

## Who are you calling ‘Turk’?

### Harems and hidden treasures at the turn of the 20th century

Peter Cherry | Bilkent University

Picture the scene. It’s a Friday afternoon. About an hour ago, a jaded cargo deliverer came into my office with a book from France that I’ve been waiting to receive for about four months. I’m now dusting off my French dictionary and struggling to understand a book which could be a further piece in a puzzle that occupied most of my time as a postdoctoral fellow at the British Institute at Ankara and whose results will soon be published. I hope it doesn’t offend the BIAA’s archaeologists if I say this is about as Indiana Jones as it gets for a literature scholar.

The book in question is *Le jardin fermé* (*The Closed Garden*) and it’s by Marc Hélys. Well, actually it isn’t. Like just about every writer and character I’ve been researching recently, Marc Hélys is a pseudonym. Marc Hélys was actually a woman called Marie Léra.

The story goes that two of these characters, Hadidje Zennour and Nouriye Neyr-el-Nissa, were granddaughters of a French nobleman, the Marquis de Blosset de Chateaufort. The Marquis had settled in Istanbul after falling in love with an Ottoman Circassian woman while providing training for the Ottoman military forces. He subsequently converted to Islam and changed his name to Reşit Bey. Reşit Bey’s son, and therefore also the two women’s father, Nuri Bey, had served as Minister for Foreign Affairs under Sultan Abdülhamit II.

Reina Lewis’ book *Rethinking Orientalism* (2004) describes how, as their father became more influential within the Ottoman government, Hadidje Zennour and Nouriye Neyr-el-Nissa felt increasing pressure to conform to the persona of a Turkish elite woman. More specifically, to wear the veil and to enter into arranged marriages. It should, of course, be noted here that arranged marriages were also common amongst the British elite in this period.

Nevertheless, it was Hadidje Zennour’s rejection of an arranged marriage that led the sisters to seek out the French writer Pierre Loti (also a pseudonym, for naval officer Julien Viaud) for help. For many readers in Britain and France at this time, Istanbul was synonymous with Loti due to the popularity of his bestselling novel *Aziyadé* (1879), which is set in the Ottoman capital. In this novel, Loti evoked Istanbul as a place of exotic intrigue, plotting, homoeroticism and sex. The modern-day influence of Loti’s Orientalised Istanbul is most conspicuous today in the famed Piyer Loti Cafe in Eyüp, which still boasts one of the best views of the city.

The two sisters told their story to Loti in the hope that he would write a novel that would be as popular as *Aziyadé* and save them from forced marriages. The resulting novel was *Les désenchantées* (1906) in which Hadidje Zennour is

renamed Zeynep Hanoum (an anglicised version of *Hanım*) and Nouriye Neyr-el-Nissa is renamed Melek Hanoum. Soon after publication, the two sisters fled Istanbul and travelled through Europe. They visited Italy, Germany, Switzerland, France and the UK. While doing so, they adopted the names that Loti’s novel gave them and described themselves as *les désenchantées* – that is, the disenchanted. They were disenchanted, they argued, by the restrictions they felt as educated Turkish women in patriarchal Ottoman society.

But ... Loti’s novel has it that there’s a third *désenchantée*, and that is Djenane. And this is where my Friday night reading comes in, as Hélys claims that Djenane is actually her. She claims that she is also the person who first introduced Hadidje and Nouriye to Loti. At this point, you could be forgiven for just laughing all this off and saying ‘what a confusing but charming little story’. But my research at the BIAA has convinced me that this story plays a long, frustratingly overlooked role in British-Turkish relations.

While in France, for instance, Hadidje and Nouriye met the British journalist Grace Ellison. Ellison was well acquainted with Istanbul, having been twice before and having covered the Young Turk Revolution of 1908 for the *Daily Telegraph*. Ellison encouraged Hadidje (Zeynep Hanoum) to write her reflections of her trip around Europe in letter form to her. Zeynep Hanoum’s letters were collected, edited and published by Ellison in a book entitled *A Turkish Woman’s European Impressions* (1913). These letters are sharp and frequently sarcastic critiques of cultural norms that Hadidje encountered as she travelled across the European continent.

Time and again, she comes across the Orientalist expectations of her European hosts, who are frustrated by the ways she does not conform to behaviour they expect of a Turkish woman. Most pointedly, while in Britain, she notes a



Zeynep & Melek.



series of patriarchal injustices and instances of misogyny that shocks her and leads her to consider whether Britain really is an arbiter of civilisation as she had previously thought. While visiting the Houses of Parliament in London, for example, she records how the now-defunct Ladies Gallery is ‘nothing but a harem in your workshop of law’.

The two sisters also provided Ellison with a lot of material for her journalistic endeavours. Indeed, Ellison returned to Turkey in 1913 from where she wrote a newspaper column entitled ‘Life in the harem’ for the *Daily Telegraph*. Hadidje and Nouriye’s influence exists in the way they provided contacts for Ellison and suggested background reading. Applying the thoughts of the literary critic Stanley Fish, then, Ellison’s column was a key source of information for the ‘at home or informed reader’ of Ottoman and Turkish affairs in the early 20th century.

Ellison’s column was compiled into a volume entitled *An Englishwoman in a Turkish Harem* (1913). This was a book that, although not uncritical, was unashamedly pro-Turkish in its outlook and therefore quite at odds with the majority of philhellenic travel and cultural production of the time. Like her Turkish friends in Europe, Ellison too indulges in ethno-masquerade as she is photographed in ‘Turkish costume’ and describes herself as ‘becoming Turkish’.

It should also be emphasised that this book was published just before the start of the First World War when Britain and the Ottoman Empire would be in conflict with one another. In fact, Ellison ends her book remorsefully, noting how the enemy of Britain is really Germany, and she looks forward to a time when once again the Ottoman Empire and Britain can be on friendly terms.

Lastly, Ellison’s book was also listed by the Scottish novelist John Buchan as an influence on his 1916 novel *Greenmantle*. *Greenmantle* was an enormously popular spy thriller from the writer of the now better-known *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1915). In *Greenmantle*, British spy Richard Hannay (the same protagonist as in *The Thirty-Nine Steps*) is sent on a mission to suppress a Muslim uprising in Erzurum that is hoped will help Muslims in parts of the Empire, such as the British Raj, to rise up against their colonisers and hasten a British exit from the First World War. Spoiler alert

coming up ... but in Buchan’s novel, the brains behind this mission of derailing the British, the holy man Greenmantle, is revealed to be a British traitor in disguise who is ‘performing’ being Turkish.

While writing the novel, Buchan was also working for the British War Propaganda Ministry. *Greenmantle*, like Ellison’s book, was a novel that intervened to show the Turks as harmless pawns in a game controlled by the Germans. But maybe, just maybe, his idea for duplicitous identities, of people not being who they say are, owes something to the confusing tale of Hadidje, Nouriye and Marie Léra.

I began my postdoctoral fellowship with the aim of exploring the various Turkish and British literary interactions in the early Republican era, but I was never able to get past this fascinating and frustrating story. It is my contention that it’s not just an entertaining detective case, but that these connections had a demonstrable effect on what readers of newspapers and novels in the era thought about Turkey in the final years of the Ottoman Empire. Furthermore, in all their performed identities and pseudonyms, Ellison, Hadidje, Nouriye, Marie Léra, Loti and even Buchan’s protagonist point to the ways that Turkishness was textually produced and constructed for British and French audiences at the turn of the century, exposing that, in this era of entrenched borders, nationality is really just one other constructed identity.

