

Life

New book focuses on life in Turkish harem



Author Alew Lytle Crouter has written 'Harem: The World Behind the Veil' a book about life in a Turkish harem. (UPI)

By John M. Leighton
United Press International
SAN FRANCISCO — The pleasures and pains of harem life, a society of veiled women kept secret from outsiders by a succession of sultans and pashas, is a story of romance, intrigue and terror right out of the Arabian tale, "One Thousand and One Nights."

Few Westerners have ever been allowed a glimpse inside the polygamous patriarchal society that existed for centuries in the Orient and Middle East and where women, sold in slave markets and presented as gifts, led a precarious existence. One Turkish sultan, Mehmed the Conqueror, is credited with his favorite harem beauty would convert to the Islamic faith, professing to her his love, pulled out his scimitar and sliced off her head. Another, Ibrahim, nicknamed the "mad sultan," threw a temper tantrum and had his entire harem of some 100 women stuffed into bags by eunuchs — the castrated, black male bodyguards — and dumped into the sea, to be replaced by a new group.

The 17th century sultan, Murad, passed a law prohibiting drinking and smoking throughout the Ottoman Empire and then, in a drunken stupor, would wander around searching for violators, who were promptly executed. Corpses hung at every street corner.

Harem life fascinates

Fascination with the harem lifestyle still exists, says Alew Lytle Crouter, who grew up in a Turkish house where her grandmother lived in the section where the harem resided. Down the street lived a eunuch and she recalls the communal baths used by the women.

In fashion, says Crouter, the styles of harem life have been showing up recently in New York and Paris, along with some of the Middle East music and books on the subject. In reality, says Crouter, the harem era is a study in how women who danced and entertained for the court elite were able to adjust to the circumstances of their fate and make the best of it.

"In terms of power, it is fascinating to think those women who were slaves became the power behind the scenes — virtually a reign of women — that lasted for centuries," said Crouter, who has spent 10 years of research on the subject, resulting in the book, "Harem: The World Behind the Veil" (Abbeville Press, \$35).

Boundaries of Istanbul: Crouter focuses on the mysterious Topkapi Palace in Istanbul, and others readers to the harem of the ladies — the sultan's "legal" wives — as well as the slave markets where concubines and eunuchs were purchased. The book is richly illustrated with the works, mostly imaginative, of Rembrandt, Delacroix, Ingres and other European artists.

Crouter, who left Turkey at age 14, presently lives in Forest Knolls, Calif., and has worked as an independent film producer and screen play writer ("Tell Me A Riddle"). She is editor-in-chief of Mercury House publishing company in San Francisco and developed the book, "Harem," largely from research material she gathered while writing a script on the subject with a Guggenheim Fellowship award. Male artists and writers of the 18th and 19th century, said Crouter,

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er, painted and wrote about the Oriental harems out of imagination and fantasy.

"None of the men had ever been in a harem," she said, for such trespass resulted in death.

Scheherazade as siren

The translation of Scheherazade's scintillating One Thousand and One Nights in 1704 brought to the West a sense of the exotic and erotic, mostly in the imaginations of men, she said. The story is about a sultan, killed by true love, who choose a different harem woman each night, who would then be killed at daybreak.

The cycle was broken by one concubine, who told tales that so intrigued the sultan that he had her return, night after night, until finally his anger dissolved and he allowed her to live.

At Istanbul's Topkapi Palace, some 2,000 women were kept — the largest harem in existence — and modern tours of the spacious "Grand Harem" where sultans kept their wives hidden from the world from 1540 to the early 1900s, reveals only remnants of 400 years of lives and culture, says Crouter.

"All that remains now of the thousands of women who lived in these

rooms, in fantastic luxury and isolation, are their empty boudoirs, their echoing marble halls, and countless impenetrable mysteries."

Drawing back the veil

To look behind the repulsive veil of these women's lives, Crouter searched for the few documents that would shed light on the harems — letters, books, travelogues, paintings, poems and photographs, piecing together the historical fragments and fascinating fantasies of a secret society.

Surprisingly, said Crouter, harems still exist, partially because of the current wave of Modern fundamentalism.

"Polygamy has been outlawed in Turkey and China, the two greatest harem nations, but is still a flourishing practice in the Middle East and Africa," she says. "In India, for example, having multiple wives is illegal but common nevertheless. Concubines are an accepted part of a man's life."

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- 7:15 PM Country Concert
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SATURDAY, SEPT. 2ND

- 10:00 AM Music in Salsambon Ball Room
- 11:00 AM MUSIC: THE CONCORDIA MILAN
- 12:00 PM CIRCUS: OPEN
- 2:00 PM Entertainment in Amphitheater
- 8:00 PM MUSIC: CONCORDIA MILAN
- 9:00 AM Music in Salsambon Ball Room
- 10:00 AM Entertainment in Amphitheater
- 12:00 PM CIRCUS: OPEN
- 2:00 PM Entertainment in Amphitheater
- 8:00 PM STREET DANCE: SHERIDAN & JET'S MUSIC

MONDAY, SEPT. 4TH KIDS DAY

- 10:00 AM Entertainment in Amphitheater
- 1:00 PM Entertainment in Amphitheater
- 2:00 PM Street Dance
- 3:00 PM Street Dance
- 5:00 PM Street Dance
- 8:00 PM Street Dance
- 9:00 AM Entertainment in Amphitheater
- 12:00 PM CIRCUS: OPEN
- 4:00 PM Entertainment in Amphitheater
- 8:00 PM STREET DANCE: SHERIDAN & JET'S MUSIC

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