

Zeyneb Hanoum: Turkish Traveling Pioneer in 19th Century Paris

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The Turkish woman traveler, Zeyneb Hanoum, sought a life different from the traditional Ottoman lifestyle she had grown to know. She wanted a life free from typical gender roles, stereotypical attitudes towards Turkish woman, and cultural freedom. Hanoum hoped to change her path in life by immersing herself in Western European culture, especially in Paris. She was an unusual sort of traveler in the 19th century, as Reina Lewis notes in her introduction to, *A Turkish Woman's European Impressions*. "When this book was printed in 1913, the idea that a Turkish woman—a woman that the Western reader would presume had been raised in a harem—could express herself at all would have been quite remarkable." Hanoum's spirit and soul could not be easily conquered and she would reach for what she thought she deserved—freedom. Hanoum's desire for freedom and opportunity in France led her to overlook French stereotypes of Turkish women, but her hopes were disappointed when she discovered first-hand that France was more prejudiced against Turks and less liberating for women than she expected.

Zeyneb Hanoum was the pen name of Hadidjé Zennour, a Turkish woman who lived in the Constantinople area during the remaining years of the Ottoman Empire. Her family was part of the Ottoman Muslim elite because of her father's job as Minister of Foreign Affairs for Sultan Abdülhamid II. While her father gave her and her sister a Western style education, he still expected his daughters to live as traditional secluded Turkish ladies, or *hanım*. Her father's goal in exposing Hanoum and her sister to Western style education was not to create independent women but to create more suitable and desired women as wives, ones that would properly represent affluent households. Hanoum was not a woman who desired to live as a *hanım* and started to rebel against her father's expectations. As soon as Hanoum was told of her father's

plans for her to be married to his secretary and protégé, she would not let her voice be silenced. Hanoum wanted to be heard and her goal was “to attract Western sympathy for the problems of the educated Ottoman woman.”¹ By learning to speak five different languages, Hanoum became confident that the power of her writings would bring forth justice and truth. Hanoum and her sister met with French writer, Pierre Loti, in 1904 while he visited Istanbul and hoped to inspire him to write a book about the restrictions faced by Turkish women and the various situations of Muslim Ottoman women. The sisters enchanted Loti and he included them as heroines in his novel, *Les Désenchantées*, but under false names for their safety from the repressive regime of Sultan Abdülhamid II. This was not to be her last encounter with a French man or with adventure.

After their experiences with Loti and his book, Hanoum and her sister decided it was time to embark to France. Before the two sisters could leave though, Hanoum had to decide if she was ready to leave her Ottoman life behind. In her travel account, Hanoum discusses many incidents in her life that influenced her pursuit of freedom. She attributes many of her liberal attitudes to her disgust with the Hamidian regime that ruled Turkey during her childhood. She wrote, “But how can I be otherwise when the best years of my life have been poisoned by the horrors of the Hamidian regime?”² Even though Hanoum depicts the government as an abusive one, many people found the Hamidian regime appealing because it was one that was free from outside Western influences.³ The Hamidian regime was created to fix the past mistakes of the Tanzimat regime that ruled from 1839 until the First Constitutional Era of 1876. Those against the

¹ Reina Lewis, “Iconic Disenchantment: Evaluating Femininity in the East and the West” in Zeyneb Hanoum’s *A Turkish Woman’s European Impressions* (New Jersey: Gorgias Press LLC, 2004), vii.

² Zeyneb Hanoum, *A Turkish Woman’s European Impressions* (New Jersey: Gorgias Press LLC, 2004), 35.

³ Niyazi Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 477.

Hamidian regime were typically the Young Turks who remained loyal to the Young Ottoman heritage of union and progress and “spoke out in the name of liberty and portrayed Abdülhamid as a tyrant.”⁴ Still, the Turks believed that the Hamidian regime would be a regime of their own doing—it was free from Western thought and influence. With that said, it is no wonder Hanoum was against the regime since she was an avid supporter of Western nations and was educated in the Western-style. Abdülhamid “fostered everything that preserved, glorified, and justified tradition.”⁵ Tradition was not what Hanoum was waiting for. She realized that she could not wait for change, but she must go out and find that change and forge forward with her life.

Hanoum and her sister Melek Hanoum decided they must flee Turkey in 1906, after their successful adventure in Loti’s book, *Les Désenchantées*. They were no longer safe from punishment under the Ottoman government once the book was released. The two women traveled to France in 1906 before the height of the book’s release, and Zeyneb Hanoum wrote letters to Grace Ellison, an English feminist, who would document the sisters’ experiences there. By the time the sisters arrived in France, the French men and women had heard of their trip. Their characters in Loti’s book had intrigued the country, especially the French women who wanted to host the real *désenchantées* in their home. “The fascination with their fictional alter egos was to continue as the image of the cultured but doomed *désenchantée* began to coalesce into an icon of oppressed, but elegant, Ottoman femininity.”⁶ The sisters began to adapt to French and Parisian life by wearing the fashions of the time as well as engaging in activities that other French women would perform—teatime, conversing, and immersing themselves into the culture. It was almost imperative that the sisters adapt, for their father had publicly disowned

⁴ Berkes, 253.

⁵ Berkes, 255.

⁶ Lewis, x.

them—orders of the sultan—after their fleeing of Turkey. Unfortunately their acceptance into the Western French society would be tainted with stereotypical questions and ignorance. Hanoum put great hope into creating a home in Western Europe and France, but her hope would not be enough to shield her from the reality.

In France, women were experiencing greater freedoms than in Turkey but by very little. The French feminist 19th century newspaper *La Citoyenne*, compared France's gendered conditions with societal empires. The articles by founder Hubertine Auclert, "contrasted the circumstances of French women with those of women in Niger, Tonkin, and Tunisia, as well as in countries such as Italy, Ireland, Russia, and Turkey."⁷ The articles concluded that French women had more advantages and there was an emphasis on the "uncivilized" aspects of women's lives and status that related to those of Algeria and Turkey.⁸ Even though there was progression towards the women's suffrage movement in France, the movement was still in the early stages of development when Hanoum visited in 1906. Since she had never witnessed a women's movement in Turkey, her enthusiasm for more women's suffrage in France was misguided. She was quickly awakened to reality after encountering various local residents whom had invited her to their homes. The people of Paris greeted Hanoum as the heroine of Loti's book and with fascinated curiosity, bombarding her with questions about her life in Turkey and as a Muslim. France's knowledge of Turkish women was very limited and stereotypical. *La Citoyenne* addressed one of the most common stereotypes associated with the Turks, stating that Turks find polygamy to be a good thing and should be a social institution. While this stereotype was typically seen with disgust by Western societies, *La Citoyenne* applauded the Turks for honestly

⁷ Carolyn J. Eichner, "*La citoyenne* in the World: Hubertine Auclert and Feminist Imperialism" *French Historical Studies* 32, 1 (2009): 63.

⁸ Eichner, 63.

embracing their polygamy. The loyalty that the Turks held with their convictions in comparison to the French, who are loyal to their “instincts and appetites,” was a fresh a loyalty that the French feminists hoped would catch on in French society.⁹ While the feminist paper applauded the Turks honesty, it was politically incorrect to say all Turks practice polygamy. The French ignored the corrections and Hanoum was frequently asked stereotypical questions to satisfy the French’s curiosity in understanding a Turkish woman’s impressions of Western Europe.¹⁰

Hanoum’s personal experience with stereotypes included an occurrence when a French woman asked, “How many wives has your father?” to which Hanoum replied, “as many as your husband, Madame.”¹¹ The ongoing development of French society and women’s suffrage did not stop Hanoum from experiencing what it was to be a foreigner in a Western society.

Hanoum was very educated not only in her own history, religion, and culture but also in those of other nations. It is peculiar that Hanoum decided to leave out the history of France’s occupation and influence on the Ottoman Empire in her travel account, since it did influence her home country’s history. “The nineteenth century introduced a crucial shift in efforts to broaden knowledge which up to that time had been largely disinterested and reflective of a genuine warmth for the countries studied.”¹² From this time onwards, interest in the Mediterranean Arab countries was inextricably linked to France’s expansionist ambitions. The French’s presence in the Ottoman Empire during the 19th century was for developmental reasons—scientific and expansionist.¹³ During the years of the French “coup d’éventail” in Algeria, the Ottoman Empire was targeted. The turbulent history of those years and the French’s goals for the Ottoman Empire,

⁹ Eichner, 75-76.

¹⁰ Hanoum, 51.

¹¹ Hanoum, 49.

¹² André Raymond, “French Studies of the Ottoman Empire’s Arab Provinces,” *Mediterranean Historical Review* 66, 2 (2002), 55.

¹³ Raymond, 56.

“led to experiments that gave some power to Arab leaders in the countryside,”¹⁴ which induced the barbaric behavior of the French to the Arabs. The French occupation of the Arab nations created a more miserable, ignorant, and barbaric Muslim society than in previous years. The French influence on Turkey in the 19th century contributed to some of the hindrances that Hanoum despised so much in Istanbul. “It appears that the *Sabah* columnist had been influenced by the agrarian colonies in France, Netherlands, and Switzerland, where hundreds of vagrants were re-educated through agricultural work.”¹⁵ Even though Sultan Abdülhamid II wished to prevent outside Western countries from interfering with his ruling of Turkey, the past influences of Western countries, especially France, already had made their mark.

Hanoum began to notice, little by little, that her evolution into a Western woman was faltering. In her letters to Ellison, she spends more time discussing how she still remembers the ways of Turkish life, what it is to be a Turkish woman, and her connection to Turkey. “There are habits, my dearest friend, which cannot be lost in the West any more than they can be acquired in the East,” Hanoum writes to Ellison in regards to her letter writing techniques.¹⁶ Soon, she begins to experience the negative aspects of Western life, including gambling. It is not long after this experience that Hanoum begins to end her letters with thoughts about her home in Turkey, “but in spite of all my efforts my thoughts wandered, and I was far away in Turkey.”¹⁷ Hanoum’s optimism begins to waver and her ailing health, poor financial status, and constant misunderstanding of the culture push her towards leaving Paris and returning to Turkey. She says, “I think—yes, I almost think I have had enough of the West now, and want to return to the East,

¹⁴ Zeynep Çelik, *Empire, Architecture, and the City* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), 11.

¹⁵ Nadir Ozbek, “‘Beggars’ and ‘Vagrants’ in Ottoman State Policy and Public Discourse 1876-1914,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 45, 1 (2009): 788.

¹⁶ Hanoum, 147.

¹⁷ Hanoum, 150.

just to get back the old experience of calm.”¹⁸ Sadly for Hanoum, neither Paris nor Turkey felt like real homes to her, but in the end she did have to choose. “Yet here in the West what a difference! I have actually written to my father and begged him, should I die in Paris, to have me taken home and buried in a Turkish cemetery.”¹⁹

It was a big risk for Hanoum and her sister to abandon their lives in Turkey in search of freedom, and unfortunately for Hanoum, it resulted in her return to Turkey, the very place in which she did not feel free. While in France, Hanoum became disillusioned with the life available to women in the West and found the rigors of trying to survive in a market economy insufficient compensation for the increased but still restricted freedoms of non-segregated society.²⁰ Towards the conclusion of her travel account, Hanoum reflects on her previous expectations of France,

Do you remember with what delight I came to France, the country of Liberté, Egalité, and Fraternité? But now I have seen those three magic words in practice, how the whole course of my ideas have changed! Not only are my theories on the nature of governments no longer the same, but my confidence in the individual happiness that each can obtain from these governments is utterly shattered.²¹

Hanoum doesn't directly state that she overlooked the French stereotypes of Turkish women with her high hopes and unrealistic expectations but she does reveal that she has come face to face with reality and the question of what were her expectations of her travels? She retains her title as a *désenchantée*, but now her disappointment is in the West. As Hanoum returns home to Turkey on a ship, she does not return as a woman of Paris, she returns as, “*Désenchantée* I left

¹⁸ Hanoum, 155.

¹⁹ Hanoum, 161.

²⁰ Lewis, x.

²¹ Hanoum, 237.

Turkey, *désenchantée* I have left Europe. Is that role to be mine ‘til the end of my days?—Your affectionate friend, Zeyneb.”²²

²² Hanoum, 246.

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