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RACE, IMPERIAL POLITICS AND RELIGION IN TAMBURLAINE THE GREAT I & II

Rinchuila Raleng

Research Scholar

English Department, University of Delhi

Delhi, India

Abstract

The paper attempts to critically analyse the two plays of Marlowe's Tamburlaine the Great I and II (1587-1588). It examines the dimensions of Marlowe's racial construction, imperial politics and representation of religion in these two plays. Being written in the Elizabethan era, Marlowe casts the prevailing situation of the period in these two plays. It mainly showcases the English worldview and experience of their contacts with the Easterners and military problem with the East, particularly the mighty Ottoman Empire. As the plays were staged during the period when the expanding Ottoman Empire was a great threat to England and the Europeans, the perspective of the Europeans is largely reflected. Many critics and scholars have found the framework a compelling way to mediate European imperial and colonial desires within the plays, as much as it has been greatly challenged as ahistorical. Apart from the obvious dimensions of imperial and religious concerns that try to overshadow the significance of race, I would argue that there is significant dimension of race and racial hierarchy in the plays. The paper is based on critical reading of the plays and secondary data.

Keywords: Easterners, Elizabethan Era, Imperial Politics, Ottoman Empire, Race, Religion.

Introduction

Marlowe's plays Tamburlaine the Great I and II (2020) demonstrate his awareness of the political and religious conditions of his times. The impact of living in Elizabethan era in which England encountered the Easterners, mainly the Muslims and the military problem are reflected in his plays. These plays are based on the life and achievements of the 14th century powerful conqueror of Central Asia and India named Timur. The real historical figure, Timur/Tamburlaine was viewed by the Europeans as a Saviour for defeating the Ottoman Empire at a time when Turks capture of ever-increasing swaths of south-east Europe seemed unstoppable.¹ He appears to be sympathetic to Christianity, but in reality, he never had any consideration for the Christians. He conquered the Ottoman Empire for sheer desire to expand his empire and not because it was a threat to the Christians. Construction of race and racial hierarchy are significant dimensions inbuilt in Marlowe's plays as the 'racial other' or the 'Easterners'. The playwright portrays the easterners, particularly, the Persians and Egyptians based on their skin colour and physical features. These easterners are further classified into racial hierarchies on certain criteria which are often tinged with political and religious considerations.

Racial Construction and Signifiers

Construction of race and racial hierarchy is showcased in Marlowe's portrayal of the other or the Easterners. The texts clearly cast the whiteness of the English people or for that matter Europeans as superior than the non-whites—the easterners. According to Vaughan (2010), the white or whiteness became the norm of Early Modern stage (92). Arthur Little also points out that the characters in the plays eulogise the "white people—the whiteness of white people—who are being fashioned" (92). The easterners are further differentiated into hierarchical categories. They would consider the Persians and the Egyptians as higher than the Turks. This was mainly due to the assumed identification of the Turks as an embodiment of the Ottoman Empire which was a raging Islamic expansionist and a great threat to the Europeans, especially Britain. The threat of Islam to European Christendom could be another factor.

As the play begins, the characterisation of racial elements becomes apparent. Marlowe's hero Tamburlaine sets certain standard for beauty which is white or fair skin. It unveils Tamburlaine's love for Zenocrate, the Egyptian Princess whom he has kidnapped² by praising her whiteness as the text reveals:

"Zenocrate, lovelier than the love of Jove,
Brighter than is the silver of Rhodope,
Fairer than whitest snow on Scythian hills,
Thy person is worth more to Tamburlaine
Than the possession of the Persian Crown,
Which gracious stars have promised at my birth" (I: 1.2.99-104).

¹ See Barlett (2012).

² Zenocrate, the Egyptian princess and her train of treasures were captured by Tamburlaine and his gang as she was travelling from Media in Persia to return to her father, the Sultan of Egypt.



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Tamburlaine continues to praise her saying:

“With milk-white harts upon an ivory sled,
Thou shalt be drawn amidst the frozen pools,
And scale the icy mountain’s lofty tops,
Which with thy beauty will be soon resolved” (I: 1.2.110-113).

The passage certainly portrays the identity of Zenocrate as different from her race and positioned her as an “othered” because of her fair skin for which Tamburlaine repeatedly praises her. Tamburlaine considers her fit to be wife of a conqueror because of her beauty (I: 1.2.41-43). As Tamburlaine himself is described as having pale skin (I: 2:1.8-23), his own whiteness and physical beauty apparently is considered compatible to Zenocrate’s physical characteristics. Thus, Tamburlaine’s idea of Zenocrate is linked directly to his recognition of her racial difference, and he therefore claims to privilege her fair skin and places her above both crown and richness.

The Persian Lord, Theridamas is also praised and judged based on his physical appearance (1:1.2.206-209). Therefore, Marlowe portrays Tamburlaine, Zenocrate and Theridamas who are racially higher than Bajazeth, the Turkish Sultan. Tamburlaine with his dual identity as a Scythian and a Persian characterises as the enemy of the Turks. Tamburlaine himself is also presented in the text³ through visual signifiers that would have made his Scythian identity even more attractive to early modern audience. He is also reportedly described with superior physical characteristics as “of stature tall and straightly fashioned, so large of limbs, his joints so strongly knit, such breadth of shoulders as might mainly bear Old Atlas’ burden; twixt his manly pitch, a pearl more worth than all the world is placed, wherein by curious sovereignty of art are fixed his piercing instruments of sight” (I: 2:1.8-23). He is also depicted as embodying “pale of complexion, wrought in him with passion, his lofty brows in folds do figure death, about them hangs a knot of amber hair” (ibid.).

From the above text, it is clear that the Scythian is distinguished as an embodiment of masculinity and power. The text specifically refers to his pale complexion and amber hair, a distinction that likely set him apart from the Turkish figures. These characteristics are also based on racial dimension.

Tamburlaine’s first encounter with his soon-to-be friend and commander Theridamas showcases another instance of the judgemental elements of appearance. Tamburlaine admires and respects Theridamas who is his Persian foe, even before they could exchange anything more than names. He declares:

“With what a majesty he rears his looks!
In thee, thou valiant man of Persia,
I see the folly of thy emperor.
Art thou but captain of a thousand horse,
That by characters graven in thy brows,
And by thy martial face and stout aspect,
Deserv’st to have the leading of an host!” (I: 1.2.206-212).

In their first meeting itself, Tamburlaine immediately extends admiration and respect to his Persian foe as a worthy opponent, a sheer difference of treatment on his encounter with the Turkish Bajazeth. Throughout the two plays, Tamburlaine’s forces remain largely Persian. According to Grogan by repeatedly highlighting Tamburlaine's Persian identity, Marlowe links Eastern religious schism and political ambition in his play, although the implications of this convergence are worked out more fully in Part II. Besides, by rewriting Mongol (probably Sunni) Timur as Persian (implicitly Shi’a) Tamburlaine, Marlowe transforms a narrative of tribal warmongering into a more globally and domestically resonant account of religious conflict (54). It is obvious that Tamburlaine’s self-fashioned identity in the play as a Persian rather than a Scythian Shepherd highlights his political ambition and strategy. The play dramatizes intra-Islamic conflict between an insistently Persian Tamburlaine and his Turkish enemies. Grogan’s essay “Dramatizing Islamic Schism” (2012) argues for the profound anti-Ottoman and domestic significance of Persia and Persians in early modern English drama. Moreover, as Protestant England well knew, the implication of religious schism is not just doctrinal and social, but also geo-political. For early modern English audience, Islamic schism manifests most visibly as ongoing conflict between ottoman and the Persians.⁴

We also find the construction of race in Tamburlaine’s initial confrontation with Bajazeth. Here race is used for derogatory

³ Menaphon, one of the Persian lords told Cosroe, the Persian King’s brother about the physical appearance of Tamburlaine.

⁴ It may be noted that for early modern English audience, Islamic schism manifests most visibly as ongoing conflict between Ottoman and the Persians.



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purposes within the dialogue as Bajazeth introduces himself as “the greatest potentate of Africa” (I: 3.3.76) and to note the “presumption of this Scythian slave!” (I: 3.3.83). In turn, Tamburlaine ascertains the racial and social positions when he responds: “And know, Turk, that those which lead my horse; Shall lead thee captive through Africa” (I: 3.3.88, 89). Both characters place emphasis on each other’s race as a point of insult which is clearly seen within the text. Their figurations of each other’s respective race are apparently negative and imagined in relation to the plays’ multi-racial cast. Tamburlaine instead of calling him by name or his title, he calls him ‘Turk’ (I: 3.3.88-90). Bajazeth is stripped off his nobility, his dominance over African kings, and is demeaned through denotation as a ‘Turk’. In this instance both characters insultingly identify the other in terms of race. Tamburlaine even goes to the extent of claiming to parade the ‘Turk’ through Africa as a spectacle. Tamburlaine also degrades the Turkish people before his encounter with Bajazeth by claiming that “Turks, Turks are full of brags and menace more than they can well perform” (I: 3.3.3-4). He decries Bajazeth’s “damned train, the scum of Africa, inhabited with stragglng runagates” (I: 3.3.65, 66). Such insulting and demeaning words of Tamburlaine towards Bajazeth suggest that he seems to privilege Europeans or the Western race above a generalised Eastern, Turkish race /people.

Marlowe has a scheme of differentiating the Muslims which to some commentators is rather ahistorical. He cast Mongol Timur and Turkish Sultan Bayezid as contrasting characters in many ways although both are supposedly Muslims. Chew argues in this regard that Marlowe, on some occasions, departed from the historical facts. Marlowe’s prejudice against the Turks “led him to portray the Sultan [Bajazeth] as insolently boastful before the battle and impotently raging when a prisoner. The greatness of Tamburlaine would have been enhanced, not lessened, had the dramatist conceived his principal opponent as worthy of his steel” (Chew 472). Tamburlaine is portrayed as a mighty king who defeats Bajazeth while Bajazeth is portrayed as a weak and defeated monarch who is being fed on the scraps and leftovers of his captor (I: 1.4.2.108) and who Tamburlaine used as a foot-stool on which he mounted his horse (1:4.2.38).

Hence, many critics, amongst whom are Chew, Brown, Thomas and Tydeman, Matar, and Vitkus are of the idea that Marlowe intended to “debase” Bajazeth and paint him in the dimmest colours. These critics attribute to this negative portrayal to the historical sources Marlowe might have utilized when writing his play.⁵ McJannet contends that Marlowe opted to follow Foxe’s anti-Muslim account. She opines that “His [Foxe’s] hostility to Islam and the Turks overrides any attention to the human or political dimensions of Ottoman history. All the Turks are reduced to devilish automatons who murder and pillage without any evidence of recognizable human feeling” (58). The question that may be raised here is: why did Marlowe and his European fellows loathe Bayezid and his fellow countrymen so strongly? The answer for this question would not be that difficult to find. At that time, the Ottoman Empire invaded many European countries and threatened to conquer more. Europeans would consider the Ottomans as the “menace” of the world (I: 3.3.4); no single European country was far from Ottoman aggression. Although the Europeans view both Timur and Bayezid as ruthless invaders, they loathed the Turks more due to the threat of the Ottoman Empire. However, despite the fact that the antagonism that was felt at that time between the Ottomans and the Europeans, many European countries were involved, in some way or another, in commercial and political agreements with the High Porte in Constantinople. It is also seen that the relationship between the East and the West, between Islam and the West, has never been great; it has always been tense, yet interrupted by intervals of friendship and cooperation. Emily Bartels argues that there is a kind of “double-sided” attitude by the Westerners towards the Muslims. She opines that Westerners seemed to “admire” Moorish, Turkish or Oriental characters and loathe them at the same time: they admire their advanced way of life and loathe their beliefs (Bartels 23).

In part II of the Play, an antagonistic relationship is also found between the Europeans and the East- Turkish king which is seen through the encounter between the King of Natolia and the King of Hungary. Orcanes leads the Turkish forces as the “King of Natolia” (II: 1.1.14) and makes a pact with Sigismund, “the King of Hungary” (II: 1.1.9) to oppose Tamburlaine and come to each other’s aid. However, Sigismund breaks “the articles of peace/ and solemn covenants...both confirmed...by [Sigismund’s] Christ and by [Orcanes’] Mahomet” (II: 2.2.35-38), and attacks a weakened Orcanes. Orcanes declares that “If there be Christ, we shall have victory” (II: 2.2.75), and subsequently Sigismund’s forces are defeated. Ultimately, Sigismund himself is denied a proper burial and left “for fowls to prey upon” (II: 2.3.48). Their clash presents the sole representation of Europeans in conflict with figures of racial alterity in the plays, and Sigismund’s company apparently offers the closest racial representation to the English audience.

Staging of alterity in Tamburlaine, especially the Turks, is shown in negative and demeaning ways. By degrading and humiliating the Turkish people in the plays, Marlowe implicitly conveys that the Europeans are in every way higher and stronger than the Eastern/ Turkish people; whereas, the historical account proves the other way round. The text shows many instances that the

⁵ Among the main sources are: Pedro Mexia, *Sylva de varia lecion* (Seville, 1543), a Spanish text which was translated into English by Thomas Fortescue and it was published under the title of *The Foreste, or Collection of Histories* (1571); Paolo Giovio, *Short Treatise upon the Turkes* (1546), translated by Ashton; Petrus Perondinus, *Vita Magni Tamerlanis* (Florence, 1551) and John Foxe, *Actes and Mounnments of the English Martyrs* (1570). See Leslie Spence (1926), especially p. 181.



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Ottoman Empire was a threat for the Europeans. They are more powerful in every way than the Europeans. Bajazeth's confidence also reflects the condition of Europe's fear of the Ottoman power. He believes that his army is "invincible" (I:3.1.7) by boasting as:

As many circumcised Turks we have,
And warlike bands of Christians renied,
As hath the ocean or the Terrene Sea,
Small drops of water, when the moon begins,
To join in one her semi-circled horns (I:3.1.8–12).

The above-mentioned lines certainly reflect the might and power of the Ottoman Empire which is certainly a threat for the Europeans. Bajazeth also claims how his forces made all Europe quake with fear (I: 3.3.166). Though the racial alterity in these plays are Easterners, Edward Said's idea of Orientalism which is a "Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient" (Said 1978:11) cannot be applied in this context. This perspective translates Tamburlaine and its characters through a West-East binary in which the varying Asian identities of the play are imagined stereotypically as a by-product of the West's desire to dominate the binary and construct an East that is undeniably beneath them culturally, biologically, and intellectually.

Many critics disagree with this view and argue that Tamburlaine cannot simply be understood as a prediction of English imperial desire through dramatic tropes regarding popular conception of the East. Jonathan Burton encapsulates this repudiation of Orientalism from a New Historicist perspective in his essay "Anglo-Ottoman Relations and the Image of the Turk in Tamburlaine" by dismissing that Marlowe's plays are 'not examples of early Orientalism' but "rather, they are illustrations of a separate, but equally complex and unsettling European relationship with Islam (Burton 2000: 152). He claims that "the value of Said's Orientalism has been its indication of the complex distortions of American and European discourses of the East that textually restructure foreign cultures and traditions in the interest of establishing and maintaining Western superiority". According to him, the flaw of Said's work is "its availability as a matrix to be applied to any East-West encounter. The ahistorical application of Said's or other postcolonial theories to this period has the potential to produce distorting, reductive arguments." Bartels (1992) acknowledges the might of the Ottoman Empire as well in her essay Double Vision of the East – Imperial Construction in Tamburlaine, wherein she states that "the East was the home of England's most powerful and threatening non-European competitor for the world's land and wealth, the Turks, who had already established an empire" (p. 4).

Imperial Politics and Religion

The English (England's) conception of Ottomans, Persians, Scythians, Egyptians, and themselves were conditional, flexible and representative of a complex political climate. Tamburlaine rises from Scythian origin and refers to himself as "the Persian King" (I: 2.7.65, 81). His imperialist ambition is well inbuilt in both the plays. Even in the later part of the play, Tamburlaine's imperial insatiable thirst still continues wherein he laments: "And shall I die and this unconquered?" (II: 5.3.150).⁶

In the course of his imperialist campaign, he conquers the powerful Ottomans (I: 3.3.268). Throughout Part I of the play, Marlowe seeks to distance Tamburlaine from Islam, figuring him in contrast to Bajazeth who claims Muhammad as a kinsman and swears "by the holy Alcoran ... [but make Tamburlaine] a chaste and lustless eunuch" (I: 3.3.76–77).

Having positioned in stiff opposition against the Muslim faith, Tamburlaine considers Quran as Turkish Alcoran and it has to be burned down which he did in the succeeding play (Play II). Tamburlaine even denigrates Mahomet⁷ who cannot be trusted or relied upon and the vows the Turks (Muslims) made in their religion cannot be trusted, Islam being inherently profane.⁸ Thus, in the early part of the play (Part I), Marlowe purposely muted the religious identity of Tamburlaine but emphasizes on Bajazeth's Muslim identity that is mocked to a great extent (I:3.3.92). Though Tamburlaine never clearly identifies himself with any particular religion, a defeated Bajazeth considers that his defeat would be a joy for the European Christendom. He expresses that:

Now will the Christian miscreants be glad,
Ringing with joy their superstitious bells,
And making bonfires for my overthrow (I: 3.3.314-16).

⁶ There are many other examples which reflect the colonial and imperial concerns of the play. Some of them are: Tamburlaine expects to grow his empire as large as the area of the land the sun shines on in a day (I:1.2.44) and he also stated, "So from the East unto the furthest West Shall Tamburlaine extend his puissant arm" (I:3.3.325-326).

⁷ Referring to Prophet Mohammad.

⁸ See Bevington, p. 421.



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Despite Bajazeth’s identification of Tamburlaine the Great as a representation of Christendom, Marlowe seems to strategically distance Tamburlaine from Christianity. Marlowe’s Tamburlaine defies Bajazeth, his religion and seeks to rouse him to be out of Europe (I: 3.3.46). Marlowe also portrays Mahomet as another meaningless religious indication as the Muslim characters in the plays and curses him since he did not intervene and help them while they needed him. This is even made clearer when Zabina, the wife of Turkish Sultan rants— “O cursed Mahomet” (I:3.3.3).

Tamburlaine’s main imperial ambition is also known from the text that “I will first subdue the Turk, and then enlarge” (I: 3.355). The text clearly shows that Tamburlaine has great ambition to defeat the Turks and further expand his empire. The text also reflects Marlowe’s (a European) colonial and imperial concerns in the east.

Marlowe further depicts the inhuman treatment and torture of the European Christians by the mighty Turks as:

Those Christian captives which you keep as slaves,
Burdening their bodies with your heavy chains,
And feeding them with thin and slender fare, That
naked row about the terrene Sea,
And when they chance to breathe and rest a space,
Are punish’d with bastones so grievously...
That make quick havoc of the Christian blood (I: 3.355-67).

As the play enters Part II, Tamburlaine began to be cast as a Muslim who swore on Mahomet (II: 1.3.125). His characterisation of being a Muslim appears to make him as an enemy to Christians. This part showcases much brutality and violent acts. Although, he identifies himself as a Muslim, he goes on killing many Muslims brutally, particularly the Turks. He does not spare to even kill his own son just because his son does not toe his ambitious military campaign and expected martial character. He also burns down the Quran (II:5.1.275). When Tamburlaine orders the holy books to be burned, he abusively uses the words Turkish Alcoran (II: 5.1.172). Tamburlaine with his dual identity as a Scythian and a Persian is ideally placed as the natural enemy of the “Turk”. So, for the Persian Tamburlaine, even the Quran becomes Turkish Alcoran (Grogan 2012: 59).

It can also be inferred that Marlowe intentionally and strategically tries to separate the Persianized Tamburlaine with the Turks by particularly using the word Turkish Alcoran while burning it. He takes sides with the Persians by calling himself as Persian king while fighting against his foe, the Turkish Sultan. Marlowe is well aware of the geopolitics of his times- the division and the enmity between the Persians and the Ottoman Turks. Tamburlaine’s identification with the Persians also reflects his political agenda and strategy. He does not want to openly show that the killings of the Muslims and burning of the holy books (Quran) are done by a European Christian but by a Persian Muslim. Tamburlaine does all the worst things, but puts the blame on the Muslims themselves as he proclaims himself as a Muslim by referring himself as the Persian king. This is seen as his imperial politics just as the politics of the early modern times. Elizabethan England considered the Ottoman Empire as a threat and loathes them, but does not want to openly reveal them, as they still need their support and friendship. Burton (2000) observes that "from its foundation, England's policy on trade with the Ottoman Empire depended upon saying one thing and doing another" (p. 132).

All these reflect Marlowe’s ambitious imperial politics and religious fanatical character which attracted criticism from many scholars. One most notable criticism was on the aspect of Tamburlaine’s religious affiliation and the play’s approach on religion that have remained a hotbed of critical debate. On the religious dimension, Watkins (2012) in her essay “Justice is a Mirage: Failures of Religious Order in Marlowe’s Tamburlaine Plays” points out its ambiguity because despite “some of the most gruesome deaths” that happened with the Muslim characters in the plays, Marlowe refuses to attribute them as “Christian victories over false gods, as early modern politicians might have done” (p. 173). She is of the view that “the plays’ larger attitude toward religion [appears to be] ... that they deliberately contest the idea that any one system of faith can fully explain human events” (p. 165). In fact, Tamburlaine does not endorse Christianity (II: 1.3.125) although there are situations where the audience would sense his tolerance towards Christendom.

Conclusion

The element of race is a prominent feature in Tamburlaine and there are ample portions that the two plays depict in support of race-based interpretations. Construction of race and racial hierarchy is also obviously represented. The presence of physical signifiers within the text clearly shows the scheme of racial construction. Such construction of racial alterity is significant before the audience of the English people. Tamburlaine repeated emphasis and admiration on whiteness/fairness and physical appearance in the case of Zenocrate and Theridamas on one hand, and the contemptuous treatment of Bajazeth with a typical eastern physical appearance on the other is a clear case of discrimination based on racial criteria.



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Tamburlaine also uses 'racial differentiation' ('racial hierarchy') as an instrument to carry out his imperial ambition. After establishing himself as the king of Persia, he fights against the Turkish Sultan of the powerful Ottoman Empire. Tamburlaine's racial contempt for the Turkish Sultan, its faith (Islam), the muting of his (Tamburlaine's) religion and the considering of the Turks lower than the Egyptians and the Persians certainly reflect racial, religious and imperial elements and political agenda.

Some critics opine that Marlowe's muting of Tamburlaine's religion is for the reason that Marlowe does not want to openly show the defeat and gruesome deaths of Muslims in the play as victory of Christians over false gods. Infact, Elizabethan England loathes them and their belief, but at the same time wants to associate with them through trade and also maintain their friendship for their own benefit.

In the final analysis, it may be concluded that Marlowe's Tamburlaine is largely a representation of the perception and attitude of the early modern period (the Elizabethan England) towards the easterners, particularly the Ottoman Empire which is mainly geo-political in nature wherein elements of race, religion, socio-economic and political agenda are articulated.

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