

Harem Envy

A wide-ranging history of Western man's erotic fixation on the East.

BY TONI BENTLEY

HAREM culture." Is that like HBO's series "Big Love" except Muslim, not Mormon, and with tassels, a potted palm and no bickering? Well yes, sort of. But there are a lot more women in a harem. A lot. The seraglio of the sultan of the Ottoman Empire housed about 1,600 virgins, each hoping to be chosen for one night of honor. The sultan makes Brigham Young, who had only a few dozen wives, look like a piker with low self-esteem.

Yet after reading Richard Bernstein's fascinating new book, "The East, the West, and Sex" (which could have been subtitled "Boys Behaving Badly"), you really have to give the Mormons credit for trying to implement an American version of the infamous harem of "the East." As if that were going to work around here. Most of the world is not only not around here, of course, but also so old and so vast that the United States is less than a blip on the screen of human erotic history. India was playing Twister — the Kama Sutra version — more than a thousand years

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before Columbus got a boat and came to find us.

It is a sobering fact that, according to Bernstein, until the mid-19th century, "most of the world still subscribed to what I have been calling the harem culture, and in only the few countries of the West, the small peninsular domain of Christendom, did a different attitude prevail." He describes the harem attitude as "both more realistic

THE EAST, THE WEST, AND SEX

A History of Erotic Encounters.

By Richard Bernstein.

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about male sexual desire than the Western culture of chastity and monogamy and less sentimental about it." Bernstein's harem mirrors the Darwinian male mind, which is sexually programmed for youth, beauty, variety and a great deal of it, "a place of limitless erotic possibility" where lust and pity party.

Already your mind is wandering from this dry — unless you just spilled your coffee — flat page to a smoky room filled with the potent scent of sandalwood and hash-

ish, where exotic young women with veils on their limbs and bells on their ankles dance languidly (sans pole) as you recline on a red brocade divan bulging with pillows, while another beautiful, silky-haired girl. . . . But wait, before you take that final plunge (or puff) that brings perfect wisdom and contentment, come back! We must first consider the political, social, economic (the old "he has the money, she doesn't" routine) and feminist (ditto but with outrage) implications of the intoxicating collision between Caucasian heterosexual men and, well, any lovely young thing who is not of their own ethnic or cultural heritage. It is here that Bernstein comes to our aid with his accessible, much-researched and far-reaching book — though his subject is so complex that he provides only a bare introduction, a kind of hybrid of history, interview and anecdote.

Bernstein also proffers a rather stiff agenda. "Orientalism," as defined most famously by Edward Said, means, Bernstein writes, that "the Western vision of the Orient is a highly eroticized one that arose not from reality but from the need to find in the East what had been planted in the Western mind even before Westerners started going there." Bernstein searches for evidence that the sexualized East is not just a Western wet dream but a reality,

and just about drowns in his findings. (It should be noted that one could easily stumble on the same lusty iniquities in New York, London or Paris if horizontally inclined.) “The eroticized vision of the East carries a hard kernel of truth,” he reports from the trenches, “which the followers of Said are loath to acknowledge.” Let the battle continue.

The author of six previous books and a columnist for The International Herald Tribune, Bernstein has logged more than 30 years of distinguished service as a journalist; as a former head of Time’s Beijing bureau and The New York Times’s bureaus in Paris and Berlin, he has spent considerable time overseas and plenty in the lands of which he speaks. He covers a lot of terrain: from second-century Chinese sex manuals that describe the beautiful bodies — “supple like grass” — of dancing girls, who “put forth all their charms so that one forgets life and death”; to Marco Polo’s reports on imperial concubines in the 14th century; to the 16th century, when “Portuguese seamen cohabited with local women in Goa, Malacca, Sumatra and Japan”; to Bangkok today, where the glories of empire have been reduced to the bars and bordellos of Patpong Road.

Bernstein defines the East as “most of the world’s territory from North and East Africa to South, Southeast and East Asia.” If your geography is a little fuzzy, this includes Algeria, Morocco, Egypt, Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Somalia, Tunisia, Yemen, Vietnam, Cambodia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Japan, and, oh yes, China and India. I must protest. Isn’t this so broad a definition of the East as to be rendered both meaningless and insulting — and, in our post-9/11 world, rather irresponsible, not to mention retro? (It’s like saying that Los Angeles is all about movie stars, medical marijuana, unreadable screenplays and gargantuan lips — O.K., not a good example.) I hate to spoil the fun, but is it really appropriate to throw all these incredibly numerous and varied countries, not to mention their women, into one big bouillabaisse called “the East”?

It is true, however, that many of the different cultures Bernstein studies do have ancient histories of sexual sophistication, and often sweetness, far beyond what’s been attained in the West, despite the considerable efforts of the Marquis de Sade, Hugh Hefner, the Moonlite Bunny Ranch and the silicone hills of the San Fernando Valley. It is not news that Christianity, with its Virgin Birth (just to start things off right), has had little interest in exploring human sexual desire or potential. Sexual energy is way too out of control even for the most committed Christians (see the Holy Trinity of Bakker, Swaggart and Haggard). Remember, genetically, we’re far more bonobo than righteous, and “harem culture” answers the simian call.

AFTER telling us the sordid and predictable tale of a foreign English teacher in present-day China boasting on his blog of his own mini-harem of Chinese conquests, Bernstein quickly takes us back to the good old days of imperialism and colonialism, when the British, French and Dutch moved in on the East — like a bad boyfriend in every way — and then to the mid-20th century, when unerring American know-how took its profligate and tacky turn in Vietnam, producing “a wartime erotic circus of historic proportions,” and the V.D. to match. The story was certainly much prettier when “Madama Butterfly,” “The Mikado,” “The Arabian Nights,” Japanese woodcuts, and Delacroix and Ingres provided the prism through which to view the East as a rhapsody of delicacy and ecstasy.

When Flaubert traveled to Egypt in 1849, he, along with Sir Richard Burton — easily the most interesting men in Bernstein’s book — recorded some of the most detailed,

salacious and divine views of sex in the East, which still color our vision today. Flaubert adored prostitution (even in Paris!): “a meeting place of so many elements — lust, bitterness, complete absence of human contact, muscular frenzy, the clink of gold.” In the dancer Kuchuk Hanem, he found the soul of his East. Her vagina (not the word Flaubert used) “felt like rolls of velvet. . . . I felt like a tiger,” he wrote. “My night was one long, infinitely intense reverie. . . . Toward the end there was something sad and loving in the way we embraced.” *En Égypte, Madame Bovary, ce n’est pas moi!*

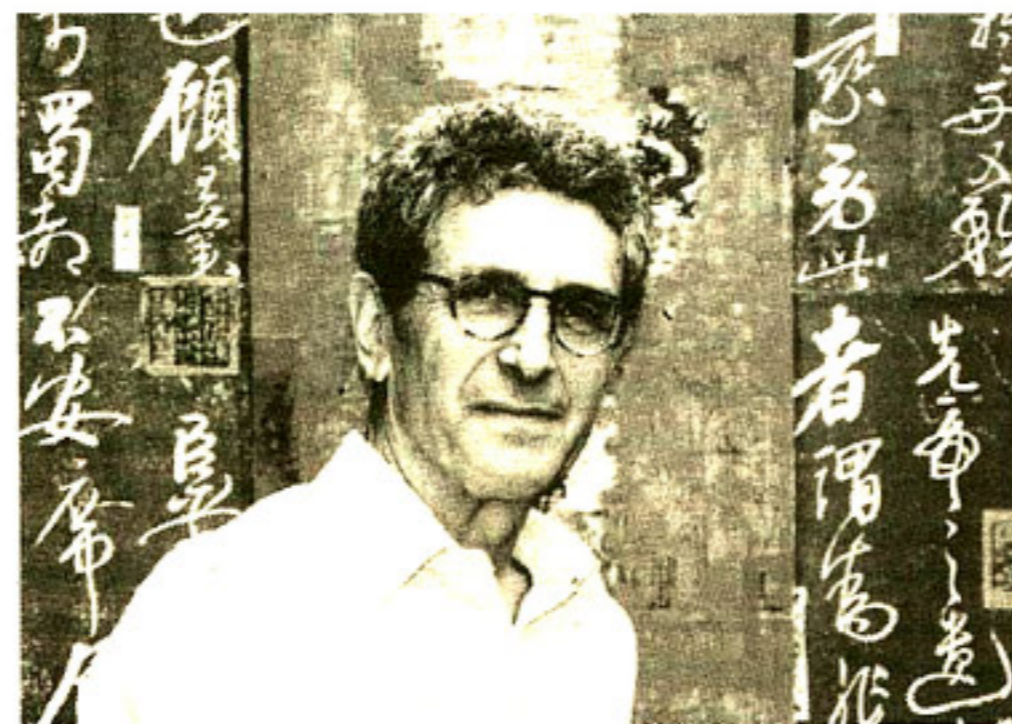
Burton, one of the most brilliant and romantic figures of the 19th century, conducted parallel searches for the source of the Nile and the source of Flaubert’s pleasure, not unconnected drives. While he did not quite succeed with the Nile, he did find that certain tribal slave girls made expert use of “the constrictor vaginae muscles,” so that a woman could induce her partner’s orgasm “not by wriggling and moving but by tightening and loosing the male member with the muscles of her privities.” (Now there’s a decent indecent word for us, girls!) She was

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known as a *kabbazah*, which in Arabic means “holder.” Holders were quite expensive. Meanwhile, of the single brutal swipe that rendered a boy a eunuch, Burton reported laconically, “He often survives.”

The first Viscount Wolsley, a field marshal in the British Army, brashly admitted that he “consorted with an ‘Eastern princess’” who provided “all the purposes of a wife without any of the bother,” and that he had no plans to marry “‘some bitch’ in Europe, unless she were an heiress.” Today the viscount could read Burton on how best to survive the castration likely to come his way. (It involves boiling water and implantation “in a fresh dunghill.”)

A commander in the Indian Army in 1803, one David Ochterlony, landed himself 13 spouses and “liked to parade around Delhi with his wives following behind, each



on her own elephant.” Not exactly the kind of afternoon outing he could take through Beacon Hill back in Boston, where he was born.

In one of his well-meaning attempts to look at the female side of things in this very male-oriented book, Bernstein states that in the age of exploration “it would seem implausible, if not entirely impossible, for there to be a story of, say, a Frenchwoman who falls in love with a Persian or Arab adventurer.” But if you want to know what the girls

were doing while the boys were indulging themselves, try Lesley Blanch’s transporting classic “The Wilder Shores of Love,” where you will find the (Caucasian) ladies of Arabia doing even more brave and interesting things than the gentlemen, as well as having plenty of sex with Bedouin sheiks.

Bernstein’s survey suggests a near-perfect illustration of the psychotherapist Jack Morin’s simple but brilliant sexual equation — Attraction + Obstacles = Excitement — where being “neither too close nor too far” is the ideal distance from one’s beloved. While Bernstein’s book provocatively externalizes, and maps, the heterosexual male erotic mind, he does not dig deeper into the real heart of darkness, the labyrinth where sex actually takes place, where hostility, anxiety, Oedipus and inequality (the truly erotic cannot distinguish the politically incorrect from a cheap garter belt) mingle with the overwhelming desire to merge. His book’s real topic is the history of men’s joy in defiling, often while loving, what is innocent and beautiful, of finding purity and wantonness in one.

Unfortunately, but perhaps of necessity, Bernstein does a certain amount of apologetic tiptoeing around his subject — with phrases like “it could be argued” — owing to the extremely politically incorrect nature of the facts: voracious males and compliant females are his subjects. The result of this journalistic diplomacy is that his writing has little edge, while his subject is all edge. He suggests rather meekly, early on, “Let’s not be judgmental about this, at least not yet.” But the orgy he is discussing constitutes the male West having global intercourse with the female East on Aladdin’s magic carpet, leaving Western women and Eastern men awkwardly conversing in the Jacuzzi. Try as Bernstein does to find them a connection, they simply do not have much interest in each other. So hold on tight, feminists, Bernstein’s got a major bone for you to chew. But don’t worry, in your favor, he has written a not very sexy book about a very sexy subject. He describes the women of Asia as “more plumlike than melonlike of breast, spare rather than full of buttocks and hips.” Where is young Flaubert when you need him?

Bernstein does risk a bit of passion (if that’s not an oxymoron), but only, literally, in the last sentence of his book — like the lover who finally weeps as he departs — when he writes of the “power of the urge that has populated the globe, that drives some men crazy and makes other men wise, the urge for a moment of delirious, primal, sublime contact with an exquisite perfumed creature.” The topic is clearly very close to his heart: the book is dedicated to his wife, the beautiful Chinese dancer Zhongmei Li, whom he calls “my vision of the East.”

But Bernstein has let us know all along that he is a decent sort of fellow, and just in case we suspect he’s a little too pro-harem he tells us that “wisdom, of course, teaches that the greatest sexual pleasure for a man comes in a healthy monogamous and loving relationship with one woman.” Whose wisdom is this? Dr. Phil’s? It’s not the wisdom of anybody who tells the truth.

Let’s leave something as nebulous as the truth to the great mystic poet Jalaluddin Rumi — born 800 years ago in the land of those dancing girls — a man who knew the value of a veil and the real nature of the longing behind all that mind-bending harem sex:

*If you want what visible reality
can give, you’re an employee.
If you want the unseen world,
you’re not living your truth.
Both wishes are foolish,
but you’ll be forgiven for forgetting
that what you really want is
love’s confusing joy.*

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