

PIERRE LOTI  
AND THE  
ORIENTAL  
WOMAN



Irene L. Szyliowicz

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*To Joe, Michael and Dara*

'Pierre Loti'  
by Nazim Hikmet

Submission!  
Kismet!  
Lattice-work, caravanseraï  
  fountains  
a sultan dancing on a silver tray!  
Maharajah, rajah  
a thousand-year-old shah!  
Waving from minarets  
clogs made of mother-of-pearl;  
women with henna-stained noses  
working their looms with their feet.  
In the wind, green-turbaned imams  
  calling people to prayer;

*This*  
is the Orient and the French poet sees.  
This  
    is  
        the Orient of those books  
that come out from the press  
at the rate of a million a minute.  
But  
    yesterday  
                    today  
                            or tomorrow  
an Orient like this  
    never existed  
                    and never will.

(from *Selected Poems of Nazim Hikmet*, trs.  
Taner Baybars, London: Jonathan Cape, 1967)

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# 1

## Literary Overview

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At the tip of the Golden Horn, high up on an embankment, looking down on a placid body of water dotted with boats and small craft, sits a small tearoom surrounded by ancient Muslim tombstones. The view from this site is glorious, and the name of the establishment evokes magic and mystery; it is the Pierre Loti Café. Who was Pierre Loti? And why is a Turkish site named after him?

Pierre Loti was the pen-name of Louis Marie Julien Viaud (1850–1923): a sailor, writer, occasional circus performer, adventurer, and member of the Académie française. More than any other turn-of-the-century writer, Viaud/Loti brought the unfamiliar to France; wherever he travelled throughout his extensive maritime career, he recorded his sensations, his impressions, and his emotions, and he transmuted these experiences into both fictional and non-fictional works. Many of the places he visited – Tahiti, Japan, Turkey, Senegal, parts of South-east Asia, and countries in the Middle East – provided him with domiciles over a period of time ranging from several weeks to several years. He attempted to learn the languages and immerse himself in the culture of the various countries he visited.

As a result of Loti's exposure to the 'Orient' (an all-encompassing term for these exotic lands), the Occidental world in general became more familiar with a large and hitherto mysterious part of the world. As a Frenchman and product of the nineteenth-century colonialist mentality, he exhibited certain contemporary prejudices but, by and large, he was more objective than most European observers and genuinely tried to appreciate the culture and people of the countries he visited.

Loti's popularity was enormous during his lifetime, but it has suffered considerably ever since. Two main reasons exist for this decline. The first is the topical character of his subject-matter – the exotic lands which so fascinated the European armchair-traveller have become more easily accessible since his death; the second is that Loti's literary manner has become dated. The sentimental



treatment of his heroes and heroines, the somewhat simplistic characterisations, the excessive indulgence in subjectivity ('le culte du moi'), the *fin-de-siècle* morbidity and despair, and the romantic attachment to nostalgia and the longing for a simpler age are all typical of the period in which he wrote. In the following era, the simple sailors and their faithful wives, the primitive Orientals and their exotic surroundings no longer satisfied the cravings of a more sophisticated literary élite nurtured on the works of writers such as Gide, Proust, Claudel, and Sartre. If Loti's reputation has declined and if the literature he wrote is no longer read,<sup>1</sup> why then should we study this author? Is his present literary status deserved? Or was his previous popularity a more correct assessment of his artistic merit? In examining this author's life and work, I hope to provide some answers to these questions.

Probably one of Loti's most engaging characteristics was his candour and his willingness to share his experiences – both public and private – with his readers. He was particularly frank about his liaisons with women; everywhere he travelled he found female companions with whom he established relationships, and his feelings toward these Oriental women provided much of the interest in his 'Oriental' novels. Since the sailor/writer led his audience to believe that his descriptions of places were realistic, he also led them to believe that his portrayals of the female indigenes were accurate. Given the stereotypical quality of all the women depicted regardless of cultural variations, it seems pertinent to enquire why all these Orientals were invested with a certain sameness and why Loti's fictional representations of Oriental women should exhibit similar tendencies. The answer is that they lead to the glorification of the European hero or his real-life counterpart. Clearly whatever formula the French author had discovered for appealing to his countrymen must have had some basis in his characterisations, for apart from the Breton novels and the many non-fiction travel books, the 'Oriental' novels were very much in demand and were certainly one of the reasons for his election to the Académie française.

Over the past decade in particular, scholarship in feminism and feminist issues has alerted readers to sexual bias in the formulation of women's roles in society and to the codification of these stereotypes in literary texts. As men define gender and its symbolic importance, they have consigned 'woman' to a subordinate position; she has been variously viewed as

Other,<sup>2</sup> as Pygmalion-formed passive creation,<sup>3</sup> as chattel ('thingified'),<sup>4</sup> as 'exchange',<sup>5</sup> as 'dehumanized sexual possession and . . . status symbol',<sup>6</sup> and as 'projection of the female aspect of the male psyche'.<sup>7</sup>

Feminist studies rebel against the masculine use of women as instruments for self-aggrandisement and/or self-fulfilment and protest the treatment of women as chattels. They condemn relationships where mutual interaction is irrelevant or avoided and where sexual satisfaction becomes an end – for men. Finally, they refuse to sanction feminine self-definition in masculine terms or acknowledge that 'her [woman's] existence lies in man'. Instead, what must be addressed is 'why woman should be defined with relation to men'.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to invoking problems of self-definition, feminists view male/female relations in political/ideological terms as a struggle for power and sexual dominion,<sup>9</sup> thus radically revising our accepted notions of heterosexual inter-relationships. Whether discussing English literature,<sup>10</sup> French literature,<sup>11</sup> or American literature,<sup>12</sup> feminist studies have provided a re-vision of our outlook on male/female attitudes and relations in life and, in its natural extension, art.<sup>13</sup>

Although feminine literary perspectives have been confined, to date, to the study of Occidental civilisations, the position of women in Oriental societies is also under scrutiny. Historians and social scientists are demonstrating that the traditional portrayal of women in these societies has been biased and based on Western judgements. European ethnocentrism and male chauvinism have combined to account for this phenomenon. The traditional Occidental attitudes of scholars and observers of the East were invested with feelings of inherent superiority, and 'objective' scholarship was frequently tainted by these implicit beliefs.<sup>14</sup> Oriental women, in particular, have been viewed conventionally by Westerners as innocent primitives,<sup>15</sup> uncorrupted by civilisation. They have been regarded as lacking autonomy and requiring protection from the superior, worldly, sophisticated, preferably Western, man. Since these women were regarded as ignorant and artless, they could be manipulated easily by their dominating masters, and further, this masculine paradigm presented these women, like their Occidental sisters, as actually craving male domination.<sup>16</sup> Certainly France's sailor/author subscribed to many of the then current conventional attitudes toward women; how