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REPRESENTATION OF THE ISLAMIC RELIGION AND RELIGIOUS CLERGY IN OSMAN HAMDİ BEY’S PAINTINGS

Abstract
Osman Hamdi Bey (1842 – 1910) was a notable Ottoman painter and an ardent supporter of post – Tanzimat era Ottoman modernisation. Although he was not known as a devout Muslim, his presentation of Islam in his paintings was not necessarily critical or judgemental. On the contrary, he saw Islam, adaptable to the modern world’s rapid progress. Islamic clergy in his paintings are depicted lively and excited, the exact opposite of submissive, lethargic and aged Muslim stereotypes of 19th century European Orientalist paintings. Here, a different form of Orientalism, a search for a modernised Islamic thought could easily be observed. In this paper, I shall try to examine Osman Hamdi Bey’s representation of Islamic clergy, believers and Muslim women. Does Osman Hamdi Bey’s self-perception about being a modern, European intellectual create a conflict between himself and his subject? While depicting Islamic scholars as intellectual and enlightened, how ideological was his approach?

Keywords: Ottoman painting, Orientalism, Islamic culture, clergy, women.
OSMAN HAMDİ BEY’İN RESİMLERİNDE İSLAM DİNİNİN VE DİNSEL KİŞİLERİN TEMSİLİ

Öz

Anahtar kelimeler: Osmanlı resim sanatı, Oryantalizm, İslami kültür, ulema, kadınlar.

1. Introduction : Eulogy to Ömer Seyfeddin and his “Perili Köşk”
One of the most popular stories of modern Turkish literature belongs to Ömer Seyfeddin, a fiercely nationalist Turkish writer of allegedly Circassian roots; and it’s called “Gizli Ma
bed” (“The Hidden Temple”). The Turkish narrator has a European guest who’s enamored with the Orient, particularly with Istanbul. The narrator doesn’t want to show him the westernized parts of Pera and Galata anymore – because those neighbourhoods aren’t called Oriental. So he takes him to his wet nurses’s home in Karagümrük – one of the oldest neighbourhoods in historical peninsula. As the story progresses with many misunderstandings and humorous hints, it’s revealed that the European guest discovered an a la Turca laundry room at night and mistook it as a hidden temple where Turks celebrated the rituals of their secret belief (which seems like a strange hybrid of Islam and pre-Islamic beliefs). At the end of the story, the guest is quite sure that there is certainly a mystery even in the laundry rooms of Turks – but only the Turks themselves aren’t able to see it.

This text, written by an Ottoman that is an Easterner, is a perfect example of how distant was the Western imaginative Orient from the living Orient and there is no other text that handled so ironically the Oriental representation in the Western eyes. As the story ends, it’s the Oriental gaze who wins – the European still sees and imagines what he wishes to do.

2. Osman Hamdi Bey: a European Intellectual in Orient
A similar kind of objection is discernable in the works and personality of Osman Hamdi Bey yet realised in a more didactic way. Having descended from a well – established family and studied in Paris, it was he who broke the widespread rules of Orientalist painting and he described the living Orient versus the imaginary one by reversing the European discourse about the two sinister topics of Ottoman everyday life, religion and women. In this text, I shall examine the representation and depiction of religious clergy, believers and Islam in Osman Hamdi Bey’s
paintings by discussing their discursive differences from the European Orientalist context. My questions are: How did he perceive and represent the reality of his changing society? In that light, how did he see Islam and Muslims; again, how did he represent them? How did he chose to represent the Islamic religion?

Like most Oriental societies, Ottoman modernisation was also not the result of an internal evolution by itself, but rather a series of reformist attempts encouraged by the state elites. In Oriental societies, this kind of modernisation has an immediate effect on the two sides of traditional corpus; religion and women. Osman Hamdi Bey was a modernizing reformist – the usage of Islamic imagery in his paintings should be treated in accordance with this fact (Germaner and Inankur, 2008: 274). Now, this imagery of Islamic religion, culture and civilisation are amorphly left on an nineteenth century photographer’s atelier, waiting for the days when they would functional again as a bunch of guiding lights as they’re about to be established and re-established along with the desires and wishes, projects and ideologies. Hereby, both figures and objects become absorbed and owned by history and then circulate again. But to revive them, one must have a methodology and causation and this can only be found in Europe. That is to say, Orient can merely be meaningful, after having touched by Western rationality – and be readable, after having been arranged by the West. Osman Hamdi Bey himself also used this pattern, and revived the Oriental representations; but since his conception and hence his approach to the matter is so different that the end result was equally strikingly different from the rest.

3. Muslim clergyman in Osman Hamdi Bey’s Painting

For him, Islam wasn’t something just to be speculated in itself. While he described Muslims engaged in an activity, he was releasing a political (and surely cultural) statement at the same time. His characters were no more ridiculous and pale replicas of their ancestors, numbed in idleness and apathy of the last centuries; just as they did in the ages of cultural bloom before the downfall, Muslims were active again now, reading books, discussing and advancing arguments using the instruments of both reason and the scripture. In this respect, among all of his work, “Hodjas Talking at the Mosque Door” (See Ills. 1) is probably the most remarkable painting which manifests his own claims and aspirations about the Islamic clergy. There are three figures here; one on the right leans back on the wall of the temple, as if he draw wisdom from it - an interesting, symbolic composition. He raises his hand, this certainly makes his rhetoric to become stronger – that proudly gesture is something like a reminiscent of the Islamic Prophet’s call from God to the Arabs of Jahiliyyah. On the other hand, the actual reality of Islamic world in 19th century was grimly different from the self-confidence reflected in this figure since most of Muslim countries had fell under the European dominance at that time. Still, the important thing here is not the actual reality but what the artist sees and makes us see – what he offers to the Western eyes, The Orient of an Oriental Orientalist.

Other figures are also as memorable as the sage; one with pink coloured kaftan, carefully listens to the man opposite to him. His strong stand and astonished facial expression is

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1 For independent Islamic nations like Ottomans, Safevids and Mughals, the stagnation and/or decline era started in 17th century.
2 In Islamic terminology, this is known as ‘akl u nakil’; means ‘knowing with the help of the reason and the scripture’.

Yeşil Mosque (literally ‘Green Mosque’ in both modern and Ottoman Turkish) was built between 1419 – 1421 by architect Hacı İva Paşa. This temple was seriously damaged by the 1855 earthquake in Bursa. A French architect
Osman Hamdi Bey in Resimlerinde İslam Dininin ve Dinsel Kişilerin Temsili

intensified with a hand put on his chin (which indicates deep thinking); he holds a book - he’s not illiterate. Figure with the arms crossed listens, with eyes closed. He also has a book in his belt; he’s too a literate person but he doesn’t join the conversation. Nevertheless he’s the passive, albeit still participating side of this talk. While iconography of this painting is both optimistic and tense, characters have nothing to do with the lustful, greedy and grotesque types in the travelist journals depicting Orient; those figures discuss and exchange opinions in front of their past as their once-glorious civilisations’ remainder.

Osman Hamdi Bey used the same composition, by omitting one figure and placing the other two in the grandiose exterior of Yeşil Mosque in Bursa. (See Ills. 2) A calligraphic panel reading The Basmala, a high candle on a gold leaf base, walls covered with coloured tiles, mahfils with arabesque wood designs, carpets - numerous items about the Orient and Islam. That scene is much more complex and richer than the previous one and has only two figures; they both hold books – there’s no possibility that they’re illiterate; on the contrary, they’re probably part of the Islamic clergy. This conversation entirely takes place among hodjas while the action and the decorative elements surrounding the scene create more ethereal and less bleak an atmosphere than the previous one. An air of mystic and educated elitism dominates the setting – it implies a conversation that only educated people can engage, not illiterate ones.

A similar approach, now transferred in a private space can be observed in “Reading Emir” (See Ills. 3). This painting was copied from a photograph; Osman Hamdi Bey frequently used this technique. The turbanned figure who’s lying and reading is the artist’s son, Edhem. But what makes this work interesting is, the way that the protagonist has been described: with his hand on his chin, lying comfortably, this young man seems to read anything except a sacred text. Where is he; in a mosque or in his home? Studying a religious text in such a careless and relaxed manner suggest that the setting is probably not a mosque. So, we suppose he’s in his private area (despite mosque-like interior of the space). Apart from the scene, we see a young Muslim thinking and concentrating on what he reads; in fact, he takes the best position to concentrate on what he reads. This introversion, reclusion, losing himself in the text, abandoning all the other possibilities of contemplation, just centering on the text seems to indicate a young believer’s effort to build his own world of ideas against the real world’s absoluteness. That the painter chose his own son as the model is also notable and could be a manifestation of his own aspirations about the younger generation.

Another moment of introversion is monumentalized in the “Theologian” (See Ills. 4); now the sacred text confronts with an old religious scholar. He put his sacred book on a rahle (a reading desk) and seriously reads it. As older generations have long lost their passion for the books, may it be a desire, an effort for a return to that neglected practice of studying and reflection of the past so ignored? It’s apparent that Osman Hamdi Bey put an emphasis on Islamic world’s loss of the tradition of contemplation for a long time. Edhem Eldem states that wealth

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After the invention of the photography, many European artists began to copy from photographs for their paintings, as most of the Ottoman artists also did in the 19th century.
of Islamic imagery in his paintings were not related to artist’s own religious beliefs, but to the need to fulfill the requirements of an Orientalism of his own style; the result is a fictional presentation which satisfies the aesthetic expectations but also answers some clichés about the Orient (Eldem, 2010: 178).

That claim hints at an Orientalist view which aims at itself – indeed, as a pro-western native of Orient, that position of Osman Hamdi Bey has a name; Ussame Makdisi calls this ‘Ottoman Orientalism’ (Makdisi, 2002: 768). The concept claims that especially bureaucrats and intellectuals (westernized parts of Ottoman elite) create their own ‘Orient’; that is to say a westernized Oriental gaze directed to more ‘Oriental’ peoples of the empire – in this context, this could be read as Turkish view of Arab subjects. Maybe the existence of recurrent Arab figure can be connected to that concept. Apart from the odalisque figure (which generally happens to be a Caucasian woman), most spectacular characters in his paintings are the Arabs (or maybe the figures with Arabian dress) – who are the most unmixed, the least westernized Oriental people and they offer a rich ethnographical imagery. Hence, for him they are the part of an imaginative Orient (which he was distantly related but can’t be associated with anymore) that represents a stage of primitiveness, an Orient that even a westernized native of East looks at and examine with curiosity. That’s why we find plenty of folkloric images of Orient when Arabs get on the stage.5 Interestingly enough, his view and interpretation of the world (that is to say, the Orient) which he was born into, indicates a confusion of identity that was nearly endemic in all 19th century.

Osman Hamdi Bey frequently painted his intimate circle and rarely described a religious person in his portraits but one portrait is still interesting in this respect because the main character is not a Sunni Muslim, but a follower of an unorthodox way of Islam, namely The Mevlevi Order. That painting called “Portrait of Kökenoğlu Rıza Efendi” (See Ills. 5), an older man in profile, on a dark background, wears a Mevlevi hat called “sikke”. That portrait has a dedication to Kökenoğlu Rıza Efendi by the painter and this also indicates the artist’s and his close circles’ relation to the religion. Mevlevi Order was (and is) far more tolerant and libertarian than the other sects; therefore it was an important factor to convert to Islam for the local population in European lands conquered by the Ottoman forces – it was also urbane and sophisticated. Followers of this order were generally from the upper classes of the Ottoman society; thus they were also the most willing part of Ottoman society to embrace modernisation. Kökenoğlu Rıza Efendi, who seems like a respected friend of Osman Hamdi Bey, must belong to that part of Ottoman society and this fact suggests that apart from the fictional Muslims in his paintings, the close circle of Osman Hamdi Bey were consisted of more refined, sophisticated believers like Rıza Efendi.

4. Muslim Women in Osman Hamdi Bey’s Paintings

Now, a painting of him called “Girl Reading Qur’an” (See Ills. 6) is also an interesting example – because Osman Hamdi Bey chose to paint a religious theme but the only character we see is a young girl, silently reading his holy book put on a rahle. She has a serious facial expression; she’s concentrated on the scripture. Osman Hamdi Bey’s representations of women, in accordance with his reformist ideals, don’t have violent or sexual tastes; those reflect the Ottoman

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5 Arab image on his paintings also includes the dark-skinned natives of Africa.
The strength of the element of actuality in his works makes us to think that the European Orientalist painting, even after passing its heyday in its motherland, was still far from being aware of the social progress in the Ottoman society; hence it was continuing to reproduce an imaginary discourse, repeating clichés about the Orient. Rana Kabbani states that the European ‘entered an imaginary harem when entering the metaphor of the Orient, weighed down by inexpressible longings.’ (Kabbani, 2008: 113). Osman Hamdi Bey, having known these representations, was acting against it. This painting shows us that ‘Muslim women doomed to live in the shades of harem’ was merely a cliché and it was far from actual reality. One can even think he wanted this social transformation; then he described both his ideals and transformation in the society. These two were increasingly intermingling for him. This young woman is associated with other paintings that depicts male figures reading sacred scripture – expression, attitude and concentration are somewhat similar. Osman Hamdi Bey’s aspirations of studying and research are not just reserved for men; they’re also for the women. A traditional scene depicting a young Muslim woman reading Qur’an then becomes a vehicle for his reformist approach and ideals for Ottoman society – and for Ottoman women.

A controversial and enigmatic example of his blending Islam with womanhood is “Mihrab” or alternatively called “La Genése” (“Yaradılış”; See Ills. 7). Mihrab is the name of the place in the mosque where religious clergy perform rituals; so it has an importance both architectural and liturgical. Here we see a young bare-headed woman sitting on a rahle and at her feet there are plenty of books written in Arabic script; an incense burner spreads a thin fume. The main controversy arises from those books – some conservativist critics call this scene a blasphemy; they object that Qur’an and other holy texts can not be pictured at the feet of a human being, especially not at the feet of a woman. Moreover, some critics also points that the woman in the painting was an Armenian; therefore depicting a non-Muslim woman increases the level of blasphemy. Wendy Shaw states that “the painting may also allegorize the museum, an institution which displaces work of devotion and resituates them as works of the gaze, thus secularizing them.” (Shaw, 2011: 89). On the other hand, Edhem Eldem indicates that the young woman in this painting was Osman Hamdi Bey’s daughter Leyla and while “Mihrab” celebrates the creation of life and the motherhood (note that the young woman is pregnant), the books at her feet weren’t only sacred scriptures of Islam; in fact, one of them was the holy book of Zoroastrian faith, Zend Avesta (Eldem, 2010: 490 – 492). It can be said that he envisaged an allegorization of life’s sublimity, while using many religious images – and not all of them are related to Islamic religion.

5. Conclusion

As is seen, the iconography of Osman Hamdi Bey’s paintings points out the phases gone through by a 19th century society still travelling along the Westernization process. With modernisation, while the traditional society was decomposing, the priority and the dominancy of the religion in social life was losing ground. However, in Osman Hamdi Bey’s works, who was an Ottoman Orientalist not a European one, there arises a new possibility of hope for religious beliefs and believers. Westernisation, in Osman Hamdi Bey’s conception, in accordance with his ideals and aspirations, had and could offer to the Islamic world abandoning contemplation the ability of recovering from inertia and setting itself into motion. Hereby, the Muslims would be freed from the Oriental apathy in which they were trapped for centuries and would reap the fruits of reading, reflecting and debating very soon, if not now – as stipulated by Osman Hamdi Bey, in order for the realization of a revival in just the same way as how the Andalus culture
created the bright Islamic civilization of the Middle Age; it was indispensable that the religion should become debatable in a rational way. And scenes reflecting this longing were visualized in a very extensive and sophisticated accumulation of Islamic images.

Here, the objective is the simultaneous reading of the splendor of the ethereal side of the religion with the underlined rationality and thus showing the Muslims the perfectness of a revived guidance of the togetherness of the two. The figures seen in these paintings are generally Muslim preachers, members of Sunni clergymen. Osman Hamdî Bey rarely illustrated the religious individuals among his intimate circle but one of his portraits is distinctive as being the only known example of the kind: it is the image of a Mevlevi dervish, one of his close friends whom he hold in high esteem (I had pointed out above that the Mevleviyeh was an elite religious sect). The Muslims of Osman Hamdî Bey, either real or fictional figures, are characters conceivable in their relation to the ideals of Westernisation: they are alert, sharp, wise, bookish and distinguished persons. The most remarkable point in his depiction of women is his refusal of using the ordinary sexual cliches such as scenes of harem and Turkish bath the Orientalist painting adored to use. The painter being aware of and adhering to the social developments of the century, chose to take his representation from the curious and active women in place of passive woman image.

Osman Hamdî Bey is a product of 19th century; hence his overall conflicts, challenges, powerful aspects or weaknesses stem from his being a painter who has the potency of concurrently representing the opposite situations echoing the identity crisis of his period. In the Ottoman society in which rival political sides were engaged in a keen struggle with each other, Osman Hamdî Bey clearly took the side of pro-Western approach and declared his vision of culture and society based on this way of thinking in his paintings. However, since he was an authentic Easterner, this characteristic ultimately caused him to differ from the European painters – it can never be said of him that he holds for the idea of ‘bon pour L’Orient.’ He interpreted the religion in a reformist way and implied that a religiousness based on rationality would be more useful. He advocated the education of women and their participation in social life and he was keenly attentive to the women in his private sphere leading a life conforming to these principles. He spent most of his time regularly reflecting on alternative solutions and finding different ways for the society for which he probably stood as an outside observer rather than living in it. Nowadays, his intellectual accumulation is probably more important than any other times for the Turks of 21st century, going through a new identity crisis.

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Illustration 1: Hodjas Talking at the Mosque Door, Oil on Canvas, 140 cm x 105 cm, Milli Saraylar Resim Müzesi. Source: Cezar, Mustafa, Sanatta Batı’ya Açılış ve Osman Hamdi, (İstanbul: Erol Kerim Aksoy Kültür, Spor ve Sağlık Vakfı Yayınları, 1995), p. 738
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Illustration 2: In Yeşil Camii, 1890, Oil on Canvas, 81 cm x 59 cm, Milli Saraylar Resim Müzesi. Source: Cezar, Mustafa, Sanatta Batı’ya Açılış ve Osman Hamdi, (İstanbul: Erol Kerim Aksoy Kültür, Spor ve Sağlık Vakfı Yayınları, 1995), p. 727
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Illustration 4: The Theologian, 1907, Oil on Canvas, 90 cm x 113 cm, Private Collection, Source: Cezar, Mustafa, Sanatta Batı’ya Açılış ve Osman Hamdi, (İstanbul: Erol Kerim Aksoy Kültür, Spor ve Sağlık Vakfı Yayınları, 1995), p.735
Illustration 5: Portrait of Kökenoğlu Rıza Efendi, 1868, Oil on Canvas, 51 cm x 40 cm, Private Collection. Source: Cezar, Mustafa, Sanatta Batı’ya Açılış ve Osman Hamdi, (İstanbul: Erol Kerim Aksoy Kültür, Spor ve Sağlık Vakfı Yayınları, 1995), p. 657
**Illustration 6:** Girl Reading Quran, 1880, Oil on Canvas, Private Collection. Source: Cezar, Mustafa, Sanatta Batı’ya Açılış ve Osman Hamdi, (İstanbul: Erol Kerim Aksoy Kültür, Spor ve Sağlık Vakfı Yayınları, 1995), p. 669
Illustration 7: La Genese, 1901, Oil on Canvas, 210 cm x 108 cm, now lost. Source: Cezar, Mustafa, Sanatta Batı’ya Açılış ve Osman Hamdi, (İstanbul: Erol Kerim Aksoy Kültür, Spor ve Sağlık Vakfı Yayınları, 1995), p. 713