

WESTERN PRESENTATION OF THE ORIENT

Yrd. Doç. Dr. Kamil AYDIN

In the course of the last few decades of the 20th century due to various political religious ethnic and economic transformations, the East has become a major focus of attention. Vast cultural and scientific - initially anthropological, archeological and geological - discoveries in the region, particularly in the Middle East¹ during the 19th and early 20th centuries have served further to shift the attention of the imperialist powers to this region.

For centuries, East and West remained at a distance either in total ignorance or possessing only superficial knowledge of each other. Each has tended to stress the other's weakness and ugliness rather than its strength and beauty. Their mutual relations have hitherto been determined in an atmosphere of suspicion, fear and scorn despite the fact that "many of the fundamental patterns of western civilisation had been developed in Egypt, Mesopotamia and Palestine, ...most of the basic social institutions of the West as well as the ethical and philosophical concepts of its people found their beginnings."²

Since the Orient is the place where the Sun rises, it has evoked a variety of mystical connotations in the languages of different nations i.e. German uses the word 'Morgenland' (land of morning) for the Orient,

designating the Occident as 'Abendland' (Land of evening). Borges thinks that in the word 'Orient' Spanish speakers can sense the word 'Oro' which means gold, and throws attention to Dante's famous line: "Dolce color d' Oriental Zaffiro."³

Critics, like Nederveen Pieterse, have examined the Orient from a historical perspective and concluded that the region is the homeland of basic religious entities as well as divergent civilisations. Pieterse, in accordance with his investigation of the region, emphasises:

Indeed Christianity is Asian in origin, and on many medieval maps we find Jerusalem depicted as the centre of the World, an Asian site as the centre of the Christian world -this is the dominant depiction on 'Mappae mundi' from the Seventh to the Thirteenth centuries and occurs frequently on maps from 1200 to 1500.⁴

Moreover, from a literary perspective, Luce Lopez Baralt, in a review of the *Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History* points out:

Europe was indeed being intellectually and artistically conquered by the Arabs, Menocal fails to mention, however, that not at all medieval scholars were so shy about their debt to Islam. Spiritual writers such as Jean Gerson, St. Albertus Magnus, and Alanus de Insulis quoted Al-Ghazzali, Avicenna, and Averroes without any hesitation.⁵

Besides various fields of the social sciences, literary scholarship also contributed to the western imperialistic process in the Middle East, for the origin of literary studies about the area can be traced back to the colonial period of the 18th and 19th centuries. The appearance of the first European version of *The Thousand and One Nights* (1704), first of the volumes by French Orientalist Antoine Galland, paved the way for further involvement in the Middle East. When the Latin American writer, Jorge Luis Borges points out the significance of *The Thousand and One Nights* due to its pioneering position in a new trend of writing, he also expresses the great depth of his admiration for the book:

Within the general consciousness of the Orient - something vast, immobile, magnificent, incomprehensible - there were certain high points, and I would like to mention a few. This seems to me the best approach to a subject I love as much, and I have loved since childhood, *The Book of the Thousand and One Nights*, or as it is called in the English version - the one I first read - *The Arabian nights*, a title that is not without mystery, but is less beautiful.⁶

However, prior to the publication of *The Thousand and One Nights*, it was also possible to encounter several eastern themes, characters and images in some European literary pieces; examples include the protagonist of Moliere's *Comedy le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* (1670). He is a young man masquerading as a Turkish dignitary, and Racine's *Bajazet* (1672) is a tragedy of contemporary Seraglio intrigue. In the early 18th century, Montesquieu's literary satire

Lettres Persanes (1721) and Rameau's opera *Les Indes Galantes* (1735), with its ballet interlude *Le Turc genereux* might count among the many examples of this trend.

As European narrations of the Orient developed through time, there was a deliberate stress on those qualities that made the East different from the West, exiled it into an irretrievable state of 'otherness'. Among the many themes that emerge from this European narration, two appear most striking. The first is the insistent claim that the East was a place of lascivious sensuality, and the second that it was a realm characterized by inherent violence.⁷ In other words, the earlier image of the Orient described by E. Said as "a place of a romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and escapes"⁸ shifted into current images of lands of terror, fanaticism and intense energy and these ideas help to shape a certain image of the Orient which tends to appeal more to the fantasies of its western creators than to any actual reality.⁹

Precisely, the Orient has been depicted in diverse ways through a combination of interest in and contempt for Eastern societies and a conviction that Orientals were unfit to analyze and organize their own culture. As a consequence of such a notion deconstructed by the colonialist west no single individual can feel himself any longer to be Oriental.

RACIAL AND RELIGIOUS PREJUDICES

In most societies, there is some degree of bias for, or against, people whose racial traits, religion, traditions, and language are

unfamiliar. Nevertheless, the intensity and pervasiveness of Western racial discrimination since the Ancient times has been so much greater than the norm that it requires explanation. Western prejudices about the East appear to influence attitudes towards the people of the region and the cultures they belong to. For instance; "the image of Romantic Arab sheik has changed into one of bloated oil princes and Palestinian terrorists."¹⁰ In one of his seminars, English orientalist H.A.R. Gibb examines this prejudicial attitude and concludes that: "At the root of the errors of our western democratic governments lies the ignorance of the people about the Near East (In American usage the designations 'Near East' and 'Middle East' are synonymous with latter more popular since the World War II), and, because of this ignorance, their susceptibility to one-sided propaganda."¹¹

Martin Bernal, while examining the historical development of so called racist-phenomena in *Black Athena*, refers to the Ancient Greeks. Taking into consideration Aristotle's following explanation, Bernal delineates him as an outstanding figure to set forth racial bias against the non-Hellenic race:

The races that live in cold regions and those of Europe are full of courage and passion but somewhat lacking in skill and brainpower; for this reason, while remaining generally independent, they lack political cohesion and the ability to rule others. On the other hand, the Asiatic races have both brains and skill but are lacking in courage and willpower; so they have remained both enslaved and subject. The

Hellenic race, occupying a mid position geographically, has a measure of both hence it has continued to be free to have the best political institutions and to be capable of ruling others given a single Constitution.¹²

Through this interpretation, Bernal claims that Aristotle tried to link racial superiority to the right to enslave other peoples, especially those of a 'slavish disposition.' On the other hand, W.D. Jordan discusses the historic racist attitude of western society toward the Blacks that Negroes were only one step above Apes in the chain of being.¹³ Similar traditional racist views were propounded by well-known English speaking philosophers such as David Hume and Benjamin Franklin when they openly pointed out that dark skin colour was linked to moral and mental inferiority.¹⁴ Even in the 20th century, racial prejudice against Africans and Asians has been a far more formidable barrier. "The American Supreme Court did not begin to move against legal racial discrimination until the mid-1950s, and it was not until the 1960s that most - though by no means all - US Blacks gained the right to vote."¹⁵

In the 19th century, there appeared a great enthusiasm for Greece because of common racial and cultural traits as Shelley states:

The human form and human mind attained to a perfection in Greece which has impressed its images on those faultless productions whose very fragments are the despair of modern art and has propagated impulses which can never cease, through a thousand channels of manifest or imperceptible operation, to enable and

delight mankind until the extinction of the race.¹⁶

Since Shelley never visited the East, his attitudes toward the East were far removed from reality, which is clearly comprehensible in "the Revolt of Islam" and "Hellas". Especially in "Hellas" his initial object was to suggest that the Greek heritage would survive even if modern Greece were under the tyranny of the Turks.

In spite of Shelley's passionate rhetoric and dramatic picture, the most well-known philhellenic poet of the Romantic era was Lord Byron on account of his participation in the Greek war of Independence. In the light of the travel accounts of such Romantic poets, this war was considered throughout Western European countries an Asiatic and African decadence, corruption and cruelty:

The barbarians of Genghis Khan and Tamerlane arrived in the 19th century. War to the death has been declared against European religion and civilisation.¹⁷

emphasising the fact that Romanticism and racism stemming from religious fanaticism are congruous with each other. Bernal concludes that: "There is also no doubt all - with possible exception of Grote - were racist and that all were Romantics with a passionate love for their images of Greece. It must now be clear that I should like to call their sober-mindedness, balance and objectivity into question."¹⁸

As can be seen from the following statement by Netherlands Ambassador for International Cultural Cooperation, Mr. M. Movrik,

another prominent motive in constituting the western bias against the Middle East is religious one as well as the racial:

What determines and characterises European culture? Europe is formed by the community of nations which are largely characterised by the inherited civilisation where most important sources are Judaeo-Christian religion, the Greek-Hellenistic ideas in the fields of government, philosophy, arts and science.¹⁹

The first crucial encounter between the Middle East and the West was the Crusades that could not lead to any just appreciation or even understanding of opponent's belief and ethical attitudes. Because the conviction behind the Crusades was to make the West believe indiscriminately all kinds of impossible reports about the Muslim's beliefs and practices. Bernal, taking into consideration the identification of Christianity with the West states that "all are related; to the extent that Europe can be identified with Christendom. Christian reaction is concerned with the continuation of European hostility and intensification of the tension between Egyptian religion and Christianity."²⁰ As Christianity and Europe are presumed to be a highly compatible combination, the two could come together with the idea of civilisation in a philhellenic movement which sided with the Christian Europe and Greeks in their struggle against the old Asia and infidel Turks.²¹

When Edward Said criticises Orientalism within a religious context by pointing out that Orientalism inherited much of the

traditional hatred of Islam as the enemy of Christendom,²² he implies the significance of the 1820s, a critical decade in the formation of Orientalism since it was dominated by the Greek War of Independence between Christian Greeks and Muslim Turks and Egyptians.

Within the religious context, another western bias against the East is echoed in the form of various inclinations to compare Christianity with other religions, basically with Islam, in terms of superiority and inferiority. Many writers of Christendom with a narrow view of Islam would agree with André Servier when he writes: "the Musulman, bound by his religion, cannot accept western progress. The two civilisations are too different, too much opposed, even to admit mutual interpretation."²³ On account of superficial interpretations of Islam, Muslims have been designated as bizarre, uncivilised and barbaric.

Islam, for Shelley, was a form of tyranny which might prevail at night, but would vanish at the break of the day. Having no first hand knowledge of the region and Islam, he was inspired by books such as *Vathek* by Beckford, *History of the Saracens*, by Ockley, and Moore's "Lalla Rookh" and Southey's "Thalaba". Accordingly, it might be perceptible from his poems that Islam happened to be the religion of the Turks, the persecutors of the Greeks with whom Shelley had such a strong affinity and whom he regarded as his ancestors as well as the ancestors of the civilised world. He does not really distinguish between

the 'tyrant' and the tyrant's religion, since he believes each is fostered by the other.²⁴

Despite his non-dogmatic attitude toward Islam as a faith Byron's main concern - if not sympathetic - was the sensual element in the Muslim life style, on the one hand, and the Muslims' treatment of women, on the other hand. In "the Giaour" there might easily be seen a metaphorical parallelism between the characters of the poem and political incidents during the Turco-Greek conflict in the 19th century, i.e. Leila, the symbol of beauty and Greece, the symbol of freedom caught in the hands of the Turkish tyrants symbolised by Hassan, her master. Leila's revolt against her master, freeing herself from his grip by willing and deliberately choosing to fall in love with his enemy, represents Greece's rise to free herself by fighting against her tyrants.²⁵ Furthermore, as Donald Rosenthal agrees, such Byronic romances of Oriental women inspired the artists in the form of eroticism which became more explicit in various paintings, particularly towards the end of the 19th Century. The idyllic trysts, taken from Byronic sources, that were often revealed during the Romantic period were gradually overshadowed by more overtly erotic wish fulfilment, safely projected onto the distant Muslim world.²⁶

Consequently, through such prejudicial accounts, a split between Islam and Christianity has successfully been created and above all, this split has gradually been transposed into enmity, hatred and hostility between people from either religion as summed up by V.G.

Kiernan that Islam was regarded, more effectively than before, as the negation of Christianity; Muhammad as an impostor, an evil sensualist, an Antichrist in alliance with the devil. Furthermore, the Islamic world designated as Anti-Europe, was held in suspicion.²⁷

NOTES

- 1-In English, the term 'Middle East' was primarily employed by political and military writers so as to refer to an area which might extend, with regard to circumstances, from Morocco to Afghanistan. "It has gradually replaced the older and more precise term 'Near East', which could be taken to refer to the countries lying around the eastern Mediterranean, and which had formed part of the Ottoman Empire. They had a sufficient similarity of religious, cultural, and social nature and historical destiny to make them an intelligible field of study". See; *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol.23, May 1991, No.2 p.126
- 2-William Yale; *The Near East: A Modern History*, New York: Michigan Univ. Press, 1958, p.3.
- 3-As cited in *Seven Nights* by Jorge Luis Borges, trs. Eliot Weinberger, London: Faber and Faber, 1980, p.47.
- 4-Nederveen Pieterse; *Race and Class*, vol.32 No.3 1991, p.7.
- 5- Luce Lopez-Baralt; *Comparative Literature* Winter 1991, vol.43 No.1, (Eugene: Univ. of Oregon), p.101.
- 6- Subsequent to the appearance of the first version of the book by Antoine Galland, there have been various versions with the same title in different languages, and each of them seems not to be similar to the other whilst the book looks interesting or recreating itself; two in French, by Galland and Mardrus; three in English, by Burton, Lane, and Paine; three in German, by Henning, Litmann, and Weil; one in Spanish, by Consinosassens. See *Seven Nights* by Jorge Luis Borges, p.42,56.
- 7-Rana Kabbani; *Europe's Myths of the Orient*, London: Macmillan, 1986 p.5-6.
- 8-Edward W. Said; *Orientalism*, London: Penguin Books, 1978, p.1.
- 9-Nader Naderi; "Max Weber and the Study of the Middle East: A Critical Analysis", *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*, vol.35 1990 (Berkeley: Dept. of sociology, Univ. of California), p.72.
- 10-Martin Bernal; *Black Athena*, vol.1 *The Fabrication of the Ancient Greece 1785-1985*, London: Free Association Books, 1987, p.404.
- 11-Richard N. Frye (ed); *Near East and the Great Powers*, New York: Konnikat Press, 1969, p.9.

12-*Black Athena*, p.202.

- 13-W.D. Jordan; *White Over Black: American Attitudes towards the Negro(1550-1812)*, Baltimore: Penguin, 1969, p.229.
- 14-*Black Athena*, p.203.
- 15-*Black Athena*, p.403.
- 16-P.B. Shelley; *Hellas*, London: Preface, p.290-91.
- 17-Courrier Francais; 7 Juin, 1821 cited in Dimakis, La guerre de L'indépendance grecque vue par la presse Francaise (période 1821-1824): Contribution a l'étude de l'opinion publique et du mouvement philhellenique en France. 1968, Thes Salonika, p.123.
- 18-*Black Athena*, p.336.
- 19-M. Mourik; "European Cultural Co-operation", in A. Rijksbaron, W.H. Roobal. M. Weisglas(ed); *Europe from a Cultural Perspective, Historiography and Perceptions*, The Hague-1987, p.19.
- 20-*Black Athena*, p.188.
- 21-*Black Athena*, p.131.
- 22-*Orientalism*, p.59-92.
- 23-*Islam and the Psychology of Musulman*, trs. Mas-blundell, p.252.
- 24-George K. Rishmawi; *Oriental Elements in English Romantic Poetry: Shelley and Byron*, unpub. diss. Bufalo: Univ. of New York, 1983, p.1-8.
- 25-*Oriental Elements in English Romantic Poetry: Shelley and Byron*, p.39-44.
- 26-Donald A. Rosenthal; *Orientalism, the Near East in French Painting (1800-1880)*, New York: Rochester, 1982, Memorial Art Gallery of the university of Rochester, p.98-99.
- 27-V.G. Kirnen; *The Lords of Human Kind; European Attitude Toward the Outside World in the Imperial Age*, London: 1969, p.6.