Chronos- Revue d'Histoire de l'Université de Balamand, is a bi-annual Journal published in three languages (Arabic, English and French). It deals particularly with the History of the ethnic and religious groups of the Arab world.

Journal Name:  Chronos

ISSN:  1608-7526

Title:  Encountering the Harem: European Men and the Sexualisation of the Harem in Early Modern Egypt

Author(s):  Mary Ann Fay

To cite this document:


Permanent link to this document: DOI: https://doi.org/10.31377/chr.v35i0.200

Chronos uses the Creative Commons license CC BY-NC-SA that lets you remix, transform, and build upon the material for non-commercial purposes. However, any derivative work must be licensed under the same license as the original.
ENCOUNTERING THE HAREM:
EUROPEAN MEN AND THE SEXUALIZATION OF
THE HAREM IN EARLY MODERN EGYPT

MARY ANN FAY¹

To enter the harem and meet the women who resided there, we discover that our route into this most private and personal of spaces is not direct but oblique. We can locate the harem in the homes of the once-powerful and wealthy; we can open the door and enter, but our encounter with the women, whose lifestories we very much want to hear, is never direct. It is mediated by sources other than the women themselves and obstructed by troublesome concepts about their character and their personality, their relationships and the lives they led behind the harem door. The historian can sit where the harem women sat, gaze at the street life below through a window screened in mashrabiyya, watch the play of light on the carved and painted ceiling and walk through the harem garden listening in perfect privacy to the songs of the birds. But the historian cannot hear their voices. How could it be otherwise, the reader might ask?

Chandler Davis, the husband of the great historian of early modern France, Natalie Zemon Davis, in a forward to her book, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*, described in a short poem the longing of the historian to meet the subjects she can bring to life in her writings but whom she can never meet in the temporal world (Davis 1991).

Born abroad, she longs for you, *compagnons*.
She longs to shake your hand, to share your wine.
She longs for home, four hundred years away.

¹ Morgan State University, Baltimore, Maryland.
Through the pane she hears you but is not heard.
She deserves your pity but will not have it.
The songs you think are vanished once they’re sung,
The pleas you think are wasted if turned down,
Jokes you dismiss if no one laughs or winces,
She listens for. You speak sometimes too soft.
And since there is no God, she notes your prayers.
And since there is no God she marks your fall.

Professor Davis is undoubtedly correct when he describes historians as gazing through the pane, seeing shadows and listening for voices she will never hear or will hear only softly. The encounter with our subjects will always be indirect, always mediated by the archives of historical documents, with all their gaps and inconsistencies, and sometimes by what remains of the material culture.

Historians of the harem have faced other problems, however, that became, and may still be, considerable obstacles in the path of the historian writing on the subject of harem women. One is the European conceptualization of the harem and the women who resided there and another is the gender system prevailing in Europe at the time. Women living under Muslim law had more legal rights than the European women who were the wives, mothers and sisters of the eighteenth-century male travelers to the Ottoman Empire and its Arab provinces from the early modern period to the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, European male travelers routinely described harem women in their writings as virtual prisoners of their husbands or masters, without any legal rights and whose primary role was to serve as sexually available objects of male lust. As I have argued elsewhere, this conceptualization of harem women in particular has become, over several centuries, the prevailing image of Muslim women in the contemporary Western media, which routinely describe women as oppressed by their cruel and despotic male relatives, deprived of legal rights by the Qur’an and shari‘a, denied the right to an education and prohibited from working. The trail left by this conceptualization of Arab-Muslim women leads directly back to the writings of European men beginning in the eighteenth century and to the origins of Orientalism as described by Edward Said. It can also be found in the “rescue” narratives
of contemporary Western feminists who argue that military intervention in countries like Afghanistan, for example, is necessary to save women from their men.

While we can describe the conceptualization of the harem, can we discover how this concept was constructed and took hold in travel writing, in art and literature and even in politics from the early modern period to the present? If we can accomplish this task, we can then move on to identifying a methodology and appropriate sources that will allow us to historicize the harem and to hear the voices of the harem women.

To historicize and contextualize the European concept of the harem, we can begin by noting that the conceptualization of women and harem women in particular, did not arise in the eighteenth or even the nineteenth century when travel to the East increased and was predominantly male. In fact, the men of the eighteenth century who traveled to Egypt came with a great deal of historical and gendered baggage. Some of what these men took with them on their voyages to the East was a long history of ignorance and animosity towards Islam, the Prophet Muhammad and Muslims, generally. The considerable baggage included the trauma of the Arab conquests of European lands beginning with much of the Byzantine Empire from Syria across North Africa and eventually into the Iberian Peninsula until stopped by Charles Martel, the grandfather of Charlemagne, at the battle of Tours, also known as the battle of Poitiers, in 732 CE. This advance, had it not been stopped, would have put the Arabs and Islam into the heart of Europe. As the French historian, Guerard wrote, Martel was “the champion of the Cross versus the Crescent.” (Guerard 1921: 122) While reductive, this statement does demonstrate the dichotomous thinking of the European Christians vis-à-vis Islam.

The Europeans responded with the Crusades called by Pope Urban II in a speech that exposed the lack of knowledge by the Europeans of Islam and the Prophet as well as their disdain, even hatred, of Muslims and their Prophet. The crusades that began in 1095 with Pope Urban’s call to arms were motivated in large part by the desire to reclaim Jerusalem and the Holy Land from the European “infidels.” Pope Urban described the usurpers as “a race from the kingdom of the Persians, an accursed race, a race utterly alienated from God [that] has invaded the lands of those Christians and has depopulated them by sword, pillage and fire...” (Bongars 1905: 513-17) The
Muslims were accused of being heathens and heretics, of destroying churches, torturing captives, circumcising Christians and raping women among other atrocities. In return for fighting the so-called infidels, the Crusaders were promised paradise after death.

The perceived threat to Europe continued in 1453 with the Ottoman Turkish conquest of what remained of Byzantium and the transformation of the Byzantine capital of Constantinople into the Ottoman capital of Istanbul. Ottoman power was represented in stone with the transformation of the Hagia Sophia, the church of Holy Roman Emperors, into the mosque of sultans.

“Not for nothing did Islam come to symbolize terror, devastation and the demonic hordes of hated barbarians. For Europe, Islam was a lasting trauma. Until the end of the 17th century, the “Ottoman peril lurked alongside Europe to represent for the whole of Christian civilization a constant danger, and in time European civilization incorporated that peril and its lore, its great events, figures, virtues and vices as something woven into the fabric of life.” (Said 1979: 59-60)

The 1517 defeat of the Ottoman navy at Lepanto by a coalition of Western European kingdoms called the Holy League was for Christian Europe a sign that the Ottomans could be defeated. The European victors did not in fact halt Ottoman expansion into the Western Mediterranean or seriously challenge its dominance. However, the Holy League’s victory at Lepanto and the Reconquista of Spain by Ferdinand and Isabella that preceded it in 1492 were early signs that the pendulum of power was slowly moving in the direction of the European states. In 1529 and again in 1683, the Ottoman armies attempted the conquest of Western Europe but were stopped twice at the gates of Vienna, the second time by the Polish king Jon Sobieski and his army.

When we unpack the baggage carried by European travelers to the Middle East, we find not only the history of warfare and conquest but also an ignorance of the Arabic language that was a formidable obstacle to understanding Islam as a faith and a culture and in particular of the rights and responsibilities that the Qur’an assigns to women. Medieval Europeans were eager to translate the scientific, medical and philosophical texts that the Arabs inherited from the Greeks and transmitted to Europe via al-Andalus. However, there were no scholars trained in Arabic who were teaching the language to others and translating texts such as the Qur’an.
By the 16th century, however, chairs in Arabic were founded at Oxford and Cambridge, and in 1793, an “ecole publique” was established at the Bibliotheque National to teach Arabic, Turkish and Persian. Sylvestre deSacy became its first and only teacher of Arabic and, according to Said, he was also the first modern and institutional European Orientalist who worked on Islam, Arabic literature, the Druze religion and Sassanid Persia. He was also the teacher of Champollion and of Franz Bopp, the founder of German comparative linguistics. Said also acknowledged the pre-eminence of Edward William Lane the author of *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* and the *Arabic-English Lexicon.* (Lane 1944) However, Said, who eschewed gender analysis in *Orientalism,* did not include the important work of Lane’s sister, Sophia Poole, who, because of her gender, was able to befriend harem women and be welcomed in their homes, which allowed her to write about women from first-hand knowledge. The French approach to hegemony in Egypt was to convince the Egyptians of the superiority of French civilization, which, it was claimed, would make their lives more pleasant and procure for them the advantages of a perfect civilization.

As noted earlier the empowerment of Europe versus the Arabs and the Ottomans goes back to the Reconquista and also to Columbus’s voyage across the Atlantic a few years before Vasco da Gama, the Portuguese navigator, arrived in Calicut, India, in 1498. Da Gama’s voyage began the European challenge to Egypt’s position as an entrepot in the East – West trade. The European presence in the Indian Ocean gradually reduced Egypt’s trade in spices, textiles, and luxury goods. Eventually, Egypt would lose its monopoly over the coffee trade from Yemen not only because European merchants had gained access to Yemen but also because the French were obtaining coffee from their Caribbean colonies. While losing some of the trade with the East, Egypt and the countries of the Levant benefitted from being part of the far flung and powerful Ottoman Empire with its huge internal markets. Additionally, the Ottoman conquest of Egypt in 1517 kept the Europeans out of the Red Sea and strictly regulated European commercial contacts with Egypt.

The eventual shift in power from east to west can be seen in the eighteenth-century by the increase in the number of travelers, some of whom were sent as envoys by their governments for myriad reasons and some of whom were traveling for purposes of their own. European disdain for the Arabs of Egypt, for example, is evident in their writings and also in their
conduct. In particular they disliked being relegated to a specific quarter of Cairo reserved for Europeans and were not allowed to ride horses, an honor reserved only for the Mamluks and their entourage. It was especially galling to the European men because it relegated them to the same level as women who traveled around the city on donkeys.

By the eighteenth century, the European travelers, almost entirely male, were arriving in the “Orient” from a Europe that was engaged economically in far-flung areas of the globe. The Europeans who lived in fear of conquest by Arab and later Ottoman armies and forced conversion to Islam believed themselves superior to the Arabs and Ottomans who once threatened them. They developed a distinctly “Orientalist” view of the people they encountered, their customs, their languages and their religion.

Their views on women were partly a product of the gender relations in European society as well as their own flawed understanding or ignorance of the Qur’an and shari’a as they pertained to women. Additionally, as Europeans and Christians, they could not visit the homes of harem women, indeed of any women. So they had no direct contact with women, except for the women who sang and danced on the streets for money and also the prostitutes who were available to men generally, including Europeans. Eventually, artists constructed visual images of harem women as naked or near-naked inhabitants of the women’s quarters in the households of powerful and wealthy men that were guarded by Black eunuchs.

The European conceptualization of the harem and its women was conveyed to a wide audience in the narratives written by European men and published in books, sent as letters home, as official reports to the governments that sent them to the East or in their paintings. In reality, depictions of women on paper and canvas were artistic day-dreams of women whose primary purpose was believed to be their sexual availability to the master who imprisoned them. The European emphasis on the imprisonment of multiple women in the harem so they would be available at any time to one man reflects the sexual longings of European men, constrained at home by Christian doctrine that allows one wife and prohibits divorce and sex outside of marriage.

European men visiting Egypt in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries insisted on the superiority of Western civilization that they argued was manifested in part by the treatment of women. Indeed, their argument consisted primarily of asserting their superiority on the grounds that Europe did not have harems and that Christianity was superior to Islam. One of
the clearest statements on the pernicious effects of the harem, veiling and seclusion on Egyptian society in general and was made by Lord Cromer, who was appointed British Controller and Consul General in 1883 after the ‘Urabi uprising that threatened British political and economic control of Egypt. This was the beginning of the British occupation of Egypt that officials justified in part by the alleged failure of the Egyptian male elite to govern effectively.

**Imperial Politics and the Harem**

According to Cromer, the primary cause of Egypt’s failure to govern responsibly was the harem and its practices of veiling and seclusion, all of which weakened Egyptian family life and made Egyptian men unfit to govern. In his memoirs, *Modern Egypt*, Cromer wrote: “The position of women in Egypt, and in Mohammedan countries generally, is therefore, a fatal obstacle to the attainment of that elevation of thought and character which should accompany the introduction of European civilization, if that civilization is to produce its full measure of beneficial effect.” (Lord Cromer 1908: 538-539)

Cromer advocated monogamous marriage and education for women so they could better raise their children, particularly their sons. In effect, the family structure remained intact with a patriarchal father at the head of the household and a mother at home who was charged with raising children who would be fit to lead in or out of political life. Certainly it is not accidental that Cromer in his later years was avidly opposed to suffrage for women, so much so that in 1908 he served as president of the Men’s League for Opposing Woman Suffrage and again in 1910-1912 as president of the National League for Opposing Woman Suffrage.

Among the baggage that Western male travelers brought with them to the “East,” was a gender system that privileged and empowered men over women. Cromer’s views on marriage and the family, and in particular the elite family, were not new or original views of the role of women in the family and society. In both Cromer’s Europe as well as in the East, women had been consigned to the private sphere of the home while men occupied the public realm of work, education and governance. It is ironic that Cromer and others were convinced of the inferiority of Muslim women, when European women, elite women in particular, were constrained as well by a gender system that relegated them to home and hearth.
In our attempt to understand how the conceptualization of harem women arose and took hold in politics, literature and art, we should consider that although gender defines the roles that women and men play in society, there is a long history of women in Europe who transgressed gender norms and even wielded considerable power, so much so that they merited inclusion in the history books. Among them were warriors like Boudicca and Joan of Arc who led armies and queens who ruled kingdoms such as Eleanor of Aquitaine, Mary Queen of Scots; her cousin, Queen Elizabeth I, Isabella of Spain, and Queen Victoria whose reign spanned two centuries. There were other visible women, non-royals like Florence Nightingale, for example, who created modern nursing on the battlefield during the Crimean war and who later traveled to Egypt and wrote a memoir of her time there. European women also asserted themselves as published writers of fiction and non-fiction. Mary Wollstonecraft became the first woman to make a living from her writing while Jane Austen and the Bronte sisters were successful novelists.

What this means to our understanding of how the harem was conceptualized is that European women were just more visible on the streets, in the shops, increasingly in the workplace and in positions of power. In fact Europe was changing as the Industrial Revolution brought women into factories, shops and workplaces of all kinds. This is in stark contrast to the harem women that Cromer and other European men could never meet, speak to or visit in their homes. Thus, Europeans equated harem women with virtual imprisonment by tyrannical masters which re-enforced the European belief in the superiority of the West in general and in particular its treatment of women.

It is important to note that men like Cromer and other male travelers to Egypt were focused at home and abroad on the elite women of the harem and not on the lower class peasant women who farmed the land, sold the fruits of their labor in the markets, owned small businesses, and were impressed as workers into the state’s cotton mills when Muhammad Ali Pasha attempted to develop a textile industry as part of his plan to modernize Egypt. Nor were they interested in the women of the middle classes, wives and daughters of well-to-do-merchants or bureaucrats in the Khedival government. Thus, the conceptualization of harem women became the conceptualization of all women. So, when we attempt to understand how the harem was conceptualized and what was responsible for its longevity, we should consider that the descriptions of harem women with all their alleged defects became
the dominant conception of Muslim women generally from the early modern period onward. How and why this was so hinges partly on the Orientalism, notably, of the French and the British, whose construction of knowledge about the “Orient” was based on the dichotomy between the Western self and the Eastern other and the alleged superiority of Western civilization over the East and of Christianity over Islam.

Conceptualizing the harem in the early modern period into the nineteenth century by various travelers from the West occurred in part because most of the travelers knew very little about Islam and the place of women in religion and society. In other words, there was no counter-narrative to the one emerging in the 18th and 19th centuries. There was little to no understanding of Islam and of the women who have a place in the history of Islam and who continue to be exemplars of piety and power such the prophet’s first wife, Khadija, a wealthy widow who was the first of the believers and used her own money to assist her husband and the spread of the faith. A’isha, the wife of the prophet after the death of Khadija, who is known as “the mother of the believers;” Hafsa, daughter of the caliph Umar, and wife of the Prophet Muhammad who, according to tradition, memorized the prophet’s revelations, thus facilitating the writing of the canonical Qur’an. There were also the poets, who were revered in ancient Arabia as poets continue to be today and include: al-Khansa of Arabia; Walladah bint al Mustakfi of al-Andalus and Rab’ia Balkhi of Afghanistan. Women were also numbered among the Sufis and the saints including the well-known Sufi, Rab’i’a-‘aladawiyya (the mystic) of Basra. However, European men who constructed the conception of harem women did not know enough about Islam or Arab society and culture to be aware of the women held in high regard by their co-religionists and who were role models for Muslim women.

The derogatory views of harem women and the religion and culture of Islam continued to dominate the discourse of Western travelers to the so-called Orient. However, in Egypt in particular, the Orientalism of the West and the Western conceptualization of the harem became embedded in something new, namely the occupation of Egypt. The connection between the harem, polygamy and British policy is that Cromer and those who followed him as administrators of occupied Egypt stated unambiguously that improving the status of women and the family was crucial to constructing an effective administrative apparatus. As Cromer said often and clearly: Great Britain
would remain in Egypt until the task of reforming family life and producing men capable of taking control of the Egyptian government was completed, which was said to be somewhere far in the future.

As for the French, their forces occupied Egypt from 1798-1801, earlier than the British, and were eventually defeated and forced to evacuate its army by combined British and Ottoman forces. Unlike the British, the French did not meddle directly in family life, although they shared the British insistence on the superiority of Western civilization. Instead, they embarked on the so-called civilizing mission as described by Jean Baptiste-Joseph Fourier who wrote: “This country, which has transmitted its knowledge to so many nations, is today plunged into barbarism. Therefore, according to Fourier, Napoleon wanted to offer a useful European example to the Orient, and finally, also to make the inhabitants’ lives more pleasant, as well as to procure for them all the advantages of a perfected civilization. None of this would be possible without a continuous application to the project of the arts and sciences.” (Said 1979: 85) As noted earlier, to accomplish these goals, the French created the Bibliotheque Nationale to teach Arabic, Turkish and Persian, and Sylvestre de Sacy became the teacher of nearly every major Orientalist. Also, Bonaparte included in his expedition to Egypt the savants and converted the palace of an important Mamluk into the Institut Francais where the chemists, historians, biologists, archeologists and antiquarians did their work. The results of their studies were published in the voluminous Description de l’Egypte between 1809 and 1828.

Said notes that by taking Egypt, Egypt’s own destiny was to be annexed to Europe, preferably. What then was the effect on the conceptualization of the harem?

By the nineteenth century, the conceptualization of harem women became politicized and used by imperial powers like Great Britain and France to justify and prolong their occupation of territory across the Middle East. Linking women’s condition to European expansion and the occupation of Arab lands in the Middle East extended the life span of the Orientalist conception of Muslim women. Taken together, the actions of the French and the British in Egypt were directed toward modernizing what they considered a backward society in all aspects of life. Over time, the harem became a trope, “a conceptual figure of speech,” a story-telling shorthand for the concept of the harem that an audience would recognize and understand instantly.” (Noah 2009) Collectively, with some exceptions, the Orientalists who traveled to
Egypt and other parts of the Middle East, arrived with a conceptualization of the harem that enabled them to consider themselves, their culture, their religion and their women as superior.

**Historicizing the Harem. Hearing Voices**

Among the historian’s tasks is the deconstruction of the conceptualization of harem women in the past and demonstrating how and why it has survived for such a long time. Another, and perhaps an even more important task, is to hear across the centuries the voices of the women of the harem. To accomplish these tasks, it is necessary to historicize the harem, which can be accomplished in part by finding the women in the archives and uncovering the influence and wealth that former concubines, later wives, of powerful Mamluks in 18th century Egypt were able to acquire. The Qur’an and *shari‘a* give women the right to own and control their own property, thereby making Muslim women legal persons. This is in stark contrast to the law in England and much of France. For example, In England, Common Law effectively made women non-persons, unable to own property or make contracts on their own, effectively non-persons.

The property ownership of harem women reveals the stark contrast between English and French gender relations, the status of women in the West generally and women living under *shari‘a* law. The Qur’an and the law give women legal rights that women in the West did not have and would not be granted to them until the late 19th and early 20th centuries and only after fierce struggles by women and the organizations they created to achieve their goals.

To demonstrate the differences between the Oriental conception of the harem and the lives of harem women, we have a window on how harem women amassed and controlled their own property and also became influential members of their households. The two most prominent among the 18th-century Mamluk women were Shawikar Qadin and Nafisa al-Bayda (the white). Their complete names are the following:

Translated her name is: The Esteemed Lady Shawikar Qadin, daughter of God’s servant, the white, freed slave of the deceased amir 'Uthman Katkhuda al-Qazdughli of the Mustahfizan (the name for Janissaries in Egypt) and known as the wife of the deceased Amir Ibrahim Katkhuda of the Mustahfizan.

Shawikar’s name identifies her as the freed slave/concubine of a powerful Mamluk, the deceased 'Uthman Katkhuda, who belonged to the most powerful household of the time, the Qazdughli. After 'Uthman’s death, she married another powerful member of this household, Ibrahim Katkhuda, who was deceased, (marhum), at the time that she created her endowment. Like other women who married into the households of powerful Mamluks, she outlived both her master and her husband.

It is noteworthy that Shawikar, like other freed concubines, identified herself as “bint 'Abd Allah,” daughter of God’s servant, because as a convert to Islam, she does not have a Muslim father. Her conversion, like those of other freed concubines who married their masters, is mandated by shari‘a law, which forbids an owner to marry his concubine. So she must be freed by her master and convert to Islam so that a legal marriage could take place. Shawikar also named herself as al-Bayda, the white, indicating that she probably came from Georgia or the Caucasus. Light-skinned women from the East were preferred as concubines and were sold for higher prices on the slave market.

Examining Shawikar’s waqf (religious endowment) discloses important information about the wealth that women like Shawikar were able to amass during their lifetimes. Although there is no first-hand knowledge of how women amassed their fortunes, we can speculate on the basis of the rights given to Muslim women in the Qur’an and according to shari‘a upon their marriages or the deaths of the husbands or their close relatives. In the case of a concubine who converts to Islam, she has the same rights as women born into Islam, which in the case of marriage, means she is entitled to a dowry/mahr that is paid directly to her. Thus, the dowry in the case of a former concubine was very likely the basis of her acquisition of lucrative income-producing property.

While men like Cromer and various travel writers were lamenting the degraded state of harem women and Muslim women in general, harem women like Shawikar were amassing large fortunes mostly in urban real estate. They did so by making a “waqf,” which is an endowment of property usually for
religious purposes, such as the upkeep of the Ka'ba in Mecca or to provide food for the poor. However, shrewd investors like Shawikar created family waqfs, which allow the donor to benefit from the proceeds of the waqf during her lifetime and to bequeath the profits to her heirs upon her death. By making a waqf and having it recorded in the court as her property, a woman could protect herself from attempts by avaricious relatives and even her husband to take control of her endowment. This is how, in part, documents made by women speak to us across the centuries as provide examples of women's agency and in particular, their ability to act on behalf of themselves to protect their interests.

Perhaps the most well-known and influential of the Mamluk women of the late eighteenth century was Nafisa al-Bayda (the white), who is also known to have exercised political influence, particularly during the French occupation of Egypt from 1798-1801. Like other harem women, her origins are unknown. We can only speculate based on her use of “al-bayda,” the white, indicating her origins in Georgia or the Caucasus. She was married to the most powerful of the Mamluks, ‘Ali Bey al-Kabir,” who built her a palace in the most exclusive neighborhood in Cairo, Azbakiyya. It was there that the yearly flood waters created a lake on whose banks lived the most powerful men and women in Egypt, including Nafisa. After her husband’s death, Nafisa married his successor, Murad Bey, who had his own sumptuous palace at Giza. Nafisa continued to live in her home in Azbakiyya until her death which means that either she traveled to Giza to visit with her husband or he traveled to Azbakiyya or, they lived separate lives. In any case, Nafisa lived a life of remarkable agency and renown.

Nafisa was an exceptionally wealthy woman whose property included houses, gardens and commercial property including the most famous, the wakala, which combined shops and apartments, and the sabil-kuttab, i.e., the fountain at the bottom that provided free drinking water and a Qur’anic school on the upper story that provided free education. Her sabil-kuttab, regarded as an act of piety, still exists today near the Bab Zuwayla gate in the district known as al-sukariyya, because of the predominance of sugar merchants in the area.

Even before the French occupation, Nafisa already knew the former French Consul and his wife, who sold cloth to important harem women. Nafisa often intervened on behalf of the French merchants. She also successfully
intervened with her husband, Murad, to reduce the exorbitant money demands made by the beys on the French in Cairo. After the French invasion, Nafisa became the leader of the Mamluk women in confrontation with the French who were demanding that they turn over the possessions of their husbands in return for being allowed to stay in their homes. Nafisa stepped in and negotiated a sum that the women raised among themselves.

Nafisa’s reputation among the French led her to become an actor in the French occupation as an intermediary between General Kleber and her husband and leader of the Mamluks, Murad Bey. When the French invaded, Murad led the resistance to the French and then, outnumbered, retreated to Upper Egypt. By 1799, Napoleon had left for France and the British refused to negotiate an evacuation of the French army. Kleber decided to negotiate with Murad in order to bring his forces to the French side. Thus, Kleber invited Nafisa to negotiate on behalf of her husband. Nafisa asked for and received two conditions and there were promises that Murad, upon a French victory, would become governor of Upper Egypt, a strategic position that provided the French forces a friendly force at their back.

In spite of Nafisa’s ability to negotiate on behalf of her husband, Kleber’s notes on the meeting have a condescending tone that devalues Nafisa’s negotiating skills. He wrote: You will recognize easily on the part of Lady Nafisa the sweetness and the ignorance of les affaires that are suitable for a woman, a lot of caution and even a little artifice. Kleber’s last sentence is the following: The conversation did not have a witness.” (Laurens 1989: 63) If Kleber’s notes are to be believed, then the rumors that Nafisa could speak and write French were true.

When attempting to locate the women in history and hear the voices of harem women, Al-Jarbarti is an under-utilized source for information about women. In the case of Nafisa, for example, he chronicled her last years after the French left Egypt and she was accused and acquitted of sedition and when the Ottoman army marched into Cairo under the control of Muhammad `Ali Pasha. Those who had collaborated with the French were punished — in the case of Nafisa, her home was confiscated and she took refuge in the palatial mansion of longtime friends. Al-Jabarti writes that Nafisa was accused later on of raising money to outfit a Mamluk army to defeat the Ottomans. She was accused of sedition and placed under house arrest. Nafisa had many friends who were in the courtroom along with some of the highest ranking shaykhs
and qadis who demanded her release. Eventually, Nafisa was allowed to return to her home where she died in 1816 where, according to Al-Jabarti, she was buried near the tomb of her husband, Murad, in the Qarafa cemetery near the shrine of Imam al-Shafi‘, the revered founder of one of the Sunni schools of law.

In his necrology of Sitt Nafisa, Al-Jarbarti wrote: “She lived a long time in honor, power and influence. Most of the women of the amirs had been her slave girls and none except Lady Shawikar was as famous as she.” (Al-Jabarti 1958) During the French occupation, after Murad Bey had made peace with the French, they showed Lady Khatun (Nafisa) great honor and paid her 100,000 silver paras from their diwan. They accepted her intercessions without question. In a word, she was charitable to the poor and was responsible for the construction of the new khan and cistern inside Bab Zuwayla. She died on Thursday, the 20th of Jumada I (April 18, 1816.)

Not all harem women lived lives comparable to Nafisa. On the other hand, not all harem women lived lives such as those imagined by male travelers to Egypt and other parts of the Middle East when they wrote of women as prisoners, as sexual objects maintained, indeed virtually imprisoned, to satisfy the lust of their masters.

The Visibility of the Invisible. Travel Writing and the Representation of Harem Women

When Europeans traveled to the Orient they constructed portraits in words of harem women that historically bear little resemblance to the reality of the lives of harem women. In their writings, Europeans, mostly male until the nineteenth century, described harem women largely in derogatory terms. One of the themes in the conceptualization of harem women or women generally is that they are kept as virtual prisoners in their homes. However, the same observers also described them riding on donkeys in the city, visiting the tombs of their dead on Fridays or participating in the yearly inundation of the Nile waters that brought water into the city and created the lake or birka in the neighborhood of Azbakiyya. There families walked on the banks and elite women sailed on boats screened in the turned wood called mashrabiyya that allowed the women to see their surroundings but not be seen.
In spite of the sightings of women outside of their homes, the description of women as prisoners in their homes remained an important element of the conceptualization of harem women in particular. The Comte de Volney who visited Egypt from 1783 to 1785 wrote that harem women “rigorously sequestered from the society of men, always closed up in their house, they communicate only with their husband, their father, their brothers and their first cousin and carefully veiled in the streets... all must be strangers to them... one must let them pass as if they were contagious... Volney also wrote that “Orientals” misunderstand women and have an incorrect idea about women which he blames on Muhammad and the Qur’an “which does not do them the honor of treating them as part of the human species.” (Volney 1789: 441-442) He also claimed that the government deprives them of all property and personal liberty and makes them dependent on a husband or father, which he described as “slavery.”

Male travelers to Egypt like Vivant Denon also focused on the sexuality of the women and men. Denon was a member of the French Institute who accompanied General Menou to Egypt. Upon learning that Bonaparte was setting out to the Pyramids with an armed escort, he joined the group and ended up in the vacant home of Murad Bey, who led the fight against the French and ultimately retreated to Upper Egypt. In his memoir, Denon described the home as a “pleasure house.” Among the many luxuries described by Denon were the tents pitched under a cluster of sycamore trees, the scents of orange and “the voluptuous pleasure of enjoyment still but imperfectly known to us but which we may easily conceive... to be attended by young slaves who unite to elegance of form gentle and caressing manners; to be indolently stretched on vast and downy carpets strewn with cushions in company with some favorite beauty, breathing perfumes and intoxicated with desires; to receive sherbet from the hands of a young damsel whose languishing eyes express the contentment of willing obedience, and not the constraint of servitude. Surrounded with these delights, the burning African need not envy the inhabitants of Europe...” (Denon 1803)

Denon, like other western men in Egypt, was fascinated by the dancers called almeh s both the street dancers and those who danced only in the households of the wealthy. Denon wrote that “notwithstanding they were all young and handsome, they were also haggard and jaded, with the exception of two of them. The women received no education other than that which is bestowed on the most infamous of professions in the most dissolve
of cities; when the dance was ended, possessed all the delicacy of manners of the women whom the resembled and the soft and the soft and endearing voluptuousness which they no doubt reserve for those on whom they lavish their secret favors.” (Ibid.) Describing the women as licentious, Denon then states “they are nevertheless introduced into the harems to instruct the young persons of their sex in all that may render them agreeable to their future husbands... and make the principal duty of women to consist in being available to their husbands/masters and bestowing pleasure.” (Ibid.) Therefore we must acknowledge that a central component of the conceptualization of harem women, indeed of women generally, is their sexuality and their alleged willingness to comply with the sexual demands of men.

In the time period of the early modern era and into the nineteenth century, there were challenges to the conception of harem women and by extension to women generally. Lady Mary Wortley Montague, Guillaume Antoine Olivier and Sophia Poole were among the travelers who wrote knowledgeably about their sojourns in Egypt, Persia and Turkey, then the Ottoman Empire. While their memoirs challenged the prevailing concept of harem women, travel writers and/or memoirists did not incorporate their insights into their own writings.

Lady Mary, one of the most accomplished of the writers, arrived in Istanbul in 1716 when her husband was named Ambassador to the Porte. Guillaume Antoine Olivier arrived in Turkey in 1756 and Sophia Poole arrived in Egypt in 1842. The writings of Lady Mary and Poole were in the form of letters home to family and friends that were published later in book form. All three of the authors wrote with first-and knowledge of the harem and the women who lived there.

Lady Mary because of her rank was invited into the homes of women of high rank like the wife of the grand vizier, the wife of the sultan’s second minister and the wife of a Sultana, the widow of the Sultan Mustafa II whom the present sultan had deposed in 1703. Lady Mary’s acquaintance with Ottoman women led her to write that “those ladies that are rich having all their money in their own hands”... Upon the whole, I look upon Turkish women as the only free people in the Empire.” (Lady Mary Wortley-Montague 1988)

Lady Mary’s views were influenced by her father’s refusal to give her a dowry, her husband’s refusal to give her an adequate allowance to run her household and English Common Law that denied women legal personhood so that they were unable to own property or make a contract. Along with
these grievances, however, Lady Mary had first-hand knowledge of the lives of harem women. Consequently, Lady Mary was extremely critical of travel writers who had no direct contact with the women about whom they wrote. In a letter she criticized “a British travel writer and all his fellow voyage writers who lament the miserable confinement of the Turkish ladies who are perhaps freer than any ladies in the universe, and are (perhaps) the only women in the world that lead a life of uninterrupted pleasure...” (Ibid.)

As for Mr. Olivier and his companion, they were sent on an official mission to restore political and commercial relations between France and Persia. During his sojourn he became friendly with an Ottoman official who asked Olivier, a physician, to examine his sick mother and advise her Greek physician on an appropriate treatment. In my opinion, Olivier is probably the only European man to enter a harem. Olivier, unlike other male travelers, had more than a passing knowledge of Islamic law as it pertains to women, the laws regulating marriage and the differences between oriental and western slavery. Most of the time in his writings he was able to present a remarkably straightforward account of the most exoticized features of life. In an Ottoman harem.

In her letter numbered XV, Sophia Poole (2003) described her first visit to a harem. Eager to visit a harem, she asked the wife of the resident missionary who, according to Poole, “has gained the confidence of the most distinguished hareems in this country.” Poole’s first visit to a harem was to “the ladies of Habeeb Effende,” the late governor of Cairo. An acute observer, Poole described the house, the clothing and jewels worn by the women, the food, the indoor bath, which well-to-do families had in their homes, and the extreme courtesy with which Poole was treated. A few days after her visit, she received a second invitation from this hareem to make a festival and fantasia for her amusement.

In spite of the first-hand accounts of life in the harem written by Western women who visited them at home on multiple occasions, their accounts did not influence the male writers who continued to describe harem women in salacious terms and their masters/husbands as tyrants.

The conceptualization of harem women in early modern and modern Egypt, is not based on face-to-face encounters between European men and harem women, indeed by any women, with some exceptions, such as Dr. Olivier, on the streets or in their homes. So, in the absence of actual
encounters with harem women and the disregard for those writers who visited the women at home we much search elsewhere for an explanation. The conceptualization of harem women was in fact a trope, a conceptual figure of speech, a story-telling shorthand for a concept that will be recognized and understood instantly. Therefore when harem women were conceptualized as prisoners, held in captivity to satisfy the voracious sexual appetite of their master/husband, as women grown fat and lazy because of inactivity, bored and lacking in education, the women become a symbol of the backwardness of the Orient and the superiority of the west in every category. The European narrative of the harem provided the justification for the British and the French to prolong and expand their occupation of territory in the region and their carry out their own version of modernity.

**Re-Imagining the Harem**

Earlier in this paper, two women, Shawikar and Nafisa, both originally concubines, eventually married their masters after converting to Islam and thus were accorded all the rights of free-born women including the right to own and manage their property. We saw earlier in this article how these women, among the most powerful women in late Mamluk history, bought very lucrative income-producing property, which they managed on their own for their own benefit and for their heirs. Nafisa, however, was the most visible of the two women because of her engagement in commercial affairs and in politics.

As noted by the chronicler, al-Jabarti, Nafisa, was the close friend of the former French consul and his wife who sold cloth to the harem women in their homes. Based on this friendship and her conversation with General Kleber, it appears that Nafisa spoke French fluently. Also, according to al-Jabarti, Nafisa attempted after the defeat of the Mamluks by Muhammad ‘Ali Pasha to finance an army to overthrow the Pasha and bring the Mamluks back into power. This is significant here because she was charged with sedition and because her many friends as well as powerful *ulama* and *qadis* appeared in the courtroom to support her. These are not the powerless simpletons of the Western imagination.
While the lives of these and other women like them demonstrate agency, it may also be enlightening to consider the harem women on a more mundane level. As we have seen, they were not reclusive. On the contrary, they appear to have comported themselves as other women did: walking in the procession of a bride to her new home; visiting women friends who have just given birth; inviting women friends to a dinner, as Lady Mary Montague described; or extending an invitation to friends to indulge themselves in the bath in her home for the sake of camaraderie as well as for health, raising her children and visiting the tombs of deceased loved ones on Fridays.

Of all the women I have “met” virtually in the archives at the ministry of Awqaf in Cairo, I am enchanted by Nafisa in part because of the friendship between her and her friend that grew out of a social occasion attended by two of the most powerful Mamluks, Ibrahim Katkhuda and Ali Bey al-Kabir. On this occasion, Nafisa, then a concubine, and later the wife of ‘Ali Bey, met Adela Hanim, the daughter of Ibrahim Katkhuda who was at that time ‘Ali Bey’s master. The friendship that grew from this encounter between the two women, Nafisa and Adela and between Nafisa and the Barudi family lasted for all of their lives. In 1803, when Nafisa was accused of sedition and expelled from her home, she took refuge in the al-Barudi mansion with her lifelong friend, Adela. With this and other aspects of Nafisa’s life, she challenges the one-dimensional stereotype of harem women as the highly sexualized captives of male lust and replaces it with the most mundane of human activities: having a friend.

Conclusion

This article on the women of the harem in early modern Egypt presents an alternative way of imaging the women and their lives. Although the lives of these women are inherently shrouded by time and distance, and we cannot be certain how they lived their lives, we can use the historian’s tools to hear the voices of the women and restore to history as much as we can recover of their lives.

Chandler Davis, whose poem to his wife, the renowned historian of early modern France, Natalie Zemon Davis, writes of the longing of the historian to meet her subjects, to shake their hands, to share their wine... She
longs for home, hundreds of years in the past. Through the pane she hears you but is not heard ... She listens for you. You speak sometimes too soft. (Forward by Chandler Davis to Natalie Zeemon Davis, Society and Culture In Early Modern France, 1990).

In his poem Davis expresses poetically the historian’s dilemma: she hears her subjects through the pane but they cannot hear her, which means she cannot know for certain if what she uncovers in the archives even approximates the everyday lives of the women she would very much like to know.

We do know that the writings of European travelers to Egypt and the near East, most of them men, are deeply flawed. As a counterpoint to these writers, we have access to written documents like the waqfiyyat (religious endowment deeds) that demonstrate women’s participation in the urban economy. We also have travel literature written by writers who had access to the harem and wrote about it with accuracy and empathy, such as Lady Mary Montagu, the physician Dr. Olivier and Sophia Poole to name a few.

Although the lives of the harem women are inherently shrouded by time and distance and we cannot be certain how they lived their lives, we can use the historian’s tools to hear their voices and restore them to history. Despite the barriers imposed on the historian by lacunae in the documents, secondary literature that reduces the complexities of women’s lives, Islamic values and culture to stereotypes and the clash of civilizations to name but a few obstacles in the historian’s way, creative historians unencumbered by Orientalist preconceptions can bring the women of the harem into somewhat sharper focus.

August 2016
BIBLIOGRAPHY


GUERARD Albert Leon, 1921, *French Civilization from its Origins to the Close of the Middle Ages*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin.


