An appropriated discourse: English Renaissance and the dramatized narrative of othering

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Abstract: At the beginning of the 17th century, as colonisation was in its initial phase, England was expanding its territories and establishing trade relations across the world. This economic venture was followed by social and cultural interactions, particularly with the Middle Eastern and North African countries. As Shakespeare in *The Tempest* delivered a powerful defence of the colonial enterprise on Jacobean stage, several playwrights of the age also employed their talents to emphasise on the cultural contrasts that existed between the European and non-European, Christian and non-Christian worlds. Many notable playwrights, inspired from the tales of the travellers and historians, recreated these inter-cultural exchanges on the English stage which were full of biasness, ignorance and misconception. They often painted Jews and Muslims, Asian and African ethnicities alike. The countries, the lands were defined as 'Other', in opposition to the civilised Christian world. The reason behind such representations was not just ignorance but also a deliberate erasure of their unique identities and individuality. Epithet like the 'Turk' represented their association with either Islam or the Ottoman Empire, and was applied as a blanket term to denote anyone hailing from the North African or Middle Eastern regions without any regard or awareness of their cultural nuances. This homogenisation was done in order to vilify them, to devoid them of any plurality, and proclaim the Christian-European socio-moral ethics as superior to the 'Other'.This paper aims to study the politics of this misleading representation and deeply analyse how the multifarious identities and cultures have been reduced to a few debilitating tropes with the help of three Jacobean plays – William Shakespeare's *Othello*, Robert Daborne's *A Christian Turn'd Turk* and Philip Massinger's *The Renegado*.

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Introduction

In an undergraduate literature classroom, the English Renaissance becomes that focal point when the students are introduced to the canonical works of Early Modern English Literature. It is considered a period of great artistic labour and creativity, a departure from all literary periods that existed previously. It is particularly hailed as the golden age of the English Drama (Carter and McRae 2001, 69) and so, when the plays of the age are introduced in a classroom, their social, political and historical mores are delved into with much detail. However, they are often limited to their immediate contexts, catering mostly to the domestic concerns and matters. It is only when *Othello* (1603) or *The Tempest* (1611) are introduced in the class that any discussions of the global scale are undertaken.

With the above plays, the themes of colonisation, territorial expansion, race and conflict in the 16^{th}-17^{th} centuries are introduced to an undergraduate class. At this juncture in history, the Portuguese and the Spanish had proved themselves to be the supreme colonial powers in Europe and established colonies around the world. The Portuguese had extended their reach till Japan whereas Spaniards had occupied a major portion in the Americas ever since Columbus discovered Bahamas in 1492 CE ("Portuguese Empire" 2012; "Spanish Empire" 2012; "Japan's Encounter with Europe, 1573 – 1853" 2019). These two countries had made their mark on the sea and discovered new lands for more than a century. England, however, was still in the process of finding footholds around the world. Their individual expeditions had reached throughout the world but formation of colonies was still a distant goal ("British Empire" 2012).

By the end of the 16^{th} century, the English had some success in North America, and they had managed to sign some trade treaties with some of the Northern African and Middle Eastern countries, particularly in the Mediterranean region (Matar 1999, ix-x). The East India Company had been formed in the year 1600 CE and several individual explorers had embarked on adventures around the sea exploring naval routes to several islands and nations in Africa and Asia as well as across the Atlantic ("British Empire" 2012). These new adventures captured the English imagination. Richard Hakluyt, an Oxford scholar and a clergyman, wrote extensively about them in his various works, particularly *The Principal*

Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation (c. 1589-1600).

Even though England's colonial escapades may not be well-reflected in the canonical texts, many works of the period dealt with such themes. Not only imperialist aspirations but also colonisation, race, cultural conflict with non-Europeans became a recurring theme in many Elizabethan and Jacobean works. Most prominently, as England established better trade relations with countries in the Mediterranean region and with the very powerful Ottoman Empire, its equation with them influenced a number of playwrights to include these exchanges in their plays. Some of these plays are mentioned here – George Peele's *Battle of Alcazar* (1588), Robert Greene's *Selimus* (1594), Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine I & II* (1587-88) and *Jew of Malta* (1589), Thomas Dekker's *Lust's Dominion* (1600), Philip Massinger's *The Renegado* (1624) and *The Emperor of the East* (1632), Thomas Goffe's *The Courageous Turk* (1618) and *The Raging Turk* (1618), Thomas Middleton and William Rowley's *All's Lost by Lust* (1620) etc.

Theatrical representation and formation of a colonial discourse

A lot of these plays have been written by some of the most eminent dramatists of the Elizabethan and Jacobean Age like Marlowe, Shakespeare, Greene, Massinger, and Dekker among others. From their titles, it seems apparent that there was a certain trend to write plays about their nearest non-European neighbours. These plays have been sometimes called the 'Oriental' plays or the 'Turk' plays. In the year 1915, Louis Wann, a scholar of the English Renaissance, listed forty-seven plays that were written in the years 1579 to 1642 which contained the Oriental matter (Wann 1915, 423-426). Filiz Barin, another literary scholar, mentions them in his essay on *Othello* and states:

> Parallel to this religious and political rhetoric about the Turks, in the Early Modern Period many plays were written and staged about them, popularizing the "Oriental matter." From 1579 to 1642, forty-seven plays about the Orient appeared in England, thirty-one of which directly mentioned Turkish sultans and other Turkish characters. (Barin 2010, 38-39)

As both Wann and Barin establish there were numerous plays written about the Orient and particularly influenced from the Ottomans. However, the theatrical representation of such characters or settings in these plays of the English Renaissance has been found to be quite unfavourable and demeaning. They have been portrayed in a pejorative

manner on the English stage, partially due to ignorance but also due to being perceived as a threat. The might of the Ottoman Empire and the religion of Islam were both seen as a possible threat to the sovereignty of the Christendom. Even though they weren't an imminent threat to the English per se, this larger perception overhanging from the bygone eras repeatedly made its way to the stage and to the minds of the people.

Some of these plays, whether titled as such or not, have been based, however loosely, on some historical Ottoman rulers. Greene's *Selimus* is named after Emperor Selim I, Thomas Goffe's *The Raging Turk,* and *The Courageous Turk* are based on the narratives found in historian Richard Knolles' work, *The Generall Historie of the Turkes* (1603), about Turkish Emperors Bajazet II and Amurath I respectively. All of these plays, mentioned above, are tragedies and have something in common – their characterisation of the monarchs and their *hamartia*. Barin summaries these attributes in his essay:

> Invariably, in these plays, the characterization of Turks and other Islamic characters, with few exceptions, was very unfavorable. Common Turkish attributes that surface in most of these plays are cruelty, immorality, heresy, and lewdness. Reinforced through different media, the image of the Turks as a threat, a deviation, and an emblem of immorality and heresy remained intact in England throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. (Barin 2010, 39)

As portrayed in the plays, these rulers were tyrannical, petty, base in their desires, insatiable in their lust for power, ruthlessly ambitious, viciously cruel to their enemies, and owed no allegiance to anyone, friend or foe. They resort to unethical means and violence, even when it can be avoided. Due to this *hamartia* or flaw in their characters, these emperors or princes also meet their end by betrayal either by an enemy or someone trustworthy to them. This is a repetitive stereotypical depiction that was more or less the plot of every Sultan's story. This is meant to be in contrast to the English customs, where the kings are anointed as divine representatives of God and hence, are considered upholders of faith. It is also meant to highlight the barbarism and savagery of the non-Christian "heathens."

Showcasing the brutality or corruption of the Ottoman rulers is an attempt to prejudice the people, stigmatise the cultural 'Other' and fashion a colonial discourse demeaning them without any recourse to their actual history. But this is not where it ends. Some Turk plays either borrow a setting in one of the Islamic countries, possibly along the Barbary Coast, or just introduce characters from the region. Even though

terms like Moors, Saracens and Arabs were also used to signify the different ethnicities, the term 'turk' was widely employed as an epithet loaded with judgement and misconception (Barin 2010). It has been applied as a blanket term for all people of these regions (namely Middle East and Northern Africa), presuming all of them align with the Muslim identity or are under the purview of the Ottomans, which is historically inaccurate. It only goes on to further elaborate the ignorance of the English playwrights about these cultures and their nuances. Additionally, the term came loaded with preconceived notions and characteristics.

> Accordingly, for a European, the word Turk began to evoke the following unfavorable characteristics: licentiousness and immorality; lying and dishonesty; and, finally, cruelty and barbarity. (Barin 2010, 48)

With these presuppositions in mind, all characters and even settings have been treated as an 'Other', something that is defined in opposition to one's own self. In this particular case, any non-European, non-Christian figure has been treated in a similar fashion. The settings have been exoticized, labelled as morally and sexually corrupt, while the characters have been painted sinful, deceitful and full of savagery; female characters have been portrayed as seductresses. Reiterating these distortions allowed the playwrights and the audiences to feel a false sense of pride and superiority, and, simultaneously, promote biasness and even hatred towards these foreign regions and its people.

Textual analysis

To elucidate how this practice was inculcated on the stage, some examples from the three Jacobean plays have been provided ahead. Around the year 1609, an event occurred which caught the imagination of the English society and was a matter of much deliberation among them. It was the news about the two renegades, an English pirate named John Ward and a Dutch pirate named Siemen Dansiker, who had converted to Islam. This aroused much anger and resentment in England. There were several pamphlets and ballads written at the time condemning them for this heresy.

One of the plays which was based on this event was Robert Daborne's *A Christian Turn'd Turk* (1612). It highlights their adventures and all the crimes they have committed against sovereign nations of the world. This play, much like the ballads and pamphlets, seeks to admonish the pirates and predict their doom for this sacrilege. However, it doesn't condemn them for their crimes against humanity but rather wishes them to have

been faithful to their religion and directed their actions towards the enemies of Christendom, i.e. the Turks. All the details about this event, as provided by the editor Christopher Hapka, highlights one important fact i.e. the conversion of the pirates caused a bigger stir in the eyes of the public than their identity as outlaws or as threats to the English empire at sea. The conversion was a greater crime than the piracy. The play tries to fill in these gaps by being imaginative. For example, Daborne dedicates a scene to their conversion. But since his knowledge about the Islamic rituals and customs was limited, he depicts it full of ignorance. This scene accentuates how misinformed, oblivious and intolerant the English were about the Orient in general and about Islam in particular. As Hapka describes it:

> The ignorance of Islamic beliefs and doctrine is shown, for example, in *A Christian Turn'd Turk*'s conversion scene, which includes a bust of Mohammed, forbidden by most Muslim denominations, on which Wards wears. Another part of the ceremony is the offer of a cup of wine by a Christian, which Ward must refuse. To Daborne, Islam is defined solely by its relationship to, and its supposed opposition to, Christianity. (Daborne 2014, Introduction)

So, as Christians kneel before Jesus Christ and vouch their truth by swearing on this figure, Daborne included a figure of Prophet Mohammed in the conversion scene. Islam as a religion forbids idolatry. Even in our recent times, caricatures or drawings of the Prophet have led to huge conflicts. But Daborne, unfamiliar with intricacies of Islam, added this to dramatize the effect. Similarly, he might have heard about the prohibition of alcohol for Muslims. It is common to include a cup of wine as part of religious services in several Christian denominations. Hence, to emphasise on the difference of faith, a cup of wine is introduced, so that Ward can reject it and the audience can feel his transition in a very dramatic manner. The play exhibits the blatant lack of knowledge and prejudice on part of the playwright as well as the audience. Also, as Hapka puts it, this lack of information has been substituted with Christian symbols implying the English could only understand Islam in contrast to Christianity. This demonstrates the 'Othering' even more.

As the play was written around 1612, at this point in England even Judaism wasn't legally sanctioned and they were hugely endorsing their successful conversions of Native Americans to Christianity (Matar 1999, 4). Hence, religious tolerance was not the order of the day and one cannot expect the English playwrights to have a deep understanding of these foreign cultures. It must have been difficult for them to imagine a society

where Muslims, Jews and even Christians had co-existed for centuries. This multiplicity and tolerant aspect of the so-called 'Turk' countries was oblivious to them. Daniel Vitkus, an expert on the Renaissance English theatre, has remarked:

> A few people among the educated classes of Shakespeare's England might have known that not all of the Barbary Moors were unenlightened pagans or even benighted "Mahometans," but most English were unaware of the Muslim rulers' policy of religious tolerance, which allowed Jews, Christians, and Muslims to live together peacefully within the same community. This policy differed radically from that of England, where the norm was religious persecution and where very few Jews or Muslims were permitted to maintain residence. (Vitkus 2003, 91)

So, the plurality and diversity of the people of Northern Africa and Middle East was limited to a singular identity in contrast to Christianity – they were reduced to being the 'Other.'

This play brings us to two important points of debate prevalent in Jacobean England – one was the figure of the renegade and second was the phenomenon of 'turn'g Turk.' The renegade (or the renegado) was a term to denote the outcasts, the people who have chosen to forsake their Christian roots and converted to Islam or Judaism. They were not only condemned but their actions were deemed as crimes against God and Christianity, and were even persecuted under the laws of their countries. Just like Daborne, Philip Massinger too based his play *The Renegado* on such a figure. In his play, the Christian protagonist Vitelli acts as a mouthpiece character who explicitly claims the supremacy of Christianity over Islam. He works as a messenger of the church who has been sent to bring Antonio, the renegade, to justice, so that he can serve his due punishment as a deserter of the 'true' faith. In the very first scene, Vitelli lands in Tunis in the garb of a tradesman and quips to his servant that now he is far away from the Christendom, is he likely to "turne Turke" in this foreign land (Massinger 1630, 1.1.38). Later, he comments:

> *Vitelli*. I am too full of woe, to entertaine
> One thought of pleasure: though all *Europes Queenes*
> Kneel'd at my feete, and courted me: much lesse
> To mix with such, whose difference of faith
> Must of necessitie…
> Strangle such base desires. (Massinger 1630, 1.3.15-21)

He believes that the Tunisians are so beneath him that he cannot perceive fraternising with them, and proclaims to his company that being courted by a Muslim woman would ruin any thoughts of sexual nature. However, in the very next act, he meets Donusa, a niece of Emperor Amurath and a Turkish princess, and is immediately enamoured by her beauty. He employs her position to fulfil his purposes in Tunis and, ultimately, convinces her to embrace Christianity. He baptizes her by throwing water at her, right after which she denounces Islam and her beliefs in the following speech:

> *Donusa*. I am another woman; till this minute
> I never liv'de, nor durst thinke how to dye.
> How long have I beene blinde? ...
> Let me kisse the hand
> That did this miracle…
> That freede me from the cruellest of prisons,
> Blinde ignorance, and misbeliefe: false Prophet,
> Impostor Mahomet. (Massinger 1630, 5.3.121-132)

This turns him into quite a hypocritical figure, since he is in Tunis to arrest the renegade Antonio for his crimes, primary amongst them his conversion to Islam, but he doesn't hesitate to encourage the opposite while being at the mercy of the Viceroy of Tunis, Asambeg. The scene also highlights a recurring trope used on the Jacobean stage where a conversion to Christianity would bring divine revelation to the new convert and they would reaffirm the truth and virtuosity of Christ, while refuting their previous faith (in this case Islam) to everyone present in the audience. Such stock characters and situations were often used to intensify the discourse of division, prejudice and superiority by including such hostility and antagonism in the narrative.

The renegades were figures who quite literally 'turn'd Turk.' However, figuratively, this phrase was applied to anyone who behaved in a manner unbecoming of a Christian. One of the examples of this can be found in *Othello*, which is possibly the most prominent Turk play. Shakespeare was quite possibly influenced by Knolles' version of Venetian-Turkish wars for the details in this play (Barin 2010). The character of Othello is a Moor but he is also a highly regarded general of the Venetian military and a Christian man. When the Venetians are threatened by an invasion on their occupied territory of Cyprus by the Ottomans, they look upon Othello to take charge of the Venetian forces and bring them to victory. His many virtues as a man and a commander are praised by most characters. However, when he is confronted with

doubts about his wife Desdemona's faithfulness, he succumbs to his 'innate' nature and she becomes a victim of his insecurities. Through him, the play asserts that even though he is now a Christian, his ethnic background leaves him emotionally volatile and lacking in restraint. This is the stereotypical 'innate' nature of a Turk. Even when he has sided with the 'true' faith, he remains incapable of redemption. In the end, Othello becomes a source of audience's pity, as he commits suicide, having failed to belong to either sides of his identity.

Even though most characters favour him, he has his adversaries, who use severely abusive language for him. In the first scene, Iago accuses Othello of biasedly promoting Cassio over him, since he believes he has been tested in wars fought on "Christian and heathen" grounds (Shakespeare 2003, 1.1.29). Anything non-Christian is seen by him as heathen. From the very beginning of the play, characters like Iago and Roderigo supply the audience with derogatory remarks and epithets hurled against Othello. Most of them target Othello's physical features and race. They describe him as "thicklips" (Ibid, 1.1.65), "a Barbary horse" (Ibid, 1.1.110), "lascivious"(Ibid, 1.1.124), "an extravagant and wheeling stranger Of here and everywhere" (Ibid, 1.1.134-135), "an erring Barbarian" (Ibid, 1.3.356) and when they are informing Brabantio about his daughter's elopement with Othello, Iago jibes "an old black ram is tupping your white ewe" (Ibid, 1.1.87-88). In his argument in front of the senate, Brabantio emphasises that he cannot believe that his daughter would marry someone "to fear, not to delight?", "with what she feared to look on?"(Ibid, 1.2.71; 1.3.99), implying that any white woman would be scared to face Othello, let alone marry him out of her love or desire for him. In his struggle with Othello, he accuses him of bewitching his daughter and seducing her using false means. In his rage, he again questions his race and ethnicity:

> For if such actions may have passage free,
> Bond slaves and pagans shall our statesmen be.
> (Shakespeare 2003, 1.2.98-99)

All these jibes at Othello's physical features aim to vehemently emphasise the distinction, and the fact that Othello will always remain a racial and cultural 'Other' to the white Christian Venetians.

Another important aspect of the play is that throughout *Othello*, the term 'Turk' is employed to serve two different contexts, both denotative and connotative. The first is to talk about the Ottomans, the enemy who forms a looming presence in the backdrop, the one that is always lurking.

Their strength is discussed with awe. Secondly, it is symbolic of character traits and conduct. For instance,

> *I Senator*. If we make thought of this,
> We must not think the Turk is so unskilful
> To leave that latest which concerns him first…
> (Shakespeare 2003, 1.3.27-29)

> *Iago*. Nay, it is true, or else I am a Turk.
> (Ibid, 2.1.114)

In various scenes, Turk has been used as a derogatory term, mostly by Iago, to emphasise an un-Christianly behaviour. It stands for an immoral or blasphemous person and is applied to debase them.

Conclusion

All these instances, highlighted through various textual examples, aim to conclude that the English at the beginning of the 17th century were highly misinformed and severely prejudiced against the Orient and particularly Islam. This intolerance was to such a great extent that it led to stereotypical depictions of them as characters on the stage. Any non-Christian, non-European was a heathen, a barbarian and a Turk. It created a discourse condemning them as the inferior 'Other', while superimposing the belief of English colonial power and might on foreign lands. These narratives were repeated so often that it gradually wiped out their uniqueness, their plurality of cultures from the English literary representations of the Renaissance and subsequent ages. This homogenisation was done in order to vilify them, devoid them of any diversity, and proclaim the Christian-European socio-moral ethics as superior to the 'Other.' These stereotypes, mainly constructed through appropriation, did injustice to the people of these regions by reducing their identities to a few debilitating derivatives.

This was partially fuelled by their ignorance of the religions and distinctive cultures of these regions and by misinformation. But in most parts, this was done rather deliberately to gain a sense of superiority and a moral victory over an enemy that posed to be a great threat in the Mediterranean region. Nabil Matar, an Early Modern historian, has elucidated this in his book, *Turks, Moors and Englishmen in the Age of Discovery*:

> But precisely because the Muslims of the Mediterranean basin were powerful and undominated, English writers turned to superimposition as an act of psychological compensation and vicarious assurance. Superimposition provided

> them with a strategy to confront the non-Christian Other, and helped them redress their colonial and cultural inadequacies before other European countries such as Spain and France. It also assured them of an epistemological control over the Muslims—over those whom they had failed to dominate. (Matar 1999, 16)

So, even though England had signed trade pacts with countries like Morocco and Turkey, this had only made them more aware of the strength and the threat the Ottomans could pose in the future. This appropriation was premeditated on their part in order to fashion a discourse of their triumphs as an emerging colonial power and a dominant religious force.

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