



How distant is *gurbet*? Refik Halid's representation of Arabs in *Gurbet Hikayeleri* — with a note on Ottoman and Turkish Orientalisms

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Abstract

This article explores Refik Halid's (Karay) reflections of his time in exile in Bilad al-Sham and other localities on the Arabian peninsula, as collected in semiautobiographical short stories written during the 1930s and published as *Gurbet Hikayeleri* (*Exile Stories*), and compares Refik Halid's views of the Arab locals with the attitudes described by Ussama Makdisi and Edhem Eldem as "Ottoman Orientalism" and "Turkish Orientalism" respectively. However, I am inclined not to restrict such belittling attitudes towards the subjects who lived in the cultural peripheries of the empire to the nineteenth century. It seems necessary to develop a definition of Ottoman Orientalism that does not restrict the term to the age of reforms, one that can place the perceptions and tensions between groups of people within the empire in their historical perspective.

Keywords

Refik Halid Karay; Ottoman Arab provinces (Syria, Lebanon); Turkish Literature; Exile; Stories (*Gurbet Hikayeleri*); *Gurbet*; Ottoman Orientalism; Turkish Orientalism.

This article explores an Ottoman-Turkish author's reflections of time spent in the Bilad al-Sham area (Lebanon, Syria) and other localities on the Arabian peninsula, as collected in semi-autobiographical short stories written during the 1930s. Exiled from Turkey for political reasons, Refik Halid spent 16 years between 1922 and 1938 in Beirut, Aleppo, and Hatay (which was not yet a province of Turkey).

Refik Halid was born during the Ottoman period (1888), educated in the Ottoman school system, lived into the Republican period, and remained a

Authors' Note: I am grateful to Avi Rubin and İpek Hünner who made substantial critical comments on this article.

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prolific writer until the 1960s. He was a member of the Istanbul elite and a product of the late Ottoman education and intellectual world. As such, his collection of short stories, *Gurbet Hikayeleri (Exile Stories)*, is an excellent source for discourse analysis to test views of Ottomans and Turks regarding the Arab locals of the Bilad al-Sham. The representation of these provinces and their inhabitants in his stories can be taken as representative of both a late Ottoman and Republican Turkish worldview.

Unlike, for instance, the memoirs of Ottoman officials dispatched to Palestine during the Great War, which would serve nicely as an analysis of Ottoman imperial views of the Arab subjects of the empire,¹ the nature of Refik Halid's representations of Arabs is more complex. While his short stories are not straightforward biographical sketches—indeed, some of them are set before his time—his style leaves no doubt that they are based on personal experiences; they should not be treated as pure fiction.

Refik Halid's relationship to the indigenous people of Bilad al-Sham was conditioned by the circumstances of his time. He lived in the region after the Ottomans had ceded control of these lands; technically, Refik Halid was not dealing with Ottoman subjects. However, he lived in this region at a moment when Ottoman rule was a very recent memory; readers can vividly sense the continuity of a peripheralizing imperial attitude. In fact, many of the stories are set in the Ottoman period; through the protagonist, who may be an Ottoman officer, Refik Halid takes the reader back to the attitudes of the period.

Refik Halid drew the inhabitants of Greater Syria with perceptible condescension. While his view of the Arab locals seems to fit well into the definitions of Ottoman Orientalism conceived by Ussama Makdisi to describe the attitudes of particularly the Ottoman elite towards the “unmodernized” people of the Orient, Refik Halid was no longer an Ottoman, nor were the people he came into contact with subjects in the imperial sense. Refik Halid was not committed to the colonial ambition of “studying, disciplining, and—most importantly—improving”² these former imperial subject, nor was in a position to do so.

¹ See, for example, Avi Rubin's treatment of a report drafted by two members of the Ottoman-Arab elite on the conditions in Palestine and Beirut in the 1910s: “East, West, Ottomans and Zionists: internalized orientalism at the turn of the 20th century”, in *Representations of the “Other/s” in the Mediterranean World and their Impact on the Region*, ed. Nedret Kuran-Burçoğlu and Susan G. Miller (Istanbul: Isis, 2005): 149-166.

² Makdisi, Ussama, “Ottoman Orientalism”, *American Historical Review*, 107/3 (2002), p. 769.

Refik Halid's views might better be examined through Edhem Eldem's concept of Turkish Orientalism, which describes the way that the ultra-westernizing Republican elite deflected the specter of backwardness onto the inhabitants of Arab lands. That said, Ottoman or Turkish Orientalisms, in other words derivatives of an attitude referred to as "self-orientalization," require further elaboration in an imperial tradition like that of the Ottoman.

This tendency toward "self-orientalization" may have taken on new forms in the nineteenth-century as a response to western Orientalism, which regarded the "West to be the home of progress and the East to be a present theater of backwardness" (Makdisi).³ However, such attitudes were not restricted to the subjects who lived in the cultural periphery of the empire in the nineteenth century. Rather, this seems to be a function of a broader version of "Ottoman Orientalism", one that formed its civilizational categories not necessarily as a derivative of nationalism or religion alone, but as a reflection of what we might call regionalist essentialism.

In other words, the Ottoman high elite had in their minds a dominant cultural and civilizational centre which served as the major reference point. All other parts of the empire earned their "oriental" status in terms of spatial and cultural distance from this centre. This civilizational center serves as the ideal and the best possible locational reference for the creation of Orientalist attitudes. Building on this assumption and examining the concepts of *gurbet* and distance from the centre of high culture, this article will see what further conclusions we might draw about the subject.

Refik Halid: intellectual and satirist

Refik Halid, an acclaimed master of Turkish language, was born in 1888 in Istanbul to the well-to-do Karakayış (later Karay) family. He received a parallel education from private teachers during his elementary school years, until he was enrolled in the prestigious Mekteb-i Sultani high school. Due to a personal conflict with the deputy superintendent, he quit the school. After passing the entrance exam for law school, he tried his luck with the law, but abandoned this too after a year. He eventually began working at a governmental office.

³ Makdisi, "Ottoman Orientalism", p. 769.

Halid's literary career commenced in 1908, when he began writing and translating for newspapers. A year later, he was offered a prestigious position as an op-ed columnist in the daily *Tercüman-ı Hakikat*. His reputation grew considerably when, around 1911, he began authoring political satires using the pen name "Kirpi" ("the Hedgehog"). This pen name indeed suited his edgy, dissident style, which would be the cause of several difficulties and two long exiles during the course of his life.

Refik Halid's lampoons, while received very well by the growing numbers of his readers, caused considerable distress among the members of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), the ruling party at the time. He was sent to Sinop on the Black Sea coast in 1913, and exiled there from his beloved Istanbul for a total of five years. This first period of exile produced the *Memleket Hikayeleri* (*Provincial Stories*), published in 1919, the first of his two short story collections and among the most vivid works of Turkish literature set in Anatolian villages.

Refik Halid returned to Istanbul in 1918, when the CUP leadership was ousted from Turkey upon the Ottoman state's defeat in World War I. Back in Istanbul, he continued to write in daily newspapers, and also functioned as a bureaucrat at various governmental offices, thanks to his closeness to the ruling party.

Portions of Ottoman territories, including Istanbul, were occupied by the allied forces in 1919, while an independence movement emerged in Anatolia under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal. While this movement was embraced with enthusiasm by many intellectuals, some of whom actually fled Istanbul and joined the forces in Anatolia, many others did not see any future in the movement, and believed that the country's fate was to be shaped through collaboration with the allied forces. Eventually, however, the Anatolian movement waged a successful struggle for independence, leading to the founding of the Turkish Republic in Ankara in October 1923. Thereupon, the new government drew up a list of 150 dissidents (the *yüzellikler*) who had been recalcitrant about the Anatolian independence struggle, and forced them out of the country under a law dated 23 April 1924.

Refik Halid was on this list of *yüzellikler*. However, due to an earlier verdict against him, he had already fled the country for Beirut in late 1922, thus commencing a long period of exile in Beirut, Aleppo, and Hatay—one that would span 16 years. He spoke Arabic only enough to get around. He had financial difficulties at the beginning of his stay; when he began writing for Turkish newspapers, he managed to earn a modest income. This even longer and unhappier exile produced a few novels and his other collection of

short stories. This collection, *Gurbet Hikayeleri* (*Exile Stories*), was published in 1940, two years after his return to Turkey.⁴

Gurbet Hikayeleri

Gurbet Hikayeleri are comprised of 18 short stories written between 1930 and 1939.⁵ Nine of them were written during the two years after Refik Halid returned to Turkey in 1938. One of them is dated as early as 1930 (“Çıiban” (“The Boil”) and the rest are dated 1935 or 1936 and were written in Aleppo or Lebanon. For reasons unclear, the story “Fırat” (“The Euphrates”), was omitted from the second edition (printed the year the author died in 1965) and from all subsequent editions.⁶

The majority of these stories exhibit a kind of hybrid genre combining fiction and memoir. In fact, at least some of the stories were published in 1939 in a newspaper under the rubric “Gurbet Hâtıraları” (“Memoirs from an Exile”).⁷ This fluidity between fact and fiction is utilized with three narrative techniques. Refik Halid often recounts his recollections in the first person,⁸ sometimes even engaging the reader directly. Alternately, he lets somebody else narrate a third person’s memoirs; that is, the story begins with a first-person description of a character, then the original narrator passes the torch to that character, who narrates his own recollections.⁹

⁴ For a good recent account of Refik Halid’s life based on his personal archive and other documents, see Birinci, Ali, “Refik Halid Karay’ın Hayat Hikâyesi ve Hâtıraları”, *Müteferrika*, 32 (2007), 43-77. See also Ünal, Yenal, *Yakın Dönem Türk Tarihinde Refik Halid Kara* (Istanbul, Yeditepe Yayınevi, 2013).

⁵ Refik Halid, *Gurbet Hikâyeleri* (Istanbul: Semih Lûtfi Kitabevi, 1940), pp. 1-84. The first edition of the book included some 17 more essays which were introduced on p. 85 under the title “Sap ve Saman” (“The Stalk and the Straw”). The fact that the running headline for the complete book is *Gurbet Hikâyeleri* must have been a mistake of the publishing house. The essays in the second part are of a different genre, they are rather straightforward memoirs of Refik Halid which were not necessarily set in foreign lands either. They were not included in the subsequent publications of the story collection.

⁶ Refik Halid included the composition dates of the stories only in the second edition of his book in 1965. Therefore, it is not clear when he wrote the omitted story “Fırat”. It appeared first in the newspaper *Tan* under the title “Fırat Kayıkçıları” (“The Euphrates Boatmen”) on April 9, 1939.

⁷ The publication dates of some of these articles in the daily newspaper *Tan* are listed in Birinci, “Refik Halid Karay’ın Hayat Hikâyesi ve Hâtıraları”, p. 73.

⁸ “Yara” (“The Wound”), “Antikacı” (“The Antique Dealer”), “Testi” (“The Jar”), “Zincir” (“The Chain”), “Akrep” (“The Scorpion”) and “Dişçi” (“The Dentist”).

⁹ “Lavrans” (“Lawrence”), “Kaçak” (“The Fugitive”), “Güneş” (“The Sun”) and “Hülle” (“The Arranged Marriage”).

Finally, in one story, the narrator tells most of the story in the third person, and later switches to another, first-person voice, who purports to have heard the first part from the protagonist, a Bedouin.¹⁰

According to their various narrators, the stories may be set either in the 1930s, during the time of the Great War, around the 1908 revolution, or even as early as the 1890s. However, it was arguably Refik Halid's intention to make the reader believe from the start that she or he is reading a semi-fictional and semi-autobiographical piece of writing. The stories related by third parties, being personal reflections of their own past experiences, also retain an autobiographical quality. Refik Halid creates a highly realistic effect in the stories, encouraging the reader to feel that fact and fiction are commingled. This is particularly true when the narrative switches almost to a travelogue informing the reader about local customs.

Sixteen of the 18 stories are set in the Arab lands: most of them in the Bilad al-Sham area, with two in Yemen and another in Palestine. Of the remaining two stories, one is about the reflections of a cleaning lady whose children die while emigrating to Turkey—first on horseback, and following the animal's death, on foot—during the Balkan War of 1912 (“Gözyaşı”, “Teardrop”). The other story is about an Ottoman officer who falls prisoner to the Russians during the first years of World War I, manages to flee to Siberia, and is nursed by a German woman when he falls unconscious and nearly freezes to death on his way (“Kaçak”, “The Fugitive”). The latter story is related as the recollections of the mayor of Abu Kamal in Syria.

Refik Halid presents his subjects to his audience as curious, almost astonishing people with equally curious customs. Prominent themes in the stories are homesickness or constraint of freedom suffered by people and animals. Notably, the story “Köpek” (“The Dog”) is about the friendship between a vagrant and a scraggly dog, both of whom suffer from homesickness and fail to adapt to their foreign environment.

The concept of *gurbet*

A somewhat nebulous word, *gurbet* is both a place and a psychological or emotional state of varying intensity. It often describes the environment in which a person suffers a strong sense of homesickness resulting from cultural and linguistic solitude. Several factors serve as the catalyst for *gurbet*, or intensify its sensation. Two main elements of *gurbet* are a yearning to

¹⁰ “Fener” (“The Flashlight”).

hear one's native language, and a longing for a specific locality. The duration of the sense of exile and solitude also figure prominently. Arguably, however, the most important factor is the individual's personal perception of cultural and spatial belonging. Distances are defined by the distance between the self and the central locality, to which the mind refers and orients itself. If a person does not feel him- or herself culturally and spatially pertinent to a specific environment, the mind creates the sense of *gurbet*. In this context, the individual begins to idealize particular locations and cultural settings.

A case in point is Refik Halid's reflections of Istanbul as shared with a fellow sojourner in *gurbet*—an old friend from law school. This friend, the governor of a small town in al-Badiya, insisted that Refik Halid stay with him for a while:

If it were possible, he would have had a desk brought in to his government office for me and we would have sat across from one other and talked about Istanbul the whole workday long. For those who are far away, the sidewalks of Istanbul are not in bad shape, there is no mud or trash in the streets, one does not suffer on the trams or ferries. The waters of Paradise, not Terkos, flow from the taps; the stupefying southwester is a nice warm kiss and the bitter north-easter is a cooling puff. Talking of the city, especially when you are in the desert, you envision a sunset-coloured sea upon which white sails glide, and springs that tinkle like a chandelier, and the shade of plane trees and terebinths, and strawberry fields and jonquil gardens, feather-light women and girls whose talk is as sweet as candy. [...] These memories are so vivid and intense that their end is correspondingly sad and demoralizing.¹¹

We may inquire as to whether there is a distinct pattern to a person's emotional progression vis-à-vis *gurbet*. Although the variety and complexity of both the place and feeling of *gurbet* make any standardization very difficult, several stages seem to be common in this situation, described as "culture shock" in cross-cultural psychology.

A sense of the superiority of the self, and correspondingly, the inferiority of the other, often surfaces after a person faces barriers in a foreign culture. The idealization and imagined superiority of one's own culture emerge as a typical outcome of this frustration. The sufferer of *gurbet* tends to imagine (and represent) his own culture as free of similar challenges. *Gurbet*, then, can be described as the consequence of a challenge to one's linguistic, social, and operational habitualities. In what form the frustration converts into hostility, if indeed it does, is dependent on the strength and variety of

¹¹ "Akrep", p. 40.

preconceptions and prejudices previously nurtured about the foreign culture in question. Here in *Gurbet Hikayeleri*, Refik Halid describes the mental state of a person in *gurbet*:

Do you know the agony of being stuck in a town in a foreign land and having to live there for a long time? After strolling in the market place and the streets for five, ten days, you grow tired of not being able to find a familiar face, or a cozy nook, and you return to your room and cringe into the silence.

Your head, filled with grim thoughts that curl and writhe day and night, grows heavy, like a chrysalis hanging from a pine tree.

Boredom has a sound, which you only hear when you are in a room in *gurbet*: the steady, maddening sound of the unseen worms that gnaw at the woods of old furniture... Suddenly, you begin to hear this worm in your heart; you feel the fine dust it gnaws off the wood amass inside of you.

If you are a weak-spirited person, you will languish and break down in no time.¹²

Gurbet is usually, although not necessarily always, experienced in a foreign land. Especially in countries with a dominant cultural centre, peripheries within the same country may present enough contrast to invoke the feeling of *gurbet*. This would be particularly true for bygone empires wherein a domineering cultural centre was nurtured by an imperial court. To be sure, there may be more than one cultural centre in an empire, but the imperial court can safely be understood to have set the standards for a high culture.

As an educated person raised in the imperial capital city of Istanbul, Refik Halid must also have cultivated the top-down attitudes of an Istanbul intellectual towards the unmodernized peoples of Bilad al-Sham; these views will become clear when we examine Refik Halid's prejudices about Arabs. And, while all of Refik Halid's hardships must have contributed to the current of frustration running through his text, it is also safe to assume that being prevented from returning to Turkey exacerbated an already-strong feeling of *gurbet*. *Gurbet* is often precipitated by an unwilling stint in a foreign environment, but the option of returning is not always precluded by legalities, an element that adds an additional layer of anguish. We can sense its intensifying effect in Refik Halid's writings.

Set in a desert city "in Mesopotamia", the story entitled "Istanbul" is structured as a candid conversation between a prostitute and an engineer—both from Istanbul—centred around their feelings about being in a foreign land. The prostitute begins with a query to the engineer: she, through irony of fate, is stuck in this hellish place and is atoning for past sins; what on

¹² "Zincir", p. 29.

earth was *he* doing here? Why would he leave Istanbul at this time of year? Showing signs of nervousness, the man does not respond. As the conversation continues, they tell each other where they are from in Istanbul, and reflect on the beauties of the Bosphorus. “Have you fallen in love with anyone?” asks the engineer. “No. Who am I supposed to fall in love with here? Their tongue doesn’t suit mine, nor do their customs”.¹³

To the engineer’s admonition regarding her drinking habits, the woman responds that alcohol is her only escape. She is suffocating from the heat, forced to live without the sea, stifled by the absence of a conversation partner: “All flat, all dry. No hillocks, no trees. No spring or fall. This heat, these untamed people, this sun, which, never sets and is always at its zenith. Rude villagers and spoiled French sergeants”.¹⁴ That is why she drinks: to reunite with the Istanbul she cannot visit. The bottle is her passport. The man grasps the bottle and says “Well then, give me one too. I cannot go either”.¹⁵

‘We’ versus Bedouins and others

Gurbet Hikayleri are enmeshed in the dichotomy of “we” versus “they”. When he comments on the desert climate or the local customs of the Arabs, the narrator often directly addresses the reader, grouped in an imagined “we”. The story “Yara” (“The Wound”), opens with a comparison of an evening in the desert with “our mornings”, so that an intended audience becomes evident (“The evenings in warmer climates carry a joy that one feels in our mornings”).¹⁶ It is important to interrogate this imagined group, a frequent fixture of the text. For now, we shall turn to his “they”, which contrasts often in an overt juxtaposition with his imagined “we”. Several groups appear in Refik Halid’s stories: Bedouins, Arabs, one Afghani/British antiquarian, westerners, a Senegalese servant, a German woman. Bedouins feature prominently in a number of stories in the book; they are the main characters of four stories, in which they are depicted with distinctly stereotypical characteristics.¹⁷

¹³ “Istanbul”, p. 78.

¹⁴ “Istanbul”, p. 79.

¹⁵ “Istanbul”, p. 80.

¹⁶ “Yara”, p. 7.

¹⁷ “Yara”, “Fener”, “Akrep” and “Dişçi”.

Refik Halid employs lengthy descriptions of the filthiness of the Bedouins' habits, as if to shock his readers with differing standards and expectations of hygiene. In the story titled "Yara" ("The Wound"), the narrator holds an administrative position as the director of a small farm founded in Syria during the Hamidian era. The story is set in the time before the 1908 revolution; the narrator is on his farm, about to enjoy his water pipe. Four armed Bedouins ride into the courtyard. One of these men had been wounded, we learn, in a skirmish between two tribes.

The three-page story is nothing more than a graphic description of the surgery that the eldest of the Bedouins (whom the narrator calls "şeyh") performs on the wounded man to remove the bullet. The Bedouins need the area supervised by the Ottoman officer to perform the operation. One of the Bedouins goes in search of equipment in the courtyard and comes back with a rotten piece of stick and a dirty rag, which, we are informed, was once used to filter yogurt at the farm. The description of the tools used for the operation as well as the dirty hands of the Bedouins, complete with long, filthy nails, form a large part of the story. The graphic description of the surgical operation and the filth is clearly meant to shock and disgust the reader. However, the Bedouin who undergoes the surgery is depicted as a courageous person who maintains his dignified silence during this painful ordeal.

Bedouins feature prominently in another story, "Akreb" ("The Scorpion"). In this story, the university friend mentioned previously takes Refik Halid to a feast organized by a Bedouin tribe. Before Refik Halid moves on to his description of a Bedouin individual with conceivably unsettling qualities for the readers, he begins by portraying the scene of the feast:

Bedouins with dirty clothes and no underwear went like vultures for the leather-coloured, half-raw, rank, steaming camel meat in the large copper dishes lined on the floor. We were disgusted by the way they tore the meat into pieces and devoured it. And the lambs, stripped of their beautiful coats, lose the clean, appetizing chubbiness they had in the meadow, and take an unpleasant shape: the meat separates from the bones, the over-boiled, shredded fat makes one retch just to look at.¹⁸

The main character of the story, a certain "Father of the Scorpions" (Ebu Akreb), wearing a filthy ragged gown with a slit in the front, is called in front of the sheykh of the tribe and asked to perform a show. Ebu Akreb, as his byname suggests, keeps a multitude of scorpions under his shirt of varying

¹⁸ "Akreb", p. 41.

size and colour; he pulls these out and places them on his arms. The scorpions attempt to sting the man at first, then settle down. Agitated scorpions can also be seen moving and crawling under the Bedouin's gown. Finally, the narrator and his friend are led to the Bedouin's tent to see his little menagerie of rodents and other animals, and his bed of breeding scorpions. The onlookers turn away and run to their car chilled and filled with disgust.

In a third story, "Dişçi" ("The Dentist"), the narrator is at a friend's gathering on a farm. He is accompanied by a gendarmerie lieutenant, a customs director, an agriculture officer, and a man with a bushy mustache called "the dentist". Asked about his profession, the dentist says that he is not a dentist, but a "tooth extractor". As a sergeant major in the defeated Ottoman army, he reports that he was returning from Syria to Anatolia when they halted to rest at a valley. A paragraph-length description of the beauty of this valley is in stark contrast to the subsequent illustration of the brutal acts that transpire when the squad is ambushed by a group of Bedouins. The Ottoman soldiers were wounded, tired, and destitute, with neither the vigour nor the means to resist the brigands. The Bedouins checked the soldiers' mouths for golden crowns. Upon detecting one in the sergeant's mouth, one of the Bedouins first dug his nails into the soldier's gums, forced the tooth back and forth, and tried unsuccessfully to rip it out. Finally, he removed the crown by toppling the soldier and pounding around the crown with a pointed stone. The Bedouin extracted three teeth thus, kept the crown, and threw away the other two. Before they disappeared over the hills, the brigands stabbed each soldier in the chest with their daggers, except for the sergeant, whom they believed to have died.

The owner of the farmhouse takes up the thread of the narrative, reporting that the former sergeant subsequently operated as a gang member in post-war Syria, fought the Bedouin squads, and made it his habit to extract a tooth from every person he apprehended alive. The story ends with the narrator seeing, when a beam of firelight flashed from the fireplace, a necklace of some 30 white molars around the former sergeant's neck.

Finally, in the fourth story, "Fener" ("The Flashlight"), the protagonist is a certain Ebu Ali, 47 years of age, from the Beni Hamra tribe. He comes to Rakka (Al-Raqqah). Being his first time in a town, the inexperienced Ebu Ali is astounded at the multitude of shops, the variety of merchandise, and, especially, by the enormous government building with its staircase and ringing bells. The astonished Ebu Ali stops by a peddler in the marketplace spotting a small device with a glass lens in the front:

- What is this?
- A wonder!
- Good for what?
- It releases light when you pull this button. [...]
- Does it not burn one's hand?
- It does not! [...]
- Does the light never run out?
- It does not! [...]
- Does it not require a match [to light]?
- It does not!¹⁹

After some bargaining, Ebu Ali pays a handsome sum for the flashlight. Overjoyed by possessing “Aladdin’s lamp”, he crosses the Euphrates on a skin raft holding the flashlight over his head, travels the desert overnight, and reaches his tent by dawn. This incident is related, we learn later in the story, by a commandant of an Ottoman squadron, who met the Bedouin when he came to ask him for help. Apparently, Ebu Ali was at a loss when his flashlight stopped functioning and decided to visit the commandant, whom the narrator describes as a very powerful man in Badiye, capable even of turning the sun on its axis. The officer discovers that the flashlight’s batteries are out of alignment, fixes them, and hands the device back to Ebu Ali, telling him that he has cast a spell on it. If the Bedouin does not pray for the sultan twice a day, the flashlight will again stop functioning. The grateful Bedouin says a prayer for the sultan, and never returns.

It is no surprise that the Bedouins are portrayed as primitive, backward, and filthy by Refik Halid. “Bedouinism” became a very loaded concept in Ottoman intellectual circles by the second half of the nineteenth century. It was frequently used in opposition to “civilization”, another popular concept in Orientalist colonial discourse of the nineteenth century. Primitiveness and filth were conceived of as the primary characteristics of an uncivilized people. However, along with their filth and backward ways, Refik Halid’s Bedouins’ prevailing personal characteristics are dignity and integrity. The author describes the Bedouins’ honesty, dignity, and obedience to the Ottoman rule almost as though these characteristics stem from their unslipped, natural human state. The narrator thus conveys a sense that they are, so to speak, excused their appearance and primitiveness.

Edhem Eldem detected a similar attitude towards Bedouins in the European guide books of the early 1900s. Uncorrupted by civilization, the “noble savage” was at times praised for his beauty and demeanor.²⁰

¹⁹ “Fener”, p. 25-6.

²⁰ Eldem, Edhem, *Consuming the Orient* (Istanbul: Osmanlı Arşiv ve Araştırma Merkezi, 2007), p. 97.

An obedient Bedouin, observed from the perspective of an Ottoman officer, was an ideal subject of the empire. It is not incongruous that the violent bandit Bedouins in the story “The Dentist” contrast with the Bedouins of the other three stories; that story is set at the end of the World War I, when the Ottoman rule was dissolving in the region. There was no authority, Ottoman or otherwise, to which they could submit.

The stories contain many stereotypes apart from the Bedouins, for example, the mendacity of the merchants (notably an Assyrian seller), and unhygienic conditions while slaughtering sheep. The author also makes several references to customs and ways of thinking—notably, fatalism—that the reader is made to believe are carried over from the “dark ages.” An overwhelmingly condescending and scornful attitude runs throughout the story “Firat” (“The Euphrates”) which is mostly the narrator’s reflections on the boatmen who operate “the most primitive, the most inelegant, the clumsiest, the most lumpish boats of all the river-crossing vessels on the face of the world.”²¹ The defining characteristic of these ignorant boatmen is presented as a fundamental lack of curiosity about new things and new places. The narrator pities these men, whose world is limited to the muddy Euphrates—which even flows unpleasantly, more like a lava flow than water—a treeless desert, and four black tents made of goat hair. The story concludes with the narrator’s astonishment at the possibility of such dull and monotonous lives.

Mysterious Arab lands and customs

Refik Halid’s text is peppered with passages describing Arab lands, customs, and the broad “Arabian world.” He seems to have conceived these as a way to introduce the readers to the atmosphere of these places in which his stories are set. A story titled “Güneş” (“The Sun”) starts with a conversation between two men on a bus from Damascus to Baghdad. When one of the men refers to an article in the newspaper that claims there is now no undiscovered place left on earth, his elderly interlocutor, described as an Ottoman officer, says sardonically:

They think so! In actual fact, there are many places and people of which we know nothing. And not in faraway places—not in the poles, and not on the islands in the oceans. Just there, behind these deserts, inside Arabistan. The truth is, Arabistan cannot be considered a completely discovered territory, a

²¹ “Firat”, p. 54.

region to whose every corner man has travelled. ... [During the Great War] it was a part of the planet without any map, on which no European's foot had yet been set.²²

The Ottoman officer's account becomes farcical when he goes on to relate his adventure of delivering, as the sultan's aide-de-camp, two bags of gold coins to a chief of a tribe in an unspecified locality in Yemen. After enduring assaults by lions, monkeys, and pagan savages, and getting lost in the middle of deserts and mountains, the officer arrives at an oasis where a paradise awaits him. He is invited to a feast where men and women recline on down pillows and camel-hair carpets. The festivity continues for 40 days, with drinking, dancing, and women cozying up to the Ottoman officer. Refik Halid, as the narrator of the frame story, distances himself from the officer's account and states that he is touched by sunstroke. However, rather than dismissing the story altogether, as a literary device no doubt, he leaves it to the reader to decide whether the interlude was "imagined, or real".

One may wish to ascribe purity to Refik Halid's motives, or state that his disquisitions on local customs are merely meant as literary devices to add verisimilitude to his stories. However, while a lot of these seemingly innocuous ethnographic observations are written in a certain didactic tone, they convey a strain of condescension. The following is from a story set in a Lebanese village on a hill looking over to the Mediterranean:

The water-drinking customs in Lebanese villages do not resemble ours. If you ask for water in a cafe or a village house when you arrive for the first time, they bring you an earthen jar with a very small and asymmetrical spout on the side. Do not expect a glass; they don't use glasses. But it is also rude and forbidden to touch the jar with your lips. So? So, you will have to lift this jar high with the help of your right hand, open your mouth facing upwards and pour the water, after calculating well, from above into your throat.²³

"Testi" relays the story of a young man who is stung by a bee while drinking water from one of these earthen jars. His throat swells, he cannot breathe, all efforts to find a doctor are to no avail, and he eventually dies. Refik Halid vividly describes the frantic search for a doctor in a shared taxi. That evening he returns to the village and sees another man about the same age drinking water "fearlessly and improvidently" from an earthen jar and

²² "Güneş" p. 47.

²³ "Testi", p. 22.

thinks that “humans are the most imprudent and the least likely animal to learn a lesson”.²⁴

The completely Orientalizing end of his representations are found in a story titled “Hülle” (“The Arranged Marriage”) set in Damascus. The story’s plot and the way it is narrated are almost reminiscent of a tale from *One Thousand and One Nights*. The narrator and a friend meet an elderly Ottoman man who tells them an anecdote from his youth. He had come to Damascus for the first time 40 years ago with the pilgrimage caravan. As he wandered around the city, trying to find anything admirable in all the dirt and dust, an old lady approached him and, after ascertaining that he was a stranger due to leave the city the next day, invited him to dinner. Although very much astounded by this invitation, the man accepted. The elderly woman and the man met after dusk in front of a mosque and walked over to the woman’s house. After an extended march through the dark and maze-like interior streets of Damascus, they arrived at her house. They entered the courtyard: no one was in sight. He was then led to a room: no voice was heard.

As he started to wonder whether he was the victim of a scam or sting, a young woman entered the room. Speaking very politely, she apologized for bothering him, and asked if the man would agree to marry her for one night and divorce her the next morning. This would allow her, according to Islamic law, to once again marry her ex-husband, who apparently had divorced her with three *talaqs*, or repudiations. She took her headscarf off after the wedding ceremony, but put it on again later after he divorced her. According to this old man, the incident was like an episode in a novel set in the Middle Ages.²⁵

Ottoman and Turkish Orientalisms: a reassessment

Refik Halid titillated his audience with peculiar plots, exotic locations, and in particular the unusual deeds, physical conditions, and customs of the Bedouins. Based on the language and the contents of the stories and the shock value he clearly wanted to transmit to his readers, one gets the impression that his audience was made up of the educated modernizing Turks who may not never have had the opportunity to visit Arab lands,

²⁴ “Testi”, p. 24.

²⁵ “Hülle”, pp. 71-6.

while carrying certain negative perceptions about their inhabitants. (And if they did have a chance to visit, they would have returned with similar observations). Playing upon preconceived notions concerning Arabs and Bedouins, the curious plots of the stories—which the reader was led to understand as snapshots from real experiences—bolstered vague imaginings with realistic detail, creating a strong sense of documented reality. Apart from being enjoyable texts from a literary standpoint, the stories must have had a mystifying, at times shocking, and yet confirming effect for some readers.

The attitudes of the late Ottoman elite towards their “degraded Oriental selves—embodied in the unreformed pre-modern subjects and landscape of the empire—as opposed to Muslim modernized selves,” were investigated and identified as “Ottoman Orientalism” by Ussama Makdisi.²⁶ Building his conceptual categories on Edward Said’s *Orientalism* and using other scholars’ work, notably that of Selim Deringil, Makdisi’s term aptly describes the attitudes of late Ottoman elite towards the “unmodernized” peoples of the Orient—particularly Bedouins, Arabs, and Kurds. Makdisi sees Ottoman Orientalism as an essential product of and response to European Orientalism, which was the source of misrepresentations of the Islamic East. According to Makdisi’s formulation, a modern Muslim—and, critically, a national, in this case Turkish—identity were essential components in the formation of an attitude that he dubs Ottoman Orientalism.

The concept of Ottoman Orientalism was recently developed by Ehdem Eldem, and temporally expanded to include the Republican elite. Turkish Orientalism operated in a similar fashion: the Turkish elite emulated and deflected Western Orientalism onto the unmodernized peoples of the Orient—including their own predecessors, the Ottomans. No longer co-inhabitants of the same country, and profoundly affected by the powerful narrative of Arab “treason” during the Great War, the Republican elite was at ease with all degrees and forms of anti-Arab sentiment.

Eldem suggests that Atatürk, the founding father of the Turkish Republic, provided a new framework for Turkish Orientalism along the following principles that Ottoman Orientalism lacked: 1) the notion of a homogeneous nation that excluded ethnic and religious minorities, 2) the principle of secularism and corresponding stigmatization of Islam, and 3) a regime change that relegated the negative perception of the Turk to a reinvented

²⁶ Makdisi, Ussama, “Ottoman Orientalism,” *American Historical Review*, 107/3 (2002), p. 770.

Ottoman past.²⁷ The so-called homogeneous Turkish nation and the secular agenda of the Turkish Republic allowed the ultra-westernizing Republican elite to project the image of backwardness onto this reinvented Ottoman past, and to render the inhabitants of the Arab lands as an epitome of this image.

The broad outlines of Ottoman and Turkish Orientalisms are the same, but an important difference between the two versions lay in the motivating forces. While Ottoman orientalism was about imperial subjects, Turkish Orientalism was concerned with a group of people no longer attached to the political entity of the ruling elite. We cannot attribute the classical colonial Orientalist ambitions of studying, disciplining, and improving the imperial subjects to the Republican elite, or by extension, to Refik Halid. He was no longer an Ottoman, and the people he encountered were no longer subjects of the empire.

Writing during early Republican Turkey, Refik Halid would seem to fit well with this latter narrative of Turkish Orientalism. However, it is notable that Refik Halid's stories avoid any demeaning descriptions of local customs that he associates with Islam. The secular Republican elite were accustomed to attribute the backwardness and the primitiveness of Arabs to their religion. Refik Halid, no less secular a person, makes sure to sidestep such aspersions. On the same note, the discourse of the ultra-westernizing Republican elite was harsher and much more overtly condescending toward the people it sought to Orientalize. Apart from a few moments, however, Refik Halid's stories are not written in a hostile language; rather, they are dominated by a general melancholic tone—conceivably reflecting his own emotional and mental state of mind and intimately connected to his position in a state of *gurbet*.

It seems then, that Refik Halid's writing is not well-contained, either by Ottoman Orientalism, Turkish Orientalism, or garden-variety homesickness. As it is clear even from the brief overview of this mode of thought, the issue of self-orientalization (and its variations) is a highly complex one, and there would seem to be no all-encompassing definition for it. The relationship of the orientalizer to the orientalized, the time period, and the underlying motivations for orientalizing are all determining factors, all of which should be taken into consideration.

²⁷ Eldem, Edhem, "Ottoman and Turkish Orientalism", *Architectural Design*, 80/1 (2010), pp. 27-8. Also see his *Un Ottoman en Orient: Osman Hamdi Bey en Irak (1869-1871)* (Paris: Actes Sud, 2010).

I accept that there is an attitude that may be called Ottoman Orientalism, as defined by Makdisi. Yet, if we are to speak of Ottoman Orientalism as conceptually and terminologically analogous to Saidian Orientalism, we should refrain from making the mistake of seeing it *solely* as a product of the age of reforms. This attitude may have gained a *new* content and impetus—may have become edgier in the age of Ottoman passage to modernity during the nineteenth century. It certainly entered a new phase, but to state that such an attitude was an absolute product of a dialogue with, and a response to western Orientalism would be to ignore the historical continuity of similar attitudes.

I am inclined *not* to restrict belittling attitudes towards the subjects who lived in the cultural peripheries of the empire to the nineteenth century. Ottoman Orientalism did not develop out of the blue in the nineteenth century. Its intellectual and cultural footing had been present possibly since Istanbul was made the cosmopolitan cultural and civilizational capital of the empire. It seems necessary to develop a definition of Ottoman Orientalism that does not restrict the term to the age of reforms, one that can place the perceptions and tensions between groups of people within the empire in their historical perspective.

In the mind of the Ottoman high elite (and possibly for the elites of every empire) one very dominant cultural and civilizational centre served as the major reference point; all other parts of the *imperium* earned their “oriental” status in terms of spatial and cultural distance from this centre. This civilizational centre is both an ideal and the best possible locational reference and starting point for the creation of Orientalist attitudes in the minds of imperial elites. The term “civilization” should *not* be understood in terms of the Orientalist discourse of the nineteenth century. I am inclined to characterize an ever-present Ottoman “orientalism” that formed its civilizational categories, not necessarily in reference to nationalism or religion, but according to a kind of regionalist essentialism.

At this point I would like to turn my attention to pre-nineteenth century Ottoman perceptions of the people of the empire, particularly the inhabitants of the Arab lands. The texts left by individuals who demonstrated familiarity with and feel for the etiquette, manners, and ideology of the imperial high culture, are extremely important. No doubt, a complete survey of perceptions of Ottomans writing about peripheral cultures from within the imperial cultural tradition is needed. As of now, however, we have only the detailed studies of the “usual suspects,” i.e., sixteenth-century Mustafa Ali and seventeenth-century Evliya Çelebi. As İpek Hüner demonstrates in her thesis, the essentializing perceptions of these two individuals

may easily have been interpreted as Ottoman Orientalism had they lived and produced their works in the nineteenth century.²⁸ The descriptions of Cairo by both authors are loaded with what seem like stereotypes tied to their imperial gaze.

Mustafa Ali gives a detailed account of the “atrocious circumstances” in Cairo, from the skilled thieves and pickpockets to men not ashamed of riding donkeys (apparently an uncouth act). Evliya Çelebi lists the lack of certain elements that he evidently regarded as requirements of polite society, for example, skilled farriers, physicians, surgeons, honest witnesses or courts, honest bookkeepers, etc. Similar to Refik Halid’s impressions about the Bedouins, both Mustafa Ali and Evliya Çelebi remark that neither women, *fellahin*, commoners, nor the *ulema* wear underwear in Egypt. Most black Arabs—whom Mustafa Ali compares to “herd animals lacking intelligence”—cover only their genitalia. While Egyptian women display unattractive manners that Mustafa Ali labels *à l’arabe*, Rumi women in town are recognized by their elegant dresses. According to Mustafa Ali, most of the Egyptians suffer from physical ailments arising from unsanitary conditions; the climate itself causes mental illnesses in those persons who habitually suffer from melancholy. Coffee houses are, again in Mustafa Ali’s estimation, full of drooling madmen deprived of reason and understanding.²⁹

In a very strange anecdote, Evliya Çelebi gets into a heated discussion with the inhabitants of a town in the Sudan about his complexion. The people of the town have a hard time understanding that he has white skin; they have never seen a white man before, and think that his black skin was flayed off. Evliya Çelebi feels compelled to declare that he is a servant to “Mehmed Khan, the Sultan of Mekka and Medina, King of Arabs and Ajams, Caesar of the Roman Constantinople”³⁰ and that people in his realm usually have white skin. He says “It is Allah who makes our face white in here and hereafter”.³¹ Seeing Evliya Çelebi’s reluctance to remove his clothes and turban for the local ruler to see his whole body, one savvy Ethiopian advises the Sudanese ruler with the following words (reconstructed, of course, by Evliya Çelebi himself): “These are the people of Rum (*Rum*

²⁸ Hüner, Nazlı İpek, “Traveling within the empire: perceptions of the East in the historical narratives of Mustafa Âli and Evliya Çelebi on Cairo”, MA Thesis, Sabancı University, 2011.

²⁹ Hüner, “Traveling within the empire”, pp. 51–4, 60, 68, 72–81.

³⁰ *Seyahatname*, vol. X, İstanbul University Library, TY 5973, fol. 409b; cf. Hüner, “Traveling within the empire”, p. 52.

³¹ *Seyahatname*, X, fol. 410a.

kavmi). They have never heard such proposals, or seen such acts and manners". Evliya Çelebi eventually leaves the town unscathed (and clothed), but his top-down and somewhat facetious way of recounting this conversation, his astonishment at the inappropriate demands of the local people, and his presentation of himself with a lofty reference to the Ottoman ruler all point to his "civilizational" consciousness.³² Furthermore, Evliya almost constantly refers to the Bedouins as a wicked, infidel, naked people who murder passers-by; to him, the *fellahin* too are by nature wilful, hostile, and tyrannical.

It would seem, then, an awareness of being a representative of the dominant high culture shapes one's attitude toward others more than anything else. Refik Halid's attitude was not so different. He was a well-educated person quite conscious of what qualified as high culture. Western cultural references, notably French ones, may have featured prominently in his conception of this high culture, but the primary reference point in his mind was clearly Istanbul; the metropolis and its high culture appear as the counter-reference of every place Refik Halid travels. In these farflung "Arab lands," Refik Halid and his protagonists from Istanbul are forced to endure a miserable hot climate, burning sun, muddy rivers. These characteristics qualify the place as a "corner of hell".³³ If Refik Halid had spent his exile years in rural Bulgaria or Albanian towns, would his comments have been any different? My guess is no. He probably would have fixated upon the strange customs that did not conform to his civilizational standards, just as his predecessors did. Ottoman Orientalism, yes; but not necessarily something that arose from nineteenth-century western Orientalism.

And yet, as we have seen, Refik Halid's work does not seem to align perfectly with the existing definitions of Turkish Orientalism either. Although his depictions of Bedouins are clearly the product of a mind that fundamentally differentiates the civilized from the uncivilized, I do not think that this differentiation appears in Refik Halid's work as a consequence of religious, ethnic, or nationalistic sensibilities. Refik Halid has a few characters whom he identifies as "Turkish" or who speak Turkish in his stories. In a story set in the time of Sultan Abdülhamid II (r. 1876-1909), he proudly reports that all "Turkish" officers regardless of rank are referred to as "pasha" by the Bedouins ("Yara", "The Wound"). In another story, a junk dealer who was forced to flee to Palestine is overjoyed to see a Turkish boy.³⁴

³² *Seyahatname*, X, fol. 410a.

³³ "Istanbul", p. 77.

³⁴ "Eskici", p. 13.

The prostitute from Istanbul, whose story was paraphrased above, is described from the beginning as speaking Turkish.³⁵ However, in these instances, it is the language that they speak, not their “ethnicity”, that ties them to the civilizational centre.

A distinctive element of the Ottoman imperial high culture from the sixteenth century onward was its emphasis on the Turkish language. The imperial court deliberately facilitated the creation of an imperial language in which a distinct high literature could be developed. Eventually, the court language distinguished itself from the vernacular. As a result, language consciousness became an unmistakable feature of the identity of the members of the high culture. It not only enabled a new literary terrain specific for Ottomans to be explored, but also the ability to command the language became one of the conditions of belonging to this Istanbul-centered imperial culture.

It is certainly a long way from the sixteenth century to Refik Halid’s time. But by all accounts the imperial language project proved very successful. The Ottomans of the high culture continued to admire Arabic and Persian, but Ottoman Turkish created a special category of belonging and a strong component of the Ottoman imperial identity. The age of nationalisms no doubt lent a new meaning to Ottoman Turkish. Refik Halid’s emphasis on Turkish should be seen as a part of this larger complex and continuous attitude, rather than a straightforward nationalistic position.

It is admittedly bold to use one individual collection of stories from the 1930s to attempt to expand the definitions of Ottoman and Turkish Orientalism. These initial impressions are merely the starting point of what will ideally become a more comprehensive project contributing to the literature on this topic of Ottoman imperial attitudes towards peripheral cultures. One would imagine that the intensity of high elite’s perceptions of peripheral cultures would vary, depending on the period and the distance of the particular Other from the imperial centre. In any case, however, for these elites, Istanbul is the navel of the universe, the point from which all distances, physical and ideological, are intentionally or unintentionally measured.

³⁵ “Istanbul”, p. 77.