The Private World of Ottoman Women

Godfrey Goodwin
London: Saqi Books, 2006. 261 pages.

The publication of *The Private World of Ottoman Women* is an important landmark in both social and gender history. Until this point, accounts of the

seemingly mundane activities of Ottoman women were limited to travelers' accounts, gossip, and information that could be discerned through the lattice-work guarding the imperial harem. Godfrey Goodwin's groundbreaking work, however, introduces the reader to a society with women who were, in many areas, their husbands' peers and, although restrained by certain gendered restrictions, had a remarkable level of mobility. His book not only removes the popular notion that "Ottoman woman" is synonymous with "harem girl," but shows that there was an extensive network of politics, intrigue, and socio-religious change and adaptation outside of the urban elite. It also presents the reader with an understanding, although not overemphasized, that these were women who lived within the parameters of Islam as both Christian and Muslim women, and who distinctly embodied the ideals of the feminine in Islam.

The book is cleverly organized to reflect both the chronology of the empire's development and its class hierarchy. The majority of the first two chapters, "The Coming of the Nomads" and "The Wanderers," discuss in-depth the empire's early formation and the pre-Islamic period of tribal nomadism, and essentially illustrate the empire's boundaries and seeds of social activity. Thus they are not terribly informative about Ottoman women. But this is in no way the fault of the author, who does provide some interesting tidbits where information could be gleaned and placed into the context of the thesis.

Only in the third chapter does more information become available. Here, Goodwin relies upon both primary research and a variety of travelogues by European men and women. In addition, he now begins to weave anecdotal tales of women into his narrative, which alleviates some of the historical drudgery that comes with the text. In particular, the story of Kira Hatun (Rumi's wife) remains in the reader's memory: She intercedes at the gates of Paradise on behalf of a couple killed for committing adultery so that they may also enter heaven (p. 76). Such moments soften the text's content and add to the Ottoman woman's multidimensional image.

The book's major strength lies in the author's discussion of the harem and the network of women inside Topkapĕsary. In particular, one discovers that not only was the harem *not* a center of lasciviousness, but was, in reality, an intimate area in which women were educated and groomed for a life outside the harem if they could not bear the sultan any children (p. 127). In effect, then, the imperial family viewed this institution as a kind of finishing school that one entered through abduction and slavery, as opposed to social class. The women's sexuality was closely guarded: lesbianism was forbidden and, rather amusingly, so were such "phallic" vegetables as carrots –

apparently, there was a fear that these bored young women might use them as masturbatory devices and thereby ruin themselves (p. 131).

In addition, Goodwin makes an important contribution to "traditional" discussions of the harem by debunking the myths and stereotypes of harem life on the grounds that much of what has been said is just hearsay, gossip, and fantasy. It is also noted that much of what is said about the women themselves must be carefully weighed as gossip, which, after the art of seduction, was the most important political tool for women in the imperial harem.

Goodwin's discussion of the imperial family at Topkapĕsary is particularly interesting, as he weaves tales of women together and, despite linking them by the sultans that they bore, gives them their rightful place in history. A reader interested in the so-called "First Ottoman Queen," Hasseki Hürrem (born Alexandra), will find a marvelous set of anecdotes and information about her philanthropies, politics, and devotion to her husband Sulayman.

Overall, this book's importance lies not so much in the so-called "private lives" of Ottoman women, but in how they functioned within the empire's changing landscape, from its foundations until its collapse after the First World War. At times, they seem to be secondary to the text, which is limited to available accounts left behind by a largely illiterate and secluded female population. Nonetheless, the author paints an exquisite portrait of these women, returns to them some of the dignity lost through a largely phallocentric writing of history, and extracts them from the mythology of the exotic. Goodwin's work frees the peasant woman and the odalisque from their cages and returns them to the social pedestal that they enjoyed as savvy, Muslim citizen-women of their empire.

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