

## MELEK HANIM INTRODUCTION

Born in 1814 Marie Dejean changed her name to Melek Hanım and converted to Islam upon her marriage to her second husband, Kıbrıslı Mehmed Emin Pasha- three times grand vizier, governor of Edirne and Aleppo, ambassador to London and St. Petersburg. Melek Hanım and Mehmed Emin pasha had three children Ayşe Sıdıka a daughter and two sons Muharrem who died in infancy and Mustafa Djehad. After her rather dramatic repudiation and divorce Melek Hanım was exiled to Anatolia but she escaped to Istanbul and from there to Europe with her children. During her years in Europe two texts were published under her name *Thirty Years in the Harem* and *Six Years in Europe: Sequel to Thirty Years in the Harem*. In the last page of *Six Years of Europe*, Melek Hanım has learned of Mehmed Emin Pasha's death (1871), her daughter's elopement and as she writes in despair: "Husband, daughter, wealth, position, prospects gone!" (332). She adds that she was faced with "supplying the necessities of existence." (332) While she insists that the sole merit of her two texts is "their truthfulness," (333) Irvin Schick in his introduction to *Thirty Years in the Harem* calls attention to the inaccuracies in her texts and casts doubt on the authorship of Melek Hanım. Schick suggests that the antislavery, abolitionist editor Louis Alexis Chamerovzow's influential role is evident in *Six Years in Europe* and credits the editor's political views and affiliations with the book's success. The author's suicide in 1873 brought her story to an abrupt end.

In addition to being a page turner replete with Orientalist stereotypes of beautiful, childlike women, a cruel Harem full of rivalries and intrigues and inaccuracies, this text is important in that it provides us with an account of how mislead women and young people had of the freedoms offered in the West. Like Zeyneb Hanım the author of, *A Turkish Woman's European Impressions*, (1913) Melek Hanım found that she had exchanged one harem for another, that without economic freedom there was no freedom and that the ability of a woman of her station with her qualifications to earn a living without losing social footing was not possible. While her accounts may be inaccurate the reader is given enough information about political events of the time to make the author appear well aware of the rhetoric of her time period. In the extracts provided the readers are exposed to the Cretan revolt which lasted from 1866-1869. The Island of Crete had risen against the Ottomans with the Greeks but while Greece received its independence in 1830, Crete was not included as part of the Greek state and a series of insurrections followed. In the 13th century Crete as a Venetian colony and referred to as the

Kingdom of Candia and continued to be referred to as Candia after the Ottoman conquest in the 17th century. It is not clear if the author is using Crete and Candia interchangeably or if she is referring to an earlier insurrection. The author comments on British and Russian designs on the Ottoman Empire and in particular Istanbul or at the time Constantinopolis. She describes the Ottoman Empire as a sick man which refers to a quote attributed to Tsar Nicholas I (1853). The British saw Constantinopolis as important to their strategic interests and the protection of their trade routes from East to West and the Russian Empire aspired to have an exit to the Aegean and Mediterranean. Neither succeeded.

It is this curious mixture of accuracy and inaccuracy that tempts the reader to see this text as a believable first-hand account.

#### Further Reading

Melek Hanım, *Thirty Years in the Harem*.

Schick, Irvin C. (2005) "Introduction," *Thirty Years in the Harem*. Piscataway New Jersey, Gorgias Press: V-XXVIII.

Siobhan – you mentioned Reina Lewis – I'm not sure which book. let's add her to this?