

Beyond Harem Walls: Redefining Women's Space in Works by Assia Djébar, Malek Alloula and Fatima Mernissi

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Abstract

Orientalist and colonial representations of harems have resulted in the association of North African women with domestic confinement. North African authors such as Assia Djébar (1980), Malek Alloula (1981) and Fatima Mernissi (1994), however, suggest that this view is biased. While focusing largely on Fatima Mernissi's memoir, *Dreams of Trespass*, this article builds on these authors' exploration of the various ways in which women of the Maghreb are portrayed, in order to provide a clearer understanding of the dynamics of women's space in the context of colonial North Africa.

Keywords

Harems in literature, Women's space in Orientalist art, Colonialism and gender in North Africa

A cornerstone of postcolonial criticism has been the denunciation of the distorted perceptions conveyed by representations of colonial subjects mediated by the colonizer's gaze. Within a North African context, women are usually portrayed in a secluded domestic environment by the French colonial powers. Especially apparent in artistic and literary depictions, these portrayals result in the association of North African women's space, and, by extension, North African women themselves, to the notion of the harem, characterized by an imagery of closed quarters surrounded by impervious walls and heavily locked doors. Indeed, the word harem, deriving from an Arabic euphemism for the women of the family, particularly the wives, entered European languages and came to refer to a physical space, a private and confined place in a home where women must stay.

By this definition, the women who live in harems are understood to be definitely tied to the space in which they reside. While domestic seclusion is still one of the most common features associated with women in Islam, texts from the Maghreb suggest that this view is limited and offer evidence that will lead to a clearer understanding of women's space in colonial North Africa. These works include Assia Djebar's 'Regard interdit, son coupé' that concludes her book *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* (1980), Malek Alloula's *Le Harem colonial: images d'un sous-érotisme* (1981) and Fatima Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood* (1994). Djebar and Alloula offer insights into colonial representations of the North African woman and her space by focusing on visual depictions (Orientalist art in the case of Djebar, and photographs in that of Alloula), thereby shedding more light on the colonial origins of the prevailing understandings of what a harem is, namely the inaccessible quarters of Islamic women. Mernissi presents an alternative definition of the word with a subjective outlook on the issue through a narration of her childhood. All three authors, however, explore various aspects of gender and space in an attempt at offering a revisionary definition of gendered separation in the Maghreb. They condemn French colonial representations of the harem as necessarily a place, a part of the domicile inevitably defined by impregnable walls, by accusing them of stemming from an imperial imperative to access and control all aspects of colonized societies. As an extension of these authors' endeavors, I propose to build on their exploration of various ways in which North African women have been portrayed, in order to provide a clearer and more nuanced understanding of gender dynamics in the North African context, and challenge the common association of harems with physical boundaries.

In French imperialist discourse, the inaccessibility of the harem is a leitmotiv that can be found at least as early as the seventeenth century. Many critics have noted that the French enlightenment's view of Muslim women is indissociable from secluded spaces. Parvine Mahmoud (1960), Ruth P. Thomas (1978), and Madelaine Dobie (1994), for instance, have each commented on Montesquieu's portrayal of Persian women according to motifs of sequestration. Another example can be found in Diderot's *Encyclopédie* (1775), where De Jaucourt's definition of "sérail [sic]" as a palace where the women of Turkish and Persian emperors are locked up along with slaves reveals that Muslim women's space is only perceived as a place of incarceration (106–8). This inescapable connotation of seclusion is fur-

ther evidenced by the inclusion of the entry for “sérail” under the architecture section of the *Encyclopédie*, which further inscribes women’s space within buildings, as well as by the choice of using “sérail” rather than the word of Arabic origin “harem,” as “sérail” derives from the Latin *serraculum*, signifying an enclosed place of confinement. The inaccessibility of Muslim women in their space, and the perception of that space, the harem, as an impregnable fortress, became the stereotype upon which a vast body of Orientalist art was subsequently based.

Some aspects of the letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montague describing her travels to Turkey were another important influence on the image of Muslim women prevailing in Europe since the early eighteenth century, and particularly so through her impact on Orientalist painting. The value of Lady Wortley Montague’s description of Muslim women’s space in her letters was largely due to the fact that, as a woman, she had access to hitherto unapproachable harems. Consequently, as Lady Wortley Montague wrote in her letters that she wished her friend the painter Charles Gervase—who had painted her portrait—was with her in the Turkish baths to capture the indigenous Muslim women in their natural habitat, later male depictions of that space understood to be exclusively feminine will rely considerably on imagination fueled by epistolary accounts, and focus almost exclusively on the inaccessible nature of their subject and the sensuality of the baths. As Isobel Grundy (1997) notes in her edited volume of Lady Wortley Montague’s letters: “Jean August Dominique Ingres painted ‘Le Bain Turc’ in 1862, having made notes nearly fifty years earlier from MWM’s [Mary Wortley Montague] two accounts of Turkish ladies at the baths” (149). For many, Ingres set the canon for European representations of Muslim women. According to Roger Benjamin:

Ingres’s imagery of the harem and bath was fueled by travelers’ accounts such as the Turkish Embassy Letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. Yet Rome was the furthest limit of Ingres’s actual travel, and his erotic Orient remained a mirage of nudes beyond his grasp and multiplying in his imagination in works like the *Turkish Bath*. (1997, 9)

Since Ingres’s paintings did not stem from firsthand contact with his subject, his works bear little resemblance to the referent they claim to portray. Indeed, his harem women have European facial features, and, more importantly, perhaps because he was not familiar with the landscapes in their

parts of the world, Ingres painted them against indoor backgrounds, thereby contributing to the prevailing conception of the harem as an extension of the domicile.

Yet, starting with the French invasion of Algeria that began in 1830, it became gradually easier for Orientalist artists to journey to North Africa and have direct access to their subject. One particularly important painter who traveled through North Africa is Delacroix, whose “voyage to Morocco,” according to Benjamin, “became the archetype of the Orientalist experience” (1997, 8). As Anne Donadey has noted, European painting “plays a pivotal role” in Assia Djebar’s writings (2001, 96), and ‘Regard interdit, son coupé’ focuses on Delacroix’s brief stay in Algiers during his North African travels and on his painting *Femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement* (1834). This painting is a particularly important one that had a tremendous influence on Orientalist art, and whose success, according to Christiane Peltre, “prompted Ingres to strike out in an Orientalist direction in his own work” (1998, 184). In *Femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement*, two women are seated in the middle while a third one is leaning on her elbow in the foreground on the left side of the painting. In the right side, another woman, seen from her back, has her hand on a curtain, as if she has just pushed it aside to reveal the scene. Djebar’s description of Delacroix’s experience in Algiers, which provided him with material he later used for his painting, indicates the importance of colonialism in orientalist portrayals of North African women. In ‘Regard interdit, son coupé,’ she writes:

The adventure is well-known: the chief engineer of the harbor of Algiers, Monsieur Poirel, a lover of painting, has in his employ a *chaouch*, the former owner of a privateer—the sort who used to be called a *rais* before the 1830 conquest—who, after long discussions, agrees to allow Delacroix entry into his own home.

[...] The house was situated in what used to be the rue Duquesne. Delacroix, in the company of the husband and undoubtedly of Poirel as well, crosses “a dark hallway” at the end of which, unexpectedly and bathed in an almost unreal light, the actual harem opens up. (1992, 134)¹

¹ “L’aventure est bien connue: l’ingénieur en chef du port d’Alger M. Poirel, amateur de peinture, a dans ses services un *chaouch*, ancien patron de barque de course—un “*Raïs*” d’avant 1830—qui consent, après de longues discussions, à laisser Delacroix pénétrer dans sa propre maison.

[...] La maison se trouvait dans l’ex-rue Duquesne. Delacroix, accompagné du mari et sans doute de Poirel, traverse “un couloir obscur” au bout duquel s’ouvre, inattendu et baignant dans une lumière presque irréaliste, le harem proprement dit.” (2004, 238–39)

Djebar does not see Delacroix's visit to the harem solely as an intrusion, but dwells on the effect that the sight has on the painter as well. However, she does present his encounter with these Algerian women as an invasion marked by the importance of colonial supremacy. The man who consents to open his house appears as a fallen figure; an old *raïs* [captain] now humiliated by colonialism and reduced to a simple *chaouch* [usher] running errands for the very colonial power that defeated him. He is initially reluctant to let Delacroix come into his home, and Poirel's official authority clearly plays a role in his eventual consent.

The invasion of this man's domestic space is equivalent to an invasion of his privacy, and therefore Delacroix's ability to lay eyes on the women is an index of French colonial command. Moreover, the features of the house where Delacroix happens to see the women convey a sense of inaccessibility. Having to first force a colonized subject to yield access to his domicile, and having to follow a "couloir obscur" before reaching it gives the sense of a gap between the colonizing man and the colonized woman that the former can only cross by means of imperial violence. This gap constitutes for Delacroix a frontier that is at once symbolic (convincing the man to give him access to his home) and physical (the house's walls and door that he cannot force open). Because in this case the invasion of the space behind the frontier is equivalent to invading a private place, an artistic depiction of this space must ensure that the frontier remains impassable in order to preserve the privacy of the scene. This results in a painting where women remain indoors surrounded by walls that make the scene more gratifying and valuable not only by being a constant reminder of its usual inaccessibility (and therefore rarity), but also by insuring that the scene remains private in spite of the intrusion. When the harem is spatially defined by walls, it is conceived as a penetrable space behind a crossable boundary, hence the necessity to represent women indoors in order to show the extent of the power of the colonizer who was able to cross the frontier that the walls symbolize, and get inside.

"Through Algerian women," Marnia Lazreg has argued, "French male writers could satisfy their desire to penetrate Algerian men's intimate life by having their wives and daughters as spoils of conquest" (1994, 39). By perpetuating the portrayal of North African women indoors and inaccessible to the colonizer, French colonialism is able not only to demonstrate its power with every intrusion into their space, but also to invoke the liberation of colonized women (both figuratively and literally) as a justification of its enlightening mission. According to Frantz Fanon, colonial

accessibility to the Algerian woman indicates a failure to resist on the part of the colonized population. In 'L'Algérie se dévoile,' the first chapter of *L'An V de la révolution algérienne*, Fanon argues that the French colonizer views the inaccessibility of Algerian women as a form of national resistance, and focuses the colonial discourse on the limitation of her inaccessibility by conveying an image of her as a victim of a demonized jailer throughout all colonial administrative channels:

[The dominant administration] described the immense possibilities of woman, unfortunately transformed by the Algerian man into an inert, demonized, indeed dehumanized object. The behavior of the Algerian was very firmly denounced and described as medieval and barbaric. With infinite science, a blanket indictment against the "sadistic and vampirish" Algerian attitude toward women was prepared and drawn up. Around the family life of the Algerian, the occupier piled up a whole mass of judgments, appraisals, reasons, accumulated anecdotes and edifying examples, thus attempting to confine the Algerian within a circle of guilt. (1965, 38)²

While Fanon's analysis is limited to the interaction between colonizers and colonized in such venues as workplaces and schools in colonial Algeria in the twentieth century, paintings such as those of Delacroix conveyed the same image of female servitude in Europe since the nineteenth century.

The enhancement of the sexuality associated with harems is perhaps the most important aspect of Delacroix's *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* perceptible in Djébar's presentation of the painter's experience in Algiers. Following the scandal caused by Edouard Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1862) in which a nude woman is portrayed outdoors in the company of two fully dressed men, it became safer and more acceptable to show the naked body of a stranger rather than that of a French woman, and Orientalism became the idiom of artists initially interested in nudes. This erotic dimension that accompanies Orientalist art is apparent in the artists' insistence on representing women in one of the most intimate locations: the bath, or hammam, first described by Lady Wortley Montague in the early eighteenth century. This obsession with hammams confirms the European

² "On décrit les possibilités immenses de la femme, malheureusement transformée par l'homme algérien en objet inerte, démonétisé, voire déshumanisé. Le comportement de l'Algérien est dénoncé très fermement et assimilé à des survivances moyenâgeuses et barbares. Avec une science infinie, la mise en place d'un réquisitoire-type contre l'Algérien sadique et vampire dans son attitude avec les femmes, est entreprise et menée à bien. L'occupant amasse autour de la vie familiale de l'Algérien tout un ensemble de jugements, d'appréciations, de contremaitres, multiplie les anecdotes et les exemples édifiants, tentant ainsi d'enfermer l'Algérien dans un cercle de culpabilité." (2001, 19)

inability to dissociate women from an intimate walled place, and preoccupation with penetration, as walking into the bathroom symbolizes walking into the most secluded recesses of the house. Various examples of sexuality in harem bath paintings are to be found in such Jean-Léon Gérôme tableaux as the oils on canvas *Bain Turc ou Bain Maure (Deux Femmes)* (1872), *Un Bain Maure* (1874) or *Femme Turque au Bain* (1877), which typically show a naked light-skinned woman being bathed by a dark skinned servant. According to Benjamin:

In a nineteenth century context, the juxtaposing of black and white bodies implied varying racial and sexual interpretations. In an established Western visual arts tradition, the representation of a black servant served to sexualize the setting. By the mid-19th century, scientific discourse associated the sexual appetite of the black woman with lesbian sexuality. This association was further enhanced by the belief, commonly held by western audiences and fostered by numerous travel accounts that lesbian relationships occurred in the women's baths. (1997, 100)

This representation of harem baths as highly sexualized places is very telling of the European colonial conception of the Islamic woman and her space. Ingres's *Le Bain turc* (1862), where more than twenty women are packed in a steamy room is an extreme example of a harem painting where a bath is represented as a highly sexual place. The numerous naked female bodies that crowd the painting and the two women who are erotically cuddling express a viewpoint of harems not only as extremely confined spaces but also as places where sexuality is abundant. Privacy and seclusion are therefore fundamental to Orientalist representations of harems not only because they present a proof of colonial power by stressing the inaccessibility of the scene that the painter is able to witness, but also because privacy is a crucial component to sexual fantasies. The sexual element at stake here introduces the issue of intimacy and the need for the uncanny (in the Freudian sense of *unheimlich*; literally "un-homely") space to be as contained as possible. Orientalist art, in that sense, sublimates the un-homely space of Islamic women by plainly depicting it as a home. The more private a space is made, the more *heimlich*, or home-like it becomes. Thanks to the safety offered by four walls, sexual fantasies can be given free rein, whereas anxiety is associated to the unidentified—and potentially threatening—unknown that lurks outside the surrounding walls.

With the advent of photography, this sexual dimension will become the most important, if not the only defining feature of North African women's space. In *Le Harem colonial*, Alloula shows that the French colonizer's failure to access women in North Africa as they had been pictured in Europe

resulted in the fabrication of an alternate space for colonized women that would be accessible to colonizing eyes. Alloula analyzes photographs of Algerian women used as French post cards in the early twentieth century that closely resemble typical Orientalist paintings, their subject being almost inevitably a naked or semi-naked woman, often reclining and usually captured indoors. As Laura Rice-Sayre puts it, Alloula analyzes these photographs “in order to reread the messages sent home by the French colonizers and to ‘return to sender’ their own image as it is captured in these tawdry and embarrassing public photos of their own private colonial and sexual desires” (1986–87, 352). Since the photographs of Algerian women become postcards destined for a European audience that cannot judge of their fidelity, the photographer has great freedom in his construction of the Algerian woman, and is therefore free to sexualize her. Moreover, since the models for these postcards were generally recruited among the poorest segments of society, where many women resort to prostitution out of necessity, not only were they not representative of Algerian women at large, they also validated colonial dominance economically.

Julia Clancy-Smith has argued that “the construction of French Algeria was as much the forging of a gaze—or spectrum of gazes fixed upon Muslim women—as it was the assembling of mechanisms for political and economic control” (1998, 155). The eroticization of the Algerian woman, according to Alloula, reflects a rejection of the colonizer that is paralleled by the rejection that the French photographer feels in the face of the veil worn by Algerian women. The importance of the veil and the colonial gaze has been the object of extensive study. Fadwa El Guindi (1999) in particular has drawn a link between veils and walls as obstructions for the onlooker by comparing traditional Afghan veils to architecture of Arabic and Islamic style. Although in the case of a veil the visual rejection is accomplished by means of clothing, a harem’s wall seen from the outside functions similarly, and forms a large empty surface that constitutes an obstacle for the colonizer’s gaze. This rejection, for Alloula, takes place at three levels:

Draped in the veil that cloaks her to her ankles, the Algerian woman discourages the *scopic desire* (the voyeurism) of the photographer. She is the concrete negation of this desire and thus brings to the photographer confirmation of a triple rejection: the rejection of his desire, of the practice of his “art,” and of his place in a milieu that is not his own. (1995, 7)³

³ “Drapée de son voile qui la vêt jusqu’aux chevilles, l’Algérienne décourage le désir scopique (le voyeurisme) du photographe. Elle en est la négation concrète qui confirme à

The rejection on the artistic level appears as the veil represents a blank spot on the picture and the rejection of the photographer's sexuality is evident from the woman's control of her own sexuality. Both of these rejections imply a third rejection, that of colonialism, by being a constant reminder that the photographer is standing in an alien environment. When the colonizer does not accept this inversion of the power relation of colonialism, a substitute to reality is created: an unveiled woman influenced by exotic representations of harem scenes is constructed according to prejudicial standards to serve a colonial agenda. As Winifred Woodhull observes, Alloula "invites readers to deplore the French imposter's efforts to insinuate himself into the closed space of the harem in order to take what he (the imposter) imagines to be the native man's place" (1993, 45). Alloula's colonial postcards actually depict interior scenes, entirely recreated in the studio, through the use of scenery, props and models:

The photographer will come up with more complacent counterparts to these inaccessible Algerian women. These counterparts will be paid models that he will recruit almost exclusively on the margins of a society in which loss of social position [...] affects men as well as women (invariably propelling the latter toward prostitution).

Dressed for the occasion [...], the model will manage, thanks to the art of illusion that is photography, to impersonate, to the point of believability, the unapproachable referent: the *other* Algerian woman, absent in the photo. (1995, 17)⁴

Accordingly, *Le Harem Colonial* shows the photographer conquering the final bastion that resists colonialism by creating a world that is imagined to be behind harem walls, and this pseudo admission into women's space stands for the completion of colonization and the achievement of the colonizer's desire of penetration. Thus, the harem is one of many divisions between colonizer and the colonized. It incarnates a physical boundary and

celui-ci un triple rejet. Celui de son désir, de l'exercice de son «art» et de sa place dans un milieu qui n'est pas sien." (2001, 13)

⁴ "Ces femmes algériennes inaccessibles, le photographe va devoir impérativement leur trouver des équivalents plus complaisants.

Ce seront les modèles rétribués qu'il recrutera presque exclusivement dans les marges d'une société où le déclassement social [...] touche aussi bien les hommes que les femmes, poussant presque invariablement ces dernières vers la prostitution [...].

Paré pour l'occasion [...], le modèle, par la grâce de cet art de l'illusion qu'est la photographie, figurera à s'y tromper ce référent inaccessible: *l'autre* femme algérienne, *l'absente de la photo*." (2001, 19)

works as a frontier that the colonizer crosses virtually in the photographer's studio. This fantasized construction of the harem is a decisive element in colonial relations since it represents the colonizer's victory over an environment of resistance, thereby completing domination over the colonized.

In concordance with Alloula's argument that the colonizers did not cross into the colonized woman's space as much as they constructed an imaginary one instead, Fatima Mernissi (1994) confirms the function of the harem as a frontier against the colonizer. The setting of the tales in her autobiography, *Dreams of Trespass*, is colonial Morocco, where women are never in contact with the colonizer. She says she grew up in a harem, then literally calls her house a frontier and sees the front gate as a protection against the "foreigners standing a few meters away" (1994, 22).

As Melissa Matthes (1999) has noted, a subjective approach such as Mernissi's offers an alternative view on history and politics. As such, personal narratives can require a reassessment of the prevailing academic views on a given area. Indeed, Mernissi's choice to publish her memoir in English rather than Arabic or French indicates that her targeted audience resides outside North Africa. In fact, her very use of the word harem to refer to her house is unusual in the Moroccan Arabic that she grew up speaking in Fez, and indicates that she is not in dialogue with her own society. Instead, she is attempting to deconstruct the word harem and its significance from an outsider's perspective, more than she is trying to paint a better picture of its referent. This is further apparent in the philological investigation of her character throughout the book. The narrator in *Dreams of Trespass* is a curious child, eager to understand her surroundings and zealously trying to find out what the word "harem" means. In her quest for a definition, she asks her Aunt Yasmina:

The word "harem," she said, was a slight variation of the word *haram*, the forbidden, the proscribed. It was the opposite of *halal*, the permissible. [...] Mecca, the holy city, was also called Haram. Mecca was a space where behavior was strictly codified. The moment you stepped inside, you were bound by many laws and regulations. (1994, 61)

The word harem here does not refer merely to women's quarters. For Mernissi, although physical borders can geographically bind a harem, they are incidental. The defining feature of a harem is not that it is denied to the public eye and peopled with women, but rather that it is strictly regulated by a definite set of rules. Here, the harem is an environment defined by a

codified behavior, not by borders or walls, or what is to be uncovered inside it. The unique function of private quarters in the house ceases to apply when it comes to the harem as defined in *Dreams of Trespass*. To Mernissi, for example, the “*Ville Nouvelle*,” or French quarter in Fez, has all the characteristics of a harem because it is defined by a regulated frontier. She ironically notes that the colonizers who create the frontier and regulate it do not realize that they, themselves, live in a harem, as the “*Ville Nouvelle*” is, indeed, a harem by her standards.

Throughout *Dreams of Trespass*, Mernissi tells anecdotes that void the habitual stereotypes associated with harems, and the customary privacy and sexuality are invalidated by stories of her mother trying to spend some quiet time with her husband and children away from the members of their extended family with whom they share the house. Ultimately, Mernissi’s quest for a definition for the word harem does not yield a single definitive answer, but builds a picture of “harem” as a complex concept, implying different notions, the most important of which is what she calls “*hudud*,” the Arabic word for frontier. Interestingly, Mernissi insists on the value of this frontier between women and the outside, not between women and men in the house. There are no women’s quarters in the house. Men and women who belong to the same household roam about freely. For Mernissi, rather than being spatially definable, the harem is composed of the invisible behavioral conventions between genders. In other words, the harem does not have walls, locks and a secure gate, and does not delineate privacy. The notion of harem conveys the basic cultural rules of decency that govern the relations between two groups, such as those that exist between genders or between colonizers and colonized for instance. If a woman leaves her house and goes to a store run by a man, this man’s store is not different from the so-called harem where she resides because the rules that apply in her domicile still apply in the public sphere. Indeed, not only would the store become a harem, but the streets on which she walks from her house to the store are a harem as well, since the social rules and conventions do not cease to apply there. Benjamin reflects on this issue in his reading of Gérôme’s painting *Le Harem dans le kiosque* (1870):

Gérôme’s subject is a rather unconventional representation of the harem. [...] The usual atmosphere of cloying eroticism associated with the private chamber or the steamy confines of the baths is replaced by one of easy sociability out of doors. [...] Nevertheless, the fantasy themes of clausturation and the master’s wrathful possessiveness are still much in evidence, with the fearsome guard confronting the viewer’s

gaze directly, barring access to the women separated from us in their elegant, floating prison. (1997, 103)

Gérôme's vision of women outdoors is original in comparison with the accepted Orientalist idea that cannot dissociate them from the privacy of walls. However, it only reasserts the spatial characteristics that the west connects to harems. The women of *Le Harem dans le kiosque* are still contained within a distinct perimeter (the kiosk), and although they are not behind walls, they are still restricted within the physical space defined by the kiosk's wooden columns and roof. This situation inside a closed space is even apparent from the title, through the preposition *dans* [in] that expresses the inclusion of the women inside the limits of the kiosk. Moreover, the "fearsome guard confronting the viewer's gaze" enhances the privacy of this scene and its indoor quality, since one would have to pass this armed-to-the-teeth sentinel to penetrate the strictly traced perimeter where women stand. The panoptical figure of the guard, in addition to conveying an image of Muslim women as prisoners, underscores the inaccessibility of these women for the painter. In addition to the guard, a very narrow path reminiscent of the "dark hallway" that Delacroix had to cross with Monsieur Poirel in Djébar's short story separates the women from the viewer. Thus, even this painting, which at first appears to be the exception to the rule, merely reestablishes the stereotypes of Orientalist harem representations; especially the inevitable framing of women within a closed area.

The Orientalist inability to dissociate women from a closed location contrasts sharply with Mernissi's vision of harems. As she describes rural harems, she points out: "the walls and everything worked for our harem in Fez, but did not work at all for the harem on the farm" (1994, 47). When young Fatima compares her own house in the city to her aunt Yasmina's in the countryside, she concludes that there are no consistent spatial defining features to harems: "The gate had hardly any meaning, because there were no walls" (1994, 60). However, Aunt Yasmina's farm did have social rules that governed behavior, namely the relations between genders, and can therefore be considered a harem by Mernissi's designation.

In addition to spatiality and physical attributes, Mernissi's complex description of harems acknowledges the existence of a tradition of gender separation (at least as far as urban Morocco in the mid-twentieth century is concerned) but contradicts the colonial view that distinguishes between public and private when it comes to women's place in North African soci-

eties. Instead of a binary opposition between public and private, which is the typical division of social space in France, Mernissi presents a quaternary opposition where the public and private spaces are each further subdivided into a male and female subspace in accordance with social, cultural and religious norms. Colonial matters happened largely in the public sphere; however, being largely a masculine enterprise, colonialism had limited access to women's subspace within the public side of the colonized society. As a result, without a precedent for a male/female division of social space, the colonial perspective superposed a public/private model on North Africa, resulting in the omission of women's place in the public arena and the blending of male and female private spaces into a single one.

By representing North African women almost exclusively indoors, Orientalist art and colonialism in general establish their strategic location as outsiders, invaders and imprisoning agents. Using their insider's position to offer alternative representations, Mernissi, Alloula and Djébar provide an example of counter-colonial readings that clarify the scope of Orientalist representations. While Djébar and Alloula denounce flaws in colonial representations of women by focusing on Orientalist art and photography, Mernissi rectifies those flaws by painting a more detailed portrayal of the situation in her memoirs. She takes a literary approach to accomplish a form of revisionary scholarship, and sets forth a definition of harems as social spaces characterized by gender-based rules of conduct rather than physical spaces bound by walls. Ultimately, all three authors force us to reconsider our understanding of harems, not only as far as the meaning of the word goes, but also in terms of the dynamics involved in women's space in North Africa.

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