

AYŞIN CANDAN

THEATRE AND MODERNITY

FROM THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE
TO THE TURKISH REPUBLIC



HOLLITZER





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MICHAEL HÜTTLER · SUNA SUNER



THEATRE AND MODERNITY

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by

Ayşın Candan

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Ayşın Candan

For the Centennial of the Republic of Turkey

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INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

MODERNITY

What is modernisation? We see modernity assuming different forms depending on the era and social context. Although it has been around since the Middle Ages, the meaning of modernity becomes concrete and visible during the 18th–19th centuries. It develops in parallel with the spread of literacy, social mobility, urbanisation, etc. On the other hand, industrialisation and the birth of capitalism in the West along with colonisation and the advance of globalisation start to manifest the not-so-positive consequences of modernisation. Already in the mid-19th century, Karl Marx was saying: “At the same pace that mankind masters nature, man seems to become enslaved to other men or to his own infamy”.¹ During the same century the French poet Baudelaire, who witnessed the barricades of the 1848 revolt as well as the vast public works, projects in the rebuilding of Paris, was applauding, in *Paris Spleen*, the beauty of modernisation amidst all the ugliness and destruction along with the images of poverty that emerged as dark alleys were replaced with wide boulevards. And today, as we are increasingly witnessing the bipolar ebb and flow of modernisation, Marx’s observation is turning into a prophecy that grows stronger each day.

Against such a background, in the current form assumed by modernity in the social and cultural spheres, we notice the existence of structures that advance through different conceptions of time under different geographic conditions. Today, the idea of alternative modernities developed during the process of modernisation concedes to the existence of social structures evolving in different cultures and different times. From this perspective we can look at the social transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Republic of Turkey in its own specific dynamics.

As of the 19th century, culture and art have assumed an important role in rendering modernisation a leading factor in the transition from empire to nation. Its most prominent evidence has been observed at the very outset. It may be assumed that the first modern person in the Ottoman Empire is Sultan Mehmed II, the Conqueror. That a small nomadic people from the Kai tribe came and settled on the outer rims of Asia Minor and proceeded to conquer Constantinople, the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire, under the leadership of a young sultan of 23, was as unexpected as this sultan’s offer of friendship to Western states. Assuming Byzantine bureaucracy and state apparatus with the awareness of henceforth

¹ Marshall Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, p. 20.



Fig. 1: Gentile Bellini, *Portrait of Sultan Mehmet II with a Young Man*, c.1500, oil on panel, 33.4 × 45.4 cm. Municipality of Istanbul, Turkey

being the sole sovereign of Eastern and Western Rome, Sultan Mehmed II signed a peace treaty with the Republic of Venice in 1479 and asked for an artist to be sent to him. Gentile Bellini, who arrived to fulfill this request, stayed in Istanbul for 16 months where he made three portraits of the Sultan and designed portrait medallions. Despite the Islamic faith's denial of concrete depictions, Sultan Mehmed II, who spoke many languages and had extensive knowledge about Eastern and Western civilisations, attained immortality through art with his portrait by Bellini which is on display today at the National Gallery in London.

THE OTTOMANS AND THE HISTORY OF TURKS

This study, which explores the role of the performing arts in the modernisation of the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey, is not a historical or sociological account, it employs an approach specific to theatre research. That said, a discussion on modernisation necessitates an explanation on its historical background to determine its framework and borders.

Europeans are the first to call the Ottomans “Turks”. The word Turk is ingrained within the foundation of the Republic of Turkey. The Ottomans, on the other

hand, regarded themselves as an Islamic community and did not feel the need to seek another identity or history. Before the foundation of the Republic, the only subject of instruction at schools was Islamic history. Meanwhile, European historians, and foremost Arnold Toynbee, argued that Turkey was re-established as a republic merely owing to the Turks' emulation of the superior Western civilisation²². The emphasis placed on the pre-Islamic Asian identity of the Turks in line with Atatürk's demand, following the foundation of the republic, should be understood as a reaction developed against the centuries-long domination of such marginalising perspectives held by European historians regarding the Ottoman state.

We know that Turks are a nomadic people who set out from the Altay region of East Asia and began to convert to Islam as of the 10th century. In cultural heritage buildings constructed by the Seljuks, who were among the first Turkic tribes to reach Anatolia, we can see the resplendent cultural synthesis created by their migration and settlement. The 13th century mosque and hospital, which Dogan Kuban calls the "Divrigi miracle", attests to the cultural synthesis in Anatolia that survives to our day. All of the ornamentation techniques imported by the Seljuk-Turkic tribes and stonemasonry specific to the Anatolian geography have merged here. Consequently, we can say that architecture is a field wherein the most abstract thoughts and hypotheses turn into tangible entities. As an architectural historian and culture critic Kuban's studies on this structure continued for many years and the building has been included in the UNESCO World Heritage List. In yet another comprehensive volume titled *Osmanlı Mimarisi* (Ottoman Architecture), Kuban gives concrete and solemn evidence about the Turkish-Ottoman synthesis and concludes that the Ottoman state is an Eastern Mediterranean and Balkan state with a Muslim identity.³ Similar thoughts resonate in contemporary history research, for instance in the works of researcher Barış Ünlü:

"The nomadic lifestyle of Greater Central Asia met with the sedentary civilisation of the Greater Near East during the 14th and 15th centuries in Anatolia and the Balkans. The blending of these two different social structures, mentalities, and cultures in *kairos* created the Ottoman Empire."⁴

This contemporary take by Ünlü also contains the view that the aforementioned dilemma underlies the state which was created by the Ottoman Empire by bringing together the right impulses at the right time as illuminated by the Greek concept of *kairos*. This result also manages to bring an end to questions such as

2 Arnold Toynbee, *The Modern World: A Survey of Historical Forces*, Vol. VI: Turkey (London: Ernest Benn Limited, 1926), pp. 3–5.

3 Dogan Kuban, *Osmanlı Mimarisi* [Ottoman Architecture], p. 31.

4 Barış Ünlü, *Osmanlı: Bir Dünya-İmparatorlugunun Soykütüğü* [The Ottomans: Genealogy of a World Empire], p. 210.



Fig. 2: The western portal of the Divrigi Mosque (Eastern Anatolia)

whether it was Byzantine heritage or the Islamic civilisation that the Ottomans inherited most from, or, whether it was by pillage or motives of expansion that lay behind the idea of conquest.

THEATRE DURING THE OTTOMAN ERA

THE FRUITS OF THE *TANZIMAT* PERIOD OF REFORM

The question of when the first theatrical activities emerged in the form that they had in Western countries has always been a subject of debate. The initial and most striking impressions of Yirmisekiz Mehmed Çelebi, who was the first Ottoman ambassador sent to a Western country by Sultan Ahmed III, during his official visit to France in 1720 alluded to the women he saw in France: “In the realms of France, women are held in higher esteem than men and do whatever they may wish and go wherever they may desire”, he says in astonishment.⁵ After a night in the theatre where he watches an opera, he writes, “... And at the opera, with the

⁵ 28 Mehmet Çelebi, p. 9.