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Psychopolitics of the Oriental Father: Between Omnipotence and Emasculation

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Psychopolitics of the Oriental Father is a Freudian analysis of the image of the “Oriental father,” and an intriguing look at how the Oriental subject imagined itself. Somay’s aim, in his words, is to make “an inquiry into the cultural/historical unconscious of non-colonial Oriental spaces, into how the so-called Oriental subject was structured and split in the passage to capitalism” (6).

The main argument, the uniqueness of the Turkish (post-Ottoman) nation-state experience, is built around the recurring (primordial) father image, and its striking contrast to the West, in which a certain type of “brotherhood” triumphed over the father and led to democratic citizenship. Although the book makes a gripping read and opens up interesting questions about the “authoritarianism” of Turkish modernism, this “Oedipal” argument and the extensive and indefinite “Orient” rhetoric fails at large to explain the gendered aspects of Turkish modernization in its complexity.

The book is arranged into seven chapters. In the “Introduction,” Somay discusses the asymmetry between “the Occident” and “the Orient” and underlines that what is often discussed under terms such as “Westernization,” “Europeanization,” or “development” etc. are in fact the advent of capitalism in the Orient, which helps maintain the Occident/Orient dualism to function properly. The first chapter, “Is East East and West West?” builds on the asymmetry, but ends up questioning it. Somay articulates how the East/West dichotomy was accepted as self-evident and “essential” by focusing on racial characteristics as defined in

the 19th century, and discusses how white domination became the hegemonic narrative in a way that served the imperialistic agenda of the Europe. With references to Michel Foucault, he exemplifies the dualisms produced and maintained by the Western ratio such as sane/insane, criminal/lawful, infirm/healthy (24). According to Somay, the subaltern positions in these dualisms also uphold the dualistic ratio with the expectancy of a future reversal of roles (25). To transcend the dualism, Somay suggests a “not-only-but-also look” (which he differentiates from “both”) earlier examples of which can be found in Bertolt Brecht, Ernst Bloch, and implicitly in Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of “dialogy”.

In the second chapter, Somay mentions the use of extensive slave labor in material production in Greco-Roman civilization as a major difference between the Orient and the Occident, which as a result, contributed to the formation of a leisure class, and narrative of freedom, the leisure class forming the present-day intelligentsia. The idea that “father function” therefore assumes different forms in the West and the East, follows rather speculatively. Somay then develops his theses on the father image, returning to Freud and his *Totem and Taboo*. He says that the brothers’ revolt against the primordial father figure and patricide are not central metaphors “as a starting point for civilization” in the Orient. Generally there is fratricide instead. It is often the father who succeeds to suppress and even when a son kills the father, the “position of absolute domination remains,” and is filled by the son later (53). With the exclusively Oriental tradition of circumcision, Somay argues that “the permanent supervision of the castrating father” is maintained (54). The failure to kill the primordial father also means his “jouissance” of freely mating with all women available continues as a rule, while in the Occident the brothers declined the father’s prior position, declared each other’s wives taboo and therefore made monogamy a strict law for both genders. A reference, in passing, to Stalinist and Kemalist top-to-bottom regimes ends the second chapter, suggesting “the despot,” “the totalitarian leader” as “the father” of the communities.

In the third chapter, Somay delves into the problematic aspects of the Oriental intellectual, taking his lead from India under British rule, as in the works of Homi Bhabha. Somay argues that “new body images” modeled on the West (73) appeared as a result and he calls the transgression across cultures as “transvestity”. Following Bhabha’s line of thought, with Jacques Lacan’s theory of hysteria and René Girard’s theory of triangular desire, Somay articulates the Oriental Oedipal bargain, which he argues to be fundamentally different from the Western Oedipal bargain, as the father continues to be “an external entity” (77) in the Orient. The colonial invader kills or emasculates the father: For example, in the case of India, it replaces the father first with a company and then Queen Victoria, a woman, eventually causing the loss of the ego-ideal for the Orient. Somay articulates on how transvestitism is different from mimicry: in mimicry, the mimic strives to look like the other, while transvestite strives to fit into the image of desire in the gaze of the other (87).

The fourth chapter revolves around the birth of modern/secular Turkish intelligentsia at the end of the 19th century in “the translation chamber,” an office made of Muslim Turkish youth who were previously sent abroad for education and who, after their return, are given the task of translating significant works of Western philosophy and literature. Somay punctuates the “belated” efforts to catch up with Western civilization with references to Gregory Jusdanis, and Daryush Shayegan etc., and he shows how Europe becomes an object of desire, and with the defeat of 1878 (the Russo Turkish war) he argues that a new bargain, a Hamletesque bargain, takes place as Ottoman intellectuals face Western cultural and political hegemony, with the loss of their the sultans (their fathers). The concept of the West is “masculine” in war, Somay argues, but “feminine” in the good, new ideas, and since Ottoman intellectuals desired to “rejuvenate” the father rather than killing him as suggested by Jale Parla, Somay argues that they seek for “a marriage” of their civilization with the West. Western ideas thus became “trophy wives” for Ottoman intellectuals.

To acquire the European object of desire, the Ottoman intellectual had to look European. Hence, the fifth chapter deals with the Empire's urge to modernize via vestimentary reforms, which continued into the premature Turkish Republic in the form of a "Hat Revolution". Somay focuses on the masculine ideal of the new nation-state and discusses how the reforms tried to shape it physically. The sixth chapter elaborates on Mustafa Kemal's emergence as a father figure, who later takes the name Atatürk –the father of Turks-, having abolished the Sultanate on 1 November 1922 and the Caliphate on 3 March 1924, and leaving the brand-new nation state fatherless. With the introduction of Mustafa Kemal, Somay critically turns against his theses about the termination of the father figure in the West, and refers to the "temporary" rebirth of the father figure in several European countries in the process of nation building, such as Napoleon for France, Bismarck for Germany and Garibaldi for Italy, adding hastily that these are "discredited (even discarded) afterwards" (141). Mustafa Kemal's idealization as a figure of "serene wisdom and paternal compassion" and the extensive mourning after his death are indicators, according to Somay, of how the image of the primordial father is kept alive. Somay shows the continuity of the father image with references to more contemporary images such as the late Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel, who was also referred to as "baba" (father), and his famous hat.

The seventh chapter marks the uniqueness of the Turkish case among several other nation-building processes in Europe (or the Third World) with its giving rebirth to the primordial father image, and diverts the focus from men on the status of women rather unexpectedly. In this chapter, Somay articulates how being a woman became a complex issue in "modernizing" Turkey because of the Islamic tradition of veil. With references to scholars such as Deniz Kandiyoti, Nilüfer Göle, Meyda Yeğenoğlu, Yeşim Arat etc., Somay problematizes female visibility in the Kemalist reforms, and elaborates on the position of the veiled women, who campaigned for their rights in post 1980s.

Having traversed a wide range of historical periods with the Orient/Occident rhetoric and the resurrecting father image, the

conclusion leaves us in June 2013, when an uprising to protest the replacement of Gezi Park, the only green area in the greater Taksim district, with the replica of the historical Gunnery Barracks grew into a bigger protest. Demonstrations spread over the country, caused the occupation of the park, and gave birth to the Gezi Commune. Somay sees the commune that also included Islamic youth and several veiled young women, and the peaceful protests, as a revolt of brothers and sisters, a reminder of the “possibility of another modernity” (188). The book ends with this positive impulse of revolt and peaceful protest in the Orient “finally” targeting the father image not to replace him, but to challenge the whole system.

In *Psychopolitics of the Oriental Father*, there are examples derived from a wide period of Turkish history to support the everlasting image of the castrating “Oriental father,” which range from the tales of nomadic Turkish tribes (Dede Korkut) to political figures of contemporary times such as Süleyman Demirel but in the end of the book, we find ourselves, as readers, with the possibility (of dreaming) of a Western style democracy in “the Orient” without much explanation. How was Gezi possible in the Orient, if the primordial father has never been “really” dead? How could the participants of Gezi adopt “a castrating role” in their already “castrated” positions? The problem in this book’s “not-only-but-also” look is that it promises a transgression of boundaries and dualities only at the very end, and because of the Freudian exegesis, it brings too few “also”s to the table theoretically to explain the complex relationships between the fathers and sons (the oppressors and the oppressed) in the Orient. The figure of the all-able-castrating father is only one questionable face of a complex image, which needs to be reconsidered and critically examined.

The idea of “the Orient,” which is the main pillar of this book, needs a more detailed analysis to escape being a trope and serve as an analytical tool to understand Turkey. Starting from the first chapter entitled “Is East East and West West?” Somay puts a question mark on what are often accepted as “common sense” dualities, but he leaves the suspicion in the air. In addition to Gezi, the Arab oppositional

movements (the Arab Spring) in Tunisia and Egypt could have been very well included as examples in the problem of “killing” the Oriental father. That the trigger of the movements in Tunisia, which became a catalyst for the Tunisian Revolution and the wider Arab Spring was Mohammed Bouazizi’s setting himself to fire in December 2010 after being publicly humiliated by a female municipal official, Faïda Hamdi (Bouazizi’s family claims that she slapped him in the face, spat at him, confiscated his scale, and tossed his cart aside) brings other complexities to the table, which reminds us that “the Oriental father” can also be female. Hence, if we need to move from the Freudian Oedipal triangle to the Orient’s political authoritarianism, and to Turkey’s political struggles with its Oriental father, and finally to the “position of absolute domination,” which remains although the father gets killed, we seem to rest on several preconditions, assumptions, conventions etc., which make a large-scale transformation impossible. Somay’s willingness to confront fantasies and projections of the Orient is challenging but *Psychopolitics of the Oriental Father* dangerously derails the discussion to an impasse, while working through the complexities of the subjectivities in the Orient.

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