

FICTION OR PRECONCEPTION: THE ‘APE’ ALLEGORY IN ROSE MACAULAY’S *THE TOWERS OF TREBIZOND*

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ABSTRACT

In *The Towers of Trebizond*, in Chapter 22, Rose Macaulay begins to train an ape named Suliman which she bought before leaving Turkey. Though she criticizes the mission activities carried out by the Church, she intends to implement mission on this ape. With the supposition that it originally belonged to mountains and has not climbed up the path of civilization, she organizes a ‘civilization’ course for it, aiming to ultimately have an Anglican, emancipated and civilized ‘human being’. In this respect, it could be said that Macaulay’s perspective of Turks and their need to get civilized are represented with the allegorical ape. When the writer’s overall attitude towards the people living in Turkey is taken into account, it could be suggested that she intentionally created such a fictitious ape character to denote an uncivilized Turkish person. It is known that Rose Macaulay actually visited Turkey and Cyprus in 1950s, and shared her impressions in her letters to her sister. In these letters, she regards the Turks as ‘the most inferior’ people of the world in terms of intellectual capacity, which in part explicates why she chose an ape to train both spiritually and culturally. Therefore, in this study, whether the ape character in this novel is a product of fiction or preconception will be examined, mainly referring to Macaulay’s own writings.

Key Words: Rose Macaulay, Ape Allegory, The Towers of Trebizond, Prejudice

THE LIFE AND WORKS OF ROSE MACAULAY

In this study, the focus will be the ‘ape’ character in the work. Whether it is a character just for the sake of fiction or an allegory representing the Turkic image in Macaulay’s mind will be discussed.

In *The Towers of Trebizond*, in Chapter 22, Rose Macaulay begins to train an ape named Suliman which she bought before leaving Turkey. She sets a multidimensional civilization course for the ape, including religious, cultural, moral and spiritual training. This ape and its steps up the path of civilization are so important for Macaulay that she allocates an entire chapter for it. The book is semi-autobiographical, which makes it in part roman a clef. For this reason, throughout the paper,

Macaulay's historical journey to Turkey and Cyprus is going to be helpful to clearly analyse the ape character.

Emily Rose Macaulay (1 August 1881 – 30 October 1958) was born in Rugby, Warwickshire the daughter of George Campbell Macaulay, a Classical scholar, and his wife, Grace Mary. Among both of her parents' ancestors and relatives were many clergymen. This clerical heritage would affect Rose especially in the last years of her life. Her religious education started at a very early age, four, when her mother explained to her and her sisters and brother about God and taught them to say a simple prayer (Smith, 1972: 22). Because of her mother's illness, they had to move to a warmer place, Varazze, Italy. According to Jane Emery, writer of *Rose Macaulay: A Writer's Life*, this small town offered her many opportunities and contributed to her development much:

Until she was 13 she would live much of her life out of doors in a state of freedom and delight, which would shape her mind and spirit, sharpen her senses, nourish her imagination, and generate an unquenchable thirst for adventure and for the means with which to capture and understand her experience (22).

While in Varazze, because Rose's dream of growing up to be a man does not come true as she felt herself like a boy rather than a girl, when she was thirteen, her father forces her to conform to her prescribed gender identity. As a devout Christian, her mother supplied them with 'Prayer Book Lessons' every Sunday and made them learn the collects by heart (Smith, 1972: 29). They returned to England in 1894.

Rose's first published piece of work was in 1898 in the school magazine while she was a student at Oxford High School. She showed an enthusiastic interest in history. Eventually, she studied Modern History at Somerville College where many famous people studied such as Margaret Thatcher and Indira Gandhi. Vera Farnell, who retired as Somerville's Vice Principal, Dean, and French Tutor in 1947 states that the primary objective of the school "[is] based on an idea of intellectual integrity and independence, of a wide tolerance and of a liberal attitude to innovation" (Emery, 64). This school was so influential in Rose's later life. For instance, she was mostly in the pursuit of finding a liberated life for herself and others and offering emancipating power of Anglican Church to people she met; and she never got married and had journeys to different parts of the world such as Turkey and the USA.

Macaulay, a prolific writer, wrote her first novel, *Abbots Verney*, in 1906. When the book was published, she was twenty-five and she was deemed 'young novelist'. Following the novels *The Furnace* and *The Secret Rives*, she published *The Valley Captives* in which she wrote about her own brother who was murdered by Varazzian robbers. Smith suggests that Aulay's death affected her deeply and though she had developed more agnostic beliefs in a strictly religious environment in her childhood, her agnostic belief started to become more religious and in the next few years she became a dedicated believer (Smith, 1972: 55). In most of her books, she discussed "the idea of rejection, loss, failure, of

being at odds with society" (Smith, 1972: 59). According to Jane Emery, Macaulay inherited this tendency to gloomy feelings partly from her father (Emery, 79).

In World War I, she served in the army as a nurse and after the war, because of her competence in Italian, she was sent to Ministry of Information where she met her lifelong love Gerald O'Donovan. Gerald was a married man, and a love affair similar to this appears in *The Towers of Trebizond* between Laurie and Vere. In the last years of her life, Father Johnson (a priest) and she send letters to each other. This relationship contributed her reunion with the Church: "Her spiritual 'exile' and the torments of remorse and contrition were left behind, in profound thankfulness for the Christian life with its 'new dimension', as she called it, she longed to share with others the blessed experience of forgiveness" (Smith, 1964: 23). In such a mood, she wrote *The Towers of Trebizond*. Additionally, she creates the fictional representation of historical Macaulay as Laurie in the book. The mentioned examples from her life show us that the novel is a roman a clef to great extent and thus it gives the outline of Macaulay's

The Towers of Trebizond, Rose Macaulay's most famous novel, mostly takes place in Turkey in 1950s. The book is an example of travel-book genre. She is believed to have completed it in 1956 after her visit to Turkey in 1954. The book, full of irony and fantasy, is semi-autobiographical. The main characters are Laurie (Macaulay herself), Aunt Dot, Father Chantry-Pigg and Dr. Halide. While Dr. Halide is a Turkish Anglican, the others are British Anglicans. They start their excursion in İstanbul and visit many places in Turkey including Trabzon, Rize, Giresun, İzmir, Kayseri and Hatay. These places are religiously and historically important for Christianity. They introduce their missionary ideas to people they meet during their travels, sometimes by telling the superiorities of the Anglican Church, sometimes by degrading the beliefs of the people they meet. Additionally, they observe the daily life of Turkish people and throughout the book they criticise Turkish people in terms of their religion and culture on the grounds that they do not belong to Western perspective in terms of faith and traditions.

While they are in Trabzon, Aunt Dot and Father Chantry-Pigg leave for Russia and Laurie goes on her journey in Turkey. After Turkey, she reaches the Middle East and finds herself in the middle of the war between Arabs and Israelites. Then, she returns to England and starts to train an ape which she brought back from İstanbul. Finally, Macaulay ends her novel by laying great emphasis on her own paradoxes in terms of religious doctrines.

Chapter 22 of the book starts with these lines: "Soon after this I collected my ape from its quarantine and went down to Aunt Dot's house..." (Macaulay, 193). This is the ape she brought back from İstanbul to London. The reader is captivated with a training course for it and Laurie's intriguing and stimulating sense of humour: "I was determined to educate this ape, and to find out how high it could climb up the path of civilization, and how near to a man or woman it could get. It would, I thought, shed some light on human progress from the ape stage" (193). As stated in the introduction, I will try to discuss whether this ape character is a fictitious animal character or an allegory for Turks in the paper.

RELIGIOUS TRAINING

For most of her life, Rose Macaulay considered herself as agnostic, not belonging to any kind of Church, though she discusses the superiority of Anglican Church to the others many times. She, as Laurie in the novel, criticizes Aunt Dot and Father-Chantry Pigg for their missionary thoughts and activities. The emancipating or liberating power and feminine emphasis of Anglican Church seem to have gained significance for Macaulay; therefore, throughout the book, she foresees the probable emancipated situation of Turkish women with their acquaintance with the Church. However much she tends to suggest that she has an agnostic belief or is a non-practising Christian, it could be argued that, particularly in her seventies, she sticks to the Church and its doctrines as suggested by Çıraklı: “She did publish the book after her reunion with the Church of England so the novel could be a sign of her liberation from the long-term resentment at God and Christianity” (Çıraklı, 171). Also, her preference, ‘Trebizond’ not ‘Trabzon’, for the title of the book might result from the common perception that the name ‘Trebizond’ symbolizes its Christian past.

At the very beginning of the book, Laurie states the aim of their excursion to Turkey as: “We were off in three weeks on another mission investigation expedition, this time to Turkey and the Black Sea, to find out how successful an Anglican mission in the neighbourhood of Trebizond seemed likely to be, and how it would be regarded by the local population” (13-14). Accordingly, Macaulay organizes a religious education or a sort of missionary activity for the ape, similar to the one she dreams for Turks in real life: “I was teaching it a little religion” (196). As a result, because of her punishment, by speaking to it very sharply, giving the dullest food and chaining it up for a while, for its mischievous behaviour driving the car on its own and barely avoiding to overrun a gardener, she concludes that it has developed conscience and sense of sin. To attain its religious pace, Laurie takes it to the Church to join the sermons. She teaches it to genuflect and witnesses that it even crosses itself. In the end, according to Laurie, it becomes a very devout Anglo-Catholic:

During the sermon it leaned against me and fell asleep, snoring a little, because it was rather old-fashioned, and possibly something of an anti-clerical too. I thought it was a fine convert from the Moslem religion, to which I suppose it had nominally belonged before (197).

The ape’s name is ‘Suliman’, which is both an Islamic and Turkish name. After its conversion, she decides to give it a ‘more Christian’ name for the celebration of its emancipation from its burdens, which, according to Macaulay, it inherited from its native culture and religion.

CLIMBING UP THE PATH OF CIVILIZATION

Laurie wants the ape to start from the beginning where all human beings started, painting pictures on cave walls. Accordingly, she puts it into an empty room with a bowl of paint and a brush. Its

drawings look meaningless to her and she mocks the ape's drawings as surrealist or some sort of abstract. Moreover, she tries to teach it the alphabet but it mostly fails to grasp it. In its attempts to play sports such as chess and tennis, it succeeds in tennis which in the beginning mostly requires physical ability while it fails to play chess as the play merely needs mental ability. Driving a car appears as its favourite activity and it even drives it on its own and barely avoids running over a gardener. Changing gears becomes an obstacle for the ape again as it requires reasoning, decision making and timing. To sum up, the ape does well in physical activities even though its attempts in mental ones end up in vain. Macaulay, in the novel, criticizes the mental inabilities she comes across in Turkey, such as their fruitless talk with Turkish police and their problem in understanding even their mother tongue. Likewise, in one of her letters to her sister when she was in Cyprus, she writes about her perception of the Turks' mental abilities as follows: "I had an interesting talk with a German this morning who has lived in Turkey for 17 years. He thinks Turks on the whole (as I do) the stupidest people in the world, and not really belonging to Europe" (Smith, 1972: 166). It is a well-known fact that it is a general tendency in most parts of the world to make an analogy between a stupid person with an ape. Macaulay's allegorical ape in the novel seems to be also an example of this tendency. As stated above, with the religious and moral aspects of the course as well as its sessions about daily life, the ape, according to Laurie, develops its level of understanding and climbs up the path of civilization to a limited degree. For this reason, Macaulay concludes that they need another crusade against Turks in order that they could be liberated and civilized.

Laurie is not content with the situation of the ape at the beginning; however, she is somewhat satisfied with its conversion to Christianity and adoption of civilization in the end. This sort of start and finish for the ape seems to have been drawn from her assessments about Turks and her dream to emancipate them through conversion to Christianity and civilization respectively. It is possible to learn much about Macaulay's ideas about Turks from both the novel and her letters to her sister written while she was travelling across Turkey and Cyprus. Throughout the novel, all the characters criticize almost everything in Turkey, including people's faith, culture and daily life. Most of the time, she reaches the theories from practices. In other words, from the scenes she historically witnessed or created in the novel, she draws a theoretical picture for the reader. For instance, in her search for money to live on during her stay in Turkey, she wants to hire her camel to a passer-by couple, ending up with her astonishment and a criticizing/satirical induction. She offers her camel to the couple as the woman was carrying something heavy on her back and the man was walking in front of her. After a short bargain, the man accepts to hire it and to Laurie's astonishment, he jumps on the camel, yet leaving the woman with a huge load on her back and still following him. This scenery tells Laurie that:

I did not have much luck with the women, there was probably something in the Koran against accepting lifts from strangers on camels, but men Turks, owing to thinking there

is something in the Koran about how they must not tire themselves, and quite likely there is, the Koran being most odd, are usually ready to be carried by anything that will carry them (137).

Her preconception against the Koran is strengthened and solidified with this experience. She assumes that this couple are the authoritative reference for her induction. Almost all the negative appearances in the novel are attributed to the doctrines of the Koran as well. A shift from Christianity to Islam in Turkey, especially in Trebizond, seems to have meant the destruction of civilization, and a possible shift from Islam to Christianity would rebuild the lost body and soul of the civilization, as happened to the ape with a tried-and-true technique implemented by Laurie in Chapter 22.

Another noteworthy point about the uncivilized situation of the ape in the novel is its inability to produce meaningful sounds: “When it was angry, it set up a great gibbering and chattering, and whenever it could it cheated” (193). The two verbs defining the ape’s way of articulating sounds (‘gibbering’ which means speaking meaninglessly and ‘chattering’ which means speaking foolishly) might denote Macaulay’s perception of Turks as ‘barbarians’:

I spent most time imagining the Byzantine courtiers and clergymen talking of the barbarians who were threatening the Empire and later, after Constantinople had fallen, and Trebizond was the Empire, and debating how to hold it, how much tribute could be paid to Turks, how best to form an anti-Turkish union, whose eyes should be put out, what envoys should be sent to Rome (118).

After the fall of Constantinople to Turks in 1453, Byzantine Empire had to move its capital from Constantinople to Trebizond, which only lasted eight years and conquered by Mehmet II in 1461. Obviously, Laurie longs for the Byzantine and Christian past of Trebizond and postures that the capture of Trebizond by Turks was a regression to ‘barbarism’. The general conception of Turks’ being barbarians seems to have been shared by Macaulay as well. The plausible point here is that, as the word ‘barbarian’, in its literal meaning, designates the person whose speech is incomprehensible, in other words, one who ‘gibbers’ or ‘chatters’ as the ape did when it was angry in London in the novel, another allegorical analogy is set between the ape and Turks. As a barbarian, destructive characteristic of a Turk is also represented with the ape’s mischievous behaviour. All in all, Macaulay sets forth another reasonable cause to justify her suggestions of conversion of Turks from barbarism to civilization, and, to her, she realizes it on the ape to some extent.

It could be suggested that Macaulay created this allegorical ape character as a result of her preconception about Turks, resulting from her irremediable longing for the Christian past, her Western education (for example, Nicole Pope and Hugh Poe, in the book *Turkey Unveiled Atatürk and After*, following their visit to Turkey, state that: “We learned to overcome our own cultural and political prejudices about the Turks, which, although not realizing it at the time, we had brought with us part of

the baggage of our Western education” (3)) and traditional Turkic image in her mind. As Kamil Aydın states in *Images of Turkey in Western Literature*, *The Towers of Trebizond* is “a typical example of exaltation whereas the other one is dramatically humiliated” (122). The ape is taught with the introductory courses to European civilization and religion by Laurie in the book, and the significance of the missions motivated by Anglican beliefs is emphasized and animated in the novel. The need for Turks’ adoption of civilization is illustrated and solidified. So is the route to civilization. As a last word, the ape becomes an allegory for the Turk regarded as uncivilized, unconverted and unliberated.

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