The (Western) Harem

In the 19th century, the arrival of the colonial gaze into the Middle East occurred through the prism of Islam as it was lived within different parts of the Ottoman Empire, but mainly in the imperial capital of Istanbul. As the West – and more specifically Europe – came in increasingly intimate contact with the Islamic culture of its new colonial subject, it also constructed its own vision and image of the societies and people it came into contact with. Specifically, interesting among these constructed images is that of the harem. The harem existed on several planes, either as imagined by men or seen by women, as being a space within which women were kept at captivity by their husbands, and in which sensuality unknown to the West existed. The aim of this paper is to discuss how the harem was taken away from being the “women’s side” of a house or palace¹, and became a focus of fantasy for the colonial observer, and how this was maintained.

We shall begin by looking at the source of this fascination and fantasizing regarding the harem itself. An important source which lied at the basis of this perversion of meaning seems to be the book of Arabian tales “One Thousand and One Nights” which was then more commonly known and referred to as the “Arabian Nights”. The literary world of the Arabian Nights portrayed a harem which was an exotic image frozen in time, populated by only the most beautiful women, whose lives were filled with sensuality, intrigue, and the mystical (Roberts 183). For many of the Western visitors to the Orient, this image of the harem remained dominant, and held much sway in the way in which the harem was hyper-sexualized by both the men and the women who wrote about it (Roberts 181; Ali 42). Another important source of these perceptions regarding the harem appears to be found, as both Ali and Ahmed argue, in the Medieval writings which set out to demonize the Islamic world vis-à-vis the Christendom, whose

¹I am using this definition, basing it on personal cultural knowledge as a Turk who has intimate knowledge on the subject, by virtue of being born in and educated about it.
impact lasted well beyond (35; 524). What is significant here is that all of the authors in this
category were men of the clergy who “however confident their statements… had in fact no
conceivable means of access to the harems” and thus wrote from fantasy in the first place (Ali
40; Ahmed 524; Lewis & MacMaster 123). Thus, their writings were tainted, not only by a
glaring ignorance of the subject, but also by the religious notions that hey held, which allowed
them to blow out of proportion the sensual aspect of the harem as a locus of promiscuity and
sexual immorality.

As such, the harem fantasy was something that could be named as a “second-hand”
fantasy. Neither of the sources it was built upon were primary sources which described – with
concrete evidence or the backing of experience – the actual conditions of the harem. The former
was an entirely literary source which was bound to take liberties of its own, whilst the latter were
a body of texts written by men who held the were culture in which the harem belonged with
contempt and thus were to introduce a great amount of bias. However, both sources converged
on the point of painting the harem as a site of boundless sexuality, and imbued in the Western
onlookers of the Orient a fantasy and fascination with the harem. As we shall see, the visitors of
the harem itself were not – for the most part – let down by what they saw and, in their works,
reinforced the (hyper)sexualized vision of the harem.

One important reason why the harem fantasy has been reproduced as much as it has been,
can be found through the pressures created by the creation of “fads” around the cultures being
subjected to the colonial gaze. The harem was not excepted from this rule, and its Arabian Nights
inspired images were reproduced, by popular demand, in the artwork of the era (Ali 38-39). Such
popular and public reinterpretations and variations on the theme of harem, in the medium of arts
– especially in painting – reproduces the commonly held views. In fact, because the paintings
turn the harem into a much more easily accessible image, they allow for a much wider strata of people to participate in the colonial gaze and fantasy regarding the harem. Thus, there is a vicious cycle, in which the colonial gaze fueled by the harem fantasy, leads to the creation of artworks in which the fantasy is reproduced in increasing quantities for increasingly larger audience, and the harem fantasy becomes an expected and believed feature of the Orient.

However, a major way in which the harem fantasy was reproduced was through the accounts of those travelers who could gain access – European women – and the views held by the succeeding modern feminists. Several travelers have, beginning with Lady Mary Montagu, visited and wrote about their experiences on both the harem and the hammam (both of which are markedly gendered, and female spaces). The female colonial gaze has been, in a single most important respect, different from the male colonial gaze by its acceptance of the harem as a space of domesticity (Roberts 182). Yet the gaze has also been decidedly Western, and the same biases apparent to the male colonial gaze existing in it, such as the bourgeois mindset, the sexualization of the harem, and the notion of Western superiority (Roberts 182; Foster 8-9). In this primary respect, the female view into the harems of the Orient is not remarkably different than the way in which the male view had been constructed earlier. The female gaze does admit that the harem is a domestic space, and affords it a certain notion of respect, as a space in which women live and socialize. However, it continues on with the assertion that the harem is an exotic space, in which lives that are led in a fashion that is in violation of the morals of the colonizers, and is an object of immense fascination. Thus, the accounts of these women are further reproductions of the harem fantasy, which adds to the existing works that propagate the fantasy. They do not offer a challenge to the standing images, but offer an insider’s look into the existing paradigm of the harem fantasy. And, they did this, not as people imagining a distant reality in a
voyeuristic fashion, but as participants – occasionally “going native” – and living the fantasy themselves (Foster 14; Roberts 185-186; Lewis & MacMaster 123). As such, they provided a first-hand account of the inner workings of the harem, which went to further justify the Western fantasy by providing “truthful insiders accounts” that the people could rely on, in order to further justify and propagate the existing fantasies.

Of course, it is not simply the case that the female colonial gaze did not differ much from the male colonial gaze, which is important in it becoming a tool for the continuation of the harem fantasy in general. The contents of their recollections also matter in not just how they contributed to the maintenance but also to the furtherance of the harem fantasy. In their discussion of the harem, the women sexualized both the men and the women they came in contact with (Roberts 184-185). In this sense, what was initially a scene for sexual promiscuity and male domination over women’s sexuality was transformed to include sapphic imagery. Thus, a fantasy which could be initially considered as “sexualized” was transformed into one which was “hyper-sexualized”, furthering the harem fantasy by taking one of its essential aspects to a higher level.

Female travelers and feminists also introduced a certain humor to their interactions and condescension towards the women they encountered in the harem (Roberts 184; Ahmed 526; Foster 11). The humor allowed for the harem to move beyond being an oppressive or foreign space for the female colonial observer, and allowed for it to be experienced in a novel fashion: a playful spectacle. This transformation into a spectacle – and one which might be enjoyed by the participant – helps to maintain the image that the harem is a place which holds an appeal for pleasure. Admittedly, this is no longer a sensual form of pleasure, however by expanding the definition of the “pleasure” to be derived in the harem it inevitably helps enlarge the scope of the fantasy of the harem. Being no longer just sexualized, the harem now can be conjured as an
image which has a broader audience to appeal to, by the emphasis of its playfulness and “spectacularity”. On the other hand, the condescension towards the women of the harem, helps to set up a barrier between the Western female observers – who came in close contact and at times “went native” – and maintain the barriers between the “civilized” members of society and the “exotic” members of the harem. In this manner, the illusion which surrounds the harem fantasy is permeated by the observers, but never broken down to allow for the real domestic nature harem to be seen. Women of the Orient are thus locked into their positions as “fantastical beings” of the harem, never elevated out of this imagined form of exoticized existence even though they are observed intimately, in a domestic place.

Looking back holistically, it can be seen that the harem and the connected harem fantasy has been created by and has accompanied the colonial gaze as it was directed towards the Muslim societies, especially towards those of the Ottoman Empire. It has been rooted in Medieval and literary images of the Orient, which were reproduced in great multitude, and improved upon by the work of women who could access the harem. Through all of this, the harem has been exoticized, thoroughly sensualized, experienced first-hand, and yet kept at arms distance and firmly under the colonial gaze. It has been thrown out of its religious, domestic, and socio-cultural context in the Muslim societies of the Orient, and made into a fantasy realm with which the Orient could be identified with and used as a mirror for the “backwardness” that could be found there.
Works Cited


