**Motherhood and the Construction of Gendered Identity: An Exploration of Middle Eastern and North African Harems**

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Motherhood has been the topic of Western feminist discussion since Simone de Beauvoir's critique in her influential work *The Second Sex*, but only recently has it permeated the historiographic discussion around the harem in the Middle East and North Africa. This paper discusses normative feminine identity within the harem and the relationship between motherhood, reproduction, and the state. In this paper I will explore various case studies addressed by salient Middle Eastern and North African scholars in order to discuss the centrality of motherhood to harem women's identity and the construction of normative femininity. How do law and state politics create a normative feminine identity? What role does motherhood play in and provide to the state? And lastly, who is in charge of the construction of feminine identity within the harem? Organized by question, this essay will look at the imperial Ottoman harem and harem slave system as well as the Kano palace harem in Northern Nigeria. Additionally, this discussion will add to the discourse around historical gendered identity and to the growing historiographical discourse around life within the harem.

Before exploring the case studies through the proposed questions, it is important to consider terms and to establish geographical and chronological scope. For the purposes of this paper, I will be using the definition of "harem" as proposed by Marilyn Booth in the introduction of her edited work on the history of the harem. Booth states that the term refers to a sacred or forbidden space accessible only to women and intimate male relatives as well as an established institution that operates as a domestic space in Islamic society.[1] The harem can be both imperial as in the house of the sultan in the Ottoman Empire, royal as in the Kano palace in Northern Nigeria, and domestic as in the houses of officials. In each of these examples, the harem acts as a space comprised of the wives and concubines of the patriarch as well as their children and other slaves. Depending on the harem, eunuchs also live in this space and act as guards and administrative assistants to the state.

This paper focuses primarily on the women within the harem, therefore eunuchs and male members will not be discussed. Though the wives living in the harem were free Muslim women, a vast majority of female harem occupants were slaves. This dynamic is especially true in royal and imperial harems such as the Ottoman and Kano examples. Amy A. Kallander explains this dichotomy in her work on gender and royal households in Ottoman Tunisia. Similar to European imperial powers, Kallander notes, the Ottoman Empire relied on interdynastic marriage for territorial expansion. However, with each marriage (Islam allows a man up to four wives), the possibility of in-laws using heirs against the dynastic family remained a threat. Therefore, slave concubines fulfilled the reproductive needs of the dynasty since they were property of and loyal

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[1] Marilyn Booth, *Harem Histories: Envisioning Places and Living Spaces* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 5.

to, the sultan and the state.[2] Additionally, the geographical and chronological scope of this study is important to understanding the significance of motherhood to the construction of feminine identity. Since each harem system relies on Islamic law for governance of both state and society, the information they provide on the centrality of motherhood to the creation of a normative feminine identity is extensive.

In the western context there has emerged significant feminist literary criticism, some of which provides insight into the Middle Eastern and North African gender theory discussed in this paper. Firstly for the purposes of this paper the term õmotherhoodö refers to the biological ability of women to conceive and give birth to a child. Additionally, õnormative femininityö implies a socially constructed identity which women are expected to embody. This particular definition comes from the major twentieth century French existential feminist Simone de Beauvoir who argued in her famous work *The Second Sex*, that our notions of femininity are not innate but rather influenced by socio-cultural pressures and institutions.[3] Judith Butler, a late twentieth-century gender theorist, expanded upon de Beauvoir and asserted that these gendered identities persist due to continuous performance. The theory of performativity implies that there is no biological basis for our ideas of femininity and masculinity.[4] Though de Beauvoir and Butlerøs contribution to the discourse on gendered identity is valuable, they focus on a narrow definition of feminine identity (white, Western, bourgeois women).

Moreover, the contemporary Islamic feminist scholar Leila Ahmed provides insight into the rise of Islam and its historical past whilst arguing against the notion of Islam as inherently patriarchal. Ahmed notes, for example, that uxorilocal marriage and matriarchal notions of motherhood were common in sixth-century Arabia. Only after androcentric interpretations of Islamic law did patriarchy curtail womenøs influence.[5] Additionally, Ahmed notes that the Quøran outlines complete biological and spiritual equality of the sexes.[6] This is in stark contrast to Western notions of gender difference as proposed by St. Thomas of Aquinas who in the late thirteenth century expanded upon Aristotleøs notion of the biological inferiority of women.[7] Late twentieth century feminists such as Adrienne Rich and Julia Kristeva respond to the persistence of this view in Western society. For example, Rich proposes that women reclaim their bodies, specifically the womb and the idea of reproduction, for themselves and not for the use of patriarchal society.[8] Though her argument is centred on the Western experience, it is important to note the implication of biology and biological abilities as being significant in the creation of a

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[2] Amy A. Kallander, *Women, Gender, and the Palace Households in Ottoman Tunisia* (Austins: University of Texas Press), 38.

[3] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Division of Random House, 1974), 283.

[4] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1980), x-xi.

[5] Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots and Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 41-2.

[6] Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, 61-2.

[7] Though he did not agree with Aristotle in the idea that women were made as imperfect males, St. Thomas of Aquinas promoted the notion that women were inferior to men in both mind and body and were the natural subjects of men. See Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, trans. A. L. Peck, Loeb Classics (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1943), Book IV, vi, 460 and "Question 92. The Production of the Woman." *SUMMA THEOLOGICA: The Production of the Woman (Prima Pars, Q. 92)*. Web. 27 Apr. 2015. <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/1092.htm#article1>

[8] Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: Norton, 1976), 285.

normative identity. Kristeva also provides a salient insight in claiming that both the religious and secular idea of feminine identity is wrapped up in motherhood.[9]

Kristeva¢s notion of feminine identity through motherhood is still applicable in the nineteenth-century Muslim world where religion and the state were not separate. In order to explore how law and state politics create this normative feminine identity around motherhood, the case study of a Circassian slave by Ehud R. Toledano and a Muslim harem wife by E. Ann McDougall are discussed. The case studies are set in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and abide by the same Islamic law and operate within similarly structured harem systems. Though they share share chronological and structural scope, Toledano focuses on Ottoman ruled Cairo, Egypt and McDougall on õHausalandö in Northern Nigeria. Geography is important to note because it implies that the construction of identity through motherhood is not a geographically isolated occurrence, but is in fact linked to the Islamic harem institution.

McDougall¢s study of the wife named Baba reveals that socio-cultural identity is not determined by the aspect of raising a child, but rather the biological ability for women to give birth. Previously noted by Ahmed, M lik  (early Islamic) law put no emphasis on wifely reproduction as it resulted in a swift depletion of the husband¢s finances since he could have up to four wives. However when reproducing with concubines, his economic loss was less and he could still receive an heir. Ahmed goes on to state that it became advantageous for all women to give birth, but better for men if it was not their wives but instead their concubines.[10] Additionally, Leila Ahmed notes in the edited work by the Islamic scholar P,nar  lkkaracan that Muslim jurists regarded the purpose of marriage to be a contractual agreement for sexual satisfaction, not specifically procreation.[11] This no doubt assisted in the consolidation of empire through interdynastic marriage and the issue of disloyal heirs as noted above by Kallander who also explained that the political advantages of a marriage could cancel out the wife¢s role in reproduction.[12]

If Baba, as a wife, was not relied upon or expected to have a child, why was reproduction and motherhood so essential to her identity as a woman? McDougall analyzed Baba¢s life and determined that a vitally important aspect of her life governed by Islam was *iddah*, meaning the celibacy period between divorce and remarriage.[13] This practice reveals the amount of importance placed upon conception and implies the significance of women¢s reproductive capacity to identity. However, Baba was infertile thus forfeiting a normative feminine identity so reliant on her biological ability to be a mother. Furthermore, McDougall notes that to a Hausa woman, reproduction was not only absolutely central to her identity as a woman but also to her culture and society.[14]

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[9] Julia Kristeva and Arthur Goldhammer, "Stabat Mater." *Poetics Today* 6, no. 1/2 (12 1985), 133.

[10] Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, 93.

[11] Leila Ahmed, õArab Culture and Writing Women¢s Bodiesö in *Women and Sexuality in Muslim Societies*, ed. P,nar  lkkaracan, (Istanbul: Women for Women's Rights, 2000), 57-8.

[12] Kallander, *Women, Gender, and the Palace Households in Ottoman Tunisia*, 85.

[13] E. Ann McDougall, õHidden in the Household: Gender and Class in the Study of Islam in Africa,ö in *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, (2008. 508. *JSTOR Journals*),  520.

[14] McDougall, õHidden in the Household,ö 524.

The status of wives increased significantly with motherhood and they were rewarded with gifts and celebration;[15] thus when Baba could not physically give birth she suffered the possibility of not only experiencing an identity crisis but also losing social and economic standing. In order to re-establish a normative feminine identity, Baba's husband õadoptedö a slave who was then freed when given a new Muslim name and presented to Baba as her new child.[16] Although adoption was a very controversial legal issue, it is not unfamiliar in Islamic history as Ferhunde Özbay notes in his piece on child domestic labour in Turkey. He states, for example, that in 1926 with the institution of a new civil law code, an artificial lineage could legally be contracted through adoption.[17] Before this, however, legal adoption was denied under Islamic law in favour of a sort of õfoster familyö or the bringing-in of *evlatlıks* (slave children).[18] It was not unfamiliar to create an artificial sense of motherhood in order to conform to normative gender identities. McDougall notes that Baba referred to the acquisition of this õsonö in reproductive terms when she claimed that it was õjust as if [she] had born him.ö[19] Baba thus conceived her normative feminine identity as intrinsically involved with the process of giving birth and motherhood.

Toledano's case study of a Circassian slave girl in Cairo also emphasizes the legal and biological aspect of identity through motherhood. In 1854 an Egyptian police report detailed the story of emsigül, a Circassian slave who became pregnant by her slave dealer Deli Mehmet while under his possession. Still wishing to sell her for the price of a virgin, Deli Mehmet did not inform the buyers that she was pregnant and this resulted in emsigül's return to Deli Mehmet at the discovery.[20] In emsigül's story, she underwent various forms of abuse from the slave dealer and his wife who both, for their own reasons, did not want emsigül to become a mother. In order to understand fully the implications of emsigül's motherhood and why it provoked violence from Deli Mehmet and his wife, it is important to discuss Jonathan Brockopp's analysis of early M lik law and its implications for slavery and motherhood.

Brockopp discusses the two types of slaves in early Islamic law, one of which was the *umm walad*, literally õmother of child.ö[21] The *umm walad* is a concubine who, once she gives birth, is recognized by law as the mother of the master's child and can no longer be sold or alienated. The M lik text claims that even if a concubine experiences a miscarriage, she is still considered an *umm walad* and receives all the benefits that come with the position since she technically had her master's child in her womb.[22] Motherhood was seen as social advancement and advantageous to harem women, thus providing economic and social incentives to a normative feminine identity.[23]

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[15] Kallander, *Women, Gender, and the Palace Households in Ottoman Tunisia,* 86-7.

[16] McDougall, õHidden in the Household,ö 521.

[17] Ferhunde Özbay, õTurkish Female Child Labour in Domestic Work: Past and Present,ö (project report prepared for ILO/IPEC, Istanbul, 1999), 11.

[18] Özbay, õTurkish Female Child Labour in Domestic Work,ö 8-9.

[19] McDougall, õHidden in the Household,ö 521.

[20] Ehud R. Toledano, "Slave Dealers, Women, Pregnancy, and Abortion: The Story of a Circassian Slave girl in Mid nineteenth Century Cairo," in *Slavery & Abolition* 2, no. 1 (12 1981), 56-8.

[21] Jonathan Brockopp and Ibn Abd Al- akam Abd All h, *Early Mālikī Law: Ibn 'Abd Al-Hakam and His Major Compendium of Jurisprudence*, (Leiden: Brill, 2000) 164.

[22] Brockopp, *Early Mālikī Law,* 197.

[23] Ibid., 199.

Since  emsigül was the property of the slave dealer Deli Mehmet when she became pregnant, she was then considered a legal concubine and could not be sold. However Deli Mehmet swiftly violated this law in order to receive the price of a õvirginö Circassian slave girl. As Brockopp notes above,  emsigül would have become an *umm walad* when she gave birth. This title gave her privilege and status under law and legally protected her from being sold or alienated by her master. Deli Mehmetøs wife also attempted to exclude  emsigül from a normative harem womanøs identity by trying to induce an abortion and when that failed, her attempted adoption of the *umm walad's* son.[24] This case study provides further insight into the importance of motherhood to a harem womanøs identity and the role of the law in the creation of a normative femininity.

In her study of the imperial Ottoman harem from its inception in the late fifteenth-century to its solidification in the mid seventeenth-century, Leslie Peirce discusses how and what motherhood provides to the state. Peirce focuses on the primary female actors within the imperial harem and how these women occupy space. A womanøs relationship to the ruling patriarch, in this case the sultan, is organized spatially within the imperial harem. For example, the *valide sultan* (sultanøs mother) was the most important and influential woman within the harem. Not only was she the lead figure in the household, but she also controlled all administrative duties and received the largest stipend.[25] The *valide sultan's* power was also constructed spatially. For example, her bedrooms occupied the centre of the harem thus articulating her role as executive.[26] The second most important figure in the imperial harem was the sultanøs favourite concubine known as *haseki*, The *haseki* ranked higher than the sultanøs other blood relations because she was the mother of a potential heir.[27] Furthermore, concubines who were not considered *haseki* were referred to as õthe mother of Prince X,ö as noted by Peirce in her examination of the imperial privy purse. Additionally, concubine mothers of female children were not listed individually thus implying an elevated status granted only to mothers who provided potential heirs to the sultanate.[28]

The elevated position, centrality of power and increased stipend provided harem women with incentive to conform to a normative feminine identity with its basis in reproduction. In her study of eighteenth century Turkey, Ahmed reveals a great emphasis put on motherhood in popular culture as seen through a Western womanøs eyes. Lady Mary Wortley Montagueøs account of her experience with harem women shows motherhood and reproduction as õobsessively sought after,ö and of great import. Whereas Montague was surprised by the prized nature of motherhood, Ahmed explains that the social and economic advantages of motherhood greatly influenced the actions of wives and concubines.[29]

The centrality of motherhood to the functioning of state is also explored in Patricia Romeroøs article on the abolition of the slave trade in Kenya. In 1907, the sultan passed an ordinance on the

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[24] Toledano, "Slave Dealers, Women, Pregnancy, and Abortionö, 58.

[25] Leslie Peirce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 126

[26] Peirce, *The Imperial Harem,* 138.

[27] Ibid*.,* 127.

[28] Ibid*.,* 129.

[29] Ahmed, õArab Culture and Writing Womenøs Bodiesö, 63.

abolition of slavery through pressures from the British. This ordinance excluded concubines as they were not seen as slaves. However, it conceded that if they charged a master with mistreatment, his concubines would be freed.[30] This exception implies that concubines were not included in abolition because their role as mother in the patriarchal state was too important. The combination of the domestic and the political, as noted by Kallander in the Ottoman Tunisian example, made the family õthe most salient political model.ö[31] Motherhood thus became an essential component of the political structure, integral to the running of the state.

The normative feminine identity of harem women came to rely on motherhood in order to support the political system. This brings us back to the literary-feminists who discussed motherhood and feminine identity as socio-cultural constructions created by the state. Women identify themselves and physically situate themselves within a space according to their reproductive abilities; thus, normative feminine identity within the harem is largely connected to ideas of fertility. In the Northern Nigerian case study proposed by Heidi Nast, the idea of fertility is very important to the formation of normative feminine identity of the Kano palace women and helps to explore the question: who is in charge of the construction of feminine identity within the harem?

In her discussion of the pre-Islamic and Islamic history of the Kano palace in Northern Nigeria, Nast reveals gendered labour revolving around the issue of fertility. For example, she notes that eighteenth-century Kano concubines were heavily involved in pot-based indigo dyeing, an activity laden with reproductive significance.[32] Royal women would wear the blue clothing and consummate their marriage on blue cloth in order to ensure fertility. This fertility labeled labour was further gendered by its spatial positioning right behind the major concubine harem. Once the industry started to become quite lucrative and indigo-dyed cloth was no longer made only for fertility ritual purposes in the nineteenth century, men asserted a monopoly over the industry and eventually banned women entirely.[33] This example of restricting concubine labour to that which involves reproduction and fertility constructs a normative identity revolving around the notion of motherhood. In Nastøs example, it is the men within the patriarchal system who create this feminine identity.

According to Asifa Siraj, though motherhood appears as a defining feature of womenøs identity, Islam gives significant power and respect to mothers. In her article also exploring the creation of Muslim womenøs identity, Siraj provides keen insights into the intersection of Western literary feminist critiques and Islam. For example, though Western feminists such as Adrienne Rich claim that patriarchy has constructed the womb as a symbol of powerlessness, Siraj argues that Islam emphasizes the womb and womenøs biological ability to reproduce as a source of power.[34] Especially when discussing Nastøs Kano case study, the idea of the womb linked with power is

[30] Patricia E. Romero "÷Where Have All the Slaves Gone?øEmancipation and Post-Emancipation in Lamu, Kenya." *The Journal of African History* 27, no. 03 (12 1986) 500.

[31] Kallander, *Women, Gender, and the Palace Households in Ottoman Tunisia,* 4.

[32] Heidi Nast, *Concubines and Power: Five Hundred Years in a Northern Nigerian Palace*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005) 75-7.

[33] Nast, *Concubines and Power,* 79.

[34] Asifa Siraj, "÷Smoothing down Ruffled Feathersø The Construction of Muslim Women's Feminine Identities." *Journal of Gender Studies* 21, no. 2 (12 2012), 188.

quite evident. When the concubines of the Kano palace were participating in the indigo dyeing industry for purposes of fertility and reproduction (aspects associated with the womb) they had significant agency. As seen in previous case studies, a woman's womb and its ability to facilitate life also provided women with economic and social advancement. Through women's participation in the gendered labour, they assist in the construction of a normative feminine identity to which motherhood is central.

The discourses surrounding the harem, normative ideas of femininity, and gendered identities in Islamic law are vastly growing. Scholars such as Marilyn Booth, Leila Ahmed, and Amy A. Kallander have begun salient expansion into the realm of the harem and have opened discourse for deeper research. This paper contributed to the historiographical discourse around the harem by adding a discussion of motherhood as being central to women's identity. The story of emsigül the Circassian slave, and Baba the Nigerian wife, revealed how law and state politics create normative identity through slave laws around concubinage and conception as well as the institution of adoption. Leslie Peirce's study of the *valide sultan* and *haseki* showed the dynastic importance of mothers to the continuation of the sultanate state as well as the emphasis placed on motherhood in popular culture. Lastly, Heidi Nast and her spatial analysis of the Kano palace in Northern Nigeria provided insight into who creates normative feminine identity within the harem. This research, however, poses more questions than it answers: can normative feminine identity be separated from the state? Who dominates the fertility sphere? Is motherhood more than a gendered construction? These questions call for greater research into Women and Gender Studies of the Middle East and North Africa.

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