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# Domesticating the Harem



**Odalisque with Slave, 1841**  
**Jean Dominique Ingres**  
**Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore, Maryland**

## Harem

RECONSIDERING  
ZENANA IMAGERY  
IN NINETEENTH AND  
EARLY TWENTIETH  
CENTURY INDIA

BY GIANNA CAROTENUTO

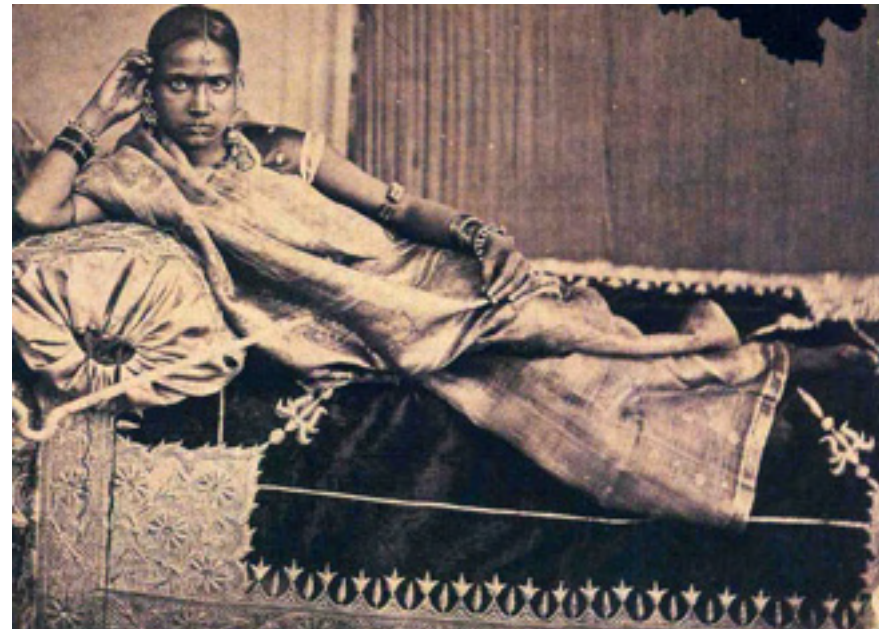
Loosely bound with a black ribbon in a now long forgotten gesture of affection, one hundred and twenty photographs of the women of the Seventh Nizam of Hyderabad's royal *zenana* (female household) were discovered in the dark storerooms of the King Kothi palace in Hyderabad, India. One expects these so-called harem pictures to depict the stereotypical sexualized image of lounging half nude odalisques smoking hookah pipes. A common misunderstanding is that the harem and the *zenana* are one and the same; operating as pictorial or semantic designations,

they are most often used interchangeably. The surprise in the discovery of these photographs is their presentation of women as wives, sisters, and mothers, as well as consorts and concubines, an uncommon depiction that complicates the conventional understandings of what a harem might be. Rather than eroticize, the pictures domesticize the Indian female, and present the possibility for a different understanding of the predominant definition of the harem.<sup>1</sup>

Taken between 1905 and 1910 (approximately) by Raja Deen Dayal, court photographer to the Nizam and dignitaries of the British Raj, these pictures were produced at a crucial moment in the history of India and its colonial legacy. Hyderabad at this time was a bastion of traditionalist sentiment, squeezed by colonial pressures and modern forces of Indian nationalism, the appeal of modernity, and nascent female emancipation movements of the late nineteenth

century. The Nizam's court, firmly rooted in its Indo-Islamic heritage, held out during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries against British efforts to reform and modernize Indian society and resisted the Indian National Congress campaign for self-rule, insisting upon political and cultural autonomy from both spheres.<sup>2</sup> Refracting the Nizam's resistance through the camera lens, Dayal's portraits celebrate the *zenana* women's place as an integral part of time-honored Indian society, as opposed to the view that relegates women of the harem to exotic deviants. In this context, the women of the House of Jah, legendary for their exceptional beauty, elegance, and refinement, symbolize the customary power of the Nizam. Their powerful gaze suggests confidence in their rank and authority, thereby refuting notions of disempowering subjugation.

The spectacular adornment symbolizes both the wealth of



**Courtesan, photographer unknown, c. 1870**

The Nizam and each woman's personal power. The lavish clothing and the excessive jewelry function as a code that tells of each *zenana* woman's group and individual status, their hierarchy within the harem, and their relationships to each other and to the Nizam. There are both similarities and subtle signs of individuation in dress and type of jewelry within different groups of women.

Presented in Dayal's photographs as an ensemble of 44 courtesans, 22 concubines, 6 premier wives, singular beauties, and mothers with children, the women confirm The Nizam's royal status by their sheer number. The range of female types portrayed in these pictures emphasizes the diversity of physical beauty and regional identities of the Nizam's *zenana*, while the various groupings indicate the

varied structure of female roles and familial associations.

In general, the women are carefully arranged in neat rows or posed against stock European-style painted backdrops; they are presented in a sober, classicizing manner that lends a sense of noble reserve. The standardized composition reveals fluctuating levels of conformity and individuality within the *zenana* rank and file that alludes to the larger flexibility of a colonial modern female identity. This visual conformity reflects a sense of internal cohesiveness that a segregated community of women would exhibit. It also references typical portraiture styles inherited from long standing indigenous painting of the Mughal Dynasty (1526–1857) that produced a vigorous pictorial tradition of *zenana* imagery.

Reconsidering representations of the nineteenth and early twentieth century *zenana* of India, my doctoral dissertation aims to unravel the visual

and cultural paradox of harem *versus zenana* imagery in Colonial India (1820–1920). It offers a close reading of the photographs discovered in the King Kothi palace, and other pictures, painted and photographed, of royal Indian *zenanas* from collections in America, Europe, and India in order to examine the private and public representation of elite Indian women alongside the unstable conditions of colonial Indian female identity. I am primarily concerned with the sociopolitical currency of harem mythology, the manner in which harem and *zenana* images were employed by both traditional and modernist factions to define Indian womanhood, and the influence of the Orientalist trope of the erotic harem upon representations of *zenanas* in India.

The discourse around the colonial harem was an important factor in the development of a pictorial narrative for Indian femininity and, as Dayal's pho-

tographs of the Nizam's *zenana* indicate, the transformation of the Indian family. For the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the harem was defined as a site of female power and promoted as a place of Indian tradition, and is but one of the ways that Indian women were idealized during the colonial period. But the *zenana* was also an aspect of Indian society that caused great concern for the colonial British rulers of the subcontinent, generating legislation against widow burning, child marriage, and education of women that ran counter to the norms of Indian society. Burgeoning nationalist and feminist movements of the modern Indian nation also utilized the *zenana* as a platform of debate that employed pictures of elite Indian women to capitalize on the harem myth and to reconstruct the definition of womanhood to serve indigenous political agendas. When female identity is read through

the pictorial history of the traditional *zenana* rather than exclusively through that of the harem, which contains the larger legacy of stereotypes, a more nuanced understanding of women's lives during the colonial era becomes apparent.

While the pictures of the Nizam's *zenana* attest to the veracity and strength of the ancient tradition of female segregation practiced in the early twentieth century by the elite classes of India, they also announce its decline. I argue that the well-known and powerful narratives of the harem, with its eroticized images and sexualized connotations, along with inaccurate notions about the actual boundaries of *pardah* (female sequestration), have eclipsed our understanding of not only what a harem might be in the Indian colonial context but has also limited the possibilities for other notions of elite female identity to emerge—identities that are not solely generated through a



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Three thematic threads run through Dayal's images that inform the dissertation: first, the interplay between the European eroticized harem, the nationalist reconceptualization of the harem, and the traditional Indian domestic *zenana*; second, the exchange of artistic influences, genres and mannerisms of European stylistic trends and Indian aesthetic practices; and third, the shifting image of female identity as the fulcrum between the Colonial and the modern eras.

The familial nature of the Nizam's *zenana* pictures are their most striking attribute within these themes. According to Arjun Appadurai, "in a sex-segregated colonial environment," photography was one of the "central practices through which family, domesticity and reproductive intimacies...moved into the public sphere" (Appa-

durai 1997:5). For the Nizam to have his *zenana* photographed featuring his wives, children, and concubines suggests a choice to both expose the lived reality of the *zenana*, and also display them as his possessions.

As a record of a private royal *zenana* in colonial India, these rare photographs resonate with conflicting realities—on the one hand, the photos of the Nizam's women assembled on carpets in the palace garden exhibit the exotic notions of the harem common to Western Orientalist fantasies. On the other hand, as an intimate memoir of family life, these pictures depict a domestic space filled with children, family hierarchy, and household practices. For example, the Nizam presents himself casually arm in arm with his children at whose feet are seated their various mothers, along with the family *ayah* (nanny). Imaging the non-traditional family challenged British constraints on the morality of its Indian subjects. Other

photographs in the Nizam's archive feature the women of the *zenana* in their roles as royal consorts, gathered in varying groups of ten and twenty, some lounging casually on the ground, others seated, with bottles and dishware interspersed amidst their ranks as if ready for an afternoon picnic. Paradoxically, these pictures show the full spectrum of the traditional domestic sphere while including visual references to the Orientalist harem in their composition and select iconography.

Considered in a larger socio-political context, the Nizam's *zenana* pictures nuance the discussion of Indian female identity during the colonial period and help answer questions about how Indian women and men of the colonial era negotiated the complicated exchange between colonial expectations, traditional Indian culture, and modernity.

Colonial photographs of Indian women champion a variety of identities. Malavika

Karlekar engages with the various modes of representation made of Bengali women at the turn of the twentieth century, subjects which range from philanthropists to housewives and social activists.<sup>3</sup> However, a discussion of harem/*zenana* imagery is left unexplored. My comparative analysis with the Nizam's *zenana* pictures and other pictures of elite Indian women draws attention to the enormous disjuncture between how the harem and the *zenana* were exoticized and popularized, primarily for European audiences, and how it was lived and portrayed by Indian culture. When measured against other colonial images of Indian harems and *zenana* women (an extremely limited archive), the influence of the Orientalist trope of the erotic harem upon representations of *zenanas* becomes apparent.

The trope of the harem, one of the most pervasive stereotypes of the colonial era, existed

in sensationalist renderings of the "unveiled" harem women featured in stereotypical style as lounging courtesans and dancing (*nautch*) girls. These "Orientalized" renditions were mass produced at the later half of the nineteenth century by European and Indian artists alike, such as painters Edwin Lord Weeks (1849–1903) and Raja Ravi Varma (1848–1906), or the photographs of Maharaja Jai Singh II, who documented his own *zenana* thirty years earlier in 1870, setting a precedent for the harem as an eroticized space that remains fixed in popular imagination. In contrast, pictures of the domestic *zenana* were not frequently published and remained hidden from view.

What my study suggests is that the eroticized female is refashioned in pictures of conservative elite Indian women crafted for the campaigns of Indian nationalist reform. AsINDERPAL GREWAL has noted, "while the harem woman in Orientalist

texts were seen as promiscuous and duplicitous... those of the Indian *zenana* were seen as passive and exploited..."<sup>4</sup> This feminine binary inherent in the discourses of Imperialism and Indian Nationalism, is seen in the simultaneous interplay of the erotic and the domestic. The pictures of the Nizam's *zenana* reveal complex and discrete differences overlooked in harem discourse, whereby pictures of the harem are primarily eroticized and those of the *zenana* are predominantly domestic. In the case of the Nizam's *zenana* both undercurrents are present. A careful analysis of these *zenana* pictures makes possible a distinction between the harem as a construct and the *zenana* as a reflection of a lived reality. What is gained from this understanding is that, in both cases, Indian women were idealized, either through erotic or domestic narratives, and in service to both Indian and British concerns.

Part of the impact of the Nizam's *zenana* archive is the challenge posed to the standard argument that women were forbidden from depiction because of the laws of *pardah* (female sequestration). Current scholarship has presented the colonial harem/*zenana* as a site for British and Indian attempts to modernize and reform not only the status of women but also the future of Indian society.<sup>5</sup> However, many scholars assume that elite female portraiture during the colonial era is rare because the laws of *pardah* forbid women from having portraits taken. This taboo intensified the mystic and titillating effects of pictures of harem women, causing them to be misread. Based on my findings, the claim for the rarity of elite female representation in India, in particular, that of the women of the *zenana*, is an untenable fiction, one tied to the powerful mythology of the harem and its legacy of exoticization, which has colored understandings of status, rights, and mobility for elite colonial Indian women, including

interpretations of the boundaries dictated by *pardah*.

The harem trope was often put to use by Indians to produce anti-colonial propaganda. For example, the *zenana* pictures of the Seventh Nizam of Hyderabad, I argue, were, from an Indian perspective, intended to act as proof of the Nizam's power and status. Furthermore, Daya's pictures attest to the Nizam's desire to preserve his traditional way of life in the face of colonial and nationalist reforms.

The assumed absence of elite women from the pictorial record is further strengthened by the perceived dominance of the Orientalist harem genre in literary and visual arts of the colonial period. Because harem pictures featured women unveiled, an unorthodox gesture, it was thought that the women depicted could not be of elite females, but those of lesser status. However, my research shows the contrary is true, that elite women were extensively photographed, either as individuals or

included in their *zenana* community. This reveals a wide spectrum for reconsidering traditional female roles and the status of Indian women in colonial India. What becomes clear is that there is a harem genre, or style of representation, that is employed in varying degrees in the representation of the *zenana* and of elite Indian women.

Though both of these categories of female representation, the erotic and the domestic, at first seem designed to meet Western standards of womanhood, they in fact are informed by and functioned in response to colonial pressures upon Indian culture. The category of pictures that escaped public scrutiny are those of the *zenana*. Though often idealized, *zenana* pictures remain grounded in the desire to preserve a certain cultural authenticity while they also accommodate modern forms of self-exposure. At the time, made for private viewing and kept within the confines of the family, the Nizam's pictures co-exist with other *zenana* archives that circulated beyond domestic limits,

such as those of the royal women of Gwalior or Lucknow. Having commissioned these pictures, the Nizam has produced powerful symbols of a traditional royal lifestyle. Exposing his women to the scrutiny of the photographic process goes against the belief in the sequestered status of the female, therefore, defying cultural norms and casting doubt upon the presumed ban on elite women's pictorial representation. From a contemporary viewpoint, it is easy to see the Nizam's pictures as evidence for women's continued subordination within a patriarchal system/family. However, examined in their historical context they stand as a testimony to the ambiguous responses inherent in the colonial moment, and speak of the expanding frontiers of women's lives at a time when those possibilities were severely limited.

In tracing the many ways in which female identity was fashioned during the colonial period in India, an analysis of *zenana*



**Gianna Carotenuto at the Chowmahalla Palace, 2005**

pictures bring us full circle. From their initial impact as rarely-seen depictions of the female household of the Nizam, a deeper analysis reveals aspects of Orientalist fantasies and notions of resistance, to both British colonial presence and Indian nationalism, and reference to

burgeoning female agency. These remarkable photographs speak to the complexities of patriarchal control and traditional values, and in their analysis we find a mixed legacy from these representations of the lived reality of elite Indian women.

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#### NOTES

1. *Zenana* is a Persian derivative that signifies "woman" and the female quarters of the home. As an Eastern institution it comes from the concept of *pardah*, a Persian word that literally means "curtain," but connotes the concealment of women from public view. The Arabic term "harem" conveys the notion of taboo and generally refers to prohibition or unlawfulness as well as something revered and holy. When used by the West, it most often signifies a place of erotic decadence. In my study I make a clear distinction between the Indian use of the word *zenana* for domestic contexts from the use of the term harem, which does not occur as a colloquial term in Hindi or Urdu. It is most

often employed by the West to refer to an erotic context for female segregation.

2. Rajendra Prasad. *The Asif Jahs of Hyderabad: Their Rise and Decline*. Vikas Publishing House Pvt.:New Delhi. 1984.
3. Malavika Karlekar. *Re-Visioning the Past: Early Photography in Bengal 1875-1915*. Oxford University Press: New Delhi. 2005.
4. Inderpal Grewal. *Home and Harem: Nation Gender, Empire and the Cultures of Travel*. Duke University Press: Durham North Carolina. 1996:51.
5. See Antoinette Burton, *Dwelling in the Archive*. Oxford University Press: New York. 2003. Though there are no studies to date in the discipline of art history on the visual component of the *zenana*, see Karen Leonard (1978), Meredith Borthwick (1984), Ruby Lal (2005), Geraldine Forbes (1996), Ruby Lal (2005). Gail Minault (1994).