

Relevance of Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great Part II* to 21st Century Ethnocentrism and Islamophobia

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Abstract: The obscure and often make-believe portraits of the Turks, coupled with preconceptions and prejudices against Islamic nations of the East always occupied a significant place in English dramatic literature, particularly during the Elizabethan England. In fact, stereotypical portrayal of the Turkish characters was never absent from the Renaissance drama in Europe. Christopher Marlowe was undoubtedly one of those English dramatists who extensively employed Turkish characters and the images pertinent to Islamic cultures and geographies. Among those images are Turkish slave, frequently identified with the Jews, fearful Janissary Army, Turkish Pashas, or Sultans, and other unfamiliar characters that always captivated the imagination of the Elizabethan audience. The aim of this study is to make an in-depth analysis of Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great Part II*, as a typical example of Elizabethan drama that gives a biased and prejudiced portrayal of Turks and Islamic nations, and to find out how these biased and pejorative images related to this particular geography prevailed throughout the centuries and, finally to seek an answer to the reason why these images remained virtually unchanged even in the 21st century, referring to his above mentioned work.

Key Words: Islamophobia, Ethnocentrism, Muslims, Turks, Christopher Marlowe, *Tamburlaine the Great*, Elizabethan Period.

Throughout the history prevailing prejudices have always caused a miscommunication between the East and the West. Though the studies on the reasons of that miscommunication are limitless, very few of them have focused on the literature based reasons. Despite the orientalist images attracted the attention of the western researchers and scholars, and Muslim or Turkish images have an extensive coverage in English Literature, studies on the political and social implications of these misconceptions are very rare.

In this study, sixteenth century English points of view towards the Turks and Islam are going to be analysed in order to find out how these biased and pejorative images related to this particular geography prevailed throughout the centuries and, finally to seek an answer to the reason why these images remained virtually unchanged even in the 21st century, referring to Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great Part II*.

Following the very significant events like the discovery of the continent of America, 'the Act of Supremacy', the defeat of The Spanish Armada, "explorations, trade, and the first steps of colonization ... , England was truly finding its own national identity and it was a time of great cultural development" (Levin, 2002, p. 1). In this period, dramatic literature reached its peak and covered such a long distance that the era was named the 'Golden Age of English Drama'. The age was a milestone not only for the dramatic literature and other branches of art but also for the development and future of England. The first political and economic relations between England and Turks were inaugurated and "there was a fashion for plays about Turks (and other Islamic nations) in late Elizabethan drama" (Shepherd, 1986, p. 142). And major themes of these plays were 'brutal' Janissary Army, arrogant Turkish Sultans, disdained pashas, 'infidel' Muslims and Islam. This fashion was the consequence of the publications about Turks all around Europe, because, "in the 16th century about 2500 publications about Turks ... were spread around Europe and in these too the image of the 'bloodthirsty' Turk was imprinted. In the period 1480 to 1610, twice as many books were published about the Turkish threat, [which are directly related to sieges of the Eastern Europe by the Ottoman Empire and the conquest of Istanbul by the Conqueror, Mehmed II], as about the discovery of the continent of America" (Karlsson, 2006, p. 6). And The Elizabethans, like all the rest of Europe, were the enthusiastic readers of these books (Wann, 1915, p. 445).

The reason for literature based text analyses within the context of historical or political studies on Elizabethan Period Turks or Muslims is a frequently asked question. This is not a choice or an inclination to cite the plays or playwrights because, "if one searches for non-literary evidence of an English 'colonial discourse' about [Turks], Islam and the Muslims, one would come up with very little (Matar, 1999, p. 8), so it imposes a necessity to analyse, comprehend and have a grasp of the dramatic literature of the era to have an insight into this colonial discourse. Consequently, "in regard to the source material, critics and historians who have examined Renaissance 'Islam' and [Turks] have relied predominantly on works by playwrights such as Peele, Kyd,

Marlowe [and] Shakespeare ... as there were dozens of plays about Turks and Moors from the 1580s until 1630s" (Matar, 1999, p. 6).

Before an in-depth analysis of Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great Part II* within the context of Islamophobia and ethnocentrism, the definitions of the terms, their contents should be made in order not to cause confusions and to indicate what is meant by these terms. Islamophobia is a neologism, in fact, "a new word for an old fear" (Stone, 2004, p. vii). Among the numerous definitions, the Runnymede Trust, the UK's leading race equality think tank, identifies the perceptions of Islamophobia in the report on British Muslims and Islamophobia entitled "*Islamophobia: A Challenge For Us All*" as follows:

- Islam is seen as a monolithic bloc, static and unresponsive to change.
- It is seen as separate and "other," it does not have values in common with other cultures, is not affected by them and does not influence them.
- It is seen as inferior to the West. It is seen as barbaric, irrational, primitive, and sexist.
- It is seen as violent, aggressive, threatening, supportive of terrorism, and engaged in a clash of civilizations.
- It is seen as a political ideology, used for political or military advantage.
- Criticisms made of "the West" by Muslims are rejected out of hand.
- Hostility towards Islam is used to justify discriminatory practices towards Muslims and exclusion of Muslims from mainstream society.
- Anti-Muslim hostility is seen as natural and normal (Richardson, 1996, p. 5).

And the second term, ethnocentrism, has numerous components, and as it contains lots of notions as to human being, different approaches and definitions cause confusions. However, Sullivan summarizes the term clearly in his comprehensive study as:

Ethnocentrism [is] a perspective on the relationship between one's own culture and that of others. An ethnocentric perspective evaluates anything from another culture using one's own values and beliefs, filtering everything seen in that culture with a bias that promotes the superiority of one's own culture. Under ethnocentrism, any cultural entity of another culture—its religion, dress, language, behavior, religion, political system—is automatically inferior or suspect, [moreover] ... difference is viewed as problematic and something that should be ignored, eliminated, or assimilated (2009, p. 186).

"Christopher Marlowe holds a most important place in English literature through his brilliant poetic gift and also as Shakespeare's exact contemporary ... and his forerunner in the creation of poetic drama. He died a violent death, stabbed under curious circumstances, in 1593, a time when Shakespeare was beginning to emerge in his full stature" (Yates, 1979, p. 135). Marlowe, who is also known as a spy for the Queen Elizabeth I, "is particularly prone to provocative juxtapositions of allegedly opposed religious systems [and nations], particularly in *Tamburlaine Part Two*, where religious affiliation first starts to emerge as a serious issue in Marlovian drama" (Hopkins, 2008, p. 114). Like most of the works of Elizabethan Period, Marlowe's approach to Turks and Islam was nefarious, pejorative, farcical, barbarous insulting, unenlightened and preconceived, and all these images constituted the basis of his drama and these works always captivated the imagination of the Elizabethan audience who were claiming a share on the glorious East against the expanding Ottoman Empire.

The second part of *Tamburlaine the Great* begins with the conversation between Orcanes, king of Natolia and Gazelleus, viceroy of Byron. Ottoman Janissary Army is on the banks of Danubius, and Gazellus and Orcanes express an opinion about a truce between Turks and Sigismund, the king of Hungary. When Orcanes asks about Gazelleus' idea, his short but significant answer evokes a 'bloodthirsty' Turkish image to the audience even in the first scene of the first part via the lines: "King of Natolia, let us treat of peace: / We all are glutted with the Christians' blood ..." (I,i,13-4). Just after Gazelleus, Uribassa adds and warns Orcanes about the huge army of Hungary. Orcanes' reply reflects them as a tyrannical nation:

...
Millions of soldiers cut the arctic line,
Bringing the strength of Europe to these arms,
Our Turkey blades shall glide through all their throats,

And make this champion mead a bloody fen: ...
(I,i,29-32)

Towards the end of the first act, Tamburlaine is seen with his wife and sons while trying to train his sons about how to be a real, courageous and fearless soldier. Though Zenocrate is not pleased with the atmosphere and anxious about his sons, Amyras and Calyphas antagonise and pass their opinions in their trial conversation with Tamburlaine as follows:

AMYRAS:
And I would strive to swim through pools of blood,
Or make a bridge of murder'd carcasses,
Whose arches should be fram'd with bones of Turks,
Ere I would lose the title of a king.

TAMBURLAINE:
...
And, sirrah, if you mean to wear a crown,
When we shall meet the Turkish deputy
And all his viceroys, snatch it from his head,
And cleave his pericranion with thy sword.

CALYPHAS:
If any man will hold him, I will strike,
And cleave him to the channel with my sword.
(I,iv,92-101)

Marlowe achieves his goal with these lines most probably to incite the Turkish hatred and to show the Turks as a nation who deserves death and sorrow. Tamburlaine the Great's hate is boundless and "Marlowe does not attempt to find an answer to the paradox of Tamburlaine's having used vice to achieve greatness and this is left conveniently unresolved" (Burnett, 1987, p. 322).

Major provocative attacks of Marlowe towards the Turks and Islam can be analysed under three subtitles. The first is 'debasement of women' which is put into stage by the raped and debased Turk/Muslim women figures. And the discourse referring to the Turk and Muslim women should be detected attentively to gain insight into implications, definitions and adjectives. Of these implications, the first one belongs to Calyphas. Though Calyphas hates the wars, though he never resembles his father, and though he is slaughtered by Tamburlaine towards the end of the play because of his anti-war and feminine inclinations, he dreams of the Turkish women as a sexual fantasy. This fantasy is reflected in his conversation with Perdicas to play cards for kissing the captive Turkish women first, and the word chosen for the women is 'concubines':

CALYPHAS:
Come, thou and I will go to cards to drive
away the time.
PERDICAS:
Content, my lord: but what shall we play for?
CALYPHAS:
Who shall kiss the fairest of the Turks'
concubines first, when my father hath conquered them.
(IV,i,61-5)

Having won the war and captured the Ottoman Sultans, Tamburlaine boasts for his victory and asks his companies to ransack the tents of the Turks and take the Turkish women to bring them to his own tent to celebrate the victory. His command echoes with the following lines; "Ransack the tents and the pavilions / Of these proud Turks, and take their concubines" (IV,i,162-63). His intention is beyond question, because his discourse clarifies everything. Marlowe's choice of words is over humiliating, amazingly insolent, and outstandingly derogatory. All these approaches are summed up in Tamburlaine's words: "Then bring those Turkish harlots to my tent, / And I'll dispose them as it likes me best" (IV,i,167-68).

The rapes, cuss words and abuses continue in Act Four and despite the words of Orcanes and the women's begging and crying, no change is seen in Tamburlaine's decision and he replies Orcanes: "Live

continent, then, ye slaves, and meet not me / With troops of harlots at your slothful heels (IV,iii,81-2). And just before few lines of his reply, Tamburlaine calls his soldiers:

TAMBURLAINE:
Hold ye, tall soldiers, take ye queens a-piece,--
I mean such queens as were kings' concubines;
Take them; divide them, and their jewels too,
And let them equally serve all your turns.
SOLDIERS:
We thank your majesty.

(IV,iii,70-73)

Before marching to Babylon, Theridamas explains the reason of the Turkish women being with their sultans on the battlefield: "It seems they meant to conquer us, my lord, / And make us jesting pageants for their trulls" (IV,iii,88-9). The words Marlowe uses for the women such as 'spoil, trull' are still very pejorative, and affront. Muslim and Turkish women are all reduced to sexual objects and they are exposed to verbal and sexual torture by Tamburlaine. This torture is observed in lines below:

TAMBURLAINE:
And now themselves shall make our pageant,
And common soldiers jest with all their trulls.
Let them take pleasure soundly in their spoils,
Till we prepare our march to Babylon,
Whither we next make expedition.

(IV,iii,90-4)

The second subtitle can be 'the humiliation of the Turks as a nation'. The obscurity and abstruseness mixed with preconception on Turks and Islam continue to be seen with the same figures, biases and debates with no change throughout the play. In addition to all the above mentioned scenes, several others which are full of negative identifications and definitions of Turks are directly delivered via Tamburlaine by Marlowe. The level of the hatred is absolutely obvious in these lines:

TAMBURLAINE:
...
Usumcasane, now come, let us march
Towards Techelles and Theridamas,
That we have sent before to fire the towns,
The towers and cities of these hateful Turks
(III,ii,144-47)

And now, ye canker'd curs of Asia,
(IV,i,134)

Well, bark, ye dogs: I'll bridle all your tongues,
And bind them close with bits of burnish'd steel,
Down to the channels of your hateful throats;
And, with the pains my rigour shall inflict,
I'll make ye roar, that earth may echo forth
The far-resounding torments ye sustain;
...
I will, with engines never exercis'd,
Conquer, sack, and utterly consume
Your cities and your golden palaces,
And, with the flames that beat against the clouds,
Incense the heavens, and make the stars to melt,
As if they were the tears of Mahomet
For hot consumption of his country's pride;
(IV,i,184-89/194-200)

These provocative lines towards the Turks are fairly enough to cause tough prejudices and provoke the Elizabethan audience. The message of ‘cruel, barbaric, atrocious Turks’ is conveyed directly and insistently. As a consequence of these repetitions about the images of Turks, Elizabethan society begins to “apply the word ... ‘Turk’ to anyone guilty of infidelity or greed” (Honan, 2005, 41).

Third and the last but the most radical subtitle is surely the debasement of Islam and Prophet of Islam. The first attack begins in the Act Three when Theridamas tries to persuade Olympia to go with him to Tamburlaine. Before Theridamas declares his love to Olympia, Theridamas tries to convince her: “But, lady, go with us to Tamburlaine, / And thou shalt see a man greater than Mahomet” (III,iv,45-6). Here, Theridamas compares the prophet with Tamburlaine and identifies him with godlike characteristics. Not only does he underestimate the prophet but also he exalts Tamburlaine.

On the other hand, the religion of Tamburlaine or his theism or atheism is one of the most important puzzling issues in the play. As “the details of his life are scarcely known in the West” (qtd. In Marozzi, 2006, Back Cover), many know the historical character Tamerlane as an anti-Muslim. So most critics allege that Marlowe’s Tamburlaine was an atheist and lots of critics assert that the Tamburlaine character was a Christian. In fact, the Tamburlaine character was neither a Christian nor an atheist. Like the historical character Tamerlane, he was a Muslim but towards the end of the play he refuses his own religion. When one reads between the lines, this later refusal is seen clear. For instance, when Calyphas tries to prove his courage to his father, he begins to tell what he would do if they met the Turkish Sultan. Tamburlaine’s reply to his son reveals the entire questions about the religion of him.

TAMBURLAINE:
Hold him, and cleave him too, or I'll cleave thee;
For we will march against them presently.
Theridamas, Techelles, and Casane
Promis'd to meet me on Larissa-plains,
With hosts a-piece against this Turkish crew;
For I have sworn by sacred Mahomet
To make it parcel of my empery.

...

(I,iv,104-10)

Here, the last two lines divulge all the confusions, because if Tamburlaine were an atheist or a Christian, or if he were not a Muslim, he would not swear by the Prophet of Islam. Moreover, he would not say ‘sacred Mahomet’, because only the Muslims use the word ‘sacred’ for the Islam prophet. Throughout play, we come across the adjective ‘sacred’ in various scenes, but all of them are uttered by the Muslim characters like Orcanes, Callapine and Olympia.

One may put forward an antithesis about the religion of Tamburlaine because of two reasons. The first one is the words of Frederick as follows:

FREDERICK:
Your majesty remembers, I am sure,
What cruel slaughter of our Christian bloods
These heathenish Turks and pagans lately made
Betwixt the city Zula and Danubius;

...

(II,i,4-7)

Here, Marlowe either commits a logical error as Frederick says “...our Christian bloods” (II,i,5) or excludes Tamburlaine from the society of Frederick. And the second reason which may prompt one to think that Tamburlaine was not a Muslim is the first scene of the last act which is the most pejorative, shameful and hideous of the whole play about the Turks and Muslims. “Having ordered the massacre of every citizen of Babylon, Tamburlaine now turns on ‘Mahomet’ (or Mohammed). He calls on Usumcasane to present him with the ‘Alcoran’ (the Koran) and other religious books and orders them to be burnt” (Simkin, 2001, p. 82). This provocation is verbalised as follows:

TAMBURLAINE:
Now, Casane, where's the Turkish Alcoran,
And all the heaps of superstitious books
Found in the temples of that Mahomet

Whom I have thought a god? They shall be burnt.
(V,ii,171-74)

However that never means that Tamburlaine is a Muslim, as “we know from Marlowe’s sources that the historical Timur the Lame was a devout follower of Mohammed, and the poetic licence Marlowe allows himself should alert us at once to the significance of this moment at the climax of the play. He speaks of ‘that Mahomet / Whom I have thought a god?’ (V,ii,173-74) implying a conscious rejection of beliefs previously held” (Simkin, 2001, p. 82). Following lighting a fire, Tamburlaine continues his words as:

...
In vain, I see, men worship Mahomet.
My sword hath sent millions of Turks to hell,
Slew all his priests, his kinsmen, and his friends,
And yet I live untouched by Mahomet.
(V,ii,177-80)

The point of view of Stevie Simkin to the lines “Now, Mahomet, if thou have any power, / Come down thyself and work a miracle:” (V,ii,185-86) is quite a change and interesting: “The challenge may actually be a sly (and, if detected, deeply shocking) reference to the crucifixion, when Christ was mocked by those standing around and told to save himself and come down from the cross” (Simkin, 2001, p. 84). And finally, Tamburlaine finishes his words:

...
Well, soldiers, Mahomet remains in hell;
He cannot hear the voice of Tamburlaine.
Seek out another godhead to adore:
The God that sits in heaven, if any god,
For he is God alone, and none but he.
(V,ii,196-200)

Just about five hundred years, scholars, men of letters and critics have talked comprehensively of this scene, Tamburlaine’s burning the Koran, and Tamburlaine’s religious confusions, but Simkin’s words are enlightening and significant enough to be quoted at length:

Tamburlaine was a monstrous figure in the annals of history and, as a follower of Islam, a heathen. Marlowe evokes the Islamic prophet Mohammed only to have Tamburlaine blaspheme against him; in so doing, Marlowe was simultaneously raising a spectre that an Elizabethan audience would have instinctively reacted against (Mohammed) and depicting Tamburlaine as a heretic to his own religion. As so often, Marlowe seems to be playing a double game: it is likely that the Elizabethans may have enjoyed hearing a heathen religion attacked, but at the same time it is likely that many would have been shocked by Tamburlaine’s godlessness. Tamburlaine offers another challenge: for him, Mahomet’s failure to respond to the outrages he has committed against Islam is proof of his non-existence, or at least of his powerlessness (2001, p. 83).

This provocative scene, which cannot be more depreciatory and degrading for any religion, had already rung the bells of Islamophobia and ethnocentric approaches towards the Turks and Muslims centuries ago. Hence, literary and historical scholars like Honan accept that “Tamburlaine’s three worst acts of cruelty and impious pride occur in Act V, when he destroys Babylon, breaks his oath with its governor, whom he kills in cold blood, and mocks Islam while burning copies of the Koran” (2005, ps. 179-180). Wilson quotes Edward Said as having stated that “Marlowe’s ‘oriental stage’ helped fabricate the stereotype of Islam as Christendom’s other ...” (1995, p. 56), but this argument would be much more proper with the words ‘constituted the basic stereotype’ than ‘helped fabricate’. And although “several explanations for Marlowe’s radical debasement of the Turk ... character[s] have been proposed” (Brown, 1971, p. 38), they generally can not go forward than an assumption. Of these explanations, Marlowe’s being patronized by the Queen Elizabeth to protect and spread her policies causing these debasements can never be accepted, because according to historical sources, it is surely known that Marlowe wrote the first part of *Tamburlaine the Great* when he was in Cambridge and after a short time of his graduation, he wrote the second part.

After all, “In the absence of a translation of the Qur’an or of documents from Arabic, Turkish or other Islamic civilizations, Britons saw Islam exclusively through the prism of Muslims attacking, enslaving, converting (as with the Janissaries especially) and killing Christians” (Matar, 2009, p. 217). But despite the centuries, communication technologies, mobilized interreligious and intercultural studies, businessmen’s and politicians’ co-operations, the negative approaches towards the Turks and Muslim still remain unchanged and “the images that had been constructed in Britain about Muslims over the centuries still dictated both the perception and the treatment of the Mahometan” (Matar, 2009, ps. 230-31). Among the numerous examples which may clarify this unchanged status-quo, two quotations are enough to summarize. First, Charles Issawi, who was a scholar on history of Ottoman at Princeton and Columbia Universities, defines the 15th and 16th centuries’ Europe in that subjective touch:

A new act in the Christian-Muslim drama opened with the coming of the Turks, who captured Constantinople, subjugated the Balkans and converted many of their inhabitants, invaded Italy, and twice besieged Vienna. They inspired terror all over Europe, as may be seen from the contemporary literature and also from the prayers offered in churches for deliverance from the Turks (Issawi, 1998, p. 147).

Second, a few years ago, *Tamburlaine the Great Part II* was performed in Barbican which is known as the most popular and the largest arts centre in England and in the Continent. The book burning scene, of course, was omitted and on this omission Dalya Alberge, commented that “Marlowe’s Koran-burning hero is censored to avoid Muslim anger” (*the Times*, 24 Nov 2005). However, it is interesting that the reason of the censorship is not to be respectful to the followers of a religion or to the religion itself but to avoid Muslim anger.

Consequently, “the exercise of placing Marlowe within the political, social, cultural, and literary controversies of his age, and occasionally within those of later periods, makes us aware of the degree to which the ideological debates that so intrigued Marlowe continue to be relevant to our own troubled times” (Deats and Logan, 2008, p. 9). And although Derek McGhee says “in the early twenty-first century, hatred, prejudice, intolerance and antagonism between groups are commonplace in the UK, just as they are throughout the world” (2005, p. 1), it is absolutely clear that the background of this history is based on an old story. The examples demonstrated throughout the analysis suggest that those prejudices, misconceptions, misrepresentations, ethnocentric approaches, misunderstandings, bigotries, cultural and religious intolerance are primary reasons for wars and conflicts horror and terror all over the world as in Bosnia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Chechnya, North Ossetia, Ireland, Catalonia and so on, and “the world is not a safer place as a result of the war on terrorism (Lyon, 2005, p. 78).

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