

**Us and Them: The Idea of Otherness  
in T.E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*  
and F. R. Atay's *Zeytin Dağı*\***

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The theme of this Conference, aptly worded as “Cultural Encounters and Cultural Differences,” gestures towards a wide range of contemporary concepts and theories which in essence have their authentic context in literature, critical theory, history, sociology, psychology, linguistics, anthropology, ethnology, politics, international relations, law, and religion. Yet, it is in the larger and more universal context of cultural studies that they have, over the last three or four decades, been addressed more extensively and interrelatedly through an interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary and synchronic approach.

One such concept is that of *otherness*, which constitutes the leitmotif of this paper. However, before we can describe the cultural meanings of this concept and, for illustration, situate it in T.E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* and Falih Rıfki Atay's *Zeytin Dağı* [*Mount Olive*], it would, for the sake of clarity and contextualization, be necessary for us first to point out briefly the relevance between the two works, and the common ground between the two authors.

In World War I Britain and Turkey fought each other at three major fronts: Gallipoli, Iraq, and Palestine. Historically, both Lawrence and Atay were directly involved in this war and were closely associated with the Palestine Front, which, for Lawrence, also included, in fact far more significantly, the Arab Revolt against Turkey. Before the war, Atay had begun his working life as a junior government official in the “Sadaret”, that is, the Ottoman office of the Grand Vizier; at the same time, he had been affiliated with the Istanbul daily *Tanin*, to which he used to contribute a weekly column entitled “Cumartesi Konuşmaları” [“Saturday Talks”] (Atay 9). When the war broke out in 1914, he was enlisted and, following his short-term basic training at Istanbul War College, he was commissioned as a junior staff

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officer and appointed to the headquarters of Jemal Pasha, Commander-in-Chief of the Palestine Front (Atay 13-14 and 35-37). The headquarters had been set up in the large and well-appointed German guesthouse for pilgrims on Mount Olive in Jerusalem (Atay 5, 13-14 and 37-39). As a staff officer he served Jemal Pasha to the end of the war and experienced and observed at first hand all the suffering and frustrations at the Front. In the closing months of the war in 1918 he wrote part of his memoirs of the Canal operations, which he entitled “Ateş ve Güneş” [“The Fire and the Sun”] but did not publish them because Jemal Pasha, to whom he showed them, did not wish him to do so (Atay 7). Later on he completed his memoirs, which consisted of two pieces entitled “Çöl Destanı” [“The Desert Epic”] and “Zeytin Dağı” [“Mount Olive”], and in 1932 he published all the three pieces under the covering title of *Zeytin Dağı*. The publication of *Zeytin Dağı* soon aroused some controversy and political polemic as regards Atay’s portrayal of Jemal Pasha and a somewhat critical account of his actions (Atay 8). Especially, the loyal supporters of the old “İttihat ve Terakki Partisi” [the Union and Progress Party], which had been in power from the Young Turks Revolution of 1908 to the end of the war and dragged Turkey into the war on the side of Germany and the other Axis Powers ( Karal 9-75, 108-211, 373-399; Fromkin 40-76; Tauber 54-58), vehemently attacked Atay for what they thought a demeaning representation of Jemal Pasha, who had in fact been one of the three most powerful leaders of the Party (Fromkin 43-44, 49 and 58). On the other hand, for rebuttal there were those leading journalists and writers, like Yakup Kadri [Karaosmanoğlu], Hüseyin Cahit [Yalçın], Behçet Kemal [Çağlar] and others who praised *Zeytin Dağı* (Atay 139-140); Yakup Kadri referred to it as “one of the greatest works of the Republican era” (qtd. in Atay 139). Hüseyin Cahit was more enthusiastic in his praise of Atay’s work when he wrote:

*In Zeytin Dağı...[ Atay ] created a monument which will raise his fame and art in Turkish literature to a very high level and make them live forever (qtd. in Atay 140).*

As for T.E. Lawrence, before the war, as an Oxford graduate of history, he had been involved in the British archeological excavations of Carchemish in Northern Syria and worked for the Palestine Exploration Fund for the survey and mapping of Sinai for archeological and future military purposes (Mack 105; Wilson 63-148). When the war broke out, he volunteered for service in the Military Intelligence Section of the British army. In view of his cartographic expertise and his familiarity

with the Middle East, he was appointed in December 1914 to the British Cairo headquarters as a staff officer for maps and intelligence (Mack 130 ff.; Wilson 151 ff.). From Cairo he was soon sent on an intelligence and diplomatic mission to Hejaz to assess and report on the logistics, finance, and other aid needed by Sherif Hussein, Grand Sherif of Mecca, and his four sons in order to stage a widespread Arab revolt against Turkey, whose suzerainty had been extended to the sherifs of Mecca and Medina, the Islamic holy places, since the sixteenth century (Mack 113-115, and 119). For the revolt, Sheriff Hussein expected to be fully financed and supported by Britain and the other allies (Lawrence, *Seven Pillars* 49). On their side, as Lawrence pointed out, the British authorities in Cairo “foresaw credit and great profit for [Britain] in the Arab development” (*Seven Pillars* 62), and, among them, especially High Commissioner Sir Reginald Wingate absolutely supported Lawrence’s findings in Hejaz about the feasibility and expected success of an Arab uprising. Lawrence described this political stratagem as follows:

I urged that the situation seemed full of promise. The main need was skilled assistance; and the campaign should go prosperously if some regular British officers, professionally competent and speaking Arabic, were attached to the Arab leaders as technical advisers, to keep us in proper touch. Wingate was glad to hear a hopeful view. The Arab Revolt had been his dream for years (*Seven Pillars*, 113).

Thereupon, appointed with the task of liaison work between the Arabs and the British authorities in Cairo, Lawrence was sent back on mission to Arabia, where he actively and tactically assisted the management of the Arab Revolt practically put into effect by Sherif Hussein’s four sons, especially by his third son Sherif Feisal who was the *de facto* leader (*Seven Pillars* 115 ff.). Lawrence stayed with the Arab Revolt to the end of the war and soon became a celebrity with his new image as “Lawrence of Arabia.”

It was a personal account of his work for the Arab Revolt that Lawrence attempted to present in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. We say “attempted” because the writing of the book was quite hectic and adventurous. As Lawrence succinctly explained in his “Introductory Chapter” (*Seven Pillars* 21), and also as we learn from his youngest brother A. W. Lawrence’s “Preface” to the book (15-20), he first began to write *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* during the early months of 1919 when, as a member of the British delegation, he was attending the Paris Peace Conference (A. W. Lawrence 15; Mack 282; Wilson 612). About the Christmas of the same year, he lost

a very substantial part of his manuscript (A.W. Lawrence 15; Mack 282-283; Wilson 627). As he pointed out in a leaflet afterwards,

A month or so later I began, in London, to scribble out what I remembered of the first text (qtd. in A.W. Lawrence 15).

This second text was completed within months. Yet, he was not satisfied with it. So he set about writing a new text, which he completed in February 1922. As for the second text, he burnt it “all but one page” (qtd. in A.W. Lawrence 16). In the meantime, he had the final third text, which to him “appeared...still diffuse and unsatisfactory” (qtd. in A.W. Lawrence 16), privately printed in Oxford only in eight copies. Then, in 1926, a limited number of this final text, also called “Subscribers’ Text,” was published for private subscribers (A.W. Lawrence 16-17; Mack 319, 348-349; Wilson 730-773). Finally, in 1935, the year Lawrence was killed in a motorcycle accident, the book was reprinted with some “omissions and alterations...to save hurting the feelings of persons still living” (A.W. Lawrence 18).

Both *Zeytin Dağı* and *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* are personal accounts based on memoirs. Yet, as such, they are not to be considered a personal chronicling of events, situations, and personalities. In fact, under the apparent text of memoirs, especially in the case of Lawrence’s work, lies a subtext of cultural encounter with other ethnicities, which is revealed through a great deal of shrewd and private reckoning. Naturally, under the historic and political circumstances, in which both authors found themselves involved during the war, this cultural encounter with others was not one of recognition and interactive relationship but, in fact, an epitome of discriminated otherness. In this perspective, when deconstructed and viewed intertextually or heterologically, the otherness expressed through both texts, in particular through Lawrence’s text, becomes, to borrow Edward Said’s felicitous phrase used in a different context, “the crudest form of us-versus-them” (8). In fact, the idea of otherness that one senses and discovers in *Zeytin Dağı* is mainly confined to a mild and detached stereotyping of the Arabs and the British in cultural, moral and ethnic terms, while from Lawrence’s account emerges a brutal and aggressive sense of otherness which reaches beyond mere stereotyping and cultural alienism and verges on an ethnic prejudice against the Arabs and a deep-seated racism against the Turks. Lawrence’s ethnic prejudice against the Arabs is expressed through complaints, denigrations, mockery, caricaturization, and sarcasm. However, to serve Britain’s war aims in the Middle East against Turkey and, therefore, to fulfil his mission of the

Arab Revolt, in the field he chose to disguise his prejudice against the Arabs and pretended to assimilate to their way of life in order to suppress his sense of otherness:

I was sent to these Arabs as a stranger, unable to think their thoughts or subscribe their beliefs, but charged by duty to lead them forward and to develop to the highest any movement of theirs profitable to England in her war. If I could not assume their character, I could at least conceal my own, and pass among them without evident friction, neither a discord nor a critic but an unnoticed influence. Since I was their fellow, I will not be their apologist or advocate (*Seven Pillars* 28-29; also, cf. 30).

For him, the Arabs lacked intellectual cultivation and refinement; for instance, when Sherif Hussein boasted to the British delegation of having a military band that had been captured from the Turkish Governor General in Taif, he was “congratulated...on having advanced so far towards urbanity” (*Seven Pillars* 73).

However, Lawrence’s racism, which, on the surface, appears to be a strategical, ideological and established formal attitude towards the Turks as the enemy in a war situation, is fundamentally fostered by inexplicable xenophobic dogmatism and irreducible enmity. It is not merely associated with skin colour, linguistic difference, economic and political dominance or a colonialist attitude; intrinsically and more profoundly, it relates to ethnic personality, history and genetics (cf. Ackermann 21-22). The origins of his racial prejudice against the Turks can be traced back to his undergraduate years at Oxford where, from 1907 to 1911, he studied history with a special interest in the Crusaders’ warfare techniques and military fortifications (Mack 38, 48 ff.; Wilson 44 ff.). During his summer vacations he would go on cycling tours in France to study the castles built in the Middle Ages by the Crusader nobility returning from their campaigns in Syria and Palestine. He was exceedingly carried away by his interest in the subject. So, in order both to do a field study of the subject and to find an answer for himself to the question whether, in the construction of their own castles back at home, the Crusaders had copied the Byzantine and Arab techniques of fortification or had themselves carried their own techniques to the Middle East and used them there, in July of 1911 he set out on a month-long walking exploration of the Crusader fortifications in Palestine, Syria and the Euphrates basin as far out as Urfa and Harran (Mack 68-75; Wilson 52-62). He recorded in a diary his impressions and observations of the area and its ethnic communities. It was on this journey that he made his very first real encounter with the Turks and their culture. We learn from the diary that his cultural encounter with the Turkish natives of the area, whom he discriminated from other positively-perceived local ethnicities such as the Arabs, the Jews, the Kurds, and the

Armenians, was often subverted by his persistent sense of racial and cultural alienism. For instance, when he was staying overnight at a small Turkish village on the “Mezman Su” (*Diary* 19), one of the minor tributaries of the Euphrates, he jotted down the following entry in his diary:

Tuesday, July 25 [ 1911]: Up at 3.45 (dawn) and had a wash in the stream, ate a cucumber, and had a lesson in bread-making from the women. By the way, not a man in the village knows a word of Arabic, so I am rather put to it. All pure Turk, which means very ugly, half-Chinese looking fellows with flat eyes and broad noses, and wide-split tight-pulled lips of thin skin (*Diary* 20).

Apparently, his aversion to the Turks continued to increase and become much stronger in the following years. When, as a member of the British archeological team, he was involved in the excavations at Carchemish in Northern Syria from March 1911 to December 1913 (Mack 100-104; Wilson 78-134), Turkey was fighting the Balkan War, and he strongly hoped that, once Turkey was defeated, the Arabs would seize the opportunity for independence. Hence, in a letter, dated 5 April 1913, he wrote:

As for Turkey, down with the Turks! But I am afraid there is, not life, but stickiness in them yet. Their disappearance would mean a chance for the Arabs, who were at any rate once not incapable of good government (qtd. in Mack 104-105).

During the war, this early prejudice of his against the Turks was replaced by an implacable sense of hatred, which pervaded his account of the Arab revolt in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, and which he never felt the need to conceal. For instance, in a letter he wrote to his mother on 1 July 1916, he praised the Arab Revolt and added:

I hate the Turks so much that to see their own people turning on them is very grateful (*Letters* 84).

It may still seem puzzling to many of us today why he stereotyped the Turks negatively and depicted his cultural encounter with them in scathing terms. Part of the answer may lie in his study of medieval history at Oxford, which aroused in him a lasting romantic fascination with troubadour poetry, French *chansons de geste*, *romans d’aventure*, medieval chivalric life, and, in particular, the Crusaders (Mack 38, 41-55; Allen 7-33). Of course, we know that medieval chronicles and histories about the Crusaders’ campaigns in the Middle East are mostly characterized by an anti-Turkish and anti-Islamic discourse (cf. Joinville 211 ff., 286-287 passim). As we learn from Mack (41-47) and Allen (51-72 passim), at the University, Lawrence read these chronicles and histories with great ecstasy and unfailing interest. Obviously, he was so carried away by the history of the Crusaders that, during the Arab Revolt, he thought of himself as a modern follower of the Crusaders and dreamed of the

liberation of Syria through the implementation of the strategies he had learned from them:

I felt that one more sight of Syria would put straight the strategic ideas given me by the Crusaders (*Seven Pillars* 282).

More fantastically, he may have projected himself into a self-sacrificing Arthurian knight, like, for example, Sir Galahad, set on an arduous quest for the Arab holy grail of liberation and independence. We make this comparison because the one book, which he was reading on the eve of the Arab Revolt, was Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* (*Seven Pillars* 113), which, as Mack has pointed out, he "carried with him throughout the Arabian campaign" (42).

Historically, as Muslims, the Seljuk Turks in Anatolia and other Turkish communities in the medieval Middle East had been at war with the Crusaders and posed a serious threat to the Christian presence in the area (Runciman 1: 59-79 passim, 2: 21-31 passim, 3: passim)). Hence, the negative image of the Muslim Turk, originally stereotyped through the Crusaders' narratives, was further enhanced and augmented throughout later centuries along with the Turkish imperial expansion into the Balkans and Central Europe. Especially, in the era after the Turkish conquest of Istanbul and the consequent demise of the Byzantine Empire in the fifteenth century, in most Western writings about the Turks, be they of history, politics, diplomacy, pilgrimage, travel or trade, this traditional image was maintained recurrently to the extent that the ethnic identity of the Turks as Turkish and their religio-cultural identity as Muslim came to be used interchangeably. Thus, the semantic and cultural borderline between the words "Turkish" and "Muslim" was ignored: the Turk was the Muslim, and the Muslim was the Turk. Consequently, as Muslims, the Turks were most often negatively stereotyped in the Christian West and represented as the only archenemy. Presumably, it is in this context of the traditional Christian and Western stereotyping of the Turkish ethnicity as such that one can safely situate the latent premises and underlying paradigms of Lawrence's xenophobic attitude towards the Turks. However, during the Arab Revolt which, for Britain and her allies, was only a political and tactical manipulation and exploitation of the Arabs in order to defeat Turkey in the Middle East and establish their own hegemony in the region (*Seven Pillars*, 282 passim), Lawrence, as the ablest agent of this policy, carefully split this traditional stereotyping and refrained from reference to the Muslim side of it. Deliberately and most professionally he exploited its ethnic aspect for the

achievement of his government's war aims in the Middle East. So for him and the Arabs in revolt, the Turk was the hated other that had to be utterly destroyed. Therefore, one can conclude from Lawrence's subtexts in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* that, like a crusader knight who undertook the mission to save Jerusalem from what he considered to be the enemies of Christ, also Lawrence in the Arab Revolt assumed the guise of a modern political and cultural crusader for the liberation of the Arabs and their lands from what he believed to be the oppression and tyranny of the Turks.

If we recall that sociologically "stereotypes are most often exaggerations or distortions of reality" (Helmreich 2), the negative perception of the other is essentially formed upon them and becomes the outcome of a subversive process of demystification. In his *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* this was obviously what Lawrence tried to describe. His continuous denigration of the Turks as the ethnically, culturally, morally, and politically contemptible other (*Seven Pillars* 54-56) was part of this demystification process whereby, under the pretext of freedom and independence, he was able to precipitate the already growing Arab discontent of the Turkish rule into an Arab revolt (*Seven Pillars* 44-53). Once demystified through Lawrence's incessant racial and cultural stereotyping, the Turk was no longer a Muslim brother to the Arab but a hateful other and alien that had to be eliminated most mercilessly in the desert through thirst, hunger, sabotage, ambush, banditry, betrayal, and massacre.

It is this very metamorphosis of the brotherly Muslim Turk into a distrusted other and an enemy in the eyes of the Arabs that Atay problematizes throughout *Zeytin Dağı*. He emphatically points out that, although the Arabs had lived under Turkish rule for centuries, they had never been subjected to a process of cultural or ethnic assimilation into a Turkish self (39 ff.). For him, it was the Turks, like the Turkish Azimzades of Damascus and many notable Turkish families of Aleppo, who had lost their cultural identity and become metamorphosed into the Arab self (39). It is clear from his arguments that the cultural encounter between the dominant and the dominated had produced a perverse situation which contravened the principles of imperialism. As he pointed out,

The job of empires is to create colonies and nationalities. Yet the Ottoman Empire had become a milch cow which, leaning its huge body on its side from Thrace to Erzurum, had given its udders into the mouth of its colonies and nationalities and let them suck its milk and blood (41).

Again and again he argues that Turkey had for centuries poured its wealth and human potential into Arabia to prosper and protect it. The holy places



had been impeccably improved, looked after, and reconstructed. Yet, it was an imperialism and exploitation practised and benefited from not by Turkey but by the Arabs under the aegis of Islam (Atay 40 *passim*). Therefore, for Atay, the Arab Revolt was an act of betrayal and treason, a denial of the Turkish sacrifices and services undertaken for Arabia for centuries (39 ff., 58 *passim*). He argues that it was not out of an ideology of independence and nationalism that the Arabs had revolted but that they had been attracted by the British gold and politically manipulated by the British (70-71, 82-85 *passim*). So out of frustration at the futile loss of the lives of what he calls “Türk çocuğu” [“the Turkish boys”] (41) or “Anadolu çocukları” [“the Anatolian boys”] (104), and out of anger at betrayal and Arab hypocrisy, Atay uses a mildly scathing language to describe the manners and under-civilized conduct of the Arabs (81 ff. *passim*). Thus, his idea of otherness is related to his sense of cultural difference but not to racial prejudice and stereotyping. Moreover, unlike Lawrence’s extreme racism and alienism as regards the Turks, Atay never makes a contemptuous and negative reference to the British. With a humanist’s tolerance and unbiased, he just refers to them by their ethnic identity and so simply calls them “İngiliz” [“British”]. In “Çöl Destanı” [“The Desert Epic”] (97-107) and “Ateş ve Güneş” [“The Fire and the Sun”] (111-135), which are both Atay’s epic narratives in the Homeric style of the heroism and self-sacrifice of the Anatolian boys in Sinai and at the Canal, the only interesting stereotyping of the British is through their technological superiority and imperial status; while the Turkish army, which had been utterly exhausted by thirst, hunger, and fatigue, had only rifles and bayonets and was made up of Anatolian boys, the British, who were well-fed and better equipped, consisted mainly of colonial troops and had the necessary military hardware including aircraft (97-135).

To conclude, the idea of otherness that underlies the narratives by Atay and Lawrence displays a great deal of difference in stereotyping and cultural perception. Atay’s attitude towards the Arab other betrays some contempt and denigration while his reference to the British reveals heroic respect and a sense of martial equality. So, the otherness he expresses is benign and self-distancing. On the other hand, Lawrence emphatically reiterates a more damaging and subversive idea of otherness which in fact gestures towards negative stereotyping, alienism, and crude racism. Hence, we may add that his perception of the Turks and the Arabs as two

separate stereotypes of the other fully served the British war aims in the Middle East in World War I.

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### Abstract

In World War I Britain and Turkey fought each other at three major fronts which were Gallipoli, Iraq, and Palestine. Both T.E. Lawrence and Atay were involved in this war at the Palestine Front. When the war broke out, Lawrence joined the British military intelligence and was initially stationed in Cairo, working in the Arab Bureau, while Atay was enlisted in İstanbul and was posted as a junior staff officer to the headquarters in Jerusalem of Jemal Pasha, Commander-in-Chief of the Turkish Palestine Front. Atay stayed with Jemal Pasha to the end of the war and witnessed all the suffering, bloodshed, strains, and treachery of the Palestine Front, and after the war he wrote three separate accounts of his observations and experiences, entitled “Zeytin Dağı” [Mount Olive], “Çöl Destanı” [The Desert Epic], and “Ateş ve Güneş” [Fire and the Sun]. Later in 1932 he published these three pieces jointly under the covering title of *Zeytin Dağı*. T.E. Lawrence, on the other hand, was commissioned by the British military authorities in Cairo to stir up the desert Arabs into a widespread revolt against the Turkish rule in Arabia so that, under the pretext of political independence and sovereignty, the Arabs could be lured into action for the fulfilment of the British war aims in the Middle East. Fired by his fantasies of the medieval Crusaders by whose exploits in the Middle East he had been fascinated, Lawrence regarded himself as a modern crusader dedicated to the salvation of the Arabs and so carried out his mission with frenzy throughout the war. Like Atay, after the war, he wrote a personal account of his campaign with the Arabs, which he published in 1926 as *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. Besides being private war narratives, both *Zeytin Dağı* and *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* have another common ground, which is the depiction of the ethnic, cultural, and political other; Atay’s others are the Arabs and the British military, while Lawrence’s others are the Arabs and the Turks. The representation of otherness by both writers is vastly different and needs to be assessed in the light of their narratives. So this paper is a study of the idea of otherness in both texts. For this purpose, the paper attempts to

demonstrate that, in his attitude towards his Turkish and Arab others, Lawrence was essentially motivated by racism, negative stereotyping, and cultural prejudice, while Atay adopted a more tolerant and humanist approach towards the British and a politically critical and culturally deprecatory attitude towards the Arabs.