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The Daily Telegraph (London, Greater London, England) · Sat, Nov 11, 1989 · Page 52
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Never mind the coffee

● *ANTHONY POWELL praises a detailed study of life in the world's seraglios*

A TURKISH Customs declaration of about 1790 states the merchant's goods as: "Circassian girl about eight years old; Abyssinian virgin, about ten; five-year-old Circassian virgin; Circassian woman, fifteen or sixteen years old; about twelve year old Georgian maiden; medium tall Negro slave; seventeen year old Negro slave. Costs about 1000-2000 kurush." At that period a horse cost about 5,000 kurush.

These were slaves for Turkish harems, probably as odalisques (servants) rather than wives, but the life of relative luxury caused some Circassian and Georgian families to encourage their female children to enter the life willingly; though in her 1864 travel diary, Lucie Duff Gordon reported the blacks and Abyssinians as fighting hard not to be captured by slavers.

Alev Lytle Croutier was born in Turkey, then went to the United States when she was 18, where she made a career in documentary films. She is now writing a screenplay based on the lives of harem women. Her grandmother had been member of a harem, her maternal grandfather a "Young Turk", of the generation that challenged all those things.

Her book is well done, of great interest, splendidly illustrated, though it must be admitted that the pictures are mostly by Western artists (Ingres, Gérôme, John Frederick Lewis, etc) who romanticised harem life.

The author goes into the history of the harem in a thorough manner, which, it need hardly be said, is very different from the European, especially French, picture, although the French have some right to regard themselves as authorities on the subject, with their Levantine and North African colonial interests.

It was also a French girl in the late 18th century, kidnapped by corsairs, who eventually captivated a Sultan, who instituted various reforms. Pierre Loti, too, with his *Les Désenchantées*, who even if he were biased, enormously popularised the mania in France for things Turkish.

Harem: the World Behind the Veil.
By Alev Lytle Croutier.
Bloomsbury. £19·95.

Polygamy, originally an economic measure, was recognised by Mohammed as preferable to infanticide; though women are allowed into the Islamic heaven only if the will of their husbands. During the 15th and 16th centuries the population of the Sultan's harem dropped from over a thousand to a few hundred, but after the 17th century rose again to over 2,000.

Naturally the size of a man's harem depended on his income (a large one attracted the attention of the Inland Revenue), and latterly many felt it preferable to have only one wife, as tedious rules existed as to physical relations with wives in rotation, this made the system almost as burdensome for men as for women.

Alev Lytle Croutier goes into the question of eunuchs in considerable detail. The Armenian Queen Semiramis traditionally instituted eunuchs as a feature of her entourage. Their physical abilities varied, and it was by no means unknown for them to have love affairs with women of a harem (who also indulged in lesbian affairs among themselves), also homosexual associations with fellow eunuchs.

The fantasy of Sultans having sexual relations with hundreds of women in their harem is on the whole untrue, though when Murad III died (1595) over a hundred cradles were being rocked in the Topkapi Palace. Several Sultans appear to have preferred in practice to stick to one wife only.

The author gives an amusing account of her own early days when customs remained which were only gradually dying out. For example, making good Turkish coffee (for which she gives a recipe) was regarded as absolutely essential in a wife. I have never much cared for Turkish coffee. Even so, one hears with a slight pang that when she returned to Turkey everyone was drinking instant coffee.

There had been elaborate marriage ceremonies not many years before, in which the sheet displaying proofs of the bride's virginity was hung out on a balcony. The wedding-night of her grandfather and grandmother was such a fiasco that they had to kill a cock the following morning, not as sacrifice to Aesculapius, but to provide appropriate stains.

However much romanticism should be guarded against in writing of harems, it must be admitted that something like the story of Roxelana (1525-1558) is striking. She appears to have been a slave from the Ukraine, who managed to make herself wife of Suleyman the Magnificent, greatest of the Sultans, first to fall under the sway of a woman. All the contemporary foreign ambassadors at the Sublime Porte comment on this unheard-of situation.

There is a mass of interesting information impossible to touch on here, both historical and social. In connection with love affairs which undoubtedly took place from time to time (notwithstanding the risks) between ladies of the harem and men of the outer world, one is reminded of Kipling's story "Beyond the Pale".

It will be remembered that Trejago (presumably a Cornishman) knew far too much about things. When an old woman threw a packet containing half a broken glass bangle, one flower of the blood-red *dhak*, a pinch of *bhusa* or cattle food, and 11 cardamoms into his dogcart Trejago knew that the broken bangle meant a Hindu widow, the red flower "desire", one card — omen "jealousy"; more than one, the hour to arrive. All this resulted in a love affair and awful tragedy.

Here we are told that "A few cloves, a scrap of paper, a slice of pear, a piece of soap, a match, a piece of gold thread, a stick of cinnamon, a corn of pepper" meant "I have long loved you, pant, languish, die from love of you. Give me a little hope. Do not reject me. Answer me with a word."

Roger Moore, as James Bond, and his harem in 'The Spy Who Loved Me'

A word from our computer

● *ROBERT McCRUM on processor-lit*

FLYLEAF

I RECENTLY spent four months writing the first draft of a novel with a 20-year-old Parker Forty-Five (measuring my progress with a slowly emptying bottle of Waterman's). In the past, I used to make the transition to typescript by sending a laboriously-transcribed fair copy to a patient spinster in Bexhill. This time I made the transfer using my own word-processor, an experience that has sponsored a number of contradictory reactions.

There is, first of all, instant gratitude for the ease and simplicity of the keyboard and the screen. No more hammering a rackety old portable for the second and third drafts. No more Tipp-Ex. There's the joy of justified margins, a regular word count and an automatic spelling check. I know I'm using only a fraction of my IBM's capacity (rather like owning a jumbo jet to watch In-flight movies) but it's a fraction that makes all the difference.

Then there's a new experience with the hard copy (as I've learnt to call it), spewing in a continuous roll out of the chattering printer. I remember reading that P.G. Wodehouse devised a Heath Robinson contraption so that he never had to change the paper when he reached the bottom of the page. At the end of a morning he would simply cut off what he had done and peg it on the wall. He claimed he was able to examine the unfolding shape of his work better, mentally adding or cutting at a glance. Now we are all pocket Wodehouses.

But then the anxieties start. There is the fear of Loss. (There always was. In the bad old days, I used obsessively to photo-copy my work, storing copies in odd places in case of fire or theft. When I discovered, from an insurance assessor, that even the fiercest blaze did not consume the contents of the average household fridge, I took to keeping my manuscript, wrapped in tinfoil, in the freezer.) In theory, with the word-processor, these anxieties should dwindle.

Everything's on disc and all you have to do is keep a copy. But what if the disc gets corrupted? What if hi-tech thieves...? Now I have back-up copies (why am I revealing this?) in a jiffy bag in the glove compartment of my car. I tell myself that the odds of having my car stolen and my flat gutted on the same day are statistically remote.

A more nagging anxiety is the fear that this machine promotes prolixity. The pristine nature of the word-processed page, with its neat margins and regular spacing, seems powerfully superior to the ragged lines of the old-fashioned typescript. Typewriters do not "re-type", they "edit".

But that means there's no opportunity or need to feel each sentence under your fingers, draft by draft. The good bits remain untouched, effortlessly reformatted by the all-powerful machine. This seems perilous. I happened to speak to Bruce Chatwin, who felt passionately about the dangers of the new technology. "You seem to be at the heart of the beast when in fact the beast is at the heart of you," he warned.

There is, however, a bonus to these anxieties. People often say that with this new technology we face the death of literary scholarship. Without manuscripts, the argument goes, there will be nothing for scholars to study. My experience suggests that quite the reverse is true. I have several word-processed drafts of what I've been doing.

Precisely because so much vanishes into the oblivion of the VDU, I've kept the copies. Plenty — far too much, probably — for the curators and bibliophiles of Texas and beyond.

Of course, we are pioneers. The generation for whom words on the screen are as natural as words on the page is still growing up. Important parts of the communications industry have not yet said goodbye to Gutenberg. Newspapers like The Daily Telegraph have become computerised and its journalists will modem their copy down a phone link to the office, but many writers and most publishers are still working with typescripts, rubbers and pencils.

So, in literary terms, the new technology has yet to find its distinctive voice. It's a fairly safe bet that this will happen, though it's obviously impossible to predict what form this will take. One thing is certain: this is an English-language affair. Of all the information stored in the world's computers, it is estimated that at least 80 per cent is in English. The world's word-processing programs are in British or American English.

A hundred years ago, in the 1880s, Mark Twain caused a mild sensation as one of the first — and certainly the most famous — American writer to use a typewriter. A generation passed before Ezra Pound (and, to a lesser extent, T.S. Eliot) discovered in the rhythm and spacing of the new invention a poetic suggestiveness. Perhaps 50 years later, the electric typewriter liberated the pop-literary gifts of the young Tom Wolfe and his Aaaa