

SHIFTING WESTERN ORIENTALISM WITH MYTHS: SEEING WHAT IS BEHIND INDIAN AND TURKISH THOUGHT

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Abstract: I aim to present a narration of selected Turkish and Indian myths to interrogate Western Orientalism, and capture an aspect of the idea of difference. By focusing on how subjective truth is constructed in some critical points grounded on Indian and Turkish culture by the European thinking, I examine the space that leads to the clash of civilizations. The Indian and the Turkish thought are comparatively analyzed in their 'own worlds' with their customized rituals, stories and symbols. The hypothesis underlying this article is that the dominant literary narratives skip mythic memories that are integral to the Western and the Eastern identification. There must be some gaps grounded on cause and effect relation in history and those black spots may be the complex networks colored by various stories, myths and legends. The Oriental field necessitates urgent reconsiderations about the formation of a cultural reality of 'Others' for the dissolution of the Eastern and Western borders in certain minds.

Keywords: Orientalism, mythology, Turkey, India, West

BATILI ŞARKİYATÇILIĞI MİTOLOJİ İLE KAYDIRMAK: HİNT VE TÜRK DÜŞÜNME BİÇİMİNİN ARKASINI OKUMAK

Bu çalışmada, Batı Şarkiyatçılığını sorgulayarak, 'farklılık' düşüncesinin bir boyutunu yansıtacak olan, Türk ve Hint mitolojisinden anlatılar sunmayı amaçlamaktayım. Batının, Türk ve Hint kültüründeki kritik noktalarını, öznel gerçeklik ile nasıl kurduğuna değinerek, 'Medeniyetler Çarpışması'na sebep olan alanı incelemekteyim. Bu makalenin hipotezi şudur: Baskın edebi anlatılar Doğu ve Batı kimliklendirmesi ile ilişkili 'anlatıları' atlamaktadır. Tarihte sebep-sonuç ilişkisine dayalı boşluklar olmalıdır ve bu kör noktalar çeşitli hikaye, mit ve efsanelerle renklendirilmiş, atlama karmaşık yapılı alanlar olabilirler. Şarkiyatçı alan, Ötekinin kültürel gerçekliğinin yeniden yapılandırılması ve bazı zihinlerde Doğu- Batı sınırlarının çözülmüş hâl hâsunda tekrar değerlendirme yapmalıdır.

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INTRODUCTION

OTHERING ORIENTALISM

"Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet." (Rudyard Kipling, The Ballad of East and West)

The ambivalent relationship between the Orient and the Occident dates back years ago. The Orient has been exaggerated, imagined and fantasized. Full of rich cultural heritage, the East became the realm of exotic sentuality and spiritual mystics. Presenting the East before an encounter with it, the West faced its self image later on. The Orient and the Occident encountered in certain contact zones. The transculturation took place and it created more ambivalence, intented discourses and many other moral and cultural dislocations. In academia, in 1978, Edward Said published his notable work '*Orientalism*' leaving the largest trace into the Orientalist tradition. He stated that "*the Orient is based on European experience. Institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles*"² all reinforced the image of the Other in Western systems.

Orientalism was criticized to become an enclosed system which was designed to ignore reality. The orientalist tradition was followed with other names who criticed Said's theory such as Robert Irwin, Bernard Lewis, Ibn Warraq and Daniel Martin Varisco. In 1992, Samuel Huntington and in 1990, Bernard Lewis theorized the 'clash of civilizations'. The statement of Huntington was that:

"Differences among civilizations are not only real; they are basic. Civilizations are differentiated from each other by history, language, culture, tradition and, most important, religion. The people of different civilizations have different views on the relations between God and man, the individual and the group, the citizen and the state, parents and children, husband and wife, as well as differing views of the relative importance of rights and responsibilities, liberty and authority, equality and hierarchy. These differences are the product of centuries. They will not soon disappear."³

In the last decades, the Oriental studies hopefully went beyond from 'bringing civilization' to backward nations- such as the work of Huntington- to reasonable narratives of regime of difference, subaltern, identity, hybridity studies. Trying to

² Said Edward, *The Edward Said Reader*, Random House LLC, 2007, pp.68

³ Huntington Samuel, *Clash of Civilizations*, *Foreign Affairs*, 72:3, Summer 1993, pp. 22-49

eliminate the difference between the Orient and the Occident, an Orientalist guilt took place, “*perhaps, beneath that, there may be yet another layer, an admiration of India, a desire to learn from India, perhaps even a genuine if misguided desire to give India something in return.*”⁴ Indian Orientalism hovered around British self-conceptions re-circulating wider projects of justifying imperial rule. Representations, literally or culturally established a British subjectivity and narrative agency. Many of the Indian regions were disciplined in British discursive measures and approached British ideals through a matrix of colonial agenda. On the other hand, Turkish Orientalism gathered around Islam, the Harem and the exotic Ottoman traditions. Byron, Pierre Loti, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Fanny Davis wrote on Turkey as a Middle Eastern nation with a big emphasis on Islam. In spite of the different position geographically, linguistically and culturally, Turkey was generalized as an Arab alike country somewhere in Middle East. India and Turkey were recreated challenging the muteness of the past as oriental objets in other works.

“The romantic bridge-builders have been trying to connect the West with the East and search for a synthesis that could combine “European rationality” and “Indian spirituality.” In this view, Indians need the more down-to-earth European attitude and practicality whereas the material West should adopt the emotional attitude arising from Indian spirituality. Interestingly, most representations seem to reinforce the binary ontology between India and Europe.”⁵

No combination such as above will fit the current Indian or Turkish identity. India is India even if it is reconfigured with globalization. Oriental cultures exist in eclectic forms, not in totality. They possess diversity and have their own customized way of seeing reality. Even if they are successive in the paradigm of globalization, they don’t constitute a model of totality. In other words, Indian orientalism differs from Turkish orientalism in practical life, so we have orientalisms but still they have a common sense of constructing reality. The multi layered India and multi-cultural Turkey share common stories; one of them is the *Arabian Nights*.

ARABIAN NIGHTS, STORY TELLING AND ORIENTALISM

“*Oh, great and powerful King,*” Scheherazade said. “*I have a younger sister, and I would like to say good-bye to her before I die.*” The king agreed and sent for Dunyazad. The young girl sat at the foot of the bed. “*Oh, Sister,*” Dunyazad said, “*tell me a delightful story to while away the last few hours of our waking life.*” “*That would please me,*” Scheherazade said. “*If our wise king will permit me, then I will begin.*” “*Tell on,*” said the king, who for once was having trouble sleeping. Scheherazade rejoiced, for this was part of her

⁴ Doniger Wendy, *On Hinduism*, Oxford University Press, 2014, pp.564

⁵ J.Jouhki, *Orientalism and India*, 2006, Ph.D. electronic document

*plan. And on this, the first night of the Thousand and One Nights, she began to tell her stories*⁶.

Story telling in oriental narrations potentially embodies the biggest place in acquainting and familiarizing with the narrative tradition of other cultures. Stories are reconstructed with their specific stock of characters or change in characterization. Recreating the Oriental history *Les mille et une nuit*, Antoine Galland is viewed as a departure name for European Orientalism. His work became a re-introduction of the oriental knowledge, a product of the interface between European/Romance and Arabic cultures. However, scholars' failed to address adequately the eastern identity in 'One thousand and one night' and it became one of the epistemological difficulties of writing on the Orient without a sense of internality. Different authors used different techniques and followed different objectives in their works, several types of intertextuality were adapted in *The Thousand and One Nights*. All of the stories were and are true in their way. The collection is highly multicultural; the origin probably Persian, the type of the frame-narrative is Indian supported by many Jewish, Greek, Turkish and of course, Arabic stories from different regions and historical periods.

In the Nights, the King and the husband of Sheherazade,

"Shahriyar is no longer the bloodthirsty tyrant he used to be; he becomes an anxious intellectual trying to find the eternal truth. Suddenly, he comes to the conclusion that he can never succeed unless he frees himself of the main obstacle which is his human body. His spiritual self is not able to reconcile with the physical one and thus he is irrevocably doomed. The equilibrium between his body and spirit is disrupted and the whole story leads to the tragedy of man. We no longer know how to tell stories, we don't know anything anymore"⁷

Through the representation of storytelling, the character is redefined no longer as fixed and severely sheltered, but as an idealist of some moralities. The re-portrayal of the differences in inter-textual fiction establishes a connection between the East and the West as well as redefining the Eastern way of living. The story therefore aims to dissipate the concept of orientalism with its cultural connections. "The story is to meet the expectation. To change it. Or to dissuade from the expectation. The story is supposed to console, convince, deceive, fascinate and thus recreate us. Story-telling grounds on those tricks."⁸ Scheherazade's tale of *One Thousand and One Nights* thus provides a literal reality how to gain freedom through the power of story telling. It is

⁶ Amy Peters, *The Everything Fairy Tales Book: A Magical Collection of All-Time Favorites*, Everything Books, 2001, pp.86

⁷ Khoury, *The Journey of Little Gandhi*, Macmillan, 2009, pp. 19.

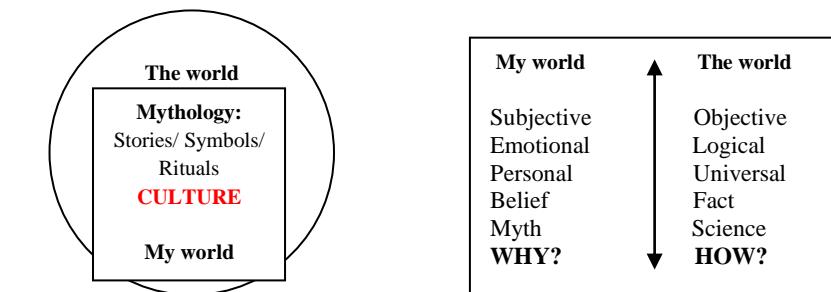
⁸ Güneli Gün, *Bağdat Yollarında* -originally in English as *On the road to baghdad*- My own translation, İstanbul Remzi Kitabevi, pp.269

through story-telling that the common perceptions about cultures evolve, change and elude from the restrictions of the Orientalist tradition. The original versions of the Arabian Nights still shape the boundaries of the Western world, but not the Eastern one. Without even telling a word on the West, excluding Western values with a sense of liberation, the story profoundly inspires the restricted Oriental academia on behalf of the East.

SEEING YOUR REALITY THROUGH MY MYTHOLOGY

The Orient gives meaning to life through some upper motivations such as myths, legends, stories, rituals and beliefs. It is connected to the universe through some kind of spirituality that is hard to explain to the West. To understand a myth is to see what is hidden in a culture's custom, religious tenet, law, politics, hierarchies, social structures, arts, music, way of life. The unexplainable is explained in that way. The puzzle is solved even if it encourages an aura of mystery. A myth satisfies our need of interpreting the nature of human actions both historically and culturally. The symbols attach us across many cultures and time periods. It is so powerful that it can directly and empathetically relate us to peoples who lived in other worlds. Meaning is created through those base opinions according to the big scheme in the Eastern world.

Humans always look for information to confirm their beliefs or their own truths. The question is: “*What is more important the world or my world, logos or mythos?*”⁹ This is the primary question to understand *difference* and *clash*. In the great work “*Mthyrs that mystify*”, Indian mythology versus European thinking, Dr. Devdutt Pattanaik tells the story of two brothers, Ganesha the elephant headed god and Kartikeya, the warlord of the gods. One day, they decided to go on a race three times around the world. Kartikeya went around the continents, flew over the oceans and huge mountains once, twice and three times. Ganesha simply whirled around him once, twice and three times and said: ‘I won’. ‘How come’ said Kartikeya. Ganesha said ‘you went around the world, I went around my world. What matters more? Two mythologies are right but different.



⁹ Pattanaik Devdutt, *Myths that Mystify*, In TED Talks on May 20, 2010

Sekil 1¹⁰

Sekil 2¹¹

This subjective understanding of life inspires the clash of civilizations.

Nothing lasts forever as he says. Your way is not absolute truth just as their way is not therefore illogical superstition. To live in today's world of clashing cultures, you have to accept that your truth is subjective. In the western world, everything is clear cut, systematic, all leading to a predetermined outcome but in India you live an infinite number of lives. They do not live for one heaven but believe in many versions of paradise.

Where is the center of the world? Allegorically, is it London, Paris, Istanbul, the Indus Valley or Mekka? In my world, it is what a Turkish satirical Sufi and a wise man, Nasreddin Hodja says on his grave: "*This is the center of the world*".



God created the first man from soil for non-muslim Shamanist Turks. God left this first man under the control of a hairless dog and went to search him a soul in the sky. In Guatemala mythology, the first man was created from mud in the beginning but when gods realized that this creature was weak, they recreated him from cornflour. In mamluk mythology the first man Ay-Atam was made of loam. Such as Yezidis, beside of soil, water, air and fire were also his raw materials. In greek mythology Zeus made artists modelled a woman which later on he revived. Every culture makes sense of itself with its own customized values, rituals, symbols and unwritten laws.

Civilizations encounter with each other in different contact zones. Nations' own mythologies create secure spaces; safe houses.¹² Here, we have stories as a space of

¹⁰ ibid

¹¹ ibid

encounter. “*Social spaces where disparate cultures meet and clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination*”¹³ build a safe space of cultural interaction through mythology and story-telling. These spaces “attempt to invoke the spatial and temporal copresence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctions whose trajectories now intersect”¹⁴. In the imaginary space of contact, people teach, learn and discuss certain aspects of history. The safe house of mythology provides an opportunity for identifying with the ideas, interests and history of others. The clash happens, the contact zone turns to be a safe house by showing the treasure of ‘others’ and creating mutual understanding and wisdom. What I offer is that this safe zone is built with ‘myths’ and ‘stories’ of cultures.

DRIFTED AWAY FROM ORIENTALISM: SUFISM AND BUDDHISM

The Orientalist theory as briefly discussed above ignored mythology of nations, folk tales such as the Arabian Nights and other spiritual or cultural motivations that civilizations construct their present. For a while, the Occident attempts to see the folk wisdom, beliefs and religious motifs of a culture instead of adapting systems of modernization for the ‘rest of the world.’¹⁵ “*Because religion has replaced this gap, which provides a basis for identity and commitment that transcends national boundaries and unites civilizations.*”¹⁶ Indians and Turks share a long history dating back to pre Islamic Ottoman period. They share common spiritual traditions such as Sufism and Buddhism which are practised in geographic ranges in their own individual assertions. There is a meditation of highly devoted practitioners living around a spiritual master in both of them.

“For example, Abu Yazid Bistami introduced into Sufism the concepts of *fana* and *khud'a* from the influence of his teacher, Abu ‘Ali al-Sindi. *Fana* means cessation of existence – the total destruction of the individual ego in becoming one with Allah; *khud'a* means deceit or trick, as the description of the material world.”¹⁷

All forms of Buddhism deal with the similar topic of *nirvana* – release from recurring rebirth– and many Mahayana schools assert that the world of appearances is similar.¹⁸ On the other hand, we can find examples of literary

¹² Pratt Mary Louise, The art of the contact zone, MLA,1991, pp.33-40

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Kishore Mahbubani, *the conflict between the West and the Rest*, The National Interest, Summer 1992, pp. 3-13

¹⁶ Huntington, pp.22-49

¹⁷ *The relation between Buddhism and Sufism: Response to Majid Tehranian*, Nov.16 2013, The Berzin Archives

¹⁸ ibid

borrowings from Buddhism into Sufism. For instance, the Buddhist image of a group of blind men each describing an elephant differently, based on each touching a separate part of the animal, found its way into Sufism in the writings of the Persian scholar Abu Hamid al-Ghazali.¹⁹ Advocating philosophical skepticism, al-Ghazali used the image to illustrate how Islamic theologians possess only partial truth, while Buddha used it in *The Sutta of the Non-Buddhist Sects* (Pali: *Tittha Sutta*) to demonstrate the futility of the non-Buddhist philosophers debating their views with each other. Other Buddhist influences on Sufism occurred in the sphere of ritual practice.

Common rituals are clearly presented in the work Dr. Alex and Akpinar in the work, the Dharma of Islam. Before settling down on Anatolia, which means before Islam, Turks were ruled by wordly law called “yasa” by Gengis Khan²⁰. Yasa orders the universe. It has very similar connotations with ‘Dharma’ which is the teachings of Buddha, the universal law, the experience of truth and the enlightenment. Dharma points to the law of Karma and rebirth. It is a manifestation of reality and the factors of existence such as it exists in Sufism. Sufism alike is experiencing and actualizing the truth particularly through consciousness and love, a purification of the human heart. At the end of the process such as Nirvana, the human being becomes spiritually mature towards self-realization, towards God. Sufis recite the names of God, Buddhists praise the names of Manjushri. They chant, holler and dance, sometimes silently. Buddhists have vajra-dances. Also, the poetry and narrations have strong attachments with the practice of Sufism and any other Indian devotional traditions. Buddhist Indian gods and Allah in Sufism are nothingness. With a spiritual open heart, a buddhist or a Sufi turns to a mirror that faithfully reflects the whole being; the Orient or the Occident, they are all one.

The orientalist hermeneutics took Persian originated Sufism with all its branches and Buddhism as exotic wisdom and single managable entities. However, Buddhist or “Sufi doctrines can be understood only from the inside through the intellectual penetration which transcends the limits of discursive thought”²¹.

Before writing on a cultural identity, you have to infiltrate to the cultural codes of societies, listen to their colorful tales, their mythology, their stories. Go and introduce yourself to Buddha, Ram, Shiva or Vishnu for instance. Approach to Mevlana Celaleddin Rumi and listen to its sayings, open your hearth. Then an Orientalist is welcome and may write on the Orient, whoever it may be.

¹⁹ ibid

²⁰ *The Dharma of Islam: A Conversation with Snjezana Akpinar and Alex Berzin Inquiring Mind*
Berkeley, California, vol. 20, no. 1, fall 2003

²¹ Uždavinys Algis, *Sufism In The Light Of Orientalism*, Research Institute of Culture, Philosophy, and Arts, Vilnius ,Vol. Vo. 6 - Issue No. 2 , 2005, pp.120

Mitology, tales and stories of cultures, and their beliefs help us create a profound knowledge of the inner spirit, empathy and recognition of civilizations. In that way, European dreams, fantasies, visions, perceptions, memories will not create a meta-state and need-interest classification of the Oriental. The network which embraces cultures will thus paint cultural images that pass beyond borders of each other. Tales emigrate from certain geographies to others to connect all kinds of existences. Telling a story is to change an idea, but to understand a story is to gain the hidden treasures of a culture from outside. All the magical stories and folk tales such as Keloglan, Şahmeran (snake woman), all the Fairies and Jinnis make an Orientalist familiar with the lands of Anatolia. Maybe inside the story, you meet historical figures on your way. Then you fly to Indian lands and become the wise man, now you are in the Eastern world. *“Thus it is correct to say that every domain is linked, and that nothing that goes on in our world has ever been isolated and pure of any outside influence. We need to speak about issues of injustice and suffering within a context that is amply situated in history, culture, and socio-economic reality.”²²* The link between the tales and beliefs such as in Buddhism and Sufism reflect deep interconnectedness of all existences and distribute those treasures to any Orientalist generously.

“But there is a difference between knowledge of other peoples and other times that is the result of understanding, compassion, careful study and analysis for their own sakes, and on the other hand knowledge that is part of an overall campaign of self-affirmation”²³ The difference is the fragile ingredient that an Orientalist ought to construct its story and sayings. It is this colorful difference that makes you coexist in one world.

The tales, practices, myths all provide an insight of many complexities and aspects of perceptions on the history of my own culture which is a shared history of yours. That is what is behind Indian and Turkish thought.

²² Edward Said, *A window on the world*, the Guardian, Saturday 2 August 2003

²³ Ibid.

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