

MÉSOGÉIOS

Méditerranée

28 (2006)



Les Relations gréco-russes
Les Philosophes physiciens dans la Grèce antique

HÉRODOTOS

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Irène Kamberidou

The body and ottoman society

Les esclaves de luxe¹

Women travellers of 18th and 19th centuries shoked, disgusted and outraged by motions of human body.

Introduction: The Harem culture

Women travelers of the 18th and 19th centuries surpassed the socio-religious barriers of Islam by penetrating into the gendered sphere and gendered boundaries of the Ottoman family or household, in other words the Harem. They succeeded in doing what no male traveler, no man, who has written about the harem, harem dancing and the position of women in Islam, had been able to do before or after them. They visited and resided – as official guests, as intimate friends and as employees – in harems that corresponded to all the socioeconomic Ottoman classes. As a result they accused male travelers of misleading and misinforming their readers, stressing that their accounts were based on second or third hand information, on their unrestrained exotic fantasies and had nothing to do with the terrible realities of everyday life in the ‘yoke of the harem’ (Lott, 1866:296) and the degrading and humiliating position of women in Islam. European women, in their identification with ‘the Other’, the women of the East, used terms such as ‘womanity’, ‘woman-kind’, ‘slavedom’, ‘privileged rape’, ‘liberty’ and ‘freedom’. (Harvey, 1871; Lott, 1866; Beaufort, 1861; Guthrie, 1802, Melek Hanum, 1872).

Undoubtedly the Ottoman harem’s multiethnic composition and the harem culture remained a mystery to the male sex, since any man apprehended in an

1. Garnett, Lucy M.J. (1891) *The Women of Turkey and their Folk-Lore*. London: David Nutt, 270-271 Strand, W.C.: 405.

attempt to penetrate the forbidden zone of the harem would lose his life. There was no social contact, social intermingling, social interaction, social interrelations, social communication or authentic personal relationships between the two sexes, even between those of the same family. The women and the men of the same so-called family (the harem and the selemlik) led totally separate social and private lives, sharing nothing between them. (Montagu, 1740; Craven, 1787; Demont, 1821; Pardoe, 1837; Melek Hanum, 1872; Blunt, 1876).

The harem inmates were women of different nations – islamized slaves, formerly captured and enslaved non-Muslims – as well as the descendants of these slaves, who died prematurely due to their confinement, their sedentary, inactive and isolated life-style, and the constant overconsumption of food, tobacco, opium and other narcotics.

In this paper we will examine the position and roles of the harem entertainers: the dancers, acrobats, pantomimes, musicians and singers, who without a single exception, were all islamized slaves that belonged to the harem's elite slavery system. These sectors of the arts belonged to the socially 'lower' class individuals or the less privileged, as were considered the slaves of the Ottomans, as well as the non-Muslim subjects of the Sublime Porte, such as the Greeks, the Armenians, the Jews and the Gypsies. In addition, all the domestic duties required in a harem were the responsibility of the islamized slaves that belonged to the harem's lower pyramidal hierarchy. In addition, non-Muslim female subjects and Europeans were also hired as servants on a full-time or part-time basis for various domestic services.

However, the women who cultivated music and dance were all islamized slaves, whose talents were recognized as children and who were trained to use their artistic abilities to amuse and distract their owners. They were not taught to dance, perform acrobatics, sing and play musical instruments for their own personal pleasure, diversion, amusement or self-expression, but solely for the entertainment of their 'superiors': their owner/master, the women of the higher harem classes or pyramidal hierarchy such as the master's mother, his legal wives, of which the Koran allowed four, his daughters, his ikbals (favorite slave concubines) and their female visitors or female guests, as was the case of the western women travelers of the 18th and 19th centuries.

According to the female accounts, free Muslim men and women never danced. Secondly, Muslim men and women never danced together. Naturally there were a few exceptions to these rules, and western influence apparent in certain harems of the Ottoman elite.

'Women of different nations',² (1816)

'In the yoke of the Harem'³ (1866)

Why were activities that involved the movement of the human body and physical exertion, such as menial work outside the household, domestic labor, dance, acrobatics and pantomime assigned to islamized slaves and to non-Muslims? Firstly, the primary reason was that islamized slaves were considered socially inferior, being of non-Muslim descent and the legal property of free Muslims. Secondly, the subjugated peoples and subjects of the Porte as well as all foreigners, as non-Muslims, were considered not only the inferiors of all free Muslims but also below the social status of the islamized slaves (former non-Muslims who had been converted to Islam).

First-hand female accounts reveal and expose what no male traveler to the Ottoman territories has been able to confirm, since men were not allowed to enter the forbidden zones of the Ottoman 'family' or household – the harems.

First and foremost, they confirm that the expansionist views of Islam and the institution of slavery resulted in the international or rather multiethnic composition of the Ottoman harems and consequently in the establishment of the harem institution. The harem inmates were women from different nations who had been enslaved and islamized, including their descendants who were born free Muslims. The 19th century female accounts reveal that the harem population, in numerical precedence, was made up of women and children from Circassia, Georgia, Greece, Africa, Arabia and Europe. There are specific references about enslaved women from Italy, France and Ireland. Furthermore, the harem population included the free Muslim women and children who were the descendants of these slaves as well as black islamized eunuchs-- castrated men and male children who were considered sexless or de-gendered. (Kamberdiou, 2002).

2. Demont, Louise (1821): *Caroline, Queen of England, the Princess of Wales, by Louise Demont Voyages and Travels of Her Majesty, Caroline Queen of Great Britain: Including Visits to Various Parts of Germany, France, Italy, Greece, Palestine, &c, &c. and Comprising the Latest Description of those Interesting Countries, With Remarks on the State of Society, Religion, Manners, Customs, Antiquities, Arts, Literature, Natural Curiosities, &c. &c. particularly such as have become the present seat of war. By one of her Majesty's suite.* London: 403.

3. Lott, Emmeline (1866): *The English Governess in Egypt. Harem life in Egypt and Constantinople. By Emmeline Lott. Formerly Governess to His Highness the Grand Pacha, Ibrahim, Son of His Highness Ismael Pacha, Viceroy of Egypt. In Two Volumes.* London: Richard Bentley, New Burlington Street: 296.

Women travelers, beginning with Lady Montagu in 1717 and ending with Lucy Garnett, in 1895, confirm that Islamic Law recognized as legal property only the non-Muslims who fell into the hands of the True Faithful (Muslims) during war – as spoils of war. The Koran, explicitly, forbids the enslavement of the 'Faithful', in other words, of free Muslims (Montagu, 1740; Garnett; 1895; Koran, 1997). Fanatic Muslims also believed that if they died in these 'holy' wars they would enjoy the same privileges in Paradise, that is to say women and children. (Hekmat, 1997; Kamberidou, 2002; Koran, 1997). In due course, the Ottomans acquired slaves, not only from conquered races or expansionist raids, but also from the pirates and cursairs who attacked European ships, from abductions, private sales, the slave-markets, as gifts exchanged between the wealthier Ottoman classes, as well as from the phenomenon of 'Voluntary Slavery' (Kamberidou, 2002).

Secondly, the female accounts affirm that the absolute and collective confinement, seclusion, isolation and segregation of the female sex as one unity, in one specific gendered space (the harem), where all the women belonged to only one man was a result of Islam, as was their absolute exclusion and isolation from public life⁴. Thirdly, they examine the harem culture and social hierarchy in this female microcosmos, confirming that each woman and child held a specific social position, rank, class, status, duty or role.

The accounts reveal that domestic labor, dance, acrobatics and musical entertainment, were part of a slave's training, namely that of non-Muslim women and children from Christian territories who had been captured, enslaved and converted to Islam.

'Physical exertion'⁵

The first hand accounts of day-to-day life in the harems affirm that any form of physical, strenuous and arduous activities, or any form of exertion and manual labor were assigned to the female slaves that belonged to a lower hierarchy than that of the elite slaves. For instance, the enslaved black women from Africa and Arabia and the white women of different nations who were

4. Kamberidou, Irene (2002): *The Poliethnic Harem Slavery Institution*, according to the accounts of women travellers in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. Dissertation at the Panteio University of Social and Political Sciences, Department of Sociology.

5. Vivanti, Anna (1865): *A Journey to Crete, Constantinople, Naples and Florence. Three months abroad*. London: printed for private circulation: 96.

considered unattractive or lacking in beauty, according to the criteria of the time, were never included in the harem's elite slavery system. They were never trained to become their master's concubines, wives, dancers, musicians, etc. They were assigned to the harem's lower pyramidal hierarchy and trained to become domestic servants. Their duties included cooking, laundry, ironing, scrubbing floors and services at the baths. (Vivanti, 1865; Blunt, 1876; Walker, 1886; Garnett 1895).

The same applied to the male islamized slaves. The male slaves provided the manual labor, the military service, the menial work and the domestic services required outside the harem boundaries, as well as in the selemlik, the men's quarters or apartments.

Military slavery

Although exercising was not part of a Muslim's daily routine, it was part of his basic military training in the armed forces and the security forces. Due to the military organization of Ottoman society, physical exercise was naturally a requirement in the army and the navy, as the armed forces were absolutely necessary for the reproduction of the Ottoman state. Territorial expansionism was part of Islamic tradition and Ottoman reality, by nature, was militaristic. The organization of the Ottoman society and economy promoted and financed expansionist armed forces and expansionist expeditions, namely the accumulation of the spoils of war – the territories and the wealth of non-Muslim nations, including the peoples themselves who were acquired as slaves. Political and military leadership in Ottoman society was united, not only in the sense of the state's military rule, but also in the common and unified identification of the leadership sectors in public administration and in the armed forces (Sarris, 1994).

But even here physical activity or physical exercise was assigned to the lower military hierarchy, such as that of the islamized military slaves and the Ottomans of lower socioeconomic groups. In the last quarter of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century, due to the decrease in the number of military slaves, military recruiters toured the provinces and the villages trying to find volunteers, using force when necessary. (Sarris, 1994) Male non-Muslims who had been enslaved and converted to Islam and 'recruited' into the military, naturally, engaged in physical exercises as a preparation for war, such as the Janissaries who had been abducted as children from the Christian populations (Fotiades, 1993) and were basically the security forces

or the police of the Ottoman Empire, the Circassians from the Caucasus and the manumitted male slaves.

After the extermination of the Janissaries by Sultan Mahmut II, a new army was established to promote the Islamic Ideal or the Holy War. It was called the *Asakir-I Mansure-I Muhammediye*, made-up of men who had been forcibly recruited. This army was later renamed *Asakir-I Nizamiye*, that is to say the regular Turkish army. The Janissaries were also replaced by special security forces called the *Asakir-i Muntazama-i Mansure* and the *Asakir-i Muzarama-i Hassa* (Sarris, 1994: 530-531).

Fat was beautiful

Physical inactivity, the lack of exercise, indolence, idleness, excessive weight and obesity were social privileges that belonged exclusively to the higher socioeconomic groups. When an individual was seen walking, instead of riding a horse or in a carriage, he/she was considered to be a member of a less privileged social group. To cite another instance, when Turks observed western travelers on foot during their excursions – walking or hiking – they believed that these individuals belonged to a lower social class in their western societies.

Fat was beautiful! Obesity or excessive weight reflected a social status for men and women alike! Women travelers, from 1786 -1895, described the harem inmates of the various socioeconomic classes as 'fat', not obese, but 'very fat', 'extremely fat'⁶, 'so immoderately fat'⁷, 'ugly'⁸, and 'disgusting'⁹,

6. Berkley, Elizabeth, *The Right Honourable Elizabeth Craven, or Lady Craven (1789): A Journey Through The Crimea to Constantinople In A Series Of Letters Written In The Year 1786*. London: G.G. J. and J. Robinson: 264.

7. Demont, Louise (1821): *Caroline, Queen of England, the Princess of Wales, by Louise Demont Voyages and Travels of Her Majesty, Caroline Queen of Great Britain: Including Visits to Various Parts of Germany, France, Italy, Greece, Palestine, &c. &c. and Comprising the Latest Description of those Interesting Countries, With Remarks on the State of Society, Religion, Manners, Customs, Antiquities, Arts, Literature, Natural Curiosities, &c. &c. particularly such as have become the present seat of war. By one of her Majesty's suite*. London:402.

8. Berkley, Elizabeth, *The Right Honourable Elizabeth Craven, or Lady Craven (1789): A Journey Through The Crimea to Constantinople In A Series Of Letters Written In The Year 1786*. London: G.G. J. and J. Robinson: 264.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 227

with 'teeth black by smoking', with 'an universal stoop in the shoulders'¹⁰, and defects in their posture¹¹. A great contradiction to the exotic accounts of male travelers who depicted the harem women as sensual beauties, although they had never entered a harem.

In 1786, the English travel-writer Lady Elizabeth Craven, following her visit to a harem in Constantinople, remarked: 'I have no doubt that nature intended some of these women to be very handsome, but... teeth black by smoking, and an universal stoop in the shoulders, made them appear rather disgusting than handsome. The last defect is caused by the posture they sit in, which is that of a tailor, from their infancy' (Craven, 1786: 226-227).

Even the women of the middle and lower socioeconomic classes were ashamed to be seen walking. They were unable to walk and move gracefully due to their indolent and idle harem lifestyle, the lack of exercise and their excessive weight. Women usually spent their time in the harems reclining, reposing, lounging, eating, drinking, and smoking. The English traveler Anna Vivanti, who was a guest in several harems on the island of Crete and in Constantinople in 1865, remarks:

Only those who are above the middle size, and they are few, look well standing. None walk gracefully... This however is considered no fault in a Turkish lady, who would be almost ashamed *to walk well, as it would prove* that she had often used such vulgar exertion. Having a whole host of female slaves at her command, a Turkish lady moves about but little when in the Harem, which she never leaves except in a carriage. The women of the middle and lower classes however walk as badly as the ladies, which appears to be occasioned in a great measure by their mode of sitting. They shuffle along with their toes turned in, wearing large yellow boots, over which they often have slippers of the same colour. One seldom sees a really pretty face among them... (Vivanti, 1865: 95-97).

Even the slaves who belonged to the lower pyramidal harem hierarchy were above the middle-size. According to the female accounts, the work, the labor or the chores of the lower caste female slaves did not take much energy or time. There was always a surplus of slaves in every Ottoman household, as the number of slaves one owned represented his social status. According to 19th century reports, in an average harem there were 10 slaves to do the work that one domestic servant in England could accomplish without difficulty.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 226

11. *Ibid.*, p. 226

The majority of the harem inmates died prematurely as a result of their confinement, the harem's sedentary, inactive and isolated lifestyle which, among other things, resulted in over-eating and in the constant over-consumption of tobacco, opium and other narcotics.

'Les esclaves de luxe'¹²

Of particular interest are the female accounts concerning the harem entertainers – dancers, musicians, singers, pantomimes and acrobats. These sectors of the arts were the exclusive obligations or duties imposed on enslaved non-Muslim women and children, who had been islamized and incorporated into the harem's organized elite slavery system, trained for this purpose, and not only!

Other than a symbol of their owner's social status and the necessary instruments of his artistic entertainment, these elite slaves or 'esclaves de luxe' (Garnett, 1891:405) were also his necessary sexual playthings/instruments (concubines) and his reproduction (childbearing) machines. (Lott, 1866:291-292). Only the master of the harem, in other words the owner of these 'she-slaves' as lady Montagu (1840:153) called the slave-dancers in 1717, and no other man, Muslim or non-Muslim, had the right to engage in sexual intercourse with these women or to observe their performances.

If a slave belonged to a free-Muslim woman or a Muslim wife, her husband had no right to have any contact with her slave-- to see her face, watch her dancing or engage in sexual relations. Only the Ottoman Sultan had the right to look upon the faces of all his female subjects (Harvey, 1871).

These elite slaves not only performed to please their master, but also to entertain the women of the higher harem hierarchy. These performances took place in the harems, for women only. They were held for the entertainment of the mistress or the first lady of the harem, in honor of her female guests or visitors, during religious holidays, such as the Ramadan and the Bairam, to celebrate the birth of a male child, a betrothal, a marriage etc. Men were never present at these exclusively female social gatherings or celebrations, as women never participated in the men's social gatherings. Women interacted only with other women, and entertained and were entertained by each other.

12. Garnett, Lucy M.J. (1891): *The Women of Turkey and their Folk-Lore*. London: David Nutt, 270-271 Strand, W.C.: 405.

Men assembled socially apart from the women, enjoying their own male companions, at their exclusively male banquets, feasts and gatherings, listening to their own music, without the presence of any woman or women dancers, as many westerners believe. Why? Because the Koran forbids Muslim men from looking upon the faces of Muslim women-- slave or free-- that do not belong to them. No man had the right to speak to or see the face of a Muslim woman that did not belong to him in the capacity of a mother, a wife, a slave, a sister, a daughter or a niece.

Naturally the men could hire non-Muslim women to entertain them at their male social gatherings, feasts, celebrations and banquets, since the Koran allows them to look upon the faces of all non-Muslim women. For instance, during the reign of Sultan Selim III (1789-1807) French dancing-masters and musicians were allowed into the outer courts of the harem to instruct the slave girls (the *adjemis*) who had not yet been converted to Islam. However, as soon as they were islamized no other man but the sultan had the right to look upon their faces. However, only two women travelers reported the hiring of non-Muslim subjects of the Port as entertainers – Fanny Janet Blunt, in 1876 and Lucy Garnett in 1891. According to their accounts, only young and beautiful gypsy girls were appreciated by the Turkish community as dancers and were hired in the harems or the Turkish households on special occasions- wedding feasts or religious holidays- in order to entertain the guests with their pantomime dances and their songs.

‘Le Harem en miniature’ or the children Harem

The children of non-Muslims, usually acquired as infants or between the ages of three to nine years, were always preferred as slaves because their training process was easier and their loyalty and devotion assured. Their adaptation, absorption and incorporation into Ottoman society were absolute, in contrast to that of adult male and female slaves.

The little female slaves that showed no promise of future beauty, according to the criteria of the time, were trained to become the harem’s domestic servants or the exclusive servants, playmates and ‘toys’ of the free Muslim children- the sons and daughters of their owners. Furthermore, those that were considered pretty or promised future beauty entered the harem’s elite slavery system and were trained to become odalisques (concubines), dancers, musicians etc. (Belgiojoso, 1855: 1043, Emmeline Lott, 1866:126).

Moreover, little slaves were trained in order to be resold later at much

higher prices, bringing an exceptional profit to their owner. Those trained as concubines, musicians, singers and dancers were in great demand in the harems of the wealthier classes. They were taught to play musical instruments such as the def, the harp, the oboe, the flute, the lute, drums, the violin, the zebec described as guitar or a type of guitar, the kanun, described as a musical instrument which resembled the harp, as well as musical instruments described as resembling something between a flute and a guitar. (Walker, 1886; Montagu, 1840, the Dowager Marchioness of Dufferin and Ava, 1916; Vivanti, 1865). The English artist Mary Adelaide Walker, who traveled and resided in the territories of the Ottoman Empire for about 40 years (1857-1897), reports that these slaves were:

Usually bought very young, at three or four years of age and taught some music, dancing and a little French. These accomplishments increase their value considerably, and it becomes with some people a matter of revolting speculation to educate batches of little Circassians, as you may fatten rabbits for market, buying them cheap in their infancy and native dirt, and selling them a few years later, with all their acquired graces, at a high price. The value of a halaik (slave) begins at about 80 or 100 (English pounds); an accomplished musician or dancer may bring her owner nearly ten times as much." (Walker, 1886: 62-63).

Little 'she-slaves' (Montagu, 1840: 153) were also selected in order to become pantomimes and acrobats/tumblers. In Constantinople, in the harem of Princess Zeineb, the favourite daughter of Sultan Abdul Medjid (1839-1861), a Jewish teacher had been hired to teach acrobatics to the very young children. In another 'class' or harem room, little slave girls were given pantomime lessons, while in another area there was a dance class where little she-slaves were being taught Turkish and French dances. (Walker, 1886: 35)

Sultan's dance

Deviations from islamic tradition

According to custom, free Muslim men never danced, not even for their own personal pleasure. A unique deviation from Islamic tradition was Sultan Mahmud (1808-1839), the son of a French slave¹³, who is historically ackno-

13. Ferte-Meun, Mme de la (1822): *Lettres sur le Bosphore, ou, Relation d'un voyage a Constantinople et en differentes parties de l'Orient, pendant les annees 1816, 1817, 1818, et 1819*. Paris: chez Locard et Davi.

wledged as the exterminator of the Janissaries. In 1836 Marie Djean saw Sultan Mahmud dancing with a harem inmate. It is the only account about a Sultan dancing, and the only account about a Muslim man dancing. In 1836, Marie Dejean, later known as Melek Hanum (1872), saw the love-struck Sultan dancing with Nazib Hanum in his sister's harem in Constantinople. Nazib was a former Circassian slave, who had been adopted by the sultan's sister, Princess Essemah or Asme Sultan. Sultan Mahmud entered his sister's harem while all the women were dancing together. As Dejean informs us: 'Mahmud looked at us for some time, and then offered his hand to Nazib-Hanum, my chaperon, and took several turns about the room with her, conversing in the most animated manner. Returning to Essemah-Sultan, he told her that it would greatly oblige him if she would give him that young lady...' (Melek Hanum, 1872:27-28).

In this harem we see another deviation from Islamic tradition. Not only did Marie Dejean see the sultan dancing with a woman in 1836, but also the women were all dancing together, for their own personal amusement and pleasure, with a Christian, namely their non-Muslim guest Marie Dejean. Dancing had become a distraction and a diversion for the women in the harems, a consolation that made their life of captivity and isolation bearable. (Pardoe, 1836; Melek Hanum, 1872).

Free Muslim women, according to custom, never performed- danced, sang or played musical instruments- for anyone. They considered it humiliating and disgraceful to provide entertainment, although there were many exceptions to this Islamic tradition as well. In 1865, the English traveler Anna Vivanti was a guest in the harem of Ismael Pacha, the General Governor of the island of Crete. Ismael Pacha, was a former slave of Greek descent, from the island of Chios, who had been abducted and enslaved as a child, and converted to Islam. As a special honour to his English guest, Ismael Pacha asked his daughter, Leilla to play the piano and to sing some English and Greek songs. This was a great honour and mark of respect towards Anna Vivanti, since the daughter of Ismael Pacha, Leilla, was not a slave, but a free Muslim:

"At last her father desired her to sing some Greek songs. Words and music were both perfectly unintelligible to me, but sounded very melancholy; and that feeling so took possession of me, that I found it difficult to prevent its being observed. There sang the poor little bird who, though the bars of her cage were gilded, and her master gentle and kind, was a prisoner for life..." (Vivanti, 1865: 52, 57-58).

Women travellers shocked, disgusted, and outraged by the motions of ^{the} human body

How do the 'lady travelers' describe the music and the dance process in the harems of the 18th and 19th centuries?

Very few western women appreciated or derived pleasure from the performances in the harems. Only one out of 100 women travelers reports or at least admits to have participated in the harem dance process. Only Marie Dejean danced with the women in the harem of Princess Essemah, in Constantinople in 1836. The majority of the women travelers did not appreciate harem dancing or even the sound of oriental music. Due to their western morality, ethics, views and social prejudices, many women travelers report that they were shocked, disgusted, outraged and upset by the motions and the disfigurement of the human body. They described the music and the harem dances as strange, curious, ugly, inconceivable, disgraceful, disgusting, provocative, immoral, extraordinary, etc.

Apparently many women travelers expressed the social discrimination and prejudices of their western societies. This is particularly evident in their accounts concerning various social groups as the 'ugly black slaves', the 'horrid negroes' or 'negresses' who were content and happy with slavery, as they call the African and Arabian islamized slaves, in contrast to what we consider to be politically correct today.

They describe harem music as Arabian, Turkish, Persian, Egyptian, Eastern and Oriental. They claimed that the sound of the music shattered their ears and the harem singers shrieked, murmured and made horrible sounds. In 1816, the Swiss traveler Louis Demont struggled to suppress her laughter and compared the voice of a harem singer with that of an owl screaming at night, stressing that the women's voices were hoarse and discordant. (Demont, 1821: 402) In 1882, the Dowager Marchioness of Dufferin and Ava (1916:182-183) commented that a harem inmate made 'the most unearthly sounds by way of singing'.

Naturally there were European women who enjoyed harem music, such as Lady Montague, the wife of the English Ambassador to Constantinople, who, in 1717, enjoyed the performance of twenty slaves dancing, singing and playing musical instruments in her honour:

"Four of them immediately began to play some soft airs on instruments between a lute and a guitar, which they accompanied with their voices, while the others danced by turns. This dance was very different from what I had

seen before. Nothing could be more artful, or more proper to raise certain ideas. The tunes so soft – the motions so languishing! – accompanied with pauses and dying eyes! Half-falling backs and then recovering themselves in so artful a manner, that I am very positive the coldest and most rigid prude upon earth could not have looked upon them without thinking of something not to be spoken of. I suppose you may have read that the Turks have no music but what is shocking to the ears; but this account is from those who never heard any but what is played in the streets... I retired through the same ceremonies as before, and could not help thinking I had been some time in Mahomet's paradise, so much was I charmed with what I had seen." (Montagu, 1840: 159-161].

The 18th and 19th century European women describe harem dancing as the Dance of the East, the Eastern Dance, Oriental Dancing, or the Turkish dance. They also claim to have observed Tunisian, Circassian and Egyptian dances in the harems. They perceive harem dancing as a wonderful gymnastic feat, the dislocated hip dance, and a universal dance of the Ottoman territories, or the usual thing, melancholy, monotonous and strange.

In the accounts that follow, women travelers observe that the harem dancers did not move their feet or that they never removed their feet from the floor when they danced. The slave-dancers waved their arms about, shook their shoulders a little, and made a sound like castanets with their fingers, dancing with half-falling backs and then recovering themselves. Furthermore, the dancers flung about the room, and then, with a hiss and a whoop, bent themselves in every direction, vibrated, shook all over, inconceivably moving their stomachs as though they had a machine to do it with, disfiguring the human body. The women bent over, stretched, swiftly uprooted their hands, shook their hips, balanced lightly on their feet without removing them from the floor, turned around in circles etc.

'Cette danse universelle'¹⁴ (1852), 'A wonderful gymnastic feat'¹⁵, (1882), 'The dislocated hip dance'¹⁶, (1882)

The Princess Christine Trivulce de Belgiojoso, who stayed in many harems during her travels in Asia Minor in 1852, observes:

14. Belgiojoso, Mme de la Princesse (1855) : *La vie intime et la vie nomade en Orient. Scènes et souvenirs de voyage*. Paris : Bureau de la Revue des Deux Mondes : 497.

15. The Dowager Marhcioness of Durfferin and Ava (1916): *My Russian and Turkish Journals*. London: John Murray, Albermarle Street, W. : 297.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 297.

There is only one dance in the Ottoman Empire, and it is the same for the Turks, the Arabs and all the Muslim nations spread out in this territory; It is the same for the Greeks and the Armenian subjects of the Sublime Port, and this universal dance does not deserve to be called a dance (or merit the name of dance I ignore what they find gracious in this dance.”¹⁷

The Dowager Marchioness of Dufferin and Ava, at an Egyptian wedding, in Cairo in 1882:

All the ladies present were relations...four girls in blue satin and silver danced... They had their hair down, and they swayed about and twisted it over, and bent themselves in every direction, the hair always following the motions of the body – this part was very graceful, but the vibration part is less so. They shake all over, and have a way of moving the stomach which is quite inconceivable. It is as though they had a machine to do it with, and I can't think how the human figure can be made to 'unheave' in the way they make it. It is extremely curious and ugly...¹⁸

In 1883 the Dowager Marchioness of Dufferin and Ava was a guest in the harem of Princess Said, the widow of an ex-Khedive in Cairo:

Arab music was being played all the time by four Houris, and once they broke into an air from Rigoletto, to which the Princess had put Turkish words the musicians came in, and four girls to dance. They were all dressed in a deep pink – body and 'divided skirt', the latter quite touching the ground. At first the dance was the usual thing. I may call it the 'Dislocated Hip' dance, and they repeated it with water-bottles on their heads. They then performed a wonderful gymnastic feat. A ring was put down upon the floor, and, throwing themselves back till their hands reached the floor, they walked backwards on hands and feet till they got to the ring, when, turning their heads under, they picked it up in their mouths. They finished off this part of the performance by turning head over heels in 'wheel fashion' three times¹⁹.

17. Belgiosos, Mme de la Princesse de Belgiojoso (1855): *La vie intime et la vie nomade en Orient. Scènes et souvenirs de voyage*. Paris. Bureau de la Revue des Deux Mondes : 97.

18. The Dowager Marchioness of Dufferin and Ava (1916): *My Russian and Turkish Journals 1881-1884*. London: John Murray, Albermarle Street, W. : 237.

19. The Dowager Marchioness of Dufferin and Ava (1916): *My Russian and Turkish Journals 1881-1884*. London: John Murray, Albermarle Street, W. : 296-297.

Conclusions

Dance, acrobatics and any form of physical movement, activity, exercise and manual labour were symbols of social inferiority for the Ottoman Turks.

1. Obesity, physical inactivity, indolence, the lack of exercise and the lack of grace in movement or in walking were considered social privileges that belonged to only the higher socioeconomic groups.

2. Dancing, acrobatics, singing and the playing of musical instruments were the exclusive duties of female islamized slaves who were part of the Ottoman harem's elite slavery system, and had been trained for this purpose, and not only!

3. No man, no adult male- Moslem or non-Moslem- could watch the performances of the female harem dancers, acrobats, musicians, singers, pantomimes, other than their one and only owner (master).

4. Free Muslim men and women never danced (although there were a few exceptions cited).

5. Men and women never danced together. (one exception cited).

6. The female accounts of the 18th and 19th centuries reveal that, not only the harem dancers, but all the harem inmates were islamized slaves, manumitted (liberated) slaves, and descendents of slaves. Naturally, the manumitted slaves, having acquired the legal status of a free Muslim, no longer had the obligation to provide domestic services, dance or acrobatic performances and musical entertainment. However, exceptions to this Islamic tradition were observed, since music and dance had become a distraction, a diversion and a consolation that made the life of female captivity bearable.

7. The majority of the harem inmates died prematurely due to their confinement and their sedentary, physically inactive and isolated life-style, which resulted in the over-consumption of food, tobacco, opium and other narcotics.

Despite the prohibitions instituted against slavery in the second half of the 19th century by Sultan Abdul Medjid (1839-1861), the son of Sultan Mahmud, the slave trade continued to flourish openly until the beginning of the 20th century, due to the large demand of the wealthier Ottoman classes for slaves. According to 19th century reports, the Ottoman elite was responsible for the preservation of the institution of slavery and as a result that of the multiethnic harem slavery institution, the harem system and the harem culture. The harem slavery institution was not abolished until the beginning of the 20th century, with Kemal Ataturk and the abolition of the Sultanate in 1922. In addition, polygamy, or rather polygyny was abolished in Turkey in 1926, with the adoption of Swiss Law.

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Abstract – Le corps dans la société ottomane - Les récits des femmes occidentales concernant les voyages et la vie dans les harems entre les 17^e et 19^e siècles, en territoires sous domination ottomanes : Asie Mineure, Grèce, Chypre, Afrique du Nord etc, confirment que toutes formes d'activités du corps n'étaient assignées qu'aux esclaves islamisées et aux sujets non musulmans de l'Empire. C'était un signe d'infériorité sociale. La conception de la beauté, de la part des Ottomans, était particulière. Être gros , obèse était bien considéré, c'était un signe d'aisance sociale. Les activités physiques ne faisaient pas partie du style de vie . Au contraire l'inactivité, l'indolence et l'obésité étaient des privilèges sociaux. Des femmes occidentales originaires de divers pays ont visité , résidé dans l'Empire et relaté la vie des femmes, il leur était plus facile d'accéder à la société très fermée des femmes. Elles constatent des formes de ségrégation à l'encontre des femmes qui vivaient séparées des hommes, recluses au foyer ou dans le harem.

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