

# THE EFFECTİVNESS OF PALACE WOMEN OR THE AGE OF MOTHER SULTANS ON THE ADMINİSTRATION OF OTTOMAN STATE

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## A. INTRODUCTION: ABOUT SERAGILO

In Ottoman Palace some women who were collected<sup>2</sup> from foreign countries were effective beyond the information we have, and played important role upon the appointment and dismissal of the Sultans, Sadrazams (The Grand Vizier), Sheikh-ul-Islams (the grand Mufti), sons of the Sultans (prince); even upon their murdering. Seragilo means, in fact, the house of Sultan. The name seragilo (harem) was given to the place in Topkapi Palace where the house of Sultan was situated with the meaning that entry of another people was canonically prohibited. The women who were in the palace or brought in here had their education in this institution called seragilo.

The Topkapi Palace, which included all the central administrating state buildings; such as the Sultan's villa, the Grand Vizier's house and similar buildings of Ottoman State for 300 years were of three parts. These were Outer Palace (Birun), Inner Palace (Enderun) and Seragilo or Sergailo of Imperial (Harem or Harem-i Humayun). **(i)** Birun was the outer palace which included the buildings of the Grand Vizier and the Imperial Chancery. **(ii)** Enderun was the inner palace which contained the buildings such as, Treasury, Enderun School, The General Headquarters of the Army. **(iii)** The Imperial Seragilo.<sup>3</sup>

However, it had been present since the establishment of Ottoman State, the organisation of seragilo completed its foundations during Fatih Sultan Mehmet (Sultan the Conqueror). The collected males who were taken into the palace on the basis of collecting system were educated and trained in Enderun (The inner Palace) on the other hand the females who were collected from foreign countries were subjected to the education and training. The Inner palace (Enderun) and Seragilo (harem) were educational institutions and were accepted as the most efficient educational foundations of the age.<sup>4</sup>

The female slaves (cariye) who were taken into the palace were being brought up with the special Turkish and Islamic training, and they were taught how to speak well and were given the best knowledge, social education, fundamental rules, and they were trained, and also they were equipped with hand craft, and needle work courses. The ones who made progress would

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<sup>2</sup> For criticism of collecting system see "The System of Collecting and its Assessment" of Fendoglu's article. At its 700<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Ottoman Symposium, Seljuck University Recrorship, Konya 7-9 April 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Uzunçarşılı, The Palace Organisations of Ottoman State (Osmanlı Devletinin Saray Teşkilatı), Ankara 1988, Turkish History Foundation Press (Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayını), see p. 38; for further information see pp. 34-38.

<sup>4</sup> İpşirli, Mehmet, "Seraglio in Ottoman State" (Osmanlı Devletinde Harem), Encyclopedia of Islam of Turkish Religious Foundation, Vol. 16, pp. 135-138.

become assistant masters, and later masters. The great number of the slave femals worked in laundry and kitchen. It was possible that they were helped to mary one of the assistant-master or master working in the Palace. The adoptive head of the women in the seragilo was Mother Sultan who was the mother of the ruling sultan of that time, and she was the most respected women there.

From the 36 Ottoman Sultans, only 23 Mother Sultans used this title, the others died before their sons became the Sultan. The senior authorised woman in seragilo was the woman who was also called Kadın-efendi (wife of sultan) who was generally the wife of Sultan from Haseki (the favourite wife of Sultan) while these women were sellected among the Europeans until the XVIIth century, after the seventeenth century they were began to be sellected among the women from Caucasus.<sup>5</sup>

The administration of the seragilo was of the Seragilo Agha who was a negro eunuch. There were negro euncuches in Ottomans which we had observed in old Eastern Roman Empire and in Middle Ages in the palaces of Abbasids and Memluks. These were serving and protecting the women part of the palace which was called Seragilo of the Empire; so that they were called as seragilo aghas, these negro eunuches were especially presented to the palace by Egypt Governors.<sup>6</sup> Eunuching is extinction of virilty of a man which was not right in Islamic law. The common specialities of the men working in Ottoman palace that all of them were eunuched. The head of them was the head of girls in the palace who was called as the lord of the door. (Babussaade Agha or Kapu Agha).

## **B. THE SLAVE WOMEN SYSTEM:**

The slave women were present in Ottoman Palace from the reign of Orhan Bey, but the increasement and that the administrating was passed to the collected slave started with Sultan Mehmet the Conqueror while the number of the palace slave women was between 200-300 during Sultan Murat III, whose date of death is 1595, the number reached to 809 during Sultan ‘Abdul‘aziz.<sup>7</sup> The slave women in the Ottoman palace were divited into two groups: The first group was in the status of servants and maids, the second group was the slave women who were living like the wife of Sultan.

### **1. The Slave Women With The Status of Maids:**

These were the maids who were generally married to another men, and they worked in the palace in return for daily payment. It was impossible for anybody to have a sexual intercourse with these women. They had no difference from the house-maids of today. The number of these slave women was between 50 and 70, sometimes more. They were living in the house-maids

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<sup>5</sup> İpşirli, “Seragilo in Ottoman State”, p. 137.

<sup>6</sup> Uzunçarşılı, The Palace Organisations of Ottoman State (Osmanlı Devletinin Saray Teşkilatı), p. 34-38. For further information see ibid, p. 172-183.

<sup>7</sup> Akgündüz, Ahmet, The Foundation of Slavery-Slave Women in Islamic Law and Seraglio in Ottoman (Islam Hukukunda Kölelik-Cariyelik Müessesesi ve Osmanlı’da Harem), Ottoman Researches Foundation, Istanbul, 1995, p. 281.

houses round the palace. The number of the slave women working, and similar information about them were registered in the documents of archives.<sup>8</sup> The number of the slave women, in this sense was nearly up to 50 or 70, and sometimes, also, 400 or 500 in the Ottoman Seraglio, and they were only palace maids. The slave women were categorised into four groups: First one was inexperienced ones (in its restricted meaning), slave women (cariye) master's assistant, and masters (privileged slave women).

## **2. The Slave Women Living Like Sultan's Wife:**

These are forbidden for the men rather than their husband, and they are like wedded wives. They become mother of Sultan's son when had a child. They can't be sold another. They receive their freedom when their husbands die at the latest. Only a few of the slave women in Ottoman palace are of this category. Until Sultan Mehmet the Conqueror, all the Sultans married to free women. Osman Gazi (Othman Ghazi) was married to two free women. The Sultans after Sultan Mehmet the Conqueror, until the demolition of the State, made marriage agreement with the manumitted slave women. The increment in the number of Sultans' wives started after Sultan Ibrahim (Mad Ibrahim).<sup>9</sup>

The slave originated women in Ottoman palace can be examined within two groups: **(i)** The liberated free slave women (Heads of the women (Kadın Efendi) and the privileged Sultan's wives (Haseki). **(ii)** Not liberated slave women (Sultan's favourite women (ikbal), the favourites (gözde) and follower beautiful young women (peyk).

### **a. Liberated slave women (Heads of Women and privileged wives of Sultans):**

While they were at the status of Sultan's slave women, the women who were given freedom by Sultan and became free, were called the Head of all women as she had a marriage agreement with the Sultan. And among these the ones who were Sultan's beloved wife or gave birth were called "The Privileged Wife" of Sultan.<sup>10</sup> However, the first of all these women was called the head women Mistress.

The marriage agreement was carried out with almost all of the head women Mistress.<sup>11</sup> Yavuz Sultan Selim, Ottoman Sultan,<sup>12</sup> had, for example, two head

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<sup>8</sup> Akgündüz, "What is the Truth of Seraglio", (Gerçek Harem Nedir?), Turkish Literature, Number 247, May, 1994, p. 9.

<sup>9</sup> Akgündüz, "Seraglio", (Harem), p. 313.

<sup>10</sup> "The women given the name "Kadın" the word which was diverted from "Hatun" were accepted as the wives of Sultan. The number of these wives was four, sometimes six or seven. According to their privileges they could have the name "The Head Women", second women etc. The ones who were loved by the Sultan most or the ones who gave births were called the privileged wives of Sultan". Uzunçarşılı, "The Palace Organisations of Ottoman State (Osmanlı Devletinin Saray Teşkilatı), p. 148; for further information see pages 148-153.

<sup>11</sup> Akgündüz, The Seraglio (Harem), p. 264.

<sup>12</sup> For expression Sultan in Ottoman see, Uzunçarşılı, "The Palace Organisations of Ottoman State (Osmanlı Devletinin Saray Teşkilatı), p. 230-234. The expression of "Sultan" is a title especially belonging to the Muslim Rulers of Sunni part. The word taken from Syriac language means the one who has the power and authority. Later it has been used with the meaning of domination, evidence or proof; İbid, p. 230.

women Mistress.<sup>13</sup> It must be accepted that this kind of slave originated women had to be liberated because in the texts connected with these women, the concept of “vela-i itaka” is mentioned, this concept is only taken consideration after the process of freedom.<sup>14</sup> Among the Ottoman Sultans, Sultan Murat III has had the most relations with slave women. Murat III, who succeeded to the throne after his father, Selim II (death in 1574) is followed by his son, Mehmet III becomes Sultan, whose date of birth is 1566, and death is 1603).<sup>15</sup>

#### **b. The Slave Women Who Aren't Manumitted (Liberated):**

These are also classified into three groups: (Sultan's favourite women, the favourites and followers):

First of them is Sultans favourite women. The First group of the slave women are of Sultan's favourite women. The one at the top is called as the chief favourite. They are generally the wives of Sultan whom he doesn't have any children. This status are non-present during the first and second eras of Ottoman State, whereas, It started during the reign of Mustafa II (born: 1664-died:1703). Sultan's favourits and their follovers section was built in Seragilo.

The second group of slave women were the favourites. This second group of slave women are the slave women who could be the nominee of the head women or the best loved or most favourite wife of Sultan The four slave women could be the above nominees were called favourite women. The number of the Ottoman Sultans who had his favourite women was only one or two.

The third ones were called the followers (peyk) The slave women who had the chance to be the nominee favourite women are called followers, as the number them in one time doesn't exceed more than four. These followesr were seen during the last period of Ottoman ruling with a few Sultans as well.<sup>16</sup>

Until Murat II (died: 1451), the sons who were born were called Çelebi (Prince), after Murat II they were called as şehzade (prince). They were provided with the education and training of special teachers.

The daughters of Sultans were called Sultans. They could live and stay in the Palace until they got married. The behavior of the Ottoman Sultans who

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<sup>13</sup> “The favourite most loved women who would give birth either male or female was called as “Haseki Sultan” (The most loved Sultan), and a small golden crown decorated with precious stones were put on her head. Upon the deaths of this kind of people living within the Palace, half of their properties and belongings were to be the Sultan's, and this has been observed in one of the declerations of properties; Uzunçarşılı, “The Palace Organisations of Ottoman State (Osmanlı Devletinin Saray Teşkilatı), p. 153. Haseki, a word which originated from Persian language, means a close friend or a person whom you share your secrets, on the other hand this word gained the meaning that a person who mastered in a job and was given as a title to a person who was experienced very much, and also it had got the meaning of the Junior ranked officer in the Sultan's Guardind team in Ottoman Palace. Haseki Sultan meant a rank in the slave women of the Palace; Doğan, M., Grand Turkish Dictionary Büyük Türkçe Sözlük, Ankara, 1986, Section, 3, Birlik Press, p. 399. According to us, telling that Haseki Sultan is a slave woman this dictionary makes a mistake because Haseki Sultan can be in the statue of free who has been given her liberity, and might not be a complete slave women. In Memluks, Haseki means the most confident security unit who can see Sultan if needed, and they are his intimate friends; Uzunçarşılı, The Introduction to the Organisations of Ottoman State, Ankara, 1988, Turkish History Foundation Publication, p. 347.

<sup>14</sup> For the concept of “vela” see, Fendoglu, Slavery in the History of Turkish Public Law, Istanbul, 1996, Beyan Press House, p. 250.

<sup>15</sup> Mehmet III had his elder son Prince Mahmut excuted to death in 1603.

<sup>16</sup> Akgündüz, The Seragilo (Harem), p. 24, 306.

were ruling a country of 24 million square kilometre were all determined before hand, but they were not obligatory.

The head women who were the wives of the Sultan and the favourite wives of Sultan were all liberated and freed slave women, and they were tied with Sultans by means of marriage agreement. It could be seen that the walls of the bedroom of the Sultans were decorated with the holly words or prophet's sayings. "Seragilo where every behavior was connected with a rule and where there was a strict discipline"<sup>17</sup> was like an educational centre.

Some famous women tried to have themselves sell to the place, pretending as if they had been slave women. Perhaps the Sultans might have preferred to get marry with the slave women of seragilo for fear that the close relatives troubles; such as brothers in law, fathers in law, and their confidency.

After Mahmut II (reigned in 1808) seragilo began to open outside, and the women in seragilo started going on some picnic resorts. The application of seragilo continued until Abdulhamit II (reigned between 1876-1909), ended and dispersed it.<sup>18</sup> Although the western artists published a lot of pictures and writings, indeed, when compared with the western palaces the Ottoman Seragilo was much more conservative.

### C. THE APPLICATION IN OTTOMAN STATE

From those women who were very close to Sultan in the palace were associated with the governing of the State when Sultan seemed to be weak in carrying on it. They, the women, governed the World Empire. The ones who had such kind of partnership in the government of the country were the slave women who were brought in from foreign countries. The five women, who were slave-women origin, and whose names were mentioned most as they governed the State in seragilo, were these women; **Suleiman the Magnificent's wife** Hurrem Sultan, **Sultan Murad III's mother** Nurbanu Sultan (died in 1583), Safiye Sultan, Kösem Sultan and Turhan Sultan.

The intervention of the four women,; failing of the Empire and the important factor of the Ottoman Empire's failing was, Magnificent Suleiman's wife Hurrem Sultan, Nur Banu, Safiye, Kösem Sultan resulted against the public government of the Ottoman State, and this became one of the most important reason that the state failed in many fields. It can be said that

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<sup>17</sup> İpşirli, The Seragilo in The Ottoman State (Osmanlı Devletinde Harem), p. 137.

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