

The Turkish Component of the 1908 European Travelogue of Nazli Rafia, Begum of Janjira

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Abstract

With the consolidation of British rule over India after the unsuccessful Revolt of 1857, contacts between Great Britain and the Indian subcontinent began to increase. The travel needs of British military officers, civilian personnel and businessmen [with or without their families] resulted in the establishment of steamship services between ports in England [London, Southampton and Liverpool] and India [Bombay, Calcutta and Madras]. Indians of wealth and influence also began to travel to Europe for studies, trade and tourism.

Similarly, journeys were also undertaken by Muslim men and women for the annual Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca. As the steamships to and from India usually passed by or through territories under Ottoman Turkish control such as Arabia and Egypt, wealthy Muslim travellers from India often began to break journey not only to visit parts of Turkey, but also to chronicle their experiences in the form of travelogues, written primarily in Urdu. The intention in the present article is to examine and elucidate the Turkish part of such a European travelogue.

Background

In a previous article, the author has examined in detail the contents of one of many available travelogues in Urdu dealing with a visit to Turkey.¹ In that article, reference has also been made to some earlier travelogues and trips, such as those of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan in 1869-1870 and Shibli Nu'mani in 1892.

While accounts of travels to foreign lands have now become a fairly well-established *genre* in Urdu prose writing, not much attention has hitherto been paid to travelogues [whether to Europe or elsewhere] penned by women of the Indian subcontinent. It is highly likely that the first such foreign travelogue produced by an Indian lady is the one translated and sent for publication by Mrs E. L. Willoughby Osborne,

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¹ Syed Tanvir Wasti, 'Sir Abdul Qadir and his Turkish Travelogue', *Pakistan Perspectives*, 6:2 (July-December 2001), pp.143-57.

which deals with the pilgrimage in 1864 to Mecca by the Nawab Sikandar Begum of Bhopal.² The book stems from notes in Urdu giving an account of the pilgrimage by the Nawab Begum made at the request of Lady Durand, wife of Sir H. M. Durand, Political Agent at the court of Bhopal, who had written to her before her departure saying: 'If ever your Highness writes a description of your pilgrimage, I shall be delighted to see it'.³ It is unfortunate that the Nawab Sikandar Begum died in 1868 before the translation of her book was published.

A book in Bengali detailing the impressions of a Bengali woman living in England was first published in Calcutta in 1885.⁴ Since that time there has been no shortage of travelogues [in Urdu, English as well as other languages] written both by men and women of the Indian subcontinent describing their impressions of people and places in many lands.

The Fyzee sisters

The three daughters of the 19th century Indian Muslim businessman Hassanally Feyzhyder⁵ all showed an interest in travel writing. These ladies, in order of birth, were Zehra,⁶ Nazli Rafia⁷ and Atiya.⁸ They were

² Mrs. Willoughby Osborne [Translator], *A Pilgrimage to Mecca by the Nawab Sikandar Begum of Bhopal*, G.C.S.I. (London: Wm H Allen, 1870). This book has been re-published after editing as follows: Siobhan Lambert-Hurley [Editor], *A Princess's Pilgrimage: Nawab Sikandar Begum's A Pilgrimage to Mecca* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008).

³ *Ibid.*, pp.3-4.

⁴ The book has been reprinted as Krishnabhabini Das, *Inglonde Bongomohila* [A Bengali Woman in England] (Calcutta: Stree, 1996).

⁵ Hassanally Feyzhyder (1843-1903) was a businessman from Bombay who lived for several years in Istanbul and had business dealings with the Ottoman court. He was married twice – first to Amirunnisa Begum and later to Razia Begum. He had a large family which included 6 sons and 3 daughters.

⁶ Zehra [also known as Zohra or Zahira] Hassanally Fyzee (1866-1940) was born and died in Bombay. She was married for a time to Hyder Camaruddin Tyabji.

⁷ Nazli Rafia Sultana Hassanally (1874-1968) was born in Istanbul and died in Karachi. For several years, she had the title of the Begum of Janjira while married to the Nawab of Janjira Sidi Sir Ahmad Khan.

⁸ Atiya Fyzee Rahamin (1877-1967) was born in Istanbul and died in Karachi [like her elder sister Nazli Rafia]. She was married to Samuel Fyzee-Rahamin (1880-1964) of Poona, a well-known painter and writer, who converted from Judaism to Islam to marry her. She was an author and

well-educated, moved in literary and social circles, and possessed a good command of English, Urdu and even Persian.

Atiya studied at a Teachers' Training College in London over the period 1906 – 1907, during which time she also kept a travel diary in Urdu. Instalments from this diary were serialized in a monthly journal in 1921 with the title *Zamana-i-tahsil*.⁹ Nazli Rafia Begum of Janjira¹⁰ travelled to Europe [including the Ottoman dominions] in 1908 and wrote a travelogue in Urdu titled *Seyr-e-Europe* [Visit to Europe]¹¹ which was edited by her elder sister Zehra and later published. It is the intention in the present article to investigate and comment on the pages of this travelogue that deal with Nazli Rafia's impressions of Turkey where, in fact, she had been born. It appears, however, that during their earlier years the sisters spent more time in Bombay than elsewhere, because Nazli Rafia repeats in several places in the travelogue that she could only converse in very short and broken sentences in Turkish.

Brief account of the European trip

The Janjira party for the trip consisted, apart from Nazli Rafia, of the following people: her husband the Nawab of Janjira Sidi Sir Ahmad

musician, and both Shibli Nu'mani and Dr Muhammad Iqbal were among her admirers. Her work is the subject of a Ph.D thesis by M. Yaameen Usman accepted [Supervisor Prof. Dr. Moinuddin Aqeel; date 2011; 405 pp.] by the University of Karachi.

⁹ The title of the journal may be translated as 'The Time for Education'. A recently published book also deals in part with this early travelogue: Siobhan Lambert-Hurley and Sunil Sharma, Eds., *Atiya's Journeys—A Muslim Woman from Colonial Bombay to Edwardian Britain* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010).

¹⁰ Janjira State was a minor princely state in India during the British Raj under the suzerainty of the Bombay Presidency. The title of Nawab of Janjira was conferred by the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb during the 17th century. The total area of the princely state was 982 square kilometres and the ruler had a local salute of 13 guns. Janjira was located on the Konkan coast and is now part of a district of Maharashtra. The state included the towns of Murud and Shrivardhan, as well as the fortified island of Janjira, just off the coastal village of Murud, which was the capital and the residence of the rulers. Janjira is the local word for the Arabic 'jazeera' meaning 'island'.

¹¹ Zehra Begum Fyzee [Ed.], H. H. Nazli Rafia Sultan Begum of Janjira, *Seyr-e-Europe* [Visit to Europe], (Lahore: Marghoob Agency, undated). The book is based mainly on letters related to the whole journey, and has a Dedication to their mother Amirunnisa Begum Fyzee in memory of her love and affection.

Khan,¹² her brother Ali Asghar Baig Fyzee, her sister Atiya Begum Fyzee, Sardar Sidi Hasan, Sidi Saeed and Dr Hashim Lakhani, as well as a male and a female retainer.

The departure from Bombay harbour on the steamship *Macedonia* took place on 25 April 1908 and the return to Bombay was on 7 October 1908. Apart from British civil servants, there was a sizeable Indian contingent of travellers on the steamship, including families from other Indian princely states. Among the more interesting fellow-travellers on the journey to Europe were Gopal Krishna Gokhale¹³ and Romesh Chunder Dutt.¹⁴

The itinerary of the trip took the passengers via Aden and the Red Sea to Port Said and then via the Mediterranean to the French port of Marseilles. The journey to London from there was accomplished by train [except for the English Channel crossing] and the greater part of the European stay was in and around London till the last week of June.

In London, the group was hosted at his opulent mansion by Sir Ratan Tata,¹⁵ and there was much social interaction between the Indian aristocrats and their British counterparts.¹⁶ While in London, the Janjira

¹² Sidi Sir Ahmad Khan (1862-1922) came from a long line of Nawabs of Janjira. He was educated at Rajkumar College in Rajkot.

¹³ Gopal Krishna Gokhale (1866-1915) was a wealthy Brahmin from Maharashtra who was one of the early leaders of the Indian National Congress and was a mentor to Mahatma Gandhi.

¹⁴ Romesh Chunder Dutt (1848-1909) was a Bengali civil servant, writer and linguist. He was the author of many books, and also translated both the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* into English.

¹⁵ Sir Ratan Tata (1871-1918) was the second son of Jamsetji Tata, the founder of the Tata industrial dynasty of Bombay. He was brought up in luxury and owned many large houses both in India and in England, but died of illness at a young age.

¹⁶ Nazli Rafia mentions an interesting meeting in London with Lord Cromer, who had returned after many years as British Controller-General of Egypt. Lord Cromer complimented her for appearing in public unveiled and asked her if it presented any difficulties. Nazli Rafia said that initially it took some getting used to, and asked Lord Cromer if the Turkish princesses of the Egyptian court were veiled. Whereupon Lord Cromer mentioned that most did not appear in public, except for Princess Nazli. Nazli Rafia then answered that she knew the family – and that her own name was Nazli. Lord Cromer was baffled when she told him of her own birth in Istanbul. See *Seyr-e-Europe*, pp.105-6.

party also met Sir Gerard Lowther¹⁷ who was later to be hospitable to them in Istanbul.

Journey towards and Arrival at Istanbul

The party continued their trip by train to Paris and its environs, followed by Switzerland and then Austria till the end of August, passing by train through Rumania to reach the Black Sea port of Constanza from where they would board a steamship for Istanbul. At Constanza, a Turkish diplomat called Kazim Bey,¹⁸ who was travelling with his daughter Safvet Khanum, very generously offered the Indian travellers his saloon and cabin in a gesture of hospitality, and volunteered to take lesser accommodation. Rafia Nazli notes that Kazim Bey's daughter, when alighting at Istanbul, had covered herself with a *charshaf*.¹⁹

About a month before the arrival of the Nawab and Begum of Janjira and their entourage, Istanbul had seen much political unrest. Units of the Ottoman Army in Rumelia [the European dominions of the Empire] had rebelled, leading eventually to the so-called Young Turk Revolution of 24 July 1908, as a result of which the Sultan Abdülhamid was forced to re-convene the Ottoman parliament after an interval of over 30 years. In several places in her travelogue Nazli Rafia refers to the political tensions between supporters of the Sultan and those of the Committee of Union and Progress which had emerged as a leading 'reform' party.²⁰

After the rich and spotlessly well-kept cities of Paris and Vienna, Nazli Rafia's initial reaction to Istanbul was that it was somewhat seedy and run-down, in addition to being rather costly, although she points out that no other city in the world could have such a magnificent location astride two continents.

¹⁷ Sir Gerard Augustus Lowther (1858-1916) was a British diplomat who served as Ambassador in Istanbul between 1908 and 1913.

¹⁸ All Turkish names in this article have been written without accents, i.e., within the limitation of the English alphabet.

¹⁹ Although it literally means a bed sheet, the *charshaf* is the outer cloak-like garment formerly used by ladies in Turkey [occasionally in rural Turkey even today] to cover themselves in public.

²⁰ The Committee of Union and Progress is known in Turkish history as *Itihad ve Terakki Cemiyeti*. This political show-down was to lead, after further political unrest, to the abdication in 1909 of the Sultan Abdülhamid and his replacement by his brother Sultan Mehmed Reshad. For details, see Syed Tanvir Wasti, 'The Last Chroniclers of the Mabeyn', *Middle Eastern Studies*, London, 32:2 (April 1996), pp.1-29.

However, she soon forgets the potholes in the roads and the barking dogs that roam some streets as she takes boat rides up and down the Bosphorus and sees the huge illuminated palaces and mansions that line both sides of this famous waterway. Moreover, the wealth and variety of available food and fruits impress her immensely.²¹

What can I write about the fruit here... There is probably no place in the world that has such cheap and delicious fruit as Istanbul... The grapes are of excellent quality. The figs have a kind of shadow and overflow with sweet syrup. I spend my whole day eating all this lovely fruit, and my appetite doubles, nay quadruples... The taste of the watermelons here is so delightful that Allah be praised! The same goes for all the vegetables... in our European trip we found nothing to compare in flavour and taste to such fruit and vegetables...

One evening the Nawab of Janjira goes out to dine without his wife and, when he returns, he is full of praise for a certain Turkish dish that he has sampled, called *yalanci dolma*.²² He makes sure that the whole party will also sample it.

Within a few days of arrival, Nazli Rafia visits the famous Covered Bazaar of Istanbul with its hundreds of shops selling cloth and leather goods, jewellery, handicrafts and food from all over the world. As befits a Begum, Nazli Rafia seeks out an acquaintance of her father's, Karabet²³ by name, and he takes them to suitable shops selling gold and diamond jewellery. Although she does not give details of the purchases, she mentions that the jewellery was of high quality, the party was very well-treated and the Turkish coffee served to them was of extraordinary good taste and flavour.

On the 3rd of September 1908, Nazli Rafia and her party visit the Istanbul Archaeological Museum.²⁴ They are not impressed by most of the exhibits, except for the sarcophagus of Alexander the Great which is in such impeccable condition with a wealth of intricate marble carvings

²¹ See *Seyr-e-Europe*, p.247.

²² *Yalanci dolma* is made of grapevine leaves stuffed with a mixture of rice, pine nuts, raisins and spices mixed with some olive oil. The leaves wrap the mixture and are cooked in an oven before being served at room temperature as an appetiser.

²³ Karabet is a common male Armenian name. There is a long tradition of Armenian jewellery craftsmen in Turkey.

²⁴ This museum, founded in the 19th century, was developed by the great Ottoman artist and curator Osman Hamdi Bey (1842-1910) who was its Director for no less than 29 years. It is housed in a most impressive building and has a rich collection of artefacts and historical items.

that it leads them to suspect that perhaps it is not genuine. In this surmise they are correct, as the current website²⁵ of the Istanbul Archaeological Museum indicates that the sarcophagus was discovered in 1887 in the [now Lebanese] city of Sidon and although it is of royal provenance, it does not belong to Alexander the Great.

The next day was particularly important from the viewpoint of the Nawab of Janjira. Meetings had been arranged for him with Turkish ministers and the Chief Dragoman of the British Embassy Gerald Fitzmaurice²⁶ personally escorted the Nawab to the official palaces. Nazli Rafia meanwhile continued her sightseeing by visiting the area of *Nishantashi* – then, as now, a fashionable shopping area populated by the wealthy families of Istanbul.²⁷

At the office of the *Sadrazam* [Ottoman Grand Vizier] the Nawab was hospitably treated to coffee and cigars and had a cordial meeting with the Grand Vizier²⁸ when word arrived that Sultan Abdülhamid was expecting the Nawab's arrival and participation in the *selamlık* ceremony.²⁹ Within the mosque, the Nawab was shown by an aide-de-camp to a special location reserved for visiting Muslim dignitaries. The Sultan, along with a prince, participated in the prayers.

²⁵ The basic link is as follows <http://www.istanbularkeoloji.gov.tr/> and supports a search in English as well.

²⁶ Gerald Fitzmaurice (1865-1939) was a staunch Irish Catholic who served at the British Embassy in Istanbul between 1907 and 1914 as the Senior Dragoman. Dragoman is the Anglicised form of the word 'Tarjuman' but the duties of the Dragoman went far beyond interpretation and covered the whole area of intelligence as well. Most British diplomats visiting Istanbul found him to be the real power within the Embassy. This is also borne out by Nazli Rafia Begum who writes [see *Seyr-e-Europe*, p.255]:

Fitzmaurice has been in Turkey for 20 years. He is extraordinarily intelligent and clever. In fact, all work in the British Embassy can only carry on because of him.

²⁷ Nazli Rafia compares *Nishantashi* to the 'West End' of London [*Seyr-e-Europe*, p.275.]

²⁸ Nazli Rafia mentions that the Grand Vizier had studied at Oxford. However, the Grand Vizier at the time of their visit to Istanbul was Kibrisli Mehmed Kamil Pasha [who was *Sadrazam* between 6 August 1908 and 14 February 1909]. Although the Pasha spoke excellent English, the only *Sadrazam* known to have studied at Oxford in his younger days was Damad Ferid Pasha [*Sadrazam* in 1919 and 1920].

²⁹ This ceremony comprised the rituals attending the reigning Sultan's offering of the congregational Friday prayers in one of the mosques of Istanbul – in the case of the Sultan Abdülhamid, often at the mosque attached to the Yildiz Palace in Istanbul.

Later there was a reception for the visitors and ambassadorial staff. Subsequently the Sultan received the Nawab, guided by Dragoman Fitzmaurice, privately in an anteroom of the palace. The Sultan extended his right hand – which the Nawab took in both of his before kissing it as a sign of respect. There was a certain amount of polite conversation on both sides, with the Nawab mentioning that praying alongside the sultan and also meeting him personally was a rare and signal honour. The Sultan also indicated his pleasure at the meeting and, later, Fitzmaurice mentioned that, in his experience, the Sultan only used this expression when he was genuinely pleased.

On the 5th of September, the Janjira party was invited to tea by the British Ambassador Sir Gerald Lowther, who kindly also sent his launch to pick up his guests and bring them to the large summer residence of the ambassador at Tarabya [Therapia] on the Bosphorus.

The Janjira party had by now shifted from their hotel called the Pera Palas to a newer and cheaper hotel in the Tarabya area. The tea party given by the British ambassador impresses the party because of the delicious tea and cakes but also because of the ceremony with which everything was served.

The entry for the 7th of September refers to various comments by Nazli Rafia on the social customs for women in Turkey, some of which are superficial and some of which are pertinent. She summarises matters by saying that women have both more as well as less freedom than their counterparts in India. They can move around freely in European costume and hairstyles, but their menfolk will not encourage them to mingle with other men.

The 8th of September turns out to be a day of great excitement. The Nawab was invited to view part of the Palace jewels and according to his account, there was a handle of a dagger that was made of emeralds, there were collections of huge uncut emeralds and also a throne encrusted with precious stones. She mentions that this is the same throne referred to in the earlier (1906) travelogue titled *Maqam-e-Khilafat* by Sir Abdul Qadir.

The ladies then went to an afternoon performance of the play described by Nazli Rafia as *Vatan* written by a Turkish writer called Kamil Bey.³⁰ In years gone by she mentions correctly that the public

³⁰ The title of this famous play is actually *Vatan yahut Silistre* [The Homeland or Silistre]. Silistre [in present-day Bulgaria] was the site of a major battle in 1854 between the Ottomans and the Russians. The author of the play is one of the great names in late Ottoman Turkish literature, Namik Kemal Bey.

performance of the play had been prohibited. Nazli Rafia is full of praise for the talented and natural performance of all the actors in the play and says that neither London nor Paris would be able to show anything better. She calls the play 'an exhilarating story of love and war'.

For the 9th of September Nazli Rafia Begum writes:

Atiya went out into the bazaars to buy several necessary items. The purveyors of foodstuffs have an excellent custom here of carrying food and comestibles all in closed containers strapped to their backs. In this way food is not touched by hand but passes to the customer directly in a utensil. Neither do the flies get a chance to alight on the food. Why cannot we adopt such customs in our homeland?

On the 10th of September, friends inform them of the welcome news published in the daily Istanbul newspapers of the award of Ottoman decorations from the Sultan's palace both for the Nawab [the Ottoman Order, First Class] and the Begum [the Order of Charity, First Class]. Nazli Rafia writes that this was a pleasant shock for us, as we were utterly unaware of such a generous award from the Sultan, although Mr Fitzmaurice had indicated much earlier that the Sultan might confer some decoration on the Nawab of Janjira. The party visits the famous mosque of Abu Ayyub Ansari³¹ by the banks of the Golden Horn where they are received by the Secretary of the Sheikh-ul-Islam. They found the surroundings of the mausoleum and mosque to be sparkling clean and were treated to a sumptuous lunch by their host. Nazli Rafia is particularly impressed by the beauty of the tile-work in the mausoleum and the grilles of silver that enclose the grave. Her joy was increased on return to the hotel when she received the official messenger who had brought the beautiful medallion-like decorations for them [including one of the Order of Charity for Atiya Fyzee, Second class]. She describes the precious metals and encrusted gemstones in the decorations.

The 11th and 12th of September are taken up with trips organized by their Turkish friends to pleasant localities on the outskirts of Istanbul,

³¹ Abu Ayyub Ansari was one of the companions of the Prophet Muhammad. When the Prophet migrated to Medina, he announced that he would stay where his camel stopped, and that place happened to be the house of Abu Ayyub Ansari. Abu Ayyub Ansari had a distinguished military career and he died at an advanced age during the campaign of Constantinople (Istanbul) in the time of the Caliph Muawiya. He died near the city walls and lies buried there. Subsequently a mosque and a mausoleum were built on the site.

such as Goksu, where among other food, they sample 'paper helva'.³² The party is also taken to a large fruit orchard where they pluck and eat wild raspberries. On the way back, they purchase peaches and figs which, according to Nazli Rafia, were extremely delicious, literally with honey oozing out of the figs. They return from these trips and wander the streets of *Nishantashi*.

Till their departure from Istanbul on the morning of 19th September, there is a merry whirl of visiting friends and large-scale shopping. However, that is not all. There is no shortage of appointments with other old and new Turkish friends in their mansions as well with some British friends, a few of which are mentioned in detail in the travelogue. Nazli Rafia in particular mentions the family of a former *Sadrazam* called Ferid Pasha and praises them very highly.³³

Nazli Rafia observes that the Turkish women at the theatre and at gatherings pay a lot of attention both to tidiness and the way they look – right down to keeping their finger nails immaculately clean. She also finds the Turkish people to be very polite, helpful and friendly – and concludes that the widespread use of western dress and other examples of overall western appearance has not led to the disappearance of Muslim habits such as hospitality and kindness. She says that Turkish women are retiring, modest and soft-hearted. Furthermore, they are also generous and shower visitors with presents. She wonders whether such fine traditional habits will change with increasing westernization in Turkey.

The trip out of Istanbul takes them via Izmir and the island of Rhodes and then, after a rough crossing of the Mediterranean by night, they arrive at the Egyptian port city of Alexandria, where the party begins its tour of Egypt before finally leaving for Bombay via Aden.

Conclusion

There is a wealth of detail in the travelogue as a whole, and this is also borne out by the Turkish component. Ottoman Turkey, as the only independent Muslim state of the time, was a source of both interest and inspiration to Indian Muslims who had lost their own empire and had become subjects of a colony.

The travelogue is written in a conversational style in fluent, even literary Urdu, with many poetical quotes both from Urdu and Persian.

³² A thin, sweet, crisp circular wafer commonly available in Turkey even today.

³³ It would appear that the *Sadrazam* mentioned is Mehmet Ferid Pasha of Avlonya, who held the post of Grand Vizier for some years after 1903.

The Fyzee sisters were highly observant and were anxious to utilize their experiences abroad to improve the quality of life in India. Such travelogues from the past provide vivid pictures partly of the lives of wealthy people of the time, but also of the conditions of the countries through which they travel.