

Shadows of Cultural Identity: Issues of Biculturalism Raised by the Turkish American Poetry of Talat Sait Halman

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In the beginning
The poet created loneliness
Then God found it
—*Shadows of Love*

This paper introduces literature written in English by Turkish Americans. Discussing the poetry of Talat Sait Halman (1931-) through his *Shadows of Love*, I examine issues of cultural identity and cross-cultural fertilization that are raised by this poetry. I argue that Halman's Turkish American poetry reflects a biculturalism which is the amalgamation of two cultures that are both hegemonic in their own ways.¹ It constitutes a meeting ground and makes possible a juxtaposition of cultures that is at the core of the complex relationship(s) between East and West.

The Turkish Americans

Turkish immigration to the U.S. started early but remained sporadic and negligible for a long time. One aspect of this immigration is that many of the emigrés known as Turks were in fact ethnically non-Turkish Ottomans; they were namely Greeks, Jews, Armenians, or Bosnians, Arabs, etc. Within the American context, this meant that their descendants claimed identities and heritages that appeared to have nothing to do with the Turkish one.² This makes it very difficult to study the immigration history of the Turks.³

In fact, there has as yet been no serious study of Turkish immigration to the U.S. Nonetheless, the Turks who came to the U.S. at various periods of its history are known to have been to a large extent of the educated strata.⁴ They never became in the U.S. the "dog" that Homi Bhabha considers the Turkish *Gastarbeiter* is in Germany (166). One reason many of these Turks were assimilated *apparently* without effort is that they had no language problem: most of them had learned English already in the home country. So, they more often than not anglicized their names, and as they were whites possessing Caucasian features, they *apparently* easily "passed" for the Eurocentric Establishment white.

Consequently, unlike many other ethnicities, Turks neither made a discernible contribution to U.S. society, nor, for that matter, were they ill-treated or subjected to racism as an ethnic group. They seemed to have effortlessly and unproblematically disposed of their “wives of youth,” so to speak. Thus, apparently emotionally unfettered, with no axe to grind and no “jeremiad” or “hunger for memory” for lamentation, the Turkish Americans today are the real “invisible men” and women.⁵

This lack of visibility disguises a peculiar predicament. In fact, the positionality of Turkish Americans within U.S. society is singularly problematic. It defies and challenges received opinion on ethnic group processes of acculturation. While from the point of view of race, they would perhaps not even be considered “ethnic,”⁶ their alien cultural background separates them from being at one with mainstream Anglo society even more in some ways than race does for historically disenfranchised racial and ethnic groups who have been in the U.S. from the beginning. Thus, on the one hand, as Caucasians, Turkish Americans do not qualify for affirmative action. First-generation immigrant Turkish Americans, coming from what is today a “developing” country and needful of grants as well as jobs, resent this very much. On the other hand, being predominantly Moslem, the Judeo-Christian faith is alien to them, thus also inherently barring them from the society they could, as individuals, aspire to belong to by their “race” or “color,” as well as education and/or socio-economic level. Yet again, for example, the “Nation of Islam” means nothing to many of them—not only because of historic circumstances, that is, because the Nation of Islam is specifically “African American,” but also because the Turks have themselves been slave-holders (Islam allows it to this day). Although Turkish Americans like to stress, in this connection, that their ancestors were never as “cruel” as their American counterparts, as former slaveholders themselves, they tend to find such organizations as the Nation of Islam distasteful and would almost never think of adhering to them, even if, the problem of race solved, they could. Indeed, as Edward Said points out in *Culture and Imperialism*, Turks were themselves one of the major imperial powers (xxv). Therefore, many Turkish Americans share the dominant culture’s racism against African Americans. However, the paradox is that Turks have also been one of the major victims of Orientalism and Western imperialism. Thus, in a way, however they may be positioned within American society as individuals, Turkish Americans as a group are subalterns in a society purportedly not possessing any subalterns. And they remain the invisible subalterns because they fail to, or rather, refuse to, self-identify with those that are emphatically “subalterns.”

The reason for their rejection of a subaltern identity is because their own is forged by a culture that is perhaps an “imperialist” one, as Said puts it, but especially one which possesses just as great a sense of exceptionalism as the American one, if not more so. One has to understand that the “invention of

tradition" which accompanied the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in the twenties was almost without precedent. This newly devised paradigm chose to formally forget about the Turkish presence, past or present, in the Balkans or the Middle East and concentrate instead on the ancient history of the Turks—redesigned, so to speak, as being more glorious than the Ottoman Empire had ever been.⁷ The project has left an indelible mark on Turks and given them the consciousness of possessing an outstanding cultural heritage. This consciousness has proven to be too potent to be obliterated by immigration to another continent and/or culture, be it the most powerful one in the world in the twentieth century. Consequently, although they *seem* integrated and assimilated, sharing with other fellow Americans what Raymond Williams calls a "common culture" (318), many Turkish Americans, and among them the first generation immigrants in particular, continue to live under the considerable influence of a residual Turkish culture. And nowhere is this better seen than in the literature they have produced in the U.S., which I discuss through Halman's poetry. I also argue that this literature raises an issue of cultural identity.

Talat Sait Halman's Poetry

Born to a patrician Istanbul family of Black Sea origin, Halman, from the age of twelve, attended Robert College, an institution of secondary and higher education run by Americans. Established in 1863, initially as a missionary school and the oldest American College outside the U.S., Robert College offered the best of both worlds, American and Turkish. T. E. Lawrence, a.k.a. Lawrence of Arabia, wrote in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* that "the new American ideas in education, when released in the old high Oriental atmosphere, made an explosive mixture" (43). Indeed, it was a rare "marriage of true minds." The Turkish-Moslem-Levantine erudition and the Turkish-Moslem-Levantine culture refined over the centuries, found in the American precepts the pragmatism that the Old World French ways—to which they had been exposed and which had been imposed upon them for so long—sadly lacked. This "marriage" was to produce some remarkable men and women, of which Halman should be counted as one.

Halman went to the U.S. for the first time in 1952, when he was twenty-one, to do graduate studies at Columbia University. He has been there since, except for the year 1971 when he served as the first Minister of Culture in Turkey, giving shape and direction to that Ministry at its inception. He has thus spent what amounts to an adult lifetime in the U.S. as a permanent resident, having taught Turkish culture and literature for many years in such universities as Columbia, Princeton, University of Pennsylvania and New York University.⁸ He now lives in New York, apparently "addicted," as Edward Said himself put it recently in a BBC interview, "to the alertness" which that city affords ("Hard Talk"). He divides his time between writing and speaking, as a much-sought

keynote speaker, traveling frequently to give these speeches. Of himself, Halman has said: "I have been living a trans-Atlantic life between two countries, in two languages, often suspended in mid-air in the middle of the Atlantic or somewhere over the European continent. Mine is a fool's paradise of cultural schizophrenia" (Letter).

Halman has published ten books of poetry in Turkish as well as two in English, *The Shadows of Love* in 1979, and *A Last Lullaby* in 1990. This latter is bilingual, containing a selection of his poems written first in English then self-translated into Turkish, and vice-versa. *Shadows of Love*, some poems of which are included in the later published *A Last Lullaby*, contains very short, *haiku*-like poems, collected under eight different headings, as "Loves," "The Tyrant," "The Prophet," "The Hero," "The Patriot," "The Revolutionary," "The Poet," and "Passions." These headings and the poems themselves are twofold, the first and last headings, constituting an enclosure for the others, have an affective basis, while the others all treat a stereotype-individual, the appellation of which, if not non-Western, is at least non-American in essence.

The salient feature of the *Shadows of Love* poems is their shortness. Extreme brevity in poetry dates back to ancient Greece. Halman himself remarks in the Introduction that the interest shown in the West to Omar Khayyam's *Rubaiyat* and the Japanese *haiku*, as well as "Ezra Pound's imagist verses . . . remind us that there is as much power in a quintessential poem as in any poem with a more sustained or elaborate structure" (*Shadows of Love* xv).

"My tiny poems . . . are difficult to define," he writes, yet adding that they do not have their roots either in the *haiku* or the *rubaiyat* tradition, but are merely "poems," or "mini-poems" or "poemettes," as he also terms them. They originated, he explains, from "one-liners" written in Turkish "in the rather strict, classical meters of the Arabic, Persian and Ottoman Turkish traditions" ("Introduction," *Shadows of Love* xvi), published in various Turkish literary magazines, and collected in a volume as *Bin Bir (A Thousand and One)*.

The *Shadows of Love* poems, ranging from two to four lines, conceived as they were initially in Turkish, may owe something to the poetic traditions he refers to. Contentwise, they seem to render in English feelings and sensations, "passions," that are normally absent in poetry in English; to introduce, much as perhaps the translations of Pablo Neruda's poems did at one time, a sensuous use of nature symbolism to celebrate love and express grief. Halman lays bare, laconically and almost covertly, a whole spectrum of emotions and passions, which Lady Mary Wortley Montagu remarked that Turkish poetry, unlike English poetry, possessed (79).⁹ These "passions" have been mutated through an American experience that is just as significant in the poetry: "Exile / Is a bird / That flies and dies each day."

Indeed, the "substance and style of these poems are not identifiably 'Turkish'," states Halman. He writes: "I should like to think of them as new poems in the English language with universal themes . . . they could be regarded

as intimations, glimpses, insights, or moments of poetic experience . . . present[ing] fleeting images of love, freedom, exile—of gods and death.” He hopes that these verses “constitute a coherent whole . . . a microcosm somewhat larger than the sum of its parts,” and concedes that before studying Western culture, he had already acquired an interest in Islamic miniatures, Byzantine mosaics, and classical Ottoman poetry, “all of which shared the aesthetic principle of exploring a truth or a macrocosm by means of a minute analysis of the parts” (“Introduction,” *Shadows of Love* xvi). Larger than the sum of their parts as they are, it is difficult to pinpoint specifically Eastern and Western elements in these poems which the poet himself wants to see as “universal.” This exceptional universality, I suggest, is achieved by the coalescence of the two cultures.

In the “Tyrant,” the poem-aphorism “In the tyrant’s city / Each house / Is a secret shriek,” almost uncannily announces Pinochet’s Chile, while “Fear / is the father / Of betrayal,” or “Fear of living / Is the cruellest death” have resonances that not only would extend to the former Soviet Union and/or Communist China and the much more recent Tiananmen Square massacre, but must indubitably have echoes of the despotism in Ottoman times. It is this tone, universal also in the sense of being both very contemporary and historicized at the same time, that characterizes much of Halman’s poetics.

In “The Prophet,” it is almost a secular messenger or seer, rather than the servant of a deity, who greets us. The most celebrated element of this “prophet” is “hope”: “The prophet / Who is assassinated before all others / Is the prophet of hope”; “The bird of hope / Longs to fly / Without wings.” This forges the nature of the “religion” he offers us, suggesting a startling vision of an ever-widening “horizon” as creed: “My dreams / In the blind alley / Pierce the horizon”; or even “A blind alley / Holds horizons / All of its own.” Devout Moslems (of which Halman should not be counted as one, being much too impregnated with Kemalism) would say of course that the tranquillity and peace of mind, the *huzur*, afforded by such an outlook is at the core of Islam. This is moreover coupled with an endless sense of freedom: “They might enslave the plant / But the seed’s freedom / Is limitless.” Such a sense of freedom obviously heralds cosmic dimensions which would transcend any religion. Yet the poet-persona who thus transpierces the mundane boundaries of his existence checks himself in time, almost with a masochistic turn of mind, for, “Hope is a bird / That searches the sky / For its own grave.” As with blissful erotic love (see the paragraph below) it is as if ecstasy, even in religious terms, is ominous.

As in the later *Dört Gök Dört Gönlül*, the best poems in the book are those on love. Some poemettes celebrate radiant love, as in “Gods envy / The rainbow / Of my love,” or as in “When you love / You have a thousand eyes / And each one is dazzled,” or point to that inner necessity which love seems to gratify, as in “If it doesn’t burn with love / The torch / Is nothing but a piece of wood”; or as in “A colour / Fades and dies / If it does not love another colour.” Yet most

poems reflect a sense of doom, as if too much happiness can only be ominous: "A single bud is a hope / A thousand buds / Are an omen of the end." What Oriental sense of self-sacrifice is concealed behind such an attitude?

However, what is noteworthy is that even if that last question can be answered, a new set of questions arises on the Western/American aspect of the discourse of the poems. For this discourse is at surface not at all that of the Turkish-Islamic tradition which requires that love be conducive to spirituality, be denuded of its physical aspects. Again, it is the ineffable amalgamation that transpires in these poems. This is what I construe as the biculturalism in Halman's poetry.

Biculturalism

What conclusion can we draw from the poems in *Shadows of Love*?

First, these poems are solely in English. The biculturalism in Halman is subtle and evocative, and contains both Eastern/Turkish sensibilities as well as a recognisably Western framework. The Eastern/Turkish element does not confuse but merely delights with its sanitized, unthreatening exoticism. Perhaps, in this attitude some readers would accuse him of catering to Western tastes (see Chow, especially the "Introduction," for a discussion of this issue), as Turkish readers accuse the Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk (whose novels such as *The White Castle* and *The Black Book* gain more esteem in the U. S. than they do in Turkey) of doing.

However, the discourse in English is obviously far from being the voice of unadulterated mainstream white middle-class America, in its manifestation throughout of a philosophy of life quite alien to it. It is not that of unadulterated Turkish poetics, either, since the Turkish-Islamic tradition requires, for instance, that love constitute a stepping stone merely to love of God, to a mysticism devoid of any eroticism.

The most distinctive aspect of Halman's poetry in English is that it does not raise the issue of "hybridization," as Bhabha will have it, where the literature written in English contains non-Anglo elements that render the work hybrid, with the non-Anglo element coming from a tacitly accepted or formally acknowledged "subordinate" culture. Rather, it is an imbrication that requires a different approach—the bicultural one.

It is evident that the blending of the two cultures helps create a synthesis that constitutes the backbone of Halman's poetry. While Latinos, unless irrevocably assimilated, tend to consider the English language as culturally alien when not restrictive and African Americans and Native Americans do not in reality possess at present an alternative language to resort to besides English to express themselves, Halman relishes the duality. Totally bilingual, Halman in his poetry juxtaposes in diametrical opposition the elements of two cultures. His cultural schizophrenia acts as a source of inspiration for him, creating a poetry

almost impossible to label. The fact that it is almost impossible to label is the issue of cultural identity that the poetry by Turkish Americans raises.

This poetry constitutes a meeting ground of two separate cultures,¹⁰ creating an alliance as well as an exchange that structures the complex interrelationship(s) between East and West. The balance thus created is what makes the uniqueness of Halman's poetry and at the same time its difficulty—to understand and to categorize.

Such an alliance is not new of course. What is new is the fact that today literature in English is now more than ever written by "Easterners" or non-Anglo, non-Eurocentric authors who are introducing into world literature a totally novel dimension of biculturality.

At a period of time when globalization does away with distances and the communication possibilities that are its accessories allow instant access to and retrieval of material from anywhere in the world; and when within creative literature the differences between genres is being blurred at the expense of "texts"—and even if all this did not happen—it is a fact that more and more, not only poetry but also fiction is being written that requires the knowledge about and analysis of a culture other than the one in the language it is written. Derek Walcott's poetry is one example of an *oeuvre*, consecrated in the West, that needs a perspective different from the "Western" to be appraised adequately and comprehended fully. Perhaps that is why this Nobel Prize winner has not been as much written about as he should have. Albert Wendt and Haunani-Kay Trask are two such other poets. In fiction, the biculturalism makes itself felt even more acutely. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1980), recounting the birth of the present republic of India, with Walter Scott's novels of "nation and narration" as precedents when viewed from a Western perspective, has to be also analyzed from the perspective of Indian (of the subcontinent) oral narrative tradition as well as of the whole gamut of Eastern story-telling, to be fully comprehended, appraised and placed within world literature. Nor is this confined to literature in English. Tahar ben Jalloun, an author in the French language, is incomprehensible without a knowledge of and insight into Maghrebine culture, and Tchingiz Aitmatov, an author in the Russian language, is incomprehensible without a knowledge of and insight into Turkic culture. These authors have all enriched the literature of the language in which they write, bringing verve and vitality. I suggest that a bicultural approach may even prove to be imperative in a not very distant future if these authors are to be duly assessed.

NOTES

- 1 Of course, my argument may seem to go against the vast majority of what has been written about the cultural politics of the U.S. Some would say even that a much more accurate term to use to describe cultural construction in the U.S. would be cultural genocide. Americans unaware of the wealthy cultural heritage of the Turks may well believe this to be the case in connection with the Turkish Americans, as is the case with the cultures of so many other groups. The fact is that, as I point out later, Turks, until as recently as the twenties, were for many centuries an imperial power. Today, not only do Turks in Turkey exercise cultural hegemony over the various minorities living within their borders (for which they receive much criticism), but traces of Turkish culture are still very much prevalent in the Balkans, the Middle East, Israel, etc. When it comes to literature, there is an even more impressive output. As the call for papers of the *Journal of Turkish Literature* puts it: "The literature of the Turks is among the oldest of living literatures. In nearly a millennium and a half, it has been alive in many continents and regions, expressing itself in a diversity of languages and scripts, and remaining receptive to external influences as well as maintaining its intrinsic impetus for renewal." (Flyer distributed from September 1998 onwards for the *Journal of Turkish Literature*, to be published from April 1999 onwards.)
- 2 Thus, the Turkish culture they disseminated in the U.S., for example, the "Bulgarian" yogurt and the "Greek" *dolmades* (meaning "filled" in Turkish), are today known as being *their* ethnic features. Yet they retain a love-hate relationship with what is now only the mother-country of their ancestors, as evidenced by the recent discourse, for instance, of Armenian American authors such as Peter Balakian, the author of *Black Dog of Fate*.
- 3 Because they held passports showing them to be subjects of the Ottoman Sultan, Sephardic Jews, Orthodox Greeks and Christian Arabs, etc. were "Turks" statistically speaking, when they immigrated to the U.S. (See Ahmed). We cannot consider their descendants as Turkish American today, hence the difficulty.
- 4 The only exceptions are those who came from rural areas at the beginning of the twentieth century to Massachusetts, Michigan and California and worked in factories there. The majority of these went back after the proclamation of the Turkish Republic. Of the few who remained, most had married American women. The Turkish playwright Cevat Fehmi Başkut's play *Harput'ia Bir Amerikalı* (*An American in Harput*, 1955) relates the experiences, on the return to his hometown in the East of Turkey, of one such Turkish American. In *Turks in America: The Ottoman Turk's Immigrant Experience* (1986), Frank Ahmed portrays the lives of leather factory workers in Peabody, MA. While Başkut's fictional protagonist is the wealthy owner of a chain of supermarkets, Ahmed, himself the offspring of an immigrant worker from the East of Turkey, gives a first-hand account of lives that were lived in marginality.
- 5 This proposition in no way glosses over the very real struggles that African Americans have and are still contending with.
- 6 See Sollors for a discussion of what groups may or may not be considered "ethnic," especially the section "Are Yankees ethnic?" (2426).
- 7 One corollary of this "redesigning" was the conceptualization of the Native Americans as Turks (rather than Mongols) having migrated from Central Asia to the

- Americas through the Bering Strait. This will perhaps give an idea of the scope of the project.
- 8 Halman has also made many translations from Turkish to English, and vice versa, and has received the "Thornton Wilder Prize" from the Translation Center of Columbia University in 1986.
- 9 She compared the poetry of the two nations (or cultures, as we would say today) through their languages: "... neither do I think our English proper to express such violence of passion, which is very seldom felt amongst us and we want also those compound words which are very frequent and strong in the Turkish language" (79), in a letter she wrote to Alexander Pope dated 1 April 1717.
- 10 For a bicultural approach to a poetry that is the "meeting ground" of British and Turkish cultures, see Pultar, "The Empire Writes Back Bilingually: Taner Baybars's 'Gülten'."

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