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WHITE INK



Dr. Abdul Haq Al Sanabi

The Constitution of the Haremlik: Laws of Discipline and Control within "The House of Felicity"

Despite the solid political structure that characterized the Ottoman Empire in the past, there is a consensus among historians (although they are few) that the "Haremlik" was a parallel institution that relied on its own power. The Haremlik was the center of decision and direction in many major decisions that were planned before being approved by the Ottoman Porte. The influence of the Haremlik in guiding the Ottoman political decision reached the point that it was called the "Sultanate of the Harem" or "Sultanate of Women" (Turkish: Kadınlar saltanatı), considering that it was, in practice, a state within the state. This is what made it a rich material for many TV dramas, which dealt with the phenomenon of "The Sultan's Harem" in an extensive manner with little objectivity and historical control, given the scarcity of references that were unable to explore the shadow areas within this strange and secret space.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, or what is known as the reign of the second period's sultans, the Haremlik in addition to the Aghas, constituted an indomitable political power. This caused some to call this historical period in the Ottoman Empire the title of "The government of Women (harem) and Eunuchs". This matter can depict a large part of the truth, according to some evidence collected by specialists in the history of the Sultanate.

Through the available references, the hierarchy system and the functional tasks assigned to the harem who are responsible for managing the Haremlik can be presented as follows:

The Great sultana or "The Mother Sultana"

In Turkish, it is "Valide sultan". She is considered to be the most important figure inside the Haremlik and the most influential one within the Ottoman Sarayi. She is the only one who has the ability to communicate with the outside world as the mother of the ruling sultan. The mother sultana acquires this position once her son is appointed to the throne of the Ottoman Empire. She was transferred from the Old Sarayi to the Ottoman Porte in a great Parade called "The Parade of the Mother Sultana" to begin exercising her influence as the highest female official within the Haremlik.

In parallel with this distinguished position, the mother sultana plays important roles related to managing the Haremlik and providing the necessary advice to the sultan due to her accurate knowledge of what is going on inside "The House of Felicity". She also manages some endowments, whether within Anatolia or in other regions of the Sultanate, such as the country of the Two Holy Mosques. This is what made her gain financial power in addition to her political and protocolary position within the Haremlik, which made some describe her as the actual ruler of the Ottoman Empire in many historical stages of the Sultanate.

Kadinefendi class

They formed a class of beauties who gave birth to a son to the ruling sultan and had a special rank within the royal palace. A group of maidservants and eunuchs were serving them in a terrible competitive atmosphere dominated by envy, cunning and deception to win the throne for one of their sons. The Belle who gave birth to the sultan's eldest son was called "**Baş Kadın**" and thus she would be, in practice, the next "mother sultana" within the Ottoman Haremlik. In addition to these main ranks within the Haremlik, there are some important jobs performed by the maidservants according to the hierarchical ranks defined by the "The Haremlik constitution", including the "Kalfa", which is considered one of the maidservants who have a higher position than the rest of the servants and has a central role in the management of the Haremlik. There are also those who have been called "**Gözde**", which is higher than the Kalfa and means the maidservant who has captured the attention of officials inside the palace and not necessarily the Sultan himself, which allows her to rise within The House of Felicity. As for the one who capture the Sultan's attention, even temporarily, she is called "**Iqbal**" and has a special rank within the Haremlik. In addition to these "protocolary" or "routine" positions, there are positions that can be considered as "technical" and depend on the competence and honesty of some harems, and here we are talking about **the treasurer and jewelry Curator**.

After this presentation of the functional tasks, we have to go through, without much detail, the tools of Discipline and Control imposed by the customary constitution of the Haremlik, based on the sensitivity and danger of this institution, whose importance increased due to the desire of the Ottoman sultans to have the largest number of sons to strengthen the Ottoman lineage. It should be noted that most of these sultans preferred to have sons from their concubines instead of their legal wives, given that most of them belonged to large families and their loyalty to family fanaticism prevailed over loyalty to the sultan. Therefore, the fear was that power would pass to these families in the event that the throne passed to one of the sons of the sultans' legitimate wives.

It can be asserted that "The Haremlik" remained for many years a very disciplined place far from what the term "The House of Felicity" might imply. It was a regular school (like Enderün) following a set of strict disciplines which, if broken, would subject offenders to severe punishments, in many cases to the death penalty.

In this context, the Haremlik enclosed a group of suites dedicated to the mother sultana, his wives, young sons and some beautiful maidservants, in addition to the royal room, which had a privileged location allowing the sultan to roam inside the Haremlik with the help of the "Kaya", who is one of the largest employees of the Haremlik that was entrusted with organizing the Sultan's visits to his women.

One of the rituals that marked the ceremonies of the Sultan's entry into the Haremlik was his wearing of silver shoes that emit loud noises to cause a commotion and draw the attention of the maidservants and push them to adopt an exceptional position and special behavior by bowing and not raising their heads to see the face of the Caliph.

In terms of security, the strict controls that governed movements within the Haremlik were imposed by a set of constraints linked to the affiliation of the maidservants to groups of countries that were included in the category of "enemy countries or empires". Therefore, many of the maidservants formed a fifth column for these countries inside the royal palaces, which made the rulers of the Ottoman family establish a strict constitution regulating the movement and dealings within the Haremlik while preventing any contact of the maidservants and eunuchs with the outside world, with the exception of the mother sultan.

In this regard, the maidservants, as soon as they entered the palace, were subjected to a very rigorous educational formation, starting with their conversion to Islam, then arranging them according to the ranks we mentioned, while teaching them their duties and rights and training to discipline. They were subjected to strict control by those of a higher degree of maidservants or eunuchs and aghas. In the event of non-compliance with the internal constitution of the Haremlik, the maidservants were subjected to forms of punishment whose severity varies according to the type of violation that was committed. Punishments start from restraining, imprisonment and flogging by black eunuchs, and the punishment may reach execution in a hideous way, as they were loaded into a bag filled with stones and thrown into the waters of the Bosphorus, where the Sarayi of the Haremlik is located in the Ottoman Topkapi Palace. These harsh punishments push the harem to perfect their work in an atmosphere of sincerity mixed with terror, which ensured discipline and the normal success of the affairs of the Haremlik.

Because the constitution of the Haremlik was not a written document, its customary nature made it difficult to document and record what was going on inside "The House of Felicity". Accordingly, there is a small number of historians who dealt with this secret institution accurately.

In general, it can be said that daily life inside the Haremlik, or "The House of Felicity" was like the activity of a military barracks in the perfect discipline of a strict protocolary regime. It is what finds justification in the fact that the Haremlik, during a period of time, was a state within the state. Most of the major decisions were arranged within the walls of this institution, which was the basis that gave birth to senior statesmen, headed by the Ottoman Sultan himself.