EAST AS A FANTASTIC IMAGE IN DER PRINZ VON THEBEN BY ELSE LASKER-SCHÜLER

Abstract

Else Lasker-Schüler has a special place in German literature with her bohemian life, avant-garde clothing, naive but tenacious personality. For this Jewish woman author, who has been brought up in a Christian milieu, the East is a fantastic image, a fairy tale country, or the geography where her roots trace back and that shapes her personality. In Germany at the beginning of 20. century, clothing like an eastern is not only the symbolisation of her difference, but also a revolt against alienation of Jews. This identity, shaped by the eastern tales she has used to listen since her childhood, is both a mainstay to lean on against the hardships of her authorship life and acted as a shelter to stay away from her sorrows and treat her wounds. Her book, Der Prinz von Theben which tells the story of the East abstracting it from its reality through exotic and erotic images, was published in 1914. The author, who identifies herself with the Egyptian prince Joseph whose story is told in sacred texts, attains the power she could not get in real life as the prince of the East in nine stories.

Key words: Else Lasker-Schüler, Der Prinz von Theben, East, fantasy, image

Else Lasker-Schüler’IN DER PRINZ VON THEBEN ADLI ESERINDE FANTASTIK BİR İMGE OLARAK DOĞU

Özet

Else Lasker-Schüler, bohem yaşam biçimiyle, avangard giyim tarzıyla naif ancak kararlı kişiliğiyle Alman edebiyatında özel bir yere sahiptir. Hristiyan bir çevrede büyümüş olan bu Yahudi kadın yazar için Doğu, fantastik bir image ve bir masal ülkesi olmasıyla yanı sıra köklerinin uzandığı ve kişiliğinin şekillendiği bir coğrafyadır. 20. yüzyılın başında Almanya’da bir Doğu gibi giyinmek yazar için sadece farklılığının bir sembolü değil, aynı zamanda Yahudilerin ötekileştirilmesine karşı bir başkaldırıdır. Yazarlık yaşamının güçlüklerine.....
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INTRODUCTION

Together with Enlightenment, European thinking world develops an understanding which takes the individual to the center as a subject. Western subject who takes him to the center determines the position of the other as environment and defines this environment as East. It is seen that West who added an imagery meaning to East by time forms by this way an East image away from his reality and imaginative. In the frame of this understanding, a lot of Western travellers and writers -like Lamartine, Nerval, Gautier, Karl May etc.- organize journeys to the areas they call as East behind the imagery world they have created on their own. One of them is Else Lasker-Schüler. Lasker-Schüler who was born as the sixth child of a Jewish family on year 1869 at Elberfeld, Germany almost creates a fairy tale country by adapting to the fantastic definition that the Western Thinking World has referred to East with the Old Testament and Bible stories she listened from her brother. Magnificent palaces of East, powerful sultans and with harem women who blink an eye behind tulles with all their lust, they find life as the elements of an erotic and exotic texture up to feed the fantasy hunger of the West. The story of Joseph which was told in Holy Texts, who became a prince to Egypt after being thrown out to a well by his brothers attracts him since from his childhood days as an Eastern figure whom she identified herself with. In the short story book named as Der Prinz von Theben which was published in 1914, she presents the geography where her roots reach out as an erotic image enriched with erotic dreams by taking it away from all its real. The writer who feels the stress of living in Germany with an ethnical identity more and more each day leaves away from the painful reality in this work and she takes refuge at the imagery East in the shadow of palm trees and tulles.

East as an Fantastic and Erotic Image

1900s onwards in Germany had witnessed an increasing amount of othering of the Jews that had the end result of stronger perception of ethnic and cultural identity among some groups. Under such suppression, some Jews consequently “got back to their old self” by largely emphasizing and putting their Oriental identity forward. This attitude emerged especially among the inteligentsia of the time causing some sensitive people like Else Lasker-Schüler find themselves in much more of a conflict and exaguration. As Prince Joseph had long been in the center of her childhood fantasy, him and his territory, in other words the East, emerge as the object of a feeble and sensitive girls desire to possess and control power. Astrid Gehlhoff-Claes describes the state of the writer as the following: “She was a Jew who grew up in an environment where Christians live and she has been exposed to anti-semitism and racism in her early childhood. She was a bourgeois with a kind spirit and poetic mind... A male by creation

Anahtar Kelimeler: Else Lasker-Schüler, Der Prinz von Theben, Doğu, fantazi, imge
in the body of a female, an Esterner by spirit who is imprisoned in her home in the West ... Her spirit was in flame with the sunset colours of Jerusalem...” (Gehlhoff-Claes, 1986:152)

East is an exotic magic to Lasker-Schüler that stems from her childhood. The stories she was told by her brother generates colourful scenes about the East. “Her brother Paul constantly tells her from the Bible the story of Joseph betrayed by his brothers. This story turns out to be one of the most important aspects of her life, such that she was later named Prince Joseph. Yusuf is the Arabic equivalent of Joseph. Yusuf is the ruler of the kingdom called Theben.” (Gisland, 1993:43)

This Eastern image made tangible as Prince Joseph and Theben is combined with the mystical and fantasy-driven nature of Harem and turns Lasker-Schüler out to be a epic heroine throughout her life and literally takes her away from her Western identity. This epic Eastern image that has been frequently emphasized both in her poems and her narrations comes out as the pivotal element of the story book, Der Prinz von Theben. “East, is not only the home of the first person narrator but also the home of her poems; because, she claimed that her poems were the melodies of the East. East was the place where the thoughts of the first person narrator reside. The East was also the place where she lived. (...) The East is the picture of the richness of one's self and identifies with the heart.” (Reiss-Suckow,1997:270)

In her work of art that consists of nine short stories, some erotic fantasies are adorned with mythological and religious elements and presented as the reality of the exotic East by the first person narrator. “Identities of the figures in the stories are either Jews or Arabs or Easterner as a whole but these identities are in fact in represent either men or women.” (Berman,1996:38)

The writer integrates these identities together with eroticism. In her understanding, being an Eastern person is being an object of sexuality, therefore she labels Eastern women and men as the figures of sexual pleasure. In fact, this labeling is a common approach in works of many western scholars and writers as of 19th century. In his work named Orientalism, Edward Said reveals that behind this sexuality-centered view of the East created by the West lies the will of the West to dominate and rule the East.

“We may as well recognize that for nineteenth-century Europe, with its increasing embourgeoisement, sex had been institutionalized to a very considerable degree. On the one hand, there was no such thing as “free” sex, and on the other, sex in society entailed a web of legal, moral, even political and economic obligations of a detailed and certainly encumbering sort. Just as the various colonial possessions -quite apart from their economic benefit to metropolitan Europe- were useful as places to send wayward sons, superfluous populations of delinquents, poor people, and other undesirables, so the Orient was a place where one could look for sexual experience unobtainable in Europe. Virtually no European writer who wrote on or traveled to the Orient in the period after 1800 exempted himself or herself from this quest.” (Said, 1995:190)

The subjects of the stories are about love, power, religious themes and sexuality. These stories may seem to be the reflections of Else Lasker-Schüler's colourful fantasy world, but in fact, they are small fragments of fantasies in which she took refuge when she wanted to flee from the sad reality of her own life. Skirmishing with a life full of dissapointment and sadness, her two marriages ended up with a divorce, she had an illegitimate and ill son and above all, poverty weighed on her like nightmare, the writer consequently turned into her inner self and distanced herself from reality. Without a refuge, Lasker-Schüler found remedy in her pure
childhood fantasy world. This world was deeply rooted in Jerusalem. Under the effect of her Jewish roots, the writer lapsed into an Eastern identity and decided to find refuge in the imaginary Theben, the home of Prince Joseph. Theben was a new home for Lasker-Schüler, it was a safe haven.

The writer is in love with Joseph and she identifies herself with him. She owns him so much that she says “You know I am the real Joseph.” (Gisland, 1993:54) She lives like men in the body of a female, meaning that she in fact is an androgen. As a woman, Lasker-Schüler is in pain in a male-dominant world. Maybe the only way for her to stay alive in this world is to be like a man. As she doesn't consider herself powerful as a woman, she prefers to be a powerful man by becoming Prince Joseph. “This homeless princess, this lonely woman turns into a poor shepherd boy; because in her world, only men have an access to power, being one of them is the only way to approach to them which could make her the leader of the young shepherds: thus, she turns herself into Joseph who is the prince of her young fans.” (Hedgepeth, 1994:120)

Der Prinz von Theben is a fantasy book that women writer wrote to heal the wounds she suffer for she was a woman in a male-dominant world.

Male characters in the stories are depicted strong, powerful and full of lust. On the other hand “(...) Females in the Der Prinz von Theben were not depicted with positive elements.” (Hedgepeth, 1994:118) except for the Princes from Bagdat in the story called Der Kreuzfahrer (Crusader). In her book, generally women are only the sexual symbols and erotic pleasure elements in the men's world.

In the story “Der Fakir”, Fakir is written as an erotic symbol. He is an extraordinary male character that provokes sexual passion in women. His smell is somewhat like an aphrodisiac among the women in town.

The smell that oozes from the pores of Fakir’s complexion was pulsing the veins, just like stolen fruit and forbidden drink in Quran. Youngsters were craving in pain and the girls in town were gulping his smell in secret. Their bodies come like brown and yellow roses were looking at him. (Der Prinz, p.110)

There is a religious perspective in the story Der Derwisch, however, this very perspective is away from the whole reality. In Islamic tradition, a Dervish is someone purifies himself from the worldly pleasures, spends most of his time worshiping to God and has no room in his life for sexuality. Due to these attributions of his, he was deeply respected by other people. But Else Lasker-Schüler gives him a completely different attribution, that is presenting him as an erotic figure.

Yet in the story, Dervish was a sacred person. However his sanctity served for the sex appeal and made him much more attractive. Not resisting the charm of Dervish, people threw themselves under the hooves of the animal he rode and considered dying like this as a way of reaching the high grounds of martyrdom. While Dervish was dancing, women, especially the British women, lost themselves in his charm. In these ways, the writer puts an Oriental man into a single context, his sacred personality is not even an issue, and she finally reduces him down to a single dimension in the eyes of Western women, she does it by putting forward his sexuality only.

Every evening, British ladies go on the hot, cemetery road, riding on their donkeys. Sacred cats behind the cemetery’s cage are looking out worldly. Dervish is dancing. Coloured eye women
listening to the tweets of the spring and having their blue tulles on their hats shiver. (…) Thin necks of Western women stem from the transparent dresses they wear in which their bodies stand as if in a glass vase. (Der Prinz, p.103)

In the stories *Ein Brief meiner Base Schalome* and *Der Fakir*, the dimension of sexuality increases and attaches to violence. The narrator of both stories is the Princess of Bagdat, in other words, an Oriental woman. It is obvious in these stories that Lasker-Schüler’s perspective on women is exactly the same with her perspective on men. The writer unifies Oriental women with Harem and depicts them as histeric and masochist. The narrator does not feel herself safe among those women in Harem, she is frightened, because the Eunuch teaches women some masochist fantasies.

My horny aunt with silk shalwar began to took of her clothes. All women curiously attended to the training of the Eunuch. The Eunuch opened up a book onto the carpet in which horrible pictures stand out. His voice was bending like a river of lust toward the hot desires of the women. Below the dove of Muhammad there was a curtain and behind it Harem Guard was keeping sharp and pointed tools, whips and torches. (Der Prinz, p. 108-109)

Schalome and her sisters were depicted as histeric and masochist women, in other words, the writer adapted an erotic representation of Harem women, it shows that Lasker-Schüler considered all Oriental men and women within this single context. The East of Lasker-Schüler is a place where eroticism is worshipped, men and women exist only for this purpose and it is therefore imaginary, it has nothing to do with the real East. Such single dimensioned assessment is the sheer consequence of the prejudices that Western intellect developed throughout the centuries.

In the storybook *Der Prinz von Theben*, the writer creates an exotic and pornographic Eastern depiction. Such depiction in which figures take place only for their sexual desires is very horrifying and also very othering. These are in fact the people of a geographic place where sexuality is a taboo and representing them only with this side of them display the level of misleading and distorted nature of their being understood as others in the minds of Western people. Depicting sacred and respected figures of the East, meaning dervishes and sheiks, as the sole figures of sexual fantasy is, in fact, a typical reflection of the orientalist understanding among the Western intellects and Else Lasker-Schüler is one of them.

**Conclusion**

The East and the West had been through many confrontations and many of them resulted in conflicts. After the crusades, the East and the West confrontation did not help come close towards each other but the contrary. So the both sides in the mind created vague and distorted images for each other. Andrea Fuchs-Sumiyoshi describes the image of the East in the Western minds as the following: “In the Western literature, the East was depicted either as a country that challenges and treathens the Christianity, or as a loser country of the barbarians in terms of politics, religion and civilization, or as a country where amazing politics and prosperity reign, or as an ideal country of tolerance.” (Fuchs-Sumiyoshi, 1984:19)

Behind this misleading and mind-boggling understanding of the East lies the Western “othering” that helps distance itself from the East and consequently makes up a higher and stronger position of itself by stepping on the object they have othered. In the beginning of the 20th century, Else Lasker-Schüler’s creation of exotic East and its imagery was in fact the end
result of such Western perspective. Women and men have been presented as delusive characters of lust, violence and desert mirages imprisoned in an epic atmosphere. These characters are in fact the writer herself. The writer is a Western woman who lost her struggle in life. Not finding any refuge, she made up a legend out of the East by digging down her childhood fantasies in her mind. She fled from Nazi attacks and first went to Swiss and then to Jerusalem. She looked for the East of her dreams, but she could not find it. There was no Prince Joseph, nor might Sultans, nor magnificent palaces there, but bare truth. Nevertheless, the writer does not turn back because the doors of the West are now close to her. She turns back to her roots and dies as the heroine of the epic she created in the heart of the East -Jerusalem- in the year 1945.

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