



Reina Lewis, *Rethinking Orientalism. Women, Travel and the Ottoman Harem*

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Appeared twenty-six years after the publication of Edward Said's foundational study, *Orientalism* (1978), Reina Lewis's *Rethinking Orientalism. Women, Travel and the Ottoman Harem* (2004), as the title itself, in its programmatic orientation, seems to suggest, is to be seen both as a (direct) outgrowth of the groundbreaking conceptualizations originally exposed in Said's work and as a theoretical space in which these very same elaborations are partly questioned.

Eventually problematized in the much later *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Said's initial positions, which earned *Orientalism* the designation as one of the founding texts of the disciplinary field of Post-colonial Studies, constitute the major conceptual paradigms of *Rethinking Orientalism*. At the same time, however, Lewis engages with them critically by casting further light on the theoretical untenability of a rigid West/East divide. The resulting dialectical tension at the heart of the text is one of its most noteworthy aspects, even more so when one considers that Lewis's work revolves around the trope *par excellence* of Orientalist discourses: the harem system.

Consisting of six chapters (each subdivided into inter-related sections), an argumentative introduction, in which readers are also taken through a theoretical trajectory tracing the developments of Post-colonial Studies, and a conclusion coherently orchestrated in both Saidean and post-Saidean terms, *Rethinking Orientalism*, at the time of its publication, had the merit of uncovering some literary 'gems' mostly hidden to the contemporary Western reading public, although originally conceived for an Occidental readership and written in English.

However heterogeneous in terms of literary genres – being travelogues, memoirs, autobiographical and narrative texts –, these works share many leading threads as far as their authors' cultural belongings, their temporal contextualization and representational strategies are concerned. Written in the first decades of the twentieth century, when the



specific transitional phase in the history of Turkey marked by the passage from the Ottoman Empire to the young nationalist Republic was drawing to a close, these literary interventions attest to Ottoman women's reaction to Eurocentric biases. Indeed, Lewis argues that not only do they all contribute to defamiliarizing stereotypical configurations of the Eastern female identity as traditionally produced and reproduced in the West, but they do so from the unconventional perspective of the Ottoman women who authored them.

The first chapter of *Rethinking Orientalism* introduces the autobiographical profiles of Demetra Vaka Brown (1877-1946), Halide Edib (1884-1964) and of the sisters Zeyneb and Melek Hanım, whose works form the fulcrum of Lewis's study. To this group of Ottoman writers adds the British author Grace Ellison (d. 1935) who had a pivotal role in the publication of Zeyneb's and Melek Hanım's output. In the subsequent chapters, Lewis's detailed cultural contextualization of their works, as well as her interpretative analysis (conducted through the interdisciplinary instruments of Cultural Studies) signal the complex relationship linking the results of her own project to those of *Orientalism*.

On the one hand, in Lewis's view, the works she analyses display certain a complicity with the traditional cultural grids informing Western perception of the East and of the Eastern female identity in particular. Indeed, especially in their paratextual apparatus (i.e., allusive book titles and covers), the harem is subjected to a process of representational commodification intended to entice a Western readership already familiar with the specific field of European female harem literature which had been initiated by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's *Embassy Letters*, written in 1717 (four years before the publication of Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes*). This explains why, as Lewis highlights, "Ottoman women publishing in the West [...] did not write outside Western literary conventions and the publishing industry" (17). Moreover, such a partial adherence to Western representational codifications is to be viewed, as Lewis points out, as part of a more general absorption of Western models promoted by the Turkish republican (male) intellectuals of the day who associated liberation and modernization with Westernization in a urge to depreciate any cultural element reminiscent of the Ottoman past.

Among the targets of this supposed cultural reformation is the Ottoman woman's social agency which is, on the contrary, recuperated in the works analysed by Lewis. In this sense, then, their Ottoman authors, in negotiating new identity configurations through the literary practice, not only contest a representational gender unbalance internal to the nation but, in so doing, they also write back to a pervasive gendered racialization with which European harem literature, especially when produced by male authors, was traditionally imbued.

A detour focusing on the divergences between European harem literature authored by men, on the one hand, and by women, on the other, is now in order so that the multilayered deconstruction of Orientalist stereotypes activated both in the works



studied by Lewis and, at a critical level, in *Rethinking Orientalism* itself can be appreciated. Whilst harem literature produced by Western male authors configured eroticized – as well as depoliticized – female models, harem literature produced by European women was highly politicized and its themes – ranging from the exaltation of Ottoman women’s sexual liberation as in Montagu’s ‘enlightened’ *Letters* to the Victorian appreciation of their self-determination – acted as a litmus paper of its authors’ own historically specific identity negotiations. It is a fact, however, that it was laced with Orientalist fantasies.

Lewis argues that Ottoman female harem literature constituted a further different typology of politicized literary practice. Ottoman women writers’ deliberate intervention, although exploiting Western formal conventions, was aimed at contesting not only forms of gender subordination internal to the Turkish nation, but also the systematic eroticization of Eastern women activated within Western dominant representations of the Orient. Indeed, in her text Lewis foregrounds Ottoman women’s active enunciation of micro-histories as opposed to the master narratives produced in the West. Moreover, showing how Edib as well as Zeyneb and Melek Hanım interacted with Ellison in a process of “intercultural penetration” (253) allows Lewis to complicate Said’s ‘West/East’ binary couple by showing how Orientalised subjects’ counter-discourse stood in a productively dialectical relationship with Western meaning-constituting practices.

Contentious though one of Lewis’s initial remarks according to which Ottoman women’s “work constitutes a new instalment in the field of Western harem literature” (17) certainly is (indeed, it undermines the very oppositional nature of this literary production which her book is, on the contrary, committed to exalting), the overall originality of Lewis’s theorizations cannot be overstated. Through the filter of Lewis’s elaborations Ottoman female harem literature reveals itself as a space in which those who have traditionally been regarded as subalterns, instead of being ‘spoken for’, deliberately articulate their own cultural inscriptions, thus demonstrating that “the West was never the sole arbiter and owner of meaning about the Orient” (1-2).

Finally, at a macro-disciplinary level, by making Turkish history and culture a new terrain of critical investigation, *Rethinking Orientalism* also succeeds in expanding the scope of Post-colonial Studies itself. Thus, it is precisely in a multifaceted stretching of disciplinary boundaries and, as we have seen before, in the dual axis of convergences with and divergences from the orthodoxies of post-colonial theorizations that the numerous strengths of Lewis’s work reside.

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