

**The Ottoman Harem in 21st Century Turkish Television: A
Historical and Feminist Analysis**

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation as an Honors Scholar at
Point Loma Nazarene University, San Diego, California on April 3, 2023.

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Date 4-3-23

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Introduction

Historical accounts and sources pertaining to female members of the Ottoman royal family is very limited. The primary reason for this was that the Ottoman Empire was a Muslim society in which it was disrespectful towards the Sultan to talk about the women in his household. Since these women lived within the Harem, they were kept away from the public eye with very few people having access to them. As such, many historical accounts omitted speaking about female dynastic members altogether.¹ Those that did typically referenced the women not by name, but as the mother of their child. For example, instead of using a concubine's name, primary sources contained the words 'the mother of' and then the name of the concubine's child.

The information that was available pertaining to female members of the dynasty often came from both Ottoman and European second hand sources. While both accounts were heavily influenced by male perspectives, when it came to European sources, they were further distorted by Orientalism. Essentially, as Europe began defining what it meant to be European and part of a certain European country, it used the East as a means of doing so. The East, otherwise known as the 'Orient' was used as a contrast to Europe.² The 'Orient,' in this case the Ottoman Empire, was viewed as a place of mysticism, foreign riches, sensuality, wicked foreign queens, and lustful kings.³ Harems were depicted in writings and paintings as buildings filled with sexually

¹ Leslie Peirce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 113.

² Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 3.

³ Ottoman Sultans were referred to by Europeans as the Grand Turk. The Grand Turk was viewed as a lustful and tyrannical ruler.

available women that wore revealing clothes for a male's pleasure. In contrast with this perception of the 'Orient,' Europe thus defined itself as 'civilized,' orderly, lawful, and with placid Christian women. With this narrative, an 'Oriental' lens was created in which events in the Ottoman Empire were viewed. Furthermore, Europeans may not have fully understood Eastern, in this case Ottoman, customs and Islam in general. These misinterpretations in early sources created further bias and misunderstandings that carried down throughout history.

During the 1500s, European ambassadors and travelers were writing down accounts for those back in Europe to document the events happening in the Ottoman court. These events were closely related to the Sultanate and its members in both the Harem and Topkapi Palace. Since these men were not Ottoman, they were not bound by the custom of omitting female members of the dynasty from their writings. As such, the information involving Ottoman royal women often came from European sources, regardless of how inaccurate the report was. Moreover, the ambassadors and travelers were writing to a European audience. Therefore, stereotypes and inaccuracies were occasionally used so that Europeans could comprehend what was going on in the 'Orient.' The narratives that were recorded in the 1500s were carried down throughout history in Europe. As the years passed, those narratives were changed to fit European audiences and popular tropes at the time for entertainment purposes.⁴

In the last several years, there has been a reclaiming of Ottoman history in Turkey as an effort by the government to redefine their country. The booming interest in Ottoman history has been called 'Ottomania.' This was exemplified by the surge in Turkish television shows, both documentaries and soap operas, that were used as a means of portraying Ottoman history.⁵ The

⁴ Peirce, *The Imperial Harem*, 114.

⁵ Alexia Bloch, *Sex, Love, and Migration: Postsocialism, Modernity, and Intimacy from Istanbul to the Arctic* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2017), 34.

Turkish television shows were utilized to fulfill Turkey, and the rest of the world's interest in the Ottoman Empire. The historical accounts that were available to generate the storylines for those shows were the previously described Ottoman and European sources that contained misinformation, speculation, and distortions. Furthermore, in order to generate views from outside of Turkey, the Turkish television shows capitalized on sensationalized accounts for entertainment purposes.

It is in this context that this paper seeks to analyze the Turkish produced and written soap opera titled the *Magnificent Century* as a case study to gain an understanding of how history has been distorted into a narrative for consumption. The series was released in 2011 and ended in 2014 after 4 seasons. Thus, with each episode running around 2 hours long, over 100 hours' worth of the series was viewed for this project. Although the *Magnificent Century* is based on historical events, it still is a modern reflection on how women are being viewed. The series depicted the life of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent with a specific focus on his Harem and wife, Hürrem Sultan. She is famous in history for breaking decades of tradition and for the large amount of power she held during her lifetime. The power she held was uncommon and not typical for royal women in the Ottoman Empire in the early 1500s. Therefore, this paper studies how modern Turkish television portrays her life since she is a significant and unique woman in their history. It seeks to understand if the series depicts her accomplishments and reclaims her story or if it merely reproduces patriarchal stereotypes with orientalist influences.

In addition, this paper strives to understand how that ties into what feminist narratives are being utilized. More specifically, this paper aims to achieve this through the analysis of the 3 main themes regarding the central female character of the show, Hürrem Sultan. The 3 main themes in the *Magnificent Century* are interpersonal relationships amongst women, women in

politics, and women in motherhood. The themes will be analyzed through the categories of how historically accurate the series is, how the show specifically depicts women in different scenes, and what the show is explicitly and implicitly saying about women.

This topic is important because how women in power are viewed is an issue that was relevant during Hürrem Sultan's lifetime, and it still is today. Throughout history, women who held power were often cast in a negative light and their lives were overshadowed by sexist stereotypes. In modern times, advancements have been made in the treatment of women and in women's studies. Although there is more of an acceptance of women in power, some patriarchal views are still used. Therefore, analyzing the series, *Magnificent Century*, will reveal how historical women whose stories have been distorted by false stereotypes and narratives are being portrayed in contemporary times despite progress in women's studies.

Woman vs Woman

Historical Background

The girl who was known as Hürrem Sultan⁶ was born in the early 1500s in Ruthenia in what is now a part of modern-day Ukraine.⁷ However, during her lifetime it was still a region within the Kingdom of Poland. The name given to her by her birth family was believed to have been Anastasia or Aleksandra Lisowska. Unfortunately, the region of Ruthenia was very susceptible to raids by slavers seeking to acquire young men and women to fulfill the demand for slaves in the East. In Hürrem's early teenage years, during a raid on her hometown by Tatar

⁶ Title used by females and males to indicate that they were a member of the Ottoman royal family

⁷ Although multiple areas have claimed to be the official birthplace of Hürrem Sultan, historians believe that she was born in a town called Rohatyn which is located in the Eastern region of the Kingdom of Poland. It is also speculated that her father was a Ruthenian priest. In 1999, Ukraine replaced a statue of Vladimir Lenin in Rohatyn with a statue of Hürrem Sultan to honor her. The statue is named 'Nastia Lisovska.'

slavers, she was kidnapped and taken to the East. Whether she was brought directly to the Ottoman Empire or went to other slave markets first is unknown.⁸ In any case, she was brought to the slave markets in Istanbul, the capital of the Ottoman Empire.

For much of its history, Istanbul, and the Ottoman Empire as a whole, had a large demand for slavery. Slavery was essential for the empire to function since slaves of both genders served in a myriad of positions. Ranging from the imperial household to homes in different Ottoman provinces, slaves held positions such as viziers, concubines, soldiers, household servants, and more. The slaves used to fill these jobs were brought in from borders of the Ottoman Empire. These countries included Southern and Eastern European countries, the Mediterranean and Africa.⁹ Once taken from their homelands, men and women were brought along trade routes and distributed to slave markets across the entire Ottoman Empire.¹⁰ Likewise, the teenage Hürrem was sold in the Istanbul slave markets and eventually found herself in the Imperial Ottoman Harem.¹¹

At the time of Hürrem's arrival, the Imperial Ottoman Harem was located in the "Old Palace" in Istanbul. After the fall of Constantinople in 1453 to Mehmed the Conqueror, the Sultan and his court moved into the Old Palace (Eski Saray). To accommodate his growing court and to showcase his prestige, Mehmed ordered the construction of a new palace where his court would be centered. The new palace was named Topkapi Palace and was located along the banks of the Bosphorus Strait. The Sultan and his court moved into the new building while the Imperial

⁸ Leslie Peirce, *Empress of the East: How a European Slave Girl Became Queen of the Ottoman Empire* (London: Icon Books, 2017), 25.

⁹ Leslie Peirce, *A Spectrum of Unfreedom: Captives and Slaves in the Ottoman Empire* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2021), 4.

¹⁰ For more on slavery in Istanbul during the reign of Sultan Suleiman I, see Yvonne J. Seng, "Fugitives and Factotums: Slaves in Early Sixteenth-Century Istanbul" *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 39, no. 2 (1996), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3632618>.

¹¹ Location where the female members of the Ottoman dynasty lived. The word 'harem' is derived from Arabic and has connotations to a sacred or forbidden space.

Ottoman Harem remained in the Old Palace in Bayezit Square. Thus, in order to access his harem, concubines had to either be brought to Topkapi Palace or the Sultan would have to travel to the Old Palace.

Generally, all residents in the Harem were slaves which included concubines, servants, and eunuchs.¹² Those living in the Harem that were not slaves were the Sultan's children, the Valide Sultan (the mother of the Sultan), and a few others such as the Sultan's sisters if they chose to live there. Despite portrayals of the Imperial Ottoman Harem as a lustful and sensuous place filled with beautiful concubines, it was instead a very rigid and tightly controlled institution. Likewise, the system in the early 1500s that governed the Harem was carefully regulated, monitored, and strict. It was viewed as "akin to a convent, with rigid rules of behavior based on notions of sexual propriety, all with the aim of ensuring the continuation of the dynasty."¹³ Thus, major conflicts and upheavals amongst its residents were not allowed. In essence, the Harem system served as a means of producing and raising competent heirs to the Ottoman throne.

One key component of the Harem system was that all concubines, who were the only ones allowed to give birth to princes and princesses of the Sultan, were slaves. Sultans had relied on slave concubinage to produce heirs for over 100 years previously. This was significant and important for several reasons. The first reason was that concubines were usually young Christian girls of European descent. Sultans had to rely on young foreign slaves because it would potentially cause discontent if he began enslaving his own subjects to serve as sexual slaves and

¹² Eunuchs were castrated males who worked in the Harem and had close proximity to female members of the Ottoman royal dynasty. For more information on eunuchs from the foundation of the Ottoman Empire until the end of Sultan Suleiman I's reign see Jane Hathaway, *The Chief Eunuch of the Ottoman Harem: From African Slave to Power-Broker* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 4-76.

¹³ Marc David Baer, *The Ottomans: Khans, Caesars, and Caliphs* (New York: Basic Books, 2021), 203.

broodmares. In addition, according to Islamic law and tradition, a Muslim could not be enslaved at least by another Muslim.¹⁴ On the other hand, a Christian could be forced into slavery and owned by a Muslim master. Thus, young Christian girls were an acceptable means of continuing the Ottoman royal dynastic line.

Secondly, as slaves, concubines did not possess any ties to foreign powers. Since they had been kidnapped from their homelands, these women had no contact with their birth families. It is possible that their families were not even alive given the violent raids, warfare, disease, and famine common during this era. In any case, most slave concubines never saw or communicated with their family once they were forced into slavery. Without connections to people and nations outside of the Ottoman Empire, the usage of slave concubinage held no risk of foreign powers' interference with Ottoman succession and or gaining influence in internal and external affairs. Similarly, it prevented "entangling alliances with formerly or potentially powerful families" in order to keep a prominent family from gaining too much power.¹⁵ Since other kingdoms and families did not have blood ties to the dynasty, they did not have any valid ties to dynastic matters.

Thirdly, slave concubines would be devoted to raising their royal children and would be loyal to only the Ottoman Empire. Amongst the slave residents within the Ottoman Harem, contact with the world outside of the Old Palace was highly restricted and regulated. Sultans did not want to risk the potential of concubines bearing illegitimate children should they come into contact with an uncastrated male. Moreover, the dynasty did not want concubines who had access to the Sultan sharing secrets with foreign powers. While royal women in other countries could write home and demand their home countries to intercede on their behalf if they disliked

¹⁴ Peirce, *A Spectrum of Unfreedom*, 15.

¹⁵ Baer, *The Ottomans*, 204.

their living situation, slave women in the Ottoman Empire did not have that option. With such limited contact to the world outside of the Harem and succession matters, concubines held little stakes in other governmental affairs.

Finally, Ottoman Sultans had ceased to have legal wives that were free Muslim women because it avoided potential political conflict. A legal wife was entitled to privileges, rights, and status that slave concubines were not privy to. For example, legal wives could petition for the ability to have children if their husbands refused to give them any. On the other hand, as slaves, concubines had no control over their fertility. Thus, if a Sultan had concubines only, he could dictate how many children, if any, his concubines could have with no issues.¹⁶ Furthermore, without the presence of a legal wife, who would in essence be the Empress of the Ottoman Empire, sole ruling power remained with the Sultan. Major political power would remain centralized in the hands of the Sultan and male governmental officials. For all these reasons, the Ottoman Empire had turned toward the usage of slave concubinage.

Once these enslaved young women were brought to the Harem, only some were specifically chosen to become concubines. A majority of the women brought into the Harem became servants that either carried out the daily chores within the building or became a part of the retinue of a female member of the dynasty.¹⁷ The much smaller number of women who became concubines were quickly taught the rules and expectations of what it meant to be selected as a concubine. As a rule, each concubine was only allowed to give birth to one son. A concubine could bear the Sultan any number of daughters for as long as he maintained interest in

¹⁶ Baer, *The Ottomans*, 204.

¹⁷ Albert Howe Lybyer, *The Government of the Ottoman Empire in the Time of Suleiman The Magnificent* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1913), 56.

her. Yet, once a son was born, the concubine in question and the Sultan were no longer allowed to produce any more children together.¹⁸

Once intimate contact with the Sultan ended with the birth of a son, from that point on, the concubine was responsible for her son's upbringing. In the Ottoman tradition, all sons of the Sultan, regardless of age, were considered viable candidates to be the next Sultan when their father died, stepped down, or was overthrown. As such, a prince's education had to be in a manner befitting a potential heir to the throne. Therefore, the prince's mother ensured that some of the best tutors were hired to teach the prince languages, swordsmanship, and statesmanship amongst other subjects. Since a concubine had only one son, she was able to devote her undivided attention to the prince and see to it that he was a competent heir to the throne.¹⁹

It was essential that all sons of the Sultan were being suitably groomed for the throne because a prince's incompetence spelled disaster for the futures of himself and his mother. According to the rules of Ottoman succession, when the Sultan died, (or left the throne for other reasons), his sons would essentially fight one another until one prince emerged victorious. The son that defeated his brothers engaged in the policy of fratricide in which he killed all his brothers. Or, if the new Sultan was feeling lenient (or had no other choice), he paid other foreign countries to hold his brothers captive as was the case with Bayezid II and his brother Cem in the 1480s.²⁰ Thus, in order to give her prince the best chance of success and survival, it was in a concubine's best interest that she supported her son to help him become the next Sultan. This was for both maternal and practical reasons since if a concubine's son died, then his mother was sent into exile, her living conditions were reduced, and her status was removed.

¹⁸ Caroline Finkel, *The History of the Ottoman Empire: Osman's Dream* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 132.

¹⁹ Murat Iyigun, "Lessons from the Ottoman Harem on Culture, Religion, and Wars," *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 61, no. 4 (July 2013): 699, <https://doi.org/10.1086/670376>.

²⁰ Halil Inalcik, *The Ottoman Empire: The Classical Age 1300-1600* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1973), 31.

With this dynastic system, not just anybody could become a concubine. Concubines were carefully and specifically chosen based on their traits, intelligence, and aptitude to best support a prince. Once chosen as a concubine, a woman would be educated and taught the ways of royal life so she would be able to successfully guide any potential children she may bear.²¹ Even if she did not produce a son but rather a daughter, a concubine still had to make sure that her daughter was a commendable princess. After the woman was educated and trained, she was presented to the Sultan. It is important to note that the Ottoman Harem system was not a romantic process. Instead, it was a political one in which not every woman in the Harem was sexually available to the Sultan. Although the Sultan could grow to care for a concubine, practicality preceded romance for the most part. Thus, any notions of the Imperial Ottoman Harem as a lustful place with scandalously garbed women draped everywhere must be discarded.

It was this system that the teenaged Hürrem was entering into before 1521. At her arrival, the Harem housed Suleiman I's mother Ayşe Hafsa Sultan, his son Şehzade Mustapha, and Mustapha's mother, Gülbahar Mahidevran Hatun. Hürrem was chosen to be a concubine and after her education, was sent to Topkapi Palace to meet with Sultan Suleiman I to officially become his concubine.²² She was renamed 'Hürrem' which means 'cheerful' due to her upbeat personality despite the trauma she had already endured.

Representation in Show

Congruous to historical events, if creative license is taken into consideration, the television series, *Magnificent Century*, begins with Sultan Suleiman ascending the throne

²¹ Kaya Şahin, *Peerless Among Princes: The Life and Times of Sultan Süleyman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), 34.

²² Peirce, *Empress of the East*, 49.

following the death of his father, Sultan Selim I.²³ Simultaneously, a young Aleksandra La Rossa has just been kidnapped from her hometown after witnessing the brutal murder of her family at the hands of slavers. However, at this point in the show, this is where complete historical accuracy ends. The first few episodes of the series depict Aleksandra on a slave ship bound directly to the Ottoman Harem in Istanbul where she is to become a concubine of Sultan Suleiman I. Her captors directly state that she is no longer a free woman. Rather, she is now the property of Suleiman I and her fate is his to decide. After an arduous trip to Istanbul, Aleksandra is sent to the Imperial Harem.

In the *Magnificent Century*, the Ottoman Harem is located directly next to Topkapi Palace and even connected with the palace since it is all part of the same complex of buildings. From the beginning of her arrival to the Harem, Aleksandra fights her new status as a slave and concubine. She is shown shouting, fighting, and in general, not endearing herself to those around her. Multiple times she defiantly shouts that she is not a slave to those around her, including Valide Hafsa Sultan. At the same time, Aleksandra is still trying to process her trauma and the fact that her entire family is dead. Despite her bouts of anger and melancholy, Aleksandra is forced to attend lessons within the Harem and begins to learn how to acclimate to the rules that dictate Harem life.

While it seems to Aleksandra that her fortunes will not improve, by chance, to celebrate the Sultan, women within the Harem are chosen as performers for a group dance for Suleiman. The man in charge of choosing the women, Ibrahim Pasha, who is a close friend of the Sultan, notices Aleksandra through a window. He takes note of her beauty and decides to include her as

²³ Sultan Selim I was also known as Selim the Grim. For more on the life of Selim I reference Alan Mikhail, *God's Shadow: Sultan Selim, His Ottoman Empire, and the Making of the Modern World* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2020).

one of the dancers for the Sultan. Sensing that the dance presents an opportunity for her, Aleksandra carefully performs the steps to entice the Sultan. Her dance attracts Suleiman's attention which indicates that she has won his favor and that he will send for her soon. After several failed attempts at meeting, Aleksandra spends the night with the Sultan who then renames her Hürrem for her 'cheerful' personality. With her new name, Hürrem is established as a clear favorite of Suleiman's despite her child-less status. Unfortunately for Hürrem, her newfound favor with Suleiman earns her the ire of Mahidevran.²⁴ Episode 3 of the *Magnificent Century* can be used to summarize Hürrem's turbulent relationship with Mahidevran in the series. Within the episode, there are three scenes that highlighted the progression of their relationship. This episode sets up the conflict between the two competing women that characterizes their interactions throughout the rest of the television show.



Figure 1: Hürrem is shown on a balcony vowing to change her station within the Harem.

²⁴ In the show Mahidevran bears the title of Haseki since she is the 'main woman' of the Sultan and mother of his son. This is not accurate since the title was created only for Hürrem to indicate her high status.

In the first scene, Hürrem stands alone on a balcony with only a white dove on the floor before her. Already, Mahidevran and her allies within the Harem have begun to mistreat Hürrem for catching the Sultan's favor. To make matters worse, while Hürrem remains childless, Mahidevran announces to the Harem that she is pregnant with her second child.²⁵ As such, while others are celebrating Mahidevran's success, Hürrem remains powerless. Wanting to be alone to contemplate her future, Hürrem walks onto a balcony. In the frame, Hürrem is clothed not in her usual jewel colored dresses, but rather, in a low cut white dress with blue trimmings. Her long red hair is curled and left unbound. Directly in front of her stands a white dove on the ground. Slowly she bends down, picks up the dove, looks at it for a moment, and then sets it free. The dove is seen flying away while Hürrem remains standing, eyes watching the bird fly away.

As this takes place, a slow violin plays in the background. The music for the scene is subtle, slow, and contemplative. It highlights her inner musings and adds a somberness to Hürrem's thoughts as she realizes she must cast off the person she was before. This is made clear with her inner monologue in which Hürrem vows:

“ I will not speak of my grief to anyone. I will not share it. I will scream my troubles to a deep well. I will pour them into the sea. The waves will take them away. I will answer everything that hurts me with laughter. I will shed my tears only for my family. I am Aleksandra La Rossa. I will transform this slave girl into a lady and fight my fate. I will become Hürrem Sultan.”

At the end of her promise, Hürrem sets the white dove free and rejoins the other women in the Harem with her new outlook on life. This scene serves as a turning point for her life in the Harem and defines the rest of her actions in the *Magnificent Century*.

²⁵ Historically, Mahidevran never had a second pregnancy. Mustapha was her first and last child.



Figure 2: Appearing before Suleiman, Hürrem asks to be converted to Islam.

In scene 2, with Hürrem determined to rise up within the Harem, she decides to convert to Islam at the advice of a eunuch, Sümbül Agha. After bribing him with gold, Sümbül advises that if she truly wants to gain power within the Harem and defeat Mahidevran, Hürrem must first convert to Islam.²⁶ Even though her conversion and night with Suleiman will infuriate Mahidevran, Hürrem resolves to go. Her goal is to keep herself within Suleiman's good graces and chambers because as long as she is in both, Mahidevran is not.²⁷ With this in mind, when Suleiman summons her again the next night, she went to him wearing a dark red dress. The dress is once again low cut in the bosom with a necklace hanging right above her cleavage. Her dress is in stark contrast to the clothing Mahidevran usually wears. Mahidevran's style entails a light brown dress that is similar to her own skin color. Her dresses usually contain a square neckline

²⁶ Historically, all women in the Harem were converted to Islam, especially concubines.

²⁷ At this point in history, Mahidevran no longer had sexual relations with Sultan Suleiman since she had already given birth to a son.

with very little cleavage shown. Therefore, while Mahidevran's clothes attract little attention, Hürrem's clothing in the scene makes her stand out.

After bowing before Suleiman and kissing his hand, Suleiman tells Hürrem to ask for whatever she wanted. She responds, "I want to believe in what you believe in...I want to believe in your Allah...My heart wants it." Endearing to Hürrem and believing her words to be the truth, Suleiman states, "I would be a slave to your heart and soul, Hürrem." He then proceeds to 'convert' Hürrem. Since Suleiman takes Hürrem's words at face value, he does not suspect her of any ulterior motives. As Hürrem successfully converts to Islam, she becomes one step closer to removing Mahidevran from Suleiman's favor.



Figure 3: As Hürrem (left) leaves Suleiman's chambers, she encounters a grieving Mahidevran (right).

As Mahidevran realizes that Suleiman is losing interest in her, and that he is increasingly interested in Hürrem, she becomes despondent. Mahidevran believes that she is losing Suleiman and weeps herself to sleep the night Hürrem converts to Islam. To make matters worse, when she wakes up that morning, she clutches her abdomen in pain. There is blood on her bed, and it

becomes clear that Mahidevran has suffered a miscarriage.²⁸ After her sheets and clothes are changed, Mahidevran aimlessly wanders the hallways in the Harem. At the same time, Hürrem, who has just left the Sultan's chambers, is also boisterously walking down the hallways in the Harem. As chance would have it, they both turn down the same hallway corridor. The camera pans to show the viewers both women.

At one end of the hallway stands Hürrem, in a vibrant, low cut red dress that shows off her cleavage. The red dress is in stark contrast to the wall behind her. Light shines upon Hürrem from the window next to her. Her red hair is neatly tied to the side and her cheeks are rosy. In comparison, at the other end of the hallway stands Mahidevran. Her hair is unbound and in a mess. She wears a beige nightdress with pink undertones that causes Mahidevran to blend into the wall behind her. In addition, her face is gaunt, colorless, and wan which makes Mahidevran blend further into the background. She also stands within the shadows of the corridor.

Mahidevran quickly approaches Hürrem and accuses her of causing her miscarriage. Hürrem, who has not heard the news, stands confused and asks for clarification. Instead of explaining what happened, Mahidevran strikes her across the face and Hürrem falls to the ground. As Mahidevran begins beating Hürrem and screams that she is a murderer, Hürrem does not fight back. After beating Hürrem to the point of unconsciousness, the episode ends with Mahidevran standing over Hürrem's battered and unconscious body. It is made clear that there will be no reconciliation between the two. From that point on, Hürrem and Mahidevran will wage an open war against one another with any tactics seen as fair game for power and status. They will not stop until one stands over the other; one triumphant and the other defeated.²⁹

²⁸ There is no historical record of Mahidevran ever suffering from a miscarriage.

²⁹ *Muhtesem Yüzyil*, season 1, episode 3, directed by Durul Taylan and Yagmur Taylan, aired January 19, 2011, on Show TV.

Feminist Analysis

Within episode 3 of the *Magnificent Century*, the transformation of Aleksandra to Hürrem Sultan and her subsequent rivalry with Mahidevran Hatun, was highly problematic within a feminist lens. To begin, Hürrem's agency within the Harem must be called into question. Given that she was a slave within the Harem, her options were already severely limited. Ottoman protocols, historically and in the show, dictated her daily life and restricted her from returning to her homeland. Thus, although she was actively choosing to make a vow of silence and stifle her trauma, Hürrem had no choice but to do so. She needed to move on for the sake of survival, not because she chose to become a slave concubine. Typical of an oppressed woman, Hürrem could not "afford to relinquish the belief that they exercise some measure of control...They cannot afford to see themselves solely as 'victims' because their survival depends on continued exercise of whatever personal powers they possess."³⁰ Either she became a powerful concubine or she remained powerless with no way to escape the situation. The dove scene within the series indicated that Hürrem's true desire was to be free and that viewers should be sympathetic to her plight.

However, in order to gain power, Hürrem chose to make an enemy out of Mahidevran through the seduction of Suleiman. Historically, Mahidevran would have had no claim over Suleiman since she had already borne him a son years ago. In this instance, the writers of the show created a false narrative of women fighting one another for the attention of a powerful man. In this historically inaccurate scenario, the idea of Hürrem remaking herself into a woman who has her own power and agency to forge her own destiny was an illusion. Whatever power

³⁰ bell hooks, "Sisterhood: Political Solidarity between Women," in *Feminist Social Thought: A Reader*, ed. Diana Tietjens Meyers (New York: Routledge, 1997), 485.

she would be able to attain can only come from the patriarchy, Suleiman himself. He was in charge and had the ability to take away any power Hürrem had at a moment's notice.

Furthermore, Hürrem's power stemmed from her prescribing to the gendered roles of women as submissive wives (concubine) or mothers. Since maintaining Suleiman's interest would be a more stable source of power, Hürrem's identity was built around being an accessory, sex object, and slave to the Sultan. Women were being portrayed not as their own person, but rather, as an extension and living expression of their relationship with a male in power. They were being who they had to be, not who they wanted to be in order to survive.

Moreover, since Hürrem had this resolve to 'remake herself,' the emergence of the stereotype of a seductive woman who at the same time has childlike qualities was used. Since, at the time of her kidnapping, Aleksandra was not even twenty years old, she "being a girl...is the point where she starts to be told to behave in certain ways...But at the same time she is considered to be a woman...she is harassed and becomes a magnet for the male gaze."³¹ This strange dichotomy could be seen in the second scene. Hürrem's purposefully chosen dark red dress with a low cut bosom blatantly presented her body as a sex object that should be viewed with lustful intent by a male gaze. Rendering her body an object for Suleiman, "she is the recipient of male desire, the passive recipient of his gaze."³² At the same time, she 'humbly' asked Suleiman to teach her about Islam and then convert her. Suleiman took on the stereotype of an authoritarian figure whose purpose was to guide a silly young girl into maturity.

Hürrem's other clothing and actions further emphasized Hürrem's dual immaturity and seductiveness. Typically, the colors associated with a sedate, mature, and matronly woman

³¹ Elif Akşit, "Being a Girl in Ottoman Novels," in *Childhood in the Late Ottoman Empire and After*, ed. Benjamin C. Fortna (Brill, 2016), 94, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1163/j.ctt1w8h1jx.9>.

³² E. Ann Kaplan, "Is the Gaze Male?," in *Feminism and Film*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 125-126.

tended to be darker in color. In contrast, her dresses were always in bright jewel tones that a young girl might wear. The colors of the dresses hinted at immaturity while the cut of the dresses did not. All of them were low cut, leaving Hürrem's bosom available to the male gaze, which emphasized her sexual availability. Furthermore, when in the presence of Suleiman, Hürrem often acted giddy, flighty, and mispronounced words like a young girl. Only when left to her own devices did Hürrem's intelligence and seriousness come forth.

To make matters worse, the stereotypical seductive woman in question was also portrayed as a so-called 'homewrecker.' All of her decisions in episode 3 were to the detriment of another woman, Mahidevran Hatun. Since, only in the series, Mahidevran was in a committed relationship with Suleiman, Hürrem was literally 'the other woman.' Hürrem's main plan in the first arc of the show was to remove Mahidevran from Suleiman's side and take over her position. The writers ignored the possibility of having the two women come together over a sense of shared grief over a lost family and the trapped situation they were in. Rather, it was made clear that there would not be any true and lasting solidarity between the female characters.

The final scene of the episode centered around a physical fight between the pair where the intent was to cause serious harm. Mahidevran misdirected her anger and grief over the miscarriage towards the only person she could, another woman. Even though Mahidevran's miscarriage had no historical basis, there was some evidence that some sort of disagreement happened between both women. According to a letter from ambassador Bernardo Navagero, Mahidevran and Hürrem had an altercation where "she insulted her, and as she was doing so she scratched her all over her face and mussed up her clothing..."³³ It was from the contents in this letter that the *Magnificent Century* writers drew from for this scene.

³³ Leslie Peirce, *The Imperial Harem*, 59.

Despite the specific details in the letter, the accuracy of the event was open to doubt. The European diplomat did not have direct access to the Harem and the women within it. Any news about the lives of the women in the Harem had to come from second hand or other indirect sources. Thus, details about the event could have been exaggerated, made up, or mistakenly reported. The contents in the letter, and the idea of Hürrem as a seductress, were further exacerbated throughout history by European media and orientalism. Europe was all too eager to portray a ‘foreign oriental’ queen as ruthless and sexually promiscuous as an offset to their own supposed ‘mild mannered, moral, and chaste’ women. Additionally, the stereotype of the “Muslim woman...as a queen or noblewoman wielding power of harm or succor over the hero”³⁴ was also popular in the culture of the time and sold well amongst European masses. On the other hand, it was not impossible that the squabble in the letter actually took place. However, given the structured nature of the Harem and the large number of servants it housed, the show’s version of events was impossible.

Finally, it was interesting to note that while both women were almost in the same situation, they chose to view each other as adversaries instead of blaming the true person who has complete agency and was mainly responsible for their fates. The person in question was Suleiman himself. As a free male, and ruler of the Empire, Suleiman had complete autonomy and literally owned both women. Yet, the series wrote him as the sympathetic young ruler who, despite trying to do his best, had been led astray by Hürrem. The relationship between himself and Hürrem was romanticized in the series, but upon closer examination, the cracks began to show. The whole premise of their relationship was built upon power, ambition, lies, and lust.

³⁴ Mohja Kahf, *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman: From Termagant to Odalisque* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), 4. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.pointloma.idm.oclc.org/lib/pointloma-ebooks/detail.action?docID=3442959>.

When it comes to power, Hürrem was a slave (object) while Suleiman owned her. Suleiman treats Hürrem as an object “for conquest and protection” which is problematic.³⁵ Therefore, the power dynamic and interactions between the partners was unbalanced with the man wielding most of it. Hürrem had very little agency or control within the relationship. In this vein, since Hürrem wanted some of the power Suleiman held, she initiated the relationship. Power was a useful tool and lever that would be used to further Hürrem’s ambition to gain status. Thus, Hürrem lied to Suleiman about wanting to convert to Islam for the sole purpose of power and ambition. Without those two key points, there would be no purpose for Hürrem to seek out a relationship with Suleiman. She wanted him for what he could offer her; not for companionship or actual devotion.

On the part of Suleiman, he entered into the relationship with Hürrem for lust. As his property, Hürrem’s body became an object to Suleiman. The way that she was ‘prepared’ each night before going to his rooms reduced her from a person into a “sexual object...she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire.”³⁶ The way Hürrem physically looked was the representation of his lust and stylized towards his visual pleasure. To make matters worse, as Hürrem’s ‘master,’ Suleiman literally owned and controlled her sexuality and reproduction. Since her sexuality and ability to bear sons was her only source of power, Suleiman was in direct control of Hürrem’s fate.

³⁵ Susanne Kappeler, “Subjects, Objects and Equal Opportunities,” in *Feminism and Sexuality: A Reader* ed. Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 305.

³⁶ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in *Modern Feminisms: Political, Literary, Cultural* ed. Maggie Humm (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 348-349.

Women in Politics

Historical Background

Within a year of becoming a concubine of Suleiman I, Hürrem Sultan gave birth to her first child and son, Şehzade Mehmed in 1521. According to the rules of the Imperial Ottoman Harem, Hürrem should have ceased to have relations with the Sultan to instead focus on the upbringing of her son. Instead, in a radical break with tradition of one son per concubine, Hürrem continued to have children with the Sultan. She proceeded to give birth to a daughter, Mihrimah, and four more sons, Selim II, Şehzade Abdullah, Şehzade Bayezid, and Şehzade Cihangir. Following the birth of Mehmed, Suleiman I and Hürrem Sultan entered into a monogamous relationship with one another. With no need for other concubines besides Hürrem, the Harem became the home of “a close-knit family in an environment that precluded such a thing.”³⁷ For the first time in Ottoman history, the royal family resembled that of a nuclear family.

Suleiman and Hürrem’s shift to a monogamous relationship was altogether not too surprising considering an event that took place within the Harem following Mehmed’s birth. According to the European ambassador Pietro Bragadin, when two new Russian women were brought to the Harem, Hürrem went to Valide Hafsa Sultan and “became extremely unhappy and flung herself to the ground weeping.”³⁸ Hafsa and Suleiman were both deeply moved by Hürrem’s tears and sent the Russian women away from the capital. This incident revealed that Suleiman was willing to not take new concubines at Hürrem’s request. It also indicated that

³⁷ Şahin, *Peerless Among Princes*, 222.

³⁸ Peirce, *Empress of the East*, 76.

Hafsa, who had some influence over Suleiman, did not entirely disapprove of her son's tradition breaking shift to a monogamous relationship.

A short while after the birth of Cihangir in 1531, Hafsa Sultan died. With the death of the most prominent and powerful woman within the Harem, Hürrem attained the position as the highest ranking woman within the Harem hierarchy. Prior to Hafsa's death, Hürrem's own power and status within the Harem had steadily increased given that she had continued to remain in Suleiman's favor. The Sultan had even created the title of 'Haseki' specifically for Hürrem.³⁹ The title of 'Haseki' indicated that Hürrem Sultan was the most favored concubine of Suleiman I. As such, Hürrem's time in the Ottoman Harem is referred to as 'the age of the favorite.' Therefore, as the next highest ranking female in the dynasty, Hürrem was left in charge of ruling the Harem.

For the next several years, Hürrem and Suleiman continued to break with long standing Ottoman traditions. Each major break would further increase Hürrem Sultan's status and power. Within a year or two after Hafsa's death, Hürrem was freed from slavery by the Sultan. Previously, tradition had dictated that concubine mothers were only freed when their master, the Sultan, died. However, Suleiman disregarded tradition by marrying Hürrem, thereby making her his legal wife. This was the first time that an Ottoman Sultan had taken a legal wife since Murad I in the 1300s.⁴⁰ Essentially, Hürrem Sultan had gone from a slave girl to the Empress of the Ottoman Empire in a little over a 10 year span.

With her new titles of 'Haseki' and 'Empress,' Hürrem was allowed privileges that no concubine before her had. One privilege was that she was able to build and run several "major

³⁹ Haseki means 'the favorite' or the 'chief consort' to the reigning Sultan

⁴⁰ Colin Imber, *The Ottoman Empire, 1300-1650: The Structure of Power* (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002), 89.

trusts in Istanbul and Edirne, in Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem.”⁴¹ Hürrem also built charitable buildings in Istanbul, the capital of the Ottoman Empire. Prior to Hürrem Sultan, tradition only allowed concubine mothers the opportunity to conduct charity within the provinces of the Ottoman Empire. This followed the Ottoman system involving the education and training of princes.

In the Ottoman Empire, when a prince came of age, he was sent to live within a province of the empire. While in the province, the young princes were to govern the area so that they would personally learn how to rule. Furthermore, a prince was expected to continue his studies with tutors and learn how to make his own allies in preparation for fighting his brothers for the throne. The princes would also form their own harem, which was not the same size as the ruling Sultan’s harem, to start producing the next generation of heirs. This was done to ensure that there would always be a successor to the Ottoman throne to prevent a succession crisis.

When a prince left Istanbul to live within the province he was assigned to, his mother went with him. Concubine mothers were sent alongside their sons to monitor and guide their progress within the province. These women would write reports to the Sultan on how their son was behaving and if he was ruling the province well. They could also petition the Sultan if their sons were misbehaving and plead for the Sultan’s mercy on their son.⁴² A prince’s mother would also help form their son’s harem and rule over it for him. Once a concubine left for a province with her son, they usually did not return to Istanbul and the Old Palace unless their son defeated his brothers and won the throne. In that case, the woman would return to the Ottoman Imperial Harem and rule it as the Valide Sultan.

⁴¹ Douglas A. Howard, *A History of the Ottoman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 102.

⁴² An example of a concubine petitioning the Sultan was during the reign of Bayezid II. His concubine, Gülrüh Hatun, wrote to him asking for help replacing their son’s ‘corrupt’ tutors. For her letter, reference Peirce, *The Imperial Harem*, 49.

While in the provinces, the concubine mothers were able to exercise the limited amount of power they had. Interestingly, concubines were really only able to wield their power and influence the world outside of the Harem only after they entered into the post-sexual phase of their life. In other words, “sexual maturity-and thus legitimate power-was defined for women as the absence of sexual activity.”⁴³ They exercised their ‘legitimate power’ by sponsoring charities and having mosques or bathhouses built in the provinces they lived in with their son. Concubine mothers were only allowed to build within the provinces their sons lived in. They were not allowed to build elsewhere and were especially not allowed to build in the Ottoman capital, Istanbul. Patronage within Istanbul was usually limited to powerful men within the dynasty.

However, Hürrem Sultan was able to break that constraint when she was given permission to build in Istanbul by the Sultan. Her ability to construct foundations within the capital indicated the amount of favor and power she had with the Sultan. Within Istanbul, Hürrem had a large complex built containing a soup kitchen, bathhouse, and hospital. Furthermore, she also had a large soup kitchen constructed in Jerusalem as well. Since her soup kitchen was so large, it served “food for 50 staff, the guests in its 55 rooms, and for 400 ‘poor and pious’ people twice daily.”⁴⁴ Therefore, Hürrem Sultan was involved in a wide array of charitable institutions to help the poor.

Unlike her forebears, Hürrem Sultan possessed an unprecedented amount of power for a former slave concubine. It also must be noted that she did not leave the capital when her eldest son, Mehmed, came of age and left for his assigned province. This was in part because her other sons had not reached their maturity and Cihangir had a spinal deformity that prevented him from

⁴³ Leslie Peirce, *The Imperial Harem*, 23.

⁴⁴ Amy Singer, *Charity in Islamic Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 149.

being sent to a province.⁴⁵ Secondly, because she had multiple sons, leaving for a province with one of her sons would indicate favoritism. At this point in her life, Hürrem had not indicated any favoritism on which son she supported to gain the Ottoman throne.

Another example of Hürrem breaking tradition was that she served as an unofficial advisor to Suleiman and was involved in foreign relations. When Suleiman was out on campaign, Hürrem served as his eyes and ears within the capital. After a fire broke out in the Old Palace, Hürrem and her children moved into Topkapi Palace, bringing women right to the center of where governmental affairs took place. With such direct access, she wrote Suleiman letters detailing what was happening in the capital and Topkapi Palace when he was not there.

Hürrem Sultan was not the only ‘favorite’ and advisor to Suleiman I. For much of Suleiman’s life, he had a close companion named Ibrahim Pasha. Ibrahim Pasha was born in Parga, which at the time was a part of the Republic of Venice. In his boyhood, he was captured and forced into slavery. Purchased by a woman who “gave him a good education...he met and became the property of Suleiman, then heir to the throne and governor of Magnesia.”⁴⁶ Initially starting out as a companion to Suleiman, Ibrahim rose through the ranks and was eventually appointed as the Grand Vizier of the Ottoman Empire.⁴⁷ While the position of Grand Vizier came with power and prestige, it also came with the precarious nature of being a high standing politician. As the old adage states, the higher they go, the harder they fall. In the Ottoman Empire, there was a high turnover rate for high governmental positions. It was not uncommon

⁴⁵ Due to his spinal deformity, Cihangir was not considered to be eligible to become the next Sultan. Since he was not in the line of succession, and also due to poor health, Cihangir remained in the capital with his parents. For more reference Howard, *A History of the Ottoman Empire*, 98.

⁴⁶ Lord Kinross, *The Ottoman Centuries: The Rise and Fall of the Turkish Empire* (New York: Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1977), 182.

⁴⁷ The Grand Vizier was the highest ranking vizier in the Ottoman government. It was also a prominent position to have in the government.

for Sultans to execute governmental officials for failures or perceived slights.⁴⁸ This would be the case for Ibrahim Pasha for, after ascending to the position of Grand Vizier, he would be executed by Suleiman in 1536.

Although historians allege that there was a rivalry between Hürrem Sultan and Ibrahim Pasha, there is little to no evidence supporting their claims. The only suggestion that there was perhaps friction between the pair was in a letter from Hürrem to Suleiman in 1526 while he was away from the capital. In the letter Hürrem stated, “An explanation has been requested for why I am angry at the pasha...if it becomes possible to speak in person, it will be heard. At present, we still send greetings to the pasha, may he accept them.”⁴⁹ While Hürrem’s words provided a mere hint of a disagreement, there is no actual proof that the two hated each other. Nor is there any conclusive evidence that they plotted against each other.

Representation in Show

While time has not brought forth definitive or reliable sources that point towards a long-standing feud between Hürrem Sultan and Ibrahim Pasha, the series, *Magnificent Century*, portrays them as adversaries. The storyline of the middle of the show centers around the long-standing hatred between the pair and how both work towards removing the other from the Sultan’s favor. In the *Magnificent Century*, their rivalry starts from the very beginning when Ibrahim Pasha chooses to turn a blind eye to Mahidevran Hatun’s cruelty to Hürrem. With each of his refusals to help Hürrem, Ibrahim blatantly allies himself with Mahidevran and her son, Mustapha. In doing so, from Hürrem’s standpoint, he declares himself her enemy.

⁴⁸ Kinross, *The Ottoman Centuries*, 182.

⁴⁹ Peirce, *Empress of the East*, 178.

The disdain Hürrem harbors for Ibrahim does not initially bother him. However, as she continues to retain the Sultan's favor, the animosity between the two grows into outright hatred. With both serving as influential figures to Suleiman, they begin plotting against one another in the hopes of removing the other from the Sultan's side. This is because Hürrem and Ibrahim stand in the way of each other's ambitions. Hürrem seeks to place her son on the Ottoman throne; Ibrahim wants Mustapha on the throne. Ibrahim wants to rise within the government; Hürrem wants him away from the Sultan. Neither can attain their political goals so long as the other is alive. So, to eliminate the threat, each plot the downfall of the other in the hopes of being the sole influence on Suleiman's decisions. Through Hürrem and Ibrahim's rivalry, Hürrem's actions symbolize how the series views women involved in politics.



Figure 4: Ibrahim accuses Hürrem of plotting against Mustapha.

The discord between Ibrahim and Hürrem, along with the theme of women in politics, can be summarized in episode 80 and 81 of the *Magnificent Century*. In the first scene, in episode 80, Ibrahim confronts Hürrem in his office after summoning her. Both are clad in the symbols of their power. Hürrem is richly garbed in a purple dress and veil, leaving her body

covered. She is also adorned with earrings and a crown. Ibrahim is dressed in dark green robes made with material of a fine quality, indicating his high status. He has come to accuse her of planting a spy in Şehzade Mustapha's harem with the intent of having the spy harm Mustapha. Unfortunately for Hürrem, Ibrahim's accusations are indeed true since she did send a spy to harm Mustapha.⁵⁰ To make matters worse, Ibrahim has captured the spy and plans to present the spy to the Sultan. Since the attempted murder of an Ottoman prince is a capital offense, Ibrahim believes that he has found the perfect way of getting rid of Hürrem. Thus, he boldly enters her personal chambers and proclaims, "I want you to think about your sins...this...night will make you feel a bit humble...as there is no other way left for you." With these dramatic words, Ibrahim indicates that he has triumphed over Hürrem and that her time in power has come to an end. It also implies that Hürrem is wicked and that a night of reflective humility will do her some good.

However, not one to be defeated, Hürrem keeps a stoic facade throughout Ibrahim's speech. Even though her potential for ruin is high, she looks him straight in the face. She counters his words with "No one can accuse me with such slander. Especially you, never! Do you think our Sultan still trusts you?...You're digging your own grave, you just don't know it." Instead of being cowed or admitting to her crime, Hürrem maintains a calm demeanor. She matches Ibrahim's bold attitude and tries turning the situation around. Hürrem's cutting remarks to Ibrahim reveal that he has lost favor with Suleiman and that she will ensure his execution. Once they part ways, Hürrem orders her main ally, Rüstem Pasha, to either kill the spy or threaten her to silence.

⁵⁰ Hürrem's attempt to poison Mustapha has no historical basis. This event in the series is entirely fiction.



Figure 5: Ibrahim (right) and Hürrem (left) glare at one another from different balconies in Topkapi Palace.

In the second scene, which takes place the next morning, Hürrem anxiously fidgets on the balcony attached to her chambers. Instead of her brightly colored dresses, she is garbed in a dark brown dress that lacks her usual flair. Although she wears a crown and earrings, they are not large or elaborately decorated. Her face lacks its usual coloring; there is little color on her cheeks and lips. Instead, her eyes are rimmed in red, which highlights her anxiety and guilt. Hürrem has yet to receive any news on whether the spy has been taken care of. As she gazes outwards, Ibrahim appears from the balcony above hers.⁵¹ Unlike Hürrem, his appearance is one of confidence and power. While Hürrem glares up at him from below, Ibrahim smugly smirks down at her. The hatred between the two is palpable to viewers.

To Hürrem's delight and Ibrahim's horror, Hürrem's allies have managed to blackmail the spy into changing her confession. Before the Sultan and Ibrahim, the spy declares that Ibrahim has forced her to falsely accuse Hürrem Sultan. Horrified that Ibrahim would slander his wife, Suleiman takes a visible step away from Ibrahim. Before Ibrahim can defend himself or make the spy retract her accusation, the spy leaps from the balcony and kills herself. Scrambling

⁵¹ Historically, the Harem was not close to the Sultan's chambers in Topkapi Palace.

to take charge of the situation, Ibrahim maintains that Hürrem is at fault and that she wants to drive Suleiman and Ibrahim apart. Instead of listening to Ibrahim's pleas, Suleiman angrily declares that "If one day my friends become my enemies, it is only because of their actions." With those ominous parting words, Suleiman storms out of the room. Infuriated that his plot against Hürrem has been turned against him, Ibrahim once again returns to the balcony. As he glares down at Hürrem from above, she smugly smirks up at him. With great cunning, Hürrem has turned the tables on Ibrahim and implicated him to Suleiman.⁵²



Figure 6: Hürrem persuades Suleiman that she is innocent of any crimes.

In the final scene, which takes place that night, Hürrem appears before Suleiman in his chambers. Hürrem approaches the Sultan in a simple golden nightgown with minimal decoration. Although she has entered his chambers many times before in her usual regalia, on this particular night she comes to him dressed as herself, not as a regal queen or politician. Her choice of clothing makes her seem unarmed, more personal, and innocent. Both her cheeks and lips are rosy in color with minimal makeup. Her overall appearance gives off an aura of innocence and

⁵² *Muhtesem Yüzyil*, season 3, episode 20, directed by Durul Taylan and Yagmur Taylan, aired January 23, 2013, on Star TV.

honesty. In contrast, Suleiman is fully dressed in dark robes with elaborate embroidery. While Hürrem's countenance is serene, Suleiman's is grave and stern.

After approaching Suleiman, he fiercely tells her that an accusation has been made against her. She scoffs and replies that Ibrahim must have accused her. She then carefully asks Suleiman if he believes Ibrahim's slander against her. Finally turning towards Hürrem, Suleiman coldly states, "If I believed it, you would not be here now." Sensing that Suleiman is torn on who to believe, Hürrem quickly begins speaking. Looking Suleiman in the face, Hürrem asserts that Ibrahim has "his eye on your throne...It looks like he wants to get him [Mustapha] on the throne. I fully trust Prince Mustapha but I can't say the same for Ibrahim Pasha. His heart is filled with ambition."

Despite almost killing Mustapha, Hürrem is quick to use him as a means of declaring her innocence. By proclaiming her trust and support for Mustapha, Hürrem wants to eliminate the idea that she is responsible for harming him. She also makes sure to implicate Ibrahim and paint him as an ambitious man who will do anything to gain power. While Hürrem is not incorrect, she uses the truth for her own means. Not fully unaware of Hürrem's manipulation of the truth, Suleiman softly asks her, "And you Hürrem? What is your heart full of?" Immediately Hürrem replies, "Love, Suleiman. Love for you." With her words, Suleiman softens his demeanor and draws her into his arms. Once again, Hürrem uses the truth to her own benefit. She did not lie for, throughout the entire series, Hürrem is completely loyal, devoted, and in love with Suleiman. However, she also knows that her response will erase any doubts Suleiman has against her. Meanwhile, Suleiman's doubts and mistrust towards Ibrahim remain. Unfortunately for Ibrahim, Suleiman will soon after have him executed in the middle of the night.⁵³

⁵³ *Muhtesem Yüzyil*, season 3, episode 21, directed by Durul Taylan and Yagmur Taylan, aired January 30, 2013, on Star TV.

Feminist Analysis

The scenes in episode 80 of the *Magnificent Century* utilize several stereotypical clichés involving women in power. In the first scene, as Hürrem stood before Ibrahim, her body and hair were fully covered with a high collared dress and veil. Even the color of her dress was darker than her usual style, in that it was not striking or suggestive. Her wardrobe made it clear that in this instance, she was not to be subjected to the male gaze. As such, it was apparent that she was not sexually available to Ibrahim. Instead, they stood before each other as mere political rivals competing for political power.

Hürrem and Ibrahim's conversation reflected the stereotypical sexist notion that a woman involving herself with politics goes against her role as a female. When Ibrahim stated that she needed to be 'humble' and 'reflect on her sins,' he was chastising her for stepping outside of patriarchal dictated gender norms. As a woman, Hürrem was expected to tend to the care of her children and engage in other 'womanly pursuits.' Or if she was to engage in politics, it had to fit the stereotype of "the politically competent woman" socializing "children and to filter the needs of home and family into the political system."⁵⁴ Instead, Hürrem involved herself in the politics beyond socializing her children, which, in this context, was seen as a male dominated arena. In doing so, her political forays were viewed as sins and cast with suspicion as unnatural, unwomanly, and malicious.⁵⁵ Furthermore, women were often expected to be virtuous and moral. At the same time, Hürrem did not ascribe to these traits so she was viewed by Ibrahim as lesser than.

⁵⁴ Susan Bourque and Jean Grossholtz, "Politics an Unnatural Practice: Political Science Looks at Female Participation," in *Feminism and Politics* ed. Anne Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 36, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.pointloma.idm.oclc.org/lib/pointloma-ebooks/reader.action?docID=1173598&ppg=34>.

⁵⁵ Although Hürrem's choices in this episode are criminal, her other political endeavors are viewed in the same light. This episode is used to be representative of all her political efforts, not just Hürrem's negative political actions.

Ibrahim thus attempted to take on the task of putting her back in her place. His statements imply that whatever punishment she was going to receive was deserved for going outside of the gendered norm of women staying in the domestic sphere. In response, Hürrem's parting words to Ibrahim reflected the true power dynamic that governed them both. While they held political power, they had only attained it as favorites of the Sultan. Their status was beholden to Suleiman's good will and their behavior had to reflect that. This was why Hürrem felt comfortable in challenging Ibrahim because she knew that Suleiman was displeased with him.

In the next scene on the two balconies, Ibrahim was placed on the Sultan's personal balcony above Hürrem's, looking down upon her. His position portrayed to viewers that he was above her by the natural order of things as a male and legitimate government official. As a woman, Hürrem was not officially allowed to be involved in politics and symbolically remained below Ibrahim on her balcony in the Harem. Hürrem's appearance reflected that she was guilty of some nefarious action. Historically, it would have been highly unlikely that Hürrem Sultan was engaged in constant malicious political intrigue. To do so would place unnecessary risk on herself and her own children when she already was the most powerful woman in the empire. Realistically, a vast majority of Hürrem Sultan's political career involved communicating government affairs to Suleiman when he was on campaign and corresponding with other nation's royals.⁵⁶

In contrast, the show purposefully chose to have Hürrem involved in a myriad of morally dubious political schemes. Hürrem's portrayal in this episode as a woman involved in politics relied heavily on the stereotype of the cunning and ruthless queen. More specifically, her

⁵⁶ For greater detail of Hürrem Sultan's role as a diplomat reference Peirce, *The Imperial Harem*, 220-221.

depiction was drawn from the European trope of a cruel ‘oriental’ queen. In Europe, Hürrem Sultan was known as Roxelana, which roughly translated to ‘girl from Ruthenia.’ The name Roxelana, which can be shortened to Roxane or Rossa, was synonymous with a queen who was “represented as sexually predatory, manipulative, ruthless, and bloodthirsty, and a witch.”⁵⁷ The name was also associated with being a whore. Hürrem Sultan’s European moniker developed over the years as European countries created plays, chronicles, songs, and poems with false storylines where she controlled the Sultan and persecuted her enemies. The *Magnificent Century* writers made use of these false narratives and built the character of Hürrem Sultan around the cruel ‘oriental’ queen stereotype. They chose to turn away from history where there was little to no concrete evidence indicative of a long-standing conflict between Hürrem Sultan and Ibrahim Pasha.

As depicted on the balcony scene, Hürrem fits this ruthless queen stereotype. As she watched from down below, it was revealed that her allies had been able to threaten her spy to prevent the girl from exposing Hürrem’s plot. Her allies accomplished this by threatening the life of the girl’s mother. With no other choice, the girl falsely accused Ibrahim of trying to tarnish Hürrem’s reputation and kills herself. Hürrem’s political career was thus centered around her wickedly orchestrating the downfall of those who posed a threat to her power. She was even willing to have innocent women executed in order to preserve her power and status. With no other woman in the show to serve as a contrast to Hürrem, the idea of a woman involved in politics is intrinsically tied to all the misdeeds done by her. In this sense, “the dominant cinema specifies woman...in certain positions of meaning, fixes her with a certain identification...woman is constituted as the ground of representation, the looking glass held up to

⁵⁷ Jennifer Higginbotham, *The Girlhood of Shakespeare’s Sisters: Gender, Transgression, Adolescence* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 51, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt20q22dc.6>.

man.”⁵⁸ However, when it comes to male characters, there is a wide spectrum of men in politics. There are just male politicians and there are wicked male politicians. Unfortunately, when it comes to women, there is only Hürrem with all her decisions reflected back on women as a whole. As such, the show implicitly implied that there are negative connotations to women involved in politics. Writers also failed to portray all of the benevolent political aspects of Hürrem where she fed and had compassion for the poor. Most of her charity work and letters to foreign dignitaries were ignored.

Although Ibrahim had the advantage over Hürrem by being a male and legitimate political office holder, she had the capability to sway Suleiman in a way Ibrahim could not. Hürrem was Suleiman’s romantic partner and could use their relationship to her advantage. Since Ibrahim’s accusation against her had planted a seed of doubt in Suleiman’s mind, Hürrem sought him out that night. The plain nightdress that she wore symbolized how she was going before Suleiman without any guile or falsehood. It seemed that she was coming to him as she was, not as a political figure. Her true intent was revealed once she started talking with Suleiman. In an indirect manner, she was able to implicate Ibrahim of slandering her. Hürrem also successfully cast herself as innocent of any wrongdoing.

The way Hürrem was able to divert Suleiman’s suspicion away from herself lends credence to the idea that appearances are deceiving. Whereas Hürrem’s appearance implied a naivety and innocence, her actions made clear that she had actually come with the intent to be deceitful. In this way, the show subtly hints at the untrustworthiness of women as they possessed ulterior motives. Employing the European narrative of Suleiman being “under the evil influence

⁵⁸ Teresa De Lauretis, “Alice Doesn’t: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema,” in *Modern Feminisms: Political, Literary, Cultural*, ed. Maggie Humm (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 355-356.

of his favorite Sultana,”⁵⁹ Hürrem is shown misguiding a ‘bewitched’ Suleiman for her own benefit. She knowingly broke the trust between Suleiman and Ibrahim to get rid of him.

Whilst Hürrem was presented as the manipulative wife, Suleiman was characterized as the unknowing husband blinded by love. His devotion for his wife caused him to overlook her faults and harmful actions against others. Hürrem knew this and used his love for her towards her advantage. When he asked her what was in her heart, Suleiman hinted that it was merely ambition. Quickly, Hürrem turned the situation around by stating it was pure love for him that was in her heart. Suleiman quickly gave in, as he believed his love for her was returned. Men were therefore shown to be weak and easily guided when ‘ensnared’ by a seductive woman.

Women and Motherhood

Historical Background

Following the execution of Ibrahim Pasha, Hürrem Sultan remained as the sole great influence on Sultan Suleiman I. Her interests remained divided between matters of the Empire, charity works, and her children. Out of her 6 children, Mehmed, Mihrimah, Selim, Abdullah, Bayezid, and Cihangir, her son Abdullah would not survive past the age of 5. Around the age of 3 years old, Abdullah caught a disease and died in 1528. Hürrem’s remaining 5 children would survive to adulthood, although most would not live to an old age.

As the sons of Sultan Suleiman I reached their maturity, they began preparing to leave the capital to head to their assigned province to learn about governorship. Suleiman’s eldest surviving son, Mustapha was the first to leave Istanbul in 1532 at the age of 17. He had been granted governorship over Manisa, and set out to the province alongside his mother.⁶⁰ Popular

⁵⁹ George J. S. Eversley, *The Turkish Empire 1288-1924* (New York: Howard Fertig Inc, 1969), 134.

⁶⁰ Manisa is a province located in Western Anatolia and a part of modern day Turkey.

culture and historians throughout the years have alleged that Hürrem had kicked Mustapha and Mahidevran out of Istanbul. They have argued that Hürrem was able to get the two of them out of the capital prior to Mustapha reaching maturity.⁶¹ In this sense, Hürrem Sultan has been cast into the stereotype of a wicked and cruel stepmother. However, Mustapha and Mahidevran were never cast out of Istanbul over a supposed rivalry. They both had left the capital per Ottoman protocols involving the upbringing of princes.

While in Manisa, Mustapha formed his own small Harem and started fathering children to continue the Ottoman line of succession.⁶² Mustapha ruled Manisa with no issues for almost 10 years until he was ordered to move to the province of Amasya in 1541. His younger brother, and Hürrem's eldest son, Mehmed had come of age and Suleiman had decided to give Manisa to Mehmed instead. Mehmed set out to Manisa without his mother given that Hürrem remained behind with Suleiman and her other children. At the time, it seemed to some that Mehmed was the favorite son of Suleiman.⁶³ Mehmed taking over Mustapha's position as governor of Manisa was seen as proof of Suleiman's favoritism. With Mustapha in Amasya, Mehmed ruled Manisa for only two short years as he died of smallpox at the age of 21. Both Hürrem and Suleiman were deeply grief stricken over the loss of their eldest child. Breaking Ottoman tradition, Suleiman had Mehmed buried in Istanbul instead of the province of Bursa.⁶⁴ The location of Mehmed's final resting place indicated the level of attachment Suleiman had to his son. Following Mehmed's death, Suleiman had a mosque built to commemorate him and appointed his son Selim as the new governor of Manisa. His other son, Bayezid was sent to the province of Konya.

⁶¹ Kinross, *The Ottoman Centuries*, 236.

⁶² Peirce, *The Imperial Harem*, 53.

⁶³ Peirce, *Empress of the East*, 253.

⁶⁴ Finkel, *Osman's Dream*, 139.

Cihangir remained in Istanbul with Hürrem and Suleiman since his spinal deformity prevented him from being considered for the throne.

As Hürrem's sons left for their provinces, her daughter, Mihrimah Sultan remained in the capital with her. Mihrimah Sultan had a very close relationship with both her mother and father. In her teenage years, Mihrimah was married to a government official named Rüstem Pasha in 1539. At the time of their marriage, Rüstem had worked his way through the government and held the position of vizier. With his marriage to Mihrimah secured, Rüstem was able to become the Grand Vizier several years later.⁶⁵ It has been widely believed by historians that Rüstem Pasha served as a useful ally to Hürrem Sultan in securing the Ottoman throne for her own sons. It has been alleged that both Rüstem and Hürrem were the key figures behind the execution of Şehzade Mustapha in 1553.

For much of his adult life, Şehzade Mustapha retained favor with his father, Sultan Suleiman I. With the death of Mehmed, it was believed by many that Mustapha would become the next Sultan when Suleiman died. He had been recorded by the Ambassador Navagero for being "much...loved and desired by all in the empire to succeed. The janissaries want him and they let this be known manifestly."⁶⁶ Despite these glowing recommendations, what mattered most was Suleiman's own opinion of him. In any case, Mustapha remained popular amongst the populace, soldiers, and the janissaries.

However, in the early 1550s, rumors began spreading involving Mustapha, Hürrem Sultan, and Rüstem Pasha. The first rumor claimed that Mustapha was planning to overthrow his

⁶⁵ Lybyer, *The Government*, 164.

⁶⁶ Zahit Atçil, "Why Did Suleyman the Magnificent Execute His Son Şehzade Mustafa in 1553?," *Osmanlı Araştırmaları*, no. 48 (2016): 77, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/309128882_Why_Did_Suleyman_the_Magnificent_Execute_His_Son_Şehzade_Mustafa_in_1553.

father, Suleiman I. Sons overthrowing their fathers was not an uncommon phenomenon in Ottoman history. Suleiman's father, Selim I, had deposed his father, Bayezid II and proceeded to kill his own brothers for the throne. Bayezid II died soon after, most likely from poison.⁶⁷ Therefore, it was not impossible that Mustapha was perhaps thinking of overthrowing his own father and killing his brothers. Suleiman was notified about these rumors from various sources, including Rüstem Pasha. Although he did not initially act against his son based on the rumors, the seed of Mustapha's supposed betrayal had been planted. Suleiman believed his son was capable of betraying him since the Ottoman "system ensured that sons viewed their father and half-brothers as enemies more than kin."⁶⁸

The second rumor was that Hürrem and Rüstem were actively plotting against Mustapha and trying to orchestrate his downfall. It would not be unreasonable for them to wish for the downfall of Mustapha. For Hürrem, Mustapha posed a danger to the lives of her own sons. If Mustapha had taken the throne, per the Ottoman policy of fratricide, he would execute all of his brothers. For Rüstem, since he was allied with Hürrem's sons, Mustapha would most likely have had him executed as well. Thus, sources of this rumor stated that Hürrem and Rüstem were behind the whispers of Mustapha's treason. When Suleiman failed to act against Mustapha in a decisive manner, Hürrem and Rüstem supposedly fabricated false evidence that implicated Mustapha for treason.

In 1553, letters were found and brought before the Sultan as proof of Mustapha's betrayal. These letters were correspondence between Mustapha and the Safavid ruler, Shah Tahmasp in which the Shah promised to ally with Mustapha. According to sources Rüstem was accused of "forging a letter from Mustafa to the Shah of Iran, in order to implicate the Prince in a

⁶⁷ Baer, *The Ottomans*, 129.

⁶⁸ Mikhail, *God's Shadow*, 21.

charge of plotting with the enemy.”⁶⁹ In Suleiman’s eyes, this was sufficient evidence that convinced him Mustapha was going to ally with the Safavids against him. He would not risk the chance of being overthrown by his own son and decided to take action.

That same year, Suleiman left the capital with his youngest son, Cihangir on campaign. As the army made camp in Ereğli outside of Konya, he summoned Mustapha to meet him there. Mustapha arrived at the army camp in October 1553 and was welcomed upon his arrival. The next day, on October 6, 1553 Suleiman called him to his tent within the army camp. After entering his father’s tent, executioners seized him and proceeded to strangle him. His body was then presented in front of the army “on a rug...in front of the tent, so that the Janissaries might look upon the man whom they wished to make their Sultan.”⁷⁰ It also sent the message that treason would not go unpunished. Mustapha’s body was later sent and laid to rest in Bursa. His mother, Mahidevran Hatun, was stripped of her status and power, sent into exile, and lived in poor conditions.⁷¹

Despite the accusations against him, many people across the empire, including the janissaries, were angered at the execution of Mustapha. They believed that an innocent and righteous man had been unjustly executed by his own father. After his death, poems were written declaring Mustapha “unproved any crime of him, and unknown any infamy. Saint! O Martyr!”⁷² To make matters worse, Mustapha’s young son Mehmed had also been executed. The populace saw the death of Mustapha and Mehmed as a miscarriage of justice. Although Suleiman was the one to give the order for Mustapha’s execution, Hürrem Sultan and Rüstem Pasha were primarily held responsible for his death. Hürrem could not be punished to placate the angry masses since

⁶⁹ Imber, *The Ottoman Empire*, 104

⁷⁰ Ogier de Busbecq, *Turkish Letters* (London: Sickle Moon Books, 2001), 22.

⁷¹ Peirce, *The Imperial Harem*, 56.

⁷² Şahin, *Peerless Among Princes*, 236

she was Suleiman's wife. On the other hand, Rüstem could be and was used as a scapegoat. To this effect, Suleiman relieved Rüstem of his title as Grand Vizier as punishment.⁷³ Barely over a month later, tragedy struck again when Hürrem's son, Cihangir, died suddenly from health problems at age 21.⁷⁴ Unlike Mustapha, his body was sent to Istanbul and laid to rest next to his brother, Mehmed.

Following the death of Mustapha, the only possible candidates for the Ottoman throne were Hürrem's sons, Selim and Bayezid. For the next five years, both brothers would live alongside their parents peacefully. Unfortunately for the family, Hürrem Sultan died on April 15, 1558 in her mid fifties. Even though the exact cause is unknown, Hürrem most likely died from disease.⁷⁵ Hürrem was no longer able to prevent the two brothers from engaging in open conflict against one another for the Ottoman throne. She was also not able to serve as a buffer between them and Suleiman if they fell out of favor with him. Indeed, within a year after his mother's death, Bayezid fell out of favor with Suleiman. Suleiman had accused Bayezid of rebellion and proceeded to support Selim against his brother. With the backing of the Sultan, in May 1559, Selim defeated Bayezid. Fearing for their lives, Bayezid and his sons fled to the neighboring Safavid Empire to escape executioners. Eventually, Suleiman paid the Safavid Shah to hand over Bayezid and his sons to Ottoman executioners. Bayezid and his sons died September 25, 1561.⁷⁶ Suleiman ruled the Ottoman Empire for five more years before dying on September 6, 1566 at the age of 71. Since he had only one surviving son, Selim ascended the throne and became Selim

⁷³ Finkel, *Osman's Dream*, 143.

⁷⁴ Peirce, *Empress of the East*, 302.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 322.

⁷⁶ Imber, *The Ottoman Empire*, 107.

II.⁷⁷ The future generations of the Ottoman dynasty continued through Hürrem and Suleiman's bloodline via Selim II and his concubine, Nurbanu Sultan.

Representation in Show

In the series, the *Magnificent Century*, after the death of Ibrahim, Hürrem turns her attention towards Şehzade Mustapha. From Hürrem's perspective, the moment she became a mother to sons, her life's goal was geared towards the survival of her children. Through her time in the Harem, the main threats towards the children have been Mahidevran, Ibrahim, and Mustapha. Since Mahidevran and Ibrahim have been defeated, Hürrem views Mustapha as the last obstacle preventing her own sons from taking the throne. As such, she gathers allies and, with their help, attempts to have Mustapha killed multiple times. To Hürrem's bitter disappointment, each of her attempts have ended in failure.

To make matters worse, Suleiman's health has slowly been declining and Mustapha's popularity has been increasing. Resolved to change tactics to ensure Mustapha's downfall, Hürrem enlists the aid of her daughter, Mihrimah Sultan, and son-in-law Rüstem Pasha. Acting in concert with her mother, Mihrimah steals Mustapha's seal and makes a copy of it.⁷⁸ Using the replica seal, Hürrem's allies are able to forge letters implicating Mustapha for treason. Once the letters have been fabricated, Rüstem proceeds to present the letters to Suleiman. After reading the letters and reflecting, Suleiman resolves to execute his eldest son when he goes out on campaign. At the same time, Mustapha and his allies are informed about the plots against himself within the capital. Despite his mother and councilors' advice not to trust the Sultan, Mustapha remains undeterred.

⁷⁷ Selim II was also known as Selim the Sot due to his alcoholism. He was not well liked by his people and only reigned as Sultan for 8 years.

⁷⁸ There is no historical evidence that ties Mihrimah Sultan to the death of her half-brother, Mustapha.



Figure 7: Mustapha seeks council from his advisors and family.

The conflict between Hürrem Sultan and Mustapha, along with the theme of motherhood, can be summarized in episode 123 of the *Magnificent Century*. The episode begins with Mustapha holding council with his mother Mahidevran, his concubine Mihrunnisa, and two of his top advisors after receiving a summons from Suleiman. As Mustapha sits solemnly, his council stands on either side, framing him in the middle. In this setting, the council's position serves to draw the viewers' gaze directly to Mustapha. The five of them are all clothed in somber, dark colors which highlights the serious nature of the meeting. The council has gathered to discuss how Mustapha should respond to the summons from Suleiman. Mahidevran is the first to speak. She passionately declares that it is not safe and that she will not let Mustapha leave. Mustapha counters her words by stating that "If I do not fulfill the order of his majesty, it will be perceived as a rebellion." The others agree with Mahidevran's words and caution Mustapha about the threat Suleiman poses to him.

Once again, Mahidevran pleads with Mustapha saying "It is clear that he [Suleiman] sees a threat to his power in you. Rüstem and Hürrem set him up against you. He will not spare you!

He will kill you without even blinking!” After her words, Mustapha stands up and clasps his hands behind his back. The scene focuses on his face. Before everyone he makes his opinion known with the words “For years, they wanted to make his majesty my enemy. They could not do it until now. They will fail again! My trust in my father is boundless! We gave our words to each other.” The words Mustapha references was a promise in which both parties vowed they would not kill the other. Knowing that his mind is made up, Mahidevran honors her son’s decision despite her worry. In this way, Mustapha is cast into the role of the dutiful son who goes to his father even if he knows it means his death.



Figure 8: Cihangir pleads for his mother to save Mustapha.

In the second scene of the episode, Hürrem goes to the chambers of her youngest son, Cihangir. When Cihangir hears that his favorite brother, Mustapha, has been accused of treason, he decides to go to his father. He believes that he will be able to convince Suleiman that Mustapha is innocent and undeserving of punishment. Hürrem is clothed in a high collared black dress and her hair is completely pinned up. Most notably, the actress that originally played Hürrem has been replaced by a visibly older actress to indicate that Hürrem is no longer a young

woman. When it comes to the other characters in the series, like Mahidevran, the actors and actresses have remained the same. To indicate aging on them, makeup and hair spray are used.

Hürrem comes to Cihangir's room in order to request that he remain with her in the capital. Cihangir refuses and states that his presence will only annoy his mother. His statement hints that he supports Mustapha and not his mother. Confused, Hürrem asks, "Haven't I always loved you? Have I not been with you since you were born? Have I ever neglected you?" Cihangir slowly turns to face his mother and said, "I've never denied that you did a lot for me. And I will not deny it. I give you great respect because of what you went through in order to survive in this palace. But that does not mean that I consider your every action to be right." In other words, Cihangir knows that his mother has manipulated events to get rid of an innocent Mustapha. Although he respects his mother, Cihangir will not side with her since what she is doing is, to him, morally wrong. Again, he asks his mother to tell the truth to save his brother so that he might stay with her in the capital. Distressed, Hürrem solemnly pauses before saying that Mustapha is guilty, and she will not save him. Hürrem lets her son go because she is not willing to do the right thing by helping Mustapha.



Figure 9: Mustapha, dressed in all white, rides out towards his execution.

In the final scene of the episode, Mustapha rides out to the army camp in response to his father's summons. As he leaves his tent, he hugs his advisors and thanks them for their service to him. Inwardly, Mustapha knows that by going to Suleiman's tent, he is walking to his death. Yet, he still holds on to some hope and trusts that his father will keep his word by not executing him. As he begins his procession to the royal tent, Mustapha is the only one garbed in all white from kaftan to cape. Even the horse he rides on is all white in contrast to the other brown and black horses. After riding for several minutes, his entourage is stopped by a group of janissaries. The soldiers beg him not to go further if he wishes to spare his own life. In response, Mustapha valiantly replies, "I welcome you and your brave soldiers and the people who love me a hundred times. Do not forget. You are not here to stop me, you are here to walk with me." As Mustapha proceeds towards the camp, loud, dramatic music is played in the background.

When Mustapha reaches Suleiman's camp, a large group of soldiers await his arrival. They form columns on either side of his horse and pay their respects to him. At the royal tent, Mustapha dismounts his horse and walks down the aisle of soldiers. His face is set with grim determination as, in the background, a woman sings mournful chords that seem to lament Mustapha's fate. Before entering the tent, Mustapha slowly takes off his white robe, sword, and other marks of his status. Upon his entrance to the darkly veiled tent, he sets his eyes upon his father standing before him. Clothed in all black and through the complete silence of the scene, Suleiman angrily cries, "You betrayed me, Mustapha! You betrayed me!" Turning his back on his son, executioners surround Mustapha and fight him. As a woman begins vocalizing again, Mustapha cries out "Lord! Lord! I did not betray you! Father! Father!" Almost escaping the tent, Mustapha is ultimately caught and strangled before Suleiman. After the executioners step away from the body, Suleiman kneels before his son and brings him into his arms. The body is then

replaced with that of Mustapha as a young child. As mournful violin music begins, Suleiman screams out “Mustapha” and wails. Although Hürrem has succeeded in executing Mustapha, she pays the ultimate price. Her own son Cihangir dies several days later in his grief over the death of his brother.⁷⁹

Feminist Analysis

When examined through a feminist lens, episode 123 of the *Magnificent Century* had several prominent messages surrounding the role of women as mothers. To begin, the series utilized costumes to portray their image of motherhood. In arc three of the show, the lead actress playing Hürrem was replaced, albeit for health concerns, with a visibly older actress. This is not meant to be a criticism of the new actress since she did a wonderful job with the role. However, it was interesting to note that the casting director chose the new actress from an older age demographic than the other lead actresses. When it came to Mahidevran, the young actress’s hair was spray painted gray and wrinkles were added with makeup to indicate aging. Similarly, other young actresses who played aging characters had their hair painted and wrinkle lines added.

The older versions of Hürrem and Mahidevran were at the phase in their lives where their sole focus was on guiding their sons on the path to the Ottoman throne. To reflect their shift to motherly concerns, and to indicate their age, both of their clothing styles had changed. Mahidevran, and especially Hürrem who was notorious for her suggestive outfits, wore clothes that completely covered their bodies. Their dresses were no longer brightly dyed. Rather, the dresses were in more somber and mature colors such as black, dark brown, and dark green. The

⁷⁹ *Muhtesem Yüzyil*, season 4, episode 21, directed by Durul Taylan and Yagmur Taylan, aired February 21, 2014, on Star TV.

high collared dresses contained multiple layers that completely covered the bosoms and arms of the women.

In this manner, the bodies of Hürrem and Mahidevran were not visible nor subjected to the male gaze. Nothing in their costume hinted towards sexuality or sexual availability. It was as if their roles had completely shifted from that of a lover to only a mother. The series seemed to imply that sexuality should not be associated with motherhood or with aging women. Although Hürrem and Mahidevran were only in their fifties, both are victims of “the mythology of the sexless older woman, shorn of her femininity and sexual interest after surviving the devastations of menopause...”⁸⁰ However, it should be acknowledged that there is no one way a mother should look. After all, a mother is “a complex person in her own right with multiple roles to fill and conflicting desires” which “is absent from patriarchal representations.”⁸¹

The second message the series possessed surrounding motherhood involved what the role of a good mother should entail. The ideal version of motherhood was encapsulated in the first scene as Mustapha and his council gathered. In the moment, Mahidevran acted as the chief advisor for her son as she attempted to guide him through his tough situation. She did this through speaking words of wisdom and caution to him. Her only concern centered around the safety of her son and the threat Suleiman posed to his life. She had little care for how her own status and living conditions could be reduced if he was executed. Rather, Mahidevran’s focus was towards Mustapha succeeding in life and his ascension to the Ottoman throne. Thus, the interests of the mother aligned perfectly with her son. As such, Mahidevran’s portrayal was tied to the myth that a “mother’s assumed capacity for unconditional love, uncontaminated by self-

⁸⁰ Jean Dresden Grambs, *Women Over Forty: Visions and Realities* (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 1989), 55.

⁸¹ E. Ann Kaplan, “The Case of the Missing Mother: Maternal Issues in Vidor’s *Stella Dallas*,” in *Feminism and Film*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 467.

interest or anger, makes her sacred...”⁸² This then made Mahidevran fit the archetype as an ‘ideal’ mother.

Regrettably, Mustapha was ultimately more dutiful to his father than his mother. As a male, he “must break with their primary identification with their mothers in order to become male identified.”⁸³ He could not remain with his mother in their home. Instead, in order to placate Suleiman, Mustapha had to identify with his father and enter into the political arena with him. Mustapha’s decision was emblematic of the power a father has over a mother in a household unit even if the father is less trustworthy than the mother. The notion of a mother not acting in her child’s best interest is not even considered.

As Mahidevran is presented as an ideal mother in scene one, Hürrem was portrayed as an imperfect mother in scene two. Although Hürrem had the same goals as Mahidevran to ensure the survival of her sons, she went about it in the wrong way. When she stepped into Cihangir’s chambers, the two of them were already at odds. During Cihangir’s childhood, he and Mustapha had formed a close brotherly bond. So, when Hürrem sought to have Mustapha executed, Cihangir distanced himself from her. As a mother, Hürrem was not acting according to her son’s wishes. Thus, the mother and son duo were alienated from one another, with Hürrem seen as a not ideal mother.

Moreover, in a reversal of roles, Cihangir, the son, served as a moral voice and compass to Hürrem, his mother. Typically, a parent acts as a guiding and moralizing voice to their children. However, since Hürrem falsely accused Mustapha of treason, Cihangir tried to reason

⁸² Coppélia Kahn, “The Hand That Rocks the Cradle: Recent Gender Theories and Their Implications,” in *The (M)other Tongue: Essays in Feminist Psychoanalytic Interpretation*, ed. Shirley Nelson Garner, Claire Kahane, and Madelon Sprengnether (London: Cornell University Press, 1985), 78.

⁸³ Linda Williams, “Something Else Besides A Mother,” in *Feminism and Film*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 485.

with his mother that her actions were wrong. Attempting to repair their relationship, Cihangir requested that Hürrem reconsider her actions and save Mustapha. Ignoring her son's wishes, Hürrem refused and lied by saying that Mustapha was guilty. Irrevocably damaging their bond, Cihangir chose to desert his flawed mother and side with his righteous half-brother. This symbolized how as a 'bad' mother, Hürrem was "punished for her violation of the desired patriarchal ideal."⁸⁴

Not only was Hürrem written as a poor mother, she was depicted as the stereotypical wicked stepmother. In contrast, Mustapha fulfilled the trope of the innocent lamb who was led to the slaughter for the sake of filial piety. Scene three emphasized his innocence and pure intentions with his all white wardrobe. Furthermore, the scene played itself into the stereotype with the usage of the soldiers that tried to stop him and watched from the sidelines. Consequently, Mustapha was viewed as a martyr and almost Christ-like character. He, as the innocent male, was the victim that paid the ultimate price for the wickedness of a woman. In addition, the other two victims to Hürrem's lies were Suleiman and Cihangir. As Suleiman clutched a child Mustapha's dead body, the viewer was reminded that a father killed his son due to the false testimony of a woman. Similarly, Cihangir died of sorrow from his mother's actions, implicating Hürrem in her own child's death.

Historically, Hürrem's depiction as the stereotypical wicked stepmother was rooted in both Ottoman propaganda and European media. Supporters of Mustapha were quick to blame Hürrem for his execution, bypassing the role Suleiman had in the affair. Following their example, as the years passed, stories of Mustapha's execution made it to Europe. Intrigued by the 'orient,' and following the example of Ottoman sources, Europeans put their own twist and

⁸⁴ Kaplan, "The Case of the Missing Mother," 468.

exaggerations on an already falsely sexist narrative to make it more attractive for popular consumption. For example, in a history book written by Richard Knolles in the late 1500s, he proclaimed that after gaining power Hürrem, began “straightaway to plot in her malicious head the utter destruction of him,” Mustapha.⁸⁵ Hürrem’s role as a guilty figure therefore became solidified and generally accepted as fact.

Conclusion

Throughout the course of her lifetime, Hürrem Sultan dramatically changed Ottoman tradition through her rise from a slave girl stolen from her homeland to becoming the legally free Empress of the Ottoman Empire. Hürrem Sultan was intelligent and politically savvy. She was also a devoted wife to Suleiman and did her best to protect her children. Her life marked the beginning of an era referred to as the ‘Sultanate of Women’ in which the female members of the Ottoman dynasty wielded far more power than their predecessors. The era would last for over 100 years. Yet, despite all her accomplishments, she was vilified and called a witch, whore, and an evil queen. Over the centuries, false narratives, enduring negative female stereotypes, and European culture had transformed Hürrem Sultan’s legacy into one of greed, murder, and tragedy. All were used by the *Magnificent Century* to make the plot more dramatic for entertainment purposes.

Although the series touched on Suleiman’s role in their version of events, it was overlooked until the very end. Rather, the series devoted much of its plot towards the depiction of Hürrem Sultan as a sympathetic, but overall guilty character. On the other hand, in reality, Hürrem and Suleiman loved one another deeply. Both wrote love letters and poetry to each other

⁸⁵ Richard Knolles, *The Turkish History from the Original of that Nation, To the Growth of the Ottoman Empire: With the Lives and Conquests of Their Princes and Emperors* (London: The Basset, 1687), 512.

throughout the course of their lifetime. Hürrem Sultan was more than the series' depiction of her as conniving woman who led Suleiman in whatever direction she wanted. Rather, she was a powerful Ottoman queen who impacted the Ottoman Empire and made a lasting impression in world history.

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