

Christine Isom-Verhaaren, 'Royal French Women in the Ottoman Sultans' Harem: The Political Uses of Fabricated Accounts from the Sixteenth to the Twenty-first Century', *Journal of World History* 17/2, Honolulu 2006, s. 159-196.

Ottoman Empire changed from a weak but still formidable state at the beginning of the eighteenth century to a powerless entity that was regularly stripped of territories that various European countries decided they wanted to add to their colonial empires. Imperialists such as Lord Cromer, British consul general in Egypt from 1883 to 1907, used the treatment of women in Islamic societies to justify their foreign rule over these areas. As a result anything that supported the view that these societies were backward and needed to be reformed by Westerners was incorporated into the ideology to serve colonial ambitions.⁷¹

During the late eighteenth century and into the early nineteenth century, a new French woman, who some authors claim was Aimée du Buc de Rivéry, resided in the Ottoman Imperial harem. Whatever the historical truth about this woman, later in the nineteenth century and then extending into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries she also has become a symbol with political uses that have changed over time. That symbol is still functioning today in the "biographies" or historical novels about Aimée du Buc de Rivéry. While the story lends itself to the genre of romance novels, which explains some of its popularity, another factor is the nature of relations between the West and the Middle East, especially since the later 1960s. Once again, because it is the symbol that is important, the historical accuracy of the tale is immaterial.

NAKSHIDIL

Aimée du Buc de Rivéry, a cousin of Josephine, Napoleon's first wife from Martinique, is the second French woman with royal connections who is rumored to have entered the harem and become the mother of a sultan. Supposedly, Aimée was captured by corsairs from Algiers and later presented as tribute to Abdul Hamid I (r. 1774-1789) by the dey of Algiers. Under the name Nakshidil, she then became the mother of Mahmud II. This identification is impossible because documents show Aimée was still in France in 1788, after Mahmud was born.⁷² Some versions of this legend tackle this issue by making her the foster mother of Mahmud while others ignore it altogether. Evidence that Mahmud's mother was French is found in a letter written by the mother-in-law of

⁷¹ Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, pp. 150-154.

⁷² Deny, "Walide Sultan," p. 1117; Alderson, *Structure of the Ottoman Dynasty*, Table XLIV, n. 3.

the French ambassador to the Ottoman Empire at the time of Nakshidil's death in 1817. She writes:

The Valide sultan is dead. . . . It is said that the deceased Sultane was French, of American origin, and that she was born in Nantes; it is added that at barely two years old, her parents embarked with her for America and they were captured by a corsair who took them to Algiers, where they perished. The little girl was purchased by a slave merchant, who judged by her beauty at such a tender age, that she would one day amply compensate him for the care that he lavished upon her. He was not mistaken in his expectation; at fourteen she was a dazzling beauty, sold to the Dey of Algiers to be included in the tribute that he owed to the Grand-Seigneur. She was sent to Abdul Hamid, who found her beautiful and elevated her to the rank of Kadine, that is to say he married her. She gave him Mahmud, the reigning sultan. Mahmud has always had a great respect for his mother. It is said that she greatly surpassed in amiability the Circassians or Georgians which is not surprising since she was French.⁷³

The comtesse who wrote these letters does not identify the source of her information so we are unable to evaluate its reliability. However, if the valide sultan's parents died when she was very young, it is difficult to see how anyone would know much about her background before she arrived in Algiers. Nevertheless, this story, while a little improbable, is quite believable in comparison to claiming that she was Aimée, about whom the comtesse says nothing. Even a woman whose son-in-law was an enemy of Napoleon would surely have mentioned that the Valide was a relative of Josephine if she had heard the story.⁷⁴

However, fifty years later, in 1867, when Sultan Abdul Aziz, son of Mahmud, went to Paris to be entertained by Napoleon III, "He was greeted with great enthusiasm by Napoleon III, who told the press that their grandmothers were related."⁷⁵ Another invented tradition concerning a French woman with royal connections in the Ottoman harem was being created to support the political aspirations of the rulers of the Ottoman Empire and France. As in other examples of invented traditions, this legend was loosely connected with a historical phenomenon. Initially this legend also emphasized the relationship between the two rulers, just as the earlier myth had done.

⁷³ Comtesse de la Ferté-Meun, *Lettres sur le Bosphore, ou relations d'un voyage à Constantinople et en différentes parties de l'Orient pendant les années 1816, 1817, 1818, et 1819*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Chez Locard et Davi, 1822), letter 87, pp. 329-331.

⁷⁴ Bacqué-Grammont, *Représentants Permanents*, pp. 52-53.

⁷⁵ Wallach, *Seraglio*, p. x.



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NAKŞİDİL VALİDE SULTAN

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Sultan I. Abdülhamid (1774-1789)'in kadınefendisi ve Sultan II. Mahmud (1808-1839)'un validesi olan Nakşidil, menşei ve saraydaki konumu dile getirilerek XIX. yüzyılın ilk çeyreğinden günümüze kadar Batı'da ve daha sonra İstanbul'da bir çok haber, makale, roman, televizyon-sinema filmi, tiyatro ve benzeri ürünlere konu olmuş bir isimdir. Bu yönüyle Nakşidil, Osmanlı sarayı haremının üyeleri arasında hakkında en fazla tartışma yapılan ve gündemde tutulan bir kişilik olarak gözükmemektedir. Bu araştırmada, onun kimliğiyle ilgili süregelen söylentilerin son durumuna ve biyografisine dair yeni bilgilere işaret edilmektedir.

A. Nakşidil'in Kimliği

Nakşidil Kadın'ın Fransız asıllı ve kraliyet ailesinin akrabası olduğu öne sürülerek geliştirilen yorumların ilk iddia olunduğu şekliyle kalmadığı, çeşitli kalemlerin katkılarıyla ayrıntıların artırıldığı ve onun biyografisinin mükerreren inşa edildiği görülmektedir. Gerçek bilgi takibinin mümkün olmaktan uzaklaşması ise roman yazarlarının bu yaklaşımla konuya el atmalarının neticesidir. Nakşidil'in aslında Aimée du Buc de Rivery olduğu iddiasının ilk gündeme getirildiği yıllardaki bilgiler dikkate alındığında söylentiler kısaca şöyle özetlenebilir: Bir manastırda öğrenim gördüğü Fransa'dan Martinique Adası'na dönüş yolculuğunda Cezâyirli tarafından kaçırılan Aimée, İstanbul'a ulaştırılarak I. Abdülhamid'e hediye edilmiş ve sonra Şehzâde Mahmud'u doğurmuştu. Sonradan imparator olacak

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