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## Voluntary Acceptance of Western Imperialist Discourse in Turkish Historical TV Series: The Case of The Magnificent Century

*Batılı Sömürgeci Söylemin Türk Tarihi Dizilerinde Gönüllü Kabulü: Muhteşem Yüzyıl Dizisi Örneği*

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**Abstract:** *Despite the exciting rise of Turkish productions in recent years, particularly of historical drama, it is alarming to see that most of these shows voluntarily accept the European heritage of Orientalist depictions of the Ottomans, Turks, and Islam in general. "Other"-demonizing discourse characteristic in Western media served for centuries as a way to morally justify the subjugation of Middle Eastern peoples by reinforcing the artificial binary between the "sophisticated and democratic West" and "the ignorant and despotic East." It is therefore my modest aim in this article to demonstrate that contemporary productions such as the Magnificent Century [Muhteşem Yüzyıl in Turkish] are based on these stereotypical clichés and can be culturally and socially harmful on a global scale. Putting the populist debates in the public sphere aside, I will approach the issue as a scholar of postcolonial criticism and demonstrate the Orientalist undertones in the series; the uncanny reasons of such a representation; and its serious consequences both home and abroad.*

**Keywords:** *Ottoman Empire, Orientalism, Postcolonial theory, Suleiman the Magnificent, Historical TV drama, harem, historical fiction*

**Öz:** *Son yıllarda tarihi dizi ve filmlerde Türk yapımcılığının yükselişte olmasına rağmen, pek çok dizide Osmanlıların, Türklerin ve daha genel olarak da İslam'ın oryantalist bir söylemle resmedilmesi, Avrupalılardan miras kalan bu algının gönüllü olarak sahiplenilmesi kaygı uyandırıcıdır. Türkleri ve Müslümanları barbar, ilkel, vahşi ırklar; Türk erkeğini şehvet düşkün ve kaba saba; kadını egzotik bir seks objesi; Osmanlı haremni de ahlaksız ve sıradışı seks fantazilerinin yatağı olarak resmetmek asırlarca İngiliz ve Fransızlar gibi Avrupalı egemen sömürgeci güçlerin alameti farikası olagelmıştır. Bu "Ötekini şeytanlaştırma" söylemi yüzyıllar boyunca uydurulan "demokratik ve gelişmiş Batı" ile "ilkel ve despot Doğu" ikilemi güçlendirerek Orta Doğulu halkların sömürgeleştirilmesinde sözde ahlaki bir bahane ve gereklilik olarak ortaya çıkarılmış ve sömürgeleştirme sürecinde etkili bir biçimde kullanılmıştır. İşte bu makalede, Muhteşem Yüzyıl dizisinin dayandığı bu oryantalist söylem incelenecek ve bunun uluslararası platformda nasıl zararlar verebileceği irdelenecektir. Popülist söylemler bir kenara bırakılarak, konu tarih araştırmaları, edebiyat eleştirisi ve sömürgecilik incelemeleri bağlamında ele alınacak ve dizideki Oryantalist altyapı, böyle bir portrenin neden kullanıldığı ve hem yurt içinde hem de uluslararası arenada ne gibi ciddi sıkıntılara yol açabileceği sorularına cevap aranacaktır.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Osmanlı tarihi, Osmanlı klasik çağı, Sömürgecilik tarihi, Oryantalizm, Kanuni Sultan Süleyman, tarihi roman, tarihi dizi, harem*

"Those who tell stories rule the world."<sup>1</sup>

Plato, *Republic*

Despite the exciting rise of Turkish productions in recent years, particularly, of historical drama, it is alarming to see that most of these shows voluntarily accept the European heritage of Orientalist depictions of the Ottomans, Turks, and Islam in general. The portrayal of the Turkish/Islamic races as barbaric, primitive and vulgar; of the Turkish man as lustful

<sup>1</sup> Book III. *Republic* (New York: Hackett, 2011).

and ignorant; of the Turkish woman as exotic and lascivious; and of the Ottoman harem as a hotbed of immoral and bizarre sexual encounters has long been a trademark of European colonial powers such as the British and the French.<sup>2</sup> This Other-demonizing discourse served for centuries as a way to morally justify the subjugation of Middle Eastern peoples by reinforcing the artificial binary between the “sophisticated and democratic West” and “the ignorant and despotic East.”<sup>3</sup> It is therefore my modest aim in this article, to demonstrate that contemporary productions such as the *Magnificent Century* [*Muhteşem Yüzyıl* in Turkish] are based on these stereotypical clichés and can be culturally and socially harmful on a global scale.

*Magnificent Century* is a Turkish prime time historical television series supposedly based on the life of Süleyman I (a.k.a. Suleiman the Law-Giver or Suleiman the Magnificent), the longest reigning Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, and Hürrem (a.k.a. Roxelana), the slave girl who became his queen. The show generated controversy and complaints from many viewers for what they referred to as a “disrespectful”, “indecent”, and “hedonistic” portrayal of the historical sultan. Turkey's Radio and Television Supreme Council received over 70,000 complaints about the show and warned the network to publicly apologize for wrongly misrepresenting historical events and figures.<sup>4</sup> As recently as late 2012, even the Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan condemned the director of the TV series and the owner of the channels that broadcast the series harshly.<sup>5</sup> Despite the debate, or perhaps because of it, the show remained popular with viewers, with consistently higher ratings and eventually being the most-watched TV series in the history of the Turkish TV industry. Aired in more than 45 countries, the show was the latest production that took the region by storm.<sup>6</sup>

Putting the populist debates in the public sphere aside, I will approach the issue as a scholar of postcolonial criticism and demonstrate the Orientalist undertones in the series; the uncanny reasons of such a representation; and its serious consequences both at home and abroad. For matters of space, to avoid vague statements, and to have a sharper focus, I will

<sup>2</sup> As defined in *Orientalism* by Edward Said; a clear set of essential differences between the “West” and the “East,” the former always depicted as logical, mathematical, scientific etc., whereas the latter is irrational, sensual and barbaric. See Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993). For a comprehensive historical overview of the representations of Islam in the Christian discourse see Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image* (Boston: Oneworld, 1993). For more varying perspectives see A. L. MacFie, ed. *Orientalism: A Reader*. (New York: New York UP, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Robert Stam and Ella Shohat explain that Eurocentric discourse is diffusionist; it assumes that democracy, science, progress, and prosperity all emanate outward from a western source. This kind of grand narrative sanitizes Western history while patronizing and even demonizing the non-west. The West conceives itself in terms of its noblest achievements but the non-West in terms of its deficiencies, real or imagined. See Stam, Robert and Ella Shohat, “De-Eurocentricizing Cultural Studies: Some Proposals,” in *Internationalizing Cultural Studies: An Anthology*, ed. Akbar Abbas, et al. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 481-99.

<sup>4</sup> “Muhteşem Yüzyıl’a Rekor Şikayet,” NTVMSNBC, accessed November 12, 2012, <http://www.ntvmsnbc.com/id/25169180/>

<sup>5</sup> “Turkey's PM Erdoğan slams TV series about Ottoman sultan,” accessed Jan 2, 2013, <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-299316-turkeys-pm-erdogan-slams-tv-series-about-ottoman-sultan.html>

<sup>6</sup> The show is said to have more than 150 million viewers in the Middle East, Balkans and Turkic Republics. See “Muhteşem Yüzyıl’ı 150 Milyon Kişi İzliyor,” *Hurriyet*, accessed December 5, 2012, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/22005105.asp>



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only look at the first premier episode of the series that could be said to have set the tone for the entire show.

The TV series opens with the beginnings of Hurrem's tragedy when half-Tatar, half-Turkish barbaric tribes pillage and loot her village, killing, raping, abducting or enslaving the inhabitants young and old, man and woman. Out of this village burned to ashes by these Turkic tribes, we see Hurrem hidden in a church, taking a vow for vengeance from the Turks. Once abducted from the village to be a slave in the sultan's harem, the story goes on with equally stereotypical epithets about the Ottomans and Muslims. While on a ship full of slaves, like herself treated rather inhumanely and under gruesome conditions by Turkish sailors, Hurrem screams, "Haven't we come to the hell of the Ottomans yet?!" When the Turkish sailors see this stubborn and troublemaker girl, they are quick to punish her with waterboarding and beating. From these first scenes on, Hurrem is the epitome of European individualism and free will while the Ottomans stand for despotism and fanaticism. This positive portrayal of Europe is further symbolized by the cross that she secretly carries and it is this cross with which the reader is supposed to associate oneself rather than with the Muslim crescent.

When we finally see the Sultan, Suleiman the Magnificent,<sup>7</sup> what we have is a balding man in his forties who likes posing a lot with a sword in his hand or on his belt and who either makes love with a concubine or utters heroic words against the infidel Christian nations. In one particular scene, he walks on a map showing European kingdoms thereby symbolizing his thirst for domination and conquest by every means possible. The Turks are definitely a threat to Christians and to the rest of Europe for that matter. The image of the Islamic armies spreading through Christian lands by the sword is very well emphasized by actions and scenes like this. There is not a single hint of the real concept of *futuhat* or conquest that truly drove the Ottoman state and spirit.

Throughout the entire episode, Suleyman is driven by the greed to capture all those lands that do not yet belong to the Ottomans. He poses a serious threat to Eastern and Central European cultures, a characteristic of the show that is clearly embodied in a Venetian envoy who is forcibly and inhumanely made to kneel down before the sultan. However, the actual concept of *ghaza* (not 'jihad' as in the sense of 'holy war')<sup>8</sup> is radically different than what is portrayed in the show. In his highly influential *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu Klasik Çağ* [*The Ottoman Empire: The Classical Age*] Halil İnalcık states:

The Ottoman Empire came to being as a protector of the Orthodox Church and millions of Orthodox Christians, although it was the central tenet of the state to continue the *ghaza* tradition. Islam granted safety for life and property for Christians

<sup>7</sup> Historians unanimously define the era of Sultan Suleiman as the greatest of the Ottoman Empire. For example, see Halil İnalcık, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu Klasik Çağ: 1300-1600*, (İstanbul: YKY, 2004), 9; and Norman Itzkowitz, *Ottoman Empire and Islamic Tradition* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1972), 35.

<sup>8</sup> Much needs to be noted to draw attention to the major misunderstanding of the concept of "jihad" in contemporary post-9/11 discourse, within which Islamic defensive war is fused with the concept of "holy war" as in the Crusades without much care. Even less known is the difference among terms such as "jihad" and "ghaza" and "futuhat." Cemal Kafadar notes, "jihad should not be understood as incessant warfare to expand the abode of Islam or a mentality that recognizes a permanent state of war;" Cemal Kafadar, *Between Two Worlds: The Construction of the Ottoman State* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1995). For more on the misleading nature of terms such as "jihad" in contemporary discourse, see John Esposito and Dalia Mogahed, *Who Speaks for Islam? What a Billion Muslims Really Think*, (New York: Gallup Press, 2008).



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and Jews with the condition of submission to the state and the paying of the “*cizye*” tax. It allowed them to practice their religion freely and live accordingly. Those Ottoman Turks who lived together with Christians at border regions applied these notions of Islam with generosity and toleration.<sup>9</sup>

İnalçık adds that this was also a result of the realistic Ottoman administration; the policy of tolerance was a necessity to secure the financial sources of the treasury.<sup>10</sup> A comparison with Western kingdoms should be noted here. When the Jews of Europe were considered less than human and were expelled with the fervor of the Inquisition courts that burned them for simply not converting to Christianity, the Ottomans welcomed them to their lands.<sup>11</sup> The prosperity of Jews and other non-Muslims in Constantinople were always one of the primary things that captured travelers’ attention. Travelogue after travelogue, from Tavernier to Tournefort to Lady Montagu, you can easily find depictions of prosperous lifestyles of the Jews and Christians in Ottoman lands.<sup>12</sup>

The personality of Sultan Suleiman in *The Magnificent Century* applies the cliché notion of the absolute sovereignty of Ottoman sultans, another major misconception among those who are not much familiar with the realities of the Ottoman administration. When the actual workings of the state are examined more closely, however, it is clear that the empire’s fate was not between the two lips of any Ottoman sovereign as is usually imagined. In the *Ottoman Empire and Islamic Tradition*, Norman Itzkowitz states, “Sovereign power resided in the will of the sultan, but the practical necessities of governing and expanding state required the sultan to delegate some of his authority.”<sup>13</sup> Even Lord Kinross, who wrote one of the most populist and cliché-laden twentieth century narratives about the Ottoman Empire, cannot help but draw attention to this quality in his *Ottoman Centuries*: “The Sultan had no power to change or ignore the principles of the Sheriat, the Sacred Law, propounded by God and delegated through the Prophet, which thus acted as a limitation on his divine sovereign authority.”<sup>14</sup>

Regarding religious limitations, the Sultan of *The Magnificent Century* is very problematic. The only moments when Suleiman utters the words “Allah” or “Muhammed” are after he has just had sex with a concubine while half naked in bed, or when he swears against the infidels to chop off their heads or while declaring  *jihad*  against them. The sultan’s viziers, the viceroys to the sultan, are no smarter than him, either. Rather, they look like old women gossiping about state affairs, that brings to mind the kitchen gossips of *Asmalı Konak*, the most

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<sup>9</sup> İnalçık, *Osmanlı*, 13. Translation is mine.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Bayezid II (r.1481-1512) brought tens of thousands of Jews, Muslims, and non-Catholics from the inquisition courts of Ferdinand and Isabella to the Ottoman ports in the fifteenth century. Salonicha, along with Constantinople, was one of the locations where Jews chose to create their own communities. For more on the history of Sephardic Jews that escaped from Spain to the Ottoman Empire see Elli Kohen, *History of the Turkish Jews and Sephardim, Memoirs of a Past Golden Age*, (UP of America, 2006); Avigdor Levy, *Jews of the Ottoman Empire*, (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1994); *Jews, Turks, and Ottomans: A Shared History*, (Syracuse UP, 2002); *The Sephardim in the Ottoman Empire*, (Princeton, Darwin P, 1992).

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, *The Turkish Embassy Letters*, ed. Malcolm Jack. (London: Virago, 2009) and Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq, *The Turkish Letters*. trans. Edward Seymour Forster (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1927).

<sup>13</sup> Itzkowitz, *Ottoman*, 40.

<sup>14</sup> Lord Kinross, *The Ottoman Centuries: The Rise and Fall of the Turkish Empire* (London: Perennial, 1977), 206.



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famous work of the scriptwriter of *The Magnificent Century*. The intrigue and meddling among the viziers is not unlike the “troubling” harem women in the show. Wisdom is nowhere to be found in an administration that ruled most of the known world at the time. This is another surprising and therefore disappointing feature of the show since even commonplace knowledge would include the widely-known wisdom of these figures. İnalçık demonstrates how most of these viziers were only second to the sultan in terms of authority and the grave decision making process.<sup>15</sup> Kinross also narrates several cases of these influential viziers in terms of how they “contributed positively for all their personal failings to the greatness of his empire.”<sup>16</sup> One should also note that these figures were the graduates of higher education institutions that were arguably the best during the time.<sup>17</sup>

But there is indeed one smart and complex figure in the administration: Pargalı Ibrahim, who is not only a vizier but also a close friend to the sultan. Purportedly based on another historical figure, Pargalı is depicted as the sultan’s right-hand man in whom he confides more than anyone else in the seraglio. Pargalı is smart, sensitive and thoughtful, and the sultan looks, most literally, into his eyes whenever he is about to make an important decision. It is almost as if he needs Pargalı’s consent before taking any action. However, being the smartest and most humane character in the story, Pargalı is very much like Hürrem since he comes from a Christian background, as well. The audience is made to believe that it is in his blood to be royal, unlike the natural-born despotic Turks who are always depicted to be chained to barbarism. And again, similar to Hürrem, Pargalı has his own monologues questioning and lamenting his fate which was captured and sealed by the Ottoman state. The exchanges of meaningful and emotional gazes between the sultan and Pargalı go so far as to suggest a homoerotic relationship, another Orientalist stereotype about the bizarre sexual adventures of the Ottoman seraglio. The world of the exotic East, as compared the normative West is now complete.

However, Pargalı’s most prominent feature is his hidden loyalty to his mother culture, which has been forcibly and violently taken away from him. Deep inside, he resents his current surroundings, the Ottoman culture and the Islamic lifestyle. In monologue after monologue, we witness a troubled individual who has not completely come to terms with the Ottomans. “What was my name, what did it mean, in which language, I forgot,” he says in one scene, “Forgetting is freedom. Or else, they don’t let go of your heart, the language that you took your name in,” accompanied by flashback scenes where Pargalı is violently captured by Ottoman soldiers from his family. This should not come as a surprise to scholars of Orientalism since the so-called loyalty of the convert pages to their culture of origin has long been shown as a clear sign of Ottoman barbarism and inhumanity. When looked at in more objective accounts of the Empire, however, it is almost unanimously accepted by historians that the system of *devshirme* was masterfully orchestrated and perfected during the Ottoman classical age. Itzkowitz narrates in detail the sophisticated process of recruiting Christian boys from the Balkans and emphasizes that certain categories of boys were exempt, including boys with trades to the local economy, orphans, and those with known behavior problems. He also adds that there were many families who tried to buy their sons into the *devshirme* system as soon as they learned the personal advantages for their sons’ careers.<sup>18</sup> These individuals were

<sup>15</sup> İnalçık, *Ottoman*, 97.

<sup>16</sup> Kinross, *Ottoman*, 259.

<sup>17</sup> Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, for example, notes that the Ottoman higher education reached at its zenith with the establishment of the Süleymaniye Madrasa; Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, *Osmanlılar ve Bilim: Kaynaklar Işığında Bir Keşif* (İstanbul: Etkileşim, 2010), 22.

<sup>18</sup> Itzkowitz, *Ottoman*, 50.



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known for their loyalty to the sultan and the sultan only.<sup>19</sup> Kinross was so amazed by the sophisticated process of this kind of education within Ottoman lands during Suleiman's reign that he observes that this education was "largely free and moreover far in advance of any available at this time in Christian countries."<sup>20</sup> Far from what Pargalı wants his audience to believe, most of these Christian boys welcomed and enjoyed great careers; and conversion by force was an anomaly within the Ottoman tradition. Itzkowitz states conversion to Islam was not compulsory at all.<sup>21</sup> Suraiya Faroqhi also notes, "Involuntary conversions to Islam were rare, in stark contrast to the situation in the European states of that era, in which the treat of expulsions and even executions enforced religious conformity."<sup>22</sup> She further emphasizes that the overwhelming majority of all conversions appear to have been voluntary.

Not surprisingly, however, it is the harem that takes lion's share of Orientalist imagery in *The Magnificent Century*. The image of the harem has long been discussed by scholars of Ottoman history both in Turkey and abroad and the cliché image of the harem as a setting for bizarre sexual encounters has been demonstrated to be a fantasy of Western male visitors by scholars such as Leslie Pierce, Reina Lewis and Filiz Barin Akman.<sup>23</sup> Leslie Pierce states, for example, "In stark contrast to the historically persistent Western image of a group of concubines existing solely for the sexual convenience of their master, the harem of a household of means included women related to the male head of household and to each other in an often complex set of relationships, many of which did not include a sexual component."<sup>24</sup> In her groundbreaking work, *Rethinking Orientalism: Women, Travel, and the Ottoman Harem*, Reina Lewis articulates a similar argument:

The vision of the harem as a sexualized realm of deviancy, cruelty and excess has animated some of the West's best known examples of dominant Orientalism from fine art, to operas, to novels and popular literature. For political thinkers, the (inevitably sexualized) tyrannies of Oriental despotism provided a foil to Europe's won image of just governance, be it monarchy or republic. In a variety of discourses, the veiled, secluded Oriental woman became the perfect image of the non-citizen.<sup>25</sup>

Harem literature therefore relies on the stark contrast between the familiar space of the "West" and the exotic "Eastern" Other. In a book that includes authentic harem autobiographies, Douglas Scott Brookes notes along the same lines, "The imperial harem of the Ottoman sultans has long fascinated outsiders as a mélange of sex, debauchery, slavery, power, riches, and sheer abandon—in short, the incarnation of the most attractive ones."<sup>26</sup> Behind this veil of sheer spectacle, however, there lie very different realities. "The accounts we have of the harem by male authors—all foreigners," she goes on, "may safely be treated with skepticism, or even discounted outright, since Ottoman court practice barred foreign men from entering the harem at all (with the possible exception of physicians). Their accounts are

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 53-60. For more on the *devshirme* system, see İnalçık, *Osmanlı*, 83-93.

<sup>20</sup> Kinross, *Ottoman*, 211.

<sup>21</sup> Itzkowitz, *Ottoman*, 40.

<sup>22</sup> Suraiya Faroqhi, *The Ottoman Empire: A Short History* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2009), 75.

<sup>23</sup> See Leslie Pierce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (*Studies in Middle Eastern History*) (New York: Oxford UP, 1993); Reina Lewis, *Rethinking Orientalism: Women, Travel and the Ottoman Harem* (New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 2004) and Filiz Barin Akman, *Osmanlı Kadını: Batılı Kadın Seyyahların Gözüyle* (İstanbul: Etkileşim, 2011).

<sup>24</sup> Pierce, "Beyond," 42.

<sup>25</sup> Lewis, *Rethinking*, 97.

<sup>26</sup> Brookes, *Concubine*, 1.



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second-hand at best, and prone to fancy.”<sup>27</sup> Even Albert Howe Lybyer notes in his quite prejudiced and outdated historiography, *The Government of the Ottoman Empire in the Time of Suleiman the Magnificent* notes, “The Harem of Suleiman was not the large and costly institution that was maintained by some of his successors; like his father Selim, he was not given to sensuality.”<sup>28</sup> He further adds:

The character of an Oriental royal harem has often been set forth incorrectly. While it may contain hundreds or even thousands of women, a very few of these are the actual consorts of the monarch. A large number are the personal servants and entertainers of himself, his mother, his consorts, his daughters and his infant sons.<sup>29</sup>

In the context of the reign of Suleiman the Magnificent, Leslie Pierce notes, “According to the conventional etiology of Ottoman decline, the ‘intrigue’ and ‘meddling’ of harem women is both a symptom of collapse and a principal cause of further corruption of institutions and customary practices.”<sup>30</sup>

Unfortunately, the harem stereotypes still dominate the cultural, intellectual sphere both at home and abroad, particularly in historical fiction. As Jack Shaheen quotes, “The great majority of mankind is often more influenced by things that seem, rather than things that are. . . . The true tutors of our children are not schoolteachers or university professors but filmmakers.”<sup>31</sup> Rather than seeing the harem as an institution of higher education for many women in the Ottoman aristocracy that included courses on calligraphy, reading, recitation, painting and other disciplines of art and social sciences, the emphasis is always given to sexual fantasies as imagined by European male visitors who had never seen the harem themselves. Studying the travelogues of female visitors to the harem who had a much easier access to women’s quarters, both in the palace in the larger public sphere, Filiz Barin-Akman concludes in her *Osmanlı Kadını: Batılı Kadın Seyyahların Göziyle* [*The Ottoman Woman: Through the Eyes of Female Travelers*], “As many travellers witnessed themselves, Ottoman women were free to go outside. The travellers’ accounts on the womens’ visits to the hamam, meetings with their friends, and spending time at open-air picnic places with each other . . . all demonstrate this fact.”<sup>32</sup>

*The Magnificent Century*’s take on polygamy is at least as unnuanced and biased as other issues that it gravely misrepresents. The unquestioned view of the Middle Eastern cultures as a misogynist sphere is a commonplace notion within the central Western discourse. Therefore the issue of polygamy has mostly been used as a shortcut for the so-called misogynistic Islamic cultures without much authentic and reliable research. Lewis states, “Contrary to Western expectations, few harems housed more than one wife of any single man and those that were polygamous were usually restricted to two of the total of four wives permitted by religious law.”<sup>33</sup> She also notes that polygamy was for long periods an expensive practice that only the few elite were able to practice. Brookes also notes, “In practice, the prince’s sexuality was restrained by the fact that each maiden he took to bed had to be provided a rank, her own suite of rooms and servants, and the right to advance in the

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>28</sup> Lybyer, *Government*, 56.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Leslie, “Beyond,” 41.

<sup>31</sup> Shaheen, *Reel*, 2.

<sup>32</sup> Barin-Akman, *Osmanlı*, 125. Translation is mine.

<sup>33</sup> Lewis, *Rethinking*, 97.



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concubine hierarchy.<sup>34</sup> As a result of these restraints few sultans had unusual number of wives and this was a vital necessity given that Ottoman Empire was based on the lineage of the family of Osman.

It is indeed true that there were men who got married to multiple wives during the time of the Ottomans. However, it is a well-known fact among Ottoman historians that the practice was very limited and only those who were very rich and could afford multiple houses did this practice. It is actually the observations of the European travelers, once again, that tell us that very few Ottoman pashas were married to more than one wife. Brookes notes,

Far from dissolute abandon, . . . dictates of practical considerations decidedly limited the tally of concubines a prince might take, despite the fact that Ottoman court custom allowed the monarch such freedom in theory. . . . Far from painting a picture of titillation . . . a system of rules, traditions, and standards of behavior that tightly governed life and interpersonal relations in the harem.<sup>35</sup>

This is the theme that emerges from a number of authentic harem narratives that Brookes looks at. He therefore concludes that unbridled lust and abandonment to pleasure are nowhere to be found within the authentic harem context.<sup>36</sup> All D’Ohsson, Pardoe, and Rycout indicate that polygamy in the Ottoman Empire was a rarity.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, it is also important to historicize the subject matter and put things in perspective: Even if the Ottomans were living in a world of slavery and polygamy and despotism, European kingdoms at the time did not live in our twenty-first century world of democracy. Much has been written on the bastard children of kings and queens of Europe, on the forsaken women who were not more than collateral residues of immoral kings.<sup>38</sup> Comparing the Ottoman world out of context with our modern time and age is an injustice in and of itself.

Along the same lines, the concept of the *hamam*, Turkish bathhouses, as a hotbed for bizarre sexual encounters or for dominating the female gender in a highly patriarchal society is very much played out. *The Magnificent Century* does nothing to reconsider the European attitudes towards the *hamam*. In her scholarship, Barin-Akman defines *hamams* as “Women’s coffehouses” where women engage actively in the public sphere.<sup>39</sup> In an age when there was no sewage system in most of Europe and when cleaning too much would be grounds for being burnt in an inquisition for being a Muslim, the Turkish bathhouses were centers of hygiene and cleanliness that had its roots in the Roman Empire.<sup>40</sup> The portrayal of the *hamam* as a heaven for sex and lust, like cities of Sodom and Gomorra, was a tool for European writers to contrast once again the hetero-normative standards of the West with the bizarre cultural and religious customs of the East.

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<sup>34</sup> Brookes, *Concubine*, 3.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 274-5.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> qtd. in Davis, *Ottoman*, 86.

<sup>38</sup> See Given-Wilson and Curteis, *The Royal Bastards of Medieval England* (London: Routledge, 1984) and Powell and Beauclerck-Dewar, *Royal Bastards: Illegitimate Children of the British Royal Family* (London: History P, 2008).

<sup>39</sup> Barin-Akman, *Osmanlı*, 78.

<sup>40</sup> See Elli Kohen, *History of the Turkish Jews and Sephardim: Memoirs of a Past Golden Age*. (UP of America, 2006); Avigdor Levy, *Jews of the Ottoman Empire* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1994), *Jews, Turks, and Ottomans: A Shared History* (Syracuse UP, 2002), *The Sephardim in the Ottoman Empire*. (Princeton: Darwin P, 1992).



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At this point, the question begs to be asked: Why, then, does a group of writers, TV producers and directors choose to represent their own history from the perspective of the European imagination? Why does a major group of the Turkish intelligentsia look down on their own culture, history and religion while cherishing and looking up to everything European and non-Muslim? A full-fledged answer to this vital question is unfortunately beyond the scope of this article. A book or a library of books would be necessary to discuss this issue, since it would be to narrate the story of the Turkish Republic and the ensuing identity crisis of the new state between the East and the West, the two terms that have always been conflicted with one another starting with the policies of Atatürk, the republic's founding father. However, a couple of observations could be made to hint at some possible answers regarding the rationale of this intellectual elite. I will call this rationale as "voluntary self-colonization," meaning a self-inflicted Otherization system based on the European colonial heritage driven by the strong desire to disavow the nation's own religious, historical, and cultural references and the desire to demonstrate to European masters that the new Turkey is more Western, less Muslim and therefore more contemporary than the "archaic" Ottoman civilization.

Turkish authors and historians such as Cemil Meriç, Peyami Safa, Yahya Kemal, Attila İlhan, Niyazi Berkes and many others have tried to point to this chronic disease many times in the last century trying to understand the issue. It is true that the Turks have never been colonized; unlike India, Egypt, Algeria or many other Middle Eastern and African countries, the Ottoman Empire did not become a colony to the major European imperial powers such as the British and the French. Colonization in its typical sense did not take place in mainland Turkey. However, we cannot say the same thing regarding cultural imperialism dominating and taking Turkey in its grip. With the so-called modernization movement that was essentially a top-down westernization process, highly dictated and followed ruthlessly on a grand scale for decades, our minds and memories have indeed been colonized for generations.

İlhan states that the creation and stratification of native intellectuals who would reinforce and thus perpetuate the superiority of any given Western culture over the national one occurs in several ways. First, by way of education designed top-down, a generation is created who would serve the best interests of the colonizer: "This happens so effectively that these people do not feel obliged to further their own national interests but the interests of the dominating culture; thus they live and think according to the values of the hegemony."<sup>41</sup> İlhan also adds that the artistic and cultural values of the comprador bourgeois are always the artistic and cultural values of the metropolis (of the colonizer), not the values of the nation in which the comprador was born. The rift between the comprador intellectual elite and the nation increases more and more, which then has two major consequences: (1) The nation can no longer produce the intellectuals to lead the culture toward more autonomous and independent futures, and (2) the intellectuals whose tastes now lie in foreign artistic values despise national texts and literary traditions. The latter quality further spreads across the nation by way of media, which is also run mostly by the rich comprador intelligentsia or by way of education as the ruling elite design curricula to foster the westernization movement.

For many decades, if not a century, Turkey's primary education curricula have long been manipulated by hardcore Kemalists who have seen Islam and the Ottoman heritage as problems to get rid of. This ideology had always serious issues with the Ottoman legacy in one way or another. Ahmet Yaşar Ocak notes that modern ideology blamed Islam for the backwardness of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>42</sup> In a comprehensive study on the history of the

<sup>41</sup> İlhan, "Arms," 199; all translations from İlhan are mine.

<sup>42</sup> Ocak, "Islam," 196.



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evolution of contemporary Turkey, *Turkey, Islam, Nationalism and Modernity*, Carter Vaughn Findley states, “Even if secularism does not sweep religion away, it turns religion into a problem, no longer the all-encompassing reality but something whose place must be determined.”<sup>43</sup> Similarly, Niyazi Berkes writes that a recurrent theme in Kemalist Westernization was its “absolute determination to achieve an unconditional transformation to Western civilization and to destroy all forces of reaction.”<sup>44</sup> Accordingly, “Unlike the Islamist view of history, the new view took the Islamic period as only an episode in, and, secondary to, the national and civilizational aspects of the Turks’ history.”<sup>45</sup> While talking about the colonization context in India, George Lamming notes the colonized mind has to win the approval of the headquarters; that is how it affirms its very existence. It is thus the Turkish elite learned the European ways of looking at the Ottoman Empire rather than authentic eyes and minds trying to understand and come to terms with one’s own past. This is how we learned to fantasize about our own sultan’s life just like a traveller who was setting out on a trip to Constantinople to experience the exotic East.

The creators of *The Magnificent Century* have publicly defended themselves on several occasions, and their primary emphasis has been that they are not making a documentary, but a fictional TV show; therefore, the defense goes, they do not have to be accurate.<sup>46</sup> It is true that historical drama and historiography are two different things. Historiography deals with facts, evidence, accuracy, numbers, statistics and it does not have the luxury of making events or characters more appealing or interesting. Historical fiction, on the other hand, is based on real events but it fills in the blanks with what Hayden White, the prominent theorist of historical fiction, calls “constructive imagination.”<sup>47</sup> Accordingly, you can very well go ahead and combine two events that happened within a ten-year interval in one complete scene for dramatic effect or you can very well cast a forty-year old sultan to a twenty-year old charismatic actor. These are all within the realm of historical drama. However, this does not mean that drama gives you the privilege of bending truth, misrepresenting reality and applying a defective focus in such a way that what you represent becomes a figment of your imagination or your preference of how things were rather than historical drama based on historical events. It is important to emphasize that I am not arguing about the misuse of historical details such as the color of shoes or clothing or the design of tables or curtains as being anachronistic or not, as some historians argued; that is not my point at all. And honestly as a writer of historical fiction, I do believe in the poetic liberties that may be taken by authors. However, I do criticize the use of colonial stereotypes in the depiction of one’s own history and culture in such a way that it becomes a battle front for new-age Westernization and the anti-Islamic campaign.

After all, the ramification of a TV show might be much more far-reaching than one might realize. In the international arena, portraying the East as despotic and archaic serves the

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<sup>43</sup> Findley, *Turkey*, 9.

<sup>44</sup> Berkes, *Development*, 454.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 501.

<sup>46</sup> See, for example, “The Dirt, and the Soap, on the Ottoman Empire,” *NY Times*, accessed January 2, 2013, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/17/world/middleeast/17iht-m17-soap.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/17/world/middleeast/17iht-m17-soap.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0)

<sup>47</sup> For extensive scholarly discussion on the historical fiction, see Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1973); *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1987); *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978).



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interests of the European cultural hegemony around the globe. In the domestic arena, it alienates individuals from their own past and reinforces the inferiority complex in the face of the West. Particularly, in the post-9/11 era, the image of Islam as antithetical to western lifestyles, as an enemy to modern values is perpetuated and Turkish culture and history becomes evidence for the so-called universal Islamic despotism as recuperated in the last couple of decades. The famous German newspaper *Die Welt* already gave the verdict several days after the airing of the TV show, “Magnificent Century proves once again that the Ottoman sultans were barbaric, lustful and unfair.”<sup>48</sup> It is the statements like these that prepare the ground for the ban on minarets, burqas, and the eventual image of the Muslim as a terrorist. This is how you give fuel to Islamophobia. As for the domestic arena, historical and cultural identity is labeled as backward and primitive and a new wave of propaganda is created against conservative political parties. It is not a coincidence that such a TV show is aired at a time when the nation and the state are coming to terms with their own history, culture, and religion. Neither is it a coincidence that the TV show was launched in the heyday of the major national elections when there was an effective propaganda campaign against so-called Islamists. The intellectual elite as a by-product of a large-scale westernization movement in Turkey had once again sharpened their swords.

All in all, although I highly value the rise of such productions and their wide-scale distribution, I also believe that it is critical to pay attention to the cultural image created and perpetuated by such shows. We should always keep in mind that manufactured prejudice damages possibilities of the co-existence of different cultures in a time when it is most needed. As John F. Kennedy once noted, “For the great enemy of truth is very often not the lie-deliberate, continued and dishonest—but the myth-persistent, persuasive and unrealistic. Too often we hold fast to the clichés of our forefathers.”<sup>49</sup>

In her authoritative book, Lewis concludes, “In today’s postcolonial times the commodification of the view from behind the veil has not gone away. The immediacy of the *hanım* stereotype may have faded but the Western fascination with the exotic continues and the desire to see the unveiled face is re-activated by the new veiling practices in the context of global postmodern politics.”<sup>50</sup> This new-age Orientalist practice does not really tell us much about the Ottoman Empire, if anything at all; rather it displays an ideology that the producers are trying to disseminate through such shows. Self-identification with Europe brings about seeing one’s own history through a European lens. As Schick states, “the function of sexuality in orientalist (or alterist) discourse was not merely to create the image of a male/active colonizer penetrating a female/passive territory, as is often claimed, but rather to assist in the construction of Europe’s spaces of otherness by establishing the alterity of the non-European.”<sup>51</sup> Therefore, a considerable portion of the Turkish intelligentsia, including the likes of the creators of *The Magnificent Century*, have become prey to this disease of Othering the Self, which I therefore define as “self-inflicted Orientalism.” As a Turkish national, I can only feel positively about the rise of Turkish TV series and the ever-increasing status of the Turkish movie industry in the larger region. However, if the national-cultural-religious consciousness is put aside with a blatant fervor of monetary gain and if history is made food for culture wars, those who have the potential to rule the world can also destroy it.

<sup>48</sup> See, for example, “Will Turkey Squander Its Opportunity to Lead?” for how *The Magnificent Century* debate is used to criticize Turkish political culture; accessed January 1, 2013, <http://rendezvous.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/12/30/will-turkey-squander-its-opportunity-to-lead/>

<sup>49</sup> Quoted in Shaheen, *Reel*, 7.

<sup>50</sup> Lewis, *Rethinking*, 268.

<sup>51</sup> Schick, “Women,” 98.



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