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Book Review*; The Ottomans a Cultural Legacy*

Diana Darke
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Abstract

The Ottomans: A Cultural Legacy by Diana Darke presents the Ottoman as a multidimensional civilization, encompassing political, administrative, cultural, intellectual, scientific, and everyday life practices. Darke challenges conventional portrayals of the Ottomans as rigid and militaristic, highlighting the experiences of both Muslims and non-Muslims within a diverse and inclusive society. While the book advances striking arguments, this review focuses specifically on issues related to religious tolerance and the status of women. This paper suggests that Darke does not fully examine the influence of Islamic principles as a foundational element shaping the Ottoman prior to the nineteenth century. The overlooks on the role of Islamic principles in governance and the formation of the cosmopolitan character of the Ottoman state, reduces the depth of its historical analysis. Despite this limitation, the book offers a compelling reinterpretation of Ottoman history from a fresh perspective. Overall, the book underscores that openness and engagement with diversity were essential for sustaining social welfare and communal harmony, offering valuable insights for contemporary plural societies.

Keywords: Harem, Millet System, Ottoman, Religious Tolerance, Women

Book Review

This book, *The Ottomans: A Cultural Legacy*, is a paperback reprint edition published in 2025 by Thames and Hudson in London. As indicated by its title, the book focuses on the cultural legacy of the Ottomans within the broader context of human history. It explores this legacy through twelve chapters, namely The Ottoman Psyche, The Commercial Spirit, Statecraft and Geography, Religious Values, Scientific and Industrial Innovations, Literary Curiosities, Musical Traditions, Medical Mores, Aesthetic Sensitivities, Architectural Identity, Culinary Delights, and Home and Lifestyle. The thematic breadth of these chapters reflects the author's attempt to present the Ottoman legacy as a multidimensional civilizational experience, encompassing not only political and administrative structures but also cultural expression, intellectual traditions, scientific and economic practices, and the patterns of everyday life.

As stated in the introduction, the book seeks "to look afresh at the Ottomans" (p. 7) by interrogating and challenging the narrow and orientalist representations of Ottoman history that

have long dominated Western scholarship. By foregrounding perspectives that have been largely marginalised or overlooked (or even misunderstood), the study contributes to a meaningful reconfiguration of Ottoman history beyond entrenched Eurocentric and Orientalist paradigms. Darke's discussions of scientific and industrial innovations, for instance, contrast with Lewis's suggestion that the Ottoman had already experienced technical backwardness as early as the reign of Sülayman al-Qānūnī in the sixteenth century.[1] Overall, the author's critical endeavour is sustained throughout the book, which engages a wide spectrum of themes ranging from the foundational principles of Ottoman governance and social organisation, to cultural expressions such as art, women rights, distortion of historical narrative between Muslim and Christian, scientific discovery and, ultimately, houses, lifestyle and fashion. This book put forward striking arguments yet this paper aims to examines issues related to religious tolerance and the status of women in the Ottoman kingdom. Darke in her writing, departs from conventional portrayals of the Ottoman as a rigid and coercive military power,[2] as well as from depictions of Islam as a religion that imposes restrictive constraints upon women.[3]

Darke presented that the Ottoman was a cosmopolitan kingdom that ruled effectively in Europe, Asia, Arabia regions and Africa. The Ottoman according to the author appreciate multicultural society and tolerance to all religions practiced by its subjects (p49) and welcome everyone including refugees (p.19). Such an outlook has not been consistently reflected in the scholarly literature on the Ottoman or Islam. Bernard Lewis acknowledges that the Ottomans developed their own distinctive achievements in the fields of art, education, philosophy, and literature; however, he also suggests that the equality of imperial subjects was contingent upon specific prerequisites rather than grounded in universal principles.[4] Meanwhile, Anidjar in his discussions on "theological enemy" suggests that the Christians and the Arabs were enemy throughout the history.[5] Such arguments stand in contrast to Darke's position, as she argues that the Ottoman accommodated non-Muslim communities and developed its own distinctive approach toward them (pp. 57–60). Her arguments were shared by Baer in his book *The Ottoman: Khan, Caesar and Caliphs*. Baer suggests that the Ottoman had a close relationship with Jews and Sultan sometimes referred as the messianic.[6] Darke further suggests that misunderstandings of Ottoman and Muslim–non-Muslim relations emerged as a result of the history of political wrangling in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, particularly in the context of the encroachment of the nation-state among Christian subjects.

Moreover, Darke presents the millet system in a notably positive manner (pp.72-80 treating it as a viable and functional social model within the Ottoman context.[7] The Millet System employed religion as a primary marker of collective identity and structured social and administrative relations accordingly. Although inequalities existed, particularly in the imposition of higher tax obligations on Jewish and Christian communities, the system nevertheless granted non-Muslim subjects a significant degree of autonomy in managing their internal affairs. Furthermore, the Ottoman state did not attempt to impose Islam upon its subjects, nor did it pursue policies aimed at forced assimilation into a uniform culture or a single set of laws and regulations.

According to Darke, the *Devishirme* system was a mechanism that maximized individual talent regardless of class, family background, religion, or ethnic origin, until the system was abolished in 1648 (pp. 23-24). It also functioned as an important conduit through which Christians incorporated into various sectors of the Ottoman state apparatus, thereby enjoying avenues of social mobility. A significant number of them were joined Ottoman military and served in the elite Janissary corps. Christian soldiers fought on behalf of Bayezid I (r. 1389–1402) at Kosovo, and as Darke suggests, the military and administrative commitment of Christians particularly

Greeks, Bulgarians, and Bosnians persisted into the later centuries. These groups continued to serve the Ottomans, including participation in the campaign against Hungary in 1526 (p. 71). Darke's account of Ottoman history resonates with other scholarly works that seek to reassess and reinterpret the Ottoman past. Baer, for instance, demonstrates that religious tolerance was widely practised among Ottoman society. One of the most prominent Ottoman figures to emerge from the *devishirme* system was Sokollu Mehmed Pasha, who converted to Islam and rose to the highest ranks of Ottoman administration. He played a significant role in shaping Ottoman policy in the Indian Ocean and, notably, exercised his authority to appoint his brother as Patriarch of the Orthodox Christian Church.[8] This practice suggests that religiously based animosity was not a defining feature of Ottoman governance during this period. Moreover, several Ottoman sultans entered into marriage with women of Christian background, further illustrating the pragmatic and inclusive nature of Ottoman political culture. For example, Orhan (r. 1324–1362) married Nilüfer Hatun, while Sultan Murad I (r. 1362–1389) married the daughter of the Bulgarian emperor (pp. 70–71). In sum, Darke demonstrates that before the 19th century, religion was never perceived as a dividing line or a source of antagonism in the Ottoman Kingdom.

Nevertheless, Darke's arguments can be regarded as atypical relative to dominant interpretations in the broader historiography of the Ottoman. This is evident in Berg's discussion about the legal definition of communities from the Millet System. He suggests that Millet System reinforced social inequality during the *Tanzimat* period.[9] Meanwhile, Badem show that the lingering legacy of this system contributed to the continued marginalization of non-Muslims in areas such as military service, legal rights, and social standing.[10]Clearly, Darke offers a distinctive perspective on Ottoman policies regarding religious tolerance, which is particularly valuable for readers, especially those seeking fresh and alternative viewpoints to compare with existing scholarship. In summary, this book serves as a valuable resource for readers aiming to gain a deeper and more nuanced understanding of Ottoman historical developments.

Another important facet highlighted in this book is the significant role and status of women in Ottoman history. Darke states explicitly and unequivocally that many Western scholars have harboured misconceptions regarding the status of women in the Ottoman history. One of the central factors underlying these misconceptions stems from a fundamental misunderstanding of the harem. Literally, the term Harem refers to private quarters allocated to the sultan's wives, concubines, and his imperial offspring.[11] Darke suggests that Western scholars often focus on Harem and concubines of Sultan potraying a negative image of women in the Ottoman history (p.68). Isom-Verhaaren described Harem as slaves (read: concubine) who were captured during wars as the trophies of victory.[12] The harem is typically associated with themes of sexual availability and the despot's control over women.[13] Roxelana, a Harem (later wife of Sulayman al-Qanuni) was frequently associate with negative portrayal in Europe due to her unusual relationship with Sultan Sülayman.[14] Yet, according to Darke, Roxelana was an accomplished writer and pioneer of diplomatic relations between the Ottoman and Poland as well as Safavid, Persia (pp 109-110).Besides that, in the study about Circassian slaves and Harem show that the Circassian slaves, play specific roles within a hierarchical system, influenced by social dynamics and the overarching institution of slavery. [15] Therefore, Darke contends that European scholarship must move beyond the exoticized representations of the harem that have been inaccurately sustained by earlier studies.

Furthermore, in examining the trajectory of women during the Ottoman period, Darke demonstrates that women played influential roles in the workforce and acted as powerful benefactors and commercial property owners (pp. 11, 37-38). This recognition of women's roles and functions within society was grounded in Islamic principles, under which women's rights were taken seriously. Women of all social classes and religious backgrounds had access to legal institutions and were able to bring grievances before the courts throughout the Ottoman territory. Notably, Christian women often preferred to use Ottoman courts as venues for legal redress (pp. 39, 67). Qureshi corroborates Darke's argument in his study Muslims-Christians' relationship during the fall of Constantinople (1453), asserting that Christians due to theological schism between Orthodox and Latin Christianity favoured Ottoman governance over that of the Byzantines.[16] To reflects the relatively expensive rights and opportunities afforded to women in the Ottoman, Darke shows that women were educated and professionally trained in medicine, serving as doctors, nurses, (pp.133-134) skilled healers (p.134), and vaccinators (pp.136-138), demonstrating their significant contributions to healthcare and public welfare. Collectively, these insights challenge Western misconceptions and emphasize the multifaceted agency of women in Ottoman society.

This book offers a fresh perspective on Ottoman history, challenging earlier inaccurate accounts. The author emphasizes that Ottoman history encompasses the experiences of both Muslims and non-Muslims as the Ottoman subjects comprised people of different faiths and ethnic backgrounds. Yet, while the book highlights the diversity and inclusive character of Ottoman, it does not fully analyse the influence of Islam as the core elements that shaped the Ottoman prior to the nineteenth century. Darke also notes that, beginning in the nineteenth century, religious tolerance declined as the influence of Western-style nation states extended into millet communities. The cosmopolitan character of the Ottoman was further challenged by both non-Muslim and Muslim groups, whose growing allegiance to the concept of the nation state led them to adopt more insular attitudes toward communities of different ethnic backgrounds. Clearly, the main limitation of this book lies in the insufficient analysis of Islam as the foundational influence shaping the Ottoman prior to the nineteenth century. By not fully addressing this core aspect, the work overlooks the role of Islamic principles in governance and the formation of the cosmopolitan character of the Ottoman state, which reduces the depth of its historical analysis. Furthermore, the book makes minimal use of primary sources, which may be regarded as a shortcoming by some readers.

Nevertheless, the book remains a valuable resource for students and history enthusiasts. In the Malaysian context, its discussions are particularly significant, as they offer guidance for navigating a plural society. The work implicitly underscores that openness and the willingness to engage with differences are not merely desirable but essential for sustaining social welfare and communal harmony.

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