

Representation of Turkishness in American Cinema Aslıhan Tokgöz

“For a nation of pigs, it sure is funny you don’t eat them. Jesus Christ forgave the bastards. But I can’t. I hate them. I hate you, I hate your nation and I hate your people.”

Billy to Turkish judge in court, *Midnight Express*

“This story could have happened in almost any country, but if Billy Hayes had planned to be arrested to get the maximum commercial benefit from it, where else could he get the advantages of a Turkish jail? Who wants to defend Turks? (They don’t even constitute enough of a movie market for Columbia Pictures to be concerned about how they are represented)”

Pauline Kael, *The New Yorker*

Any analysis related to Western stereotypical imagination of the Turks in contemporary cinema will lack a crucial component if it is not traced in a historical context.¹ Despite the Western world’s common association of Turks with the Orient, Turks have lived in Europe for centuries. Today, part of Turkey is still located on the European continent. The state, since the political revolution of 1920s, is secular and West-oriented. Also, the Muslim-majority public trained in Western-oriented schools largely considers itself close to Western ideals. However, the legacy of the Ottoman Empire, as a powerful, ever-expanding force once at the threshold of Austria in Europe, has caused in the Western world a feeling of perceived military threat against its power. An account by Simon Shephard about the image of the Turk during the Renaissance period points to this commonly perceived threat and possible reasons for categorizing the Turks:

¹ The broad category ‘Turks’ is used here as the imagined monolithic construct produced by western discourses. It, by no means, attempts to present a deterministic role reversal that presents Turks as the ever-good stereotype.

Turks, Tartars, even Persians constituted the infidel powers which neighboured and threatened European Christendom. The word “Turk” was mainly used in two ways, as a generic name for an Islamic State with its own characteristic institutions of Government and military; and as a description of behaviour or character- the Turks ‘being of nature cruel and heartless’...The idea of cruelty was probably produced by the Turks’ distant foreignness combined with an absence from their lives of comprehensible Christian ethics, but more importantly by their military threat.²

The defensive categorization of the Western mind thus led to the emergence of the notion of ‘orientalism’, certain stereotypes of the Orient and the Turks attached to it.

As Edward Said observes, the relationship between West (“Occident”) and East (“Orient”) is indeed an example of a relationship of power and domination.³ Orientalism is thus a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between the Orient and the Occident. It is a Western style of dominating, restructuring and building hegemony over the Orient.⁴ Said notes that orientalism is indeed an accepted grid for filtering through the Orient into Western consciousness, into the general culture.⁵

The introduction of the (negative) stereotypes of Turks into the ‘general culture’ of the West has been through western literature and film. These media have generally attributed negative physical and moral characteristics to the Turks so that they are always ugly, filthy, lustful, fanatical, irrational, cruel, and unreliable. Their only reason for existence is to pose challenge to the western hero. Their countries are passive background to the stories in which all the important and good things are done by Western heroes like

² Simon Shephard, *Marlowe and the Politics of Elizabethan Theatre* (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1986), pg 142.

³ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (London: Penguin, 1991), pg 5.

⁴ *Ibid*, pg 2-3.

⁵ *Ibid*, pg 6.

James Bond. If they have a problem, they are not able to solve it because a western hero is necessary to solve the problem or at least to show them the way to the solution.⁶

Western literature has various examples in which Turks are associated with cruelty, religious fanaticism, espionage, dirtiness, and drug addiction. Some examples from Early English Stage are Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlane the Great* (1590) and *The Jew of Malta* (1592), John Mason's *The Turk* (1610) and Robert Daborne's *Christian turn'd Turke* (1612).⁷

As for the representation of the "terrible Turk" stereotype, films have been even more influential with the added effect of the visual factors. *Lawrence Of Arabia* (David Lean), for instance, represents Turks as corrupt, evil, barbarian, ugly, sodomite people by using the point of view of a British army officer. Similarly, in *Pascali's Island* (James Dearden) Ben Kingsley plays/masquerades as an ugly, bisexual Turkish spy who becomes tragically involved with an English archaeologist and an Austrian painter. Due to his fanatical jealousy and denunciation, the lovers are killed by the cruel Turkish Pasha of the island.

As literary and cinematic examples reveal, Turks have long been approached from what I call 'a stereotypical filter' through which the *gaze* makes the Westerner feel superior and safe in relation to the Turk/the Muslim subject. To return to Said's notion of

⁶ Kamil Aydin, "The Good, and the Bad and Ugly : Western Cinema Images", *The Fountain*, vol I, no:3, Winter 1993, cited in Dervis Zaim, "Representation of the Turkish People in *Midnight Express*", *Araf Dergi*, November 1994, pg 13.

⁷ Other examples are Thomas Kyd's *The Tragedy of Soliman and Perseda* (1599), Fulke Greville's *The Tragedy of Mustapha* (1609), Thomas Goffe's *The Raging Turke or Bajazet the Second* (1631), Ladowick Carrell's *The Famous Tragedy of Osmand the Great Turk* (1657), Nevile Payne's *The Siege of Constantinople* (1675), Elkonah Settle's *Ibrahim the Illustrious Bassa* (1677), and Mary Pix's *Ibrahim the Thirteenth Emperor of the Turks* (1696). Cited in Kamil Aydin, "Western Images Of The Muslim Turks Prior To The 20th Century: A Short Outline", In *Hamdard Islamicus*, Winter 1993, vol xvi, no 4, pg. 106 cited in *Ibid*.

Orientalism in this context, orientalism, to Said, is never far from the idea of Europe, namely a collective notion identifying the Europeans as against the culturally inferior non- Europeans. The major component in European culture which can be described as “superiority over others” gives this culture its hegemonic characteristic.⁸ On the hegemonic nature of Western consciousness, Said maintains that

Under the general heading of knowledge of the Orient, and within the umbrella of Western hegemony over the Orient during the period from the end of the eighteenth century, there emerged a complex Orient suitable for study ... Additionally , the imaginative examination of things Oriental was based more or less exclusively upon a sovereign Western consciousness out of whose unchallenged centrality an Oriental world emerged , first according to general ideas about who or what was an Oriental , then according to a detailed logic governed not simply by empirical reality but by a battery of desires, repressions , investments, and projections.⁹

Said’s conceptualization of Orientalism as a form of western hegemony, and particularly his reference to “desires, repressions , investments, and projections” is useful in examining the ongoing Eurocentric ‘gaze’ at the Other in contemporary mainstream American film, to which *Midnight Express* (1978, Columbia Pictures) is no exception. Indeed, this ‘one-sided gaze’ within the film has not gone fully unrecognized in the West. Pat H. Broeske, for instance, argues that it is a manipulative, one sided (Hayes’s version), and a “modern horror story about the nightmare of an ordeal in a foreign prison”.¹⁰ Noted film critic Pauline Kael states that “this story could have happened in almost any country, but if Billy Hayes had planned to be arrested to get the maximum commercial benefit from it, where else could he get the advantages of a Turkish jail? Who wants to defend Turks?”¹¹ Similarly Mary Lee Settle who visited Turkey and felt uncomfortable for her

⁸ Said, pg 7.

⁸ Said, pg 7-8.

¹⁰ Pat H. Broeske, In *Magill’s American Film Guide*, (NJ: Salem Press, 1981), Vol. 3, pg 2149.

¹¹ Pauline Kael, *When the Lights Go Down*, (New York: Hall Rinehart and Winston, 1980), pg 499.

“misrepresentation of Turks” in the West points out that Turkey “is known only for its mistakes and its brutalities”. She observes that “The Turks I saw in *Lawrence of Arabia* and *Midnight Express* were like cartoon caricatures compared to the people I had known and lived among for three of the happiest years of my life.¹² Similarly, David Robinson states that *Midnight Express* is “more violent, as a national hate-film than anything (he) can remember” -a cultural form that “narrows horizons, confirming the audience’s meanest fears and prejudices and resentments”.¹³

Long after its release, even the film’s producer David Puttnam also accepted that the film is based on a “dishonest book”.¹⁴ For Puttnam, the story implies that Billy was innocent; it focuses on much of his escape, though he was released under an amnesty agreement. Moreover, in 1986, director Alan Parker admitted that it was a mistake to call Turkey “a nation of pigs” and that he “should have been smart enough, intellectually and politically, to balance that remark”.¹⁵

Despite such assessments, the film was a great box office success and an extraordinary achievement in the Golden Globe and Oscar awards. It received the Oscar award for best screenplay and best music categories, while it was awarded the Golden globe Awards in all six categories available in 1979. Even more important, the film has turned into a significant referential point about the Turks in the memory of Western audiences. Thus, the Eurocentric gaze inherent to the film has led to a regenerative process in which many other stereotypes of the Muslim Turkish subject could well be absorbed in Western imagination with almost no resistance.

¹² Mary Lee Settle, *Turkish Reflections* (NY: Prentice Hall Press, 1991), pg 8.

¹³ John Wakeman, (ed), *World Film Directors*, (New York: T.H. W. Wilson Co, 1988) vol II, pg 741.

¹⁴ Shipman D, *The Story Of Cinema*, (London: Hadder and Stoughton, 1984), pg 1103.

¹⁵ Andrew Horton, “Britain’s Angry Young Man In Hollywood: An Interview With Alan Parker”, *Cineaste*, New York, vol 15, no 12, (1986), pg 32.

In its representation of Turks from the point of view of an American, *Midnight Express* reproduces the 'hegemonic' gaze of the West so central to its relation with the Turks throughout history. The point of view of the film is, indeed, that of Billy, the white subject, and this leads to the imposition of Turkish stereotypes both on an individual/character-identified and structural level. I call this the creation and regeneration of a Eurocentric *gaze*, in which both mental and perceptual subjectivity of the white are widely used at the expense of a loss of the subjectivity of the Other. Throughout the film, as noted Turkish critic and film maker Dervis Zayim observes,

we are shown events from Billy's optical position or hear sounds as he hears them. For example, on his first night, before he is hung up by the ankles and clubbed by Hamidou, Billy Hayes hears trampling feet. Then we see him as he turns his head to learn who is coming. Film is full of such perceptual subjectivity: He and the Swiss person are at the window, watching while the Turks torture the children. We hear Muslim prayers as he hears and wakes up from his bed. But the perceptual subjectivity of Turks is quite restricted in the sense that we very seldom hear or see things from the Turk's perceptual vantage point. The exceptional cases to this are those in which they will attempt to harm somebody.¹⁶

Billy's subjectivity and the film's obvious use of his point of view reflect the Eurocentric structure of the film, that is, as Kaplan has stated in her discussion of the imperial gaze, one which fails to understand the local culture and one which embodies anxiety due to loss of domination. It is also important to note that the subjectivity of the Turks in the film is mere impossibility. They are rather objectified, dehumanized, even homosexualized for the white subject to deal with the anxieties of a possible castration. In this respect, Turks function in the filmic text as blacks do in American society; that is although they own a penis, they are seen by white men as a castration threat, and thus the anxiety leads the white man to not 'see' the Other even if he *gazes* at him. In *Midnight*

¹⁶ Zaim, 18.

Express, that takes the form of rigid stereotyping as either voiced by Billy or shown through point of view shots that exclude any human aspect of the Other from the filmic frame, or through feminizing the Turks by focusing on their homosexual tendencies, or by using surreal imagery at the most extreme level, such as in the scene in which Turkish people, the Muslim subjects, visually appear as pigs, thus totally animalized to the white, Christian subject.

To sum up, *Midnight Express* is one Oscar-winning movie that is just another example of how the Western imagination constructs the Muslim Subject as 'the primitive other'. Hence, the filmic construction, through its representation of the relationship between the Christian protagonist and the Muslim Turkish people, enhances and stabilizes previous conceptions of the non-Western subject. As such, the film reinforces an 'imperial gaze', which re-creates this imagined relationship between the Western Self and the Turkish Other.

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