

# THE NASREDDIN HODJA IN THE 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY UNITED STATES LITERATURE: MEANINGS PAST AND LESSONS PRESENT

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## **Abstract**

Originally the product of the pre-Ottoman Anatolian peasantry's oral tradition, written versions of the body of tales featuring the famous tricksterish character, Nasreddin Hodja ("Hodja"), suddenly appeared on many American bookshelves in 1888. Their journey across the Atlantic Ocean was made possible by one of America's most beloved humorists, the tricksterish Mark Twain. Twain published five Hodja tales as part of a collection of stories in the popular *Mark Twain's Library of Humor* ("Library"), a book whose introduction specifically identifies its contents as representatives of American humor. Indeed, that most of *Library's* tales are of unmistakably American origin gives rise to the question: why did Twain choose to include the equally unmistakably Turkish Hodja tales in this collection? Striking parallels between the Turkish culture that produced the Hodja tales and the American culture of Twain's post-Civil War era suggest an answer to this question. Both cultures were in flux, experiencing momentous changes that triggered profound anxieties. The wise humor of the Hodja tales provided both cultures not only diversion from those anxieties, but also ways to constructively reframe them. The story of the Hodja's emergence in nineteenth-century America is thus a story about the commonalities of the Turkish and American peoples.

**Key words:** Nasreddin Hodja, Turkish folklore, Turkish humor, Mark Twain, American humor.

## **19. Yüzyıl Birleşik Devletler Edebiyatında Nasreddin Hoca: Geçmişin Anlamı ve Bugünün Dersi**

### **Özet**

Özgün olarak Osmanlı öncesinin sözlü gelenekte yaşayan kurnaz köylü karakterine ait yazılı fıkralar 1888'de birdenbire Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'nde ortaya çıkar ve kitaplıklarda yerini alır. Bu Mark Twain sayesinde mümkün olmuştur. *Mark Twain Mizah Kitaplığı* adıyla çıkan ve girişinde Amerikan mizahını yansıttığını düşündüğü bir kitabında Twain, 5 tane Nasreddin Hoca fıkrasına yer vermiştir. Bu kitapta yer alan anlatıların çok büyük çoğunluğu Amerikan kökenliken Mark Twain niçin Nasreddin Hoca fıkralarını da, Amerikan mizahına uygun olarak görmüş ve seçmiştir? Hoca fıkralarını yaratan Türk kültürü ile İç Savaş

sonrası Amerikası arasında şaşırtıcı benzerlik ve paralelliklerde bu sorunun cevabını bulabiliriz. Her iki kültür de geçmişten gelen hoşnutsuzlukların ve son derece büyük değişikliklerin olduğu bir dönemdedir ve bilge Nasreddin Hoca fıkraları hem rahatsızlıkları yatıştırmış hem de onları yeniden şekillendirmiştir. Nasreddin Hoca fıkralarının ortaya çıktığı 19. yüzyıl Amerikalılarıyla Türkler arasında ortaklıklar vardır. Bu da onların hikayesidir.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Nasreddin Hoca, Türk folkloru, Türk mizahı, Mark Twain, Amerikan mizahı.

“The Hodja’s Donkey on His Veracity.

A friend calls on Narr-ed-din [Nasreddin]<sup>1</sup> to borrow his donkey. ‘Very sorry,’ says the Hodja, who does not want to lend the animal, ‘but the donkey is not here; I have hired him out for the day.’ Unfortunately, just at that moment the donkey begins to bray loudly, thus giving the direct lie to the Hodja. ‘How is this, Hodja?’ says his friend; ‘you say the donkey is away, and here he is braying in the stable!’

The Hodja, nothing daunted, replies in a grave manner: ‘My dear sir, please do not demean yourself so low as to believe the donkey rather than myself – a fellow-man and a venerable Hodja with a long gray beard.’

The moral of the last fable some people will never perceive. It is this:

An ass [donkey] will always reveal himself by some inappropriate remark. Asses should be seldom seen, and never heard. The wise man hideth his ass when the borrower cometh around” (Clemens, Samuel Langhorne eds., 1969: 288).

The story about the emergence of the Nasreddin Hodja (“Hodja”), famous tricksterish character of Turkish folklore, in nineteenth-century United States publications is one that exposes an intriguing relationship between the young republic and Turkey’s predecessor, the Ottoman Empire. While the historical record points to modest levels of engagement between the two countries, a careful examination of two books published by the famous and much-beloved American author, Samuel Clemens (referred hereinafter by his *nom de plume*, “Mark Twain,” or “Twain”), suggests that elements of Ottoman culture resonated on a deep level with the younger country. This article explores that resonance and the conditions from which it arose.

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<sup>1</sup> One of many English-spelling variations of the Nasreddin Hodja’s name.

Hodja tales first appeared on bookshelves in the country that is America today when it was still a colonial possession of the British Empire.<sup>2</sup> However, not until 1888, approximately 150 years later, when Twain included five Hodja tales in *Mark Twain's Library of Humor* ("Library"), did large numbers of Americans encounter the Turkish folklore character. This 1888 publication is remarkable for two reasons.

The first reason has to do with Twain's stance toward the Ottoman culture. On the surface it appears to have been an ambivalent one. Certainly, Twain's earlier observations about the Ottomans in the highly popular *Innocents Abroad*, which describes Twain's 1867 journey to the Ottoman Empire (amongst other countries), are not flattering. However, it is important to note that virtually none of Twain's observations about the various cultures he encounters on this journey are flattering. Why? *Innocents Abroad* is a comic satire, and, as such, is not meant to be understood literally. In this book Twain employs colorful, outrageously hyperbolic language for the purpose of eviscerating one and all, from Americans to the citizens of every country he visits. Indeed, the primary targets of Twain's scathing commentary are not the citizens of foreign countries – certainly not the Ottomans – but those of his own country: his fellow Americans. Thus, for instance, Twain refers to the American captain of his ship as a "smooth-faced animated outrage," and the ship's American first mate as a "spider-legged gorilla" (Twain 1869: 35-36). The generosity with which Twain doles out these comic insults suggests, then, that the following unflattering description of Constantinople's market district and its occupants may not, and in fact, probably does not, convey Twain's real sentiments:

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<sup>2</sup> Their route was circuitous, and originated in France. In 1694 Antoine Galland, the French scholar, and former diplomat to the Ottoman Empire, who famously introduced to Europeans *The Thousand and One Nights*, published a lesser-known work entitled *The Remarkable Sayings Apothegms and Maxims of the Eastern Nations; Abstracted and Translated Out of Their Books, Written in the Arabian, Persian and Turkish Language: with Remarks, by Monsieur Galland, Who Lived Many Years in those Countries* ("Apothegms"). *Apothegms* represents the first known instance of the western language publication of Hodja tales *in toto*. Approximately one year later, in 1695, a London publisher produced an English language translation of *Apothegms*.

The prominent American colonist, Cotton Mather, obtained a copy of *Apothegms* some time prior to 1724. Mather includes a Hodja tale from Galland's book in his own publication, *The Angel of Bethesda*, calling the tale "a pretty Story" (Isani 1970: 58; Bullough 1973: 206). Interestingly, for the remainder of the eighteenth century, as the colonies underwent their transition to an independent republic, Hodja tales seem to have disappeared from the written record.

“The shops here are mere coops, mere boxes, bath-rooms, closets – any thing you please to call them – on the first floor. The Turks sit cross-legged in them, and work and trade and smoke long pipes, and smell like – like Turks. That covers the ground. Crowding the narrow streets in front of them are beggars, who beg forever, yet never collect any thing; and wonderful cripples, distorted out of all semblance of humanity, almost . . . A street in Constantinople is a picture which one ought to see once – not oftener” (Twain 1869: 359).

Nor is it at all likely that Twain literally means what he writes when he adds:

“Commercial morals, especially, are bad. There is no gainsaying that. Greek, Turkish and Armenian morals consist only in attending church regularly on the appointed Sabbaths, and in breaking the ten commandments all the balance of the week. It comes natural to them to lie and cheat in the first place, and then they go on and improve on nature until they arrive at perfection (Twain 1869: 369).

In *Innocents Abroad* Twain’s tricksterish persona obscures his sentiments about the Ottoman peoples. *Library*, published nearly twenty years afterward, suggests a clarification of his stance. *Library* comprises, almost exclusively, tales of American origin. Indeed, the book’s introduction is explicit on the matter of its inherent Americanness: “of the different kinds of *American* humor [in this book]. . . the native flavor prevails throughout; and whether Yankee, Knickerbocker, Southern Californian, refined or broad, prose, verse or newspaper, *it was and is always American*” (emphasis added) (xii-xiii). Thus, it is highly interesting that a handful of tales are of clearly foreign origin, and even more interesting that almost all of these tales of foreign origin are none other than Hodja tales.

What motivated Mark Twain, “arguably America’s greatest (and trickiest) writer” to present multiple Hodja tales in a book self-identified as American humor (Reesman, 2001: ?) The answer likely has to do with the tricksterish qualities characterizing the Hodja tales. Like post-Civil War America, the Hodja tales emerged from a region and era marked by significant upheaval. Indeed, these tales appear to have evolved, in part, in response to that unrest. During the early years of the Ottoman Empire, the large peasant population suffered from “turmoil on a grand scale” that “drastically changed the political, social, and demographic fabric of the land” (Başgöz and Boratav 1998: 13). Much of this turmoil occurred as a result of policy directives that, ultimately, successfully established order throughout the Empire.

“Between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries,” although large segments of the Ottoman population were sedentary, a number of nomadic tribes ranged the landscape (Başgöz and Boratav 1998: 13). When clashes took place between the two groups that “threatened the very foundation of the sedentary society,” the Empire responded by working to convert the nomadic groups into settled, tax-paying citizens. This was a slow, tension-filled process (Başgöz and Boratav 1998:13). Tension also arose from another large-scale change then occurring throughout the Empire. As the Anatolian peoples turned from “the folk religion of the Turkish tribes” to Islam, the adjustment process was sometimes difficult, creating frictions within communities (Başgöz and Boratav 1998: 13). The turmoil that made the Hodja’s world a restless and uncertain one thus imbued it with many of the same psychological pressures evident in post-Civil War America.<sup>3</sup>

Post-Civil War America was an America in flux. A number of factors contributed to this state of affairs. One important factor was the terrible aftermath of the Civil War. The northern states having defeated their southern neighbors, relations between the two regions immediately after the war were fraught with tension. Both sides had suffered horrific losses in terms of human life. Recovery from the war was more complicated, however, for the South than it was for the North. Not only had the South experienced significant property damage, but its cultural fabric had been rent; with slavery abolished, the region was obliged to reconstruct itself both culturally and materially.

Impacting the entire country – both North and South – was the Industrial Revolution. The effect of America’s transformation from agricultural to industrialized society simply cannot be overstated. It brought prosperity to the nation; it also brought problems. One significant issue had to do with the need for a larger workforce than the country’s population could provide. The American government and businesses responded by recruiting workers from abroad. While the resultant influx of immigrants eased the labor shortage, it also triggered racial tensions. Conflicts erupted not only between the dominant culture and newly arrived immigrants, but also between different groups of immigrants. Members of the dominant culture, specifically, men like Mark Twain, who were Caucasian, and of western European descent, perceived these post-Civil War changes as threats to their way of life, and to their personal identities. They felt marginalized – pushed aside – in their own culture (Ammons and Rohy 1998: 13-22).

For this reason Twain and many of his male readers likely found resonance not only in the issues shaping Hodja tales, but also in the character of

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<sup>3</sup> The American Civil War began when the southern states seceded in 1861, and ended with its defeat in 1865.

the Hodja himself. Although the Hodja's profession places him in a position of authority over his peasant neighbors, he is poorly compensated for his services. Obligated to supplement his income by working "on the land along with the peasants," the Hodja thereby becomes "an integral part of the village community and economy." He is thus "at once a central and a marginal figure" (Başgöz and Boratav 1998: 7). As such, the liminal Hodja is ideally situated to appeal to the post-Civil War generations of Caucasian men. Positioned as powerful by virtue of their gender and race, they suffered from feelings of "defeated masculinity" as a result of the forces of industrialization and modernization that were then converting their country into an unfamiliar landscape (Habegger 1976: 886-87). The rules that shaped their world had undergone significant changes since pre-industrial times. New ones tended to challenge the control that Caucasian men had previously exercised over their families and within their communities. The resultant hybrid of shifting physical reality and psychological perspective made liminal figures of broad swathes of post-Civil War Caucasian men. A way to re-frame their culture, the better to control it, is what the Hodja tales offered their readers.

Such re-framing is evident in this article's prefatory and concluding Hodja tales. In both instances, the Hodja is responding to everyday circumstances that challenge his sense of control. He cannot control his tattletale donkey of the first tale, but he can wield language in a way that transforms a potentially awkward situation into a humorous one. Likewise, good manners prevent him from expressing blunt annoyance with the importunate beggar described below. Nevertheless, the Hodja manages to communicate his opinion of the man's rude behavior in a way that is guaranteed to prevent further occurrences.

The humorous appeal of these tales draws from the Hodja's clever ability to wrest control over mundane confrontations. That he does so within the parameters of society's rules of civility is critical to the stories' appeal for post-Civil War Americans searching for a way to retain their legitimacy as leaders of the established culture. The Hodja tales thus provided a useful paradigm for this audience, empowering them just as many centuries ago they empowered Ottoman peasants.

"A mendicant [beggar] knocks at the Hodja's door.

'What do you want, my friend?' asks the Hodja, putting his head out of an upper floor window.

'Come down, Hodja Effendi, and I will tell you,' replies the mendicant.

The Hodja obeys, and coming down to the door, asks again of the man what is wanted.

'Alms,' is the answer.

‘Oh! Very well,’ said the Hodja, ‘come with me up-stairs.’  
Leading the way, the Hodja conducts the man to the top-most floor  
of his house. Arrived there, he turns round and remarks:  
‘I am very much distressed, my good friend, but I have no alms to  
give you.’  
‘Why did you not say so down below?’ inquires the man angrily.  
‘Why did you not tell me what you wanted when I asked you from  
the window? Did you not make me come down to the door?’  
retorts the Hodja.  
The moral whereof is:  
Be polite and considerate when you beg favors” (Twain 1996:  
196).

Excavating the Twain translations of the Ottoman Hodja stories  
provides us with yet another story, a new and important one about  
contemporary Turkey and America. It is the story about our shared response to  
anxious uncertainty, about our historical commonalities of values and  
perspective. This new story contains many names, both Turkish and American,  
but the name of its inspiration is Turkish, through and through: the immortal  
Nasreddin Hodja.

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