

## **Book Review**

### ***Brides for Sale* by Neriman Cahit**

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When Cypriots talk of the 'missing' they tend to mean those who disappeared either during the low level civil war that continued on the island following independence from Britain in 1960, or those who disappeared during the mainland Greek coup d'état and subsequent mainland Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974. But as Neriman Cahit's book, *Brides for Sale*, shows thousands more Cypriots disappeared during the height of colonial British rule from the 1920s until well into the 1950s. These missing, all Turkish Cypriot women, were sold as brides to foreign muslim Arab men by their families, and until now they have received very little attention.

As she indicates in her foreword, Cahit is aware of the political implications of describing this practice as slavery. It is not, she is at pains to explain, a term imposed from the outside, rather it is the word used within the Turkish Cypriot community itself to describe what happened to the women, most of whom were aged between 11 and 18.

Cahit's study can be described as part historical contextualization and part oral history project. She begins by setting the scene for the sale of the women linking it very firmly to the rise of extreme poverty in Cyprus during the 1930s. Despite attempts by the British colonial administration to alleviate rural poverty on the island, the scale of the problem was such that at one point even the loan sharks who preyed on the poor ran out of money. In these circumstances the prospect of selling a daughter, or in some cases a sister or cousin, for fifteen or twenty pounds sterling, which was enough to buy three or four acres of land, was too much to resist.

The fate of the women sold was often unknown as the men who came to purchase them as 'wives' would invariably return to their home countries, usually Syria, Jordan, Lebanon or Palestine, and the women never heard from again. This situation was particularly acute prior to the Second

World War when few Cypriots had the means to travel. With the outbreak of war Cypriots enlisted in the British army found themselves billeted to Egypt, Lebanon and Palestine, and the fate of some of the women was finally discovered. As Cahit describes, using newspaper articles and letters written by these soldiers as her source material, Cypriot soldiers were shocked to find girls from Cyprus working in brothels in Jerusalem and Alexandria. Notably this horror cut across the ethnic divide in Cyprus, with both Turkish and Greek Cypriots writing letters to the Cypriot press on what they had seen.

The evidence does not seem to indicate whether the women found in brothels were bought with that specific purpose in mind, or if they ended up as prostitutes as a result of running away from their husbands. To judge by the oral accounts given in Cahit's book the level of violence against the bought brides was high, especially where the woman found herself to be a third or fourth wife. This gave her a low status within any household she joined, and was contrary to assurances given in Cyprus, where monogamy was the norm, that the woman sold would be the man's only wife. Inevitably a number of women ran away, but without means of support their ability to fend for themselves was limited.

One of the remarkable features of the trade in Cypriot women is how widespread it was and widely known, but very little was done to prevent it. Cahit estimates tentatively that as many as 4,000 women were sold between 1930 and the end of the 1950s, but the figure appears little more than a best guess. Few real records were kept, and the colonial authorities seem to have turned a blind eye. Within the Turkish Cypriot community itself the practice also appears to have been condoned by silence, although periodically Turkish Cypriot newspaper reports and campaigning pamphlets did appear. In these Turkish Cypriot writers attempted to raise the indignation of their audiences by using Orientalist characterizations of the Arabs lusting after blonde haired and blue eyed Turkish Cypriot women. Writing in 1945, the Turkish Cypriot political activist Mustafa Bitirim warned his readers that the Arab man cannot be trusted to look after their daughters as he chases after women all day. 'Every single cell in their bodies is full of sexual desire,' Bitirim claimed, and he has an 'insatiable lust for flesh.'

Despite the nature of her subject matter Cahit remains an admirably dispassionate narrator of the tales she has uncovered, and she even manages to be remarkably humane as to the motivations behind the sale of the women. Not all, but many families who sold their women were literally starving. Cahit suggests that even had they remained nominally free in Cyprus the women sold were not guaranteed a happy or long life. The women themselves knew that, of course, but without exception the surviving women Cahit interviews, most now in their 80s and 90s, all lament being sold by their families and sent away from the island.

With that in mind it should be noted that not all of the women lived miserable lives in their new homes, but perhaps inevitably it is not the rare successful marriages that remain in the memory after reading Cahit's book. It is the stories of beatings, isolation and a desperate longing to return home. It is also the sense of absolute incomprehension, bitterness and betrayal that almost all of the women quoted show toward their families in Cyprus. Alongside this is the question why it has taken so long for Cyprus to acknowledge the harm done to these women.

The book is not without its flaws. At times it is difficult to work out who is being quoted, and some of the material appears to be repeated several times. But still an important manifestation of recent slavery in Europe has been brought to light and there is no doubt this publication is a remarkable public service.

**Dr Michael Paraskos**