

ON SERAGLIO SYSTEM IN THE OTTOMAN PERIOD

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Some non-Muslim slave-women² in the Ottoman Palace³ were been more effective than what was known on the administration of the Ottoman State; they played important role of the accession of the Sultans to the throne, on the appointment and as well as in the assassination of Sadrazams (the big vizir), Sheykhulislams and Princes. In fact, the Seraglio was the home of the Sultan; at the Palace of Topkapi was called as “harem”, which means that to enter to the this place was “haram (forbidden)” in Arabic (forbidden by Religion); women who were in the Palace or were brought there took their educations in this Institute, called the Seraglio.

The Topkapı Palace was three divisions, comprising the Central State buildings (The palaces of Sultan, Sadrazam and similar places), for 300 years of the Ottoman State; Birun, Enderun and Harem (or Harem-i Hümayun). **The first** of them was Birun, an external Palace, consisting of the buildings of the Sadrazam and the Divan-ı Hümayun (Council of Sultan). **The second** was the Enderun, an Internal Palace that consisted of Treasure, the school of Enderun, general headquarter of army etc. **The third** was Harem-i Hümayun.⁴

The organisation of the Seraglio completed its organisation at the period of Fatih (Conqueror) Sultan Mehmet although it was present since the foundation of the Ottoman State. Recruitings were educated in Enderun, and women in the Seraglio were the status of “slave” and “recruiting”⁵ system. The Enderun and the Seraglio were perfect institutes of education in its age.⁶

Slave-women were prisoners of war were taken into the Ottoman Palace were trained privately with the education of Turk-Islam, enlightened with Turkish language, knowledge and courses of sewing-embroidery; those who were at the progressive degree became first “midleers” and then craftswomen. Most of the slave-women would work in the laundry and kitchen; they could even get married with their partners at the Ottoman Palace. The virtual head of women at the Seraglio and the first lady of the Palace was the Mother of Sultan (Ruler), her name being in Turkish

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² The concept of “slave-women”; she was a slave-woman who was taken generally to the Palace for service but some of them were been “Mother of Sultans” and ruled the Ottoman State for years.

³ See to the system of the recruiting and its critics, Fendoğlu, H. Tahsin, *Devshirme Sisteminin Değerlendirilmesi (The Critics of The Recruiting System)*, Article, Presented at “International Symposium at 700th Anniversary of the Founding of Ottoman Symposium”, Unpublished, Rectorship of University of Seljuck, Konia (Iconium), Turkey: 7-9th April, 1999.

⁴ Uzuncarchılı, I. Hakkı, *Osmanlı Devletinin Saray Teşkilatı (The Organisation of the Palace of The Ottoman State)*, (Ankara: The Publication of The Institute of Turkish History, 1988), 3th ed., 38; for detail about Seraglio, see, *ibid*, 34-38.

⁵ The concept of “recruiting” means “collect” or “recruitment”. It means terminologically that a boy who was 12-18 years old was taken from their home to serve for the Ottoman army or bureaucracy services. Only boys not girls may be taken for recruiting.

⁶ Ipshirli, M., *“Osmanlı Devletinde Harem” (The Seraglio in the Ottoman State)*, Diyanet İslam Ansiklopedisi (Encyclopedia of Islam of Religious Affairs in Turkey), XVI: 135-138.

“Valide Sultan”. Only the mother of 23 Ottoman Sultans of all 36 Sultans took the title of “Mother of Sultan”; other 13 Sultan’s mothers died before their sons became Sultan. The second authorized woman of the Palace was the wife of Sultan who was named also “kadın’efendi” (lady) who were named “haseki” and in general “gözde”; they were selected from the Europe in the XVIIth century and from Caucasus after XVIIth century.⁷

The administration of the Seraglio belonged to “Agha (Head) of Harem”, who was an eunuch. There were also at the Ottoman Palace “black eunuch aghas”, who were present in the Orient and Roman Empire, as well as and the ‘Abbasid dynasty in Baghdad and Memlük Palaces in Egypt in the Middle Ages. They were at the Seraglio Building (the division of women at the Palace) to protect the women at the Palace; for this reason they were called as “harem agha (the head of the Seraglio)”. These eunuches were presented by the Egyptian governors to the Ottoman Palace.⁸ Eunuch (in arabic, khisa or ikhtisa or tavashi) was the loss of virility and thereby was forbidden by the Islamic law. The common feature of male personnel working at the Ottoman Palace was to be castrated. The head of the Seraglio at the Palace was “Kızlar Aghası” or “Babüssaade Ağası” or “Kapu Ağası” (The head of girls).

The System of the Slave-Women. There were always slave-women at the Ottoman Palace since the second Sultan of the Ottoman, Orkhan Khan, but their increase and access into administration began at the period of Fatih (Conqueror) Sultan Mehmet. The number of slave-women were 200-300 at the period of Sultan Murat III (death, 1595); after that period, it increased and reached 809 at the period of Sultan ‘Abdal ‘Aziz.⁹ Slave-women at the Ottoman Palace were divided into two groups; those were as “servant” and as “wife”.

The System of Slavery in the Ottoman Theoretical Law. Slaves were obtained only in legitimate war waged by a government. Private razzias, kidnapping or even sale of infants by their parents have no legal sanction whatsoever. The Quran (24:33) orders that if a well behaving slave was prepared to pay off his value to his master, that latter could not refuse the offer; in fact he would be constrained to grant his slave opportunities to earn and save the necessary amount for obtaining manumission. Islam’s aim was first to provide shelter to the prisoners of war who lost everything, and for some reason or other was not repatriated; and secondly to educate them and give them the opportunity of acquiring culture in Islamic surroundings, under the government of the Ottoman.¹⁰ According to Islamic law, every slave has the right to purchase his emancipation by paying his value to his master; and in order to earn the necessary amount, he may compel his master to give him facilities to work, and during this period he does not require to serve his master; it was the duty of the government to allot every year in the budget a certain sum for aiding the slaves to buy their freedom. The sistematic emancipation of slaves, which was ordered by the Quran, presents another glorious example. As a matter of fact there were been several

⁷ Ipshirli, M., “*Osmanlı Devletinde Harem*” (*The Seraglio in the Ottoman State*), 137.

⁸ Uzuncarshılı, *Saray Teşkilatı (The Organisation of the Palace)*, 34-38, see for details, 172-183.

⁹ Akgündüz, A., *İslam Hukukunda Kölelik-Cariyelik Müessesesi ve Osmanlı’da Harem (The Institution of Slavery of Men or Women in the Islamic Law and the Seraglio in the Ottoman)*, (İstanbul: The Foundation of Ottoman Researches), 1995), 281.

¹⁰ See, Hamidullah, Muhammad, *Introduction to Islam*, (Ankara, 1997), 110.

dynasties of Muslim rulers in history, drawn solely from slaves who had been freshly liberated. The liberation of slaves also seems to have been made by written documents. If an Ottoman citizen was made prisoner of war by an enemy, payment of ransom was needed for purchasing his liberation. The basic principle of the system of international relations in Islam, in the words of jurists, were that the Muslims and non-Muslims were equal in respect of the sufferings of this world.¹¹

1. Slave-Women as the Status of Servant:

They were married with their husbands, served as workers and took wages. It was impossible for anybody to have sexual relations with them. It can be said that slave women were not different from the servants of today. The number of this kind of slave-women were 50-70 or more. They stayed at the houses near the Palace. The number of slave-women in laundry and other knowledges were registered on the documents of the Ottoman Archieves.¹² The number of slave-women at this status were 50-70 or sometimes 400-500. Slave-women were divided into four groups; Beginners (Acemiler), Slave-women (in the narrow sense), Middleers (Kalfalar), and Craftswomen (Ustalar or gedikli cariyeler).

2. Slave-Women (Cariyes) as the Status of Wife-like:

These were slaves-women as wife, and forbidden for anyone only their husbands. When they had a child from his master, they were called as “ümmül-veled” (the mother of child) and they could not be sold; they got freedom when her master died at the latest. Few slave-women were in this class. The Ottoman Sultans got married with free women by Fatih (Conqueror) Sultan Mehmet. Sultan Ottoman-I Khan (the Founder of the Empire) was married with two women. The Ottoman Sultans after Fatih (Conqueror) Sultan Mehmet married with free slaves-women until the collapse of the Ottoman State. The increase of the number of slave-women began after Sultan Ibrahim.¹³

Slave-women at the Ottoman Palace were divided into two groups; free slave-women (kadin’efendiler, hasekiler), and the non-free slave-women (ikbals, gözdes and peyks).

(a) Slave-Women who were emancipated (women-ladies and hasekis or Haseki Sultans):

They were, first, at the status of Sultan’s slave-women, but later were emancipated by the Sultans, and then married with the Sultans; these slave-women were named as “kadin-efendi (women-ladies)”, whereas those who had a child was

¹¹ Ibid, 196-197, 61, 159.

¹² Akgündüz, A., “*Gerçek Harem Nedir*” (What is the Real Seraglio), in *Türk Edebiyatı Dergisi* (in Review of Turkish Education, 247, (May 1994), 9.

¹³ Akgündüz, *Osmanlı’da Harem (The Seraglio in The Ottoman)*, 313.

named “Haseki Sultan” (The Sultan has a child).¹⁴ The first of them however, was called as “bash’kadın’efendi” (the first lady). Most of women-ladies were married.¹⁵ Yavuz Sultan¹⁶ Selim had two women-ladies (or hasekis).¹⁷ These were women who gained their liberty, because the documents regarding them mention the concept “vela-i itaka”; the concept of vela-i itaka (the authority on the emancipated men or women) can be in question after the process of freedom.¹⁸

Sultan Murat III was more interested in the slave-women among in the 36 Ottoman Sultans. Murat III was ascended to the Ottoman throne in 1574 after Selim II. After Murat III followed him his son Mehmet III (birth 1566, death 1603).¹⁹

b. Slave-Women who were not emancipated:

These were divided into three groups: ikbals, gözdes and peyks.

The first group of slave-women in the Seraglio was ikbals, and first of them was named as “bash’ikbal (the head of ikbal)”. Ikbals were generally slave-women from whom Sultans had not child. This status began since Sultan Mustafa II (birth 1664, death 1703); this status was inexistent during the preliminary and middle periods of the Ottoman State, and Sultan Mustafa II constructed a building of “Division of Gözdes and Ikbals” in the Topkapı Palace.

The second group of slave-women were named “gözdes”. This group of slave-women was the possible candidates of women-ladies. These women’s number were four. The first four slave-women could be “haseki”. The number of Sultans who had gözdes were one or two.

¹⁴ “Cariyes named “kadın” was deterroriated from the concept of “hatun”, and considered Sultan’s wife. The number of them is four, sometimes six and seven; women, according of hierarchical row, were divided into bash’kadın (the head of women), the second women, etc. (If a cariyeh was born a child from Sultan then she was called as Haseki); *Uzuncarshılı, Saray Teshkilatı (Organisation of the Palace)*, 148; see for detail, 148-153.

¹⁵ Akgündüz, *Osmanlı’da Harem (The Seraglio in the Ottoman)*, 264.

¹⁶ See for “Concept of Sultan in Ottoman”, Uzuncarshılı, *Saray Teshkilatı (Organisation of The Palace)*, 230-234; “The Concept of Sultan was a title, belonging to the Musulman Rulers especially Sünnis (Ortodox). This word was taken from Süryanis; it means the owner of power; later it meant dominion, evidence, and guidance”, *ibid*, 230.

¹⁷ “If a haseki was born child for Sultan, she was named as “Haseki Sultan” and a placed on her head a small gold metal with valuous diamond”. “If a Haseki Sultan dies, her heritage is divided into two half for Sultan, according to status of slaves law, but a kadı’s verdict must be available”; Uzuncarshılı, *Saray Teshkilatı (Organisation of The Palace)*, 153; The concept of Haseki is a word from Persian, meaning real friend, a man who knows secrets, and a profession in the Ottoman Palace; a small officer belongs to Bostancı Odjack; a degree for Palace Slave-women; Doğan, M., *Büyük Türkçe Sözlük (A Grand Dictionary of Turkish)*, Ankara 1986, Third Edition, Birlik Yayınları, 399. This Dictionary halted or did a mistake because of Haseki Sultan was not a slave-woman. Because she was not a slave, she took her liberty and in the status of emancipated. Haseki in Memlüks, a woman who knows the secrets of Sultan, goes to the Sultan’s place whenever she wants, and she was a very trustable woman; Uzuncarshılı, *Osmanlı Devlet Teshkilatına Medhal (An Introduction of Organisation of the Ottoman State)*, (Ankara: The Publication of The Institute of Turkish History, 1988), 4th ed., 347.

¹⁸ See for the concept of “vela”, Fendoglu, H.Tahsin, *Türk Kamu Hukuku Tarihinde Kölelik ve Cariyelik (Slavery and Cariyeship in the History of Turkish State Law)*, (İstanbul, , Publishhouse of Beyan, 1996), 250.

¹⁹ Sultan Mehmet III executed his big son Prince Mahmut at the year of 1603.

The third group of slave-women were Peyks. Peyks were possible-candidates of “ikbals”, who were not more than four. Peyks were only 1-2 at the late periods of the Ottoman Sultans, as Gözdes.²⁰

The son of any sultan was named “chelebi (prince)” until the period of Sultan Murat II (death, 1451); after Sultan Murat II, they were named as “shehzade (prince)”, and they were always educated by famous teachers. The girl of Sultan was also named “sultan”, and they were at the Palace until they got married. When all of the behaviours of the Ottoman Sultans’, dominating country of 24 million km², behaviours of them were determined, there was no sanction as regards their behaviours.

Women-ladies (Kadın-efendi) and “haseki” were emancipated slave-women, and as a rule, they were married with the Sultan. The walls of bedrooms of the Seraglio were full of educative articles of the Qoran and the Hadith. “The Seraglio was a center for education where each behaviour was determined as a strict rule.”²¹ Some of famous women in the country could be sold to the Palace as a “slave-woman”. It was possible to say that Sultans would like to marry with slave-women because of negative affects of brother-in-law, grand-father, secret-keeping and intervention of relations.

After Sultan Mahmut II, (ruling in 1808), the Seraglio began to open-out and the Seraglio women began to go to picnic. The Seraglio continued until ‘Abd al Hamit Khan II (ruling between 1876-1909) dispersed this structure.²² Western writers published many writings and photographs about the Ottoman Seraglio. The Ottoman Seraglio was more conservative than other similar Palaces.

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²⁰ Akgündüz, *Osmanlı’da Harem (The Seraglio in the Ottoman)*, 24 and 306.

²¹ İpshirli, “*Osmanlı Devletinde Harem (The Seraglio in the Ottoman State)*”, 137.

²² Anthony Dolphin Alderson, *Bütün Yönleriyle Osmanlı Hanedanı (The Ottoman Dynasty With All Aspects)*, Translation to Turkish, Shefaettin Severcan, (İstanbul: 1999), 133; İpshirli, “*Osmanlı Devletinde Harem (The Seraglio in the Ottoman State)*”, 135.