



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Cross-cultural Dressing in the Late Ottoman Empire

Lewis, R.

Citation

Lewis, R. (2001). Cross-cultural Dressing in the Late Ottoman Empire. *Isim Newsletter*, 8(1), 12-12. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/17505>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/17505>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Orientalist Imagery

REINA LEWIS

Cross-cultural dressing is usually seen as a Western activity, but elite Ottomans would have been by the end of the empire perfectly accustomed to wearing Western clothes – something which challenges current theories about cross-cultural dressing. The following considers photographs of cross-cultural dressing in books written by two friends: the Ottoman Zeyneb Hanum, who with her sister, Melek Hanum, collaborated with Pierre Loti on his novel, *Les D senchant es*, and the English feminist and Turkophile, Grace Ellison. Zeyneb Hanum's epistolary account, *A Turkish Woman's European Impressions* (1913), was edited by Ellison, whose own story of visits to Turkey, *An Englishwoman in a Turkish Harem*, appeared two years later in 1915. In both books the authors appear cross-culturally dressed, yet the images register very differently.



▲ 'An Englishwoman wearing a yashmak (veil)', in Ellison 1915. By permission of the British Library (shelfmark 10125 bb32).

▼ 'Zeyneb in her Paris Drawing-room', in Zeyneb Hanum 1913.



Cross-cultural Dressing in the Late Ottoman Empire

Within Orientalism's fantasy logic about the forbidden harem, women writers could claim an insider's knowledge prohibited to Western men. But, as Ellison knew, associating oneself with a realm so relentlessly sexualized in the minds of the West was also risky: 'To the Western ear, to be staying in a Turkish harem sounds alarming, and not a little – yes, let us confess it – improper' (Ellison 1915, p. 2). Although this closeness to the object of study might prohibit a mode of detached scientific neutrality otherwise desired by European women, Ellison welcomes the proximity permitted by cross-cultural dressing when the privileges of passing gain her access to religious sites:

... now I am wearing a veil who can tell whether I am Muslim or Christian?... [But] how could I, even as a veiled woman, take my place amongst the women ... I was just a little frightened; my action might be mistaken for irreverence.

(Ellison 1915, pp.162-4)

But she is all laughter at having fooled some Europeans.

Just before we reached our carriage I saw a dear friend... escorting some English visitors round... She recognised my voice, and I was introduced as a Turkish lady to my compatriots.

I felt just a little guilty at their delight in meeting a real Turkish woman, but it was too dangerous to undeceive them in those fanatical surroundings. "And how well you speak English too!" they said. "English was the first language I spoke," I answered truthfully. I wonder whether Miss A. ever told them who I really was?

(Ellison 1915, p.169, my emphasis)

Yet though Ellison delights in being mistaken for a Turk, the narrative also marks out her distance from her Oriental objects of study, often by referencing her attempts to 'capture' Oriental women in photographs.

There is a beautiful old woman in the household whom I long to "Kodak". Once I thought I "had" her... but she noticed me, alas! then cursed, screamed, and buried her head in her roomy pantaloons. I shall not try to repeat the experiment.

(Ellison 1915, p.183)

Not only did the new technology of photography develop coterminously with the new investigative social sciences of anthropology and ethnography, it also became an established part of the fieldwork process – classifying, conceptualizing and visualizing 'other' peoples. For Ellison, the Orient's enchanting distinctiveness becomes exasperating when it thwarts her ethnographic and scopophilic desire to gather photographic evidence: she finds members of her hostess's entourage to be 'most fanatical' in their insistence that photography is forbidden by Islam (though photography was, in fact, increasingly available in Istanbul by this period). Defiantly entitling her book *An Englishwoman in a Turkish Harem*, Ellison fronts it with a photograph of herself, 'The author in Turkish costume', in

'native' dress – her hair covered by a *tchar-chaff*, her face unveiled. The Ottoman clothes are identified as 'costume', rendering 'native' clothing as timeless and archaic rather than as modern fashion, further endorsing the sitter's racialized identification.

Grace Ellison is identified as 'the author' at the head of the book, yet in another plate, 'An Englishwoman wearing a Yashmak' (see photo), the identity of the woman as well as her face is allegedly veiled. But it is clearly Ellison and her face is still clearly visible, being only partly obscured by the *yashmak*. If the logic of the veil is that one cannot identify the wearer, why does the caption to 'An Englishwoman wearing a Yashmak' identify the nationality or race of the subject but not her name? Passing only makes sense if it can be based on the transgression of clearly fixed boundaries of racial and cultural difference. So Ellison, secure in her position as an 'Englishwoman', can be thrilled when she hoodwinks people into thinking that she is Turkish, just as she plans to hoodwink her readers who open the book expecting one thing (disreputable 'smoking room' tales of polygamy) and get another. By presenting herself through photographs and prose as willingly acculturated to Turkish life, Ellison suggests the positive aspects of haremization and keys into a mode of surveillance based on invisible voyeurism. Whilst the book pictures elite Ottoman women's adoption of Western fashions, Ellison herself only appears *à la turque*. Her presence in English dress would be too anti-exoticizing, would too much trouble the transculturating drive of the book.

European harems

The reverse side of cross-cultural dressing is illustrated by Zeyneb Hanum. Offering a cogent criticism of the limitations of Western 'freedom', she finds the harem in Europe:

What a curious harem!... [This] Ladies' Club [where she is staying in London] is not a big enough reward for having broken away from an Eastern harem... A club... is after all another kind of harem, but it has none of the mystery and charm of the Harem of the East.

(Zeyneb Hanum 1913, pp.182-6)

Zeyneb Hanum exerts a haremizing gaze on the West that makes strange its familiar division of space and organization of sexuality, relocating Orientalism's sexualized projections back to their Western point of origin:

But, my dear [Grace], why have you never told me that the Ladies' Gallery [in the Houses of Parliament] is ... the harem of the Government!... You send your women out unprotected all over the world, and here in the workshop where your laws are made, you cover them with a symbol of protection.

(Zeyneb Hanum 1913, p.194)

Clearly Zeyneb Hanum had European clothes and even in Turkey, like many elite women, would have habitually worn Paris fashions – but remarkably in this book about her time in Europe we see the sisters wearing Turkish clothes in all but one of the illustrations. In the face of the potentially acculturating ef-

fects of their sojourn in Europe these photographs work to maintain a sense of the author's Turkishness. It is, after all, the racialized specificity of her gendered gaze on Europe which supports the rationale of the whole book. So when we turn to photographs like 'Zeyneb in her Paris drawing room' (see photo), we have a mixture of the two – a visibly Turkish woman in her Turkified room in the French capital. If the frontispiece to Ellison's book, featuring her in 'Turkish costume', is designed to testify to the actuality of her visits to Turkish harems, the photograph which fronts Zeyneb Hanum's book shows her bringing the harem with her. Being seen wearing a *yashmak* in Paris proves her authenticity as a Turkish woman in the way most easily recognizable to the West. Unlike Ellison, who can leave it to captions to distinguish her racialized identity, Zeyneb Hanum's book cannot start with any hint of unreliability in its narrator.

Zeyneb Hanum's identifications need to be seen as performative, as identifications which, rather than being natural or innate, are constructed and understood through the reiteration of socially and culturally recognizable signs of difference. The completely unnecessary wearing of the *yashmak* in the frontispiece makes sense if we allow that the veil (in all its versions) is the ultimate sign by which the Western consumer can distinguish the 'Oriental' woman from the Occidental. Her knowing deployment of Orientalist imagery suggests a self-conscious manipulation of Western cultural codes, since cross-cultural dressing would have had a very different meaning for her in an Ottoman context. There, Western commodities were seen as part of a continuum of goods, the value of which was concerned as much with rarity as with ideas of cultural difference. So whereas the cross-dressing of the English Ellison in Turkey works to endorse the racialized boundaries she transgresses, the excessive theatricality of Zeyneb Hanum's attempt to dress as a Turk in Europe reveals the non-naturalness of those apparently absolute differentiating terms. Rather than transmit the Orient to Europe it reveals the inventedness of traditions of cultural difference.

A longer version of this article previously appeared as 'On Veiling, Vision and Voyage: Cross-Cultural Dressing and Narratives of Identity', *Interventions*, Vol. 1, no. 4, 1999, pp. 500-520.

References

- Ellison, Grace (1915), *An Englishwoman in a Turkish Harem*, London: Methuen.
- Zeyneb Hanum (1913), *A Turkish Woman's European Impressions*, London: Seeley, Service Co.

Dr Reina Lewis is senior lecturer at the Department of Cultural Studies at the University of East London, UK. She is author of *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Representation, Femininity* (Routledge, 1996). Her current research on representation of and by Ottoman women, *Feminism in the Harem*, will be published by IB Tauris in 2002. E-mail: R.2.Lewis@uel.ac.uk