

## THE OTTOMAN SERAGLIO: AN INSTITUTION OF POWER AND EDUCATION

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**Abstract:** From the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards, especially in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Ottoman Seraglio fascinated the Europeans and was often made the subject of European fantasies and prejudices. Essentially, this was due to the imaginary representations and misperceptions arising from the secrecy and censure that surrounded the life and concubines in the Seraglio. However, contrary to the distorted and mistaken perception of Seraglio as such, historically, it was an institution whereby the concubines were instructed in various forms of art, music, protocol and imperial etiquette, poetry and history. Those concubines who excelled in their skills and intellectual capacity were held in esteem and often rewarded. Especially the favorites from among them were personally praised and respected by the Sultan. Beginning with Hürrem Sultan (Roxelana) (c. 1510-1558) in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the chief concubine who gave birth to a son by the Sultan began to exercise her power and influence not only over the other concubines but also over the Sultan himself. In this regard, first Safiye Sultan (c. 1550-1605?), Kösem Sultan (c. 1589-1651) and Turhan Sultan (1628?-1683) were the most famous figures who had much influence on the Sultan and the politics of their time. The effects of the concubines on the Sultans were written by some of the concubines; especially, Leyla Saz Hanımefendi who was a member of Ottoman Seraglio, wrote her actual experiences of life at the palace and in her memoir and made references to many incidents she encountered to prove that Harem was not the place of femininity but education. So the main aim of this article is to prove that Ottoman Seraglio was not the place of femininity but the institution of power and education.

**Key words:** Ottoman Seraglio, the rule of women, concubines, Kösem Sultan, Turhan Sultan, Leyla Saz Hanımefendi.

### **Osmanlı Haremi: Güç ve Eğitim Kurumu**

**Özet:** 16. yüzyıldan bu yana, özellikle 17. ve 18. Yüzyıllarda, Osmanlı Haremi Avrupalıların ilgisini çekmiş, Avrupa kurgusu ve önyargılarına konu olmuştur. Bu durum, özellikle, Osmanlı Haremindeki cariyelerin gizlilik ve sansür ile çevrelenen hayatlarının hayali tasvirlerinden ve yanlış algılanmalarından kaynaklanmıştır. Osmanlı Haremi bu şekilde çarpıtılmış ve yanlış algılanmasının tam tersine, tarihsel açıdan, cariyelerin çeşitli sanat dalları, müzik, protokol ve emperyal görgü kuralları, şiir ve tarih konularında eğitildiği bir kurumdur. Eğitimlerde ve entellektüel becerilerinde başarı göstermiş cariyeler takdir edilir ve ödüllendirilirdi. Özellikle aralarından gözde olanlar, özel olarak onurlandırılır ve Sultan tarafından saygı görürdü. 16. Yüzyılda Hürrem Sultan (Roxelana) (c. 1510-1558) ile başlayarak Sultan'a erkek oğul veren gözde, gücünü ve etkisini yalnızca diğer cariyeler üzerinde değil Sultan üzerinde de kullanmaya başlamıştır. Bu bağlamda, ilk Safiye Sultan (c. 1550-1605?), Kösem Sultan (c. 1589-1651) ve Turhan Sultan (1628?-1683) dönem politikası üzerinde etkisi olan tanınmış gözdeledir. Cariyelerin Sultanlar üzerindeki etkileri, özellikle Osmanlı

Haremî'nin bir üyesi olan Leyla Saz Hanımefendi, saraydaki kendi kişisel deneyimlerini ve karşılaşmış olduğu olayları günlüğünde Harem'in sadece cinsellik merkezi değil eğitim yeri olduğunu kanıtlamak için yazmıştır. Bu makalenin amacı, Osmanlı Harem'inin bir eğlence yeri değil bir eğitim kurumu olduğunu Leyla Saz Hanımefendi'nin günlüğüne dayanarak kanıtlamaktır.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Osmanlı Haremî, kadınların yönetimi, cariyeler, Kösem Sultan, Turhan Sultan, Leyla Saz Hanımefendi.

The Ottoman '*Harem-i Hümayun*', which is generally known as the '*harem*' or "*seraglio*", and described somewhat with derision as "the world of isolated women" (Akşit, 2007, p. 23), has always preserved its privacy and secrecy in history. It has also been referred to metaphorically as a 'golden cage' (Anhegger, 1987, p. 7), in which most beautiful girls from various European countries vied with each other in order to capture the heart of the sultan, and where the most dangerous tricks were played to obtain power. In other words, it was generally considered to be a place of power and femininity. There existed some famous odalisques, who were in fact the sultans' wives, such as Hürrem Sultan (ca. 1500/1506?–1558) known as "Roxelana", Safiye Sultan (c.1550?–1603) known as "Baffo of Venecia", and Kösem Sultan (c.1589–1651)<sup>1</sup> known as "Anastasia", who used their femininities to influence the sultans and played important roles in the political affairs of their times. However, this does not mean that the harem was a place of pleasure and enjoyment. Apart from Lady Mary Montagu (c.1689–1792), who resided in İstanbul from 1716 to 1718 as the wife of the English ambassador Edward Wortley Montagu, the life in the harem was also described in detail by a Turkish lady named Leyla (Saz) Hanımefendi (c.1850–1936), who was associated with the harem since her father was a physician there. Actually, she not only closely witnessed seven Ottoman sultans' harem life, but also received in the harem a strict training, among others, in Ottoman court music. Through her training and accomplishment in Ottoman court music, she came to be a highly qualified composer and performer and achieved great fame. In her memoirs, she referred to many incidents that she encountered in the harem. So this paper is an account of life and practices in the Ottoman seraglio and of the sultans' rivalry and struggle with each other in order to gain power and influence in the reign of the Ottoman Empire. Basically, the word *harem* is the Turkish transcription of the Arabic word *haram*, which refers to the separate, protected part of a household where women, children, and servants live in a maximum seclusion and privacy" (Aksoy Croutier, 1989, p. 17). The root of the harem tradition, which is based on 'polygamy' goes back to the Mesopotamian times in antiquity (Şahin, 2006,

<sup>1</sup> See Sakaoğlu, 2008, p. 32.

p. 9). It became popular through the slave markets in the Middle East. Within the Ottoman Empire, the harem was first founded during the reign of Orhan Gazi (b.1288, r.1346–1360), the second sultan of the empire. It was during the reign of Mehmet the Conqueror (b.1432, r.1451–1481) that the harem gained much importance and evolved not only into a special kind of social institution but also into a place of education that would exert its influence in the affairs of the empire in the future (Baysal, 2009, pp. 591-603).

The harem's popularity gradually increased and fascinated the Europeans and was often made the subject of European fantasies and prejudices. Essentially, this was due to the imaginary representations and misperceptions arising from the secrecy and censure that surrounded the - harem. However, contrary to the distorted and mistaken perception of the - harem as such, historically, as stated above, it was an institution where the concubines were instructed in various forms of art, ranging from music, poetry, history, and domestic skills to protocol and imperial etiquette. Those concubines who excelled in their skills and intellectual capacity were held in esteem and often rewarded. The favourites among them were especially personally praised and respected by the sultan. Even the Ottoman elite class would want their daughters to enter the harem both to receive a good education and enjoy the luxurious life of the palace. Thus, the girls who had a chance of being a member of the harem received a very formal training in various arts and science of the time, as they were the candidates for becoming a female sultan (sultan) who would actively take part in the governing process of the empire in the future. Therefore, although, the harem was directly associated with luxury and a pleasurable way of life, it was mainly a domestic institution of education. The concubines who did not become wives or favourites of the Sultan held various positions - depending on their abilities, not only in the harem of the sultan, but also at the palace of his daughters and sisters. In addition, the sultan had them married to government officials. It was a great honour for these men due to the fact that these girls were exceptionally well brought up, educated and given substantial amounts of money or dowries<sup>2</sup>.

The Ottoman palace was mainly divided into two sections: the *enderun* and the harem. The *Enderun* was actually an imperial college, where the - future statesmen and imperial officials were educated, while the harem was the place in which young women and concubines were educated. Writing, eading, dancing, drawing, etiquette and protocol, calligraphy and gilding were the main courses taught. The harem was so protected that even the high-status statesmen could not have access there. It was such a secluded place where only the sultan

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<sup>2</sup> See Aksoy Croutier, 1989, p. 29.

could enter as a male person. For this reason, it was impossible for the Europeans to visit and observe it closely. That is why many European writers and artists who travelled to the Ottoman lands tended to fictionalize and romanticize the harem both in their writings and drawings. As Alev Croutier, whose grandmother had been a member of the Ottoman harem, has clearly pointed out,

The history of the Harem [...] symbolizes the fluctuating fortunes of the [Ottoman] Empire. The great expense of upkeep, the ruthless rivalry among the women, intrigues that influenced political affairs, and, ultimately, the exquisite beauty of these women of many nationalities fascinated the entire world. Everyone was very curious to know what happened behind the harem walls--but no one was allowed [to go into it]. Foreign ambassadors and artists reported accounts obtained from the peddlers or servant women who had entered, but such narratives were often muddled by wishful exoticism. To this day, the reality is difficult to ascertain (Aksoy Croutier, 1989, p. 29).

A firm and demanding hierarchy existed in the harem. No female was allowed to violate the hierarchy and behave liberally. Being a female in the harem was very challenging as the females were required to display absolute obedience and not underestimate the harem's established rules. In fact, there were five different levels of female/womanhood practised in the harem. The lowest but the most difficult level was being an 'odalisque' as it was the first step of entering the harem. As Croutier has further explained,

before admitting the [...] girls into the Seraglio [Topkapı] Harem, trained eunuchs [male servants of the Palace] carefully examined them for any physical defects and imperfections. If a girl were proclaimed satisfactory, the chief eunuch presented her to the Valide Sultan [Ottoman Emperor's mother] for approval. Once she was confined within [the Harem], her Christian name would be changed to a Persian name that suited her particular qualities. If, for example, a girl had beautiful rosy cheeks she might be called Gülbahar, Rose of Spring. [...] and [there] began an arduous training in palace etiquette and [...] culture (Aksoy Croutier, 1989, p. 30).

After being trained for two years as 'odalisques', the ones who had extraordinary beauty and talent were educated to become the sultan's concubines (*cariye*). They learned to dance, recite poetry and play musical instruments<sup>3</sup>. The most attractive, witty and talented of them were chosen for

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<sup>3</sup> See İrtem, 1999, p. 26.

the service of the sultan. This time, they were named *gözde*, that is, the favourite, and were taught “writing and religion, sewing, embroidery, playing the harp, and singing” (Peirce, 1993, pp. 123-125). The *gözdes* were very close to the sultan. It was generally believed that the sultan chose his wives from among them and the *gözdes* preferred by the sultan would be called *ikbals* and earn high ranks. If the sultan was pleased with the *ikbal*, “her relation to the Sultan [was] publicized, only then would she be endowed with a private apartment, carriage and slaves<sup>4</sup>. When an *ikbal* gave birth to the sultan’s child, she was elevated to the position of the sultan’s leading wife (*kadin efendi* or Haseki sultan). If, per chance, the child was a boy and succeeded the sultan, his mother was called the *Valide Sultan* who became the ruler of the harem and wielded much power over the sultan not only in personal matters but also in the affairs of the empire<sup>5</sup>.

Christopher Neumann in his article entitled “Political and Diplomatic Developments” comments:

The Sultan’s mothers [Valide Sultans] enjoyed high influence and great prestige;..., the ruler’s position had become more exalted, and as a corollary this implied his growing seclusion in the palace and increasing influence on the part of the palace circle (Neumann, 2006, p. 48).

Among these Valide Sultans, the most famous one known by the Europeans was Hürrem Sultan (ca.1500/1506–1558), called Roxelana. Her physical charm and beauty captivated Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent, who was generally known in Europe as the ‘Grand Turk’ (b.1494, r.1520–1566). He was not only a very successful commander but also a sultan who – upheld the rule of law and administered justice fairly to all his subjects in the empire. As Şahin has observed,

Süleyman the Magnificent dreamt of an eternal peace throughout the world. As his magnificence was universally celebrated, the titles of “Most Revered Lord”, “World Renowned”, “Holy Judge”, “Sultan of the Sultans” were bestowed upon him. He was the ruler of the Arabs, Greeks, Slavs, Tatars, Turkmen, Kurds, Turks, and of all Anatolia, under his reign, the empire was at its most prosperous and influential, the peoples of three continents sharing benefits of his judicial and social reforms (Şahin, 2006, p. 56).

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<sup>4</sup> See Peirce, 1993, p. 135.

<sup>5</sup> See Şahin, 2006, p. 33.

But, paradoxically enough, this ‘Holy Judge’, the ‘Grand Turk’, would be passionately enslaved to Hürrem, a Russian concubine, who would become the sultan in the future. It was again this love that would make him, metaphorically, blind and deaf and let his own son, Sehzade Mustafa (c.1515–1553), be killed violently, organized by Hürrem Sultan. In the history of the Ottoman Empire, Hürrem was unique as she was the one who not only managed to regain her freedom as a concubine, but also became the legal wife of the sultan through her intelligence and attractive physique. Süleyman the Magnificent was also unique, because he was the only emperor who got legally married to a foreign concubine and made her sultan of the empire and did not have any affair with another woman in the harem, even after her death. Being a daughter of an orthodox priest in Russia, Roxelana was enslaved at the age of fourteen. After being trained approximately for two years to become suitable for admission to the harem, she took her place as one of the ordinary concubines in the harem, and was given a new name, Hürrem, meaning ‘being happy’. Through her ‘womanly tricks’ and brain power, it was not too difficult for her to be recognized by the sultan. Interestingly enough, both Hürrem and Süleyman the Magnificent found themselves in a very deep love which would last thirty-five years. In this period, Hürrem gave birth to four Sehzades (‘princes’); Mehmed (b.1521), Selim (b.1524), Beyazıd (b.1525), Cihangir (1531) and a Sultan Mihrimah (b.1522)<sup>6</sup>. After giving birth to four sons respectively, Hürrem, inevitably, acquired much power, which she used not only in the rule of the harem but also in the empire’s politics. Her ambition to have control both over the sultan and over the empire drove her into a conspiracy to organize terrible murders within the empire. She personally organized the murders of İbrahim Paşa (c.1546–1595) who was very dear to the sultan and a very successful grandvizier of the empire as well. With this murder, she got the control of the ruling system, and with the murder of Sehzade Mustafa, she let her own son, Sehzade Selim (1524–1574), get the throne. Hürrem Sultan actively took part in the political arena of the Ottoman Empire more than twenty-five years.

Another sultan who followed Hürrem’s track, not known as much as her by the Europeans, was Safiye Sultan (c.1550–1605), who was a member of the Venetian Baffo family, captured by pirates at the age of thirteen. She was presented to the harem and managed to become Sultan Murad III’s (c.1546–1595) sultan by giving birth to Sehzade Mehmed. She was as ambitious as Hürrem in imperial politics. Many historians agree upon the fact that to keep the sultan away from the administration of the empire, it was Safiye Sultan

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<sup>6</sup> See Sakaoğlu, 2008, pp. 161-165.

(c.1550–1605) who arranged for him to spend most of his time in the harem<sup>7</sup>. Murat III and Safiye Sultan were married for thirty-two years. When Sultan Murad III engaged himself in the pleasures of the harem, it was Safiye Sultan who ruled the empire for ten years under the name of her husband. She did not hesitate to give the order of murder for the ones who went against her decisions. When the sultan died suddenly in 1595, she let her son Sehzade Mehmed, who would order Sultan Murad's nineteen *sehzades* to be killed in order not to challenge him in the future for the throne. In the reign of Sultan Mehmed III (b.1566, r.1595–1603), Safiye Sultan did not refrain herself from administrative deeds. It was reported by the historians that just like Hürrem, Safiye Sultan also got bribes from the foreign ambassadors to solve their problems with the empire<sup>8</sup>.

Kösem Sultan (1589–1651), known as Anastasia and was of Greek origin, Sultan Ahmed I's (c.1590–1617) wife, was not the last but one of the most important sultans who also used her femininity to possess power in order to intervene in the administrative and political affairs of the empire. She exercised her power approximately for thirty years in between 1623 and 1651. It is a historical fact that, from 1623 to 1632, she administered the empire by herself as the *de facto* regent and attended the divan meetings because her son Murad IV was only a twelve-year-old child, when he succeeded his father Sultan Ahmet I, and "was to remain for some time yet a little more than a tool in the hands of his mother, Kösem" (Parry, 1976, p. 137). As Halil İnalcık has commented,

none of the valide sultans was as influential as Ahmet I's wife, Kösem Sultan [Mehpeyker Sultan] who lived in alliance with a faction of the Janissaries who played a vital part in all changes of grand vizier and in all accessions to the throne until the accession of Mehmet IV [1648–1687]. Until Mehmet IV's mother, Turhan Sultan, had her strangled in 1651, she controlled all the strings of government (İnalcık, 1973, p. 98).

Whether Sultan Mehmed IV's mother Turhan Hatice (ca.1628-1683) Sultan, whose original name was Nadia and was of Ruthenian (Ukrainian) origin, sanctioned it or not, Kösem was killed violently with a curtain by the chief black eunuch of the harem. With the death of her rival, Turhan Sultan became the Valide Sultan. As a regent, Turhan Hatice wielded great power, and accompanied her son, Sultan Mehmet IV, to important divan meetings and, on several occasions, spoke from behind her curtained sitting place. Due to her

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<sup>7</sup> See Sakaoğlu, 2008, pp. 27-39.

<sup>8</sup> See Kayra, 2008, p. 89.

inexperience, Turhan relied on the other members of the government to advise her on political matters. This is evident from her correspondence with the grand viziers. Parry has pointed out that,

Mehmet was much too young to assume the government himself, and it remained in the hands of successive Grand Viziers as well as Mehmed's grandmother and his mother Turhan [...] Therefore, the instability of the government continued, and intrigues were rife at the palace (Parry, 1976, p. 162).

In this power struggle, Kösem planned to dethrone Mehmed and replace him with another young grandson. This conspiracy had more to do with replacing Turhan Sultan as her ambitious daughter-in-law with the one who was more easily controlled. The plan was unsuccessful as it was reported to Turhan by one of Kösem's slaves. Whether Turhan sanctioned it or not, Kösem Sultan was murdered after serving three years as the regent for her young grandson.

It was these struggles which made the harem people very attractive and challenging. On the other hand, the educational side of the harem should not be forgotten. Leyla Saz Hanımefendi, born in Istanbul in 1850, was very important as she was the one who closely witnessed the real life in the seraglio and published her memoirs between 1920–1922 as serials entitled *Harem-i Humayun and Sultan Saraylar* [The Imperial Harem and Sultans' Palaces]. In 1924, her memoirs were republished as a book under the title *The Imperial Harem of the Sultans*<sup>9</sup>. The book was translated into French by her son Yusuf Razi Bel and was published both in France and England with a preface written by Claude Farrère. Leyla Saz was privileged enough to take place as a *nedime* (a maiden attending on a princess) in the harem for seven years during the reigns of seven different sultans. Thus, in the history of the Ottoman Empire, she was a unique person who was the first hand observer depicting in her memoirs the realities in the harem. She was not a member of the harem, but, interestingly enough, she experienced the life there as if she were a member of it. In her book, she states:

I beg pardon of my readers for presenting myself, first of all, at the start of my story. But, I think this must be done in order to dissipate any doubts which might arise as to the spirit of authenticity which surrounds the facts which I am going to report. One may well ask how I could be so knowledgeable on the intimate life of the Serail since no one has been able to enter. This is what I would like to explain. My father, Doctor İsmail Paşa or Hekim İsmail Paşa was one of the first graduates of the

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<sup>9</sup> The first English translation was published in 1925.



School of Medicine of İstanbul. [...] His extensive education gave him a privileged position. He was consulted on many questions and soon became the intimate counsellor and favourite of the Sultan and of members of the Imperial family. He came to the position of the Vezir and was appointed to the highest positions within the Empire (Saz, 1995, pp. 20-21).

Her father's position in the seraglio had given Leyla Saz Hanım a chance to receive a good education, especially on classical Turkish music, which would enable her to be a well-known professional composer in the future, having more than 200 compositions of Ottoman court music, still popularly performed today. Leyla Saz depicted the harem as follows:

It is this environment of refinement, of elegance, of incomparable richness which I will try to describe. It is the life of the sultans, at once majestic, refined and courteous, that I am going to recount to you. I will describe also the life of those girls of the Serail known as Saraylı, who were all recruited, it is true, among young Circassian slaves, but brought up and educated with the greatest care and submitted to a discipline and a hierarchy of a very severe degree. They were, all by the perfection and the distinction of their manners, worthy indeed to serve such illustrious manners (Saz, 1995, pp. 22-23).

Contrary to the fictional narratives and drawings which put emphasis on sexuality and sensual pleasures in the harem, Leyla Saz gives a totally different picture of the life in the harem and, thus, implicitly rejects the exaggerated and somewhat romanticized views of it:

The harem is considered to be an institution of education and to the women's section a prayer is written: "May Allah lead us to beneficial ways". In accordance with this prayer, most of them got married with dowries given by the Sultan, since an odalisque is not a slave, not even a sexual one. Each odalisque in the harem is considered the adopted child of the Sultan. [...] it is understood that they are made themselves feel welcome as the very adopted child and educated well. In the arrangements the harem's interior, it is a requirement that no one who lived here would have even one second to waste. Dance, music, sewing, education [...] The harem is something like a military organization (Saz, 1995, p. 33).

From her depiction, it can clearly be deduced that the odalisques were not the sultan's sexual slaves or concubines. It is a fact that, beginning with the reign of Mehmet the Conqueror, the sultans chose their wives from among the harem girls, but they did not have affairs with all the odalisques in the harem, was truly a centre of spiritual and physical education for women. Especially, on the bedroom walls of the sultans as well as on the walls of the *sehzađes'* private quarters, there were many verses inscribed from the Quran and from the Prophet's statements, which encouraged the education of girls within the family.

Especially as regards musical education, the harem was also—a distinguished institution which offered serious education to the ladies. In the harem there was always active a large group of female musicians called *sazendes* who had been taught both Turkish and European classical music. Leyla Saz, a member of the *sazendes*, a concise description of her music lessons:

Among the tutors of western music at the Serail, I only knew Necip Paşa and Kadri Bey. Necip Paşa had composed a lot of western music as well as quite a bit of Turkish music, which are very similar to the Western ones. I remember him very well because he visited my father many times. At the Serail, he came to the music classes, particularly on the rehearsal days. Apparently, Donizetti Pasha, the brother of a composer, who was himself a talented musician, often, came to the classes; but, I don't think I ever met him (Saz, 1995, p. 28).

Thus, from this description one can infer that, contrary to the legends and drawings in which music was depicted as a tool used to entertain the sultan sensually, music in the harem was an important subject which was seriously taught and practised. Leyla Saz puts emphasis on this issue stating that “at the Serail, just like at the Imperial Harem or at the courts of the *sultanes*, [the *sazendes*, female musicians] became so familiar with music that it was almost their second nature” (Saz, 1995, p. 46). The *sazendes* were chosen from among “the most talented girls of the Serail and then were sent to music class on specific days and at specific hours” (Saz, 1995, p. 46). They were “wonderfully accomplished in the Imperial Harem” (Saz, 1995, p. 42). She further states that

the female orchestra did, in fact, play [...] in a most remarkable way and, among other music, played tunes from *William Tell* and from *La Traviata* which were very much in favour those days in İstanbul [...]. The Harem orchestra also played pieces of Turkish music to perfection (Saz, 1995, p. 44).

This shows how seriously and perfectly the female orchestra was taught the western music which was taught with notes. These girls were professional musicians and admirably equalled their male counterparts who formed the sultan's or princes' orchestras. The music courses for the *sazendes* were so special and distinctive that some particular rooms which “were not accessible to everyone were arranged. Important people of the Serail could listen to these lessons standing before the doors outside of the room” (Saz, 1995, p. 45). Leyla Saz narrates her experience of this class as follows:

I often went to the music classes with one of the small Sultans who was always accompanied by a *kalfa*; sometimes I was able to slip alone and at other times I was able to listen with other girls just like me; our presence was tolerated because we were well behaved and always sat quietly in a corner without making any noise and without bothering the class. We listened with utmost attention and tried to remember all we could of the

pieces that were being played. Then we would quickly run off to try to play them back to ourselves on the piano (Saz, 1995, pp. 45-46).

It was those music classes which made Leyla Saz Hanımefendi deal with music professionally and become a classical Turkish music composer. It is assumed that she composed more than two hundred pieces of music. There might have been more harem people who were as talented as her, but we –particularly appreciate Leyla Saz for her memoirs because very few females dared to publish their memoirs concerning their lives in the harem.

In conclusion, it would not be wrong to claim that, contrary to the biased and misconceived opinion in the West, the Ottoman harem was neither a place of uncontrolled desire nor a prison for helpless women kept for the lascivious pleasures of the sultans. As with many institutions that are foreign to the experience of the West and different from its own traditions, the harem in Ottoman culture has been a focus of fascination as well as derision for the Western mind. These conflicting views stem largely from a misunderstanding of the reality of the harem on the one hand, and the very real impossibility of a closer scrutiny on the other hand, both because of the nature of the institution itself and because of the religious, cultural and political context to which the harem belonged.

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