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NEW MIDDLE EASTERN REVIEWS

Women and Slavery in the Late Ottoman Empire: The Design of Difference

Madeline C. Zilfi

New York, Cambridge University Press, 2010, 281 pp., \$95 / £60, Hardback

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Zilfi's masterful new work creates space for debate on the topic of women, slavery and the gender hierarchy in the late Ottoman Empire. The author's discursive examination of these complex topics attempts to illuminate the challenge that abolition posed to the very core of the Ottoman household structure. Zilfi opens the book with her interpretation of the structure of late Ottoman society, thereby laying the groundwork for the discussion of slavery that takes place in later chapters. In the first three chapters, rather than describing late Ottoman society in terms of a fluid system that would befit her discursive approach to the topic of women and slavery, Zilfi opts for a rigidly structural binary in which one element dominates the other – *askeri* over *reaya*, Muslim over non-Muslim, master over slave, male over female – with the *ulema* identified as a 'conservative' force holding this structure together (p. 5). In the first chapter Zilfi also justifies her use of Istanbul as a microcosm of the Ottoman Empire by stating that 'the Ottoman way was often really, and sometimes merely, Istanbul's practice' (p. 7), a rather doubtful claim. She then engages in a fruitful discussion of the English term 'slave', contrasting it with the more nuanced Ottoman terminology, an excellent point that should be emphasised more often in the scholarship on slavery.

The second and third chapters discuss the interrelated themes of women, gender (which, like other aspects of Ottoman society, Zilfi depicts as a binary), and social hierarchy. Within these chapters is contained a long meditation on the nature of sumptuary laws in the pre-modern and reform era Ottoman Empire. While the author's mastery of her sources is evident, her main argument in this section is not. For instance, the claim that '[t]he [sumptuary] legislation's recurrent nature and panorama of material targets give evidence of manifold interests and social perspectives' (p. 64) is not particularly hard-hitting. While this statement and the preceding description provide much interesting empirical history and information, nonetheless it is difficult to tease a unified argument out of her thematic explorations.

Having opened chapter four with a brief discussion of slave agency, Zilfi does not address this topic again. In some ways, the later chapters of this book, in arguing so strongly that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries female slaves were marginalised and rigid patriarchal systems went essentially unchallenged, do a disservice to the agency of the female slaves of the empire. Recent scholarship has demonstrated that even the lowest of female slaves did whatever was in her power to negotiate her position, including recourse to violent crime, with often disastrous effects for her owner.¹ Such challenges to the 'patriarchal hegemony' which Zilfi identifies as the mainstay of Ottoman society are not addressed.

¹ Y. Hakan Erdem, 'Magic, theft, and arson: the life and death of an enslaved African woman in Ottoman İzmit' *Race and Slavery in the Middle East: Histories of Trans-Saharan Africans in Nineteenth-Century Egypt, Sudan,*

The later chapters of this work are strengthened by Zilfi's interpretation of the historiography of Ottoman slavery, especially concerning the *kul* system in the pre-modern period. Furthermore, Zilfi supplies what is probably one of the first English-language descriptions of the ethnicities of the Ottoman Empire's slaves in the pre-modern period, and a general discussion of the legal intricacies of the various forms of slavery, a much-needed introduction to this topic. She then describes the process of enslavement and transportation of slaves to the Ottoman Empire. These later chapters of Zilfi's book are fruitful in their engagement with the wider literature on slavery in the New World, North Africa, and the Mediterranean during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The author synthesises the results of these studies and weaves them into a coherent general narrative of slavery in the late Ottoman Empire and the surrounding zones. Zilfi also mounts a very convincing argument against the 'benevolent stewardship' apology for slavery in the Middle East, averring that regardless of the possibly kind treatment that domestic slaves may (or may not) have received, the ills of the institution as a whole far outweighed any mitigating aspects.

Zilfi's fifth chapter seeks to shed light on the meaning of slavery among elite Ottoman households, using tangible examples, such as gravestones and naming practices, to illustrate her points concerning female slaves' incorporation into (or exclusion from) the family structure. There are, however, some methodological problems with her use of material sources for the writing of women's histories. Discussing the social roles of women in the eighteenth century, Zilfi states that: 'Female grave markers, sometimes with sculpted veils and garlands, represented women's purity perhaps but also suggested their limited social identity' (p. 79). The assumption seems to be that because women's social identities were not equivalent to those of men, they were somehow lesser, and current ideas of gender equality seem to have been imposed anachronistically on historical phenomena. Comparing the relative 'fullness' of men and women's social identities according to very limited criteria, such as gravestone markers, that were originally intended only to reveal information about men, rather than women, seems like a flawed methodology for evaluating the depth or fullness of Ottoman women's social roles.

Zilfi offers further reflections on many topics in her sixth chapter, such as her interpretation of the growing importance of female domestic slavery in the Ottoman Empire in the later period. She offers what is probably the most coherent and well-informed account in English of the use of female slaves as prostitutes. Her seventh chapter, entitled 'Men are *kanun*, women are *shari'ah*', argues that during the Tanzimat period the distance between the *kanun* and *shari'a* grew as the influence of reformist measures took hold, and that the realm of the family remained primarily under the jurisdiction of the *shari'a*. While it is well known that family law remained largely within the purview of the *shari'a* during this period, Zilfi takes this development to signify that women, and especially female slaves, were disadvantaged by their lack of access to the (better and more egalitarian, it is implicitly assumed) secular legislation.

The author's empirical findings are not in any way flawed; in fact, she is meticulous in her synthesis of the available published sources. Furthermore, her interpretation of these findings is highly detailed and complex, and is informed by an impressively wide reading of literature from a number of fields. However, the ethical framework in which these findings are situated is not informed by pre-modern philosophies of gender, slavery, law, etc., but rather infused with current understandings of what constitutes good and bad social practice.

and the Ottoman Mediterranean, ed. Terence Walz and Kenneth Cuno (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2010), pp.125-146. See also: Ehud Toledano, *As if Silent and Absent: Bonds of Enslavement in the Islamic Middle East* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

The implicit ethical assumptions are only obvious as a result of the semantic framework in which the author situates her narrative; a philosophical methodology is nowhere clearly elucidated. In particular, an implicit value judgment is levied against pre-modern practices which Zilfi describes as ‘misogyny’ or ‘conservatism’, terms which make little sense when applied within the context of pre-modern social practice. It often seems that she has already made up her mind about the evils of the Ottoman patriarchal system and the persistence of ‘masculinist’ tendencies throughout the reform era. As a result, it appears that she seeks out studies that support her condemnation of these tendencies to the exclusion of contradictory evidence, hence the mere lip service given to the question of slave agency without a serious commitment to the attempt to recover original instances of challenges to ‘patriarchy’.

The field of slavery studies in the Ottoman Empire is perhaps not ready for a general account attempting to synthesise numerous and disparate secondary studies into a single comprehensive narrative. Beyond palace slavery, domestic and industrial slavery in the pre-modern Ottoman Empire remain largely unstudied. Questions of numbers and demographics that typically establish the groundwork for further inquiry have not been addressed for any period of the Ottoman Empire, and beyond such basic questions, there does not even exist an authoritative study of the most abundant primary sources available on pre-modern slavery in the Ottoman Empire, namely legal compendia, *fetvas* and court records, which would furnish a basis for discussion while also providing a picture of the legal norms against which the realities of slavery could be compared. Prior to laying such a basic groundwork, it seems a brave task to undertake the project that Zilfi has attempted with this book. However, it is certain that the empirical findings presented in her work are of great value. In fact, because of the previous absence of detailed and wide-ranging works on female slaves in particular, this book will be widely relied upon in the field of Ottoman slavery studies, at least in the Anglophone academy. This contribution will undoubtedly shape the nature of research into slavery in the Ottoman Empire, and represents a major work in the burgeoning field of Ottoman slavery studies. Furthermore, to its great credit, this book contains an excellent bibliography which gathers the secondary studies on slavery in the Middle East and its immediate geographical proximity as well as the relevant methodological literature. It will be a boon for future scholars of slavery in the Ottoman Empire.