
rezensiert von/compte rendu rédigé par
Devrim Çetin Güven/Hanife Güven, Izmir

«Ottoman Tulips, Ottoman Coffee» provides thought-provoking reading both for professional scholars and for amateur readers interested in cultural studies. When keywords such as «Ottoman modernization» and «cultural studies» are used, the first book that comes to mind is Edward Said’s «Orientalism» (1978), the founding text of Postcolonial theory. Said attempted to deconstruct the myths of «Orient» and «Oriental culture» as essential categories manufactured by French, English and American scholars, travellers, and artists; particularly from 18th century onwards. He asserted that Orientalism was a discursive mechanism of cultural domination over the Middle East. Hence, it was an attempt of «cultural colonization».

«Ottoman Tulips» stands in the tradition of Saidian counter-Orientalism, since it criticizes Eurocentric approaches of Western and Turkish scholars' cultural «self-colonizing» attitudes. Thus both works share postcolonial approaches, yet there is a fundamental contrast between them: Whereas Said attempted to build a spatially and temporally universal abstract theory of the discourse produced by Europeans on the Middle East, this text focuses on a spatially and temporally specific topic and attempts to dismantle the myths built around it.

That specific topic is the Tulip Period (1718–1730), which witnessed the construction of the first printing press, cultural reforms, imperial circumcision festivals, as well as a number of building projects, such as the splendid Saadabad Palace. This period was a new era in the Ottoman socio-cultural history, in which modern urbanization began, and upper class women participated in social life. This era was characterized by a real «cult» of tulips. The Ottoman court was enthusiastically engaged in the cultivation of 839 species of tulips, and it was covered in decorations made from these flowers. In modern Turkish historiography this period was depicted both as a time of extravagance and leisurely pleasure of high society, as well as «a precocious attempt of modernization that was interrupted by a reactionary rebellion lead by Patrona Halil Janissary soldier who frequented Janissary coffee shops. Accordingly, coffee with all that that implies, is another marker of this era.

In «Decline, its Discontents and Ottoman Cultural History: By Way of Introduction», the editor Dana

Sajdi elucidates how the category of decline based on the idea that the Ottoman state fell into a stasis and a decay following the death of Sultan Süleyman I in 1566, has been constructed from 18th century onwards. She informs us that a new approach not only criticizing, but also rejecting this «decline» thesis, has been formed in the field of Ottoman history. Beginning with Albert Hourani in the 1950s up to recent years, scholars are now advocating that in fact the Ottoman Empire gave a remarkable performance in adapting itself to the changing world order and it showed concrete signs of modernity in the social, economic and cultural realms before modern capitalist society emerged in Europe. The Ottoman Empire was not the absolute Other of the West, it was rather »universal«, thus comparable with European states and societies. However, the main object of these researches working mainly throughout the period of the 1980s–1990s was restricted to social and economic history and the issue of culture was neglected. Sajdi notes that after this issue, i. e. the deficiency of the cultural aspect, was addressed by Amy Singer in 1999, a »cultural turn« occurred in the field of Ottoman studies in the early 2000s and a »cultural studies« approach has been systematically adopted by it. Thus, we can locate »Ottoman Tulips« on the extension line of that »cultural turn«, which has been co-founded by Ariel Salzman’s »The Age of Tulips« (2000), which analyses the trajectory of this flower that was fetishized by early modern courts, which resulted in its recurrent representations in poetry, textile, tiles, architecture etc. Following this pattern »Ottoman Tulips« attempts to reconstruct one of the most interesting and idiosyncratic eras of Eurasian history through a cultural studies perspective, by focusing on its two most prominent emblems: tulips and coffee. Accordingly, the book consists of these two discursive pillars: high (tulip) culture and the popular (coffee) culture.

In »The Perception of Saadabad: The Tulip Age and Ottoman-Safavid Rivalry« Can Erimtan refutes the Eurocentric historiography which maintains that the Saadabad Palace was the result of an Occidental »mimetic desire« to imitate Versailles. He replaces this consolidated view with his thesis: »the Saadabad Palace was in fact an outcome of Ottoman-Safavid rivalry and the palace was mainly inspired by Chihil Sutun Pavilion in Isfahan«. Orlin Sabev’s »The First Ottoman Turkish Printing Enterprise: Success or Failure?« revises the traditional approach that diagnoses İbrahim Müteferrika’s printing activities as failure. Sabev argues that this approach is not correct at all when the statistical data is re-evaluated in its historical and geographical context. Babak Rahimi in »Nahils, Circumcision Rituals and the Theatre State« conducts a close reading of the symbolism of the Imperial Circumcision Rituals of the princes. The author sees in these theatrical representations a radical evolution of national and social identity formation processes.

As mentioned above the other discursive pillar of the book is the popular culture symbolized by coffee. Following the logic of Sajdi, we can assert that »coffee« denotes popular culture, since the Patrona Halil Insurgency, which had culminated in the tragic toppling of Sultan Ahmed III, had been organized in Istanbul’s Janissary coffee houses. In his text entitled »Janissary Coffee Houses in Late Eighteenth-
Century Istanbul«, Ali Çaksu focuses on the social, cultural, political, commercial and even criminal functions of these cafés that had become the locus of »anti-palace« dissident culture throughout the 18th–19th centuries. He shows in detail how this public place worked simultaneously »as a centre of rebellion«, »a centre of Bektashism«, »a business office«, and a »mafia club«. In »The Heart’s Desire: Gender, Urban Space and the Ottoman Coffee House« Alan Mikhail adopts Foucault’s concept of »heterotopia«, which is determined by hybridity and heterogeneity. Coffee house is a heterotopic place where public and private, male and female sexual identities overlap. According to Mikhail, Ottoman coffee house is a heterogeneous space where several different sites are collocated, it is thus an environment that allows contradictory identities to coexist.

Unfortunately, this volume omits to discuss the literary function of the coffee house, as a place where men told each other stories. The author of »The Cairo Trilogy« (1956–1957) Naguib Mahfouz, who was born in Egypt, then a tributary state of Ottoman Empire, could be seen as a modern inheritor of this tradition, since his main inspirational and thematic sources were coffee houses of Cairo. Furthermore, in Orhan Pamuk’s »My Name is Red« (1998), a postmodern detective novel set in the end of 16th century, relating the mysterious murders of Ottoman court miniaturists who are involved in a project to prepare a secret book for the Sultan and an amateur detective’s effort of finding the killer, »coffee« and »coffee house« are major motifs of the narrative. Coffee and the coffee houses of Istanbul are on the target of conservatives who see them as threats against religious and moral values. On the other hand, coffee houses are places where stories are told by a secular and »modern« storyteller who advocates coffee and coffee houses, and satirizes reactionary groups.

»Ottoman Tulips« overlaps in many respects with »Orientalism« that has been a watershed work in the field of cultural studies: both attempt to unfold alternative histories, both debunk the misrepresentations and essentialist reductions of »the Orient« by the Orientalists and both emphasize the phenomenon of »culture«. However, although »Orientalism« was an overall criticism on the ideological apparatus of the domination of Europe over the Middle East from the 18th to the 20th centuries, it excludes the counter-Orientalist currents of Ottoman historiography. Furthermore, despite its thorough analysis of the Western myth-making about the Near East, it has a fundamental weakness: it does not present alternatives for the Western (mis)representations. In that sense »Ottoman Tulips« has the potential to complement »Orientalism« in focusing on the cultural life of Ottoman society and its internal criticism towards the Eurocentric historiography. Thus, it makes a contribution to shed light on the Tulip Period and early Ottoman modernity from the perspective of cultural studies.