Prototypes of the Turk in British Perceptions

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Abstract. This paper aims at exploring the very prototypes in the eyes of British despite dynamic changes over different phases in history. It is based on the diachronic study on British accounts of the Ottoman Empire including monographs, travelogues, recollections, journals. My exploration of these descriptions reveals that British perceptions of Turk exhibited incessant stereotyped negative facets although in the zenith as well as decline of the Ottoman Empire the prototypes of the Turks are balanced by British admiration for their meritocracy, strong army and reforming spirit. I suggest the British negative representations the Turk survive over the passage of time and serve to construct the national Self of the former in a more positive light.

Introduction

In Orientalism, Edward Said argued that Western representations of the Orient are greatly biased. In fact, the widely blamed argument tells some truth about British perceptions of the Turk. According to K.E. Boulding, image refers to the total cognitive, affective and evaluative structure of the nations or countries in the international systems. It connotes that the construction of image is affected by a set of subjective factors such as friendliness or hostility between nations. As for the topic discussed here, I argue that the mutual relationship between the Ottoman Empire and Britain displayed more of antagonisms than intimacy over time, which means the British evaluations of the Turk has a deep root in the earlier history and then gains further consolidation and deepening in their later encounters.

The Turks as City Plunders

Islam erupted in the seventh century. At that time, Christianity took the predominant position whether in influence or scope. “Beyond the boundaries of Christendom, which was disunited politically but at least nominally shared the same faith, lay what Christians saw as the land of the pagans, the idolators, by extensions (drawing on Greek and Roman precedents) the barbarians,”[3] Subsequently, the vastly two different religions boasted confronting discrepancies, in particular, the horrible memories of crusades haunted Christendom persistently. After the capture of Constantinople in 1453, Muslims were equated with “Turks” regardless of their racial or ethnic origins. The invincibility of Ottoman armies took Europe by storm, the Turk was portrayed as barbaric, cruel “city plunders”. Humanists lamented the loss of Byzantine independence, Piccolomini sorrowed that one of the two lights of Christendom has been extinguished and all the glory of Greece destroyed. [5] Factually, cruelty enjoyed a prominent place in the prototype of the Turk in the British horizon even in the later centuries. There is a well-known Arabian proverb which goes as the follows: wherever the Turk treads, grasses always wither, which implies that under the shadow of crescent, the land turns deserts. Hence, the destructive power of the Turk can be imagined. In British descriptions of the Turk’s propensity for cruel and barbaric acts, tragic scenes are always the theme whenever the Turk invaded. For instance, in the course of the 1683 siege of Vienna, the Turk embodied three categories of image according to Jason Charles Fleming. First, the Turk was the destroyer of property by burning and plundering. Second, the Turk was
engaged in butchery and disregard for Christian lives. Third, the Turk offended women he was encountered with brutally. As the descendants of Ishmael, whom was conceived as an offspring of Saracens, the Turk inherited their inherent wildness since they lived in the tents in deserts. In essence, the perception of Saracens stayed stationary throughout generations, thus displaying some unchanging attached characteristics such as degradation, ignorance, brutality etc. In The English Parnassus the author Joshua Poole assembled a list of synonyms and epithets for “Turke” from a comprehensive survey of the best authors: unbelieving, misbelieving, thifty, abstemious, cruel, unpitying, merciless, unrelenting, inexorable, warlick, circumcised, superstitious, bloody, wine-forbearing, turban’d, avaritious, covetous, erring. On the whole, the above conceptions hold water as the modifiers vividly summarize the gross image of a Turk both externally and internally.

Hence, the image of being terrible destroyers can be seen in the nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire. During the Greek Independence Movement, the massacre in the island of Scio stirred British hearts most: “Scio became the scene of indescribable horrors. The male inhabitants were massacred: their houses were plundered and burned—not one was left standing except such as belonged to foreign consuls.” The straightforward cruel image was embodied in the Sultan himself, as God’s shadows on Earth; the image of them was a combination of both facts and fiction. Adolphus Slade, an admiral in the fleet of Mahmud II, was “taught to believe that he (the Sultan, the writer adds) may cut off as many as fourteen heads a day.” In the reign of Abd al Hamid II, the prototypes of the Turk tended to be more negative. In the last decades of the century, the insurrections of persecuted Christians arose from time to time, especially during the Bulgarian Atrocities and the Armenian Massacre, thousands of Christians’ deaths from cruel murdering were common occurrences in some well-known journals such as The Illustrated London News, Punch, and the hands of the Sultan were usually depicted as dripping with blood.

The Turks as Despots

In the eighteenth century the Ottoman Empire completely lost its glamour in the last two centuries. Strictly speaking, many scholars tend to believe that the death of the Süleyman I in 1566 marked the beginning decline of the empire as the subsequent successors were feeble and indulged in pleasures. Although the prototypes of the Turk were balanced by British admiration for its meritocracy, strong army from the fifteenth century to the seventeenth, however, from this century on, the enlightened British represented a more advanced civilization while Turks in contrast were “represented as despotic, slavish, effeminate, ignorant, proud and corrupt, whereas when compared to the oppressed minorities of the empire, they are imagined to be stupid, fanatical, intolerant, oppressive and hateful.” Among the negative tags attached to the Turk, despotism was frequently linked to the Ottoman Empire. Factually, despotism can be traced back to Aristotle, who argued climate had far-reaching influence on people’s character and as a consequence drew a clear dividing line between West and East. In the eighteenth century the theory captured the attention of European intellectuals, among whom Montesquieu was the outstanding one. Ironically, Montesquieu based his formulation on travelogues while travelers took advantage of Montesquieu’s analysis of despotism to justify their evaluation of the Turk. The despotism of the Turk was elaborated in many writings of British, let’s take the Sultans in the nineteenth century for an instance, Mahmud II was lauded as Peter the Great for his attempts to rejuvenate the declining Ottoman Empire through reforms, nevertheless, he was a merciless tyrant who sought to eradicate any opponents, even his chief minister Reschid Pasha was more than once in this category. It was because of the Sultan’s “tyrannie insupportable” that triggered the general discontent in the Empire in 1839. What’s more, Abd al Hamid II went further as far as despotism was concerned. It was believed that the Sultan distrusted everybody, hence, a system of espionage was prevalent in his reign. Sir Edwin Pears recollected his letter concerning the death of the Abdul Aziz to the Daily News was learned by the Sultan as at that time British post-bag was strictly checked and regularly opened by Turkish spies. Plus, there was a harsh censorship for everything in the few newspapers. If a newspaper dared
to offend, then it was subjected to suspension or suppression. In brief, despotism seemed to be inherent in the Turks, among whom Sultans were the typical embodiment.

The Turks as Oppressors

As a matter of fact, some more negative prototypes were related to the Turk in British eyes. Among other things, Turks as oppressors captured wide attention. When the Empire was at its peak, it embraced the prestige of being tolerant as under the Ottoman dominion there were so many different ethnic groups in comparison to Muslims as the dominators. Before the eighteenth century, travelogues recorded all the subjects lived happily and harmoniously on the lands of the Empire, however, “oppression of Christians is a theme that established itself strongly in the eighteenth century… Turks despise Christians on the basis of their faith so that they became the objects of vengeance and abhorrence.” And in the nineteenth century, the things went worse, 1820s witnessed the bloodthirsty oppression of the Greeks for the latter’s inclination to be independent, and the last quarter of the century was overwhelmed with horrible tragedies of Christians. Bulgarian agitation and Armenians massacre rendered British public voiced their strong opposition to their government’s Turcophilism, and the Turk at that specific period tended to be “unspeakable Turk” as British evaluated the Turk from a moral perspective. For Gladstone, the Turk was “one great anti-human specimen of humanity.” In brief, with the decline of the Empire, the Turk degraded from being tolerant rulers to being intolerant oppressors, the British perception thereupon tended to be more negative as the latter was in the camp of Christian camp.

The Turks as Ignorant and Corrupt Beings

Just as mentioned above, ignorance and corruption are also another two prominent characteristics of the Turk, which can be best illustrated on the layer of the Oriental connotations. From Occidental perspectives, Orient has something in common with semantic field in linguistics, namely, it has association with some meanings and denotations. At the very turn of the nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire was stuck in dangers both within and without; it was nevertheless still one of the countries covering an extensive territory in Europe. However, the horizon of the Turk displayed an exorbitant difference from their geographical area. During the last Russo-Turkish war, when the Turk saw shells falling and bursting, they thought they were stars brought down from heaven by enchantment. Even the Turkish proverb releases a sentiment of ignorance: The pestilence raged for forty years, and the people whose time had come to die did die. No wonder that when plague inflicted, the Turk took no precautions against it as they believed that if enlisted on the death list, then death was unavoidable! The disagreeable and upsetting ignorance of the Turk is frequently attributed to the doctrines of Islam as it is presumed to be cramping and sterilizing. Hence it is claimed that Islam goes against civilization and progress, thus inevitably paralyzing the enlightenment of the Turk. But in British literature, it can be read that Islam, although antiquated, possesses positive as well as negative implications. The theological explanation of the Turk’s ignorance arises from the intense rivalry between Christianity and Islam.

Corruption is permanently alluded to with regard to the fall of a power. In the case of the decline the Roman Empire, some scholars ascribed the peril of the Empire to corruption. In fact, Gibbon also touched on the corrupted modes of living of the Roman authority in his groundbreaking book *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. In British literature of the Ottoman Empire, accounts of corruption are frequently read of. It seemed that corruption reigned on the level of public Turkish officials instead of Turk as a private. Fraud, venality and faithlessness of Turkish Muslims were the stock subjects in many travelogues. An overwhelming number of officials of different hierarchies bought their titles from their direct superiors including governors of the provinces, pashas and even the Sultan himself. With a view to generous reward in their short tenure, they wronged, plundered and exacted the local people, which staged the frequent scenario of portraying the Turk as avaricious oppressors. From 1716 to 1822, Phanariot Greeks bought the governorships of Jassy and Bucharest from the Sultan, and naturally they recouped themselves from
their subjects. They were constantly changed, in order to re-sell the office as often as possible.\[17\]

The prevalent fashion of selling and buying offices permeated at different ranks throughout the Empire. When traveler cherished the hope to visit Albania, their landing sites in the locality were a headache problem for them as there were no convenient transportation means. The railway has really terminated in somebody’s pocket, and has never been heard of on the spot. Travelers could not drive because there were neither carriages nor roads.\[18\] In contrast, the Sultan lived in his luxury and indolence. Once modest, graceful Murad took the throne, he was fascinated by jewelry and paintings. His money for the specific purpose was from his vassal the khedive, who dared not present himself before his sovereign without magnificent gifts.\[19\]

**Conclusion**

What remains to be emphasized is that the Turk in the paper refers to the Turk as a nation, or more specifically means some ruling officials or public Turks, as for the private Turks British met, they were as amiable, friendly, good people as those in the universe.\[20\] In truth, British perceptions of the Turk can be categorized into the broader framework about how west measures east. At the very beginning, the west was filled with envy of the east as the latter took the upper hand in the competition. But with the civilization advancing, the west overtook the east, and it began to show contempt to the east which lagged behind, thus the supremacy and strength of the west became salient. Therefore, how British perceived the Turk is a part of the panorama in which two confronting civilizations clashed with each other. The Turk who served as the embodiment of cruelty, despotism, slavishness, pleasure, corruption and merciless oppressor was in fact the Other of British who represents civilization, progress and enlightenment, helping British build a superior Self. In other words, the straightforward negative prototypes of the Turk in a way help to construct the national Self of the British in a more positive light.

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