





**Scheherazade**

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**Goes West**



Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood  
The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of  
Women's Rights in Islam  
Beyond the Veil  
Doing Daily Battle: Interviews with Moroccan Women  
Forgotten Queens of Islam





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Lyrics from the song “Go East, Young Man” from the motion picture soundtrack to *Harum Scarum*, courtesy of Cherry Lane Music and R&H Music.


Lyric excerpt of “Go East, Young Man” by Bernie Baum, Bill Giant and Florence Kaye

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To Professor Mohamed Chafik, my high school teacher, who taught me, through his pre-Islamic poetry class, that in our Moroccan heritage, be it Arab or Berber, dialogue-nurturing is considered magic, because it fuels power with beauty.



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## The Tale of the Lady with the Feather Dress

If by chance you were to meet me at the Casablanca airport or on a boat sailing from Tangiers, you would think me self-confident, but I am not. Even now, at my age, I am frightened when crossing borders because I am afraid of failing to understand strangers. “To travel is the best way to learn and empower yourself,” said Yasmina, my grandmother, who was illiterate and lived in a harem, a traditional household with locked gates that women were not supposed to open. “You must focus on the strangers you meet and try to understand them. The more you understand a stranger and the greater is your knowledge of yourself, the more power you will have.” For Yasmina, the harem was a prison, a place women were forbidden to leave. So she glorified travel and regarded the opportunity to cross boundaries as a sacred privilege, the best way to shed powerlessness. And, indeed, rumors ran wild in Fez, the medieval city of my childhood, about trained Sufi masters who got extraordinary “flashes” (*lawami*) and expanded their knowledge exponentially, simply because they were so focused on learning from the foreigners who passed through their lives.

A few years ago, I had to visit ten Western cities for the promotion of my book, *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood*, which appeared in 1994 and was translated into twenty-two languages. During that tour, I was interviewed by more than a hundred Western journalists and I soon noticed that most of the men grinned when pronouncing the word “harem.” I felt shocked by their grins. How can anyone smile when invoking a word synonymous with prison, I wondered. For my grandmother Yasmina, the harem was a cruel institution that sharply curtailed her rights, starting with the “right to travel and discover Allah’s beautiful and complicated planet,” as she put it. But according to Yasmina’s philosophy, which I later discovered she had adopted from the Sufis, the mystics of Islam, I needed to transform my feelings of shock toward the Western journalists into an openness to learn from them. At first, I had great difficulty doing so and started wondering if perhaps, due to my age, I was losing my capacity to adapt to new situations. I felt terrified of becoming stiff and unable to digest the unexpected. No one noticed my anxiety during my book promotion tour, however, because I was wearing my huge Berber silver bracelet and my red Chanel lipstick.

To learn from travel, one must train oneself to capture messages. “You must cultivate *isti’dad*, the state of readiness,” Yasmina used to whisper conspiratorially in my ear, so as to exclude those whom she regarded as unworthy of the Sufi tradition. “The most baggage carried by strangers is their difference. And if you focus on the divergent and the dissimilar, you get ‘flashes.’” Then she would remind me to keep this lesson secret. “*Teqiyeh*, secrecy, is the name of the game,” she would say. “Remember what happened to poor Hallaj!” Hallaj was a famous Sufi who was arrested by the Abbasid police in A.D. 915 for publicly proclaiming in the streets of Baghdad: “I am the Truth” (*And al’haq*). Since Truth is one of the names for God, Hallaj was declared a heretic. Islam insists on the unbridgeable distance between the divine and the human, but Hallaj believed that if you concentrate on loving God, without intermediaries, a blurring of the boundaries with the divine becomes possible. Arresting Hallaj disturbed the Abbasid police, because to arrest him — a man who declared himself

made in the image of — God was to affront God himself. Nonetheless, Hallaj was burned alive in March 922, and since I have always believed that staying alive is preferable to self-immolation, I kept Yasmina's instructions regarding travel an absolute secret, and grew up so intent on realizing her dream that crossing borders still terrifies me.

Throughout my childhood, Yasmina often told me that it is normal for a woman to experience panic when crossing oceans and rivers. "When a woman decides to use her wings, she takes big risks," she would say, and then would add that, conversely, when a woman doesn't use her wings at all, it hurts her.

When Yasmina died, I was thirteen. I was supposed to cry, but I did not. "The best way to remember your grandmother," she told me on her deathbed, "is to keep alive the tradition of telling my favorite Scheherazade story — 'The Lady with the Feather Dress.'" And so, I learned that story — narrated by Scheherazade, the heroine of *The Thousand and One Nights* — by heart. Its main message is that a woman should lead her life as a nomad. She should stay alert and be ready to move, even if she is loved. For, as the tale teaches, love can engulf you and become a prison.

At age nineteen, when I took the train to register at Mohamed V University in Rabat, I crossed one of the most dangerous frontiers of all my life — that separating Fez, my medieval hometown, a labyrinth-like, ninth-century religious center, from Rabat, a modern, white metropolis with wide open city gates, situated on the edge of the Atlantic Ocean. At first, I felt so terrified of Rabat, with its large avenues, that I could not even move about without Kemal, a fellow student who happened to be from my neighborhood in Fez. But Kemal kept repeating that he was confused about my feelings for him. "I wonder sometimes if you love me, or if you just need me as a buffer against the thousand other men who have flocked here from all over Morocco to register at this university," he would say. What I resented most about Kemal in those days was his incredible ability to read my mind. But one reason I became fond of him was that he knew Yasmina's tale by heart. However, his version was the official one, published in the book version of *The Thousand and One Nights* (better known to many English readers as *The Arabian Nights*). And he told me that illiterate women like Yasmina were more subversive than educated ones both because they introduced heretical distortions into the tales and because they used storytelling, that oral medium, to escape censorship. Throughout Muslim history, he said, the oral tradition has reduced even the most tyrannical of despots to powerlessness.

According to Kemal, the first distortion that Yasmina introduced into her favorite tale was to feminize its title. In the book version of *The Thousand and One Nights*, the story is called "The Tale of Hassan al Basri," Basra being a city in southern Iraq, at the crossroads between the Mediterranean and the trade roads heading toward China. But the tale that I inherited from Yasmina was entitled "The Lady with the Feather Dress," and it opens in Baghdad, then the capital of the Muslim empire. From Baghdad, Hassan, a handsome but bankrupt youth who had squandered his entire fortune on wine and a gallant company, sailed away to strange islands to seek his fortune. Gazing at the sea from a high terrace one night, he was struck by the graceful movements of a large bird who had alighted on the beach. Suddenly the bird shed what turned out to be a dress made of feathers, and out stepped a beautiful naked woman, who ran to swim in the waves. "She outdid in beauty all human beings. She had a mouth as magical as Solomon's seal and hair blacker than the night. . . . She had lips like coral and teeth like strung pearls. . . . Her middle was full of folds. . . . She had thighs great and plump, like marble columns." But what captivated Hassan Basri the most was what lay between her thighs: "a goodly rounded dome on pillars borne, like a bowl of silver or crystal."<sup>1</sup>

Smitten with love, Hassan stole the beauty's feather dress while she was swimming and buried it in a secret tomb. Deprived of her wings, the woman became his captive. Hassan married her, showered her with silks and precious stones, and when she bore him two sons, relaxed his attentive tenderness, believing that she would never again think about flying. He started traveling on long trips to increase his fortune, and was astonished to discover one day when he returned that his wife, who had never stopped looking for her feather dress, had finally found it and flown away. "Taking her sons in her bosom, she wrapped herself in the feather dress and became a bird, by the ordinance of Allah to whom belongs might and majesty. Then, she walked with a swaying and graceful gait and danced and sported and flapped her wings. . . ,"<sup>2</sup> flying away over deep rivers and turbulent oceans to reach her native island of Wak Wak. Yet before leaving, she left a message for Hassan: He could join her if he had the courage to do so. But no one knew then, and still less knows now, where the mysterious "Wak Wak" — land of exoticism and faraway strangeness — is located. Arab historians such as Mas'udi, the ninth-century author of *Golden Meadows*, situated it in East Africa, beyond Zanzibar, while Marco Polo describes Wak Wak as the land of the Amazons, or the "female island" of Socotra. Others identify Wak Wak as being the Seychelles, Madagascar, or Malacca, and still others situate it in China or Indonesia (Java).<sup>3</sup>

Yasmina's second subversive distortion, according to Kemal, was her unhappy ending. In my grandmother's story, Hassan keeps desperately searching for the mysterious Wak Wak, but is never able to locate it, or to win back his wife and children. But in the book version of *The Thousand and One Nights*, recorded by men, Hassan does manage to find his wife and sons, and brings them back to Baghdad to live happily ever after. Kemal told me that men are irresistibly attracted to independent women and fall deeply in love with them, but are always terrified of being abandoned — which was why he himself resented Yasmina's ending. "To end the story the way your rebellious grandmother did, by insisting on women's privilege to abandon husbands who go on long business trips, does not help Muslim families to become stable, does it?" he said. Attacking Yasmina and blaming her for Hassan's family problems became Kemal's favorite way of expressing his jealousy whenever I wanted to respond to an invitation as an unaccompanied woman or undertake a trip by myself. He kept telling me that he wished we were still living in medieval Baghdad, where men could imprison women in harems. "Why do you think our Muslim ancestors built walled palaces with internal gardens to imprison women?" he would ask me. "Only desperately fragile men who are convinced that women have wings could create such a drastic thing as the harem, a prison that presents itself as a palace. "

Every time this conversation arose, as it did too often for my taste, I tried to calm down Kemal by reminding him that men in the Christian West did not lock up women in harems. But instead of soothing him, this argument only made him flare up even more. "I do not know what goes on in the minds of Western men," he would say. "All I can tell you is that they would have built harems, too, if they saw women as an uncontrollable force. Could it be that in their fantasies, Westerners imagine women without wings? Who knows? "

The passionate debates provoked by "The Lady with the Feather Dress" went on between Kemal and myself throughout our student years, and even continued after we had become adults and started teaching at that same university, Mohamed V. Although we specialized in different fields Kemal — in medieval Arab literature and I in sociology — understanding the power of the oral tradition became important to both of us — a strategic tool with which to understand the dynamics of the modern Arab world. We rediscovered the power of our mothers storytelling while listening to our students, who in the 1970s came mostly from the shantytowns of Casablanca and Rabat — areas not equipped with

either electricity or television. If the mothers of our middle- and upper-class students had lost their power to tell stories and saw their kids fall prey to Hollywood fantasies, this was not the case for the less fortunate majority. Encouraging my sociology students to gather oral tales from the remote Atlas mountains and the Sahara desert, and asking literature experts to help decode them, created new occasions for Kemal and myself to collaborate — i.e., constantly contradict each other. Until, that is, we stumbled on *lawami*, the intriguing Sufi “flashes” that so often turned up in our heated academic debates. And what puzzled both of us and our students the most was that in many oral tales, the cleverer sex is rarely the one that religious authorities would expect. If Muslim laws give men the right to dominate women, the opposite seems to be true in the oral tradition.

Never were Kemal and our passionate conversations so present in my mind as when I had to face the inquisitive stares of the Western journalists I met while on my memorable book promotion tour. What the journalists could not even begin to suspect was how fragile I felt behind my makeup and heavy silver jewelry. And one major reason that I felt so fragile, I soon discovered, was that I knew hardly anything about Westerners and even less so about their fantasies.

1. The English translation used here is that of Richard F. Burton, *The Book of the 1001 Nights and a Night* (London: Burton Club For Private Subscribers, 1886), vol. VIII, p. 33. The Arabic original used here is “Hikayat alf lila wa lila,” al Maktaba ach-cha’biya, Beyrouth, Lebanon, vol. III, p. 383.

2. Ibid., p. 59.

3. Ibid., p. 61.





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## Sex in the Western Harem

I never realized until my book tour that a smile can betray so much of one's inner feelings. Arabs, like many Westerners, think it is the eyes that give one away. "The eye is the wide gateway to the soul," wrote Ibn Hazm, an expert on love, "the scrutinizer of its secrets, conveying its most private thoughts."<sup>1</sup> Growing up, I was taught that a woman should lower her gaze, so that men could never know her thoughts. The so-called modesty of Arab women is in fact a war tactic. But the smile, I discovered during my book tour, can give one away as easily as the eye — and in many different ways. Not all of those journalists' smiles were alike. Each, according to nationality, expressed a different mixture of feelings.

We can break the West into two camps as far as smiles are concerned: the Americans and the Europeans. The American men, upon hearing the word "harem," smiled with unadulterated and straightforward embarrassment. Whatever the word means for Americans hinges on something linked to shame. The Europeans, in contrast, responded with smiles that varied from polite reserve in the North to merry exuberance in the South, with subtleties fluctuating according to the distance of the journalists' origin from the Mediterranean. French, Spanish, and Italian men had a flirtatious, amused light in their eyes. Scandinavians and Germans, with the exception of the Danes, had astonishment in theirs — astonishment tinged with shock. "Were you really born in a harem?" they would ask, looking intently at me with a mixture of apprehension and puzzlement.

My book starts with the sentence: "I was born in a harem," and that short sentence seemed to contain some mysterious problem, because everyone, without exception, started his interview by asking, like a magic formula, "So, were you really born in a harem?" The intensity of the look accompanying the inquiry signaled that my interviewer did not want me to evade the question — as if there were some shameful secret involved. Yet for me, not only is the word "harem" a synonym for the family as an institution, but it would also never occur to me to associate it with something jovial. After all, the very origin of the Arabic word "haram," from which the word "harem" is derived, literally refers to sin, the dangerous frontier where sacred law and pleasure collide. *Haram* is what the religious law forbids; the opposite is *halal*, that which is permissible. But evidently, when crossing the frontier to the West, the Arabic word "harem" lost its dangerous edge. Why else would Westerners associate it with euphoria, with the absence of constraints? In their harem, sex is anxiety-free.

Suddenly, during these book interviews, I felt trapped in a strangely solemn and dramatic situation totally out of place in the usual mundane world of book promotion tours. I felt that if I said, "Yes, I was born in a harem," I would immediately create a problem for both my interviewers and myself. Why is this happening? I kept wondering. My feminine intuition, which starts functioning at full speed when strange things occur, was alerting me to the fact that these smiles had sexual undertones that I couldn't read. The journalists were perceiving a "harem" that was invisible to me.

I called Christiane, my French editor in Paris, for a Western woman's perspective.

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“Sure, their smiles have to do with sex,” she said, and then added, “Why don't you push them to be more talkative?”

That is when I decided to reverse roles by interviewing the male journalists who were interviewing me. “Why are you smiling?” I would ask softly when yet another one exhibited signs of excitement. “What is amusing about the harem?” This two-way exchange turned my ex-interviewers into helpful informants who soon taught me that we were not talking about the same thing: Westerners had their harem and I had mine, and the two had nothing in common.

Apparently, the Westerner's harem as an orgiastic feast where men benefited from a true miracle: receiving sexual pleasure without resistance or trouble from the women they had reduced to slaves. In Muslim harems, men expect their enslaved women to fight back ferociously and abort their schemes for pleasure. The Westerners also referred primarily to pictorial images of harems, such as those seen in paintings or films, while I visualized actual palaces — harems built of high walls and real stones by powerful men such as caliphs, sultans, and rich merchants. My harem was associated with a historical reality. Theirs was associated with artistic images created by famous painters such as Ingres, Matisse, Delacroix, or Picasso — who reduced women to odalisques (a Turkish word for a female slave) — or by talented Hollywood moviemakers, who portrayed harem women as scantily clad belly-dancers happy to serve their captors. Some journalists also mentioned operas like Verdi's *Aida* or ballets like Diaghilev's *Scheherazade*. But whatever image they referred to, the journalists always described the harem as a voluptuous wonderland drenched with heavy sex provided by vulnerable nude women who were happy to be locked up.

This is indeed a miracle, I thought as I listened to the Westerners' descriptions. Muslim male artists are much more realistic when it comes to envisioning the harem as a source of erotic bliss. Even in their fantasies, as expressed in miniature paintings or in legends and literature, Muslim men expect women to be highly aware of the inequality inherent in the harem system and therefore unlikely to enthusiastically satisfy their captors' desires.

Many of the Muslim courts employed artists who illustrated art books with miniature paintings. These paintings were not hung on walls, or exhibited in museums, but were kept as a private luxury, to be enjoyed only by the rich and the powerful, who could contemplate them whenever they liked. Contrary to what many Westerners believe, Islam has a rich tradition of secular painting, in spite of its ban on images. It is only in religious rituals that the use of pictorial representation is totally prohibited. From the eighth century onward, Muslim dynasties invested consistently in secular painting. The Umayyad princes decorated their pleasure house of Qusayr 'Amra (in what is now the Transjordan desert, near the Dead Sea) with huge frescoes, while the sixteenth-century Safavid dynasty of Persia raised the art of miniature painting to its highest peak. Most of the miniatures illustrated legends and love poems, and were thus an opportunity for both writers and painters to express their fantasies about women, love, passion — and the risks involved therein.

In both miniatures and literature, Muslim men represent women as active participants, while Westerners such as Matisse, Ingres, and Picasso show them as nude and passive. Muslim painters imagine harem women as riding fast horses, armed with bows and arrows, and dressed in heavy coats. Muslim men portray harem women as uncontrollable sexual partners. But Westerners, I have come to realize, see the harem as a peaceful pleasure-garden where omnipotent men reign supreme over

obedient women. While Muslim men describe themselves as insecure in their harems, real or imagined, ~~Westerners describe themselves as self-assured heroes with no fears of women.~~ The tragic dimension so present in Muslim harems — fear of women and male self-doubt — is missing in the Western harem.

The most talkative of the male journalists I met during my book tour were the Mediterranean Europeans. They would define the harem, with sly laughter full of malice, as “a wonderful place where beautiful women are sexually available.” Many sophisticated Frenchmen, on the other hand, associated the harem with paintings depicting brothels, like those by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (*Au Salon de la rue des Moulins*, 1894) and Edgar Degas (*The Client*, 1879). Most of the Scandinavians just blushed and smiled at the mere mention of the “forbidden” word, letting me infer that politeness and good manners require that some embarrassing subjects best be avoided. The exception to this rule were the Danes, who behaved more like their French and Spanish colleagues by bursting into merry laughter at first, and then, when slightly encouraged, going into great detail about the luxurious embroidered silks that the harem women wear, their long and uncombed hair, and their supine, patiently waiting positions.

Many American journalists described the harem women as Hollywood-inspired dancing slaves. One even started whistling the song that Elvis Presley, dressed as an Arab, performed when he invaded a harem to rescue a sequestered beauty in *Harum Scarum* (1965):

I am gonna go where the desert sun is, where the fun is;

go where the harem girls dance;

go where there's love and romance . . .

To say the least, go East, young men.

You'll feel like the Sheik, so rich and grand, with dancing girls at your command.

When paradise starts calling, into some tent I'm crawling.

I'll make love the way I plan. Go East

and drink and feast.

Go East, young men. <sup>2</sup>

Jim, a Paris-based American journalist who earns his living by writing about films, taught me a Hollywood expression regarding sexy Oriental movies that I had never heard before: “t and s.” The letter “t” stands for “tits” and the letter “s” for “sand.” <sup>3</sup> As we were talking, the Disney version of *Aladdin*, which appeared in 1992 shortly after the Gulf War ended, came up, and another journalist hummed the opening song of the movie. <sup>4</sup>

Other Americans remembered the 1917 and 1918 Twentieth Century Fox screen versions of *Aladdin*

and *His Lamp* and *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*, or the 1920 *Kismet*, while the multiple versions of *The Thief of Baghdad* seemed to be a cultural landmark of sorts in Western men's psyche. Some quoted the 1924 Douglas Fairbanks version, others the 1940 version, and still others, the 1961 French-Italian version starring Steve Reeves. The 1978 television version, where the caliph of Baghdad was none other than Peter Ustinov, was also mentioned. And an elderly journalist quoted *The Sheik* (1921) with Rudolph Valentino while smiling and caressing an imaginary mustache.

When I envision a harem, I think of a densely populated place where everyone is always watching everyone else. In Muslim harems, even married men and women have great difficulty finding a private place in which to caress each other. As for the married women in the harem, sexual gratification is impossible since they must share their men with hundreds of frustrated "colleagues." So when you think calmly about what a harem is, pornographic bliss is a totally unrealistic expectation. Even if a man kills himself at the task and stuffs himself full with aphrodisiacs, which were an important component of the harem culture, court chronicles reveal that even the most entranced of lovers could outdo himself only sometimes, and then only with that single woman he adored, for as long as his flame kept burning. Meanwhile, the other wives and concubines had to live with their frustrations. So how, I wondered, did Western men create their images of an idyllic, lustful harem?

In Western images of harems, women have no wings, no horses, and no arrows. These Western harems, unlike Muslim ones, are not about terrible sex-wars during which women resist, disturb men's schemes, and sometimes become masters, confusing caliphs and emperors alike. One of the women most often portrayed in Muslim miniatures — be they Persian, Turkish, or Mughal — is Zuleikha, from the biblical legend of Joseph, as narrated in Sura 12 (Verse 12) of the Koran under the title "Yusuf." The story unfolds in Egypt, where Zuleikha, a mature woman married to a powerful man, Putiphar, falls madly in love with the handsome Yusuf when her husband brings him home, expecting her to adopt him as a son. The miniatures show her as an aggressive female sexually harassing the pious Yusuf, who miraculously resists her seductive moves, thus maintaining law and order. The miniatures echo the tragic potentiality of adultery, especially when initiated by a sexually frustrated married woman. However, although the Koran narrates the main events of the legend, Muslim artists do not refer, strangely enough, to the sacred text as the source of their inspiration. Instead, they claim the two giant Persian poets, Firdawsi and Jami, who both wrote a "Yusuf and Zuleikha" epic, the first around A.D. 1010, and the second around 1483.<sup>5</sup> And, although the sacred and profane sources have strikingly different endings, both share one single feature: Zuleikha's capacity to neutralize law and instate chaos.<sup>6</sup>

But to get back to the texts. Although I myself cannot, unfortunately, read either Firdawsi or Jami the original, being illiterate in Persian, I am always bewitched whenever I read Sura 12 of the Koran, so powerful is its poetry. Sura 12 describes Yusuf as a handsome young man who is a victim of sexual harassment: "And she, in whose house he was, asked of him an evil act. She bolted the doors and said: Come. He said: I seek refuge in Allah!" (Sura 12:23).<sup>7</sup> The Arabic expression used in the verse, "*rawadathu 'an Nafsih*," is quite explicit: It literally means that she harassed him sexually.

The Sura of Yusuf starts with suspense, in which the reader is invited to help solve a riddle: Who attacked whom? Was it Zuleikha who physically assaulted the pious Yusuf, whose shirt was torn to pieces (12:26), or was it Yusuf who attacked Zuleikha? No wonder the legend is so obsessively reproduced by Muslim artists — its topic is not so much adultery as its probability. Men can make

marriage laws and declare them sacred, but there is always a possibility that women will not feel bound by them. And it is this small chance that women might not obey and thereby destabilize the male order that is so striking a component of Muslim culture in both historical reality and fantasy.

As one might expect, Zuleikha, the adulteress, is denied the privilege of having her name in the Koran; she is referred to only as “she.” There is also a sect, the extremist “Ajarida,” that refuses to admit that the Sura of Yusuf is part of the Koran. According to Shahrastani, a Persian writer of the twelfth century, the Ajarida claim that “A love story cannot be part of the Koran.”<sup>8</sup> This might sound logical, if love is considered to be a threat to the established order, but it is the logic of extremism, not of Islam. And this distinction is crucial if we are to understand what is going on in the Muslim world today. Yes, there are Muslim extremists who kill women in the streets of Afghanistan and Algeria, but it is because they are extremists, not because they are Muslim. These same extremists also kill male journalists who insist on expressing different opinions and introducing pluralism into the political dynamic. Islam, both as a legal and a cultural system, is imbued with the idea that the feminine is an uncontrollable power — and therefore the unknowable “other.” All the passionate if not hysterical debates about women’s rights taking place today in Muslim parliaments from Indonesia to Dakar are in actuality debates about pluralism. These debates relentlessly focus on women because women represent the stranger within the *Umma*, the Muslim community. It is no wonder that the first decision of Imam Khomeini, who paradoxically declared Iran a republic in 1979, was to ask women to veil. Elections, yes. Pluralism, no. The Imam knew what he was doing. He knew that an unveiled woman forces the Imam to face the fact that the *Umma*, the community of believers, is not homogeneous.

In Islamic societies, politicians can manipulate almost everything. But thus far, no fundamentalist leader has been able to convince his supporters to renounce Islam’s central virtue — the principle of strict equality between human beings, regardless of sex, race, or creed. Women, like Christians or Jews, are considered to be the equal of men in Islam, even though they are granted a minority status that restricts their legal rights and denies them access to the decision-making process. Women in most Islamic nations can participate in their countries’ respective decision-making bodies, but only indirectly. Women have a legal status similar to the *dhimmi* (“protected”) status of religious minorities and are represented in parliament by a *wali* or *wakil*. Since the *wali* or *wakil* (literally, “representative”) is necessarily a Muslim male, women and minorities are condemned to invisibility to keep the fiction of homogeneity alive.

To understand the dynamics in the Muslim world today, one has to remember that no one contests the principle of equality, which is considered to be a divine precept. What is debated is whether *Shari’a*, the law inspired by the Koran, can or cannot be changed. The debate is therefore reduced to “who” made the law. If it is men who made it, then the text can be reinterpreted; reform is possible. But extremists who oppose the democratization of the laws claim that *Shari’a* is as divine as the Koran and therefore unchangeable. The scandalous trial of the Egyptian Abu Zeid, an expert in the historicity of the Koran, who was sentenced as a heretic by a fundamentalist judge in an Egyptian court in August 1996, is but one such dramatization of this clash between the pro-democracy Ijtihad camp (*Shari’a* can be reformed because it is man-made) and the extremists who oppose it.

Once again, women are the focus of this debate because sexual inequality is rooted in *Shari’a*, but even the most fervent extremists never argue that women are inferior, and Muslim women are raised with a strong sense of equality. This could explain why women have emerged, in spite of extremism, as political leaders in many Muslim countries, from Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan and Tançu Shiller in

Turkey, to Megawati in Indonesia. It could also explain why Muslim women have aggressively infiltrated many university faculties and professional fields thought of as masculine — such as engineering — in spite of their very recent access to education. In the 1990s, the percentage of women teaching in universities or equivalent institutions in Egypt was higher than in either France or Canada.<sup>9</sup> The percentage of female students enrolled in engineering courses in Turkey and Syria was twice as high as in the United Kingdom or the Netherlands.<sup>10</sup> The percentage of women enrolled in engineering courses in Algeria and Egypt was higher than in Canada or Spain.<sup>11</sup>

One can easily predict that women will stir even more violent debates in the decade to come, as globalization forces both Muslim states and their citizens to redefine themselves and create new cultural identities, rooted more in economics than in religion. The fear of the feminine represents the threat from within; the debate about globalization, the threat from without; and both discussions will necessarily be focused on women. Femininity is the emotional locus of all kinds of disruptive forces, in both the real world and in fantasy. And, to get back to my book tour, it is this apparent absence of the feminine as a threat in the Western harem that fascinated me.

Exploring this enigmatic puzzle soon became my pleasurable obsession — pleasurable because, in the end, learning from travel and from talking to strangers did turn out to be the wonderful, enlightening experience that the Sufis and Yasmina had promised me it would be. For a university professor such as myself, who spends most of her days in either deadly silent libraries or in desperately slow Internet searches, talking to foreigners in comfortable Western cafés or lavish art bookstores was a thrilling privilege. And the secret to gaining enlightenment, I soon discovered, was to increase one's listening capacity. Where to start? Well, by shedding your arrogance, or at least trying to, and by respecting the other. Respecting a Westerner is a heroic achievement for a Muslim, tour de force, because Western culture is so aggressively present in our daily life that we have the impression we already know it thoroughly. But in fact, as my vulnerability when facing the Western journalists made me realize, we Muslims know very little about Westerners as human beings, as bundles of contradictory hopes and yearning, unfulfilled dreams. If we could see Westerners as vulnerable, we would feel closer to them. But we confuse Westerners with Superman, with heartless, robotlike NASA architects who invest all their emotions in crafting inhuman, exorbitantly expensive spaceships to discover faraway galaxies, while neglecting their own planet. I was stunned to realize that a Western man's smile could destabilize me because I had already decided that he was a potential enemy. I had skinned him of his humanism. All my Sufi heritage, I was shocked to discover, did not protect me against the most obvious form of barbarism: the lack of respect for the foreigner. Which is, I suppose, why this book became so enriching and therapeutic for me in the end, despite many ups and downs.

My obsessive inquiry into the nature of the Western harem gave me the chance to deepen my relationships with old Western friends and to make new ones. Two journalists especially — Berlin-based Hans D. and Paris-based Jacques Dupont — became friends, so generous were they in providing me with pertinent books, key visuals, and valuable comments, all of which helped me grasp the power of the feminine as a barrier between East and West. Hans D. helped me with the thoroughness of a German tutor when he commented on the *Scheherazade* ballet that he had invited me to see, and made me understand that women's obsequiousness, their readiness to obey, is a distinctive feature of the Western harem fantasy. Jacques, on the other hand, highlighted with the humor and self-mockery that is so unique to Parisians something that is frightening to admit in serious conversation today: What attracts him to a woman, at least at the level of fantasy, is the absence of intellectual exchange.

Through his comments, he clarified for me the second distinctive feature of the Western harem: Intellectual exchange with women is an obstacle to erotic pleasure. Yet in real or imagined Muslim harems, cerebral confrontation with women is necessary to achieve orgasm. Could it be that things are so different in the West? I wondered. Could it be that cultures manage emotions differently when it comes to structuring erotic responses? I was so baffled by these strange discoveries that I started with the basics: searching through dictionaries in both cultures, checking elementary words such as “odalisque,” “desire,” “beauty,” “attraction,” “sexual pleasure,” and so on, and listening carefully to what the Western men had to say.

1. Ibn Hazm, *The Ring of the Dove: A Treatise on the Art and Practice of Arab Love*, English translation by A. J. Arberry (London: Luzac & Company, LTD, 1953), p. 34. For the purist who wants to read the Arab original, and it is worth it since the translation is regarded as blasphemous, see *Tawq al Hamama: Fi al-Alfa wa l-Ullaf*, Faruq Sa’d, ed. (Beirut: Manchourat Maktabat al Hayat, 1977), p. 70.

2. To learn more about this song, read Ella Shohat, “Gender and Culture of Empire: Toward a Feminist Ethnography of the Cinema,” in *Visions of the East: Orientalism in Films*, Matthew Bernstein and Gaylyn Studlar, eds. (Rutgers, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1997), p. 48.

3. For more information on “t” and “s,” see *ibid.*, p. 11.

4. I later learned, reading Matthew Bernstein’s introduction to *Visions of the East*, that this song was the object of great controversy between the Disney Company and the American Arab Antidiscrimination Committee. The Committee attacked Disney for racist stereotyping and won the case. Disney was forced to change the lyrics that went, “I come from a land, a faraway place, where they cut off your ear, if they don’t like your face.” See Bernstein, *op. cit.*, p. 17, note 20.

5. Sir Thomas Arnold, *Painting in Islam: A Study of Pictorial Art in Muslim Culture* (New York: Dover Publications, 1965), p. 106.

6. In the sacred sources, be they the Bible or the Koran, Zuleikha is depicted as a loser since Yusuf defeats her adulterous scheme by resisting her seductive moves. But the Persian poets give a happier ending to their “Zuleikha and Yusuf” stories. In their version, the prophet Yusuf, after rejecting Zuleikha in his youth, meets her again later, but hardly recognizes her, as she has grown old, ugly, sick, and destitute. Then, miraculously, he restores her beauty and health — a scene often depicted in miniatures. “The poets carried the story far beyond the point reached in the Book of Genesis or in the Quran,” explains Sir Thomas Arnold in *Painting in Islam*. “Potiphar dies and Zulaykha is reduced to a state of abject poverty, and with hair turned white through sorrow, and eyes blinded by continual weeping, she dwells in a hut of reeds by the roadside, and her only solace in her misery is listening to the sound of Joseph’s cavalcade as from time to time it rides past.” One day, Joseph recognizes Zuleikha and “He then prays to God on her behalf, and her sight and her beauty are restored to her.” *Ibid.*, p. 108.

7. Quotation from *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*, translated by Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall (New York: Mentor Books, n.d.), p. 177.

8. In Arabic, “wa qalu: la yajuz an takuna qiçata l’ichqi mina l’qur’an” (“And they said: It is impossible that a love story can be part of the Koran”). From Shahrastani, *Al Milal wa-Nihal* (Beirut: dar Ça’b, 1986), vol. 1, p. 128. The author died in the year 547 of the Hijira (twelfth century). A good translation of this book is the French one by Claude Vadet, *Les Dissidences en Islam* (Paris:



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