

Review of Harem histories: Envisioning places and living spaces edited by Booth, Marilyn, Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010.

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This outstanding edited collection of thirteen chapters presents a comprehensive analysis of the social spaces signified by the contested English term “harem”. Although critiques of Orientalist discourse are well-established in the academic literature, editor Marilyn Booth has made a significant contribution to this body of work by compiling a volume that primarily considers “the harem as shaped and represented within societies of the Middle East and North Africa” (p. 4). Chapters in the volume examine the diverse spaces referred to as harems and analyze the fluidity of this concept across time and space. While each chapter delineates these specificities, Booth’s introduction notes that the term harem “denotes a certain arrangement of domestic space that has been common to a wide variety of Islamicate societies across many centuries” (p. 5).

Many chapters draw upon an increasingly well-established literature on gendered space, which is reflected in the volume’s division into three thematic sections. Part One, “Normative Images and Shifting Spaces” opens with Asma Afsaruddin’s analysis of content shifts in the biographical literature and advice manuals based upon the lives of the Prophet Muhammad’s female companions. She argues that texts from later periods in which female seclusion was valued “exercised quite a bit of poetic license... to validate and mandate the institution of the harem” (p. 24). Chapter Two, by Yaseen Noorani, examines gendered moral and social hierarchies evident in Arabic *adab* literature to demonstrate. In this literature, Noorani argues, “control over one’s women signified control over one’s self, and thereby enabled a society of rational, virtuous agents to exist” (p. 65). Cemil Schick’s Chapter Three begins with the observation that spaces known as harems were “much more likely to be a monogamous (albeit extended) family’s domestic quarters than a space dedicated to housing multitudes of women” (p. 72). This presents a useful point of departure for analysis of the harem as a space of socialization, in which both men and women were constantly imparted with gendered spatial messages.

Part Two, “Rooms and Thresholds: Harems as Spaces, Socialities, and the Law”, begins with Nadia Maria El Cheikh’s Chapter Four, which discusses the Baghdad-based harem of Caliph al-Muqtadir. El Cheikh points out that Arab scholars are sometimes equally guilty of the Orientalist tendency to depict “Arab culture heritage... as something absolutely exemplary, timeless, and outside history” (p. 87). She demonstrates that harems were subdivided by loyalties and conflicts that rendered them “first and foremost a political arena, in which highly positioned women, as well as leading eunuchs, participated in major caliphal politics” (p. 100). Chapter Five, by Leslie Peirce, reviews Ottoman *kanunname* (books of statutes) by four separate authors to determine “when, how, and perhaps why harem culture came increasingly to represent an ideal sociosexual landscape in the eyes of the Ottoman regime” (p. 111). Peirce observes that successive *kanunname* increasingly connect female respectability to seclusion, which is significant given that they “formulated a standardized middle road as reference for legal administrators throughout the empire” (p. 132), thus impacting a wide array of diverse cultures governed by Ottoman rule. Chapter Six, by Jateen Lad, examines Ottoman culture through its discussion of eunuchs of African descent who policed Topkapi Palace. Lad notes that, due to the ever-present threat of assassination and succession-related vendettas, “the deepest seclusion and strictest boundaries were drawn not around women but rather around men- namely, the sultans and princes” (p. 141). Lad envisions the harem “as a diagram of power” (p. 162) in which

the eunuchs were the only Topkapi residents who moved unhindered throughout the Palace in order to maintain such an intricate hierarchy.

Chapter Seven, by Julia Clancy-Smith, documents the culture that evolved around the use of *bayt-al-babr* (sea houses) by Tunisian royalty and the nineteenth century Europeans who sought their favors. Clancy-Smith explores the elaborate “ties of indebtedness and social obligation through the gift of housing; [whereby] the *beys* were, in effect, the Europeans’ landlords” (p. 187). These political ties frequently depended upon visits between privileged Tunisian women and their female European counterparts, and the narratives of the latter provided great insight into this feminized world. Heghnar Zeitlian Watenpaugh’s Chapter Eight discusses contemporary Syrian efforts to preserve courtyard homes and other forms of historical architecture, albeit in ways that do not critically consider “the type of familial and household relationships that the courtyard house fostered: the seclusion of high-status women, the exploitation of servants or slaves, and polygamy” (p. 225).

Part III, “Harems Envisioned”, opens with Nancy Micklewright’s chapter, in which she juxtaposes her analysis of European harem images with Turkish Ottoman family photographs. The author takes note of the visual cues that European photographers used to signal “harem” to viewers (particularly rich textiles and decorative objects), as well as the means by which Turkish families signaled their cosmopolitan identity through the use of newspapers and European dress. Such images are contextualized with “a complex, unstable, multivalent Orientalism that shaped much of the cultural interaction in this period and region” (p. 257). Chapter Ten, by Joan DelPlato, examines nineteenth century French and British portraits and narratives that incorporate the harem. She observes that the themes of death, eroticism, and unjust imprisonment are all consistent themes, and yet “that the Westerner who ‘penetrates’ the harem is also endangered is part of the erotic frisson for both the protagonist and the reader” (p. 275). Orit Bashkin’s Chapter Eleven examines harem discourse in four novels by Syrian Christian author Jurji Zaydan, whose work can be construed as political allegory. Bashkin situates Zaydan’s depictions of harems as sordid, oppressive structures in the broader social context of debates about democracy and women’s role in society. Chapter Twelve, by A. Holly Shissler, examines texts by Turkish author Ahmet Midhat Efendi, whose work frequently dealt with the family “as central to the construction of a good society” (321). In Efendi’s fiction “the well-ordered harem is society’s bulwark against such misfortunes” (340). The volume’s final chapter, by Marilyn Booth, analyzes an Egyptian literary genre that emerged following Egypt’s partial independence from British rule, a period when heated debates ensued regarding appropriate spatial boundaries for women. Many such texts focused upon the fate of young women who failed to observe appropriate norms and, in doing so, “assert both the failure of the harem system for young women from elite families and the lack of a socially and psychologically acceptable alternative” (366).

This volume will be a welcome addition to the libraries of those interested in Anthropology, Area Studies, Architecture, and Women’s Studies. The authors should be commended for producing a fine collection of research from such diverse areas.

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