

Women and Slavery in the Late Ottoman Empire: The Design of Difference

By *Madeline C. Zilfi*

New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 281 pages, ISBN 9780521515832, \$95 (hardback).

Professor Zilfi, a well-established, leading historian of the Ottoman Empire, has joined the small but constantly growing group of scholars interested in the study of Ottoman enslavement. Her current book is a most welcome addition to the second wave of studies devoted to the complex history of the practice, which is one of the most diverse and multi-faceted phenomena in the annals of human societies. While Zilfi clearly contributes to the discourse about the topic, she—refreshingly—does not pretend to reinvent the wheel, but rather treats the works of her predecessors with respect, fully engaging with their studies and demonstrating remarkable understanding of the intricacies they sought to explain in an area that had been uncharted territory.

The first wave of such studies began in the late 1970s and early 1980s, following the pioneering work of scholars like Brunschvig and Lewis, while the second came during the first decade of the twenty first century. These works were mostly concerned with locating the sources and providing the basic elements that made up the system of hunting down individuals outside the Empire, enslaving and transporting them into its domains, and then exploiting their labor and sexuality in urban and rural communities within its boundaries. They have, therefore, relied mostly on archival and narrative sources in manuscript form, and consequently utilized published accounts to a more limited extent. Madeline Zilfi reverses that order of things: she stresses the

accounts that had been neglected by earlier writers on enslavement, providing what is undoubtedly the most exhaustive synthesis of such sources (peppered with a few cases from the *Müftülik* of Istanbul, which, based on the author's previous work, offers less archival evidence than this reviewer had expected).

Thus, Professor Zilfi presents the most comprehensive treatment of Ottoman enslavement to date, in what might be described as a re-interpretive work, rather than one that unearths new and inaccessible sources. This is certainly not meant as a detraction from the clear value of *Women and Slavery in the Late Ottoman Empire*; rather, it is a tribute to the author, who managed to revise some of the main notions in the field about what enslavement was like for the individuals who endured it and for the men and women who enslaved them. Zilfi's reading of the sources and the literature brings to the fore the socio-cultural and the human, and positions her as the prosecutor of the Ottomans on account of this heinous practice. In that, she does not break new grounds, but rather stresses, underlines, and further elaborates the position taken by the leading writers on Ottoman enslavement, an achievement that is nonetheless well worth the effort.

Although *Women and Slavery in the Late Ottoman Empire* seeks to deal with just that, it is in fact a far more ambitious endeavor. It purports to provide a comprehensive account of Ottoman "state and so-

ciety,” as Chapter 1 clearly demonstrates. In *Empire and Imperium*, as the titles of the subsections indicates, Zilfi talks about: Imperial Istanbul, Seeing Like the Ottoman State, and Patriarchal Patterns. She identifies five hierarchical “dualities,” which undergirded the Ottoman worldview: the first was external, between the Abode of Islam and the Abode of War; the other four were internal, beginning with the Muslim/non-Muslim, going through the *askeri/reaya* and free/slave, and ending with gender categories. The author admits the overlapping that existed between these “polarities,” but still finds them useful in her attempt to grasp the vast notion of *Ottomanness*. The depiction of socio-cultural realities that precedes and follows that section is interesting and useful, but it really relates much more to Istanbul than to the rest of the Empire (see further blow on this).

Nevertheless, there are three major achievements in Zilfi’s book, which deserve mention even in a brief review. The first is her success in contextualizing Ottoman enslavement: socially, culturally, and politically. Following Peirce and myself, the author rightly sees military-administrative enslavement as belonging to the same category as the other, less glorified forms of bondage, which enables her to integrate all aspects of the institution. She goes beyond what has been achieved thus far in showing that enslavement was part and parcel of the Ottoman way of life, in fact inseparable from what the Ottoman Empire was all about. This also brings her to assign greater importance to enslavement in Ottoman societies than is usually acceptable in scholarly writings of the past quarter century (more on this below).

The second accomplishment is putting to sleep, once and for all, what I have called

the “good treatment thesis,” namely the apologetic argument that Ottoman, and by extension Islamic, enslavement was milder than slavery in other societies (the “part of the family” argument). Zilfi deconstructs the notion aspect by aspect, unrelentingly showing that in no part of the practice—including *kul*-harem enslavement—was there any possibility to sustain such a false, forgiving evaluation of what being enslaved really meant in the lives of the women and men who had to endure it. Although I have adopted a similar position on the issue, Zilfi’s forceful and passionate arguments surpass what has been argued in this regard before.

The third major achievement of *Women and Slavery in the Late Ottoman Empire* lies in the gendered view it applies to the study of Ottoman enslavement. Again, here Zilfi is not the first to be aware of the need to provide such perspective, but she does take it to new levels. “The centrality of women and female slavery, as social realities and as representations of Ottoman sovereignty and its vulnerabilities in the period of study,” she states at the outset, “constitutes the core argument of the book and the main counterpoint to the conventional wisdom.” (xi-xii) Indeed, her gendered reading of the sources provides new insights into not only enslavement, but also the entirety of social and political interactions in Ottoman societies, though I would not say it totally revolutionizes our view of them. To my mind, at least, Zilfi’s interpretation belongs here more to the “vulnerability” paradigm than to the “empowerment” one, a legitimate preference no doubt, but one that I would not fully embrace.

Such a wide-ranging project cannot be, almost by definition, free of faults, although in this case they are not major and do not

detract from the importance of the work. Professor Zilfi tries to explain why her emphasis on Istanbul does not make her book less about the entire Empire, because the fact that it was the largest city and the administrative center “deeply implicated [it] in the life and well-being of Ottoman subjects elsewhere.”(xi) True enough, but difficult to accept when Istanbul realities differed in so many ways from those experienced by much of the population living outside the capital. Even if we accept that Istanbul can serve as a model for urban life in other large Ottoman cities, we would still have to account for the vast majority of the sultan’s subjects, who lived in rural or pastoral communities.

In a way, only an historian who has not worked on the Arabic-speaking provinces can offer such a generalization. Zilfi does sporadically refer to Egypt, North Africa, and the Arabian Peninsula, but she appears to be somewhat removed from the discourse about those regions when writing about them. For example, my own *State and Society in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Egypt*,¹ published two decades ago, addresses many of the socio-cultural issues of Ottoman urban life that interest Professor Zilfi, with similar interpretations in most cases, but she seems unaware of it and its relevance to her current book.

Until now, the perceived wisdom in the field was that despite the interest in Ottoman enslavement, it was not as central to the Empire as slavery was to Atlantic societies. It was not economically essential as enslaved labor was to the US, Brazil, or the Caribbean, and enslaved military-administrative officeholders lost much of their political importance by the nineteenth century, it has been argued. Professor Zilfi believes to the contrary that enslavement

was much more central to Ottoman life, and that in many ways—social, cultural, economic, and political—it was germane to being Ottoman; in fact it constituted *Ottomanness*. As one who has devoted a significant part of his scholarly career to the study of Ottoman enslavement, I found this comforting and reassuring. However, and with all my sincere desire, I am yet to be convinced of this newly-found *raison d’être*; although I am willing to agree that we may have underestimated the role of slavery in Ottoman societies, we are still not at the point of embracing Zilfi’s all-important role thesis. This is, in a way, connected to my next and final point of mild criticism.

In order to be able to assign such an important role to enslavement in the Ottoman Empire, Professor Zilfi had to do two things simultaneously: she needed to augment the importance of Caucasus enslavement and the role of *kul*-harem slaves in the Ottoman body politic, and she needed to play down the numbers and significance of African enslavement in the Empire. When you do both, the net result is that you can prolong well into the nineteenth century the highly important role played by military-administrative enslavement until the eighteenth, with all the significant implications this carries for politics and the self view of Ottomans. Thus, Ottoman slavery becomes mostly white, and African women are relegated to a lesser role, relegated as it were to the margins not only of society (where they really existed), but also to the margins of the phenomenon of enslavement itself.

To do that, as Professor Zilfi chooses, you need to ignore Ralph Austen’s standard estimations of the traffic and the size of African diasporas in the Middle East

and the Indian Ocean (his article is cited in the bibliography, though) and privilege a recent study by John Wright,² which raises doubts about certain estimates of the numbers of enslaved Africans crossing the Sahara. Here again, I confess that I doubt that we have been given a solid evidentiary basis in order to revise the view that nineteenth century Ottoman enslavement was overwhelmingly female and African, and that the numbers of Circassians and Georgians enslaved by the Ottomans were not high enough to offset the picture. For the Caucasus, too, the figures we have been using tell us that it was mainly a story about enslaved women, much less about men, much less about the continued recruitment of *kuls*, although that practice was still in existence then too.

All that notwithstanding, Madeline Zilfi's *Women and Slavery in the Late Ottoman Empire* is an important contribution to the

growing discourse about Ottoman enslavement. It is a scholar's book for scholars, not intended for undergraduates enrolled in introductory courses about the Middle East or slavery. This is due mainly to its frequent recourse to the specialist's toolbox and vocabulary, which require prior knowledge and familiarity with the historical literature, methodology, and background. However, all specialized libraries and historians of the Ottoman Empire, the Islamic Middle East and North Africa, and those working in Enslavement Studies should definitely own it; and the author should be commended on her accomplished and valuable work.

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Endnotes

1. Cambridge University Press, 1990.
2. *The Trans-Saharan Slave Trade* (London, 2007).

A Moveable Empire: Ottoman Nomads, Migrants and Refugees

By *Reşat Kasaba*

Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009, 194 pages, ISBN 9780295989488.

Reşat Kasaba is a well-established, highly competent social scientist with a profound interest in the study of socio-economic processes of change experienced in the Ottoman Empire. In this book that addresses the growing interest in migration as a social, and thus historical force, Kasaba offers his readers an excellent introductory study to human movement in the context of six hundred years of Ottoman rule. This book, in the end, is a valuable, but limited in its scope, textbook covering the Otto-

man Empire that can be used in the undergraduate classroom rather than a graduate seminar.

A Moveable Empire develops the theme of how migrants' and refugees contributed to human history in ways that allows social scientists to focus on institutions and their interrelationship with human communities in all their diversity. By placing his analysis within the larger context of the Ottoman Empire's development over centuries, Kasaba hones in on the evolution of