The Empire of the Harem

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Many have claimed that the downfall of man was the manipulative, conniving woman. After all, it was Eve who had coaxed Adam into eating the fruit that had them banished from the garden. It was Delilah who had snipped off Samson’s hair. It was because of Elsa Schneider that the Holy Grail was lost to the world after both Indiana Jones and his father nearly died to retrieve it. On the other side of the spectrum, however, lies the age-old opinion that women are fragile creatures who are in perpetual need of assistance, defense, and attention. The truth, in fact, is more often than not a devious blending of the two that brings about the saying “Everything is not what it seems.” Such is the case within the harems of the Ottoman Empire. The Western world had been bombarded with rumors and stories of travels that it resulted in a flawed perception of Ottoman harems. Though delicate and beautiful, the women of the harem were far from weak.

The reason for the fantastical view of harems is its own seclusion from Turkish society. Foreigners hungered for a glimpse of the forbidden, and the visiting European painters were more than happy to oblige even if they had limited access (if at all). John Frederick Lewis was a well-known harem painter who unknowingly depicted the very reasons why he would never have been allowed in a harem in the first place. The background presence of a slave dealer’s wife in his portrait of the harem, The Hhareem, was an unintentional reminder that men were barred from entering the harem unless they were family members (Roberts 2007: 54). This is the grain of salt with which people should have taken the paintings. Because of this shift to aesthetic appeal, the focus on “multisensory pleasures evoked by the luxury of fabrics, textures, and the plays of light and shadow”
coupled with the little knowledge of exactly what happened within the harems gave rise to the Western beliefs of explicit opulence and decadence, that the harems were nothing but closets that stored pretty toys for rich men to play with (Roberts 2007:55).

The fact that women were taken from foreign lands and sold as concubines, like sex slaves, was the first step to female degradation. They played no roles in society since they were always ensconced in the harems, catering to the lustful needs of their master. They hardly contributed to the economy, and all they were good for was sex and procreation. They sat on expensive, plush furniture or in perfumed baths, preparing themselves for some sort of orgy for whenever the male head of the household was finished with a hard day’s work. They were decorated in lavish garments and wore veils to hide themselves from outsiders and give off an air of mystery. African eunuchs were their bodyguards, whose jobs were to accommodate the women’s needs as well as shield them from everyone but the master of the house. It was demeaning, difficult, and a life fraught with emotional strife.

While some of that may be true in certain cases, as a whole, it is wrong.

Because it was an Islamic entity, the Ottoman Empire still held onto a certain set of beliefs about male superiority and the subservience of women, but life in the harems was “admittedly the most comfortable type of female servitude” (Toledano 1993: 492). In fact, according to some sources, the origins of the word harem itself, defined as “forbidden” or “holy,” connotes the exclusion of men by women in that setting in the same way a group of old women would kick their husbands out of the house for one night in order to congregate in a gossip-addled knitting session (Ahmed 1982:529). While the women may have lounged in
plush furniture or in perfumed baths, they were not constantly and haphazardly preparing themselves for orgies. The wife, or wives, their children, widowed mothers, the sultan’s unmarried sisters, and the princes and princesses lived in the harem as well (Pierce 1993: 5-6). There was a rigid structure of hierarchies, rules, and a progression of rank to be adhered. The sultan’s mother stood at the top of the pyramid as she governed the harem; below her were the sultan’s favorites and the women who had already given birth to his children; following the favored were the unattractive or less-wanted women who worked and then the novices who had just recently been acquired (Coco 1997: 51). It was true that they were still concubines in that they had to be beautiful and graceful, but they also had to be educated. Similar to the princesses, they were trained in the performing arts, such as music and dance, before they were formally presented to the sultan when they came of age. Even the eunuchs held a more significant position than was initially perceived. Because of their intimate connections within the harem and therefore the masters of the harems itself, they were able to gain influence outside of it as well, even in the political arena (El-Cheikh 2005: 237-238).

In spite of their seclusion, the women of the harem actually did go out into society every so often. When they did venture outside, however, they were required to wear veils, or yashmak, to cover their faces according to the custom. As is in the harems, they were also accompanied by the eunuchs who helped shield them from prying eyes. Surprisingly, the people who were not forbidden from seeing the faces of the harem women and who were actually invited into the harems themselves were other women from foreign countries. Most
harem literature was indeed published by women such as Julie Pardoe, Sophia Poole, and Mary Rogers. Female European painters were often recruited by Ottoman princesses to draw their portraits as well. These visits were orchestrated by the harem women, controlling exactly what these foreign visitors were privy to, thereby giving them a look into the reality of the harems. These visits served two purposes: to educate the foreigners as well as a means of engagement for the harem women with the European culture (Roberts 2007: 13).

The arrival of European women who had come to catch a glimpse of harem life also gave the Ottoman women exposure to new fashions from all over Europe. Because the harems were still a part of the slave trade, women of a vast array of ethnicities had become concubines: Tartars, Circassians, Georgians, and even Greeks. This diversity, in turn, facilitated the facets of cosmopolitanism that could be found within the harem. The women were eager and open to the foreign cultures that European women introduced them to, and later years show that they had adopted certain styles and began integrating them (Roberts 2007: 122). While they still retained the luxurious, exotically decorated fabrics they were famous for, parasols and fuller skirts began to spring up in Ottoman society during the 1800s as the women worked to keep up with European fashions. This is also evident in the various portraits of princesses, which were a source of conflict for the European women who were painting them. The painter wanted to capture the casual life of the famous Ottoman harems, whereas the princesses wanted to illustrate their modernity by mimicking the Parisian fashions (Roberts 2007: 116). Either way, the paintings were made within the harems and hung within in the palaces, never to be seen by foreign eyes until later years.
Challenging another Western belief is a woman’s role in Ottoman society. Because of its Islamic identity, the idea of an oppressed woman is still maintained, but in reality, women were active members of society—not just as entities purely for procreation. They owned property, sued and were sued in return, and they owned and participated in businesses (Gerber 1980: 231). Already displaying their dynamism in that they were essentially a fully functional society within a household and not frozen in the pictures of One Thousand and One Nights, harem women should not be discounted from having power. The “implication that many… were actually members of the elite” should prompt second thoughts to exactly how much power they could wield because of their intimacy with the sultan, the ruler of the Ottoman Empire itself (Toledano 1993: 492). Scheherezade was cunning enough to fabricate enough stories to entertain the king and thereby save herself; why would a harem woman not be able to further her own political standing regardless of what isolated situation she found herself in? What kind of influence would a woman with enough ambition and cleverness have on a man who wielded the power of an empire? With that kind of underrated power, could and how did the harems contribute to the fall of the Ottoman Empire? Through their influence on the sultan, the harems were a contributing factor to the fall of the Ottoman Empire.

After his grandfather, Suleyman the Magnificent was the first Ottoman prince to have ascended to the throne without any military achievements, but he was still able to establish his authority and legitimacy time and time again as he expanded the empire to its limits. Seizing, occupying, and laying siege to lands and destroying armies during his first two
years, he was the “first Ottoman sultan to reign unquestionably as the strongest and most prestigious of Muslim monarchs” (Pierce 1993: 57). It was during the early years of his reign that he met Hurrem Sultan. Born in Eastern Europe, the young girl was captured and sold into the imperial harem where she was trained through the ranks to eventually the catch of the young sultan and became the haseki, his favorite concubine. He even became so besotted by her that in an unprecedented move that garnered a lot of criticism on his part and on his haseki, he broke tradition three times by refusing the company of any other concubine and then marrying her, fathering her four sons instead of maintaining the previous “one-mother-one-son” conventions of the family, and allowing her to accompany her son at his appointed governorship (Pierce 1993: 58). Hurrem Sultan became the first woman to have been both the haseki and the valide sultan, the mother of the sultan. In the past, a sultan had his mother, the mother of his firstborn, and then his favorite concubine, but because Suleyman’s mother had died long before, Hurrem was uncontested as she encompassed two of these positions, giving her considerable power as a woman in regards to the fact that she had both the favor of her husband and the ability to further the prospects of her son. It was also a dangerous position in that she undermined the authority of the sultan by giving her support to her son rather than to her husband (Pierce 1993: 90). This pivotal role in the empire had serious implications as the empire peaked and began its descent.

Because Suleyman did carry the empire to its limits, the strains of maintaining such an expansive entity began to take its toll. The government focused its attentions on
internalization and conservatism as its enemies began to band together while the Ottoman allies dwindled, they suffered crushing defeats, lost strategic ports, and deal with the rising threat of the Mughals (Casale 2007: 279). The former emphasis on military conquests shifted to political and administrative skills (Quataert 2005: 43). As a result, the sultan had less of a reason to venture outside his palace, which became the case late in Suleyman’s reign (Dale 2010: 184). This political seclusion turned the subsequent sultans’ attentions toward the harems which eventually called his authority into question as he focused on his own pleasures (Sansal 2011). What compromised his legitimacy even further was the gradual change of using fratricide amongst the heirs to achieve the throne when the positions of haseki and valide sultan pushed forward a favored son to be crowned. Due to this favoritism, seniority became the deciding factor of ascension because at this point in the empire, fratricide was simply illogical anyway. If the heirs were already dying from natural causes, they were either too young or unhealthy, and if one of the brothers should manage to outlive the rest of his brothers and take the throne only to realize that he was, in fact, sterile, then it would mean the end of the dynasty. So the principle of seniority was implemented where the eldest relative of the sultan would succeed regardless of whether or not he was a direct descendant or immediate relative (Pierce 1993: 99). Moreover, the issues of maturity and health among the men of the dynasty rendered the heirs either too young and inexperienced to be legitimate leaders or just mentally unstable and unfit to rule anyway.

Thus began the Sultanate of Women in which the valide sultan became the co-regent in order to assist her son, who was usually young and inexperienced by the time he inherited
the crown. She retained her previous duties as a mentor, but her elevated position meant a significant increase in power and influence over the decisions of the state, whether directly or indirectly (Pierce 1993: 236). The valide sultan’s power stemmed from both her son’s and her own spider web of connections with leading officials. The manipulative skills fostered from the power struggle to promote herself through the hierarchy of the harem contributed to her ability to manage the politics and the people of the sultanate. This, of course, led to some conflict between her and her son when she continued to intervene even if he felt competent enough to rule on his own (Pierce 1993: 241). Yet regardless of a sultan’s confidence, this relationship became an issue because of the unhealthy reliance of the sultans on their mothers, undermining the political authority as sultans themselves. Many citizens of the empire did not approve of this relationship because of these manipulative and potentially dangerous women.

Because of this dependency, the “empire was burdened with a succession of weak rulers with few skills and no training” (Johnson 2005: 4). Coupled with the constant presence and intrusion of the harem women, whether it be because of the hasekis or the valide sultans, the political structure of the Ottoman Empire was changed, weakened, and eventually led to its decline. Corruption sprang up because of the constant shifting power among sultans. The lack of expansion and isolation of the sultan alienated the military (Sansal 2011). But, even when the Age of the Harem ended and the power moved out of the palace and the sultan’s hands to the grand vizier and the pashas, the harem still managed to
retain its hold on the government by marrying princesses to these high-ranking officials (Quataern 2005: 43).

Though it may not have been a major contributing factor to the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the influence of the harem was evident throughout its existence. The politics of the isolated society cultivated women of considerable abilities. When these women were paired with men of considerable power, they became prominent figures of great influence. What the western world saw as forbidden, exotic women of mystery, were, in actuality, cunning and ambitious members of society whose goals of benefit varied from her, to her husband, and to her son. If all three were possible at the same time, then so be it. Regardless of their intentions, though, the extreme interference of the harems, by manipulative means or otherwise, led to unstable political, economic, and dynastic changes that severely crippled the empire and led to its eventual demise.
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