Feminine Power in the Ottoman Harem

Women in Muslim culture are often viewed in the Western world as oppressed, powerless beings; within the harem, they are no more than slaves and sexual objects. However, women were, in fact, deeply integrated into Muslim society.¹ The purpose of this paper is to illuminate some of the misconceptions and realities concerning women in Islamic culture. More specifically, it examines the valide sultans, or “queen mothers,” in the Ottoman imperial harem during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, arguably the height of female power in Islamic history.

The term harem comes from the Islamic root \( h-r-m \), which denotes a sacred area with no gender specifications.² It is only through rumor and misinterpretation that the Western world has assigned such a confined, erotic image of this social structure. It cannot be questioned that women were unequal with men in society, but women commanded a surprising amount of influence and presence despite their limitations. Deniz Kandiyoti coined the term “patriarchal bargains” for the capabilities of women in a male-dominated society.³ These bargains shaped female subjectivity and ideology, and were susceptible to change through historical transformations. The power exercised by the valides in the Ottoman Empire is an excellent example of this concept as it reveals the extensive changes in Ottoman royal life and political authority during this period. The harem has been described by historians as a political arena for women as early as between the 4th and 11th century.⁴

Patronage in Islamic society was an important signifier of status and influence.⁵ The sixteenth and seventeenth century witnessed a shocking rise in female architectural patronage coupled with a dramatic decrease in public projects bestowed by the sultan. This is one of the significant aspects of the valide. This essay analyzes female patronage in general as well as two specific cases; the Atik Valide Mosque commissioned by Nurbanu Sultan in the sixteenth century and the Yeni Valide Mosque endowed by Hatice Turhan Sultan in the seventeenth century. These two valide sultans appropriately represent the rise and height of the period that many historians have

referred to as “the sultanate of women.” The harem was not a prison for women; it was merely another stage for political power.

Let us first outline some of the Western misconceptions about the harem and women in Islamic society. Juxtaposing these ideas with the prominence of the valide will reveal how inaccurate these assumptions are and the reality of feminine power in the Ottoman Empire. The European traveler Hans Derschwam visited Istanbul in the mid-sixteenth century and commented that women were entirely invisible and separated in society. He noted their lack of public appearance, use of retinues and the veil while outside, and the intense restrictions of Islamic law on women. However, this observation was quite inaccurate and betrays Derschwam’s Western prejudices rather than understanding of Islamic society. Aslı Sancar reinforces this erroneous mindset, writing that, “Ottoman women were portrayed as pitiable victims, creatures captive in the harem without any individual agency.” Western observers did not have the information available to historians today, which would have completely upset their ideas concerning the harem. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, female architectural projects increased dramatically. Buildings were constructed by or dedicated to women in both Istanbul and the Ottoman provinces. Public endowments were one of several activities that women engaged in, which are discussed further below. What is particularly ironic about Derschwam’s observations and Western ideology is that they assumed the veil was a sign of subjugation and disenfranchisement, when in fact it was a practice most commonly promoted by the upper class. Lower class women were much more open in public, which was a problem in Ottoman society addressed by law edicts, or kanunnames, issued by the sultans. Women of means fashioned the veil as a form of esteem and respect in Islamic society rather than it bearing shame or punishment.

Another Western misconception about the harem is that it was gender specific, when it actually referred to male as well as female spaces. The imperial harem, harem-i humayun, was the name given to the third and innermost courtyard of Topkapi palace, which was reserved specifically for males. The women’s quarters also received the title of imperial harem, but the name was because of the sultan’s presence rather than that of the women. The palatial space was divided into the haremlık, the area allocated for women, and the selamlık, the area prescribed to men. Gendered quarters were separated in the palace, but women were secluded from men almost as much as men from women. In fact, the seclusion of women to their own space resulted in the development of a private society. Women established their own community in the harem and

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8 Sancar, *Ottoman Women*, 38.
10 Ian C. Dengler, “Turkish Women in the Ottoman Empire: The Classical Age,” in *Women in the Muslim World*, 230.
operated within their own area. The organization of the harem hierarchy and the training of princesses and concubines mirrored that of the eunuchs and young men and pages in the third courtyard of Topkapi palace.\textsuperscript{14} Therefore, the boundaries within Islamic society and the boundaries that Western observers imagined are quite different. The degree of social mobility was not wrapped up so much in a dichotomy of public/private or male/female as privileged/common.\textsuperscript{15} Women of means wielded influence and power, all within the confines of gender discrimination and a male-dominated society. This arguably made them more skillful than their male counterparts, but that is more a matter of opinion than debate.

Moving from Western inaccuracies about the harem and Muslim women, it is now worthwhile to investigate the level of participation women took in Islamic society. This will help to frame the emergence of the valide and the potential that women had for political and societal power. The harem provided the central arena of politics for royal women in Ottoman society both in terms of competition with other females and in reaching out to the male sphere of influence.\textsuperscript{16} Women embraced their sexuality and utilized it in the political arena; indeed, a primary factor in social or political prominence was through reproduction. Ian Dengler states that, “women of the ruling elites had one role not open to other women in the social order: they could become political and social arbiters.”\textsuperscript{17} Women achieved power through the act of childbearing, which in turn generated influence and authority for the mothers. This is a perfect example of Kandiyoti’s patriarchal bargains wherein women operated under male-prescribed constraints in order to achieve sovereignty and power.

Additionally, women managed the household and harem as the supreme authority.\textsuperscript{18} This concept dates back at least to ancient Greek society and the concept of oikonomos, where woman maintained the staff and upkeep of the house while the male figure operated in the public sphere. Managing the harem was no simple task; there was, in fact, an extensive hierarchy of female positions within the harem.\textsuperscript{19} The harem expanded dramatically in the period examined here due to the changes within the royal family and succession. The emergence of this distinctive harem culture is at least partially attributed to what has been termed “sedentarization” by historians of the Ottoman Empire.\textsuperscript{20} This transformation entailed sultans focusing less on military conquest and more on the consolidation and centralization of the royal family and the rapidly growing provinces of the Islamic nation. Although this can be viewed as a noble pursuit, supporting peace over war and centrality over civil strife, other scholars consider this change in Ottoman society to reflect a deteriorating political dynasty. However, there can be no question that women, the valide at the head, were tasked with important, demanding obligations within the imperial harem.

Reproduction was a necessary component to female influence and political authority in the harem.\textsuperscript{21} Indeed, the title of valide sultan was the highest role a woman could aspire to in Ottoman society. The fact that the harem was a political arena necessarily generated political

\begin{footnotes}
\item Peirce, \textit{Imperial Harem}, 139.
\item Peirce, “Beyond Harem Walls,” 45.
\item Peirce, \textit{Imperial Harem}, 3.
\item Dengler, “Turkish Women,” 236.
\item Sancar, \textit{Ottoman Women}, 55.
\item Peirce, \textit{Imperial Harem}, 6.
\item Dengler, “Turkish Women,” 232.
\end{footnotes}
factions and dissension within the women’s quarters. Moreover, the changing significance of female roles affected the hierarchy of power and thus caused conflict between royal women. The emergence of the valide was preceded by the haseki, or the sultan’s favorite. As the role of mother became more important than that of wife, the two positions clashed. A primary example of this conflict is between Mahpeyker Kosem Sultan and Hatice Turhan Sultan, which is examined in the section regarding the seventeenth century valide.

Lastly, it is important to recognize the role of women in the public sphere of Muslim society. Although Derschwam’s observations held some truth, his exaggeration and lack of understanding cause a distinctly different image of female presence in Istanbul. Women were welcomed into Islamic society through virtue and piety. This was true from the beginning of Muslim faith with the prophet Muhammad accepting female converts into his religion. Women exercised certain practices to remain “ritually ‘inside’ while physically ‘outside’” such as wearing the veil or being attended by a retinue of servants. Far from being a punishment, women embraced these personal obligations as a “confirmation of esteem.” Derschwam was correct that women were not often in the streets and, when present, maintained a level of seclusion. However, this seclusion ironically highlighted their femininity rather than covering it. Women had to promote Islamic virtues in order to be recognized as a respectable member of society, a practice that is evident in the reigns of Nurbau and Turhan. Under the kanunnames of this period, devoted women received the title muhaddere and were allowed to appear in public, as long as they were escorted by a retinue. Women were capable of achieving greater social status and mobility through piety and devotion to the Islamic faith. Moreover, their seclusion was a positive affirmation of feminine prowess. Another patriarchal bargain that appears here is that women of means were able to commission public projects in order to display their influence in place of their physical appearance. Women operated around their gendered inequality to maintain a social and political presence, which the valides utilized to display their extensive authority.

Before turning to the emergence of the valide sultan, there is another societal transformation that must be discussed: the structural changes within the royal family. Islamic faith revered mothers, which can clearly be seen from the hadith, “Heaven is under the feet of mothers.” As has been shown, reproduction was a critical aspect of female power and dictated the role that a woman would have in Ottoman society. Princes had originally been sent to govern Ottoman provinces and their mothers would accompany them, acting as regents and patrons for their son. However, princely patronage was revoked in order to further consolidate the power of the sultan. Although this detracted from political influence among males, it only served to further empower royal mothers. By the time that Nurbau received the title of valide in the late sixteenth century,

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22 Peirce, Imperial Harem, 77.
23 Peirce, Imperial Harem, 91.
26 Kandiyoti, “Islam and Patriarchy,” 34.
29 Sancar, Ottoman Women, 61.
30 Peirce, “Gender and Sexual Propriety,” 55.
sultans commissioned very few public projects and only the queen mothers endowed buildings within the capital city.\textsuperscript{31} This was in part a result of the chaotic system of succession in the Ottoman dynasty, where an heir ascended to the throne if they were capable of eliminating their rivals. Due to this unpredictable and violence-inducing process, mothers depended on their sons' political survival in order to establish their own authority.\textsuperscript{32}

In the sixteenth century, the royal family was confined to Istanbul and only the sultan could travel outside the capital.\textsuperscript{33} This greatly expanded the inhabitants of the imperial harem at Topkapi palace and affected the political operations therein. Royal women that were not mothers, as well as the women of a deceased sultan, were moved to the Old Palace.\textsuperscript{34} Coupled with this transformation was a reconsideration of dynastic succession. Rather than having an open throne upon the death of the sultan, dynastic continuity through seniority was established.\textsuperscript{35} This ended the rampant fratricide and civil war that accompanied the deaths of previous sultans and created a stable line of succession. Now, let us examine the emergence of the position of valide sultan as it generally played into Ottoman politics. Then, we will elaborate on the client networks used by the valide as well as the reflections of architecture on gendered roles. With all of that information provided, it will be easy to recognize the reigns of Nurbanu and Turhan in terms of Muslim female power and sociopolitical transformations in Istanbul.

Starting in the mid-fifteenth century, sultans only took slave concubines as their sexual partners.\textsuperscript{36} Nurbanu was, in fact, Italian and Turhan was Russian, both of them being brought to the imperial harem as captives in Ottoman conquests. Suleyman took Hurrem Sultan, or Roxelana, as his haseki in the sixteenth century, which began the transition that led to the valide sultan. Leslie Peirce states that the “greatest source of authority and status for dynastic women continued to be the role of mother of a male dynast.”\textsuperscript{37} Political influence was determined through sexual status and the queen mother was the ruler of the harem. Deniz Kandiyoti also writes that women “can establish their place in the patriliny only by producing male offspring” and that the “powerful postmenopausal matriarch thus is the other side of the coin.”\textsuperscript{38} Conflict erupted between these two sides as the budding sexual concubine clashed with the post sexual. This issue is encapsulated with the feud between Turhan and Kosem, in which the powerful matriarch Kosem attempted to wrest power from the youthful valide Turhan, resulting in a political coup and the death of Mahpeyker.

The valide controlled a vast amount of wealth in order to finance various philanthropic projects in Istanbul.\textsuperscript{39} Female patronage had become prominent with the removal of princely patronage and the sultan’s lacking endowments. Buildings erected in the capital displayed the political and financial power that the queen mother commanded. By the time Turhan came to power in the mid-seventeenth century, the role of valide had become institutionalized and thus her success

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{31} Peirce, “Gender and Sexual Propriety,” 62.
  \item \textsuperscript{32} Peirce, “Beyond Harem Walls,” 46.
  \item \textsuperscript{33} Peirce, “Beyond Harem Walls,” 47.
  \item \textsuperscript{34} Sancar, \textit{Ottoman Women}, 124. Also, Peirce, \textit{Imperial Harem}, 122.
  \item \textsuperscript{35} Peirce, “Beyond Harem Walls,” 48.
  \item \textsuperscript{36} Sancar, \textit{Ottoman Women}, 115.
  \item \textsuperscript{37} Peirce, \textit{Imperial Harem}, 230.
  \item \textsuperscript{38} Kandiyoti, “Islam and Patriarchy,” 32.
  \item \textsuperscript{39} Sancar, \textit{Ottoman Women}, 109.
\end{itemize}
was guaranteed. The valide became deeply entrenched in the political affairs of the sultan, her son, and operated as a co-regent to the Ottoman ruler. When Turhan died near the end of the seventeenth century, along with the removal of her son Mehmed IV’s grand vizier, his political power failed and his reign collapsed. This reveals how much control Turhan had over the sultan’s empire and the interdependence of mother and son.

However, even such powerful women as the valides still required intermediaries to exercise their political influence. As mentioned above, women had to maintain Islamic values and seclusion in order to appear as respectable members in Muslim society. The next section will detail how the queen mothers operated diverse, extensive networks of clientage in order to accomplish their political goals. The valide was recognized as a powerful political figure, second only to her son, the sultan. Therefore, it is easy to understand that interest in creating networks was mutual between the master and client. Just as the valide required clients to extend her influence, individuals were eager to create political ties to such an important figure in Istanbul. The idea that Muslim women in the harem were nothing more than sexual objects is ridiculous when this female position is witnessed. The favor of the queen mother was sought after with great interest because of the power and patronage wielded by her.

The valide was provided a male steward from the palace to act as an intermediary for her public affairs. This position was one of high honor and provided the queen mother with indirect contact to the world that she needed to maintain seclusion from as an exemplar of Islamic virtue and ideology. The valide also managed important political positions under the sultan. Turhan appointed Kopru Mehmed as her son’s grand vizier, which began the Koprulu dynastic era for viziers. In addition, the queen mother also selected the concubines for the sultan’s harem. This marked immense control on the part of the valide, who now held power over the women that would potentially succeed her as head of the harem. Finally, the queen mother arranged princess marriages in order to establish political ties with officials, thus creating relations with the various individuals serving the ruler of the Ottoman Empire. This is not an exhaustive list, but highlights the primary clients that the valide controlled. This shows that the queen mother was a highly desirable political ally as well as revealing her influence over the governing offices under the sultan. This position raised royal women to power possibly commensurate with that of the sovereign, despite gendered inequalities and necessary seclusion of females.

Finally, before examining the actual reigns of Nurbanu and Turhan, it is important to discuss the concept of gendered architecture. Female architecture differed from the style of males and reveals Islamic ideology as well as the patron’s personal interests. Gendered space results in

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40 Peirce, Imperial Harem, 112.
42 Peirce, Imperial Harem, 143.
43 Sancar, Ottoman Women, 106.
44 Gulen, Ottoman Sultans, 191.
45 Thys-Senocak, Ottoman Women Builders, 17.
spatial politics and historical transformations result in the “restructuring of space.” In this sense, the segregation of male and female spatial distribution necessarily creates architecture that reflects and changes according to gender ideology. Female architecture is unique in certain characteristics as seclusion, role of the buildings, and epigraphy attached to the building.

One feature that is similar between male and female architecture, interestingly enough, is the manipulation of gaze. Both genders utilized visibility and seclusion to impress upon observers the importance of the patron. A building type that emerges during this period of female patronage is the hunkar kasri, or royal pavilion. This structure, similar to the kiosks within the Topkapi palace and the riverfront, afforded visibility to whoever was inside while maintaining invisibility and inaccessibility to outside viewers. The use of this structure by valides is significant for two reasons; 1) even when outside of the palace and in public buildings, women continued to be “ritually ‘inside’”, and 2) the fact that the queen mother employed similar architecture to that of sultans, in the Ottoman capital nonetheless, speaks to her growing power and certain equalities between genders. The Western dichotomy of public/male and private/female is blurred by such instances and requires a reconsideration of gendered roles in Muslim society. Additionally, valide architecture mimics other forms of sultanic iconography such as dual minarets on mosques and the freedom to build within the capital city of Istanbul.

Epigraphy tied to these female endowments further reveals the influence and attitudes of the patrons. The vakfiye, or deed of trust, for Nurbau’s Atik Valide Mosque Complex illuminates both her role as a woman in Muslim society and as mother to the Islamic ruler. In the first part of this document, Nurbau exhorts her Muslim values as well as her generous, charitable nature. As mentioned above, women had to exercise Islamic piety and devotion to be respected in society, so it is clear to see the motivation behind the valide including such rhetoric in her deed. It goes without saying why she would cite her achievements and success as a political patron of Istanbul; almost every political endowment since the ancient Egyptians in the 3rd millennia BCE glorifies the patron and ensures that any visitor will know the full extent of his or her benevolence. The next part of the deed defends her son, Murad III, against his political opponents and critics. During this period in Ottoman history, sultans were increasingly secluded and isolated, leading many to believe the ruler to be sedentary and weak. Nurbau, acting both as her son’s mother and defending her own legitimacy in office, praises the sultan’s virtues and antagonizes the insults that others have made against him. The defensive tone of this document reveals the issues of stability and influence surrounding the sultan as well as the power and influence wielded by the valide.

Ulku Bates notes that the inscriptions in Turhan’s mosque complex cite her relationship as mother of her son rather than wife of the late sultan, Ibrahim. The power of valide sultan had been firmly established by Turhan’s reign, which reflects the sentiment of her complex’s

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49 Thys-Senocak, Ottoman Women Builders, 9.
50 Thys-Senocak, “Yeni Valide Mosque Complex,” 76.
51 Thys-Senocak, “Yeni Valide Mosque Complex,” 82.
epigraphy. The wives of deceased sultans were removed to the Old Palace while the queen mother ruled as supreme female power and co-regent to the sultan. Therefore, it is no surprise that Turhan would want observers at the mosque to remember her in her position as valide rather than wife of a sultan. This is further reinforced when compared to the inscriptions in the mosque commissioned by Mihrumah, the daughter of Suleyman I. Her inscriptions celebrate Suleyman and her husband, Selim I and entirely avoid using her name. 54 This stark contrast displays the development of the valide and the growing power of women in Ottoman society. Lastly, many of the endowments by women are religious structures, whether mosques, schools, or hospitals. This creates the same message as Nurbanu’s vakfiye: the female patron is pious, charitable, and powerful.

Finally, let us briefly examine the reigns of Nurbanu and Turhan as two models for the valide in terms of capabilities and conflicts. Nurbanu Sultan was the first valide, coming to power at the end of the sixteenth century. One of her major accomplishments, the Atik Valide Mosque, was the grandest endowment by any female patron to that point. 55 Another significant aspect of Nurbanu’s reign was her royal stipend: she received a daily allowance of 1,000 aspers while the other women of the harem received between 30 and 40. 56 These two points reveal the impressive power and wealth of the valide, which overshadowed all female figures of Islamic history. The valide was the apogee of women’s agency and power in Muslim society. The restrictions and seclusion of women did nothing to hinder the extensive influence of the queen mother. In fact, these gendered inequalities were embraced and shone through the endowments and actions of the valide.

Ottoman rhetoric praised the sultan, citing his charitable nature and protection of the lower class. 57 Following in this path, Nurbanu invokes the same style of rhetoric in her mosque to highlight her own virtues and capability. Notably, the epigraphy in the Atik Mosque mentions no name other than Nurbanu’s, implying her independence from male patrons. 58 Despite being a woman in Muslim society, Nurbanu held sovereign power and maintained wealth and authority that could only be topped by the sultan himself. Upon her death, a massive funeral procession was held for the valide. 59 This lavish public ceremony reveals the power and influence that Nurbanu had acquired during her reign as queen mother. Murad III, her son, walked alongside the funeral procession and wept openly, which is a particularly significant event. Nurbanu achieved a role unlike any held by a female and, even in death, was granted an extraordinary ceremony that exalted the powerful woman.

Hatice Turhan Sultan entered the role of valide a century later, at which point the position had been recognized and institutionalized in the Ottoman Empire. Turhan was brought as a slave concubine to serve under the current valide, Mahpeyker Kosem Sultan. 60 However, conflict erupted between the two women when Mehmed IV, Turhan’s son, ascended to the throne. As I mentioned above, the two sides of the coin concerning female power were the sexual mother of

54 Kayaalp, “Vakfiye and Inscriptions,” 313.
56 Sancar, Ottoman Women, 116.
58 Kayaalp, “Vakfiye and Inscriptions,” 312.
59 Sancar, Ottoman Women, 105.
60 Thys-Senocak, Ottoman Women Builders, 1.
the sultan and the post sexual matriarch. Kosem remained in power and challenged Turhan’s rule, accordingly due to the new valide’s youth. Kosem wanted to replace Mehmed IV with Suleyman II, whose mother could more easily be manipulated. However, Turhan was not going to give up her position as the most powerful woman in the Ottoman Empire. Kosem’s servant, Meleki Hatun, betrayed her plans to Turhan, who then had Mahpeyker killed by the black eunuchs during a political coup.

Turhan became valide sultan in 1651 with the death of Kosem. She was supported by the Muslim society because of the investment in queen mothers and quickly began exercising her power as co-regent of the Ottoman Empire. One of Turhan’s first acts as a female architectural patron was creating the two forts Seddulbahir and Kumkale on the Dardanelles, the strait connecting the Aegean Sea to the Sea of Marmara. This was an unusual endowment for a valide, but is understandable in the context of her ascension. Turhan claimed the role of queen mother through a violent coup and it was critical that she assure the Muslim society that she was a capable leader. The construction of these military strongholds on an important naval passage impressed the idea of Turhan as a protector of the empire. She secured her position in the Ottoman capital through intellect and strategic patronage. Turhan’s other significant endowment was the Yeni Valide Mosque Complex. This structure had been started by Safiye Sultan at the end of the sixteenth century, but was not finished until Turhan commissioned its completion in 1670. As noted above, one of the key features of the structure was the hunkar kasri. The particular significance of this pavilion reflects the gendered architecture of the endowment. The pavilion was enclosed and secluded, but offered vision of the royal tomb, marketplace, and religious schools. This allowed Turhan, or any women present in the pavilion, to view the public spaces where access was restricted. Not only does this speak to the gender inequalities and patriarchal bargains of female patronage, it also mirrors sultanic architecture. The idea of vision within seclusion was administered to promote the magnificence of the sovereign ruler, but became the tool of Muslim women as well.

Women in Islamic society were unquestionably held to a different standard than men. However, their seclusion was embraced rather than scorned because it created a unique feminine culture. Likewise, the harem was not an orgiastic prison, but rather a private site of female political enterprise. The valide sultans are the most impressive of female roles in Islamic history, revealing the power available to women that are often imagined as invisible and restrained. The queen mothers do not create an exception in history either, but rather exacerbate circumstances that were already apparent in Muslim society. To the outsider, Muslim women may appear to be disenfranchised, subjugated individuals. While there are certainly gender inequalities, women in the Muslim world were in fact capable of obtaining power, wealth, and influence. The harem was a political arena, and the valide was its champion.

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63 Peirce, “Gender and Sexual Propriety,” 63.
64 Thys-Senocak, *Ottoman Women Builders*, 5.
65 Thys-Senocak, “Yeni Valide Mosque Complex,” 69.
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