

## ACADEMIA Cultural Anthropology

**W**ith **Teodozja I. Rzeuska, Anetta Łyżwa-Piber** and **Katarzyna Molga** from the Institute of Mediterranean and Oriental Cultures, Polish Academy of Sciences, who have published a book (in Polish) on harems as described in the memoirs of Polish travelers, pilgrims, vagabonds and expatriates, we discuss the lives of women in the nineteenth-century Middle East.



# A SHORT HISTORY

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**ACADEMIA: In Arabic, the word 'harem' means 'forbidden,' 'sacred.' Was the space of a harem a prison, or a paradise?**

For some a paradise, for others a hell. Just like in Europe, marriages may be happy or unhappy.

**It was part of the house inhabited exclusively by women – the wives of the man of the house – and by children, as a hidden, closed part of the dwelling.**

Hidden, yes, but not completely shut off. Yes, we can speak of a certain kind of separated space, purposefully isolated from the outside world, with characteristic windows covered by mashrabiya (decorative wooden latticework), on the one hand due to the climate conditions, on the other due to the need to protect the harem's inhabitants from the gazes of other men. Frequently the door to the household would have a knocker, by means of which a male guest would an-

nounce his arrival, but which also served to inform the women he was not allowed to see to withdraw to their space. We should mention that Middle Eastern houses were divided into an open space, a zone for everyday activity by men, where they also received their guests (men from outside the closest family circle), and a closed sphere, known as the harem. Of course, the private part of the home had parts (not only rooms) commonly used by members of the family, such as the inner courtyard, roof terrace, or bedrooms. Any men who could marry any of the women living there under Koranic Law, which even included second cousins, were prohibited to enter the harem. Consequently, according to pervading social norms, the point is that the principle of modest behavior and modest appearance in Islam maintains that an outside man should not see a woman in private situations, uncovered.

In Europe, many men are proud of the attractiveness of their wife or partner and the jealousy she may



# OF YELLOW SHOES

provoke in others. In the Islamic world, a wife should not become the object of another man's desire, because in social traditions this is perceived as shame, as a blemish on her honor and the honor of her family. Therefore, to avoid trouble women went outside with their faces and bodies covered. Their father and brothers, however, were allowed to see them. As of course were other women, invited in by the woman of the house.

## Which means whom?

The mother of the man of the house, and after her death, his wife. If he had more than one, then the wife who bore him the first boy usually became the most influential. But in the court of a sultan who had lost his mother, the most important woman in the harem was the one whose son was selected as the heir to the throne, not necessarily the first-born. This was a woman's world. Properly managed, it could be a kingdom.

Paradoxically, despite the isolation, within the framework of the prevailing hierarchy and fixed rules of coexistence, women enjoyed many freedoms in day-to-day life.

## Outwardly, however, that principle did not apply.

That's true, women could not leave the house without the consent of their husband or legal guardian, and without the company of a man from their closest family circle, a eunuch or servant. For the highest social-strata citizens, the harem was therefore undoubtedly a sort of cage. But for the daughters of the very poor residents of the Caucasus, which despite the abolishment of slavery were still being sold to the rulers of the Osman Empire, such restrictions were of lesser importance. For them the harem could be an opportunity for social advancement, a wonderful place for a courtly career, or at least a way to improve their fate.

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An Arab woman at  
a window, 1911.



**In your book you wrote that if a woman did not wish for her husband to visit her at night, she would place yellow shoes outside the door. From the European perspective, a wife in a harem is a prisoner, yet such a custom attests more to a certain kind of partnership.**

Nineteenth-century travelers from the United Kingdom were already impressed by that custom. They felt that women in Victorian England did not feel as free as the Muslim women did. They therefore came to the conclusion that the women of the East, despite being isolated in the harem, had much more liberty than they themselves enjoyed. Indeed, marriages in the Islamic world functioned, and continue to function on the basis of partnership. For instance, they speak openly about sex. But that does not change the fact that in the social context, relations look differently, because they are subject to Islamic law, which emanates from the Koran. By the way, the Prophet Muhammad appreciated sensual joys and the pleasures of the body, and so he himself had many wives, but they did not live in a single closed space. The Koran does indeed state that a man has a privileged role and that sex is only possible between a married couple, so there is no leeway for extramarital sex or free love. Such contacts do occur, of course, but they are very much condemned by the society and the family. They

are also punished, but the guilt has to be proven without a doubt. The Koran permits a man to have four wives. The rule is, however, that he has to take care of each of his wives and ensure each of them equal material status, such as housing and furniture of exactly the same standard and the same education for their children. That is why few men today decide to have several wives, and if they do, it is not more than two. It is not only costly, but also time-consuming: in the long term, who can withstand travelling back and forth between two homes, sometimes many kilometers away from one another?

**Apart from that, in the evening the husband has to ponder which wife to spend time with?**

Yes, because the husband was also obliged to show equal favor to each wife. In the harems of the Ottoman sultans, this was inspected by public officials. A schedule was therefore prepared for the sultan's visits to the harem, so that none of the wives would be omitted.

**But jealousy still made itself felt in the harem?**

Women often rivalled one another. There were cases involving poison, knives, suffocation. One story we cite in our book refers to how a young girl who could have found their way into the sultan's bed too quickly ended up in a sack in the Bosphorus.

**You have said that sex is not taboo in the Islamic world. In what sense?**

In Islam, the body is the work of God, so it is not recognized as sinful. Sexuality is affirmed, albeit between a married couple, under the binding legal norm. The Middle East also has its own *ars amandi*. The idea is to satisfy the needs of the body and to draw the joy of life from doing so. We included in our book a beautiful quotation from Abdelwahab Bouhdiba: "By accepting and recommending the joys of love Islam made possible that integration of all forms of sensuality in a lyrical vision of life."

**Your book is mainly composed of the memoirs left behind by travelers. Their observations depict the Orient as a mysterious, passionate land.**

There is a certain problem in how people of the West perceive the Orient. It was defined in a remarkable way by Edward Said, an American scholar of Palestinian origin and a Christian. He did very arduous work: he combed through many publications, mainly by British, French, and American authors, namely from the countries which had political and economic interests in the East. Based on them he posited a theory that held sway for a very long time, and remains popular among certain circles today, although it is increasingly being challenged. In his view, Orientalism, mainly Western European Orientalism, was a political, cultural and scholarly thread that was meant

## THE WORLD OF HAREMS

to bring about the hegemony of the Eastern world by the Western world. There was therefore a need to demonstrate its inferiority, but also a bit of fascination, so as to demonstrate that these countries were worth dominating.

But Poles did not look at Turkey as a rival we were fighting against, we had a lot of respect for it. And vice versa. Turkey was the only country that did not recognize the partitions of Poland, and the sultans supported our independence movements. The Polish minority there was very active, and the memory of it remains alive today. That is why the memoirs of Poles are completely different – they were educated travelers or pilgrims, passing through Constantinople to the Holy Land, who did not see Turkey as a Barbarian country. Unfortunately, Edward Said did not know Slavic languages, and so he could not draw upon these sources, and thus his theory of Orientalism does not entirely hit the mark.

**Illustrations of course form an important element of your book. The credit goes in part to you, for the fact that the Institute of Mediterranean and Oriental Cultures, PAS can boast of the world's largest collection of old harem-themed postcards.**

The collection includes around 8,000 pieces, mainly from Egypt, the Holy Land, and Turkey. Why did we start collecting them in the Institute? They offer excellent illustrations to the texts we compare, and they are also a mine of information themselves. These photos show outdoor scenes, some original, some posed, taken in many cases by famous photographers for the purposes of tourism, in the Middle East, in the countries of the Maghreb and Turkey. There are also some created at photography studios in France and the United Kingdom. They differ greatly in the way women are presented. In the pictures from Turkey, the Middle East, and the Maghreb, the women are depicted in a way that is full of respect, very frequently with their faces covered. The European photos are more frivolous, reflecting the nineteenth-century imagination of the sensual Orient.

**In some of the former type, the women are completely covered, looking more like geographical shapes, without any individual traits.**

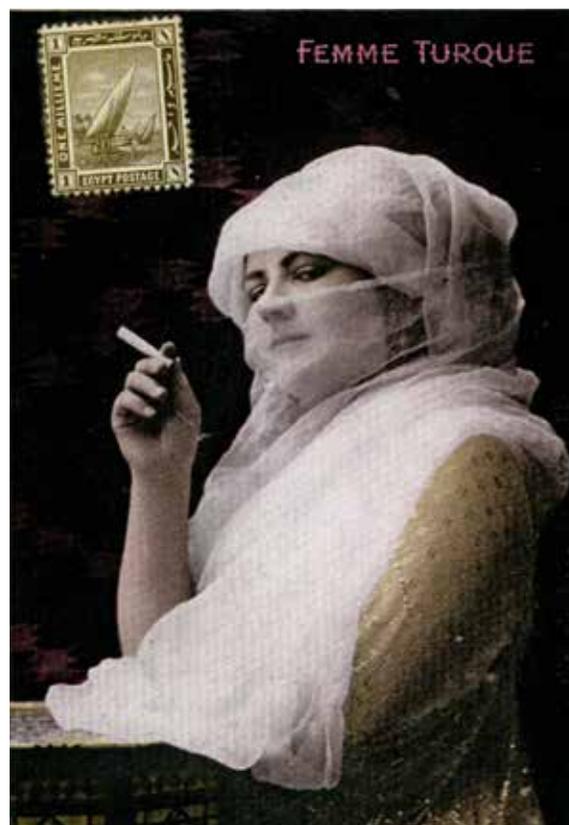
Because they were all covered up. Today, as well, women in the Egyptian oases leave their homes covered by a special material that they prepare themselves, and they cannot be seen at all. Some of the photos present bassours, or travelling harems. Women, children, and also older individuals were carried in sedan-chairs called palanquins.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, photographs that were strictly erotic began to be created and distributed on a quite broad scale. After 1841,

when it became possible to make multiple prints from the same negative, the distribution of erotic photographs was banned in France under pressure from the Académie Française. Thus, erotic images began to be spread under the guise of ethnographic photos.

**Europe in the nineteenth century saw the beginnings of women's fight for their rights. Can we use the word emancipation with respect to the Middle East?**

Both yes and no. Paradoxically, women from the poor strata enjoyed much greater freedom and liberty to move about. Unlike representatives of the upper classes, they could go to the market to buy and sell things, or work in the field without any chaperone. Today things are the reverse: educated women from rich families have much more freedom. Apart from that, sexologists are very popular in Egypt, for instance, and Egyptian television broadcasts self-help programs about sex. There are feminist movements and some extraordinarily bold, liberated, educated women; very interesting literature is being written, in support of the women's movement. But the Islamic world is highly differentiated. In Saudi Arabia, women do not have many chances of changing their situation, in view of legal restrictions. Shariah law is in force there, and all the aspects of women's functioning in society are based on it. This includes travelling by themselves, or even driving a car [editor's note: while the English



A Turkish woman, nineteenth-twentieth century, Egypt.

*A bassour, or a travelling harem, in al-Aghwat, early twentieth century, Algeria.*



*Cairo, a lady of the harem alongside her carriage, early twentieth century, Egypt.*

version of this interview was in preparation, it was announced that Saudi Arabia would allow women to drive]. It is only since 2013 that there has been Saudi legislation protecting women from domestic violence, and it was only in 2015 that a ban, not allowing women into the so-called dangerous professions, was lifted – even though it is still not the case that all professions are open to women. We cannot speak about any broadly-construed emancipation within the Muslim world as a whole.

Apart from that, a lot changes in the lives of Middle Eastern women when they get married, as a certain kind of moment of self-fulfillment intrinsic in their worldview. At least because of the fact that old maids and widows usually have worse social position than married women. Women whose husbands have died are therefore encouraged to re-marry.

#### **Is it permitted, for instance, to terminate a pregnancy?**

Abortion is a controversial topic, with varied legal interpretations. Terminating a pregnancy is sometimes permitted only at a very early stage, but never for material reasons. Consent for such a procedure is given, for instance, when the life of the mother is in

danger or when the fetus is clearly deformed or has been diagnosed to have genetic defects. And in fact it is performed very rarely, and only for medical reasons. On the one hand there is the teaching of the Koran, that a woman is like a cultivated field, meant to yield harvest every year. If that does not happen, it is the husband's fault. Apart from that, there is no system of social insurance in the Middle East; consequently, at a certain point children are responsible for supporting their parents. Apart from that, a woman who has a herd of children commands much social respect. Their off-spring are perceived as a divine blessing for the family.

It is true that today, the higher the social stratum, the fewer children people have. Poorer people assume that the appearance of a child is not a problem, even if it is their eleventh or fifteenth. That clothing and food will always somehow be found for them. Perhaps it will not have a magnificent life, but it is greeted just as joyously as the first child. The workmen hired for our excavations are very poor, but when a next child is born to them, each of us receives at least a piece of candy, beautifully packed in a little bag tied up with a ribbon. They spend a whole day's wages on this, or even two, but they are very anxious to have as many people as possible rejoice in the birth of their child. On the streets, all fathers proudly carry their children in their arms; people do not use strollers. To put it briefly, the family ties that are disappearing in our country are extremely strong there.

#### **In your voices, one can here an unwavering fascination with the Orient...**

Islam is changing greatly over the years. Our elder colleague archaeologists working in Egypt since the 1960s confirm the colossal changes in culture. Unfortunately, they are going in both directions. Just 20 years ago, in Egypt one would encounter only a few women with their faces covered, but now they are a common sight in Cairo, even in rich neighborhoods. On the one hand we therefore have feminism and openness to the world, whereas on the other hand we have ongoing radicalization.

We are enthusiastic about this world, about its people, who are extraordinarily family-focused, open, warm, straightforward and helpful. But we remain aware that we Europeans still do not fully understand that culture and that sometimes we think in terms of stereotypes.

INTERVIEW BY ANNA ZAWADZKA  
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PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAKUB OSTAŁOWSKI

OLD POSTCARDS FROM THE COLLECTIONS  
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