



Gender, Orientalism, and Postcolonialism by Reina Lewis

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I was delighted to be asked to contribute to this important project on Nordic colonialism for a number of reasons. In the first place, the scope of the creative practices covered by the participants in the previous four phases of the project are more than enticing to someone like me who has long been fascinated with the interaction of visual and literary cultural production. More specifically, I am drawn by how the geographical location of the project in the Nordic territories brings into view relations of colonialism, imperialism, and postcolonialism often neglected in what have emerged as the orthodoxies of postcolonial studies. This assertion of alternative models of imperialism has many affinities with the challenges thrown up by my recent focus on the Ottoman Empire. As well as the northern context, the fact that the project is an international collaboration that ranges across recognised external state boundaries and is purposely situated within internal territories of disputed sovereignty problematizes thinking about the nation state in ways that can extend theoretical paradigms. And, most personally, the invitation to contribute to this publication provides me with an opportunity to reflect on the last decade of my work in the context of more recent contributions by scholars, activists, and artists that animate our responses to the new exigencies of the postcoloniality with which we live.

One of the important things about this exhibition and publishing project is that it extends postcolonial scholarship to consider relations of power in the Nordic region and by so doing will not only expand understandings of the Nordic experiences but will also re-calibrate previous models of colonialism, imperialism, and resistance. Attention to the Nordic colonial experience emphasises the fragility of the entity often referred to collectively as the “west”, revealing that it was not just the “east” or the “Orient” that was an imaginary geography whose territories and populations were subject to dispute, to colonisation, and that generated anti-colonial resistance. Nordic state formation (understood as a process still under review) highlights at close quarters the internal rivalries that

drove European imperialism and colonialism. The ways in which imperial ideology and colonial conquest were essential to the construction of the western subject's sense of personal, political, and cultural integrity (the sovereign self) are rendered more nuanced when it is remembered how varieties of Nordic colonialism were motivated as much by challenging marginalization within Europe as by acquiring foreign territories. Whilst Orientalism is often characterised as an east/west binary, the Nordic case, as Elizabeth Oxfeldt has demonstrated,¹ relied not on binaries but on triangulation. Rather than simply constructing a distinction between Nordic self and Orientalised other, the take up of Orientalism was also determined by its potential to mediate relationships with more powerful European neighbours, culturally fostering preferred political allegiances to France over the more threatening power of Germany, for example. In the complex shift from the porous dynastic Danish entity to the emergent nation states of the Nordic region, the sense of western-ness created by Orientalism was moderated both by divisions within Europe and within the Nordic region itself. This parallels my Ottoman studies, where the transition from a multi-ethnic supra-national empire to a series of successor nation states (including the modern Turkish republic) was attended – as in the emergence of exclusive nationalisms in the Nordic region – by a narrowing definition of who could count as part of the body politic.

That colonial acquisitions and processes of imperial governance were for the Nordic states simultaneously local as well as distant brings an important set of questions to the consideration of contemporary postcolonial politics. Debates about minority rights, cultural relativism, and ethnic/racial/religious identities take on a new meaning in the Nordic context where, for example, in addition to the “usual” global issues raised by postcolonial diasporas, indigenous action over land rights requires demonstrations of ethnic authenticity comprehensible in intrinsically local terms. Yet alongside these necessary appeals to authenticity, cultural activists use the insights of postmodernism to address the fluidity and contingency of our senses of self. As someone whose work on colonial discourse and postcolonial theory has always been about the marginal – in terms of gender and geography – but who still wants to argue for the wider applicability of conclusions drawn from these often overlooked case studies, I am inspired by the ways that *Rethinking Nordic Colonialism* can hold the tensions between the necessity of asserting identity whilst also deconstructing the powerful force of representation.

Working with the Invisible Archive

It is the value of the exception that has led me repeatedly to seek out material that was “off the map” in relation to previously authoritative accounts. It is hard now, when the bookstore and library shelves are groaning with titles on colonial history, postcolonial cultures, and women in the non-western world, to imagine that even in the early 1980s there was little about gender and imperialism. As with other areas of research in women’s studies (before it became gender studies), most work on imperial history was concerned with men, and those antidotes to studies of the great and the good, which sought to inscribe “ordinary” experiences, usually spoke of the experiences of ordinary men. Edward W. Said’s important polemic *Orientalism* in 1976 had barely mentioned women and in his and other accounts where women did appear they featured largely as image – as slaves, concubines, odalisques – not as agents. I was inspired by the early work of feminists such as Sara Mills² and Helen Callaway³ who in different ways studied the experiences of women in the formation of imperial relations. Developing alongside other strands in women’s history, early accounts of women and imperialism sought to demonstrate that western women were involved in the imperial and anti-imperial project and aimed to correct the often unthinking masculinism of early studies of imperial politics and society. Concerned mainly at first with white and western women, the fact that their subjects might often display overtly imperialist views (or a contradictory combination of support for “natives” alongside the unthinking presumption of imperial privilege) was a profound challenge to some feminists who had hoped for “purer” narratives of sisterhood. But just as the recognition of systemic inequality between women in the modern world was to blow apart the wishfulness of feminist slogans such as “sisterhood is global”, the evidence unearthed by feminist historians and cultural critics revealed an interaction of power between women and between women and men marked by complex and uneven relations of structural inequality. Being female increasingly came to be understood by scholars and activists as a position – social, subjective, political – that was marked by differences of race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality.

It was to this often highly politicised debate about how to recognise, evaluate, and understand the differences between women that my first book, *Gendering Orientalism*,⁴ was directed. Concerned with what at the time was captured under the rubric “women and race” my intention was to demonstrate that women contributed to the cultures of imperialism and to analyse how discourses of gender interacted with those of race and empire in the production, distribution, and reception of their work. My personal motivation for this work was to use the

investigation of the past to think through the challenging politics of the present. I wanted to address some of the divisions between women over matters of race, and over Middle Eastern politics, that had since the 1980s been challenging the women's movement into which I had grown up. I wanted to think about how culture – and visual culture in particular – was part of the political. And, in the days when the numbers of books about women artists could easily be accommodated on one shelf, I wanted to expand the alternative canon of female creativity.

This brings me to a methodological point that has stayed with me in subsequent projects and that is, I realise, likely to remain intrinsic to the sorts of postcolonial work that drives me: the impossibility and potential of the “missing archive”. By this phrase I mean the difficulties faced by researchers working on minority cultures where the traces of those social agents are likely not to have been preserved for posterity. The simplest example is of early work in feminist art history, where pioneers in the field⁵ had to demonstrate that there were indeed substantial numbers of works by women artists. This meant labouring to “re-discover” women artists whose work had been forgotten, mislaid from the historical record, and written out of dominant narratives of artistic development. Early scholars in the field had not simply to look around for paintings or art objects made by women, they also had to wrest back works by women that had been misattributed to men (often male relatives) on the presumption that women could not be responsible for works of “genius”, and to look far and wide to locate works that had been allowed to disappear from the gallery walls once women's often significant reputations were allowed to diminish in subsequent generations. In literature it was the same story: as argued in Elaine Showalter's groundbreaking study,⁶ by the 1970s women in the west had lost track of previous generations of successful women authors. This meant that each subsequent generation had to re-invent the wheel, without role models or a sense of a female canon of writing.

The lessons of these pioneering studies continue to apply to much of my work, and that of others, in the diverse areas of research that are now grouped under the rubric of postcolonial studies. As with the demand to develop and teach curricula in postcolonial writing (sometimes called “new literatures in English” in the Anglophone world), researchers and teachers trying to locate works previously unattended to in the canonical accounts had to find books from what was available in print, or what could be obtained from second-hand and specialist sources. When and if primary sources could be found, teachers were generally without a field of critical and supporting material to use in the classroom. Today this too

seems unlikely, but there are still many colonial and postcolonial cultures that are under-researched and under-provisioned for teaching. It is not only that we need access to primary sources that reveal the diversity of cultural activity, and that we need supporting scholarly material with which to understand them – it is that in the moment of paradigm shift when new fields of scholarly and creative endeavour come into play we are required to think carefully about our methodological protocols and constantly to be ready to revise them.

It was with these cautions in mind that I started my search for evidence of women's involvement in visual Orientalism. My hunch was that women must have been contributing to this field – but there was little trace of it. I knew that women were participating in the professional art world of Europe and North America in increasing numbers by the mid-19th century (made possible by proto-feminist campaigns for women's access to formal art education and the institutions of art). And I knew that by the 1850s and certainly by the 1870s, Oriental subjects were increasingly popular in the visual arts, so it stood to reason that by the second half of the 19th century there must have been women in the west who were producing, exhibiting, and selling scenes of an Oriental nature.

There was another factor that drove my certainty. Much of the imagery about the Orient was driven by a western fascination with the elusive but evocative space of the Islamic harem and the women who lived there. Forbidden to western men, access could only be provided by other women – creating at once a gender-specific premium for women's accounts of harem visits.

The image of the veiled and sequestered woman of the Muslim harem had long been a focal point in the construction of Europe's imagined differences between the "east" and the "west". Oppressed, yet ultimately desirable, the woman of the polygamous harem was a dominant trope of Orientalist political and cultural activity. Whether serving as an overtly erotic fantasy of sexualised depravity or as an oppressed figure of pity in need of western rescue (neither of which was mutually exclusive), the harem loomed large in the western imaginary as a site of sexuality, excess, and perversion. The power of this motif was not just sexual: in political terms the west had since the Enlightenment deployed a vision of Oriental despotism – projected most powerfully onto the imperial household, or harem – against which could be ranged its own version of liberated rational rule. Mobilised in both monarchical and democratic discourse, the Oriental tyrant served as the hideous alter ego to just, benevolent, and accountable European

governance.⁷ But the absolute power of the despot, over his women, his slaves (male and female), and his state remained attractive and added to the multivalent allure of renditions of the harem. For women travellers, writers, and artists, the gender segregation of the Islamic world gave them something unique to sell – only they could claim to have really visited this sequestered domain. The activities of western women writers in revealing the inside of the harem (and its sister space the women’s baths) were already well known: from Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s 1717 letters from Constantinople (published posthumously in 1763) to the increase in women’s accounts made possible by the advent of travel technologies in the mid-19th century, the field of harem literature was becoming well-established. Whilst the numbers of written accounts by women have turned out to be more numerous than was initially thought (by the time I started my research in the 1980s there were at least some of them in the public domain), of women Orientalist artists barely anything was known.

So you can see why I was convinced that the coterminous development of Orientalism as a highly saleable area of artistic activity – alongside the advent of the professional woman artist, plus the gender privilege that Orientalist fantasy logic attributed to the female gaze (attested to by the market for women’s written accounts) – meant that I was so sure I would find a corpus of work by women artists. And, after some excavation, I did identify a number of women artists who were producing this type of work. In the work of artists like Henriette Browne, Elizabeth Jerichau-Baumann, and Margaret Murray Cookesley I discovered a body of female visual Orientalism that ranged from professional to accomplishment standard that was exhibited to international acclaim, that was reproduced in the illustrated and art press, and that resided in private sketchbooks for domestic and family consumption. The work that was exhibited was almost without fail evaluated as women’s work. This was not just because the unique female access to the harem posed specific issues for critics, but because of the well-established conventions of a critical double standard (discussed in relation to women’s writing by Showalter) that served to keep women whenever possible within a self-referential range by finding in their paintings, or writings, the signs of essentially feminine skills or failings. Outside of the “objective” universalism attributed to male cultural producers, women artists were regularly read in relation to the display of feminine compassion, maternalism, eye for (trivial) detail, and so on. With Orientalist work this took on a new significance since the female point of origin served to validate the reality effect of the harem scenes, leading the influential French author Théophile Gautier to proclaim on seeing Henriette Browne’s 1861 Salon exhibits “Only women should go to Turkey –

what can a man see in this jealous country?..' For a woman, on the contrary, the odalisque opens itself, the harem has no more mysteries..."⁸ But if Gautier championed the reality of her version, other critics wanted to hold onto their cherished Orientalist fantasies, specifically dismissing Browne's alternative version of chaste and domestic interiors as the result of being "despite herself, influenced by the harem's enervating atmosphere."⁹

But whatever Gautier might have said, and whatever women artists might have claimed, this does not mean that their accounts are to be read as evidence of the reality of sequestered life. They remain mediated cultural representations whose multiple meanings are marked by the mutually constituting differentials of gender and race, and class, at the points of both production and reception. This is where the power of the exception comes in – not as a demonstration of the alternative reality of Oriental female life, but as a mechanism through which the often unspoken orthodoxies of more hegemonic accounts can be highlighted. Knowledge of women's Orientalist cultural production is an important addition to our understanding of how Orientalism, and broader cultures of imperialism, worked. It is important not just because it reveals the greater diversity of Orientalist culture, but because the ways in which women's cultural production came into being, the methods through which they encountered the Muslim harem, and the ways in which their work was disseminated and discussed, reveal the complexity of Orientalism and challenge how we understand the relationship between culture, power, and the racialised processes of gender formation. Rather than seeing Orientalism as monolithic and intentionalist, it appears as a discursive formation that was heterogeneous and contested from within as well as challenged from without. Women artists often unpicked stereotypes about the sexualisation of the harem – not least because the codes of experiential veracity and eye witness privilege placed them as participants in the scenes that they represented (something not very comfortable for respectable lady artists). But they also demonstrated allegiances to ideas of western superiority and played up the exoticisation of Muslim and Middle Eastern life.

The hidden archive that I had been looking for did show that women played an important part in Orientalist culture. And it did show that they laboured under systemic gender disadvantages – the same codes of gender-specific expectations and judgements that, paradoxically, created the market for their work. But it did not reveal a position of moral purity on the part of western women, nor had I expected it would. Instead, this new collection of sources showed how attention to these women's work and to its conditions of production and reception could

raise important questions for the analysis of other bodies of cultural activity, both those coded as dominant and those positioned as marginal.

Looking for “Hidden” Voices

Having established the extent of western women’s engagement with what might be called dominant Orientalist discourse, I wanted to turn to those women produced as objects of investigation by the male and female Orientalist gaze: the “Orientalised” women of the Muslim world. The prevailing image of the harem as a sexualised realm animated by cruelty and excess bore little relationship to the lives of the women and families who actually inhabited the segregated domains of Islamic society. Having brought to the fore the existence of divergent strains of Orientalism by western women, I then wanted to see what was being done by women who knew themselves to be the objects of Orientalist curiosity. Moving again to study an as yet unknown archive, I sought out cultural representations by women from the Muslim world who wanted to intervene in western cultural and political discourse. Centring my search on the Ottoman Empire, I switched my attention to literary sources, knowing that the different conditions of female education and Islamic and regional visual arts conventions made it unlikely that I would find a counterpart painterly archive. But what I did find (and the British Library catalogue going on-line went a long way to make this possible) was a set of sources – written in English – and published in the west by Ottoman women in which they spoke in no uncertain terms about their lives to their western readers. The writers I focused on in *Rethinking Orientalism*¹⁰ came from the last generation of women to live in or have intimate experience of the segregated households of the Istanbul Ottoman elite. Publishing books in the early 20th century that told of their youth in harems during the last decades of the 19th century, authors such as Halide Edib Adivar, Demetra Vaka Brown, Zeyneb Hanoum, and Melek Hanoum strove to form life narratives in terms that would make sense for themselves and for their co-patriots whilst also prioritising their target audience of presumed western readers.

These authors like other women and men of the Ottoman Empire were well aware of western stereotypes and offended by them. But apart from personal affront, the Ottomans understood that negative stereotypes about Ottoman society were powerfully influential on western popular consciousness about the east and contributed to the formation of western foreign and imperial policies. The Ottoman state regularly challenged western presumptions about the barbarity of its rule and its society, taking pains to have its envoys treated as diplomatic equals in the courts of the west, and using the international

exhibitions to circulate alternative and preferred images of the empire.¹¹ Sultan Abdülaziz himself visited the *Paris Exposition* in 1867 and Sultan Abdülhamit II continued to mount Ottoman pavilions, at Vienna in 1873 and Chicago in 1893. Recognising visual culture as a powerful weapon in his attempts to gain recognition as an imperial leader amongst others in the west, Abdülhamit also gifted specially commissioned photographic albums of his diverse domains to the American and British governments.

Whilst much attention was paid by the imperial court and prominent male reformers and writers to matters of general technological advancement (such as transport infrastructure) and wider social advancement (education), they were also focused on gender, knowing full well that the west judged them on the basis of stereotypes about their women. Ottoman men were reportedly fed up with being asked how many wives they had – at a time when polygamy was rapidly becoming obsolete and unfashionable among the modernising reformers, and had long been unaffordable for and infrequent among the majority of the population. But in all their attempts to challenge western attitudes, the published outcries of Ottoman women were not quite what the state had in mind.

Yet women did write. As female literacy in general and in European languages especially increased from the mid-19th century, a cohort of women took on western misapprehensions in a series of memoirs, autobiographies, and travel writings. The conditions for the emergence of these sources were made possible by two factors – the development of a social and cultural context for women’s literary expression in the Middle East, and the existence in the west of harem literature as a female-identified publishing field into which their products could be inserted. Spanning the globe, these interpenetrating social and cultural forces demonstrate structural links across the perceived east/west divide. Women’s literacy and familiarity with western cultural codes was a result of the wave of Ottoman social reform known as the *Tanzimat* that took hold from the 1830s. In this, the Empire aimed to modernise itself through the selective adaptation of western technologies and goods and their associated behaviours. Though most of the education reforms were aimed at men, there were attendant advances in educational opportunities for women. Elite women increasingly took instruction from foreign governesses and shared in the cultural influx of western literature and ideas. In the decades leading up to the Young Turk revolution of 1908, progressive women and men imbibed ideas of liberty and democracy, often investing in a discourse of personal choice about romance and marriage as a substitute for the political liberties often denied under Abdulhamit’s controlling

regime.¹² Elite women from modernising centres such as Istanbul and Cairo were essential to the development of regional modernities, often leading the way in the selective consumption of western goods and the development of new forms of social behaviour. Dressed in fashions from Paris and familiar with western literature, women from elite harems were not the incarcerated passive sex slaves that the west imagined them to be. But for all that the Ottoman state and its subjects may have wanted to contest western prejudices there was no official sanction for women who wrote about private life for publication.

Ottoman women writers transgressed local codes of privacy when they discussed family matters outside the home, and, potentially, clashed with imperial decrees limiting contact with westerners when they published abroad. But Ottoman women from the progressive elite who set out to contest western stereotypes also knew they would reach a local audience and aimed simultaneously to intervene in regional debates about gender and social emancipation. The literary context in which Ottoman women started to publish was one in which local increases in literacy were linked to consumption of western cultural forms (novels in French and in translation, newspapers, magazines) that were significant vehicles for the development of a discourse of civic and personal liberty. As the Ottoman press expanded so did the range and number of women's periodicals,¹³ providing opportunities for women to write about their lives and to develop careers in journalism. The activities of Ottoman women who wrote for an international readership can be seen as part of this regional increase in publishing by women. And the forum into which their English-language works emerged was that of harem literature – a sub-section of the popular field of travel literature that privileged women's voices.

Dating back to Montagu, harem literature remained a consistently popular area of publishing, providing in the west valuable opportunities for women writers who flocked to assuage Europe's curiosity about the hidden lives of women in the Muslim world. Initially reliant on the aristocratic and upper-class women who travelled with men in diplomatic service, the field opened up in the mid-19th century to include more middle-class women who travelled for pleasure with their families (Cook's tours opened routes to Egypt in 1869) and who visited or lived in the region with men working in diplomatic service, colonial administration, or commerce. Harem literature covered a range of opinions with some women writers demonstrating allegiances to western imperialism, others challenging it, others still showing a mixture of condescension and support for Middle Eastern women. But what united the field was the appeal to eye-witness veracity – the

selling point for western women was they could claim to really see the inside of harems and bring back news to their readers.

The centrality of the harem visit to these accounts points to the increase in contact between western and Middle Eastern women and to a dialogue that counteracts the stereotype of the isolated, uneducated, sexualised and oppressed harem inmate. To reveal the existence of an archive of Ottoman women's writing in English and to highlight its place within a well-established set of local and international female networks has an importance beyond a simple curiosity value. Asserting that women from elite harems were connected to each other and to foreign women brings the harem into a public domain and into the time of modernity. Long envisioned as a privatised and sexualised realm, the harem was often depicted especially in the visual arts as a frozen zone with women living shallow lives in suspended animation awaiting the arrival of the sultan or despot. This tendency to equate geographical and cultural difference with temporal distance was, as Johannes Fabian's work¹⁴ on the development of anthropology has shown, a typical ploy of western imperial ideology. In a context where ethnography often regarded "primitive" societies as existing outside of the time of western modernity, the attribution to the harem of timelessness, and of unchanging and primitive custom, served to enhance the sense of difference between west and east. But once the interaction between Ottoman and western women is written in, the picture begins to change. Revealing Ottoman women as keen participants in a dialogue – textual, personal, and political – puts them on the stage as actors rather than as passive objects. It also allows us to reconsider definitions of what constitutes the public. Whilst the 19th century western conceptualisation of a division between the public world of work and the private domain of the domestic has been revealed as an ideal rather than actual set of spatial relations, these gender coded binarisms were, and often still are, projected onto the quite different gendered division of space within an Islamic system. Segregating societies of the Middle East operated with different concepts of public and private that have significant bearing for contemporary understandings of the Islamic world.

Within the Islamic gender division of society, the seclusion of women from non-familial men (habits often also adopted by non-Muslim populations to varying extents) did not mean that women were excluded entirely from the public domain. Firstly, seclusion by harem living and its sartorial extension the "veil" had often more to do with social status than piety, meaning that, just as working-class women in Europe moved about the city with an ease unavailable to their

bourgeois counterparts, non-elite women and slaves generally enjoyed spatial freedoms not available to elite women (of Muslim and non-Muslim extraction). Second, although elite and royal women were secluded there were well-established conventions by which their names and their presence entered the mixed-gender public domain – such as the endowment of water fountains or *medresses* (schools). But, third, and most significant for my project, the segregated spaces of the elite harem must be seen as themselves constituting a public in which women engaged with each other, provided an audience for each other's consumption of new western goods (be it fashions, novels, or domestic technology), and engaged in formal and informal cultural and political debate. These activities were recognised by women as important and also by their men, who received political news, gossip, and cultural reports from their female relatives even if they were not (except in the most progressive of households) actually present at women's events. In this way, Ottoman women's contact with western women was an adjunct to the already existing local and regional networks of friendship, family, and patronage that animated the segregated female world. But of course much of this activity was invisible to western observers, certainly foreign men, just as the presence of western fashions was rendered invisible under modest Islamic outerwear when the women moved outside the home.

In providing accounts of this period of rapid modernisation and increased take-up of western goods, Ottoman women writers demonstrate an engagement with western ideas that is highly evaluative. The ideals of personal and political liberty associated with the west were indeed attractive but Ottoman women, like others from the region, were critical of the benefits of so-called western liberation. They saw clearly the difficulties faced by western women trying to make their way in a market economy – just as western writers in turn evaluated the potential protections of the harem system against the struggles they faced at home. For the progressive Ottoman elites of the last half of the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th, female emancipation was intrinsically linked to the quest for wider social emancipation, offering Ottoman feminists substantial male support – something almost incredible to their western sisters who were accustomed to opprobrium and hostility from men.

Part of my project in looking at the writings of Ottoman women has been to put them into a dynamic with other women from the region and from Europe and America who were writing at a similar time. This aims to remove the rarity value that might otherwise skew readings of their work by forcing so limited a selection

of texts to become emblematic for an entirety of female experience. For scholarly and pedagogic reasons I have worked with collaborators to put women's travel writing from and about the Middle East back into circulation, as part of a critical sourcebook (with Nancy Micklewright¹⁵) and as facsimile editions (in the ongoing *Cultures in Dialogue*¹⁶ series, co-edited with Teresa Heffernan). These publishing ventures are aimed not just at researchers but at the classroom, to circumvent the gaps caused by out of print and hard to find sources. But beyond this act of resource provision is an intellectual project that uses the now demonstrable range of women's writing to dispute Orientalist images of female isolation with examples of contact and dialogue – whilst simultaneously revealing that dialogue between east and west to be robust and contestatory rather than aspirational and emulative. The picture that emerges is of connections between women that were physical (many of the featured authors knew each other), textual (even more of them read, and disputed, each other's work), and material (editorial collaborations, shared publishers). Tracing women's writings over a one hundred year period also helps locate harem literature as a genre responsive to changing circumstances, revealing how the field diversified as western women's travel increased, was refracted again by the advent of writings in English by Middle Eastern women, and then finally shifted registers as women came increasingly to develop autonomous and professional roles in welfare work and diplomacy. Rather than try to tie diverse sources into a coherent whole, or even to try to explain away the sometimes startling contradictions within a single text, it has been important to honour as multi-faceted and complex a literary corpus that can contain the very different works of authors such as Annie Brassey,¹⁷ Demetra Vaka Brown,¹⁸ Selma Ekrem,¹⁹ Sophia Poole, Musbah Haidar, Leyla Saz Hanımefendi, and Elizabeth Cooper,²⁰ to name but a few.

Methodology Matters

Dealing with these sources brings me straight into a methodological dilemma, which, like the dialogue I am studying, has inherent contradictions that cannot be avoided. One of my intentions in bringing to light this second absent archive was to alter the historical record by pointing to Ottoman women's political and cultural agency. This record has not only needed amendment in the west but also in the region where, in Turkey for example, the dominant historiography of the Republican period has until very recently downplayed the activities of an autonomous Ottoman women's movement in favour of a narrative of top-down state sponsored feminism. At the same time, however, as wanting to "correct" the historical record, I have to refuse to position these sources as secure points of evidence or as indexes – on the few occasions where they do get referenced

– of incontrovertible female experience. My broken record technique here is to remind us that these books are mediated cultural products and that they deserve the same rigorous critical attention that would be due to any canonical western literary text.

This is where attention to the field of harem literature as an area of publishing with specific conditions of production, distribution, and reception can be helpful in positioning the writings of Ottoman women and western women travellers in ways that can allow for their contradictions without tying them down to a single reading or honing their authors into some simplistic position based on the purity of oppression. Just as contemporary writers classified as “postcolonial” can find themselves evaluated more on how well their writing accords with the experiences and attitudes expected of, say, “third world women” so too were Ottoman writers judged as regional and religious representatives and commodified within Orientalist parameters. In a field that existed in tension with masculinist Orientalist cultures, harem literature both provided supporting evidence and acted as an antidote to typical Orientalist fantasy.



Cover (detail) from Zeyneb Hanoum's book *A Turkish Woman's European Impressions*, ed. Grace Ellison, London: Methuen, 1913.

The genre was unable to avoid the citation model that drove Orientalism – in which new sources gained authority by referencing existing western Orientalist knowledges, whether in allegiance or disputation. Just as western women had constantly to invoke the masculinist stereotypes they sought to challenge eastern women found themselves having to position their narratives in relation to western assumptions. These tensions can be seen in the materiality of the books themselves, where considerations of presentation and marketing often operated at odds with the content of Ottoman women’s writing. For example, Zeyneb Hanoum’s 1913 publication *A Turkish Woman’s European Impressions*²¹ appeared with a gold-embossed image of her shrouded in a *ya mak* on the cloth front cover, yet the pages inside tell of a life in an elite harem that was marked by a western-style education, access to European literature, and animated by the literary and musical salons that she and her sister ran for the women of their progressive milieu. Zeyneb Hanoum was not content with the limited options available to an educated Ottoman woman, but she was caustic about the limitations faced by women in the west (and eventually returned to Turkey). The contradictions apparent in her work are not signs of creative weakness or inconsistency but are, rather, indicators of the types of challenges faced by transculturated writing subjects. And these challenges can be decoded from attention to the book as artefact as well as by deconstructing the words on the page. How else to deal with the apparent conundrum of a woman who initiated a correspondence with the French author Pierre Loti in order to reveal the frustrations faced by Ottoman women (leading eventually to his novel *Les Désenchantées*), yet who was horrified by the loss of social status risked by British feminists with their street demonstrations, and who wrote cogently about the covert seclusions of British society (the Ladies Gallery in the Houses of Parliament as a “harem”), but whose book is ornamented with images of her in “Turkish” costume rather than the Paris fashions that she owned in Turkey and wore on her travels?

We see similar conundrums in the books published by other Middle Eastern writers, who all sought to market themselves within a generic form that privileged gender and that rarefied ethnic and religious points of origin (seeking the authentic Muslim female voice). The genre required the commodification of Muslim and regional femininities in ways that could not accommodate the nuance of local forms of identification and that could not take on the ways that these identities were shifting in relation to current changes in the make-up and conceptualisation of Ottoman subject-hood.

Underpinning this tension was the rubric of authenticity that created the market for Ottoman women's work whilst simultaneously hampering their ability to express their own sense of themselves. It was not just that, for those who travelled, their identity as immigrants did not match their social identity at home (an experience still common for immigrants today, where for example professional status is lost in transit or buried under the moniker "asylum seeker"). It was also that the west in general operated with different definitions of ethnic/religious/racial identity based on concepts of blood and inheritance that could not accommodate the more fluid identities of subjects formed in a multi-ethnic, trans-national Empire like the Ottoman. Whilst most of the authors in my study were Muslim, many of them had one parent or, in Zeyneb Hanoum's case, grandparent who had converted to the faith. For western reviewers this "inauthentic" identity could provide reason to disregard accounts, such as Zeyneb Hanoum's, where they wished to invalidate her observations. But for Ottomans and others in the region, conversion and "racial mixing" in the elite harems was a common social factor. The racial and ethnic diversity of Ottoman society was often commented on by western visitors,²² yet for Ottoman authors this would have been the norm.

I raise these questions as a way of returning to my methodological point about the potential and pitfalls of the invisible archive. The sources by Ottoman and Middle Eastern women that I have been working on have a liminal status on the cusp of several fields: some of them were well known at the time but most of them are obscure now; they existed within the sometimes trivialised field of harem literature but were also directly mobilised in political discourse; they were written in English by authors working in a second or third language; they owe allegiances to the conventions of autobiography but they originated from cultures without a previously well-developed genre of secular life writing (and even less of women's life stories); they were marketed as "true" stories, yet their structure borrows much from fictional as well as autobiographical prototypes; and, above all, there is little information available on the balance and nature of editorial intervention.

In short these sources raise more questions than they can answer, and this for me is their great attraction. It is not just that the books do not fit generic classifications, but that the knowledges, skills, and approaches needed to understand them as situated cultural objects force us to work across disciplinary boundaries and offer the potential to reframe procedures in their constituent fields. This can make the work very difficult, but the methodological challenges

posed in attending to these sources have much in common with the conflicting forces that acted on the social agents who created them. Dealing with the highly politicised niceties of working, for example, across competing national historiographies (not just British, Greek, and Turkish, but also Ottoman), or of trying to assert the cultural significance of literary artefacts of sometimes dubious stylistic quality, keeps us mindful of the delicate balance of interests that brought these books into being and that coloured their existence in the world.

These tensions can be very productive. It is not that I value transgression for its own sake, but rather that I have over the years learned that I need to operate across several different areas of scholarly and cultural activity and that the relationships between these areas and the people invested in them are never static. In the time that I have been working on these books the field of Middle Eastern women's history has developed dramatically, opening up new areas of enquiry that exist in uneasy alliance with other historiographical debates about the collective narratives that can represent the late Ottoman imperial experience and the emergence of the Empire's successor states. When I refer to the regional affiliations of women and reformers in the late Ottoman period I am referring to connections that existed within (and went beyond) an imperial model quite unlike that promulgated by most western empires and, subsequently, taken as typical by postcolonial studies. At conferences on postcolonial studies I am frequently the only person speaking about the Ottoman Empire, yet it provides an important alternative paradigm for the analysis of (competing) colonial powers and the political and cultural effects of Euro-American imperial policy. But by the same token, at conferences on Middle Eastern studies I have been until recently one of the few voices speaking about women's sources. And when women's sources are discussed, I am often one of the very few using cultural theory and talking of gender as performative rather than naturalized. This is not a criticism of other scholarship in the field: not at all. I make these points to illustrate that different disciplinary fields use diverse critical registers and develop in different moments and in different ways. Additionally, for contemporary scholars of late Ottoman gender relations, the burden of language acquisition is such that nuanced textual analysis may be delayed, whilst the urgency of providing information about a largely previously unknown area of female experience understandably leads many towards an information retrieval approach.

There is room, and need, for all this work. The promise of postcolonial and feminist scholarship lies in a refusal to provide alternative "grand narratives" or definitional accounts – despite political or market demands to the contrary. In

our approaches to contemporary issues of postcolonial identity, power, and representation we face similar pressures: the pressure on minority artists to represent a generality of experience (just as Middle Eastern women writers knew, and sometimes intended, that their first person narratives would also be read as statements of generic regional female life);²³ on postcolonial writers to display easily decodable signs of ethnic authenticity; and demands from minority and marginalized communities that “their” authors/artists/critics should act as ambassadors for the preferred community image. This last is perhaps the most challenging given that it rests on claims of cultural ownership which, it is inferred, “sensitive” outsiders from majority cultures should respect.

Conclusion: Postcolonial Markets?

That all these demands are contingent and historically driven is a given and should serve to remind us why attention to previous dilemmas can help locate and explain some of the fault-lines that complicate contemporary postcolonial cultural politics. In this, matters of market are unavoidable, for the mainstream market (to use a shorthand for what is itself a fractured complex set of cultural and economic formations) often has room for only limited models of cultural identity and, like most markets, will want more of what has recently sold – hence the “new” Zadie Smith, and so on. But on the statistically rare occasion when a minority artist does achieve popular and critical success there is no guarantee that her/his representation will be praised by their putative community of origin – witness the recent battle in London’s Brick Lane to prevent the filming of a movie based on Monica Ali’s²⁴ novel of the same name. Within the politics of scarcity, when each representation is over-burdened with signification, we see self-designated “community leaders” challenging Ali’s depiction of Bengali women (as oppressed by local patriarchies as well as by British racism), seeking the cultural capital of speaking for the entire community (many of whom support or are neutral about the film project, or simply defend the freedom of speech).

Like Zeyneb Hanoum, a hundred years earlier classified as insufficiently “Turkish” (Muslim in the parlance of the day) because her grandfather was a French convert, Ali is castigated as inauthentic on similar grounds. This is highlighted by Germaine Greer who, sympathizing with the opposition, notes acidly that the “fact that Ali’s father is Bangladeshi was enough to give her authority in the eyes of the non-Asian British, but not in the eyes of British Bangladeshis.”²⁵ With Salman Rushdie writing in to defend Ali against being “deracinated” by Greer we see again categories of racialised authenticity serving as the arbiter of literary value and cultural success.²⁶ That in contemporary Britain this operates through a

discourse of multiculturalism reminds us in a microcosm of what is at stake in who is recognized as speaking from and for those constructed as marginal. For just as attention to the hidden archives of which I have been writing complicates the potential monolithic homogeneity attributed to the colonizing west, examples such as the debacle in Brick Lane highlight the difficulties and dangers of inscribing as sacrosanct those who claim or are presumed to speak from the position of the oppressed. In the same way as our understanding of colonial power must attend not only to the forces of anti-colonial resistance but also to the motivation and activities of indigenous colonial elites (and their postcolonial legacies), so must we recognise that all communities are divided by patterns of power and patronage that construct and are constructed by differences of gender, sexuality, and class, as well as generation and geography.

When writers un-marked as ethnic are allowed to produce books that shock and offend and are given credit for creating works of fiction (rather than being read literally), and of individuality (rather than being read as representing a whole gender/community/nation), and are taken seriously as literary innovators, we see in the response to Ali's novel a new version of the 19th-century critical double standard that kept women writers and artists in a self-referential and therefore minor critical field. The case of Ali's first novel illustrates the same double bind that brought into being the books by Ottoman women: her impressively large publisher's advance signals the continued market value of the "authentically" ethnic female voice (her second novel is apparently designed to break this mould though it remains to be seen how it will be received), whilst the controversy over the book's reception reveals a continued desire to make literal readings of cultural artefacts that, were they to emerge from other authorial personas, would be read as fiction rather than evaluated as evidence of ethnic experience.

This, the excessive presumption of representativeness, provides the impetus for my current research on the continued and contemporary commodification of Muslim femininities. Things have changed, but the over-determined figure of the veiled and unveiled woman remains prime within competing conceptions of nation and ethnicity: if Zeyneb Hanoum were to bring out an edition of her book today with the same picture on the cover it would still sell. Post 9/11 and, in the UK especially post 7/7, the media is suffused with images of women in hijab. The veiled woman is read as paradigmatically Muslim (whatever her religious affiliation) and is accorded a status of such hyper-visibility that her own motivations for her particular performance of Islam are inevitably lost to the varied

majoritarian audiences that view her dress acts. The veiled woman is also claimed by diverse religious and religio-political factions as a sign of cultural integrity, or political commitment, or habitual devotion, each often posed as an antidote to the fecklessness of contemporary (“western”) consumer culture. Fought over by the media, spoken for more often than she is permitted to speak herself, the apparently intimate dress decisions of the Muslim woman are once more positioned as central to the emergence and regulation of new forms of national and supra-national identification. As opposition to Turkey’s bid for European Union membership re-activates assertions of the Christian-ness of Europe, we do well to remember local divisions that underwrote Orientalist cultural formations in order to comprehend the extent and effect of the gendered neo-Orientalisms that shape today’s postcolonial experiences.

Notes

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