

July 2013

Book Review: Ottoman Women: Myth and Reality

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Recommended Citation

Rahiminezhad, Vida (2013). Book Review: Ottoman Women: Myth and Reality. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 14(3), 304-305.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol14/iss3/24>

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**Ottoman Women: Myth and Reality. 2007. Asli Sancar
Michigan: Light, Inc. University of Michigan (191 pages). Hard cover (\$24.95). ISSN:
1597841153, 9781597841153.**

Reviewed by Vida Rahiminezhad¹

Since the title of the book is *Ottoman Women: Myth and Reality*, it is expected the book would provide information about the condition of women in Ottoman authority in the 19th century. However, the book is about women in Muslim elite families in Ottoman period. The Ottoman Empire is introduced as the vast authority that extended to the African, European, and Asian continents. On the one hand the first question that arises is how Muslim elite women who lived in harems can be representative of all women in the empire, and on the other hand how the condition of elite women can be take into consideration for all women even ordinary ones.

The author's aim is to answer to this question of whether orientalist's outlook towards Ottoman women is correct. To answer this question the author examines the source of orientalist's information which is normally provided by those of previous writings of some accounts such as "Arabian Nights" which portrays women as 'those villains' and what they heard since they were not allowed to enter the harem. Western women's information is based on whatever they observed inside harem. The strong point of this book is its collection of pictures about Ottoman society. However it does not portray the condition of all women in Ottoman Empire since the author just talks about condition of Muslim Ottoman women in the elite family. Therefore if the aim is to portray the condition of all women, the author should explain the life of different classes of women during Ottoman Empire.

The book has six chapters and one separate part as introduction. The first chapter talks about Ottoman women's condition from western points of view. The second chapter includes women's condition in harem and the social role of women, the role of mother-in-law and wife in elite families, and the educational characteristics of elite women and girls. In this chapter the author notes briefly the history of girls' school and the subjects they were taught as well as the marriage customs, and the birth rituals.

The third chapter is entitled *Ottoman Women like Slaves in Harem*. In this chapter the life of women slaves, different kinds of slaves and their relations with the master of the home are taken into consideration. It also describes how slaves were liberated in the Ottoman Empire. The fourth chapter is entitled *Ottoman Women in Harem*. The tasks of the heads of the empire harem, who were powerful women and the condition of concubine women in harem, are explained. The chapter explains who these concubine women were and their positions in the Ottoman court.

In the fifth chapter, *Ottoman Women in Court*, marriage and marriage contract, dowry, alimony, remarriage and custody of children are considered. The sixth chapter is named as *Ottoman Women in Metaphysic Mirror*. In this chapter the author portrays the effect of Sophists education on Ottoman women's conditions.

The language used in this book is clear and coherent. The author avoids any ambiguities through the book. The book was published in 2007 and since it compares the different attitudes

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of orientalists with those of western travelers' over Ottoman elite women, it is innovative. On the other hand, the author based on existing document tries to portray the Ottoman women's condition in Harem clearly.

This book is a historical book that brings out evidence about the rights possessed by Ottoman elite women when no western women had access to those rights at the time. The audience of this book includes sociologists, historians, and scholars in the field of women's studies and those of students who are interested in women's conditions during Ottoman period.