

Harem Literature & Women's Travel

REINA LEWIS

The production, distribution, and consumption of literary depictions of the Middle Eastern harem in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries relied on a number of local and international social and cultural developments, not least of which was the market in the "West" (in this case Europe and North America) for what is known as "harem literature." Generally characterized by first person narration, harem literature emerged by the mid-nineteenth century as a sub-genre of travel writing: one that especially favoured women whose gender gave, and was held to give, them special access to the harem's segregated spaces. Following many of the conventions of the emergent field of travel literature, harem literature offered western women a chance to claim for themselves a specialism within Orientalist knowledges that could be both generalist and scholarly. Central to the pull of women's harem literature was the explicit assumption that their gender-privileged entry to the sites that no western man could visit guaranteed the authenticity of their reports.

In the early years of harem literature, when writing for publication was still a potentially unrespectable activity, and when women novelists knew that their work would be judged within the marginalized sphere of women's rather than general writing (both reasons for the use of a male pseudonym by writers such as Charlotte Brontë in the 1840s), harem literature was a field where the gender of the author was emphatically recognized as a selling point. In contrast, men's harem accounts were

commonly acknowledged to be fictional. This set of circumstances, combined with the technological developments that made travel easier, safer, and cheaper, produced a buoyant market for women's writing of this kind.

Western women write about the harem

The premium on women-authored accounts did not guarantee that women's writings were always taken seriously: western women knew that their accounts could also be diminished as less scholarly on grounds of their gender, and sought often to align themselves with male authorities. Hence, one of the earliest observers of Middle Eastern female life, Sophia Lane Pool, in 1844 began her two-volume tome, *The Englishwoman in Egypt: Letters From Cairo*, by highlighting the role of her famous Orientalist brother Edward William Lane. Anticipating that she would

be able to see "many things highly interesting in themselves, and rendered more so by their being accessible only to a lady," he urged her to write, gave her access to his notes, and guided her in the selection of materials to be used in the book. As Pool records in the forward to her book, "The present selection has been made by him; and I fear the reader may think that affection has sometimes biased his judgement; but am encouraged to hope for their favourable reception, for the sake of the more solid matter with which they are interspersed, from the notes

The existence of a substantial body of women's writings from and about the Middle Eastern harem challenges the western Orientalist stereotype of harem women as isolated, uneducated, passive, sexualized, and uniformly oppressed. Taken together, these sources provide valuable evidence of the range of women's participation in the popular literary cultures that accompanied, tried to make sense of, and contributed to the (gendered) debates about empire, nation, and statehood which marked a century dominated by the variable fortunes of competing imperial models of East and West.¹

of one to whom Egypt has become almost as familiar as England."

Apparently self-deprecating, the preface sees off challenges of unwomanly ambition (such as must have driven a project of this scale) by presenting her work as undertaken solely in response to brotherly requirements, simultaneously emphasizing the value of her work and harnessing the intellectual credit offered by the endorsement and participation of the esteemed Lane.

Pool was joined in increasing numbers by other women writers over the second

half of the nineteenth century who found success with respectable publishers, serving a middle-brow readership keen to find out more about the territories known as the "Orient." With opinions ranging across the political spectrum, women travel writers took diverse positions on matters of empire, colonization, female suffrage, and religion, often using the East as a foil through which to evaluate and discuss the status of women in the West. Their political stance and the extent to which they displayed challenges or allegiances to Orientalist codifications varied, as did the level of their investigations and the tone of their texts. Emmeline Lott, governess in 1865 to Ibrahim Pasha, son of the Khedive Ismail, Viceroy of Egypt, produced a gossipy self-serving narrative whose snide judgements about the viceregal household were determined more by concerns with shoring up her own status than by those of accurate reportage. In *The English Governess in Egypt. Harem Life in Egypt and Constantinople* (1865), Lott provides the detailed description of sumptuous costumes, fabulous jewels, and elaborate plate that was a regular feature of women's harem accounts, but contrasts these splendours with the vulgarity of behaviour she attributes to the princesses: "their tout ensemble was even more untidy than that of hardworking washerwomen at the tubs; nay, almost akin to Billingsgate fishwomen at home, for their conversation in their own vernacular was equally as low" (177). Determined to be shown "proper respect" by all members of the household, Lott took it as her due that she would join the princesses in their own carriage when the family decamped to Alexandria, but, when she was honoured with an invitation to join them for lunch—eaten with their fingers on the floor—she declined, "first because my health would not allow me to eat Arab diet; and, secondly, because it would have been utterly impossible for any European lady to have felt the slightest inclination to partake of the refreshment in such a barbarous style" (181).

In contrast, a few decades later the extensive ethnographic studies of Lucy Garnett, such as *The Women of Turkey and their Folklore in the 1890s*, marked a shift towards a social science model and away from the personalized autobiographical narrative. As the century turned, western women's harem literature became more overtly professionalized, with opportunities for state- or voluntary sector-sponsored research, such as Ruth Frances Woodsmall's broad-ranging 1936 survey of women's lives in, *Muslim Women Enter a New World* (1936). Funded in 1928 by the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Foundation and the American University of Beirut, Woodsmall's ambitious project surveyed developments in women's education, employment, and social status in India, Iran, Turkey, Egypt, Syria, Palestine, and Trans-Jordan. Spending many years in the Middle East, holding senior positions in international organizations, and undertaking several major research projects, Woodsmall's authoritative accounts rely on social science methodologies (using interviews and independent and government surveys) instead of the impressionistic and personal observations that characterized work of the previous century.

These sources . . . are
complex, mediated
cultural commodities
with specific and often
transcultural conditions of
production, distributions,
and reception.

But the stylistic developments in harem literature were not exclusive or distinct: there were many overlaps, such as are seen in the work of the British feminist Grace Ellison, whose journalism and books in the 1910s and 1920s combined many of the elements of nineteenth- and twentieth-century writing. Offering political commentary on the progressive gender politics of the “Young Turk” government, whose support for female emancipation was directly contrasted to the appalling record of the British government, she embellished political diatribe with personal observations about key politicians and a discernible delight in the accoutrements of Ottoman harem life and the women there who befriended her. Notably, she also paid particular attention to Ottoman women writers, quoting them in *An Englishwoman in a Turkish Harem* (1915) and helping some of them to be printed in Britain.



Writing from the harem

For Middle Eastern women of the increasingly educated elite, literate in local and European languages, stereotypes about harem life were a source of perpetual irritation, as they were to progressive men from their communities who knew that western misapprehensions about the nature of segregated society influenced everything from personal interactions to western foreign policy. As foreign literature found its way into the region during the last century of the Ottoman Empire, and competency in foreign languages grew among the educated elite, more and more women started to write in English, aiming to reach a foreign and domestic audience. By the time social developments had increased female literacy, western harem literature was a well-established field and provided a forum for Middle Eastern women who wished to tell their stories. It is here that the dual nature of this area of publishing is shown most acutely, for, if western women, like Grace Ellison, knew that “a chapter, at least, on harem will always add to the value of the book” even if they set out specifically to explain that the harem was not as the West imagined, women from within segregating communities found themselves publishing accounts in a genre that specifically relied on stereotypes to sell their work.

It was not unusual for books to be marketed in ways that were in direct contradiction to the sentiments of their authors. Zeyneb Hanoum’s *A Turkish Woman’s European Impressions* was sold in 1913 with a gold embossed picture of her in a yashmak on the front cover, whilst the words inside told of a life spent wearing French couture (with appropriately modest outerwear when needed). These contradictions were to be found also in personal interactions. Middle Eastern and western women encountered each other in increasing numbers from the second half of the nineteenth century, in meetings whose complexity—always about more than just alien social mores—found its way into published accounts. The ways in which social status, for example, was not recognized, or did not travel, is seen in the outrage of Musbah Haidar, a princess of royal blood whose haughty disdain for the arriviste wife of a high-ranking American diplomat (visiting the family during the Allied occupation of Istanbul in 1918) reveals a frustration with western assumptions regularly experienced by Middle Eastern women of all classes. Recounting the tale in her memoir *Arabesque* (1944), Haidar pillories the American who admitted that she had “never been in such a cosmopolitan and elegant circle as she found herself to be in Stamboul.” When confronted by refreshments presented on a Sèvres tea service, the visitor “could not longer restrain herself”:

“What a gorgeous tray! Oh, my! What a museum-piece! And those cups and saucers, and these dear little gold knives and forks! You know, I can hardly believe my eyes. The appointments of the house and your dresses! My!!” What did these people imagine they would find or see? thought Musbah. Women in gauzy trousers sitting on the floor? In their abysmal ignorance these foreigners did not realize that many

of the veiled ladies of the Harems were better born, better read, spoke several languages, dressed with a greater chic than some of their own most famous society women.

As this late extract demonstrates, for Middle Eastern women, self-consciously intervening in western cultural codes, the types of stereotypes they had to negotiate changed over time but did not go away. Richly varied, running from the clearly fantastical to the more verifiably reliable, these sources raise a series of methodological issues that go to the heart of interdisciplinary postcolonial studies. At the most straightforward level, books like these tell a great deal about women’s lives and their encounters with each other, providing traces of a dialogue between women that was as often contestative as it was collaborative. But they should not be read simply as evidence: they are complex, mediated cultural commodities with specific and often transcultural conditions of production, distribution, and reception. Studying these sources is therefore a dual project of historical recuperation (the quest to locate women’s harem literature and travel writing is by no means completed) and postcolonial cultural analysis. Having traversed languages, communities, and genres to come into being, these books merit the rigorous critical attention that would be paid to “high” cultural texts within any of their original or destination societies. Concerned with the complicated narration of a female self, and reframing variant definitions of public and private, these sources offer a chance to reconsider the historical tensions between eastern and western cultures and bring nuance to the understanding of their current manifestations.

Image from Ruth Frances Woodsmall’s 1936 survey *Muslim Women Enter a New World* showing how the end of veiling in Turkey was linked to creating employment for women.

Note

1. Several of the authors mentioned in this article are extracted in the author’s co-edited volume with Nancy Micklewright, *Gender, Modernity, and Liberty: Middle Eastern and Western Feminisms 1837-1937, a Critical Sourcebook* (IB Tauris, forthcoming 2006). Full text editions of some of these authors are also available as part of *Cultures in Dialogue*, series co-edited by Reina Lewis and Teresa Heffernan (for a full list of titles see www.gorgiaspress.com).

Reina Lewis is Professor of Cultural Studies at the University of East London, and author of *Rethinking Orientalism: Women, Travel and the Ottoman Harem* (London: IB Tauris, 2004). Email: Reina@uel.ac.uk