

DO TWO HURREM SULTAN NOVELS

ADD UP TO ONE HURREM SULTAN HISTORY?*

Abstract: The relations and controversies between the texts and the known historical reality and the points of views of the writers are tried to be unveiled by a comparative discussion on two historical novels written about Hurrem Sultan in this study.

The first one of the books to be discussed is “Sultan’s Harem” by Colin Falconer, who was born in Britain and is at the moment living in Australia; and the second is the novel “Hurrem Sultan” by the Ukrainian author, Pavlo Arhipoviç Zahrebelniy. That an Orientalist point of view is on the front stage in the work of Colin Falconer, whose other best selling popular books as “Aztec” and “Silk Road” are also acknowledged, can immediately be observed. “Sultan’s Harem” is a book in which the Orientalist “Eastern Myth” plays an important role within the theme. Falconer has set the life of Hurrem Sultan, wife of Suleyman the Magnificent sitting on the throne during a period when the Ottoman Empire possessed lands widest in its history, and the entire Ottoman history in intrigues, forbidden loves, lust and heartless violence, decapitated heads, and blood. On the other hand, in the work of Ukrainian Zahrebelniy writing on Hurrem Sultan who was told to be born in the town called Rohatin in Ukraine, Anastasia’s – who was abducted and sold as a slave to Istanbul by the Tatars - attaining power by her personal strive as Hurrem Sultan, the tribulations she experienced during her entire life, her homesickness, and being misunderstood most of the time is covered. The writers’ preconceptions and points of views made it inevitable that diverse and conflicting historical information be spread out in the texts throughout each book. It shall be the duty of literary criticism at this point to analyze the associations between historical knowledge and writers’ points of views as well as the plot and the story and style, and to stand up against the exploitation of the literary text as a tool for mishandling the historical consciousness and universal humanitarian principles.

Although it is not possible to refer to them as an indisputable source of information, the efficiency of literary works in the formation of social value judgments and in the dominant conception, which Gramsci defines as hegemony, is and undeniable actuality. In today’s world where the relationships among societies and cultures are going through an extremely

distressed phase, the points of views on other societies and “the others” as well as the preconceptions of literary text writers is becoming all the more important. Within this context, as Franco Moretti puts it, one of the crucial functions of literary criticism should be clearly stating that an interpretation a text introduces into history cannot be valid.

In his opening speech of International Literature Festival held in Berlin between 16-17 September 2005, Carlos Fuentes remarked, “*Literature makes real what history forgot*” (Sözcükler Journal, July-August 2006, the article titled “*In Praise of the Novel*”). It must not be forgotten, however, that literature which has the capability of making real what history forgot is also able to cloud and turn upside down the historical facts. Eclipsing of the truth, as well as possibilities of illusions and fallacies, may reach dimensions all the more dangerous especially in popular texts that aim for singular accounts and try to tickle common beliefs which exist in the hoi polloi and in literary works in which subjective points of views are prevalent rather than the dialogical “polyphonic novel”, for which Bahtin provided an extensive description, that creates opportunities for “challenging the truth”.

While defining the relationship between social sciences and literary rhetoric, it is inevitable not to salute Moretti’s remark on this issue: “*Rhetorical analysis widens and refines the field of social sciences; similarly, it would be impossible to assign a meaning to the existence of rhetorical compromises if it were not for the fact that the historical frame provided by the social sciences. (...) There is no such thing as full isomorphism in real life; from this incoherency among the categories derive the issues that distinguish literary historiography from other disciplines*” (F. Moretti, *Signs Taken For Wonders*, Mucizevi İşaretler, translated into Turkish by Zeynep Altok, Metis Eleştiri, First Published in December 2005, pp.18).

Through a rhetorical analysis applied to Falconer’s Sultan’s Harem, it could be observed that as the field of social sciences and historical knowledge expand, become superficial, and conveyed out of the limits of an acceptable dimension of reality in line with a preconception in dominance of the writer’s subjective consciousness, a full-fledged Orientalist point of view is displayed. The novel, from the start to the end, bears Orientalist “Eastern Myth” symbols. By narrating how the tourist crowds the author observed in front of the Topkapı Palace in 1990 are distant from decapitated vizier heads on display there once and that executioners used to wash their blood stained scimitars and hands in the fountains they were at that moment seeing around, the novel commences as if a mockery were on stage about the

ignorance of contemporary human-beings toward history. The European travelers are being warned against the Eastern society which is savage, unchanging, and which must be seized and re-formed...

In Falconer's narrative; his father, Sultan Selim, is a savage according to Suleyman the Magnificent: "His father was a savage; he knew that" (Falconer, pp. 49). According to Ibrahim of Greek stock, who was the best friend of the Sultan and who would sooner become a grand vizier, the janissaries were "carrion eating dogs" (Falconer, pp. 18); Ibrahim clearly mentions that to the Sultan.

In the room where Prince Mustafa sleeps, there are two candles at each side of which a turbaned servant stands on guard. The candle on whichever side the Prince turns while asleep is put out immediately by the servant on duty in order for the Prince not to be disturbed, and the candle now facing the back of the Prince is lit at once.

On the towers on each side of the Central Gate (Ortakapı) at the Imperial Gate (Bab-ı Hümayun), decapitated heads are on display in wall niches. There are places for executioners on the right hand side of the door through which the emissaries enter. These executioners are capable of decapitating fifty heads per day (Falconer, pp. 399, 400).

In case Hurrem, who falls ill through the end of the novel, dies, the chief of physicians head would be nailed to the High Porte (Bab-ı Ali) (the very same Sultan would be described as an antimilitarist person who has the soul of a poet in many other parts of the novel).

According to Falconer, harem, as in the Ottoman Palace, is a tradition coming down from the nomadic period (Falconer, pp. 43). The Orientalist point of view has turned all historical and social realities upside down. Falconer associates all the egotism in the Eastern society which he mythicizes far from the developed, superior, and distinguished structure to which he himself also belongs with the creation of the Eastern man, to his unchanging characteristic which does and will exist. The mentioning of the harem as a Turkish nomadic tradition in the novel is one of the most significant precursors of this concept. Nevertheless, in the nomadic Turkish communities, in Yörüks for instance, who succeeded in preserving aspects that belong to traditional life up to this day, the woman has a say as much as the man does in everyday life. It is still possible to find countless examples on this issue in Şlhan Başgöz's work, *Folklor Yazıları* (Folklore Writings) and in other folklore studies, and to observe that life personally.

Hurrem Sultan is a kind of a woman who plots any and all types of intrigues, takes lives, make others shed blood, and who offers her body to anyone stumbles into her path in order to attain power and her aims. For the sake of those, she would not hesitate to make love with the Kapi Aga. She gets such an immense ecstasy even during her lovemaking to the Kapi Aga to whom she approaches in a pragmatist purpose that she has to tuck the sleeves of his shirt into her mouth in order to prevent herself from crying out loud (Falconer, pp.84). The Eastern woman image who is lustful, whose appetite for love cannot be satisfied, and who offers herself to men as a satisfaction material is an unchanging element that can be found from Beckford to Flaubert in many Western writers.

Hurrem's son Selim, who she will use for getting her revenge on the Ottoman's, who she knows to be instrumental in the fall of the Ottoman Empire, and who she will succeed in having ascend the throne of power is a fruit of such a forbidden love and lust.

There is nothing Hurrem cannot perform for achieving power. She have the meals of people she does have a dislike against poisoned by her servant Muomi. She uses medicine that vanquishes his sexual competency in order to prevent the Padishah from sleeping with another concubine. She had her men burn down the Topkapı Palace in order to install what she had in mind instead.

According to Falconer, the owner of the Ottoman lands is the Padishah; when the fief owner dies, the lands are returned to him. However, in the Fiefdom Organization which was valid in law until Suleyman the Magnificent, all lands were Beyt-ül mali Müslüman (common property of the Muslims). There was not any private property rights on lands based on documentation during the period of fall and decadence of the Ottoman's, not even during the last days of the Empire. Although the concept was degenerated in time and turned into benefices that passed from father to son, only the right of the cultivation of the land was given.

Emissaries and envoys are treated very poorly in the Ottoman Palace; they are called "dogs", they are frequently beheaded, or thrown to the Yedikule dungeons. Gonzago, arriving as the emissary of Venice, is persecuted every once in a while to make him kiss the soil or to lick anyone's boots (Falconer, pp. 400). Falconer must be unaware of the legendary saying about the Ottoman Palace, "An envoy cannot be blamed for his mission".

For the sake of making the novel a bit more interesting, Falconer brings another plot that starts in Venice into the Ottoman Palace. The Eastern Myth was once again made visible by placing two foreign women against each other in the Ottoman capital; one within the palace and the other thrown out of the palace as a consequence of intrigues and even though sentenced to death by the palace, her life gets saved at the eleventh hour by the man she is in love. While Hurrem living in the palace fills her slate up by the tricks she is pulling and the traps she is scheming, Julia of Venice, the man whom she loves is assigned as Grand Eunuch in the Palace following a series of misfortunate incidents, is leading a life full of melancholy and desperation.

The other end of the story starts in Venice before these two foreign women is placed against each other in Istanbul... Abbas of Morocco, who is in love with Gonzago's, a Venetian noble's daughter, is punished by her father by castration and sold as a slave. Abbas becomes the Grand Eunuch of the Ottoman Palace in such a short period of four years.

He will struggle for the obliteration of the Ottoman line and state in cooperation with Hurrem Sultan and his friend Ludovici, who is the fruit of a forbidden love of a Venetian noble, who settles in Istanbul and who is engaged in trade!

There are also diverse narratives in the novel as regards to the Hurrem's origins. Even the information that she is a Crimean Tatar can be read from Hurrem's own flow of thoughts. On the other hand, we learn from Zahrebelniy's work in which he mostly took care not to divert from research and historical sources that Anastasia of Rohatin who would become Hurrem Sultan in the process was abducted and sold as a slave by the Tatars.

In the narrative of Falconer, Sultan Suleyman is a man who does not like wars and who has a soul of a poet that desires to live as who he is. He goes all the wars due to the influence and persistence of his kin whose counseling he has to listen to. The source of his *Conquerdom* is not being a nomadic Turk from which his ascendants came from, but the Islamic faith he possesses (Falconer, pp. 18).

Hurrem assigns Grand Eunuch Abbas in order to behead Grand Vizier Ibrahim whom she does not like and sees as an obstacle in the path of attaining power. Abbas hands the assignment over to Treasurer Rustem. Influenced by Rustem's word games, Ibrahim writes a letter to Shah Tahmasp which indicates himself as Seraskier, and in which he assumes the role of the Padishah. Once the letter is brought to Sultan Suleyman, the beheading of Ibrahim

becomes inevitable. In the narrative of Zahrebelniy, however, Sultan Suleyman himself assigns Ibrahim as Seraskier in the Iran Campaign.

Although Abbas of Morocco was punished by the Venetian noble Gonzago solely because he is in love with his daughter, he concentrates all his hatred on taking his revenge from the Ottoman Palace and forms a magnificent alliance with Hurrem Sultan. The reason of the fall of the Ottoman Empire would be the cooperation these two slaves developed!

There are various aspects in the novel that are in controversy with dates, Ottoman land management, and historical facts. During the scenes full of Eastern Myth following each other relentlessly in order to spice some excitement into the novel, everything gets mixed up with some other. While dying, Hurrem would tell the Sultan that he is an idiot, that she hated him all her life (Falconer, pp. 518).

Seeking to demonstrate how influential Hurrem was for the fall of the Ottoman Empire, Falconer could find no other way but to account for depicting her younger son Beyazit, who she prevents from stepping up the throne, as a leader loved by the people and the janissaries who is aware of the corruptness and leading an army consisting of Turkmen and fief soldiers. This attitude necessitated a near-objective approach toward the social structure, which is in conflict with the general structure of the novel. Hurrem does what she is capable of even in her death bed and lies to the Sultan that Beyazit is the fruit of her forbidden love with devshirme Grand Vizier Ibrahim of the Greek stock and succeeds in having the drunken and aggressive Selim, who resembles William Beckford's hero - the grandson of Kharun Rashid in his novel *Vathek*, ascend the throne. From time to time, Falconer's general style has to get in touch with objective historical knowledge within the novel. His struggle to place the Eastern Myth on the front stage resembles the attitude of Lord Byron in his novels. Even though Lord Byron himself traveled to the East between 1809-1811, he made countless references to *Vathek*, which William Beckford wrote without even seeing the East, and used it as an important source.

The historical elements that are used in Zahrebelniy's novel, "Hurrem Sultan" stands closer to the real ones. While telling the story of Hurrem Sultan who was born in the lands he himself was born, who was sold to the Ottoman Palace as a slave, and who later succeeded in becoming the wife of the greatest Ottoman Sultan, Zahrebelniy sought to verbalize the homesickness and longings of a woman who was parted from his country and who suffered from a life that was lived away from her homeland and her own people. She struggles for

finding solutions to keep the lands she was born and raised in from Tatar raids and other marauders once she gains an important role in the palace as Hurrem Sultan. She does not abstain from visiting her fellow countrymen who were thrown into dungeons for arson and banditry, and she even thinks about marrying her daughter to their leader and thus making him the governor of Ukraine on behalf of the Ottoman Palace.

The Ottoman land affairs and information on rights of property are told in a way similar to the reality.

Abbas of Morocco, who performs the duty of Grand Eunuch for a long time in the palace and who is one of the protagonists in Falconer's version, does not exist in Zahrebelniy's novel. There are common protagonists in each novel as well as ones whose names are changed. Falconer's Ludovici, who enters the story in Venice and later moves to Istanbul, is a Venetian merchantman who lives in Istanbul from the beginning and his name is Luici Griti in Zahrebelniy's version. He has close ties with Treasurer Iskender Chelebi and with Ibrahim who, from the beginning, is a close friend of the Sultan and who will later become Vizier and Grand Vizier. That the domination of state monetary affairs by this team and especially Ibrahim's greed is vitally influential for the decadence and fall can be interpreted from Zahrebelniy's narrative. Luici Griti does not find the Ottoman land management profitable and suggests a move from fiefdom organization toward rental for money. He would become a financial advisor to the Sultan all by his will, without seeking any compensation for his services. He says that he loves the Sultan to the extent that he would donate all his fortune to the state treasury. Upon the suggestion of the Sultan, he has a manor built in the space between At Meydanı and Vizier Ibrahim's house.

The influence of plunder and oppression, carried out by greedy viziers around Anatolia such as Ferhat Pasha, on Canberk Gazali, Turkmen and Kızılbaş riots is also mentioned in Zahrebelniy's novel. It is also conveyed in the novel that the Ottoman palace traditions, exorbitance, and extravagance are inherited from Byzantium, and historical facts are sought to be clarified through an objective point of view. The taxes are raised and the value of the money is weakened due to extravagance and the obsession of the administrators toward possessions and money (Zahrebelniy, pp. 285). The Ottomans are living in grandeur; there is not even a small trace of their nomadic ancestors (Zahrebelniy, pp. 359). The rebellions, the first janissary mutinies, will also commence in the period of the Magnificent.

Hurrem Sultan attracts Sultan Suleyman's attention by the plays she performs and the songs she sings before His Eminence. Hurrem, who stays with the Sultan for three days, starts to be committed to him through an emotion mixed with respect and love she also sensed for her Latin language teacher in Rohatin, the half-priest Skarbskiy. The first spouse Mahidevran, who is jealous of Hurrem, attacks her and scratches her face. This incident also takes place in Falconer's version: After the fighting is over, Hurrem has her servant tear her face from side to side; having herself soaked in blood, she managed to benefit from the Sultan's pity and to make him get rid of the former spouse.

There are diversities between the two novels as of the timing of the events. While Hurrem's getting intimate with the Sultan occurs after the Rhodes Campaign in Falconer's version, it is before the mentioned campaign in that of Zahrebelniy.

While Hurrem does not suckle her children in order to prevent her breasts and her body shape from getting malformed in Falconer's version, she herself suckles all of her children, does not choose one over another, and raises them with a great affection.

In Zahrebelniy's novel, there formed an anti-Hurrem front led by the padishah's mother Hafsa Sultan. By corresponding via letters with her nephews in Crimea, Hafsa Sultan manages the Tatars to attack Hurrem's home country. The rumor that the Padishah is being poisoned and that sick generations are being raised for the palace spreads out.

While Vizier Ibrahim is depicted as a person who endeavors in good intentions for the future of the Sultan and the state and who is trapped by Hurrem's intrigues and gets strangled in Falconer's version, he is depicted as a character who constantly thinks of his own purse and who is obsessive for power. Although Hurrem tries to warn the Sultan of Ibrahim, she could not succeed in doing so for a considerable period of time. However, after a long while when Ibrahim starts to think himself up, even superior, to the Sultan; when he says that his caftan is valuable than the Sultan's; when he insults him as "You, Turk!" (Zahrebelniy, pp. 396), Suleyman sees the truth and has him killed by the mutes. The effort of Zahrebelniy to justify Hurrem against Ibrahim is similarly tried to be based on elements far from credible. It is discerned that the writer performs an effort toward excusing Hurrem. Ibrahim's expediency and recklessness reaches to an extent that he could kill the envoys and seize the gifts sent for the Padishah and his mother. A similar attitude comes forth in the narratives about Prince Mustafa who was born of the other wife of the Sultan and who Hurrem is opposed in favor of her own sons attaining the power. Prince Mustafa considers himself as the inevitable

successor of the throne, starts to write letters to the governors, and conceives a conspiracy against the Padishah. However, the historical sources inform us that Prince Mustafa was an honest and well-raised prince who was loved by the people and the janissaries. The narrative in Falconer's story is also closer to this fact.

While Zahrebelniy's novel seeks to justify someone who could be considered as one of his fellow country people during and after her struggle for power, it is also possible to observe that certain Hurrem criticisms conveyed via other protagonists are placed within the text from time to time. The general narrator sometimes agrees with these criticisms, and it is told that gradually Hurrem becomes a stubborn, epicurean, and capricious person (Zahrebelniy, pp. 281).

It can be asserted that Zahrebelniy pays careful attention to set up all protagonists and characters in their own internalities, independent of the writer as though they were free entities, and to present them within their own internalities...

As in Falconer's version, at the end of the Zahrebelniy's novel, there is the confession of Hurrem about her hating the Padishah her entire life even though she liked him from time to time.

In Zahrebelniy's novel, too, Beyazıt is the most suitable prince for the Ottoman throne; furthermore, it is known that in the event of his ascension to the throne he would not make an attempt on his brother Selim's life. Hurrem struggles for Beyazıt to become the Sultan both because he is the most suitable candidate and in order to prevent the other candidate, Selim, from death. She forms cooperation with Grand Vizier Ahmet in line with that purpose. Once this alliance developed in the palace is considered as a conspiracy against the Sultan, both Beyazıt and the Grand Vizier fall from grace.

The forces of Beyazıt, who is assigned to Amasya, and the forces of Selim, Bey of Manisa who is traditionally the closest candidate for the ascension to the throne, come up against each other around Konya. Beyazıt has the Yoruk army supporting him, its numbers reaching up to a hundred thousand. When the cannons of Vizier Sokollu, which are at Selim's side by the will of the Magnificent, enters into the battle, Beyazıt is defeated and eventually he seeks refuge from Shah Tahmasp. He is killed in Iran by Shah Tahmasp upon the will of the Sultan. This ending is shared by each novel. However, there are great controversies in the events preceding that ending. Falconer's novel, in which Hurem struggles her every effort in favor of Selim's attaining power only to obliterate The Ottoman Empire and in which she even claims

that the Sultan's own child is from Ibrahim for that purpose, is too far away from both credibility and historical validity.

After this comparison and evaluation, we can commence our journey to seek out the answer to the question "Do two Hurrem Sultan novels add up to one Hurrem Sultan history?". Falconer's novel, "Sultan's Harem", unfortunately, is a deceptive and subjective Orientalist work that is far from historical responsibility and can never be utilized as a reference source. The only source left which we may use in a certain extent to reach objective information about history is Zahrebelniy's novel. On the other hand, that a novel can be considered as a documentation of history on its own will create a condition in contradiction with its character! Moreover, facing history which is trying to become an empirical science, which is assigned to researching the objective baselines of concrete events, and which must not struggle to establish any kind of judgment against the doer, it also could not be deemed as an acceptable attitude to call merely a novel, mostly in which the theme of justification of Hurrem Sultan comes to the front stage, to witness for acts that were once happened and now are all over....

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