

## **Rethinking Orientalism: Women, Travel, and the Ottoman Harem**

*Reina Lewis*

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In her book, Reina Lewis discusses how to acquire an accurate understanding of the various strands of neo-Orientalism that perpetuate long-lasting and contemporary stereotypes of Muslim women from traditional Islamic societies. Within the context of the current global and geopolitical landscape as well as the alleged American war on terror, the competing western imperialist and orientalist images, along with negative stereotypes, that characterize Muslim women are rhetorical. According to Lewis, all of these elements are at the center of knowledge that is produced and reproduced. This book focuses on Ottoman women's writing from the beginning of the twentieth century and traces their "travel accounts, memories, and fractions that reveal a gendered counter-discourse that challenges Occidental stereotypes" (p. 1). The author's main theme is how these writings not only challenged western Orientalist discourses, but also intervened in the Ottoman debate about women and national emancipation. The book, which follows an interdisciplinary approach, is divided into six chapters.

In her introduction, Lewis argues that postcolonial studies have been too paradigmatic and narrow to include Middle Eastern and particularly Turkish experiences, since most postcolonial theories focus on the South Asian experience. Her novel endeavor helps bridge this void in postcolonial studies. Also, she introduces "to postcolonial studies the specificities of the late Ottoman situation and bringing to the reading of Ottoman sources the critical perspectives of postcolonial and gender theory" (p. 5). Moreover, she brings to light some western women's writings, such as those of Grace Ellison and Lady Mary Wortley, who traveled to the East exploring the status of Middle Eastern women and, through their writings, tried to "challenge Western misapprehensions" of their status (p. 45).

In chapter 1, Lewis articulates the harem as a field of study and pays particular attention to the context in which its literature emerged. Lewis traces the history of the economic and cultural conditions that supported the emergence of this literature. Such understandings counter the misconceptions that persist in western academic discourses that silenced the Ottoman harem and disregarded its members' literary contributions. Intriguingly, this chapter highlights the role of the Anglo-American publishing industry in

creating and circulating western and Middle Eastern women's harem narratives, which mostly perpetuate the stereotypes.

Lewis brings to light the Ottoman women's writing in which they addressed various topics, such as seclusion, the veil, and polygamy. By providing these women's bibliographical stitches, Lewis brilliantly illustrates their resistance to what they experienced and how they continued to work from within. However, I was hoping that later on in the book the author would expand on the limitations that Muslim feminists and women writers have dealt with since the turn of the twenty-first century.

In the third chapter, "Harem: Limits of Emancipation," Lewis highlights the harem's significant contribution to the Ottoman Empire's modernization and emancipation. She discusses how Ottoman women "conceptualised a specifically Eastern vision of emancipation and engaged in a clear-sighted evaluation of the relative merits of occidental liberation" (p. 97). While so much of what has been written casts the Ottoman harem, as well as its counterparts in Arab Muslim societies, in a negative light, Lewis challenges western understandings and provides poems and artifacts of the harem's contribution to emancipation. In this chapter, she captures how Ottoman women writers challenged or accommodated the stereotypical images held by outsiders and the restrictions within their home culture.

Throughout the fourth chapter, the author discusses how western women travellers to the Orient represented and eroticized the bodies of Ottoman women. Chapter 5 provides a sound account of the literal meaning of harem, which seems to be explained only rarely in the literature. In this chapter, Lewis provides not only a detailed explanation of the word but also its implications to western Orientalist scholarship. In the following chapter, she encompasses the Ottoman harem's historical artifacts, considers photographs to help understand issues of its inhabitants' dress and identity, and affirms that the veil controversy is not only confined to the West but is international. For this reason, she argues that "the analysis of the history of segregated life remains contentious both as part of postcolonial revisions of the past and in relation to reprises of the veil" (p. 268).

The book's uniqueness stems from its thematic emphasis on the diversity of Ottoman women. For instance, the study includes Ottoman women authors from different classes and ethnic positions. By emphasizing such factors, Lewis seeks to interrupt "some of the orthodoxies that have emerged in contemporary feminist post-colonial theory" (p. 4). Another aspect of the book's uniqueness is that it traces the East-West dialogue around Oriental women. This is an innovative perspective, because most of the scholarly

work emphasizes the tension between East and West, especially in issues related to women's status.

Although Lewis is well aware that the Ottoman Empire represented the Islamic world at that time, she makes no serious attempt to explain how Islam, as the empire's dominant faith, affected the harem's writings and experiences. Despite this omission, I argue that Lewis successfully examines what is considered to be the limitation of Edward Said's seminal work on Orientalism. Feminist scholars have criticized Said for the gender-blindness of *Orientalism*. This gender-blindness refers, to a certain extent, to how Said's work ignores the centrality of sexuality and gender in Orientalist discourse. In his *Orientalism*, Said asserts that Orientalism is "an exclusively male province" (p. 207). In contrast, Lewis successfully explores its gendered aspect by providing an interesting critical analysis of women's autobiographies, writings, and interactions with their western counterparts.

*Rethinking Orientalism: Women, Travel, and the Ottoman Harem* is timely and a *sine qua non* for appreciating the complexity of feminism in Middle Eastern societies, which is overlooked in most of the available literature. The book is organized, detailed, provocative, and provides a critical and historical pioneering perspective into the harem literature within the context of western feminism and its relationships to the publishing industry. Therefore, it is most useful for feminist scholars and readers interested in feminism and feminist studies in Middle Eastern societies. This book is a major contribution to the field of Orientalism and postcolonial studies.

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