

**"Comparative Harems: Women, Sex and Family Structures  
from the Middle East to South & Southeast Asia ."**

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The term "harem," both problematic and useful, is charged with ideas and emotions whose origins are difficult to trace. Its associations tend to cluster around these five topics:

- 1.) Space
- 2.) Sex
- 3.) Slavery
- 4.) Seclusion
- 5.) Sultan/Sovereign

The harem appeared as a site of imaginings about the Orient when Africa, Asia, and the Near East became potential colonial sites. It first became "visible" to the West in Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's eighteenth-century essay on harems, and the later Napoleonic twelve-volume *Description de L'Egypt* (1798 - 1801) which served as Orientalist fodder for several generations. In images from the Orientalist school of painting, such as Ingres' painting [\*La Grande Odalisque\*](#) around 1814, scantily clad women lounged about exotic interiors, massaged by black slaves, implying sexual decadence and slavery. Photographers, in turn, looked to Orientalist harem paintings as models for staging their photographic tableaux, producing commercial images in the colonies which traveled back to Europe via postcard. Thus images of "real" women of the harem circulated from colonial territories back to European consumers. In his book *The Colonial Harem*, Malek Alloula states "it matters little if Orientalistic painting begins to run out of wind or falls into mediocrity. Photography steps in to take up the slack and reactivates the phantasm at its lowest level. The postcard does it one better; it becomes the poor man's phantasm."

Yet true harem women were hidden from view behind veils and the walls of private family spaces in Algeria, Turkey, and Morocco, which were closed to Europeans. A respectable Muslim woman would never have allowed a photo taken of her within the family space of the household, much less in a state of undress. However, the physical invisibility of harem women served to further titillate the Western imagination, and perpetuate the West's creation of images that played upon the mystery surrounding the notion of the harem.

1920s movies such as *Lost in a Harem* and Douglas Fairbanks' *The Thief of Baghdad* fed stereotypes into a larger cultural discourse useful to Europeans engaged in political as well as cultural imperialism. In these discourses, polygamy functioned as a "site of barbarism" against women, as well as a site of racial anxiety where black

eunuchs policed the harem's spaces, in close quarters with "white" women. The harem thus was portrayed as a site where women experienced primarily incarceration and oppression by the tyrannical sultan (or sovereign). In contrast, Western notions of home and family in the later 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries aligned home and family with the democratic nation-state, where individuals were to be trained to become free, independent-thinking citizens suited for self-rule. However, to Ottoman and Asian minds the polygamous harem was primarily domestic space, where gender and social roles had different meanings, though also related to the functions of the state.

Misunderstandings aside, what was the harem in reality? Let's begin with defining terms. The word "harem" comes from the Arabic syllables *ha-ra-am*, entering English in 1634 via the Turkish, meaning "forbidden" or "off limits": literally, something forbidden or kept safe, from the root *harama*, "to be forbidden, to exclude." It is the opposite of *halaal*, meaning "allowed" or "unrestricted."

Three sorts of harems can be constructively compared:

- The Ottoman palace from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries
- Colonial India, from the seventeenth through the twentieth centuries
- Siam (Thailand) in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries

Dr. Woodhouse offers a caveat: it is problematic to treat colonial India as a single unit. In much of India, tribute was simply paid to British colonial forces, leaving local social and political structures largely intact; some Muslims ruled portions of India and some were ruled by Hindu kings, producing little homogeneity.

Was the space of the harem itself private or public, domestic or political? Neither. A public versus private divide on these spaces misleads, for these spaces' usage was conceptualized differently. As part of royal space, the harem functions dually, having different meanings in terms of social categories at play in these societies.

Why seclude women there in the first place? Did this relate more to gender or status? Why were women hidden away from view? Why were their freedoms suppressed? This approach cannot elucidate the issues in play. Many people lived in these palace spaces, the most highly secluded spaces in the realm. Several zones of gatekeepers guarded them. Status and gender have something to do with it, but this varies from context to context. The Ottoman seclusion of women emphasized the Muslim conception of privacy; but royal princes were not allowed to reproduce until they reached the throne, and this level of privacy was stricter than the level for women. In Siam, elites were not seen in general. No one was to face a royal, on pain of death; this did not change until the late nineteenth century. Siamese and Ottoman palaces had the most in common. The palaces were crowded and mazelike until individual women received residences within the walls.

Was the harem as sexual playground for one man? Islamic harems were limited. For example, Sultan Murad V had nine women and produced seven children. Sultan Abdulhamid had thirteen women and produced seventeen children. Reshad had five women, producing four children. Vahideddin also had five women, producing four children. There was no proscription on Thai King Chulalongkorn (1868 – 1910), who had 143 consorts (77 children). In the Thai system, children broadened the pool of potential candidates for important posts as well as the monarchy itself.

Outside the palace, how many elites practiced polygyny? Statistically, few. One study estimates for Ottoman Istanbul only 2.3% of males having resources to support more than one wife; in Muslim societies in North Africa and South Asia, under 5%.

Did slaves serve within the harem? Yes, but the term “slavery” requires careful definition: often this word makes us think of American plantation slavery, but the harem house slaves’ duties were generally less oppressive than that. Persons of lower economic echelons desired to improve their status by selling a daughter to the palace who, though enslaved, received training in elite manners, customs, and practices, enabling them to work in or marry into elite houses. This could serve as a remarkable career opportunity. Slavery was often temporary in these societies. Duties included child rearing, wetnursing, and so on. Slaves and non-slaves shared many of these duties in harem households. Eunuchs were absent in the Siamese context but present in south Asian and Ottoman contexts, in the last famously attaining occasional positions of great power.

Who were the harem women? Slaves, princesses, and women of all classes and castes: from slaves to servants to royal relatives to wives to concubines to the mothers of the sultan. Women in every shade of the spectrum of agency and power. This was true in both the Ottoman context and the Siamese context. We cannot really consider a harem woman to be one thing. She is not monolithic. Many different opportunities and experiences existed within the confines of the harem.

Did these women exert political power? The circulation of women into the palace, particularly high-status women, often linked their families by blood to the royal family. Coming to serve as consorts to the kings helped unify center and periphery. Places in periphery were more easily managed by this relationship. These women had more facetime with the king than even his advisors. This seems to be true for Ottoman harem women too. In Topkapi palace, the women were only a wall away from political activities in the palace: the inner circle truly was an inner circle.

Was the harem bad for women? This issue often appeared in European colonialist discourses. In these contexts, women’s status and access to their children were more protected than they have been in many other places. In the Thailand, when polygamy was phased out and monogamy became the only legal marriage type, polygamous relationships continued; however, the women no longer enjoyed the [social sanctions](#) they had possessed under customary polygamy. This clearly was a much less fair situation for both the women involved and their offspring. In the shift

from polygamy to monogamy, women lost rights to customary privilege they had held in the past. Blanket judgments should be avoided. Siamese kings tried to downplay polygamy toward the end of the nineteenth century.  
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