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IMPERIAL DISCOURSE AND THE ORIENT: THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE IN BRITISH TRAVEL ACCOUNTS OF THE VICTORIAN ERA

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Abstract

From the first half of the nineteenth century onwards, a considerable body of literature on the Ottoman Empire started to emerge in the West. In parallel to the intensified relations between the Ottoman State and the West through various channels such as trade, diplomacy and warfare during this period, traveling to the 'Orient' became an attractive experience in search of adventure and new job opportunities for Europeans. Among those, some recorded their personal experiences of the Orient in the form of travel accounts and journals, which more or less reflected the prevalent mode of discourse in the genre of travel literature at the time. Although majority of these travel accounts were in harmony with existing norms of Orientalist literature, there were also tensions emerging from the conflict between actual experiences and *a priori* held assumptions within the texts. Still, it can be argued that individual experiences often failed to change the general norms and the conceptual grip constituted by the dominant Orientalist genre.

Keywords: Orientalism, Ottoman Empire, British Travel Accounts, Victorian Era, Imperialism.

1-Introduction

The state of affairs in the East is strange, and is imperfectly understood in England. We have had to take part in them, we may have to do so again, and everyone must be anxious that our conduct should be governed by as much knowledge as can be obtainable. (Senior, 1859, p. V)

From the first half of the nineteenth century onwards, a considerable body of literature on the Ottoman Empire emerged in the West. In parallel to the intensified relations between the Ottoman State and the West through various channels such as trade, diplomacy and warfare in this period, traveling to the 'Orient' became an attractive experience in search of adventure and new job opportunities. As the new developments in transportation and communication made the Oriental journey an easier and cheaper enterprise, greater number of middle class people poured into the Ottoman realm. Technicians, doctors, teachers, military experts, merchants, travelers poured to the Ottoman Empire in the pursuit of the variety of dreams and images of the Orient.

Some of these individuals recorded their personal experiences of the Orient in the form of travel accounts and journals, which more or less reflect the prevalent mode of discourse in the genre of travel literature at their time. In contrast to 'academic' Orientalists, i.e. "anyone who teaches, writes about and researches the Orient" (Said, 1978, p. 2) from historical, ethnographical, sociological or philological aspects, majority of these travel accounts were penned by amateurs, who were doctors, soldiers, clergymen and so on. Although they contributed to shaping of an image of the Orient, they were consumers of Orientalism in the first place. This does not mean that the Orientalists in Western academic institutions were only producers of this body of knowledge and were not affected by preceding literature on the Orient. Yet it is not misleading to argue that many of these travelers were much more susceptible to popular representations and knowledge on the Orient. When they involved in an actual experience in the Orient, it is probable to assume that they were holding a textual attitude, which conflicted as well as interacted with this actual experience.

This paper will attempt to answer several questions by taking the above assumption as a departure point: To which degree we can argue that a textual attitude received from the existing Orientalist literature determined the production of individual travel accounts? Do these travel accounts only reflect a set of shared assumptions concerning the character of the Orient and its inhabitants in the West? Are there any breaking points and tensions in these texts when textual attitudes, actual experiences as well variety of other factors-like personal interests, identities- came into conflict and interaction? Is it possible to argue that the travel accounts only articulate an exotic and romanticized picture of the Orient in their representation of the other? In other

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words, can one easily discard the content of most travel accounts as irrelevant signifiers that only reflect Western norms and assumptions for the Orientals?

To engage with all of the sizable body of travel accounts produced in the West during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is beyond the scope of this paper. Within this limitation, I will mainly engage with less-known examples of travel accounts written around the mid-nineteenth century by British travelers. In fact, even in a short time period like a decade, which this paper covers, enormous changes took place both in Europe and the Middle East. I will try to acknowledge and relate the variety of opinions of the Western travelers on customs, manners and politics of the Orient to these sociopolitical conditions as much as possible.

2- A Taste of Power; Imperialism, Identity and Travel

The English traveler should always remember that he has the responsibility of being considered by the Orientals as a representative of his country; and that, according to his liberality, courage, and temper, impressions are formed of the nation he belongs to, from which the East is now expecting great things. (Warburton, 1847, vol. II, p. 322)

In a pleasant Constantinople morning on 27 October 1857, while drinking his tea, Nassau William Senior, an Englishman who was in a short travel to Greece and the Ottoman Empire, was receiving congratulations of his French friend on the suppression of the mutiny in India by the British. "You are fighting," the Frenchman said, "in India the battle of civilization. If you were to fail, the shock to the prestige of the Christians would be felt over the whole Mussulman world- in Constantinople, in Algeria, and even in Morocco." (Senior, 1859, p. 147) Apart from being Europeans in Istanbul, what were the shared notions or assumptions that brought Nassau Senior and his French friend together in celebratory mood upon the suppression of the mutiny in India? There is no need to push too much to argue that Senior and his friend were proudly regarding themselves as members of the French and British empires, but what did it exactly mean being a member of an empire? How did this notion affect and shape the identities of being French and English?

Senior's *A Journal kept in Turkey and Greece* may be a good starting point to provide some insights to these questions. After being retired from his post in political economy at Oxford University in 1852, and working in some government commissions, Senior spent the autumn of 1857 by traveling in Greece and the Ottoman Empire. Traveling might be a misleading term for Senior since he spent all of his time in Istanbul and Athens busying himself with conversations with his fellow countrymen and Europeans, which he claims to be recorded faithfully by him. His journal is a compilation of conversations that he and various European subjects living in Greece and the Ottoman Empire talked about the fate of the Ottoman territories as well as characteristics and manners of its inhabitants. One can regard the conversations between Walpole and his European friends as idle chatting on international politics and indigenous population, but what is most striking about these conversations was the way that these individuals identify themselves with the French or the British Empires. As the citizens of the imperial enterprises, the main topic of their conversations concentrates on how to divide the territories of the Ottoman Empire without disturbing the balance of power in Europe. (Senior, 1859, p. 24-33) Apparently, whatever social status they had as doctors, soldiers, teachers, etc., these individuals were regarding themselves as the representatives of their nations and putting into the stage a parody of international politics without being aware of it.

One can argue that Senior's text stands in a central position in relation to the process of imperialism. It is misleading to think that all the Europeans in Istanbul were sharing more or less same views. Yet the organization of the conversations and following statements by the author in Senior's *Journal* support a view of consensus among the Westerners on the unavoidable dissolution of the Empire. What give a kind of authority to their straight-forwardly imperialist voice were their first hand experience in the Orient as well as their very hegemonic standpoint as the members of the British and French Empires over the Orient. It is also striking to observe that Senior's criticisms for the present Ottoman government echo the frustration in Europe for its resistance to put the clauses of Imperial order of 1856 into practice. The Imperial order of 1856 which was a product of the efforts to secure European help against Russia gave several rights to Europeans like private land ownership, removal of monopolies and providing a suitable environment for European investment within the Ottoman Empire. According to Senior, unfulfilling these promises was not only a sign of the Ottoman government's corruption but also its unavoidable collapse. In fact, his complain about the government's unwillingness to sell lands to Europeans fits very well to his greater scheme of bringing European settlers, not necessarily English, who eventually would lead the Christian population of the empire to break Turkish yoke. (Senior, 1859, p. 89-91)

Written nearly one decade before than Senior's book, Warburton's *The Crescent and the Cross* also shed light how was the imperial strength negotiated its way to travel accounts. In contrast to Senior, Warburton was

no 'armchair' traveler; he made an extended tour through Egypt, Palestine and Syria then visited Constantinople on his way to Greece. Throughout his adventurous journey in which he did not only cover the major urban centers but also the interiors of Egypt and Syria, Warburton emerges as an ideal English traveler, who always manage to cope with difficulties and dangers posed by nature and indigenous population with an iron hand and strong character.

As a piece of Victorian travel writing, Warburton's text seems to be affected from the new emerging genre of the tourist guides. According to Ali Behdad, the tourist guide emerged as a 'new discursive formation' during the mid-nineteenth century. (Behdad, 1994, p. 36-37) What makes this new mode of representation different from earlier travel accounts is a shift from experience to information that puts any reader into a subjective position as a potential traveler and bombarding him with various 'facts' about the Orient. While the reader is provided with every bit of information about the Orient from the average price of a steamboat journey to the Orient to the weather conditions in different seasons, a systematic body of knowledge on the manners and customs of the indigenous population is also made available in the same context. As a result, judgements on laziness or irrationality of the Orientals become definite hard facts as the weather conditions or hotel prices. In this sense, the tourist guide becomes one of the tools that allows the dissemination and implantation of Orientalist knowledge in popular level.

In this context, the power of Warburton's text lies in the fact that it amalgamates 'enunciative modalities' of the tourist guide to a classical travel account. (Behdad, 1994, p. 40) While Warburton engages in a heroic adventure as the main character of the narrative, he emerges victorious in dealing with the difficulties and dangers posed by the nature and the orientals with the help of all the positive characteristics that an Englishman is supposed to have. In his concluding chapter, which is titled as *Hints to the Travellers in the East*, Warburton systematizes necessary qualifications, which an English traveler should possess, among the details of travel information. Even he defines the conduct of behavior that an English traveler should follow while dealing with the orientals;

Insist on the most profound respect; preserve your temper and nonchalance as your best title to influence and security. Never join in a row if you can help it: let your people fight out: If you must act, do so firmly, boldly, and fearlessly of consequences; there are no consequences that can concern a right-minded European. (Warburton, 1847, vol. II, p. 321-322)

Warburton enjoys an authoritative voice in his conclusions since the usefulness of these tactics has been already proved within the body of the text. While he was threatening Ottoman officials with the vengeance of European powers, or using his English identity to protect himself from bandits, smugglers, he was very aware of the power relations between England and the Orient as well as his racial 'superiority'. (Warburton, 1847, vol. II, p. 251-53; 260-61)

It is not a coincidence that throughout his narrative, wherever he sees the British flag – either on simple merchant ships or in a British consul's residence- the Union jack becomes a signifier representing freedom, glory and power of England. (Warburton, 1847, vol. I, p. 357; vol. II, p. 311) Overall, Warburton's account represents the necessity of empire as a part of Britain's duty and destiny. On his way to England, when he visits the Island of Corfu, which was an English military base in the Adriatic, he draws a totally different picture than what he has been describing in the Ottoman territories. In contrast to corruption, misrule, and poverty, which are the shared characteristics of the lands under the Ottoman rule, Corfu appears as place of freedom, justice and impartial rule as an example of English imperial rule. (Warburton, 1847, vol. II, p. 312-13) It is not therefore very surprising to see Warburton advocating English domination over Egypt by arguing superiority and advantages of English rule.

English capital and industry would make Egypt a garden; English rule would make the *fellah* a free man; English principles would teach him honesty and truth, and as to the comparative advantages of Turkish and English politics to the people they are to influence, let the world be the judge between Asia Minor and North America, between the influence of the Crescent and the Cross. (Warburton, 1847, vol. I, 360)

The question is how to explain Warburton's over-enthusiasm for an English identity? Although Warburton described himself as an Irish landlord and a Tory, he claimed that 'by reading and observation a good deal chastened in that creed.' He was a graduate of Cambridge with M.A. degree and his family had close ties with English rule in Ireland - his father was formerly inspector-general of constabulary in Ireland. When we are reading Warburton's narrative, we should be aware of his marginal position as someone from periphery and Irish origin claiming for an English identity, which he found an opportunity to consolidate in its space of alterity, i.e. in the Orient. His emphasis on English identity rather than a British one also raises the question why Warburton chose to place himself in a narrower identity. I am not suggesting that there should be necessarily a

strict distinction between Englishness and Irishness for someone like Warburton. Yet, we can still ask if it is possible to explain his over-commitment to ideals of English culture with his tenuous emplacement in it?

When we consider the popularity of Warburton's *The Crescent and the Cross* in England, having been reprinted so late as 1888 and having seventeen editions, we should ask the question what were the factors that made it so popular among the British? If we leave aside its literary value, which is obviously quite dubious, what is especially important is its character as an imperial narrative, which does not only confirm the British imperial project but also an identity of Englishness. In the personality of Warburton, English identity is confirmed and reinforced creating a strong us vs. them dichotomy.

Written just about the same time with Warburton's text, Frederick Walpole's *The Ansayrii and the Assassins* presents a different idea of empire and English identity. Although Walpole's text takes English identity granted as a stable point of reference, one cannot sense the Warburton's strong feeling of identification with the empire in Walpole's text. It is true that whenever Walpole sees a fellow Englishman, whether an engineer working in an Ottoman ship, or a settler in the Island of Rhodes, this reminds him valuable characteristics of English race. He describes them as hardworking, hard-drinking, tough persons 'who prove the superiority of their nation by the fist.' (Walpole, 1851, vol. II, p. 253) Despite the shared notion of superiority of English race, Lieutenant Walpole's image of Englishness is quite distant than the one of Warburton, who was an Irish landlord and writer by profession. He does not only idealize Victorian doctrines of labor in the personalities of an English settler or an engineer, but also attributes them characteristics of an ideal soldier; masculine, though, proving their superiority by the fist, etc.

Like Warburton's, Walpole's text also derives its authority from the interpretive power of a centralized subject-Walpole as a traveler experiencing the Orient- but Walpole never refers to the abstract power of the British Empire on the 'natives' or his English identity as a password in overcoming the difficulties and dangers in his travel like Warburton. Moreover, he does not get into detailed discussions of British imperial interests as in Senior's *Journal*. In this sense, it is not possible to argue that Walpole's text stands in a central position to imperial narrative as the ones of Senior and Warburton. The question, then, is how to explain divergence of Walpole's account from Senior's and Warburton's?

While tracing the imprint of individual writers, the question is who is saying what from which positions? These writers apparently come from different social backgrounds and they were the products of specific historical moment and environment. Their writings have different social purposes and there are different motives, purposes, and circumstances that shape the production of their texts.

Walpole's narrative also poses questions about the relation between Orientalist discourse and imperialism. Even though Walpole's account does not easily fit to imperialist discourse, he still uses Orientalist categories and stereotypes -which I will try to discuss in the second section in detail-. Even if we accept the existence of close ties between imperialism and production of Orientalist knowledge at the institutional level, Walpole's example warns us to avoid essentializing a huge body of literature as imperialist and aimed at controlling and ruling the Orient. Yet, the question that still remains is whether or not the usage of Orientalist categories and stereotypes in the representation of the Orient necessarily lead to justification of imperialist project?

3- A Distorted 'Reality'? Travel Accounts and the Orient

The problematic nature of the relationship between the representation and the 'reality' that it corresponds has been subject to numerous studies. Sa'id's *Orientalism* was one of the first studies that attempted to locate this tension in the scholarly literature on Arab and Islamic society. Sa'id mainly argues that this body of scholarly production is and always has been shaped by specific political, cultural, religious, economical relations and interests that the West has been maintaining with the Middle East. Orientalist scholarship, which was a reflection of the hegemonic relationship between the West and the Orient, projects and strengthens prejudices and stereotypes that has been forming and reforming in the West about Arabs and Islam for centuries. Although Sa'id problematizes the question of representation and reality in Orientalist texts, he seems to avoid the question whether or not there is a 'reality' of the Orient? One can ask what does it mean to argue the Orient of Orientalists 'is not the Orient as it is, but the Orient as it has been orientalized?' (Sa'id, 1978, 104) Sa'id's treatment of Orientalist texts indirectly assumes that there is a 'real Orient' that Orientalism distorts, displaces and makes supererogatory by inescapably relying upon predetermined values and stereotypes. Yet, he remains silent on the question what is the 'reality' of the Orient that has been distorted by Orientalism?

When Nassau and Warburton speaks about corruption of public servants in the Ottoman Empire or when they mention particular experiences in which Ottoman custom officers were taking bribes, can we argue

that they are distorting the 'reality' of the Ottoman Empire? To take another example, when they talk about terribly paved and dirty streets of Constantinople, is it possible to discard their observations as irrelevant to the 'real world' outside? To say that these travel accounts most of the times contain very detailed and valuable information about the Ottoman Empire would be stating the obvious, yet this seems to be overlooked in the arduous task of deconstruction.

Nassau, Warburton, Walpole or the other numerous travelers were trying to make sense out of new experiences in a new environment that was partially or totally alien to them. In their efforts to convey meaning to the unknown and the alien, they did not only make comparisons with their own culture and society, but they also utilize an inherited conceptual framework in the form of Orientalism. It is in the act of conferring meaning on new experiences and environment that we can trace textual attitudes in the individual travel accounts on the Orient.

It has been argued that the act of travel can be seen as 'an attempt to reconcile details and principles, to bring together theoretical positions held priori with the field observations that confirm them.' (Gikandi, 1996, p. 91) Then it should be quite possible to observe tensions coming out of an attempt to conciliate actual experiences and previously obtained conceptual framework. The last part of this paper examines in detail these tensions in the representations of Constantinople and its residents by Warburton, Walpole and Senior in their texts. I will first deal with the questions of textual attitude and authenticity as manifested in these accounts. Second, I will turn to the question of the relationship between individual standpoints and representation.

The specter of earlier travel accounts and literary pieces on the Orient haunts every travel account writer who claim to produce something that has never yet exists. Especially in a city like Constantinople which had been subject to great interest among the Western travelers since the eighteenth century, the 'belated traveler', if we borrow Behdad's term, was forced not only to face with influential texts like the ones of Lamartine, Lady Montagu, Byron and but had to arrive terms with them.

When we turn to Warburton's *The Crescent and the Cross*, for example, his text includes quotations from Murray's *Hand-book*, (Murray, 1840) Lord Byron's poems, Lamartine's remarks on the Orient as well as images taken from Gibbon's *History*. In one instance, for example, the author simply hesitates to describe the Bosphorus arguing that he cannot surpass Lady Mary Montagu's vivid and faithful description. (Warburton, 1847, vol. II, 268) In the same emotional state, Warburton avoid to picture the well-known monuments of Constantinople to his reader since these are too familiar to every reader to claim an authentic description.

The problem of authenticity reveals itself in a quite different manner with Senior's *Journal*. In contrast to Warburton's admiration for Constantinople, Senior spells out his disillusionment with the city noting that he has been disappointed after all he has heard about the city. (Senior, 1859, p. 6) Throughout his stay in Constantinople, he also visits various historical sites and monuments without losing his disappointment. Unlike Warburton, Senior is silent about the sources of his information. Yet he discovers that this previous information about Constantinople was nothing but an illusion like the city itself. (Senior, 1859, 128) In fact, this is quite typical with travel accounts in which description is often constrained by the fact that the author tries to differentiate his narrative from earlier examples by emphasizing its originality or 'reality' in comparison to other travel accounts. (Mills, 1991, p. 80)

Unlike Warburton or Walpole, Senior's interests lay elsewhere as a political economist. In fact, Senior's account represents another kind of disappointment concerning the politics and economic situation in the Ottoman Empire. Written nearly one year after the Crimean War in which France and England defended the unity of the Ottoman Empire against Russia, Walpole's text clearly voices the frustration of France and England with resistance of the Ottoman authorities in removing trade monopolies and allowing Europeans to purchase land in the Ottoman territories. In reading his *Journal* we are immediately struck by the continual emphasis on free trade and emigration of European settlers to the Ottoman lands. When we take his interests into consideration, his representation of the landscape as depopulated fertile tracks of land becomes more meaningful. From the very moment he enters into the Ottoman borders, Senior started to observe desolate and barren landscape, which he regards as an evidence of Turkish rule. (Senior, 1859, 1) Even in Constantinople, one of Europe's most populous cities at the time, he claims to see vast tracts of unoccupied land and more dogs than human beings! (Senior, 1859, 27)

Unlike Warburton and Walpole, Senior's narrative can be categorized as a travel writing, which utilizes the 'manners and customs' pattern in describing the Orient. Apart from his conversations with Europeans, his account is largely impersonal without attempting to describe his interactions with indigenous population. Whenever he talks about Constantinople, he chooses to write about monumental buildings of Ottoman past.

Mary Louise Pratt suggests that this representational technique serve to reduce current indigenous societies into vestiges of a glorious past. (Pratt, 1985, p. 130)

It is also noteworthy to observe that throughout his stay in the city, he only came into contact with the Ottoman elite whom he regards as a curious mixture of European and Oriental cultures. Yet the other orientals only emerge in the form of anonymous crowds, –curious fact for a depopulated city- filthy passengers in a steamboat, or deceptive shop keepers who appears to have no voice at all in Senior’s text.

There are several factors that shape his attitude towards the ordinary oriental. His identity as an upper-class European as well as his Christian bigotry prevents him to sympathize with Muslims and the lower classes. His inability to speak the native language also constitutes a barrier that is only circumvented by a textual attitude, i.e. borrowing stereotypes from previous Orientalist texts.

Frederick Walpole account is quite interesting in terms of its claim for authenticity. After traveling various parts of the Ottoman Empire before coming to Constantinople for the second time in 1850, Walpole found himself in Galata, the district of Istanbul, which was mainly inhabited by Europeans visiting Constantinople for business or travel. Spending as little time as possible in Galata which he considered as a bad imitation of an ordinary European city and avoiding naïve European tourists who were anxious and shocked in the face of this totally new Oriental experience, he plunged into the proper Istanbul, i.e. Turkish quarters, and wandered aimlessly looking for opportunities of adventure and conversation to improve his Turkish. (Walpole, 1851, vol. II, 266)

He got acquainted with various Turks, with some of whom he had long conversations about diverse topics like history of Istanbul and literature. This was not a new experience for Walpole since he had to come into contact with the “orientals” individually in his travel throughout the Ottoman Empire. In fact, he gives portraits of numerous individuals from different ethnic groups throughout his account. In his account each of these individuals appears as having different personalities and characteristics. Yet his actual experiences and contact with the “orientals” does not prevent Walpole to attribute them stereotypical characteristics towards the end of his book. According to Walpole,

The Oriental is a great sensualist. It is true, his fare is meager and plain; but he eats like a pig, and gorges himself with it like a vulture, lying down afterwards to sleep. He openly talks on subjects we should avoid, and though, perhaps, purer than ourselves in deed, he gloats over in public what we screen with darkness and secrecy. There seems none of that high esteem between man and wife without which marriage is a heavy chain. (Walpole, vol. II, 377)

As stated before, Walpole’s narrative cannot be easily regarded within imperial discourse even though he never shows a subjective opposition to imperialism. Yet, he does not stress on material power or superiority of Britain over the Orient, which serves as the base of Senior’s or Warburton’s authority and power over the Orientals.

The picture that appears after an analysis of these examples of Victorian travel writing reveals that they are in a theoretical harmony with existing norms of Orientalist literature. Even though we can trace the tensions emerging from actual experiences and *a priori* held assumptions in these texts, it can be argued that these individual experiences cannot change the general categories and a conceptual grip constituted by the Orientalist literature. On the other hand, we cannot argue that all of them comfortably fit into imperialist discourse. It is true that the narratives of Warburton and Senior are primarily founded on a pragmatic apprehension of Britain’s material power and they had no problem to present this as a justification of Britain’s future possession of the Orient. However, Walpole’s silence about this imperial might does not fit into a category of essentialized Orientalist literature that is in a perfect harmony with imperialist discourse. As the examples of Senior, Warburton and Walpole showed different individuals who traveled in the Orient at about the same time could return with different narratives in terms of style, representation and conceptualization. The prevalence of Orientalist stereotypes and tropes does not necessarily signify a unitary position concerning imperial discourse.

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