitutional period, as it is expressed by Stefano Taglia (2015, p. 135):

[...] while things seemed to be positive for the maintenance of a multi-religious and multi-ethnic Empire, the turning

⁴ There are a few various views on the word *Istibdat*. Kemal H. Karpas writes that *Istibdat* was differentiated between oppression (*zulüm*) and absolutism or autocracy which was a viewpoint made by Ahmet Mithat. He continues saying that “the latter was described as a means of government designed to benefit society, for the ruler (sultan) did not use it for his own personal gain. (The Politicization of Islam: Reconstructing Identity, State, Faith and Community in the Late Ottoman State, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 196.)

point came in 1909 and then 1912, when the Unionist government became more authoritarian and Turkist oriented. [...]. It is after these two dates and the taking of power on the part of the Unionists, then, that signs of the difficulty to overcome the ethnic, linguistic and cultural differences between the various components of the Ottoman Empire emerged from a background that had a previously appeared to be one of relative cohesiveness [...].

These three differing periods of Ottoman past gave some routes to the polarization of literature and literary width. The convergence in multi-religious and multi-ethnic identities brought some rich diversification in representation of literary genres. Theatre was among those mirror genres. As Nermin Menemencioglu (1983, p. 48) establishes, “The destruction of the janissary corps in 1826, the reform edicts of 1839 and 1856, the Treaty of Paris at the end of the Crimean War, which admitted the Ottoman Empire into the concert of Europe, each inaugurated a new phase in the Turkish theatre”.

2. OTTOMAN THEATRE AND MINORITIES

The restructurings the *Tanzimat Edict* initiated were all together practiced within the literary productions; the major figures were Şinasi, Ziya Paşa, Namık Kemal, Rezaizade Mahmut Ekrem, Abdülhak Hamit and Samipaşazade (Dayanç, undated, p. 82), all of whom sought to broaden the appeal of literature and bring it into line with developments in the West. Among these productions, the theatre communities and dramatic works were no exception. After the proclamation of the Tanzimat Edict, the western-oriented theatre was propped up and “during the reign of Sultan Abdulmecid I, the Western theater companies (mainly Italian and French) were regularly invited to perform in Istanbul, and some actions were taken toward developing indigenous theatrical traditions” (Abazov, 2009, p. 102). With western influences, various sultans constructed a number of theatrical buildings or playhouses for professional or amateur performances. Metin And (1984, p. 51), for instance, notes that Sultan Abdulmecid built a theatre close to the Dolmabahçe Palace in 1858, whilst in 1889 Sultan Abdülhamid constructed a theatre in the Yıldız Palace. These theatre buildings welcomed those professionals or amateurs coming out of the Ottoman quarters. Among these outsiders,

there were such different actors and actresses as Adalaide Ristori, Ira Aldridge, Alessandro Salvini, Jean Coquelin, Sarah Bernhardt, Ernesto Rossi, Frederic Febvre, Adalbert Matkowsky, Rejane, Ermete Novelli, and Andre Antione (And, 1983, p. 164).

On the other hand, the theatrical performances were not restricted to those who came from any European countries. The Tanzimat contributed much to the insiders who felt more courageous to build upon their own nation-bound communities. Even before the proclamation of the Tanzimat, some ambassadors built their own theatre houses to exhibit performances in Istanbul. As it is expressed by Menemencioğlu (1983, p. 48), “It was in Pera [Beyoğlu] that the Marquis de Nointel, Louis XIV’s famous ambassador, built for himself next to the French Embassy a theatre on the model of the Teatro Farnese in Perma, where the latest plays by Moliere and Corneille were performed”. Menemencioğlu (1983, p. 49) notes that despite the fact that the initial group was the Italian community which structured some theatrical performances, “various Ottoman minorities made early experiments, of which the most interesting was the Armenian amateur theatre, which began in 1810”. With a same supposition, Metin And (1972, p. 43) establishes that the Italian community was the earliest minority which exhibited several ballets and operas in Istanbul in 1524; these theatrical shows were not only watched by the Turkish people, but the Turkish people took some part in their representation, as well.

The Armenian theatre groups were of great significance. They were the essentials that created the presence of the Ottoman theatre. The oldest plays of the Ottoman theatre were staged in Armenian language, though several of them were translations from different languages (And, 1983, p. 170). Metin And (1983, pp. 157, 170) observes that the early theatrical performances in Turkish were exhibited much later, and the Turkish or Muslim actors or actresses were not on the stages for a long time. It was, in fact, due to the Islamic viewpoint that caused some hindrance in the performances in Turkish and by Turkish and Muslim performers. As it is articulated by Rafis Abazov (2009, p. 102) “The conservative members of the society and die-hard *ulemas* have strongly opposed theatrical plays, especially for public appearances or representation of women, citing

the need to maintain public morality and to follow the religious traditions”.

Being the frontrunner of the Ottoman Theatre, Güllü Agop (1840-1902), originally Agop Vartovyan and also known as Agop Ağa, was unquestionably the reformer of the Ottoman Theatre, and was the name who introduced the earliest performances in Turkish language, other than his mother tongue, Armenian language. After the declaration of Tanzimat Edict in 1839, upon a number of amendments in the Ottoman *millet* conception, Güllü Agop fashioned a new phase of theatricality in the Ottoman socio-cultural life through pioneering a number of Armenian actors and actresses. The Ottoman Theatre, which is well thought-out to be the earliest national Turkish theatre by Metin And, was under the rule of Güllü Agop (And, 1972, p. 113), however, it was not in a firm regulation to perform plays in Turkish, though Güllü Agop paid great attention to include Turkish actors and Turkish plays within his stage performances (And, 1972, p. 113). The problems in the correct practice of Turkish language were the chief attention of Güllü Agop; the problem was due to the lack of Turkish performers in numbers. Hence, Güllü Agop fashioned various productions in Armenian language, and these productions were for the most part acted by such Armenian actors/actresses as Agavni Zabel, David Triyants, Annik Çuhacıyan, Yeranuhi Karakaşyan, Vergine Karakaşyan, Mari Nivart, Dikran Tospatyan, Siranuş and Asdgrik among many others (And, 1972, pp. 114-15). To Petra de Bruijn (1993, p. 187), Güllü Agop’s Ottoman Theatre was in a state monopoly for the performance of plays in Turkish for ten years, and this situation provided a basis for bringing Turkish playwrights or actors in theatrical creativeness; for instance, Ahmet Vefik Pasha translated Moliere while Ahmet Cevdet translated Shakespeare into Turkish. To Suraiya Faroqhi (2007, p. 260), proclaiming a similar discourse to Bruijn’s, “between 1870 and 1880, the ‘Ottoman Theatre’ had a monopoly on Ottoman plays with set texts”.

Besides Armenians, there were various other minorities that accommodated much with the Ottoman theatrical activities. Metin And (1972, p. 43) observes that it was not only Greeks, Jews and Armenians who contributed much to the making of Turkish theatre, but those fresh-water Franks (*tatlısu frenkleri*); that is, the Italians, the French and the Germans. In her analysis, Faroqhi (2007, p. 260)

emphasizes:

Alongside these there was also theatre in the European sense of the word. French and Italian theatre troupes were particularly frequent visitors to Pera (Beyoğlu); many members of their audiences came from the resident Levantine population (whom the Ottomans dubbed ‘fresh-water Franks’).

Being the earliest performers among the Ottoman minorities, the Italians were very prolific in stage recitals. Functioning as a health institution, Societa Operaia Italiano, after its foundation in 1863, contributed much to music, opera, stage performances and the theatre (And, 1972, p. 43). Stanford J. Shaw and Ezel Kural Shaw (1977, p. 129) express that “the first real Ottoman theatre, known as the French Theatre (*Fransız Tiyatrosu*), was built in the heart of Beyoğlu by an Italian named Giustiniani, with the financial support of the Ottoman government as well as several foreign embassies (1840)”.

Among the other minorities, there were Greek, German, English, and French groups which accompanied with the theatrical acts in the Ottoman Empire. The Greeks were of a great number and they formed an imperative position in the Ottoman theatrical presentations. Nicholas Doumanis (2013, p. 31) stresses:

In 1909, the 3,000-strong community in Ankara launched ‘I Anorthosis’ (‘The Restoration’) with the express aim of reintroducing Greek to its Turkish speaking community. In the meantime, it also promoted Greek theatre and staged a number of performances in Turkish translation.

However, from Metin And’s writings, we reach that though there is not a certain date about the first Greek performances, there are a few evidences that the first performances were earlier than the Tanzimat Edict. For instance, in 1818, Aeschylus’s *The Persians*, Georgios Chortatzis’s *Erophile*, the dramatic works of Metastasio, and the comedic works of Goldoni and Moliere were performed in the rich Greek houses (And, 1972, p. 47). After the declaration of the Tanzimat Edict in 1839, many Greek plays were produced and many

of them were staged in differing settings. There came into being a very prolific Greek works that were presented by actors throughout Istanbul and Izmir (And, 1972, pp. 47-49). Among the famous Greek playwrights, D. K. Missidzis, Alexandros Zoiros, Odyssefs Dimitrakos, Epamonindas Stamatiadis, Dimitrios Vyzantios and etc. were to the front (And, 1972, pp. 48-49).

Until the introduction of the first Turkish play by İbrahim Şinasi in 1859, various diverse playwrights from different minorities produced some theatrical works, whether they were original or translation. Their writings were a basis for the emergence of Turkish theatre. Upon Şinasi's *The Wedding of the Poet* (Şair Evlenmesi-1859), a romantic play, various writers held some national topics trying to reflect the socio-political aura of the period. Namık Kemal's *Fatherland and Silistra* (Vatan Yahut Silistre-1873) reflected patriotic and heroic subjects (Brujin, 1993, p. 187).

3. CONCLUSION

In fact, the Ottoman Empire was a union that hosted various nationalities and religions. Though being considered as minorities in terms of their numbers, they had some vital effects in combining the history of Turkish Literature. Sometimes they were rewarded in terms of their mannerisms, sometimes were reproached. Though their literary productions were to the front for the most time, their rights were largely restricted due to governmental procedures.

After the Tanzimat Edict in 1839, the Ottoman minorities found some equality within their socio-cultural life, and this new atmosphere created a base for their nationalist viewpoint. The Edict and the two new-fangled Constitutional Eras helped the minority groups to manufacture their own literature, and theatre was no exception. In the Ottoman Empire, it was an obvious finale that the Ottoman Theatre was not 'national' as it was a representative of the *millet* system in the Ottoman social and cultural life. Here, it is vital to highlight that the multicultural and multinational happening was a crucial obstruction in front of the 'Turkic' drama, because the sense for creating their own theatres was essential to the other minorities. For instance, Greeks produced the sense of Greek Theatre, Armenians produced Armenian Theatre, French produced French Theatre, etc. Thus, the Ottoman

minorities were producing non-Turkish theatrical works that could not be considered Turkic.

On the other hand, such a newly-fangled ideology as Ottomanism was a hindrance in front of the formation of a national drama, since it covered the eulogy of ‘single’ identity of Ottoman hierarchy, in which all groups were gathered under one roof, thus producing all-yearned Ottoman multinational harmony. Though not being an impediment for exclusively ‘Turkic’ drama, the Islamic notion that the theatrical actions were all immoral and corrupt was a significant barrier in front of theatrical productions of the period. Thus, for the most part, it was the Ottoman minorities and western communities that affected the making of Turkic drama.

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