Illusion and Reality: Turkey in Nineteenth-century English Literature

Min HE
School of Foreign Languages, Shaanxi Normal University,
No.199, South Chang’an Road,
Yanta District Xi’an 710062, China
hemin@snnu.edu.cn, 2010542860@qq.com

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Abstract. This paper discusses the shifting image of Turkey in nineteenth-century English literature such as diplomats’ personal recollections, travelers’ accounts, monographs and some academic papers in periodicals. It shows that the image of Turkey began with the consolidation and the deepening of a negative image due to a negative stereotype which had been present from the earlier century. However, image discourse is affected by changes in the historical, cultural, political and economic contexts, and from then a positive image may be constructed, countering the negative image. This was happening in the case of Turkey in the middle of the nineteenth century. The negative image of Turkey nonetheless mounted to a new height with the shift of Britain’s strategy and the tendency to criticize Turkey from a moral perspective. It concludes that the fluctuation of the image of Turkey was a reflection of Britain’s own self-image, thus displaying complexity and multi-dimensional being of the image of a nation.

Introduction

“Turkey” is a word denoting a geographical confine, which in fact did not exist in the languages of the dominion it governed. [1] Although Ottomans were inclined to crown their empire as the Ottoman Empire, however, European countries preferred to call it Turkey, which embraces an image of an invader in the former’s perception. In the sixteenth and seventeenth century, the Ottoman power was at its zenith. The Sultan ruled over an area stretching from Hungary to the Crimea and from Tunis to the Persian Gulf. Its particular geographical location rendered it the prominence in Europe. In retrospect, Turkey played a significant role in maintaining the balance of European power. For instance, in the sixteenth century, France entered into close relations with the Porte against Habsburg; and England sought help from Turkey against Spain. Despite its decline, in the nineteenth century, Turkey still played the comparable role in keeping power balance in Europe. Although European countries coveted for a larger share of the Ottoman territory, no power boasted adequate strength to swallow the heritage of the dying empire; hence, the ostensible integrity of Turkey was the expedient compromise among the European powers, of which England and Russia were heatedly embroiled with for its own interest.

In his paper National Images and International Systems, K. E. Boulding argued that an international system is composed of a group of interacting behavior units called “nations” or “countries”, each of which can be described in terms of a set of “relevant variables” including states of war or peace, degrees of hostility or friendliness, alliance or enmity etc. The “image” must be thought of as the total cognitive, affective, and evaluative structure of the behavior unit, or its internal view of itself and its universe. [2] From the simple definition of “image”, we can infer at least three connotations: First, image is a cognitive and evaluative assessment, thus, the construction of image has inherent subjectivity; second, to construct an image is a psychological process, which means it does not match the reality all the time; third, an image is a reflection of the national Self and Other. This study benefits from the above insights into the entwined relations between international systems and national images. Despite its complexity of different images for different people, two boxes of people labelled the “powerful” and the “ordinary” are borrowed from
Boulding’s theory for further elaboration of the image of Turkey in Britain’s perception in the nineteenth century.

Factually, the image of Turkey in the Europe’s perception can be traced back to the seventh century. Under the framework of Christian narrative, the Islamic world displayed more of a distorted and degraded image. Furthermore, the Crusade resulted in sheer and absolute confrontations of the two vastly different civilizations. The collapse of Constantinople in 1453 laid a tone of “city plunders” for Turkey. As Sultans at the zenith of power took the Europe by storm, Turkey was described as “the terror of the world”. The horror it brought haunted the world so much that the “Turk” and “terrible” became an irresistibly catchy alliteration. In 1969 a book entitled The Most terrible Turk came out in New York. Thereupon negative prototypes of Turkey survived until into the nineteenth century.

A Continuum of Negative Prototypes

The very turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries witnessed continual impeding conflicts and wars between Turkey and Russia. Confronted with the deliberate aggressions by Russia, feeble Turkey had no way out but to appeal to Europe for help. As for Sultan, “the Christian powers are bound to keep such lawful promises as they have made to him”, but all went in favor to the Czar, “he is attacking an infamous power, the enemy of God and man.” [4] In this sense, Turkey was still an “infidel” for Christendom then. With the insurrection of Greeks in 1821, negative representations of Turkey were further reinforced. On the Easter Sunday, eighty-year-old Patriarch was seized and hanged over the gate of his Archiepiscopal Palace. “On the 15th of June, 1821, five archbishops, three bishops and a great number of laymen were hanged in the streets of Constantinople without any trial. At Salonika the battlements of the city were hung round with a ghastly dangling fringe of Christian heads, whose blood ran down the wall and reddened the water in the ditch.” [5] In fact, in English literature concerning the Greek campaign for independence in 1820s recorded the scenes of indescribable horrors, the image of cruel, cold-blooded killers who destroyed men as well as properties such as houses of the empire retrieved again and again in different dominions. The deliberate ferocity went to such a point that a scholar claims that “the Greek War of Independence (1821-1829) marks the most tragic phase in the history of ethnic relationship in 19th century Izmir as it does in Istanbul.” [6] One British traveler Dr. Walsh attributed the Turkish slaughter of innocent people to collective ethnic responsibility. [7]

Comparable to the negative image of the abstract ordinary Turks, the specific symbol of the “powerful” Sultan was also notorious for his bloodthirsty conducts and highly condemned despotism. Adolphus Slade, an admiral who served in the fleet of Mahmud II, was “taught to believe that he may cut off as many as fourteen heads a day.” [8] Described as a merciless tyrant, the Sultan destroyed the Janissary Corps with “unparalleled craft and cruelty” [9] The Sultan has also devised regulations for improving the notoriously corrupt courts of justice, and the vices of the other branches of administration. Bribery is denounced, extortion and violence anathematized; but here again his own example is strongly against his precepts. [10] His principal minister Reschid Pasha thought reform was retarded by Sultan’s refusal to adhere to the advice of his agents. Even the death of the proud, vain, flatter-loving Sultan was looked upon as somewhat of a blessing in disguise. [11]

What more, more stereotyped negative images were added to Turkey, a typical Oriental place in Occidental perspectives. At the very beginning of the nineteenth century, the Empire was stuck in dangers within and without, which was vividly compared to “a sick man”, nevertheless, thousands or millions of Turkish subjects believed that the Sultan was suzerain of Europe, and all other monarchs pay him tribute. [12] Likewise, the Turkish avenues for entertainment were also negative in some English travelers. The nation did not seem to have any descents of their nomadic ancestors, and they sat with the mind asleep in the shade of a plane tree, smoking a pipe. The silent way of relaxing was seen as indolence, which in the eyes of Victorian believers in a work ethic, came close to vice. [13]
Countering the Straightforward Negative Prototypes

Throughout the nineteenth century, Tukey was a continuous trouble for Europe, which comprised eastern question. Although the Russo-Turkish War and the Greek War brought to light many weaknesses, however, England was not particularly interested in Turkish affairs until in 1833 the Treaty of Unkiar Skelepsi was signed between Russia and Turkey. At the very moment English administration became alarmed by Russian motives, which were further interpreted as an impeding danger to the political and economic gains of England. As a consequence, maintaining “the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire” became one key integral foreign for England. Coincidentally, the Sultan, challenged and offended by Ali Pasha in Egypt, was determined to reform. Thereupon the Turkish image discourse is affected by changes in the historical, cultural, political and economic contexts, and from then a positive image may be constructed, countering the negative image.

Based on the English literature, the image of Turkey was mainly embodied on the layer of the “powerful”, two Sultans in the middle of the century. During the Greek War of Independence, some the Sultan Mahmud II’s oriental character was prominent. “He was haughty with a degree of ferocity, and his faces veiled the expression of the lower features with our picturesque idea of an eastern despot.” Nonetheless he was compared with Peter the Great and dubbed “the Great Lion of the East”. Despite much referred cruelty and tyranny, “Mahmoud never seems to have indulged in cruelty for cruelty’s sake alone.” Little was known about the earlier life of Mahmud, but he was definitely trained by his close friend Selim III, who was the first real reformer in the Turkish history. Ali Pasha’s intentional aggression motivated the Sultan to carry on the unfinished reform having embarked in the earlier time with iron will and political vision. Obviously, Turkey took on a new look after the Sultan’s initial attempts to reform: travelers no longer saw the Howling Dervishes cut themselves with knives; they noticed the fez as the official head-gear of his army. When he reformed public justice, the bastinado disappeared, as did the punishments for sinners against correct weights and measures in the markets, impalement and the worst excesses of torture in the prisons.

Mahmud II died in 1839 when Ali Pasha threatened the very existence of the Empire again. Yong Sultan Mejid issued Hatti Sherif De Gulhane, which symbolized the very beginning of Tanzimat. It aimed to reorganize the interior degradation and show to England the posture to modernize the waning empire. The young Sultan received western education, and he was familiar with science, literature, consequently he was open-minded and fair. Although obliged to issue Hatti Sherif De Gulhane in 1839 and Hat-I-Humayun in 1856, the two edicts displayed the Sultan’s inclination to seek for modernization and secularization. It assumed that the property, life and honor of Christians or non- Mussulman community were under the Sultan’s protection, which were in accordance with European pursuits for good, justice and fairness in the nineteenth century. It went just as Elizabeth Worneley Latimer remarked: “Turkish history has no record of any other sovereign so humane, so fond of order, so much inclined to accept the refinements of modern civilization.”

To sum up, the two “powerful” Sultans endeavored to reform, which countered the stereotyped negative image of Turkey. At that time, Turkophilism were prevalent in England. Many English were confident that Turkey was not an unchanging brutal and rash nation, in contrast, it willing to embrace civilization and refinement as it yearned for improvement. Hence, a refreshing positive image of Turkey was represented in English discourse.

Regression into Stereotyped Negative Prototypes

In the nineteenth century Turkey was intermittently bullied both at home and abroad. Its Christian subjects attempted to steer of yoke of the Sublime Porte which tried to keep its sovereignty over them. Consequently, the two parties sought for help from the rest of Europe. Among them, “Russia claimed a right to protect Greek Christians, and England claimed the right to uphold the Turkish
government. From 1821 on, this question has been the most troublesome one in European international politics. In particular, during the Crimean War, England and Turkey fought against Russia in the same alliance, which promoted the positive image representations in English literature. However, the image discourse was not monolithic; some English people measured Turkey from the traditional perspective. For example, some leading people such as Aberdeen detested the crude characteristic of Turks. In the 1960s, more and more criticism went to Turkish reform, and some observers “regarded it as a sham to deceive Westerners.” With more Christian independence movements, the English public became pessimistic about the future of Turkey, in their eyes the “sick man” was becoming a cadaver. The English public lost confidence about Turkish capability of reforming, for them “the government’s attempt to improve the Turks was like washing the Negro white, since they never were, or would be, or could be anything but barbarians.” Subsequently, the negative image of the Turkey mounted to a new height with the eruptions of Bulgarian Agitation and Armenian Massacres.

From the middle of 1870s, Bulgaria caught the eyes of English press, especially in 1876 there erupted Bulgaria uprising, and the Turkish government took stern measures to put down the insurrection. According to English consul in Adrianople, in one mountainous area about 12,000 innocent people including women and children were slaughtered, and 60 villages were put into flames. When the news of the atrocity was transmitted into England, the Disraeli administration tried to defend Turkey, and it was just “coffeehouse babble” from Disraeli’s lips, whereas another politician Gladstone held quite different views. His pamphlet *The Bulgarian Horrors* triggered overwhelming negative representations of the image of Turkey. In their eyes, Turks completely lost all virtues such as being enlightened and civilized in the earlier time. Instead they were labelled as “the one great anti-human species of humanity.” To make matters worse, in 1895 there were outbreaks in 15 towns in Asia Minor. “The number of victims in the cases of which detailed consular reports were forthcoming amounted to about 25,000, but it would probably be safe to double this figure if we include the slaughter in the villages and remoter towns of which no record was kept.” The slaughter was a thunderclap to Europe; thereupon in English literature the image of Turkey was unspeakable. In particular the Radical-Liberal circles waged anti-campaign against Turkey, and many popular English presses such as *Examiner, The Quarterly Review, Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* and *Athenaeum* issued pieces and comments which sorely denounced Turkey. Accordingly, the Sultan Hamid II was “Abdul the damned”.

**Conclusion**

In the nineteenth century, the image of Turkey in English literature shifted from the stereotyped negative prototypes to refreshing positive discourse, and then lapsed into the straightforward negative images again, displaying continuity, discontinuity and regression of the very prototypes of Turkey. Factually, the fluctuation of Turkish image is a good reflection of Britain’s political and economic interest along with the latter’s self-image. First, the consolidation and the deepening of a stereotyped negative image in 1820s were entangled with the representation of the Orient, which means there were traces of demonization, hence demonized “city plunderers” were constructed, implying an element of illusion. What came next was that the Russian ambitions in the Mediterranean and the central Asia were in conflict with English ones, which caused the latter to take initiative in forming an ally with the Ottoman Empire against Russia. Hence laudatory assessments of Turkey were the tone of Turcophiles, indicating Utopian representations of the image of Turkey. In 1870s the reappearance of negative images of Turkey was associated with English measurements of vastly different Turkey according to the former’s moral criteria. What was really hidden was that the strategic focus of Britain was diverted and forty-year-old alliance between Britain and Turkey lost its original glamor and withered. The image of Turkey lapsed into
the stereotyped prototypes again, which fully demonstrated that image discourse was intertwined with the reality. Second, the construction of Turkish image in nineteenth-century English literature was in fact a representation of Britain’s Self. Europe had different mirrors which could distinctively reflected itself, “but of all the negatives known to Europe the nearest, the most obvious and the most threatening has been the Islamic Near East, represented from the fourteenth century onwards by the menace of the Ottoman Empire.” In other words, Turkey was a mirror for Britain to perceive itself according to its own cultural and religious concepts, displaying complexity and multi-dimensional being of the image of a nation.

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References


