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"SURPRISED AND DAZZLED WITH THE BEAUTY OF THE SULTAN'S CAPITAL": DEPOLITICIZATION AND DEHISTORICIZATION OF CULTURE IN DEMETRA VAKA-BROWN'S *HAREMLIK: SOME PAGES FROM THE LIFE OF TURKISH WOMEN*

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, Demetra Vaka-Brown's representation of "Turkish women" in her personal narrative, Haremlik (1909), after her re-encounter with them at the beginning of the twentieth century will be explored. It will be argued that the writer's hold on her (cultural) identity as a Greek-Ottoman woman does not serve a "political" function despite her claim to the contrary; through Haremlik, Vaka-Brown attempts to write her own (personal) (hi)story rather than a collective story of "Turkish women" at the beginning of the twentieth century. The analysis of her narrative will mainly draw on Edward Said's Orientalism and Arif Dirlik's critique of depoliticization as well as dehistoricization of culture in his article, "Literature/Identity: Transnationalism, Narrative and Representation."

Keywords: Vaka-Brown, Haremlik, Orientalism, Cultural Identity, Depoliticization of Culture, Dehistoricization of Culture

"İSTANBUL'UN GÖZ ALICI GÜZELLİĞİ": DEMETRA VAKA-BROWN'UN *HAREMLİK: TÜRK KADINLARININ HAYATINDAN KESİTLER* ADLI ANLATISINDA KÜLTÜRÜN TARİHİ VE SİYASİ BAĞLAMDAN KOPARILMASI

ÖZET

Bu makalede, Demetra Vaka-Brown'un Haremlik (1909) adlı anlatısında yirminci yüzyıl başında Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nu ziyareti sırasında yeniden karşılaştığı "Türk kadınlarını" temsil ediş biçimi tartışılacaktır.

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Yazarın, metinde Yunan-Osmanlı (kültürel) kimliğini ön plana çıkarmasının, kendi iddia ettiği şekilde "politik" bir amaca hizmet etmediği; Haremlik'in temsil etmeyi hedeflediği "Türk kadınları"na dair kapsamlı ve çok boyutlu bir anlatı olmaktan çok Vaka-Brown'un oldukça
öznel bir anlatısı olarak kurgulandığı argümanı savunulacaktır. Metnin incelenmesinde, Edward Said'in Orientalism'i ve Arif Dirlik'in "Literature/Identity: Transnationalism, Narrative and Representation" adlı çalışmasında formule ettiği "politiksizleştirme" ve "tarihsizleştirme" kavramları kuramsal çerçeveyi oluşturacaktır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Vaka-Brown, Haremlik, Orientalism, Kültürel Kimlik, Kültürün Politiksizleştirilmesi, Kültürün Tarihsizleştirilmesi

Introduction

The national hold on literatures has been challenged and complicated by the growing popularity of "international" and ethnic literatures. Demetra Vaka-Brown's personal narrative, Haremlik: Some Pages From The Life of Turkish Women (1909) was re-published in the United States in 2004 as a part of a series entitled "Cultures in Dialogue." Due to the writer's ethnic identity, Haremlik's re-publication in such a favourable atmosphere invites attention to the book especially to see how it participates in contemporary discussions about the issue of cultural representation. In this paper, Vaka-Brown's representation of "Turkish women" and their lives in "haremlik" after her re-encounter with them at the beginning of the twentieth century will be explored. It will be argued that the writer's hold on her (cultural) identity as a Greek-Ottoman woman does not serve a "political" function despite her claim to the contrary; through Haremlik, Vaka-Brown attempts to write her own (personal) (hi)story rather than a collective story of "Turkish women" at the beginning of the twentieth century. The analysis of her narrative will mainly draw on Edward Said's Orientalism and Arif Dirlik's critique of contemporary depoliticization as well as dehistoricization of culture in his article, "Literature/Identity: Transnationalism, Narrative and Representation."

Demetra Vaka was born in İstanbul in 1877 into a financially comfortable, middle-class Greek-Ottoman family. In 1894, she accompanied the Ottoman consul (an ethnic Greek) to New York as a governess for his children. When the consul and his family had to return to Turkey in the following year, Vaka decided to stay in New York. First, she found an editing job in the Greek-American newspaper, Atlantis. Then she worked in some private colleges as a teacher of classical Greek and French. Later on, she became a journalist and a correspondent for publications such as The Atlantic Monthly, Century, The Delineator, Colliers Magazine and Asia. In 1904, she married Kenneth Brown.

The couple co-authored some romances; however, Vaka-Brown is the single author of the narratives such as Haremlik, which is her first personal narrative. The writer returned to Turkey in 1901, seven years after her immigration to the US, to observe critically Turkish women's lives before writing her book. She died in Chicago in 1946 (Kalogeras 107).

Haremlik begins with the writer's following note: "The contents of this book are not fictitious, unusual as parts of it may appear to Western readers. There has been some rearranging of facts, to make for compactness – incidents of several days have sometimes been told as of one. Substantially, however, everything is true as told" (Vaka-Brown). From the very beginning, Vaka-Brown warns her "Western readers" that the "unusual" events they will encounter in Haremlik are not the makings-up of her mind but rather they are "true" incidents. She strictly distinguishes between (imaginative) fiction and (historical) fact and wishes her book to be read as an example of the latter. It can be claimed that one of her motivations for this emphasis on factuality stems from a political purpose, which is voiced by the narrator early in the book as follows:

> [D]uring my stay in America I heard Turkey spoken of with hatred and scorn, the Turks reviled as despicable, their women as miserable creatures, living in practical slavery for the base desires of men. I had stood bewildered at this talk. Could it possibly be as the Americans said, and I never have known it?
>
> Now, I was to see for myself, and not only to see but to talk with the women, to ask them their thoughts about their lives and their customs. (13)

Vaka-Brown "stood bewildered" at the image of the people she had lived together for seventeen years in the eyes of American people. As her rhetorical question indicates, she is determined to reveal the facts specifically about "Turkish women" to her American readers. The passage above suggests, then, the writer's aim to return to Turkey was to challenge, and thereby correct the misrepresentation of a culture, which, she seems to think that she knows better than the "Americans." Vaka-Brown's embrace of her "Oriental" cultural identity , this passage implies, is a political stance taken against the contemptuous cultural representations of Turkey and Turks, of which she became aware during her stay in America. In "Literature/Identity: Transnationalism, Narrative and Representation" Dirlik levels a critique at contemporary depoliticization as well as dehistoricization of culture:

> Within the United States, [the] terms that define boundaries of difference are the legacies of the struggles of the 1960s that brought Chinese Americans, as well as other groups, into cultural and political recognition in the United States. A term such as 'Asian American' first appeared not as a term of cultural but of political identity.

> As far as we know, the term was coined by the distinguished Japanese-American historian Yuji Ichioka in the heat of political struggles in Berkeley/Oakland sometime in 1968. It is not that cultural identity was not important for those such as Ichioka, but that cultural identity was not conceived to be detachable from politics. And the goal of politics was transformative: transformative both of the constitution of the public in the United States, and of public consciousness, including the consciousness of those who were encompassed by the term 'Asian American.' History was deemed essential to this goal. (231)

One of Dirlik's aims is to emphasize "the necessity of attentiveness to historicity" (210) in questions of cultural identity and representation. The blurring of the boundaries between fiction and history, he holds, is not objectionable per se; yet, this does not mean that we can "dismiss history" or "privilege literary over historical constructions of identity" (209). If fictional forms of representation take over in the construction of the past, history as well as the political function of history are privatized – "politics conceived as public activity [is replaced by] . . . [privatized] identity politics" (213). What this entails, specifically in relation to ethnic groups and writers, is that when "evacuated of history" cultural identity they seek to assert and maintain is reified in the dominant culture (214).

When read in the light of Dirlik's remarks, Vaka-Brown's statements cited above may suggest that, as opposed to privatized identity politics that Dirlik criticizes, her narrative is informed by the significance of historicizing culture. Actually, her brief note to the reader prefacing the narrative may even suggest that Vaka-Brown privileges "history" over "fiction." Yet, as it will be argued in the rest of this paper, the narrative itself reveals that this is not the case. In and through her narrative, the writer capitalizes on the already-existing fiction about the "Orient"; constructing fictitious settings, she pursues her own oriental fantasies, and her remarks about "Turkish women" throughout her narrative remain as mere generalizations due to her partial treatment of her object of inquiry. Therefore, despite her claim to the contrary, Haremlik privileges "fiction" over "history," and Vaka-Brown's hold on her "Oriental" identity emerges as an espousal of fictitious "Orientalness" rather than a political attitude.

"Every writer on the Orient (and this is true even of Homer) assumes some Oriental precedent, some previous knowledge of the Orient, to which he refers and on which he relies," states Said (20). Orientalist writings therefore depend on that "previous knowledge" rather than the so-called "Orient." "At most, the 'real' Orient provoked a writer to his vision; it very rarely guided it" (22). Orientalist representations of the "Orient'" simply present the "Orient" as is imagined in other texts and thus in this "system for citing works and authors" (23) what is produced is a "free-floating mythology of the Orient" (53).

The acts of writing and reading, therefore, in the system of Orientalism, depend on "institutions, traditions, conventions, agreed-upon codes of understanding for their effects, not upon a distant amorphous Orient" (22). Vaka-Brown's narrative, Haremlik, constantly activates Orientalist codes of understanding. To begin with, throughout the narrative, the "East" is feminized, and the "Oriental" woman's beauty is foregrounded and depicted sensuously.

> The mist was slowly lifting – so slowly that one could imagine an invisible hand to be reluctantly drawing aside veils from the face of nature. As the air became clearer, the slender minarets were seen first above the other buildings; and then, little by little, Constantinapole, Queen of Cities, revealed herself to our hungry eyes. And as if Nature were but Constantinapole's handmaiden, the last of the fog was suddenly transmuted to glorious sunshine, that we might the more surely be surprised and dazzled with the beauty of the Sultan's capital. (1)

The passage above is the opening paragraph of Haremlik. The narrator arrives in İstanbul on a steamer and describes the scene. "Constantinapole," described as a veiled and dazzlingly beautiful woman, is stripped off her clothes in front of the passangers' "hungry eyes." The last remark is also suggestive of İstanbul as one of the women in the Sultan's harem. It is worth noticing here that the narrator, too, belongs to that group of "hungry eyes" who are all "Westerners." She does not simply interpret the Orientalist way the other passangers see İstanbul but she herself also reads and writes İstanbul from an Orientalist perspective, which, from the very first page, functions to satisfy Orientalist expectations on the part of the reader.

"While speaking she [Djimlah – the narrator's childhood friend] would clasp her hands above her head, the sleeves falling away from her white arms; she would half close her eyes, in a way that made the light shining through them softer; and her lips forming her words were fresh and crimson, like a rose with the dew on it" (61). This passage is not the sole example of the way "the Turkish woman" is depicted in the narrative. Vaka-Brown's visits to the harems provides the reader with intimate images of "Oriental" women who are, otherwise, strictly secluded behind closed doors and high walls away from the male gaze. In other words, "the sexualized display of the Oriental female body," which was according to Reina Lewis, "a central strand of Western Orientalism, fully developed and well-known by the second half of the nineteenth century" (57) informs Vaka Brown's narrative, as well.

Furthermore, "beauty" is emphasized more than anything else as the most peculiar feature of the "Eastern" woman. Describing "Aishe Hanoum," a woman from one of the harems the narrator visits, she refers to the images of women in "Rossetti paintings" : "Her eyes were that almond shape, the color, as Rossetti expresses it, like the sea and the sky mixed together" (124).

Similarly, in another instance she writes "I was especially attracted by a certain woman, whose type I had never met in flesh and blood before. To say that she looked like a Rossetti painting would be doing her scant justice, yet it was of the Blessed Damosel I thought when I saw her" (234). Later on in the narrative, the "Rossetti lady" emerges as a symbol: "She was the East itself: the mysterious East, with its strange ideas of love, and death and of religion" (268). The "East" is not only feminized but also described through a fictitious image which is quite well-known in the "West." The way the "East" as well as the "Eastern" woman is described demonstrates the narrator's attachment to the Orientalist discourse rather than an intention on her part to challenge Orientalist ways of seeing.

II.

In Haremlik, the "Occidental" is described as "sceptical," (8) or with "a mind full of . . . questioning," (12) whereas the "Oriental" who is "forbidden the truth – finds solace in the magnificence of his inventions" (5). These remarks echo those of a British officer mentioned by Said in Orientalism. Lord Cromer comments, for instance, on "the Oriental mind," which, he claims, "like his picturesque streets, is eminently wanting in symmetry. His reasoning is of the most slipshod description." In stark contrast to the "Oriental," who is "deficient in the logical faculty," the "European" "is a close reasoner . . . . he is by nature sceptical and requires proof before he can accept the truth of any propositon" (Said 38).

It is quite typical, Said notes, for Orientalists to feel "disappointment that the modern Orient is not at all like the texts" (100). The narrator in Haremlik, too, shares this feeling of disappointment. "In my sojourn among the Turkish women I had always been expecting to come across some wonderful, out-of-the-common romance; but their lives, one seen near at hand, were generally as uneventful as the most conventional western life," she laments (254). This observation, however, does not lead to any questioning on the part of the narrator with regard to her expectations; on the contrary, she keeps pursuing her "Oriental" dreams. "During my girlhood, although I had been in many haremliks, I had never happened to be in one where more than one wife was living, and they had all been somewhat Europanized. Selim Pasha's was the first old-fashioned harem which was opening its doors to me," she notes (63). Although Vaka-Brown witnesses a radical change in society in İstanbul (which is the outcome of the modernization movements in the Ottoman Empire that date back to the Tanzimat Reform in the nineteenth century), she is much more interested in the "romance" she has in her mind, which may be realized in Selim Pasha's harem. Such an attitude is quite typical, too, according to Said. "Memory of the modern Orient disputes imagination, sends one back to the imagination as a place preferable, for the European sensibility, to the real Orient," he holds (100-101). She does not only go back to her imagination but also attempts to turn her "dreams" into reality.

She persuades her friends, for instance, to travel not in the modern way they prefer but instead in the "old" style: "One day, they proposed that I should accompany them on a visit to a friend of theirs some seven hours distant. I accepted on condition that they would travel in the regular Turkish fashion and not in broughams," she writes (167). As Kalogeras puts it, "the narrator inscribes herself in the text as a theatre director who stages pageants rather than as an investigative reporter who searches for facts" (109).

The budding feminist movement in the Ottoman Empire is another source of discomfort for Vaka-Brown. She devotes an entire chapter, entitled "Suffragettes of the Harem," (153) to a secret meeting in which she participates during her stay in İstanbul. The meeting takes place in the house of "Hanoum Zeybah," who is the originator and president of the feminist society. The participants, "these forty-odd women, ranging in age from seventeen to forty, were drawn from the flower of the Turkish aristocracy," notes the narrator (167). During the meeting, president Zeybah and two other women make speeches which center on the necessity of women to "rise and break our bonds" (165). Zeybah emphasizes the significance of women's participation in administration as well as law-making processes and she holds that women, by nature, are more capable of ruling than men are (165). The following speakers, too, argue for the recognition of many capabilities women have, but which have been ignored so far by men (166). The narrator is "utterly disgusted at the whole meeting" (166) because she finds these women "lacking the sincerity, the spontaneity, and the frankness which usually characterize Turkish women" (166-167). She thinks they get infected by Western ideas – "they were all fed on French novels," she laments (170). In her long speech at the end to which all the women listen attentively, she gives them some recommendations such as acting in a more "sensible" way, having their meetings in the open and inviting the men, who are interested in their movement, as well (175). She finally adds that she is surprised at seeing they are not happy with their condition in Turkey because she thinks, "really, your troubles are not so serious as those of European women" (175).

As opposed to "the Turkish woman" the narrator has described so far as "happy" (14, 20), "gay and full of life" (15), "gigl[ing]" (134), "like children" (17), "natural comedians" (17), "devoted to [their] husband[s]" (18), these women are not content with their lives and are involved in a political movement. In other words, they contest the Orientalist image of the indolent "Eastern" woman. The narrator immediately arrives at the conclusion that it is due to their contact with "Western" ideas that they now feel uncomfortable with their lives. Otherwise, it is impossible, the narrator seems to suppose, for the "Oriental" mind, which is not "sceptical" at all like the "Occidental" mind, to involve in such critical thinking. For Vaka-Brown, these feminist women indulge in unnecessary and pretentious deeds; yet, there was in fact a large group of women in İstanbul at the beginning of the twentieth century who were struggling for the betterment of women's lives in the Ottoman Empire.

"For the period, prior to the establishment of the Republic [in 1923], we can identify over forty publications oriented toward women," states Demirdirek (66). She classifies the major demands voiced by women in these journals as follows: the demand for education, which is "the most frequently referred to and most clearly expressed demand" (67); the demand for employment (69) in that women wanted to work outside the home and gain economic independence; the subject of marriage: women discussed especially "the disadvantages of arranged marriages" and expressed their preference for "nuclear families" (70); the demand for changing the attire (71); and the demand for vote (73). Especially in relation to the women's demand for change in marriage practices, Demirdirek emphasizes that it would be wrong to argue that they merely stem from "the exposure to various alluring images and discourses of westernized life styles in cities such as İstanbul, Selanik and İzmir. Women's writings on this subject clearly state that their insistence on independent domiciles stems from the discomforts of their own living arrangements" (71). Vaka-Brown's remarks, therefore, regarding feminist women in harems seem to result mainly from her disappointment at encountering "Turkish women" who do not correspond to the Orientalist image in her mind.

In the year when Haremlik was published, Vaka-Brown wrote an article for the magazine, The Atlantic Monthly. The article includes a report about the interview she held with "Refeka Hanoum," "the first woman to be initiated into the Young Turks party" (697). She tells the reader that she met Refeka Hanoum during her stay in İstanbul while she was observing "Turkish women" in haremliks. Interestingly, however, Refeka Hanoum is not mentioned in Haremlik although a whole chapter is devoted to the women's movement in the Ottoman society. The arguments Refeka Hanoum voices during their interview cover a large space in the article. She talks about "her ideals, her hopes, and her work" (697); she states she believes in women's emancipation, which will entail, in her view, the country's regeneration (699). She shares with Vaka-Brown the information as to how they manage to send women spies to Sultan Abdul Hamid's harem so that they can organize the women there, as well, to help the Young Turks (699). Refeka Hanoum's remarkable exclusion from Haremlik might be stemming from the text's participation in the genre of the personal narrative in which Vaka-Brown's own perspective regarding Turkish women and feminism are on the foreground and it seems that she was not willing to include in her narrative any other perspective that could contest her disapproval of the Ottoman women's movement.

This is not the sole example of the writer's partial treatment of "the Turkish woman" in Haremlik. The sub-title of the book, "Some Pages from the Life of Turkish Women," needs to be delimited because the women whom Vaka-Brown observes are all urban, upper-class women living in İstanbul. The narrative, therefore, is usually set in the luxurious houses of the city: "I arrived at their [her childhood friends, Nassarah and Tsakran's] house a little before lunch time.

A French maid received me and helped me off with my wraps, and then a slave conducted me to the Turkish bath [in the house] […] After I had been thoroughly scrubbed and put into clean clothes, another slave brought me a cup of black coffee," she writes (15). Or, describing a visit to another house together with her friends, she notes that "all the slaves were in the hall, as we entered, and threw rose-blossoms over us" (33). Later on they go out to the garden "overhanging the sea. There our dinner was served, beneath the light of Chinese lanterns, while the soothing waves of the Propontis [the Sea of Marmara] rhythmically lapped the foot of our garden wall" (35). Vaka-Brown pays no attention to the lives of women who scrub her or serve her food. Female slaves in these households are only mentioned in passing; and at those rare times when they speak, it is only to praise their mistresses' grace or beauty.

Furthermore, the life of the peasant woman in nineteenth-and-early-twentieth-century Ottoman Empire was utterly different from that of the rich urban woman. "[Village women] not only brought water from the fountain and watched over their children. They could obtain humble or menial work," notes Goodwin (185). "The peasant woman's day was filled with labour and so was her spare time because she would be spinning wool if only to make clothes for the family." (185). The living conditions of poor women in the cities were not better. In "a humble family . . . the mother had neither slave nor servant but had to do her own work" (184). In addition, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, thousands of women – especially young women – worked at the factories, that made huge profits through "cheap" female labour. Now, going back to Vaka-Brown's earlier remark that "Turkish women's" problems are not so serious as those of European women, we can say that it is a sweeping generalization and a sign of her partial treatment of the women she aims to represent. In relation to the life styles of her childhood friends, Nassarah and Tsakran, the narrator states as follows:

> It is true that both Nassarah and Tsakran were sweet, commonplace young women – not very different by nature from many commonplace American friends I have, whose lives are spent with dressmakers, manicures, masseuses, and in various frivolous pursuits. With these two young women and their friends I had a peaceful and pleasant time. Except for the absence of men I might almost have been visiting an American household. (27-28)

This passage above is remarkable because this is the only instance in the text where there is a deviation from the writer's Orientalist attitude in that it challenges the notion of the hierarchical difference between lives in the "West" and in the "East." Foregrounding a similarity between "Western" and "Eastern" women (who belong to similar social classes), the narrator problematizes the latter's "otherization" by the former; yet, this critique is subsumed by the overall Orientalist discourse used in Haremlik.

An "enthusiastic reviewer" from New York Times (1909) writes that Vaka-Brown's narrative "suggests that we have been mostly wrong most of the time in our judgement of Turkish conditions surrounding Turkish women;" yet, he still arrives at the conclusion that "the Turk is Oriental, as is the Japanese, and we are not so ready nowadays to admit that Japanese human nature is identical with English or American human nature" (BR 304). This seems to be a position shared by Vaka-Brown as well.

Conclusion

Throughout Haremlik, Vaka-Brown foregrounds her "Oriental" identity only when it comes to her "knowing" Orientals much better than "Occidentals." "I know all their [the Turks'] good points and their virtues," she notes (12); "I knew Turkish women too well," she remarks in another instance (37); "I was talking about the Turks, lately, with some very intelligent American men, and it was only then I fully realized the impossibility for the Occidental mind, and especially for the active and restless American mind, to comprehend the Turkish temperament," she holds (221); and, adds that "to be able to judge the Orientals one has, like me, to be born among them, to live their life for a time" (222). Actually, early in the twentieth century, Vaka-Brown "was considered an authority [in the U.S.] on the Eastern question and authority on life in the Orient. In fact some of her books such as Haremlik went into multiple printings and were still in print in the thirties" (Kalogeras 108). Vaka-Brown emphasizes her difference from "the Occidental mind," which, she otherwise considers a significant characteristic she, too, possesses, to construct an authoritative cultural identity for herself rather than to struggle for a political identity for transformative purposes.

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