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The Hagia Sophia and the Other Turkish Locations in Agatha Christie’s “Murder on the Orient Express”

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Abstract:

British author Agatha Christie, who is one of the best-selling novelists in world literature, is the pioneering figure of detective fiction. Christie, the queen of mystery, wrote about eighty novels during her life. A great number of the author’s books were also adapted into movies. Viewed as one of Agatha Christie’s most noteworthy accomplishments, the novel *Murder on the Orient Express* was released in 1934. It is highly believed that Agatha Christie wrote this novel during her long stays in Istanbul. The story is about a Belgian detective investigating a crime that occurred on the train. In *Murder on the Orient Express* many places and locations related to Turkey are mentioned. These are the Sainte Sophie (Hagia Sophia), the Orient Express, the Taurus Express, Nissibin, the Cilician Gates, Istanbul, Konya, The Bosphorus, the Galata Bridge, The Tokatlian Hotel, Smyrna, Taurus and Haydassar. The novel starts with the completion of Hercule Poirot’s investigation in Syria at the Aleppo train station. Poirot goes to Istanbul via the Taurus Express, where he wants to take the Orient Express to London. In fact, Poirot wants to make a few days’ holiday in Istanbul and visit Hagia Sophia.

Keywords: Agatha Christie, the Hagia Sophia, Murder on the Orient Express, Istanbul, Turkey

Introduction

Literature is one of the methods by which individuals experience various societies and people groups and the portrayals which are put away in it. The British author Agatha Christie is a leading figure who reflects diverse cultures within her detective novels. Detective writing is a

fictional sub-genre of crime fiction where a murder is committed almost at the beginning of the story. Throughout the plot, multiple criminals frequently appear and the researcher attempts to find out the identity of the suspect by using different detective techniques. Detective fiction's highlight is when the detective solves the case and catches the suspect.

Hannah (2017) declares that Christie is a legend in the world of mystery writing who has sold more than two billion copies, a record bested only by the Bible and Shakespeare. This is because Agatha Christie both has a strong attention to details and outstanding analytical skills. Christie has also published six fanciful novels by the name Mary Westmacott. She also produced some nonfiction novels, made up of an autobiography with amusing description of the various explorations she had with Sir Max Mallowan- her archaeologist husband. Moreover, Christie's *Mousetrap*¹, one of her stage plays, is the "longest-running show in the world" (Wiegand, 2020).

Agatha Christie was born as Agatha Mary Clarissa Miller in Torquay, Great Britain in 1890 as a child of an upper-middle class family. She received her education at home and also served for the Red Cross as a volunteer nurse during the First World War in a hospital. Meanwhile in 1914 Agatha married to Archie Christie, nevertheless her husband fell in love with another woman in the following years. When Agatha Christie discovered that she was deceived by her husband, she disappeared for eleven days because of "emotional distress" (Barwick, 2016). Many claim that Agatha wrote *Murder on the Orient Express* during this process. Afterwards, Christie married the distinguished British Archaeologist Sir Max Mallowan in 1930. Barwick (2016) also claims that Agatha accompanied her late husband on several digs, touring the Orient Express Paris-Istanbul round trip route thirty times. It becomes clear that Christie's travels with her second husband also influenced the settings in her novels. The happy marriage lasted until she died in 1976.

Agatha Christie, the queen of mystery, wrote about eighty novels in her lifetime. A significant number of the author's books have already been adapted as films. Perceived as one of Christie's most impressive successes, the novel *Murder on the Orient Express* was published in 1934. (Barwick, 2016) expresses that there is a legend that Agatha Christie wrote this novel during her stay at the Pera Palace Hotel in Istanbul. In this novel the researcher is a professional detective

¹ *Mousetrap* is on the stage in London continuously since 1952.

called Hercule Poirot who is Belgian. He has completed a case in Syria and boards the Taurus Express train from Aleppo to Stamboul (Istanbul).

In Istanbul, Poirot plans to make a short holiday before taking the Orient Express and returning London. Poirot checks-in at a hotel as the Taurus Express train arrives in Istanbul. As soon as Poirot is in the hotel, he receives a telegram calling him back to London. Fortunately, Poirot finds a place on the Orient Express from Istanbul to Calais. As the train is fully booked, Poirot has to travel in a second-class cabin. Ratchett and McQueen board the same train shortly afterwards, and Ratchett asks Poirot to work for him. Ratchett states that threatening messages have been sent and he suspects that someone is planning to kill him. During the stylish trip through Europe Ratchett, a rich American passenger, is killed by a series of twelve knife blows in his cabin. As everybody is a suspect, Hercule Poirot interviews all people on the train to solve the crime.

The Hagia Sophia and Turkey's Other Locations in *Murder On the Orient Express*

Murder on the Orient Express is the “most ingenious crime novel ever written” (Hannah, 2017). Since the reader is faced with a murder, the book reveals a variety of places and subjects about Turkey. The country with its rich culture and history is a broad territory bridging Europe and Asia's continents. The Black Sea, the Mediterranean Sea, and the Aegean Sea cover Turkey on three sides. The largest city in Turkey, Istanbul, is situated on land on the Bosphorus Seaway both in Europe and Asia. The world-renowned writer Agatha Christie must have admired Istanbul too, which is one the subjects in her *Murder on the Orient Express*.

The novel starts at five o'clock in the morning of winter at the station of Aleppo, a Syrian nearby city of the Turkish border. Opposite the station at Aleppo, the Taurus Express train, fancifully identified by railroad guides, remains. This train which was launched in 1930, as an expansion of the Simplon Orient Express, was named after the Taurus Mountains in southern Turkey, (Boer, 2019). The Taurus Express ran between Baghdad and Istanbul in the past, and now operates mutually from Konya to Adana in Turkey. In the novel the train consists of a sleeping car, a dining car, a kitchen, and two nearby coaches.

At the Aleppo Station Lieutenant Dubocs and Detective Hercule Poirot are having a conversation before the train departs. Poirot is the passenger, and Dubocs is seeing him off. When the overnights train arrives in Stamboul (Istanbul) Poirot wishes to have a holiday in the city. Their conversation is as follows:

“To-day is Sunday,” said Lieutenant Dubosc. “Tomorrow, Monday evening, you will be in Stamboul.”

It was not the first time he had made this observation. Conversations on the platform, before the departure of a train, are apt to be somewhat repetitive in character.

“That is so,” agreed M. Poirot.

“And you intend to remain there a few days, I think?”

“Mais oui. Stamboul, it is a city I have never visited. It would be a pity to pass through—comme ça.” He snapped his fingers descriptively.

“Nothing presses—I shall remain there as a tourist for a few days.”

(Christie, 1934, p.7-8).

Istanbul is one of the most special cities in the world with its rich culture and history. Besides, Barwick (2016) declares that the city was a cosmopolitan crossroad and a melting pot of civilizations from across Europe and the Middle East in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Thus, it is noticed that Poirot is happy to see this beautiful city for the first time in the above speech. Actually, Istanbul is a culture and history mosaic that has been the subject of songs, poems and novels for centuries. So, it will be very exciting and fun for Poirot to explore Istanbul, the city of mosques, palaces, parks and mansions, which is unique in the world and dazzles with its historical and cultural texture on Europe and Asia. The famous detective will spend a few days in Istanbul and therefore shows his joy by snapping his fingers. Dubocs’ and Poirot’s conversation while waiting the departure of the train is as follows:

“La Sainte Sophie, it is very fine,” said Lieutenant Dubosc, who had never seen it.

A cold wind came whistling down the platform. Both men shivered.

Lieutenant Dubosc

managed to cast a surreptitious glance at his watch. Five minutes to five—only five minutes

more!.....

“Yes,” said M. Poirot, and went on desperately, “La Sainte Sophie, I have heard it is very fine.”

“Magnificent, I believe.” (Christie, 1934, p.8).

Agatha Christie uses conversations in her novel as an instrument to signify important issues while the plot is proceeding. In the above speech, Dubocs recommends Poirot to visit the Hagia Sophia (La Sainte Sophie in French), although the places to visit in Istanbul are unlimited. Both men call it magnificent and fine. Leonard (2020) mentions that the Hagia Sophia which means “Holy Wisdom” was completed in 537, and is an architectural marvel in both scale and style. And according to Dark & Kosteneć (2019, p.1) the Hagia Sophia² is perhaps the most well-known structure of the sixth century to survive somewhere in Europe today. For more than 900 years, the Hagia Sophia³ was the cathedral of Constantinople⁴. When the Ottomans captured the city in 1453 it was converted to a mosque, “adding the four minarets around it”, (Leonard, 2020). Because of all its featuring characteristics, “the Hagia Sophia of Istanbul is a memorial of selective historical reading” (Ousterhout, 2020).

It was time for the Taurus Express to leave after the conversation. With an air of constant hesitation, Poirot stepped onto the train, and the conductor crawled after him. Poirot and Lieutenant Dubosc waved goodbye to each other, then the train, with a terrific jackass, went forward gently. Later, the train went through the majestic terrain of the Taurus in Turkey. As Poirot stared down at the Cilician Gates⁵, standing side by side in the corridor, a sigh immediately came from the girl:

“It’s so beautiful! I wish—I wish—”

“Yes?”

² Dark & Kosteneć (2019, p. vii) also declare that the Hagia Sophia appears as the most prominent symbol of Istanbul.

³ During the reign of the Byzantine Emperor Justinian in 537 AD, the Hagia Sophia was built. It was a Christian church until the capture of Mehmet II (Fatih the Conqueror) in 1453, when it became a mosque. Throughout the Ottoman Empire era, it continued to function as a mosque. In 1935, the new Turkish Republic opened the mosque as a museum. Finally, in July 2020 the Turkish Government officially proclaimed Hagia Sophia to be a mosque whose official name was Ayasofya-i Kebir Cami-i Şerifi.

⁴ Former name of Istanbul

⁵ Gülek Boğazı in Turkish

“I wish I could enjoy it!” (Christie, 1934, p.10).

Agatha Christie presents real facts about the route of the Taurus Express in her novel. In the Mediterranean region of Turkey, the Taurus Mountains⁶, known as Toros in Turkish, are a mountain range that stretches roughly 560 kilometres parallel to the coast, defining the southern boundary of the Anatolian plateau. The characters in *Murder on the Orient Express* display their feelings for the Cilician Gates as “so beautiful, I wish I could enjoy it”, (Christie, 1934, p.10). Indeed, five major passes traverse the Taurus and the best known is the Cilician Gates⁷.

The Taurus Express then takes a break in Konya- a primary city in central Turkey. Poirot gets off the train here and enjoys fresh air. The train continues on its way after the break, and a few hours later it arrives at the Istanbul Haydarpaşa (Haydarpasha)⁸ station. Sakaoglu (1998) informs us that the greatest and most gorgeous railway station in Turkey, Haydarpasha, was designed in the early 20th century by German architects Helmuth Cuno and Otto Ritter. The station, opened for passengers in 1908, is located at the pier in Kadıköy at the Anatolian side of Istanbul. This building has a nostalgic cultural and historical value for both Istanbul and Turkey because of connecting Istanbul to Anatolia by railways for many decades⁹. With its magnificent sea view, this iconic building was the first stop of Poirot in the city.

In the city of Istanbul Poirot has to cross the Bosphorus which is a natural corridor linking the Black Sea to the Sea of Marmara, thereby becoming a very crucial waterway. Actually, the Bosphorus waterway divides the European part from the Asian part of Istanbul. In the novel it is obvious that Poirot arrived at the Asian side of Istanbul, but the cross to the European side by boat was rough for him and he did not enjoy this trip (Murder, 1934, p. 11). Upon arriving at the Galata Bridge, Poirot went directly to the Tokatlian Hotel. Christie expresses the Galata Bridge- a symbol of Istanbul in European side- in the plot, just like giving information for tourists. As soon as Poirot arrives at the hotel he receives a telegram which calls him immediately back to London. He then finds a ticket on the Orient Express and only has time to eat, since the Istanbul train to the harbour city of Calais, which is on the north coast of France, will leave at nine

⁶ Taurus, mountain chain, Turkey. (2020). *Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia*, 6th Edition, 1.

⁷ For further information please visit “Taurus, mountain chain, Turkey. (2020). *Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia*, 6th Edition, 1.”

⁸ Haydarpaşa in Turkish

⁹ There was a big fire at the Haydarpasha Station in 2010. Since then it does not operate due to restoration.

tonight. Poirot's journey on the train will take three days, and upon arriving at Calais, he will cross to England by sea.

As noticed, Poirot never manages it to the Hagia Sophia, because his plans for a vacation in Istanbul were interrupted by an unexpected telegram. However, Vogel (2015) reports that Agatha Christie had visited the Hagia Sophia and loved the building very much.

Only staying a few hours in Istanbul Hercule Poirot departs from the railway station on the symbolic train that is highly crowded. It is the Sirkeci railway station in Istanbul which is the beginning of the western world for all Orient Express travellers. Built by the German architect August Jasmund, the station began service in 1890 (Hsiao, 2020). Thus, the Sirkeci station is the first boarding point for tourists, including Christie, going to Europe by train. As Poirot travels, one of the passengers on the train is killed with twelve blade strokes and the famous detective begins his search. Poirot is aware that the killer is on the train and time is running out for him to find out. For this reason, the detective starts to question everyone on board.

Poirot begins to study, and analyses every passenger he meets and how they connect with each other. The partnership between Colonel Arbuthnot and Mary Debenham on the train is a clear example of this. Poirot wants to learn whether these two people know each other for a long a time or not. In the conversation Agatha Christie mentions another place of Turkey, and Colonel Arbuthnot's reply to Poirot is as:

“No, I did not. I first met Miss Debenham when she and I shared the railway convoy car from Kirkuk to Nissibin.” (Christie, 1934, p. 68).

Colonel Arbuthnot claims that he and Miss Debenham met for the first time during the journey from Kirkuk in northern Iraq to Nissibin (Nusaybin) in Turkey. Nusaybin is a south-eastern Turkish town by the border of Turkey and Syria. As noticed, Christie acts like a travel guide and points out that passengers were transported between Nusaybin and Kirkuk by a convoy car.

Mrs Hubbard is one of the suspects in the train and while Poirot was questioning her he specifies another location about Turkey.

“By the way, Madame, did you travel out to Smyrna this way?”

“No. I sailed right to Stamboul, and a friend of my daughter’s, Mr. Johnson (a perfectly lovely man, I’d like to have you know him), met me and showed me all round Stamboul. But it was a very disappointing city—all tumbling down.” (Christie, 1934, p. 92).

Izmir, whose Latin name is Smyrna, is the third largest city in Turkey and located on the Aegean Sea coast. Mrs Hubbard explains more of her trip from Smyrna, voicing dissatisfaction with Istanbul as something of a "tumble-down city." Her negative expressions about the beautiful Istanbul proves that she was involved in the murder, and possibly is a clue Agatha Christie has given to the reader. Because only a liar or a murderer could speak bad words about Istanbul, and a clever reader would understand this immediately.

The following parts of the book are even more interesting and engaging. Poirot continues to listen to the passengers with utmost diligence, despite the possibility that almost any traveller might have committed this murder. When Poirot investigates, he points that there is not just one murderer but many murderers. The detective discovers that Mr. Ratchett's murder was committed by the twelve passengers on the train together. With Poirot’s efforts the readers learn that Ratchett previously killed a girl named Daisy, so the passengers wanted revenge on him. Finally, at the end of the novel, both Poirot and the readers feel sympathy with the passengers, and understand the reason why they all wanted to kill Ratchett. When the train stops in Yugoslavia, Poirot decides to tell the police there that the killer has escaped.

Conclusion

The founding figure in detective fiction is the British author Agatha Christie, who is one of the best-selling novelists in world literature. During her life, Christie, the Queen of Mystery, penned some eighty novels. A great deal of books by the author have also been adapted into films. The novel *Murder on the Orient Express* was published in 1934 as one of Agatha Christie's most popular and notable achievements. Agatha Christie is widely thought to have written this novel during her long stay in Istanbul, Turkey. The plot is about a Belgian detective solving a murder that took place on a train. In this framework, many Turkey-related locations are also mentioned in *Murder on the Orient Express*.

Turkey with its rich culture and history is a wide region connecting Europe and Asia's landmasses. The Black Sea, the Mediterranean Sea, and the Aegean Sea cover Turkey on three

sides. The biggest city in Turkey, Istanbul, is arranged ashore on the Bosphorus Seaway both in Europe and Asia. The incredibly famous author Agatha Christie probably appreciated Istanbul as well, which is one of the subjects in her *Murder on the Orient Express*. The other Turkish places in the novel are the Sainte Sophie (Hagia Sophia), the Orient Express, the Taurus Express, the Cilician Gates, Nissibin, Konya, the Bosphorus, the Galata Bridge, the Tokatlian Hotel, Smyrna, Taurus and Hayda-passar.

The novel begins with the conclusion of the investigation of Hercule Poirot at the Aleppo train station in Syria. At five o'clock in the morning, Dubocs, who is seeing off detective Poirot, is already there in freezing cold weather. Via the Taurus Express, Poirot is going to Istanbul where he hopes to make a holiday before boarding the Orient Express to reach London. Dubocs suggests Poirot to visit Sainte Sophie (Hagia Sophia) while the two men were waiting for the train to leave. It was the only Istanbul site stated and recommended by Dubocs to Poirot. This confirms that Hagia Sophia is Agatha Christie's favourite location in Istanbul. In this way, the author also underlines that this building is Istanbul's most important symbol. But Poirot never approaches the Hagia Sophia, because his preparations for a holiday in Istanbul have been disrupted by an unwelcomed telegram calling him back to London.

Agatha Christie in the novel gives the readers important information about the Taurus Express route in Turkey. This train reaches the Haydarpasha station on the Asian side of Istanbul after passing through Nusaybin (Nissibin), Taurus Mountains, Cilician Gates, and Konya in Turkey.

Istanbul is probably the most important city in the history of our world, hugging the Bosphorus Strait today and, indeed, the continents of Europe and Asia. It is basically a bridge between the East and the West. In Istanbul Poirot first arrives at the Haydarpasha station. Later, he crosses the Bosphorus by ship and reaches the Galata Bridge on the European side. From there, he goes to the Tokatlian hotel, but as soon as he arrives at the hotel, he is not able to visit Istanbul and Hagia Sophia due to the telegram he received. At the end, the detective departs from the Sirkeci Station on the Orient Express and leaves Turkey- the fascinating country.

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