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Moorish Harem and the Tropology of the Veil

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Abstract: One of the significant aims of Orientalists/(would-be) colonialists is the desire to reveal the curtain and enter the "inner space" of the Moorish harem. For British travel writers, the most prominent of whom are Lawrence Harris, Walter Burton Harris, Budgett Meakin, Robert Spence Watson, and Frances Macnab, Moorish women, who are usually trammeled by the iconography of the veil, are to be "civilized" by being undressed (unveiled); they need emancipation, civilization, and freedom. In this article, I shall argue that these writers deploy some discursive poetics and politics of representation to cope with Moorish women's veil as an opaque curtain that conceals, covers, hides, or disguises the unfamiliar and the unknown. If Moorish women are hiding behind or wearing masks, then there must be something hidden behind this mask that the travel writer aspires to discern. For these writers, Moorish women are individuals who display dissimulation and dissemblance, that is why it is so difficult to understand them and get inside their heads. These writers cannot ignore that they are being looked at as they attempt to unveil the other to satisfy their voyeuristic pleasure and thus fail to fantasize themselves as full subjects. The article also demonstrates that it is the veil which enables the Moorish women to look without being seen. Not only does the veil perturb the desire of the Western/colonial subject to fix cultural and sexual difference, but it also enables the Moorish other to turn itself into a surveillant gaze.

Keywords: Moorish Women, Harem, Representation, the Veil, Travel Writing, Resistance.

Introduction

Foreign writers and explorers who journeyed to pre-colonial Morocco were mesmerized by Moorish cities in general and by certain spatio-cultural sites in particular within that urban space. They perceived the Moroccan city as a closed topos surrounded by well-fortified walls and protected by immense gates that closed at night. The central signifier in nineteenth-and early twentieth-century discourse was the harem. The latter was perceived as a sexual licence, forbidden territory, a segregated space oozed with erotic significance, about which "knowledge" is voyeuristically obtained and imaginatively reproduced. For women, on the other hand, the harem was accessed somewhat differently. It was not an off-limit territory, and hence as a "sight" could, for female eyes, be experientially authenticated; by the late nineteenth century, a visit to a harem had become a regular item on the female tourist itinerary. Moorish spaces that British travel writers visit are perceived as anti-space as they kindle in these authors many images: disgust, monotony, mystery, desire, and melancholy. The relationship between the space and its inhabitants should be scrutinized. What's more, inside its labyrinthine walls, there remains the

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erotic, the exotic, and even the forbidden: the harem. That is, the inaccessible space of alterity onto which fantasies of power and eroticism are projected.

British travel writers such as Lawrence Harris, Walter Burton Harris, Budgett Meakin, and Robert Spence Watson, among others, seek out and peep at the secret interiors of the feminized Orient. They do their best to describe the salacious harems, penetrate the secret realm of the seraglio, and explore the topic of Moorish sexuality for their British audience. The women of the harem are eroticized and envisioned as a source of attraction, derision, and mystery. These travel writers rendered the harem as an image of exoticism and mystery; they played many tricks and roles to cross and blur the inner/outer divide that the word harem seemed to signal, to get into these "inner spaces, to have a peep into them, or to send a female person to sound out and gauge their esoteric mysteries. However, they almost got only dribs and drabs. It is in these closed domestic spaces that British travel writers and explorers, as Western subjects, seek the most "glorious" and "delightful" aspects of the Orient and its "marvels." To fully grasp the Orient and to reveal the truth of it, they have to see this domain; hence not only the primacy of vision as the ultimate guarantor of truth and knowledge but also the necessity of the gaze in the voyeuristic economy of colonial desire. They know that no matter how hard they try to rip off the veil of the harem that conceals the Oriental Other from the Western Subject, their effort is destined to fail.

In her study, *Harems of the Mind: Passages of Western Art and Literature,* Ruth Bernard Yeazell argues that descriptions of the harem by westerners are "imaginative projections," as "[t]he blank walls of the harem have long constituted an imaginative provocation to the European mind."[1] The various accounts of travel about Morocco betray, in Yeazell's words, "a similar promise: no one has ever seen this sight before, or those who claim to have done so have seen it all wrong."[2] This is the promise of travel literature in general, but it is especially common when it comes to descriptions of the harem. The accounts are moved by "the impulse to claim that this traveller had really penetrated to the truth of the harem."[3] When the term "harem" or "oriental" is used in nineteenth-century classical histories, it is usually employed without specific reference to time or place, because as "structures of fantasy" these harems of the western mind are places "in which time and action are suspended," and do not "occupy a very fixed place on the map."[4]

Rana Kabbani refers to the imaginary harem as "the bourgeois drawing-room's foil," a phrase that draws upon the conceptual connection between Victorian homes and harem. She points out the usefulness of the concept of the imprisoning harem to the European imperialist, noting that it "distinguish[ed] between the barbarity of

1. Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *Harems of the Mind: Passages of Western Art and Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 8-13.
2. Yeazell, *Harems of the Mind*, 21.
3. Yeazell, *Harems of the Mind*, 21.
4. Yeazell, *Harems of the Mind*, 59-63.

the Eastern male and the civilized behaviour of the Western male. One tied women up and sold them at slave auctions; the other revered them and placed them on pedestals."[5] As the westerner's "impossible other," the imaginary Easterner stood for all the various oppressions from which the Westerner believed he had saved his women.

The term *harem* is nuanced and heavily infused with moral, loyal, and spatial implications. It denotes both the female members of a household and the dedicated spatial enclosure in which they live. This trope refers both to a space and to a category of people. In his "The Harem as Gendered Space and the Spatial Reproduction of Gender," Irvin Cemil Schick argues that "the Arabic root *ḥ-r-m*, from which harem is derived, conveys the notion of a taboo: it generally refers to prohibition, unlawfulness, veneration, sacredness, inviolability."[6] When considered spatially, "a harem is an exclusive sanctuary to which general access is forbidden, and within which certain individuals and modes of behaviour are deemed unlawful."[7] Schick also states that two words can be derived from this Arabic root. First, *ḥurmat* indicates something held holy and revered; something which is one's duty to honour and defend, and in particular a man's wives and family. Second, *ḥarem* refers to those parts of a house or property whose use is forbidden to all but the rightful owner. Certain classical Arabic dictionaries, for instance, define the harem as "the part of the house into which enters and upon which the door is closed, and it is in this sense of the private quarters of a home that the women's apartments came to be known as the harem."[8] The premise of this paper, therefore, departs from Irvin Cemil Schick's and Jateen Lad's above-mentioned definitions because considering the harem as a spatial entity makes us shed light on those who settle there; the harem as a space is the signifier of a culturally, socially, and religiously different other. In recent years, there have been many researchers who have dwelt upon the notion of the harem and its political and cultural implications.[9]

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5. Rana Kabbani, *Europe's Myths of Orient: Devise and Rule* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1986), 121, 128-129.

6. Irvin Cemil Schick, "The Harem as Gendered Space and the Spatial Reproduction of Gender," in *Harem Histories: Envisioning Places and Living Spaces*, edited by Marilyn Booth (Durham: Duke UP, 2011), 69.

7. Jateen Lad, "Panoptic Bodies: Black Eunuchs as Guardians of the Topkapi Harem," in *Harem Histories: Envisioning Places and Living Places*, edited by Marilyn Booth (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 138.

8. Schick, "The Harem as Gendered Space," 70.

9. Among the most prominent scholars who work on this subject to the present study are: Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem*; Rana Kabbani, *Europe's Myths of Orient: Devise and Rule*; Sarah Graham-Brown, *Images of Women: the Portrayal of Women in Photography of the Middle East, 1860-1950*; Linda Nochlin, *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society* and "The Imaginary Orient," 33-59; Lynne Thornton*, Women as portrayed in orientalist paintings*; Reina Lewis, *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity and Representation*; Meyda Yegenoglu, *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism*; Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *Harems of the Mind: Passages of Western Art and Literature*; Joan DelPlato, *Multiple Wives, Multiple Pleasures: Representing the Harem, 1800-1875*; Mary Roberts, *Intimate Outsiders: The Harem in Ottoman and Orientalist Art and Travel Literature*; Joanna de Groot, "'Sex' and 'Race': The Construction of Language and Image in the Nineteenth Century."

Spatial thinking is a key concept to consider when we are discussing the harem. Thinking about space not as passive or neutral or natural in its familiar contours, but rather as humanly formed and as a powerful shaper and signifier of human identities and understandings, has led scholars to consider how people in groups organize themselves physically and formatively around gender. The formulations of Gaston Bachelard, Henri Lefebvre, Edward Soja, and others have emphasized the relationships between humans' constructed spaces and lived experiences, along with the significance of close embodiments – how people have lived and used their bodies – and the way we think about and construct the spaces in which we live and move.

Today, issues of space and the body remain central, even critical, across Muslim-majority societies and Muslim communities, and one can trace these issues historically back to the concept and practice of the harem in its many variations. Likewise, spatial and bodily imagery remain central to the politics of East-West encounter. Among Muslims, some contemporary interpretations of how Islam should be lived emphasize the need to re-establish gender-defined spatial boundaries, whether by encouraging women to stay home or by asserting the importance of covering and hiding the female body.

This article examines British travel writers' irresistible urge and burning desire to enter the Moorish harem as a forbidden space as well as their deployment of a plethora of discursive poetics and politics of representation.[10] The desire to penetrate the Orient's mysteries and thereby uncover hidden secrets (usually expressed in the desire to lift the veil and enter into the "inner space" of the harem) is one of the constitutive tropes of Orientalist discourse. An obsession with a "hidden" and "concealed" Oriental life and with the woman behind the veil and in the harem has led to an overrepresentation of Oriental women to evade the lack posed by a closed "inner" space. This trope of concealment has led many male travellers to denounce the mystery of the harem and the veil, pigeonholing Moroccan women and their space as unfamiliar, disturbing, and eery. Moorish women's strong adherence to the veil should thus be seen in the context of resistance to the European self.

The Rhetoric of the Veil and Moorish Women's "Surveillant Gaze

British travel writers view Morocco through highly Anglocentric lenses: from a colonial view as inferior races in need of stewardship and civilization or from a developmentalist view as primitive savages in need of technological modernization. According to Irvin, society is not homogenous; unequal social relations are both expressed and construed through spatial differentiation.[11] Michel Foucault labelled

10. One such critic makes the distinction between "real" harems and the harem of European literature, which "is nothing but phantasm, a purely fictional construction onto which Europe's own sexual repressions, erotic fantasies and desire of domination were projected" (Behdad, "The Eroticized Orient," 110).

11. Michiel Dehaene and Lieven Cauter, eds. *Heterotopia and the City: Public Space in a Postcivil Society* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008); see also Kevin Hetherington, *The Badlands of Modernity: Heterotopia and Social Ordering* (London: Routledge, 1997).

such spatial variegations “heterotopias,” arguing that they are defined by particular mechanisms of opening and closing, and change as society changes in ways that mirror its aspirations and fears.[12] The analysis of heterotopias “takes us a long way towards understanding the power structures underlying society, for power is not intrinsically spatial just as spatiality is imbued with power.”[13] Some of these travellers claim that private/public dichotomy is frequently deployed to construct, control, discipline, confine, exclude and suppress gender and sexual difference preserving traditional patriarchal and heterosexist power structures.[14]

Budgett Meakin initiates the fifth chapter of his *Life in Morocco* with a Moorish proverb that goes as follows: “Teach not thy daughter letters; let her not live on the roof.” Meakin demystifies the interior and private world of the Moorish women. Most of the latter live in tents. Before scanning its internal features, the traveller has a panoramic vista of its surroundings. The space is instilled with “mystery” and “filth,” “little else except the omnipresent dirt is to be found in the average Arab tent.”[15] Its dwellers are depicted as living side by side with animals: “when the tents are arranged in a circle, the animals are generally picketed in the centre, but more often some are to be found sharing the homes of their owners.”[16] This description dehumanizes and undermines the Moors; their bodies are surveyed as landscapes and as a zoological specimen.

The panoramic perspective of travel writing is a technique for an aestheticizing landscape that becomes reproduced in the social descriptions of the traveller who develops techniques that may be found also in the portrayal of interiors or in accounts of the surveillance of the body itself. Budgett Meakin manages to take a peep into the interior of a tent; his eyes are like a camera, moving from one part of the tent to the other. His eyes rest on a woman who sits working on the floor: “the woman’s hand is her only shuttle, and she threads the wool through with her fingers, a span at a time, afterwards knocking it down tightly into place with a heavy wrought-iron comb about two inches wide, with a dozen prongs. She seems but half-dressed, and makes no effort to conceal either face or breast, as a filthy child lies feeding in her lap.”[17] Meakin, in this context, practices his voyeuristic penchant for gazing at the other because the latter is always surveyed as the incarnation of lasciviousness and desire hidden behind the mask. This image is just a micro portraiture of innumerable stereotypes of the oriental life rendered so abundantly in European paintings, postcards, newspapers, travelogues, etc. since the mid-seventeenth century.

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12. Michel Foucault, “Of other Spaces,” *Diacritics*, volume 16, 1967: 22-27; see also Debbie Lisle, *The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006).

13. John Allen, *Lost Geographies of Power* (London: Wiley Black-well, 2003), 159.

14. See Leslie Peirce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993).

15. Budgett Meakin, *Life in Morocco and Glimpses Beyond* (London: E.P. Duton and Company, 1905), 59.

16. Meakin, *Life in Morocco*, 57.

17. Meakin, *Life in Morocco*, 58.

The illustration of the woman in the above excerpt is an indication of two contested and contradictory visions: there is first total invisibility and inscrutability of the woman's body being represented which is a general tendency amongst most Orientalists, but at the same time there is visibility as this woman is half-dressed. So, there is always "obscurity surrounding the object of representation and an insatiable desire for unveiling inherent in representational practice."[18] Expressing the Orientalist desire to know, Meakin claims an epistemological mastery and narrative omniscience over the field of his observation, which in turn grants him the power and authority to represent. Still, the speaking subject is "caught between a fantasy of the Orient as a dream-world where his desire is realized and an image of Oriental society as an unattainable, concealed domain of absolute repression."[19]

The traveller creates a space that is permeated and loaded with "aesthetic pleasure" and colonial authority, to borrow David Spurr's phrase.[20] Although Meakin follows the strategy of exclusion, he tries to efface himself and whatever the attempt he makes to detach himself, the gaze remains ideologically one-sided and lopsided, for the eye that sees and writes is quintessentially imprisoned in a net of ideologies, histories, race, colonial affiliations, and political hegemony. The traveller's commanding view and the mobile gaze can be regarded as a colonial project as it surveys the other as an object of study, an area capable of development and appropriation, and fields where all types of activities can take place. The association of the space with the world of the harem can be attributed to the fact that the traveller intends to stress the idea that the Moorish/Oriental women of the harem as a source of eroticism and as an object for voyeurism are enticing, tantalizing, and opaque in the same way as their space wherein they live.

This premise is deeply rooted in Orientalist tradition and it has drawn the attention of many a travel writer. This tradition is transformed from one generation of travellers to another, and it reflects the patriarchal Moors who mistreat women, an act that is perceived as "uncivilized" and "inhuman"; Meakin is fascinated by the harem; he envisages women as captive figures in a secluded space, "if an Englishman's house is his castle, the Mohammedan's house is a prison not for himself, but for his women. Here is the radical difference between *their* life and *ours*."[21] There is a dichotomous opposition between a "castle," a place that is associated with civilization, progress, and emancipation, on the one hand. On the other hand, there is the "prison," which is connected to "uncivilization," "stagnation," "subjection," "oppression" and otherness, casting hence the Moor in stark binary constructs with the European.

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18. Ali Behdad, *Belated Travelers: Orientalism in the Age of Colonial Dissolution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 38.
19. Behdad, *Belated Travelers*, 38.
20. David Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing and Imperial Administration* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).
21. Meakin, *Life in Morocco*, 63, emphasis added.

Not only do images of the harem contribute to the cultural construction of the Orient as exotic, but they also provide a space of fantasy for the Western colonization of far-off territories. The Moorish women in general, who are trammeled by the iconography of the veil, are to be "civilized" by being undressed (unveiled); they need emancipation, civilization, and freedom in the same way as the space needs appropriation and rational exploitation because its inhabitants are "simpletons" and "lazy." To exemplify, Meakin states that "holding its women in absolute subjection, the Moorish nation is itself held in subjection, morally, politically, socially."[22] Yet, the Moorish space is the most exotic and one of the *Arab Nights*' *Entertainments*, "Nothing short of the unexpurgated Arabian Nights' Entertainments can convey an adequate idea of what goes on within those whited sepulchres, the broad, blank walls of Moorish towns."[23] The woman concealed behind a veil and in the forbidden space of the harem was one of the Western obsessions, indicated among others by her overrepresentation.

The harem was depicted in a variety of literary and artistic constructions, as well as in a plethora of travelogues, which helped to establish the harem as an iconic symbol of Western orientalist longing. It was built with ideas of sensuality, eroticism, barbarism, opacity, and subjugation invested into the harems as the Westerners' desires. It was primarily based on misconceptions and fantasy. The harems were viewed as everything that Western civilization was not, which added to the idea of its "otherness" in a broader sense. The idea of the harem, which is closely related to the Orient itself, was developed as an ideologically effective cultural description and is deeply ingrained in politics and power strategies.

In the form of many mythologies, the European orientalist production created a cultural portrayal of the harem. Its representations were developed with ideas that were primarily conceptualized in sensual and exotic terms. Its representations were primarily driven by masculine fantasies about the forbidden feminine world, hidden behind the veils and in restricted areas. Hence, the harem was presented in an iconic formulation in orientalist cultural output, which focused on the idea of erotically appealing and desirable beauty concealed within the prohibited harem realm. As a result, the women's role was diminished to one that was exclusively sensual, placing special emphasis on their subordination and obedience to their masters. In addition, the perception of the harem women as sexual slaves shaped their very essence and character. In this context, in his depiction of the status of women in Morocco in the 1880s, Walter Burton Harris alludes to the relationship between wives and concubines in Sultan's harem:

> "It is only very seldom that we can hear anything of the life led by his wives, except that it must be a tragic one, for the favorite, for the time being, lolls on cushions of velvet and gold in dimly-lit rooms full of the odours of in

22. Meakin, *Life in Morocco*, 71.
23. Meakin, *Life in Morocco*, 78.

cense and flowers, and attended by slaves, any one of whom, should she find favor in the sight of her lord and master, would usurp the place of the Sultana, who would sink to the degradation of slavery; and no doubt this is often the case."[24]

Because the harem was off-limits to men, especially foreigners, Harris's account of the lives of these ladies inside is probably more fantastical than factual. However, it is commonly known that Moroccan rulers maintained sizable harems and that affluent men also had a lot of slaves and concubines. Life was hard for women in general due to patriarchy in many ways, including wives as well as concubines, who no matter how hard they tried could probably not completely remove their inherent jealousy over sexual disparity and male philandering. Concubines navigated very difficult situations between the resentment of the wife and the demands of the "master." Many of these women were brought into the household as slaves for specific occupations, after which some were taken as wives by one of the male members of the household, and some of them were even freed. It was not uncommon for men of high status to marry women who were slaves, which in turn gave these women unprecedented power.

British travel writers, with their prolific production in the late and early twentieth century, provide adequate rooms for the encounters of the travellers-voyeurs with this imagined verboten world. At the same time, giving figural representation to the harem woman produced a set of meanings embedded into the cultural and political repertory. The image of the Moorish woman exposed to the gaze described on a metaphorical level of appropriation and domination – the terms of power desirable in Western political projects. This image fixed notions of the erotic "other," but also as the inferior and the powerless, which had a central role in the Western construction of the Orient.

The European representations of the harem through the various clichés kept reproducing several main perceptions, inscribed in the Western imagination of the Orient. Based on the stereotypes, which originated mainly from the visions of the Sultan's imperial household, they insisted on the notion of the harem as a sexual prison of a multitude of women, wrapped in luxury, splendour, and eroticism. Women of the harem were imagined as sexual prisoners owned by a despot, reduced to mere subservience and passivity, and without the indication of any social activities.[25] Left to idleness and waiting for their master, they are largely represented in rituals such as drinking coffee, gossiping, dabbling in magic, or having lavish harem entertainments.

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24. Walter Burton Harris, *The Land of an African Sultan* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington, 1889), 211.

25. Leslie Peirce, "Domesticating Sexuality Harem Culture in Ottoman Imperial Law," in *Harem Histories: Envisioning Places and Living Spaces*, Marilyn Booth, ed. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 104-35.

Since the masculine gaze is determined to have access to this “hidden” space, it deploys every single means that is available. Accounts and descriptions of women travel writers are utilized as a means of evading the lack that lies at the very heart of the masculine desire. Despite his ability to freely enter the Orient and move in and out as much as he wishes, the Western subject is frustrated by the closure of the space of the Oriental woman; he has no option but to speculate on the details of harem life, its mysteries, and all those obstruse aspects behind that closed curtain. Moreover, the veil and its mystery, which most British travel writers denounce, is dropped in this “inner space.” When the “inner” space is closed in this way, the only accessible means for the British travellers is either to imagine and envision or to rely on women’s accounts of the harem’s forbidden space, their description of the unveiled women, the details of their everyday life, etc. A good illustration in this context is what Richard Caton Woodville recounts about the visit of Kaid Maclean’s wife, Mrs. Kaid Maclean, to a Moorish harem. Woodville demonstrates that Mrs. Kaid Maclean ventured one day into the harem, and the moment she entered she was surrounded by the harem, who in “an indescribably short time had every stitch of clothing and jewellery off her, and then they pranced about in her outer and under clothes to the delight and amusement of the other inmates.”[26] Female travel writers, in contrast to male ones, have the chance to penetrate the “mysterious” world of the harem and decipher its exotic characteristics.

An example in this context is Frances Macnab, an English woman who travelled in Morocco as a private citizen and wrote *A Ride in Morocco Among Believers and Traders* (1902) “for readers who may feel disposed to travel in Morocco.”[27] Macnab visited Morocco before the 1904 *Entente Cordiale* between Great Britain and Morocco granted the French free reign in Morocco and the British free reign in Egypt. Macnab’s position as a woman in Victorian and Edwardian England contributed to her passionate attachment to Morocco and speculative ideas of a life for herself there. Her identification as a proto-colonial writer whose nation exercised significant influence in Morocco intersects with her position as an English lady subject to constraining gender standards at home, leading to a variety of contradicting viewpoints.

In her visit to the harem of a Basha in the city of Ksar El Kébir (Alcazar), Macnab offers vivid portraitures. She represents a group of women being entertained by an old lady who is reading destiny from the cards. They are designed to be appealing and beautiful as harem slaves, dressed in the finest attire, and accessorized with gold and jewellery to further the idea of oriental magnificence and wealth. The repetition of the typical details – such as leisurely poses, unbridled hair, etc – serves to conjure up the lasciviousness of a dreamlike harem world. In the background, this world is being protected by a dark-skinned eunuch, serving as a figure intensifying

26. Richard Caton Woodville, *Random Recollections* (London: Eveleigh Nash, 1914), 170.

27. Frances Macnab, “Preface,” in *A Ride in Morocco: Among Traders and Believers* (London: Edward Arnold, 1902), vi.

the excitement of observing the forbidden. The very act of fortune-telling which occupies the women in the scene also appears as another common theme of the harem imagery. According to Frances Macnab, these women are made-up, covered with gold, to be infinitely attractive and desirable, dreamy and distant, submissive and regal. These women "spend their time in painting their faces and dressing themselves, tattooing their hands with lace patterns as though they wore mittens, and finding some fresh spot on their cheeks where another mark can be added."[28] The picture the author forms of the Moorish women is stereotypical and Eurocentric. These women's job is to dance and sing only: a carnivalesque orgy:

> "The concubines had started singing, clapping their hands to mark time. They were of all ages and all shades of colour. Two were very pretty girls, apparently peasants, and wearing the simple dress of a peasant, which was far more becoming than the atrocious make-up of crude coloured silks, dyed eyes, false hair, and rouged cheeks of those four wives."[29]

This contradiction is present in works like hers, which is what attracts us to them. A work like Macnab's had no aspirations to coherence, in contrast to the reports that male colonial officials frequently authored that presented a plain or coherent set of observations intended to aid colonial control or guide policy decisions. Like many stories of this genre, her descriptions of Morocco can be essentializing and reductionist. Yet what they do give are the tangled webs created by the intersections of gender, class, and race subjectivities.

Unquestionably, social and cultural conditioning is a powerful mining factor in female representations of the foreign other. The harem, however, offered women travel writers direct encounters with this foreign context where gender played an essential part, not only in the situation itself but also in the discourses of representation. While their responses are never wholly free of colonialist attitudes, their engagements with a difference that was both alien and a skewed image of their own society's cultural patterns reveal itself in empathy and receptivity as criticism.

The sentiment of an imprisoned beauty that is passing time by playing music is intensified by the very space of the balcony where she is located. In harem imagery, the balcony appears often as a symbolic zone, the only space outside the harem where the women can be unveiled. It is a limited zone from where they can observe the outside world, and still remain unseen, separated, and left to loneliness. Lawrence Harris's travel account *With Mulai Hafid at Fez* (1909) is replete with generalizations when he states that Moroccan women live in seclusion and they suffer from ignorance and all aspects of primitiveness, a preconception which is not true. Harris's image of the harem is stereotypical and feeds on other vignettes that have been percolated from one generation to another. For him, Moorish women "are kept in great seclusion and have very little culture. A very few know how to read and

28. Macnab, "Preface," in *A Ride in Morocco*, 92.
29. Macnab, "Preface," in *A Ride in Morocco*, 94.

write, but the majority refrain from prayers from sheer ignorance. Their chief duty is to look after the household, and when their husbands are rich enough to possess negro slaves, they pass a life of monotonous indolence."[30]

Harem imagery is infused with fantasies about the forbidden, being dominated by the principles of male desires as the main driving force behind it. Thus, in the very core of the harem imagery lay the voyeuristic concept which presumed men as the observers and women as the observed. In orientalist discourse, such a structure had wider erotic references in the overall image of the Orient, connoting power relations. This concept of the masculinity of Orientalism is exactly what brings into focus the question of women's position and participation in its production.

In her *Colonial Fantasies*, Meyda Yeğenoğlu concentrates her analysis on the issue of the oriental veil and occidental reactions to it; she notes that the veil constitutes a "barrier between the body of the oriental woman and the Western gaze" which frustrates the male western viewer.[31] The oriental woman becomes a trope for the "hidden secrets," and is herself an object of investigation to be uncovered before the eyes of the west. As Yeğenoğlu notes, this obsession with unveiling is frequently cast in the language of "liberation," with the transparency of access to the Oriental woman being associated with that woman's personal freedom and agency. In other words, she demonstrates that "[e]recting a barrier between the body of the Oriental woman and the Western gaze, the opaque, all-encompassing veil seems to place her body out of the reach of the Western gaze and desire. Frustrated with the invisibility and inaccessibility of this mysterious, fantasmatic figure, disappointed with the veiled figure's refusal to be gazed at, Western desire subjects this enigmatic [...] to a relentless investigation."[32] Most British travel writers under scrutiny believe that they are accustomed to transparency and enlightenment and not to invisibility, something which is dark, mysterious, or impervious like Orientals. The harem as an inscrutable space and the veil clad by the inhabitants of this space are two faces of the same coin; both of them indicate opacity and mystery and obfuscate the "clear" vision of the travel narrator.

The veil is like an enigma and should thus be unveiled and made visible: "The veil is one of those tropes through which Western fantasies of penetration into the mysteries of the Orient and access to the interiority of the other are phantasmatically achieved."[33] Conquering the Moorish women is thus equal to conquering Morocco, the land, and the people themselves. This is surely not a simple military question in a narrow sense, but it is rooted in a problematic of power, which not only takes Morocco as a land to be conquered but which establishes such conquest in terms of

30. Lawrence Harris, *With Mulai Hafid at Fez* (London: Smith, Elder & CO, 15, Waterloo, 1909), 177.

31. Meyda Yeğenoğlu, *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 39.

32. Yeğenoğlu, *Colonial Fantasies*, 39.

33. Yeğenoğlu, *Colonial Fantasies*, 39.

epistemological superiority. Managing to unveil the veiled in the light of the depiction of a Moorish woman, Lawrence Harris is enthralled as he has a rare opportunity to penetrate the forbidden zones of the harem and has the following picture:

> "A gold-embroidered leather belt, pulled tightly round the waist, was very becoming, and the tiny feet were covered with green slippers intricately embroidered with a thread of gold. Her head was covered with a bright-coloured silk handkerchief, from which pended two long black plaits of hair interwoven with pearls. Several rows of precious stones hung in sparkling profusion round her neck, and her arms, wrists, and fingers were encircled with gold bracelets and rings of costly design."[34]

Harris can be seen as a voyeur, whose desire is to surreptitiously look for veiled women behind the scene. When he arrived at the house of a notable, he observed that slaves and servants were hurrying about with loads of "sweetmeats, fruits, and other edibles."[35] From a gallery above, the writer adds, "a roguish face would appear over the balcony, and large dark saucy eyes would glance down in my direction."[36] With a camera in his hand, Lawrence Harris seeks to secretly make certain snapshots for the harem; the rippling laughter and the continual chatter from the balcony was too inviting for the author, so "in desperation I asked Abdallah if I could have the pleasure of seeing the bride."[37] After Abdallah accepted the author's request, the latter tried to arrange matters by preparing his camera to get a furtive snapshot. He was eventually successful in obtaining a good one: "To a room near the roof, Abdallah led me by a stone staircase, which I had not noticed before, and standing against the wall was Zaida, the fourteen-year-old bride-elect, quite a picture as she stood there."[38] The veil is then an element of a highly charged fantasmatic scene. Nevertheless, the fantasy of penetration is only one aspect of a more complex ideological-subjective formation which oscillates between fascination, anger, and frustration.

In the nineteenth-century, European travel writers' obsession with the veil, the "precise political doctrine", to use Meyda Yeğenoğlu's expression, dissolves into a textual inscription which is witness to an underlying enunciative (and subjective) formation traversing different fields of writing. British travel texts display the veil's specific polysemy. As is well known, in Lacan's approach, the gaze is not seen but is imagined by the subject in the field of the other. With the help of this impervious veil, the Moorish woman is considered as not yielding herself to the Western gaze and therefore imagined as hiding something behind the veil. It is through the inscription of the veil as a mask that the Moorish woman is turned into an enigma. Such a discursive construction provokes the presumption that the real nature of these women is hidden, their truth is disguised and they appear in a false, deceptive manner.

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34. Lawrence Harris, *With Mulai Hafid at Fez,* 175-6.
35. Harris, *With Mulai Hafid*, 174.
36. Harris, *With Mulai Hafid*, 175.
37. Harris, *With Mulai Hafid*, 175.
38. Harris, *With Mulai Hafid*, 175.

The veil prompts a thought: if they masquerade, wear masks, or otherwise cover themselves, then there must be knowledge hidden from them behind the mask. Giving a figurative portrayal of this mask and the act of impersonating an enigmatic figure reveals the mystery that is thought to be hidden behind the veil. However, what is thus unconcealed, i.e. the "masquerade," the "veil," is the act of concealment itself. The veiled existence is the very truth of Oriental women; they seem to exist always in this deceptive manner. In his visit to the sacred city of Wazzan, Robert Spence Watson relates the following story:

> "I began to distribute chocolate and water biscuits amongst them, and, when the men saw this, they asked for some for their wives. I thought it a good chance for a bit of fun, and said if their wives wanted them they must come for them, and either seventeen or eighteen women came crowding round me. Then I told them that they must unveil before they got the biscuits. There was much laughter amongst the men at this, but curiosity prevailed, and away went their veils, and I had an excellent opportunity of studying the charms of Moorish women."[39]

A variety of reasons, mostly Eurocentric, are offered by British travel writers to explain their obsession with the Oriental veil: "civilizing," "modernizing," and thereby "liberating" the "backward" Orient and its women, making them speaking subjects. These are the manifest terms of the political doctrine. But then why are these writers obsessed with the veil? In her article "The Sartorial Superego," Joan Copjec indicates that no rational explanation can account for these travellers' preoccupation with lifting the veil, for this is a preoccupation sustained by fantasy and hence belongs to the realm of desire. Copjec adds that "what was capital in this fantasy was the surplus pleasure, the useless *jouissance* which the voluminous cloth was supposed to veil and the colonial subject, thus hidden, was supposed to enjoy." Every effort to strip away the veil was clearly an aggression against "the bloated presence of this pleasure that would not release itself into the universal pool."[40] Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century British travel writers show that the ethnic-political programme of the Enlightenment in Morocco cannot be dissociated from a patriarchal subjectivity disturbed by the presence of the veiled woman, fading under her sign.

As we learn from these writers, this is a disturbance and obsession which they also strangely enjoy, leading to a textual dialectic which, with its rhetorical excess, gives rise to "the tropology of the veil", to use Meyda's expression.[41] Such rhetoric should be viewed as an exercise in subjective absorption, turning diversity into a manageable and delightful topic of conversation, giving the European a sense of the imagined unity and control over his experience.

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39. Robert Spence Watson, *A Visit to Wazzan: The Sacred City of Morocco* (London: Macmillan and Co. 1880), 270.

40. Joan Copjec, "The Sartorial Superego." October Vol. 50, Autumn (1989): 87.

41. Yeğenoğlu, *Colonial Fantasies*, 45.

The veil is thus turned into a privileged concept metaphor in the construction of the reality of Morocco: its very ontology. We cannot overlook the important role it plays in the production of an *essential* "Orientalness." The veil is central to the discursive constitution of the referent, namely what the Orient is; it constitutes the condition of possibility of the copula "is." But this is a unique strategic-rhetorical move, precisely because it is assumed to conceal not only the Oriental woman but also, through her, the very being of the Orient. It incites an inquiry into an ontology or presence which does not just remain beyond knowledge but is closed to it as a requirement of its essential being.[42]

British writers proclaim that the impenetrability of Moorish people evokes uncovering knowledge. However, since they are always other than what they appear to be, it is difficult to study these people. There is no possibility of mixing with them because they are reserved; moreover, even when one observes them or communicates with them, one can never be sure, for dissimulation is their essential characteristic. For these writers, with such people one should always go beyond appearances, one should always be on guard against the possibility of deception. In this context, Malek Alloula demonstrates in his book *The Colonial Harem* that the world of women is always forbidden to a travel writer. This space of women counterposes to the traveller a "smooth and homogenous surface free of any cracks through which he could slip his indiscreet [gaze]."[43] Therefore, Moroccans, mainly women, for these travel writers, are characterized by their endless dissemblance and dissimulation, which is why it is so hard to understand them and to penetrate their minds.

Concluding Remarks

Moorish harem are hidden not only behind their words but also behind their silence, for even their lips are a veil; true life is missing, and its absence is dissimulated by appearances and masks. But it is paradoxically this doubt which makes the observing subject certain that there is something hidden in this infinite play of dissimulation, dissemblance, and concealment. For British observers, the veil must be hiding some essential truth, some mystery or secret. Women's black/white veil becomes the emblematic equivalent of blindness; "a leukoma, a white speck on the eye of the [traveller] and on his viewfinder."[44]

What explains such an obsession with the Oriental woman is the metonymic association established between the Orient and its women. The Orient, represented as the quintessence of sensuality, is always understood in feminine terms and accordingly its place in Western imagery has been constructed through the simultaneous gesture of racialization and feminization. For these writers, the Orient is its women. In this imagery, the inquiry into Morocco always implies a need to

42. Yeğenoğlu, *Colonial Fantasies*, 48.
43. Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem*. Translated by Myrna Godzich and Wlad Godzich (Minessota: University of Minnesota Press, 1986),72.
44. Alloula, *The Colonial Harem*,7.

discover its women. It is through the simultaneous mobilization of these two lines of inquiry, which are brought together and bear and reflect upon each other, that Morocco is comprehended in feminine terms. The process of orientalization of the Orient/Morocco intermixes with its feminization. The Moorish harem in the long run remains a site of allure and opacity.

This process of orientalization European writers adopt in their rendering of the Moorish Other underlines the Eurocentric premise that the Orient(al) silences women – even European women – and this abuse justifies European colonialism. Besides, their mission in Morocco is to "emancipate" Moroccan women from the patriarchal clutch and help embrace civilization, freedom, and equality. Therefore, one of the central elements in the ideological justification of colonial culture is the criticism of the cultural practices and religious customs of Oriental societies which are revealed to be preposterously oppressing women. Hence, the barbarity of the Orient is evidenced in the way cultural traditions shape the life of its women. Still, these writers' mission unveils the hypocrisy of colonialism and their ideological intentions. Thus premised, we can move beyond the rather simplistic and oppositional politics of the marginalized, where a simple reversal of the oppositional structure was proposed as a feasible strategy of subversion of the hegemonic operations of colonial power, a strategy highlighted by Homi K. Bhabha in his insistence on the notion of ambivalence as constituting the ground of the conflictual economy of colonial discourse.[45]

Because there is always the possibility of the colonial other's counter gaze, the invisibility the veil ensures for Moroccan women serves as both the ground upon which the subject's scopic drive is relocated and the moment at which desire is articulated. But there is something intrinsic in this particular sartorial concern that explains the fascination with lifting the veil. In the native Moroccan culture, women are linked with the inside, the home, and the land, and the veil is considered as a border separating the inside from the outside, as a screen or cover.

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45. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

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