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Women in the Middle East, 1250-1920

Most of the studies on women in the Middle East between 1250 and 1920 depend on literary material, documents, court records, and, to some extent, accounts of European visitors. Although feminists are showing new interest in studying women's lives during this period, the picture of Middle Eastern (ME) women is still inadequate. This is partly because almost all the descriptions of ME women's lives are written by men; a few are written by European females who visited the area.

The classical material focuses on upper-class women. The few Arab writers who write about women describe the lives of important ones, those who own or exchange property or are famous for their status or knowledge, etc. Female European writers of the period, mostly wives of ambassadors, were often put up at the houses of sultans or rich men's mansions and describe the lives of the wealthy women. Moreover, whether the reports and analyses home in on more commonly visited countries such as Syria, Egypt, Turkey and Palestine, or on "remote" countries such as Morocco and Iran, almost all of them, whether in the past or present, link the women exclusively with Islam. Thus, the diversity of women's lives in a region that is rich in histories, cultures, ethnicities, languages and religions is reduced to one sole reference: Islam.

The conventional wisdom about ME women has recently been reviewed on the basis of new research into the available court records and documents of the medieval period. These critical reviews challenge the popular belief, and to a certain extent much academic scholarship, that depicts ME women as oppressed, living under a patriarchal structure, suffering from abuse at the hands of male members of their families, banned from public life, secluded in harems, with little or no economic participation, and having no legal avenues to pursue their rights. Although ME women appear to have had different experiences due to their diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, by and large they were active in public life, owned and managed property, used the courts quite effectively and sued people, including their male kin (Gerber 1980, Jennins 1975, Tucker 1988). Research into the proceedings of Ottoman courts during the medieval centuries has produced a picture that is diametrically opposed to the stereotypical view of oppressed, submissive oriental women.

One of the most researched subjects is the issue of marriage and divorce and their legal arrangement. Although marriage was often arranged by parents, the woman's consent was necessary. The marriage age was between 12 and 16 in all social strata. But lower-class women who were divorced by their husbands often married again at an older age. The divorce rate among the lower classes was high and many women of that class remarried three or four times. The situation of upper class women was different. Islam allows men to marry up to four wives – provided the husband can satisfy all their needs equally. Unlike men in poor families, upper-class husbands had the financial resources to look after more than one wife. Therefore, if there was a problem in the marriage, divorce was not the only option. Upper-class men also practiced concubinage.

Legally, women have to be given a marriage gift (*mahr*) and its significance varied for women in different social strata. Women's property rights, including inheritance rights, are secured by the law and no one, including the husband, is allowed to make use of a wife's property without her permission. This made *mahr* an essential asset for lower-class women because it represented crucial economic capital on which they could survive after divorce. However, for upper-class women, *mahr* was merely a status marker, with the amount of *mahr* indicating the importance of the woman. This class-based difference in the importance of *mahr* continues to this day in the Middle East.

Among upper class families, marriage appeared to be permanent, thus providing security and comfort to women. Although upper-class men were polygamous as a rule, their affections towards their wives, daughters and sisters were unquestionable. They often established charitable endowments (*waqf*) in the names of their wives and female kin to –among other things– help divorced and widowed women from the lower classes. For example, according to many sources, more than 30% of the *waqfs* in Egypt are named after upper-class women (Ahmed 1992).

Upper-class women engaged effectively in various economic activities such as buying and selling real estate (both in urban and rural areas). Some accumulated or inherited substantial wealth, to such an extent that they donated part of it to charitable endowments (*waqfs*). Gerber (1980) and Tucker (1988) observe that almost 40 % of all property transactions in the Ottoman city, Kayseri, at the beginning of the 17th

century were made by women. Upper-class women were also successful in administering their own *waqfs*.

Ownership of slaves was another marker of upper-class women. Female slaves were well dressed and well treated by their female owners. They were taught basic domestic skills such as cooking, serving and helping with bathing. Expensive slaves were taught to entertain, sing and dance, which increased their value in case they had to be sold at times of economic crisis or when their owner was no longer happy with them (Ahmed 1992).

Lower-class women learned sewing and embroidery in their childhood and were active in textile production in cities such as Aleppo (Syria), Bursa (Turkey) and Cairo (Egypt). They made dresses for their families and sometimes sold their products in the market. However, the importation of European goods and clothing styles in the 19th and 20th centuries affected such trade.

Upper-class women's social activities included going to public baths reserved for them, in which they often spent the whole day. It was a convivial activity, with the women eating meals and drinking coffee in an atmosphere of fun and amusement, resembling the coffee houses frequented by men. Female slaves would serve the food and coffee to their owners. Women would also visit each other on occasions such as childbirth or a funeral, or when a member of a friend's family was sick. Many upper-class women also went on pilgrimage to Mecca, sometimes more than once. Lower-class women had to work hard to pay for that long and expensive journey. However,

visiting local famous tombs on festive days was affordable for all classes in cities such as Cairo and Damascus and was a common activity.

By the beginning of the 19th century, many-upper class families started educating their daughters. Some families were liberal enough to allow their daughters to attend lectures given by male scholars or even courses taught by male teachers. Many schools were opened by French, English or American missionaries, with their target groups being upper-class Muslim and non-Muslim women. This coincided with the 'revolutionary' introduction of state-sponsored schools for women by the Ottoman rulers. Education made a huge difference in the lives of lower-class and slave women, enabling them to become teachers, doctors, nurses and midwives. The public appearance of women as professionals became a subject of hot debate between opposing groups in ME societies. Many women's rights associations were established at the beginning of the 20th century and women's rights issues became a front-page issue in ME newspapers.

Upper-class women changed their dress code to bring it more in line with European styles. A new concept of feminine beauty was introduced, with an emphasis on physical exercise and a slender body. There were also major changes in family law, which until then had varied with different religions. The Ottoman rulers modernized family law and brought it under state regulation. Thus, the 20th century marked a new era in the lives of ME women, creating challenges for them and their societies.

Further readings

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