

BOOKS

Harem life: Women wedded to a culture's tradition

HAREM: The World Behind the Veil
By Alev Lytle Croutier
Abbeville Press — \$35

By Diana Ketcham
The Tribune

HAREM. THE WORD evokes an uneasy mixture of associations in the contemporary mind. From a style in fashion and interior decoration, to literal sexual slavery, to the campy plots of Hollywood musicals, to the innocent fantasies of "A Thousand and One Nights."

"It is a subject that makes people uncomfortable, men especially," said Alev Croutier, the San Francisco author of "Harem: The World Behind the Veil."

This is what Croutier discovered during the 10 years she spent investigating the art and culture of harem life, motivated partly by its relevance to her own past. Croutier was born in Turkey in 1944. While she was growing up, the circle of family friends included such vestiges from harem culture as a eunuch and an aunt who had been an odalisque. She listened to the reminiscences of a grandmother and great aunt who had lived in harems, which were in effect abolished by the official dissolution of the Sultan's harem in 1909.

"As a child, I took the notion of harems absolutely for granted since everyone around me did," the author said in an interview in her San Francisco office. "We lived in a house that had been a harem. And there was my grandmother, who lived with us, talking about harem life as 'the good old days.'"

It was not until Croutier reached adulthood that she became curious about the harem as an institution — particularly when she came to the United States for college and she realized how peculiar it seemed to Westerners.

"When I arrived at Oberlin College, other students would crowd around and ask me how many wives my father had," Croutier recalled. "They seemed disappointed when I said just one."

"Then when the women's movement came along I became even more interested in finding out more about women's lives in the harems. My purpose wasn't to show how women were oppressed by men. I wasn't interested in digging up dirt or writing a titillating book. I was just curious."

Croutier's harem is the institution that existed in Muslim cultures of the Near East and North Africa between the 15th and early 20th centuries, where polygamy was permitted and



The harem, which consisted of a man's wife, other wives, odalisques and children, offers a safe, luxurious lifestyle, but it could be fraught with bitter rivalries, says author Alev Croutier, left.

women sequestered from the world.

Her book's central chapters discuss the populous and luxurious harems of the Ottoman princes, with their opulent furnishings, elaborate baths and complex society of wives, children, eunuchs and odalisques. The most famous of these was the 400-room harem of the Topkapi Palace in Constantinople, also known as the Grand Seraglio, where Croutier's great-great grandmother had lived. Croutier saw her quarters when the rooms were first opened to the public in 1967. The entire palace is now a museum.

The book also discusses ordinary harems: the women's quarters of modest households. Typically, these would be made up of the man's mother and unmarried female relatives, his first wife and subsequent wives, if any, slave women ("odalisques"), who were often mistresses, and children.

Croutier describes how the first wife was married in an elaborate ceremony, in which she saw her husband for the first time. Second wives were acquired more informally, customarily years later, after the first wife became considered too old to be fertile or sexually enticing.

"First wives retained certain rights as head of the harem," Croutier writes. She describes a system by which the first wife would receive her husband's visit on Friday nights, with other nights allotted to the newer wives. If a husband missed three Friday nights in a row, it was considered a serious infraction of Muslim law.

Polygamy persisted in Turkey until the '20s, Croutier says, although it had been officially outlawed earlier. Despite its strict conventions, Croutier believes that the polygamous household "was very unhappy. Some women must have turned to each other for solace. But we don't have much information about this. Women accepted the situation because they had no choice. They had nowhere else to go."

According to Croutier, economic necessity gave rise to the Turkish harem. "It was a way of providing for the surplus of women that resulted from generations of warfare. Then times changed and the custom was abused. The Moslem rule was that you could have four wives; Mohammed had 18."

In her history of the luxurious Grand Seraglio, Croutier presents the vision of a female society given over entirely to pleasure and relaxation. "In one

sense, these women had a very good time," she said. "Their needs were completely taken care of, which meant something to those who were war captives or slaves bought from poor families. Their servitude encouraged them to form bonds of compassion. These relations are what we know least about, unfortunately."

On the other hand, the uncertainty of succession made the Grand Seraglio a scene of violent intrigue between the mothers of competing heirs. In the ordinary harems, domestic rivalry between the man's mother and his wives could go one for a lifetime.

In her own childhood, Croutier felt the legacy of harem rivalry. "When my parents married, my mother moved into her mother-in-law's house," the author recounts. "There was no question that my grandmother, who had been raised in a harem, was head of the household."

"The irony was that she gave orders to my mother, an emancipated woman who had been to school in France. The whole family suffered from the tension between them."

Describing her grandmother, Croutier says she "retained many of the values of the harem. She and my mother would work

very hard in the house all day long. But 15 minutes before my father came home from work, all three of us would run to change and put on makeup to welcome him. My grandmother insisted that we pretend we hadn't lifted a finger all day."

Croutier has traveled a vast cultural distance from her girlhood in Turkey to her present life in San Francisco, where she is now editor-in-chief of the publishing company Mercury House. An accomplished screenwriter and director, she wrote the screenplay for Tillie Olson's "Tell Me A Riddle" and received a Guggenheim fellowship for a film about the harem. She lives with her husband, furniture designer Robert Croutier and is the mother of a grown son. After college in the United States, Croutier says it would have been "impossible" to go back to live as a single young woman in Turkey, even though her parents hoped she would. Instead, she worked as a film maker in Japan, Europe and New York before settling in the Bay Area.

Croutier says that the changes in her mother and grandmother's lives as women have been even more radical than in her own. With the abolition of the harems, women like Croutier's grandmother lost a community and a way of life. In the book, she paints a poignant picture of the final days of the Grand Seraglio. Many of the women who had passed their whole lives there did not wish to leave.

"My grandmother missed the communal baths in particular," Croutier remembers. "She felt very isolated in our tiny family. She tried to keep up the habit of going to the public baths with other women. We would all go. I missed the baths, too, when we moved into a modern apartment. It seemed strange to go into this little room and take a bath all by yourself."

Croutier's grandmother had happy memories of the harem because her husband never took another wife. But the author remembers a great-aunt who was the object of family ill-will because she was a second wife who had started life as a slave girl in her uncle's harem. "By the time I was a child, the first wife had died, so I didn't see their rivalry first-hand, but I knew it existed from the way the family talked about my great-aunt."

However, it was her mother's generation, the author said, that absorbed the greatest strains of women's transition to a public life. "She was the link between my grandmother, who had worn a veil when she went out, and a woman like me, who flew off to a foreign country at 18 and never came back."

Diana Ketcham is The Tribune's book editor.