

## Turkish Hamman and the West: Myth and Reality

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The Turkish *hammam* has always held enormous fascination for the West. Though the Western world had known the pleasure of *thermae* since the establishment of the Roman empire, the Christian/Catholic religion had discontinued the practice to indulge in cleaning and bathing as it was considered to be the gate to sin. Catholic church's austere approach to the body even condemned an individual who would spend too much time in caring for personal hygiene, therefore it was even more openly against public places in which people's body could be touched and massaged by someone else.

When contacts between West and East were established and many Westerners began to flock to the Middle East they were immediately attracted by the institution of the Turkish *hammam* as it was considered to be an indispensable complement to the *harem*, that constituted an exotic and exciting *topos* in Westerners' imagery. European diplomats, traders, military, missionaries and adventurers would travel in a variety of Muslim countries, but most of them got in contact with the Turkish world, for a variety of reasons, not least the fact that, as early as the 15<sup>th</sup> century, most of North Africa and the Middle East was subject to the lords of Istanbul, thus constituting a vast area in which Turkish culture, including the practice of the *hammam*, was widespread and well established. Thus, when Westerners wrote their travelogues, it was mostly the Turkish world that they described and in their description *harem* and *hammam* occupied a crucial place.

As we know, Western reactions to such a different world were of two kinds: "the first was to indulge in the excitement of an exotic sexual fantasy beyond the reach and the constraints and taboos of European culture [... the second] reaction to this vision of

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promiscuity and indulgence was one of disapproval and disgust, and the denigration"<sup>1</sup> of the culture which permitted such a scandal.

More often than not these two reactions were combined, and the writer would first take particular pleasure in lingering on scabrous details about Turks' way of life, to end later with an articulated, scholarly and moralistic denunciation of the Turkish/Muslim (im)moral code.

Curiously but significantly, the first Italian traveler who described a Turkish *hammam* dedicated his observations to a cleric: Luigi Bassano, in fact, who signed one of the most authoritative commentaries on the customs of the Ottomans, amongst whom he spent about eight years (1532-1540), offered his *Costumi et i modi particolari della vita dei Turchi* (The Customs and the Manners of the Turks, 1545) to a high ranking Catholic priest, namely Cardinal Rodolfo Pio from Carpi. Here is Bassano's description of a *hammam*:

[women would go to the *hammam*] *with others, and they wash each other. It is common knowledge that as a result of this familiarity in washing and rubbing women fall in love with each other. Therefore it is common that a woman be in love with another woman. And I have met Greek and Turkish women who, on seeing a beautiful girl, seek occasion to bath with her, just to see her naked and touch her. That is why, though it is customary to go the neighborhood hamman, women would go to more distant hammams. Women's bathing is a cause of much dishonesty.*

Bassano continues by saying that Turkish women would spend whole days in the *hammam*, where they were supposed to perform religious ablutions, but in which they used to carry out only shameful activities.

It is most evident that Bassano's description was only a fake: men could not enter the ladies' *hammam*, therefore male travelers who depicted these places could rely only on gossips and second hand data. Besides, what was an Italian Catholic high priest's interest in the description of a ladies' *hammam*? Evidently, Europe was developing a morbid interest for the intimate life of its powerful Turkish enemy, so much so that, starting from this period, every traveler to the Middle East felt obliged to include a chapter on the Turks' private life, creating a narrative in which *harem* and *hammam* played a very important role. It is enlightening that, though European travelers could have a direct experience in a male *hammam*, their observations regarded only women's *hammam*. It is evident that women and

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Graham-Brown, *Images of Women: The Portrayal of Women in Photography of the Middle East, 1860-1950*, New York 1988, p. 70.

their body were becoming the arena in which West and East confronted themselves: the West, in particular, had just started its construction of an "Oriental woman" characterized by an alternation of passive and active features: she was described as submissive, segregated, enslaved, but also as alluring, seductive, mischievous. These characteristics were combined together in order to create an enduring stereotype of woman which could confirm Easterners' inferiority. The Orient itself was feminized and this construction was naturally countered by that of a "male" West that had the duty/mission to conquer and rescue not only the Oriental women but the Orient itself.

To accomplish this scheme, as early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century the descriptions of Oriental women in the *harem* and in the *hammam* tended to be similar and boringly repetitive, where repetition reinforced stereotypes and travelers depended on each other's statement in forging their narrative. The *hammam* was depicted as the place in which *harem* women, deprived of their freedom, could spend some time in lustful activities. The leitmotiv was that, being *harem* women frustrated in their sexual aspiration because many of them had to share only one man's attentions, they were forced to turn to homosexual love affairs, and the *hammam* was the proper place in which these illicit relationships could be cultivated.

Edmondo De Amicis, a famous Italian prose writer who visited Istanbul in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, reinforced the stereotype on Turkish ladies' prohibited affairs by observing: "Women have the most ardent relationships with one another. They wear the same colors, same perfumes, put on patches of the same size and shape, and make enthusiastic demonstrations."<sup>2</sup>

In addition, De Amicis summoned a woman to prove his assertions right: "One European woman traveler claims that all the vices of ancient Babylon exist among them [i.e., Turkish women]". If European men's descriptions could be disputed, an European lady's evidence could not, as she was authorized to enter the female *hammam*; therefore, female travelers were often quoted as reliable testimonies of Turkish/Oriental women's intimate lives.

One would expect women to be more sympathetic than men in dealing with their Eastern sisters, but, on the contrary, European women often showed more bias towards Oriental women than their male counterparts. It must be said that most Western women traveled (or, at least, they published their memoirs) in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, an epoch marked by Puritanism and (apparent) sexophobia: if European men would target the East as the decadent kingdom of libidinousness and idleness (though many of them would indulge in prurient

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<sup>2</sup> Edmondo De Amicis, *Costantinopoli*, Milano 1977 (1st edition 1858).

details in order to stimulate their readers' curiosity), for women the situation was more complicated. While a visit to the *hammam* was almost mandatory to every European woman traveling in the Middle East, for her the contact with other women's nudity and with their washing – a practice that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century European mentality was confined to the private sphere – was nearly shocking. As a consequence, most women travelers avoided describing the *hammam*, while others expressed their uneasiness and disapprobation.

“On entering the chamber a scene presented itself with beggars description. My companion had prepared me for seeing many persons undressed; but imagine my astonishment on finding at least thirty women of all ages and many young girls and children perfectly unclothed. You will scarcely think it possible that no one but ourselves had a vestige of clothing. Persons of all colors, from the black and glossy shade of the negro to the fairest possible hue of complexion, were formed in groups, conversing as though fully dressed, with perfect nonchalance.”<sup>3</sup>

This horrified description is by Sofia Lane Pool, an English woman who visited Cairo in the years 1840s and who continued by labeling the *hammam* scene as “disgusting”: she was visibly offended by this exposure of flesh, by the mingling of women coming from different social classes and not racially segregated. For a Victorian lady used to seeing even table legs covered by a cloth, the impact with frank nudity handled with relaxing attitude by women must have been not only outrageous, but also a further proof of what her illustrious brother (i.e., Edward Lane) went on writing, i.e.: Eastern women were promiscuous and uncontrollably licentious.<sup>4</sup>

European women's discomfort in approaching the *hammam* and its implications such as nudity and, eventually, sexuality, was such that some of them even denied the physical advantages and the indubitable benefits of Turkish baths. Among them we can include Cristina Trivulzio di Belgioioso, a cultivated and progressive Italian noble woman who spent some time in 19<sup>th</sup> century Turkey, and who defined the *hammam* and its massages as “a real torture”<sup>5</sup> Analogously, Harriet Martineau, an English feminist who traveled in the Middle East in the same period, described her experience in a *hammam* as it was a descent to the hell:

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<sup>3</sup> Sophia Lane Poole, *The Englishwoman in Egypt: Letters from Cairo written during a Residence there in 1842*, 3 and 4 with E.W. Lane by his Sister, 2 voll., London 1844, letter XXIX, vol. II, p. 173-4.

<sup>4</sup> Edward Lane was the author on one of the most authoritative and famous descriptions of 19<sup>th</sup> century Egypt, namely *Manners and Custom of the Modern Egyptians*, London 1836.

<sup>5</sup> Cristina Trivulzio di Belgioioso, *Emina*, Ferrara 1995-97, p. 86. (1<sup>st</sup> edition Milano 1858).

"Through the dense stream, I saw a reservoir in the middle of the apartment, where, as I need not to say, the water stands to cool for some time before it can be entered: several women were standing in it; and those who had come out were sitting on a high shelf in a row, to steam themselves thoroughly... The crowd and the steam were oppressive, that I wondered how they could stay: but the noise was not to be endured for a moment. Everyone seemed to be gabbling at the top of her voice, and we rushed out after a mere glance, stunned and breathless. To this moment, I find it difficult to think of these creatures as human beings and certainly I never saw anything, even in the lower slave district of the United States, which so impressed me with a sense of the impassable differences of race."<sup>6</sup>

It is often said that the Orient was (and still is!) the place where many Westerners discovered themselves: this seems to be very true for Harriet Martineau, a well know abolitionist who, while visiting a *hammam* declared that it was the very proof of the insuperability of racial differences! Westerner women seemed to be more shocked by the lack of racial segregation shown in the *hammam* than by its other features, though the whole ambiance was unattractive or even repulsive for them. They also insisted on the contraindication of the *hammam* for health and beauty and underlined how painful this experience had been for them:

"In an instant I felt as a shrimp, if he feels at all, must feel in boiling water - I was boiled. I looked at my companion: her face was a gorgeous scarlet. In our best Turkish and in faint and imploring accents, we gasped 'Take us away!' All in vain. We had to be boiled and ribbed and boiled and rubbed we must be."

wrote Anne Jane Harvey, who also brought the *hammamci*, i.e., the *hammam* keepers, as the evident proof of the steam baths' deleterious effects:

"[the *hammamci*] had been slowly boiling for so many years that they were shriveled and parted out of the semblance even of 'womanity', if such a word may be permitted. Strange to say they had but few wrinkles, but their skin seemed tightly drawn over their faces, as over the bones of a skull, and hung loosely in great folds under their chins and around their throats... [they] had grown so much accustomed to the heated and sulphurous atmosphere in which they pass the grater portion of their days, that a pure and fresher air is quite painful to them."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Harriet Martineau, *Eastern Life Life Present and Past*, London 1848, p. 544.

<sup>7</sup> Annie Jane Harvey, *Turkish Harems and Circassian Homes*, London 1871, 75.

Western women's overall preoccupation with the unhealthy climate in the *hammam* was somehow based on general assumptions postulated by European scientists who associated people's character and behavior with climate and physical environment. According to these sweeping theories, Oriental and black people were characterized by hot blood, nourished by the sun heat which provoked their high sensuality and dangerous libido. Naturally, women were also included in this explanation, and therefore considered to be lustful creatures devoted to physical pleasure and prohibited pastimes: the fact that they would even seek to create artificial heat in the *hammam* was looked down upon by both male and female Westerners, and brought as an additional proof of Oriental women's uncontrollable sensual hunger.

However, in reality, it was not the vapor and the heat that bothered Western women, but rather the atmosphere of the *hammam*, which was of plentiful relax and wellbeing, but that they rather perceived as sensual and luxurious:

"The heavy, dense sulphurous vapor that filled the place and almost suffocated me – the subdued laughter and the whispered conversation of ...[the slaves' mistresses, murmuring along in an undercurrent of sound – the sight of nearly three hundred women, only partially dressed, and that in fine linen so perfectly saturated with vapor that it revealed the whole outline of the figure – the busy slaves passing and repassing, naked from the waist upwards, and with their arms folded upon their bosoms, balancing on their heads piles of fringed or embroidered napkins – groups of lovely girls, laughing, chatting and refreshing themselves with sweetmeats, sherbet and lemonade – parties of playful children, apparently quite indifferent to the dense atmosphere which made me struggle for breath...all combined to form a picture like the illusory semblance of a phantasmagoria, almost leaving me in doubt whether that on which I looked were indeed reality, or the mere creation of a distempered brain."<sup>8</sup>

Julia Pardoe, the British historical novelist who wrote this paragraph, connected the *hammam* not only with physical but even with mental degeneration, as the "sulphureous vapor" she was talking about would cause deterioration of the brain, an opinion supported by a consolidated Western naturalists' theory about the supposed Eastern people's inferiority due to the hot climate in which they lived and that would provoke the deterioration of their nervous system. Besides, Julia Pardoe was also scared by her feeling of estrangement experienced by finding herself so exposed to other women's gaze and by her being surrounded by the tangible nudity of usually covered bodies, included her own. The *hammam*

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<sup>8</sup> Julia Pardoe, *Beauties of the Bosphorous*, London 1840.

forced European women to confront sexuality and since they were so scared by their own, they blamed Eastern ladies who instead enjoyed their bath as a customary and pleasant practice. It is not a mere coincidence that Julia Pardoe harshly criticized Lady Montagu's description of a *hammam* and labeled it as an "unnecessary" and "unwanton" revelation.<sup>9</sup> In fact, in her celebrated accounts of her Turkish experience, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu had written:

"The first sofas were covered with cushion and rich carpets, on which sat the ladies; and on the second, their saves behind them, but without any distinction of rank by their dress, all being in their state of nature, that is, in plain English, stark naked, without any beauty or defect concealed. Yet there was non the least wanton smile or immodest gesture amongst them. They walked and moved with the same majestic grace which Milton describes of our general mother. There were many amongst them as exactly proportioned as ever any goddess was drawn by the pencil of Guido or Titian – and most of their skin shiningly white, or adorned by their beautiful hair divided into many tresses, hanging on their shoulders, braided either with pearl or ribbon, perfectly representing the figures of the Graces... to see so many fine women naked, in different posture, some in conversation, some working, other drinking coffee or sherbet, and many negligently lying on their cushions, while their slaves (generally pretty girls of seventeen or eighteen) were employed in braiding their hair in several pretty fancies. In short, it is the women's coffee-house, where all the news of the town is told, scandal invented."<sup>10</sup>

This letter was written in 1717, more than hundred years before Pardoe's evidence, but it seems that there are thousand years difference in sensibilities between the two versions: Lady Montagu described her *hammam* experience with easiness and freedom, in accordance with the spirit of her age, while the desexualized Victorian woman was scandalized by Montagu's sensual representation of Ottoman ladies; and she got even more distressed by encountering and experiencing Turkish way of life in which taking care of one's own body was so important.

*Hammam* in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Europeans' minds seemed thus to incarnate the place where Eastern people's indolence and sexual deviance were put in practice and exhibited. There were very few exceptions to this attitude, and one was represented by Amalia Sola Nizzoli, an Italian woman who spent several years in Egypt, where her relatives worked at

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<sup>9</sup> Julia Pardoe, *The City of the Sultan and the Domestic Manners of the Turks* in 1836, 2 vols., London 1837, vol. 1, pp. 136-137.

<sup>10</sup> Mary Wortley Montagu, *The Complete Letters*, London 1708-1820.

court and her husband was occupied in archeological hunting. Invited to the *hammam* by a Turkish officer's wife, Amalia devoted a great part of her account by describing the rich clothes with which women were dressed, as, she explained, the *hammam* was also a pretext to show off and to please the husband who, later, would lie with their bathed wives hoping that the treatment would render them more fertile. In her account Amalia spoke more about clothes than about nudity, though she also described women's nakedness, the clamor of women's complaining about the excessive heat of the water, and women's singing and dancing. However, she depicted a genuine atmosphere of a place whose main use was the "delicious pleasure of massage" and the deep cleanliness of the body: moreover, instead of talking about illicit relations and sexual deviance, she added a detail that no other European mentioned, i.e., women after the bath routine, including smoking pipes and drinking sherbets and coffee, recited their prayers, an act that in Western travel literature is seldom described. Though Amalia confessed that on the whole it had been a boring experience, at least she did not indulge in the cliché of the *hammam* as the homoerotic place *par excellence*.<sup>11</sup>

### **The hammam of the Orientalist painters, or Sodoma and Gomorra**

Undoubtedly, a strong impulse to the representation of the Turkish bath as a heap of sins and lust was given by the Orientalist painters who chose the *hammam* as the best postcard from the Orient. Many artists would have at least one *hammam* scene in their portfolio, but some of them had a whole series of pictures showing the imagined Turkish bath: imagined because virtually all these paintings portrayed only women's *hammam*, as the West was hungry for representations of what had been turned into the climax of Oriental exoticism and eroticism.

The French Jean-Léon Gérôme was perhaps the best representative of this school, with a whole collection of oils dedicated to the Turkish bath and painted in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. All Gérôme's paintings represent completely naked women while scratching their feet with a pumice stone, walking the shallow waters of the bath pool, smoking their *narghile* on the pool border, or lazily seated in a mist of vapor. In one of these oils, in particular, some fully dressed ladies, with their hair covered, seem to be seated in a sort of

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<sup>11</sup> Amalia Nizzoli, *Memorie sull'Egitto e specialmente sui costumi delle donne orientali e gli harem, scritte durante il mio soggiorno in quel paese, 1819-1828, Milano 1841.*

theatre box and watching the naked women under them, as if they were the spectators of a theatrical performance<sup>12</sup>

The same voyeuristic attitude is contemplated in a much bigger scene that represented a *hammam* in Bursa: a naked lady is walking, sustained by a black *hammamci* who avoids the bather's falling on the slippery floor by embracing the lady's waist with her arm; both the women are represented from behind, while the bather turns her face towards the pool in which two women are bathing. On the opposite border, four women watch the walking woman and her attendant, their legs lazily swinging in the water. Under the high vault of the *hammam* there are groups of women chatting, resting after the bath, smoking; another black woman, totally dressed, holds a naked baby in her hands while talking with a woman wrapped in a red towel.

The contrast between the whiteness of the ladies who bath in the *hammam* and the blackness of the bath attendants' skin is underlined in another Gérôme's oil, which, again, shows a completely nude lady from behind, seated on a low wooden stool, while a standing black *hammamci* is washing her back. The bath attendant has the hair covered, but her legs, arms and bosom are naked. The scene is highly contextualized: a wall is covered with Arabic calligraphy, ending in corner filled with *muqarnas*; the lady seats in front of an Islamic style marble basin and her high slippers, specially designed in order to protect bathers' feet from the heated floor, wait behind her. [fig 10]

While all the particulars and details given by Gérôme were plausibly present in a Turkish bath, it is the final rendition of the ambience and its characters that render everything so exotic and maliciously sensual. The familiarity among women hints to a closer and different relation compared to what the viewer can see, as it was a prelude to more lustful events which take place beyond the visible scene. All these women seem to be waiting for somebody, maybe a Western man coming to rescue them from the boredom of an exclusively female environment.

The apotheosis of the *hammam* representation belongs to another French painter, namely Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingres, whose *Turkish bath* painted in 1862, epitomizes Westerners' concept of a female Turkish bath. Just to start with, the oil is round shaped, as a keyhole through which the onlooker observes the whole scene where there are painted more than twenty nude women none of whom is engaged in something related to the bath, nor is at all evident that the scene actually takes place in a *hammam*. The bath is a pretext to represent

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<sup>12</sup> *Allumeuse du narghilé*, Keop Gallery, Geneva.

nudity and promiscuity: the ladies are very close to each other, some on them explicitly occupied with homosexual caresses, other portrayed in languid poses, other are busy with dancing and playing instruments, but all of them are represented in pose of sensual abandon. There is also a small stool with perfumes and other beauty items, the symbols of female seduction, but nothing else: only round, soft and white female bodies that incarnate the Western ideal woman of that time. However, though completely naked, some women have either a turban or a veil on their head, just to remind us that we are in an Oriental setting. Ingres' painting confirms that in the West the idea of Turkish bath had become just a pretext to offer soft pornography to a public hungry for exoticism and erotic gratification.<sup>13</sup>

### **Rehabilitating the Turkish Hammam**

Nowadays, the West and its increasing hedonistic search for physical gratification have rehabilitated Turkish *hammam*, and turned it into an extremely profitable market. There is no luxurious hotel worth its salt that does not offer a Turkish bath treatment, though the concept of *hammam* is often revisited according to the local mentality and to Western customers' expectation of a Turkish *hammam*. The beneficial effects of the *hammam* treatments have been so widely recognized that they have started to mushroom in the foremost European capitals, where it has become very fashionable to spend one's lunch break in being massaged or vapor treated, while sipping a healthy and dietetic vegetable shake instead of a caloric and unhealthy cheese burger. Fashion goes hand in hand with business; for instance, a trendy *hammam* in Milan offers a wide range of beauty treatments -packages with massages, henna drawings, samples of "Oriental" cosmetics etc. - whose prices are not popular at all. The cheapest treatment, called "The Rose Path" costs 50 euros (about 86 YTL), but those who want to walk on the more articulated "Cleopatra's Path" must pay 140 euros (241 YTL).

Amazingly, most of these European *hammams* advertise themselves through images which echo the 19<sup>th</sup> century Orientalist paintings, with groups of women entertaining each other and helped by black assistants.<sup>14</sup> The homoerotic aspect so dear to Orientalist's narrative is also somehow revisited, as the *hammams* advertise themselves as a proper place for a would-to be bride and her female friends to celebrate the "farewell to celibacy", a gathering

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<sup>13</sup> A description of this painting is also in Rana Kabbani, *Europe's Myths of Orient*, Bloomington 1986, p. 84.

<sup>14</sup> See [www.hammamdellarosa.com](http://www.hammamdellarosa.com)

that has recently become very popular and considered to be a requirement for independent and emancipated women.

Some baths are arranged and furnished as if they were the set for a *Thousand and One Nights* movie, with Moroccan cushions and Tunisian brass teapots, and explicitly hint to the *hammam* as a heritage of Arab/Maghrebian culture, which is perhaps considered to be more exotic than the Turkish one.

There is also a particular context in which the Turkish bath gender implications are retrieved, namely the *hammam* in Turin (North/West Italy), opened more than ten years ago with the intent to reproduce "the ritual space for female relationships" which should constitute the foundation of this institution, according to the Turin bath's creators.

Curiously, an Italian/Turkish bath promotes the *hammam* as an institution born in Istanbul and whose main quality is that of constituting "a gate between East and West": if this is the case, this only quality would be more than enough to promote the *hammam* as a remarkable and indispensable institution.

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[www.ammamdellarosa.com](http://www.ammamdellarosa.com)