Female Barbary Captivity Narratives: from "Self-made Woman" to Romantic Adventurer

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Abstract:
Female Barbary captivity narratives feature women who were captured by North African pirates and their experience during captivity. Despite the numerous adaptations of women in Barbary Captivity in renaissance "Turkish plays", the fact-based female Barbary captivity narratives were rather limited. And in this essay two of them will be discussed: the narrative of Maria ter Meeteleen and the narrative of Elizabeth Marsh. These two earliest texts of female barbary captivity narratives revealed that, instead of falling into the stereotype of "damsel in distress" in renaissance drama, the captivity narratives actually in a way provided a space for the empowerment of women. Meeteleen's experience of "self-made woman" and Marsh's romantic adventure both crossed the patriarchy order in their original society and represented the unique cross-cultural experience for female individuals in early modern era.

Keywords: Captivity narratives, Female, Cross-cultural, Gender norm

Barbary captivity narratives, namely narratives written by individuals who were taken as captives or hostages at "Barbary States" of North Africa[1]. It's a genre dating back from early modern Mediterranean, significantly shaped by colonial and privateering history. Privateering was an important economic, military and diplomatic factor for maritime activities of all nations since the Age of discovery. And its influence extended from the early Mediterranean basin to the post– revolutionary America. Pirates under different flags used to "legally" plunder ships and coastal regions of enemy countries. The Barbary corsairs under Ottoman Empire took prize and captives from European ships and coasts, while the European privateers from Christian countries competed with their Muslim counterparts – in the name of Holy war or Jihad. Some of those who were taken as captives by pirates wrote down their ordeals, most of them were European captives in Barbary[2]. A number of these texts have survived throughout history. Their writing was popular among the readers and kept being published and republished along with the privateering industry went on unceasingly until the end of the 20th century.

The Barbary Captivity Narratives represents significant but neglected part of the imperial experience of early modern Europe. On the one hand, collective cultural memories of the Other were shaped by individual storytelling. The captives offered some of the first impressions for western society about the Maghreb and its Muslim culture. By mixing with the local population at a very intimate level, these men and women with diverse backgrounds provided multi-dimensioned views to the public about the customs, people and daily life in North Africa. While a sense of imperial Self and the oriental Other is always evident in their writings, the Self is often questioned, challenged or even converted when physically and mentally traumatized during captivity. Barbary captivity narratives offer a microscope

[1] Generally Speaking, "Barbary states" in early modern era refers to today's Libya, Tunis, Algeria and Morocco. Except Morocco, all other countries were under the rule of the Ottoman Empire.

[2] In contrast with the numerous European language texts, the Arabic texts from Muslim captives were quite limited. Even though the number of Muslim captives in Europe may exceed the number of European captives in North Africa, due to the lack of official redemption system (like the Trinitarian Church), the records about them are rare. For the Muslim captives in Europe, see Nabil Matar. (2008). Europe through Arab eyes, 1578–1727. Columbia University Press.

of how different identities meet, clash and mediate and most importantly--how individual narratives can break away from typical colonial discourse, thus provide pluralistic views of the imperial experience.

In this essay I would like to discuss a rather special kind of Barbary captivity narratives: the women's experience. Since the female captive has long been at the center of the public fascination. From the earliest encounter Europe had with the Ottoman Empire, the visualization and dramatization of female captive under Islamic sextual threat proliferated as the military aggression from Constantinople carried westwards. For example, in Elizabethan and Jacobean England, there were dozens of "Turkish plays" featuring female captives in Barbary, more specifically interfaith relationship of Christian women with non-Christian men. Including William Shakespeare's Othello (1604), Thomas Dekker's Lust's Dominion (1600), Thomas Heywood's The Fair Maid of the West (Parts I and II, 1602-1630), Thomas Goffe's The Courageous Turk (1618）and The Raging Turk (1618), William Rowley's All's Lost by Lust (1620), and Phillip Massinger's The Renegado (1630). In these plays, Muslim men are often characterized as tyrants who has unrestricted political power, as well as unceasing desire for abducting Christian women into the seraglio. Being in an exotic and erotic context, the heroines of these plays most of time defended their virtue as the crusade soldiers defending Christian land. The plot of victory of vulnerable female over strong, salacious Islamic male functioned as sexual representations of the increasing contacts and clashes between Christian Europe and the Islamic Other.

Interestingly enough, there was a sharp contrast between the numerous literary representations of female captives and the rare historical records about them. Although the popular fascination about western women in Islamic harem kept dominating the public view, and in real – life there were indeed a significant number of women had been being abducted into Barbary or Ottoman captivity, there were little to none records of them until the 18th century. In case of female captivity, there's one aspect to be aware of, that is there were far more female captives in Ottoman Levant region than in the Barbary coast. The reason for that is the slave raid of the Ottoman Empire in Eastern Europe was likely to bring more female captives from land, than Barbary pirates from the sea. Especially in a time when the number of female passengers were limited on any part of the ocean. Most female captives in Ottoman Empire were from east European regions such as the

Caucasus. For example, in the narrative of Joseph Pitts, an English captive who traveled with his Algerian master to Cairo, he recorded a scene in the slave market where female captives were being publicly demonstrated and inspected by potential buyers:

They are curiously decked and set out with fine clothes when they are exposed to sale, that they may carry the better price.

And although the women and maidens are veiled, yet the chapmen have the liberty to view their faces and to put their fingers into their mouths to feel their teeth and also to feel their breasts. And further, as I have been informed, they are sometimes permitted by the sellers (in the modest way) to be searched whether they are virgins or no[1].

The scene Pitts described resembles the 19th century artworks[2] depicting the slave market of Rome and the Ottoman Empire in many ways. The contrast between the fair, naked body of the female captives, and the dusty, rough environment as well as the dark– skinned viewers surrounding them, formed an erotic theme of female captives being exposed to visual-sexual violence. However, the case with female captives in North Africa is quite different. As mentioned above, Barbary corsairs did not raid European coasts as often as Ottoman army did in east Europe. Especially in England, it was a long journey to a small island and apparently less to gain. Even in the one of the rare but famous raids – the sack of Baltimore, the redemption of female seemed insignificant, thus resulting in fewer of them to return home to write their stories. During the sack of Baltimore, where the Algerian corsair took away almost the entire village. 85% of the captives were women and children. However, in 1645 when the pressured British government finally made successful negotiation to redeem those poor villagers, only one woman was available for them to bring home[3].

As a result, it was not until the middle of the eighteenth century that the fact-based female Barbary captivity narratives were published. The first female captive's account written in European language was a Dutch publica-

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[1] Joseph Pitts. (1704). A True and Faithful Account of Joseph Pitts. In Daniel J. Vitkus (2001) (Ed.), Piracy, slavery, and redemption: Barbary captivity narratives from early modern England (p. 270). Columbia University Press.

[2] For example, two paintings named The Slave Market (circa 1866, and 1871) by Jean-Léon Gérôme. And The Slave Market (1886) by Gustave Boulanger.

[3] Khalid Bekkaoui. (Ed.). (2010). White women captives in North Africa: Narratives of enslavement, 1735-1830. Palgrave and Macmillan (p. 17).

tion in 1748. Maria ter Meetelen of Amsterdam, was captured with her husband at sea by the Moroccan corsair in 1731. She dwelled 12 years in Morocco as a captive. Despite such long time of captivity, she didn't vanish in some Harem or renounce her faith, and successfully returned home with her children – mostly through her own effort. Meetelen's story showed the empowerment of female in an environment where she's ripped from male protectors – and western patriarchy traditions. Compared with the female captive's stereotype – anxious about their chastity and ready to die for it. Meetelen showed incredible spirit of industry and flexibility – like a capitalist heroine. Soon after they were taken to the land of Morocco, Meetelen's husband died and that made her particular vulnerable for the sexual aggression of Muslim male. Among her suitors was the most powerful man in that country – sultan Moulay Abdallah, who invited Meetelen to become one of his concubines and renounce Christian religion. Along with other women in his seraglio, the sultan threw temptations and pressure on Meetelen to "turn Turk"[1]. But Meetelen resisted all his sexual aggression with resilience and strategy. By pretending to be pregnant, through diplomacy and wit, she gained the compassion of the sultan. He not only granted her the right to choose another husband among the Christians, but also kept her one of the friends to the royal house. Under the favor and protection of the sultan, she often entertained with the ladies in the harem, admired the palace and gardens and even managed to run a small tavern with the financial help from the sultan. In contrast with the public imagination of the fate of female captive – submissive slave for the lustful usage of Islamic tyrant. Meetelen's narrative presented a different picture of female captives. Not wanting for male's aid or protection, Meetelen turned her female and Christian identity from disadvantage to an advantage status. She entertained the royal families with her travels in Europe and made herself a favorable guest to the palace. Not only had she persuaded the sultan to let her keep her faith, but she also used her privileges to provide protection for the Christian slaves in Meknes. What she achieved in Barbary had probably far exceeded what a woman from ordinary family could obtain in Europe. And in Barbary, her status had definitely been higher than many of the male traders, diplomats and ambassadors from her home continent.

[1] Early modern English expression to describe a Christian converting to Islam.

As the first female Barbary captivity autobiography, penned by the woman herself instead of male editors. Meetelen provided the captivity genre of women's independent voice. The mechanism of empowerment of women in the captivity narrative is that, the (western) male presence is absent because of shipwreck, pirates or other accidents which took away the formal patriarchy system, thus the woman is left alone to face a new male domination which forces itself on her. She has to count on her own to defend herself and negotiate with the alien male power, during which she might cross some social, cultural and most importantly sexual boundaries that were inappropriate or unacceptable in western society. For example, marrying again and becoming a businesswoman. Captivity provided a "safe" context for female writers to break gender norms because they are challenging the alien patriarchal order not the native one. As Mary Louis Points out in her discussion of survival literature,

survival literature furnished a "safe" context for staging alternate, relativizing, and taboo configurations of intercultural contact: Europeans enslaved by non-Europeans, Europeans assimilating to non-European societies, and Europeans cofounding new transracial social orders. The context of survival literature was "safe" for transgressive plots, since the very existence of a text presupposed the imperially correct outcome: the survivor survived, and sought reintegration into the home society. The tale was always told from the viewpoint of the European who returned[1].

However, not all of the European female captives returned, or choose to return. But it doesn't necessarily mean these women vanished in slavery. There's another possibility for women in captivity – to become female renegades. Meetelen's extraordinary personal achievement almost makes her a "self-made woman", rising from a comparably lower social class to the distinguished status in alien land. Speaking of "self-made woman", actually Meetelen has a more legendary predecessor. Roxelana, a Ruthenian slave girl who was sold into the imperial harem of Suleiman the Magnificent (sultan of the Ottoman Empire from 1520 to 1566). Roxelana abandoned her Christianity and became Suleiman's legal wife. She not only made Suleiman broke the Ottoman royal tradition marrying a slave girl, but also reached prominent power, putting her influence in the politics of the Ottoman Empire and its

[1] Mary Louise Pratt. (2007). Imperial eyes: Travel writing and transculturation. Routledge (p. 87).

relationship with Christian countries. Roxelana never wrote about her captivity. Simply because she didn't have to reintegrate into the Christian society by doing so. Not a noble-born but made her own way from slave girl to the queen, Roxelana's path could never work out in Europe. Her respected social status in Istanbul revealed a more fluid social, cultural and religious order in Islamic society – slaves can be queen, and king can someday become slave. Roxelana's life-story as well as Meetelen's captivity narratives demonstrated women's resourcefulness and empowerment in cross-cultural encounters. Even though they were put into the most patriarchal environment – the harem, they still managed to exercise the power and wit that seemed rather particular for women in western society. Therefore, their captivity stories also revealed some social tolerance which were thought nonexistent in Islamic world. Their experience proved the captivity as a "contact zone", "where social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery"[1]. In the contact zone, the collective consciousness and cultural traditions anchored in individuals are constantly challenged.

In 1769, the first fact-based English female captivity narratives was published. Elizabeth Marsh, daughter of an English Shipwright, was captured by Moroccan corsair on her way from Minorca to Gibraltar to meet her fiancé. Being single and at a blooming age, Marsh was terrified for the danger of her sex in such a notorious place she might read or heard about. Her concern became more devastating when she was forced on a long journey from Salé to Meknes to present herself to the Morocco prince, Sidi Mohammed. In order not to be taken into the seraglio of the prince, she masqueraded as the wife of Mr. James Crisp, the captain of their ship and the tender protector of her throughout whole journey. However, she was asked to go alone into the royal palace to meet the prince and his ladies. Marsh couldn't help but being impressed by the beautiful gardens and architectures of the Morocco palace, the rarities she was demonstrated with, and last but not least, the elegance and charm of the prince. After all she held fast to her "marriage" with Mr. Crisp and declined the prince's invitation for her to become his concubine. However, one unexpecting episode almost made Marsh remained in the seraglio. An English lady in the harem, a renegade, tricked Marsh to speak

[1] See Mary Louise Pratt. (1991). Arts of the contact zone. Profession. Modern Language Association, 33-40. https://www.jstor.org/stable/25595469

the words of conversion to Islam: "There is but one God, and Mahomet is his Prophet"[1]. But Marsh kneeled down in teras before the prince who threatened her with death, and finally managed to leave his palace in utmost confusion, with Mr. Crisp forcing her from a black woman trying to hold her. After their deliverance, Marsh cancelled the engagement she had and married Mr. Crisp. The pretended marriage became a real one, the story end with a touch of Romance.

One cannot be wrong to read Marsh's captivity narrative as a romantic adventure. While the Dutch girl Meetelen extended her power beyond the traditional female space, Marsh most of the time stayed in the realm of private sphere – her cabin, room and the seraglio. When thrown into an alien environment, being deprived of male protection from her family and said fiancé, Marsh's immediate response is to find a new male carer, who had "a stronger attachment than that of Friendship"[2] to her. While she is under his full protective attention, Marsh is also at the center of male gaze from both Europeans and Moroccans. On the one hand, the Moors of lower rank and the "tedious Arabs" in the desert kept tormenting her because of her sex. And the Sultan who unwilling let her go wished "lest I should be obliged to detain her"[3]. On the other hand, Marsh always had aid and company of different gentlemen from Europe, including one Mr. Court who kept writing sentimental letters to her after she leave. When Marsh dressed herself up to meet the prince, Mr. Court "walked pensively about the room, without speaking of a word"[4]. The silent tension suggested the jealousy Mr. Court may have in his mind. In a word, Marsh was at the center of her romantic relationships with different men. All seemed enchanted by her and willing to be her knight in Barbary, fighting for her safety and chastity. The romantic relationships, not the sexual or religious aggression was the core of Marsh's narrative. Therefore, although Marsh stayed in the traditional female space – space under male protection and domination. She nevertheless crossed the gender border by establishing herself at the power center in

[1] Elizabeth Marsh. (1769). the Female Captive: A Narrative of Facts Which Happened in Barbary in the Year 1756, Written by Herself. In Khalid Bekkaoui. (Ed). (2010). White women captives in North Africa: Narratives of enslavement, 1735-1830. Palgrave and Macmillan (p. 146).

[2] Elizabeth Marsh, the Female Captive, p. 160.

[3] Elizabeth Marsh, the Female Captive, p. 154.

[4] Elizabeth Marsh, the Female Captive, p. 144.

different romantic relationships. While men were anxious about woman facing alien sexual assault in Barbary captivity (which would harm their masculinity), there were women like Marsh would turn it into a romantic adventure in their own fascination. Exotic land, passionate royal suitor, and Christian knight defending her virtue, no wonder that Marsh's story would give inspiration to the modern romantic novel The Fourth Queen (2003).

The captivity in Morocco was indeed a romantic adventure for marsh, for she fully realize she had done something that would cause the censure from the public. She was conflicted by the excitement of Romance and the concern about her fate in future marriage. She protested, "the ill– disposed part of the World would unmercifully, though unjustly censure nay Conduct; but I had no Reason to be under any Apprehensions from the man whom Providence had allotted to be my Protector"[1]. Therefore, she argued for herself:

The Misfortunes I met with in Barbary have been more than equalled by those I have since experienced, ill this Land of Civil and Religious Liberty[2].

Contradicted, perplexed, mixed with anticipation and anxiety. Marsh's captivity offered a bourgeois, protestant female's experience of Barbary captivity. It can never be read as same as those narratives from whom spent years in slavery. Her romantic adventure focused on her inner emotion, distress and excitement, which follows the sentimental form of literary trend in the 18th century , rather than the style survival literature like Defoe. Marsh was never in life-danger as an upper-class woman in a country actually signed peaceful treaty with England. Compared with Meeteleen and Roxelana, Marsh remained more in the patriarchal realm of western society and maintained in traditional women's space. However, her multiple romantic relationships formulated a female fantasy that made her superior to all the male around her. In this dimension, Marsh's bourgeoisie romantic narrative also crossed the gender border by making the captivity genre a space not only for male domination but also for female fascination.

In summary, reading the captivity narratives and experiences of Meeteleen, Roxelana, and Marsh, one can realize that in the genre of captivity, while individuals were "taken away from their normal position in life,

[1] Elizabeth Marsh, the Female Captive, p. 143.

[2] Elizabeth Marsh, the Female Captive, p. 124.

stripped of customary marks of status and identity"[1], they are offered new possibilities, too. For European women in Barbary, it's the absence of western patriarchy and male protection that in a way empowered them to break away from the traditional gender norm. Captivity narratives in general offers small, marginal people's experiences of globalization, which are often overshadowed by grand exploration narratives. The body of the captives marked the frontier of the Empire in a traumatic way. And the writing of captivity as well as the study of it, can reveal to us the fluidity and ambiguity of individual identities in those early cross-cultural encounters happened to ordinary people. And the female view of this process provided a picture of compromises and negotiation, rather than male-dominated war, conquer or violence.

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