

Quarterly Literary Review

GENDERED SPACES IN ARAB WOMEN'S WRITING

*Comparing the Works of Fatema Mernissi
& Soraya Altorki*

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ABOUT FIKER INSTITUTE'S QUARTERLY LITERARY REVIEW

Fiker's Quarterly Literary Review Column is an invitation to rethink literature and utilize it not only as a mirror of society, but rather as a tool to observe, analyze, and make conclusions about the social, political, and ethical stakes in local and global contexts. As a vast and complex region with a legacy of contested identities, borders, and histories, the Middle East is also the repository of literature. Each installment of the Quarterly Literary Review takes contemporary Arab literary texts as a starting point to discuss broader landscapes of discourse such as identity, migration, morality, and history.

INTRODUCTION

The imaginary construction of the West's need to 'save' women outside its borders, backed by military power and political legitimization across decades, is what Edward Said invited us to reconsider in his seminal work *Orientalism*. Instead of focusing on how people in the Middle East are represented or misrepresented, he calls for us to consider the power-knowledge nexus of such representations, including their historical and contemporary contexts, their purpose and origins, and why they seem to endure.¹

Across history, women from the Global South have produced discourse on their place in the world, nuancing their identities beyond being viewed as oppressed women by the West, or pro-Western feminists by local patriarchal societies. As Orientalist tropes about women in the Arab world continue to be recycled in popular culture, political debates, and intellectual spheres, it is important to revisit literary and social texts that challenge the Orientalist gaze and reconfigure how we view the spaces which women occupy.

This Review is structured around the question of how feminist consciousness in the Arab world has been historically constructed, negotiated, and practiced within narratives that decenter Western liberal values. It places two texts by the Moroccan sociologist and feminist writer Fatema Mernissi (1940-2015) and Saudi anthropologist Soraya Altorki in conversation to examine how gendered spaces from Morocco to Saudi Arabia were negotiated, inhabited, and remembered throughout their early lives, and how Orientalist epistemologies persist through demands for transparency and moral legibility. Mernissi's *Nisa' 'ala ajnihat al-hilm* (1994, English Translation: *Dreams of Trespass* 1995) caused a sensation when it was published as it unveiled the intricate lives and worlds of women in Mernissi's family *harem* in the city of Fez. In this memoir of her childhood, Mernissi narrates the enclosure of women from within, while foregrounding imagination, critique, and the production of feminist consciousness outside Western liberal frameworks. Thirty years later, the anthropologist Soraya Altorki published her own memoir *Hayati kama 'ishtuha* (2024, English: *My Life as I Have Lived It*). Narrating her life and that of the women in her family in Saudi Arabia in the 20th century, it unearths a counter-archive of womanhood that renders kinship, enclosure, and gendered space as lived and negotiated structures rather than abstractions. The impact of the two memoirs, separated by 30 years, continues to endure, contrasting with portrayals of women's spaces in Orientalist art and travel writing. Rather than adjudicating the cultural accuracy of portraying women's lives in the Arab world through colonial narratives, novels, and art, this Review treats dissonance itself as analytically productive, asking what forms of interpretation become possible when Western feminist and liberal frameworks encounter lives shaped by different, or alternative, grammars of power, knowledge, tradition, and belonging.

PORTRAYAL OF ARAB WOMEN'S SPACES IN WESTERN LITERATURE

For a long time, Western interactions with Arab and Muslim women's spaces have been influenced more by moral projection, anxiety, and fantasy than by actual encounters. The image of the *harem*, an enclosed, feminized space perceived as simultaneously oppressive and opaque, has proven to be one of the most enduring and politically beneficial representations of Arab women's spaces. The *harem* is depicted in 19th century French Orientalist paintings as a tableau of motionless bodies and silent women, devoid of interiority, history, or social complexity, and made available for voyeuristic consumption. In addition to misrepresenting these women's lives, such visual regimes created a way of knowing the 'Orient' as a place that needed Western interpretation, control, and eventually intervention.

In *The Colonial Harem*, the Algerian writer and literary critic Malek Alloula examines French images and postcards of Algerian women from the colonial era, questioning the colonial mentality embedded in the way Algerian women's bodies and private spaces are put on display for the Orientalist gaze.² Western literary representations have often reproduced similar logics. From colonial writing to contemporary fiction, women's spaces are frequently framed as sites of absolute enclosures that must be entered, unveiled, or exposed in order to be morally intelligible. In his work on Westerners traveling to the Middle East, Professor Ali Behdad argues that European traveling and interest in the Middle East was not a unique feature of the 19th century. Rather, it dated back to the crusades in the 11th century and by the end of the 17th century, European travelers began producing texts about their travels in the Middle East.³ It is through these descriptions of the land's geography, people, languages, and cultures that Arabist and Orientalist scholarship began to develop as "an academic discipline and as a discourse of power."⁴ The proliferation and growth of Orientalist discourse maintained a symbiotic relationship with travel writing, making the region "epistemologically visible and exotic" for the reading public back in Europe.⁵

In her book *Heart Beguiling Araby: The English Romance with Arabia*, Kathryn Tidrick argues that the impetus behind the increased interest in traveling to the Middle East in the 19th century and the study of the region was due to the popularity of the book *Arabian Nights*, better known in the Arab world as *Alf layla wa-layla* (One Thousand and One Nights). According to Tidrick, by the 18th century, *Arabian Nights* had influenced the imagination of most of the British empire's youth. She claimed that "many an unhappy boy away at school must have lost himself in that spell-binding book."⁶ On arriving in the lands they knew from travel writing and enchanting narratives, many English people were hoping to learn more of 'native' life in exotic places. However, in the search to acquire knowledge about 'the Other,' they came to know themselves

as well.⁷

By the close of the 19th century, the representational logic of Western travel writing solidified into an interpretative infrastructure that positioned Muslim women's spaces and experiences as largely opaque and in need of the Western gaze to make them legible. Highly popular English travel writing texts on Egypt included Lucie Duff Gordon's (1821-1869) *Letters from Egypt* (1865) and Charles and Susan M. Bowles' *A Nile Voyage* (1895). In her seminal article "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?", the American anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod utilizes American scholar Leila Ahmed's concept of "colonial feminism" to explain the historical imperial concern for the condition of women and their emancipation as a cover for imperial governance.⁸ Lord Cromer, the Consul-General of Egypt from 1883-1907, exemplified this; he saw the veil as a sign of oppression "but gave no support to women's education . . . [while also opposing] women's suffrage back home."⁹ This sentiment is also highlighted in Gayatri Spivak's famous rendering of British rule in India as "white men saving brown women from brown men."¹⁰ Such savior-victim narratives were perpetuated throughout, and endured beyond, the 20th century.

This logic intensified after 9/11, when the figure of the oppressed Muslim woman became central to what Abu-Lughod has described as a "rescue narrative" underpinning the War on Terror, where such views "rationalize American and European international adventures across the Middle East and South Asia."¹¹ Political discourse, media commentary, and popular memory enthusiastically mobilized the status and oppression of Muslim women as evidence of civilizational failure, justifying military intervention and cultural reform. Hence, the language of liberation masked the exercise of imperial power within gendered spaces.

More recently, the term *harem* itself has been emptied of its historical specificity and redeployed in Western media and social commentary to describe allegedly servile or submissive Western women, often in ironic or derisive contexts. For example, Western outlets have described conservative women who are part of the United States (US) Republican party, Trump supporters, and members of the 'Make America Great Again' (MAGA) movement as a *harem*: servile, traditional, and domesticated women catering to the male gaze.¹² This contemporary usage conflates vastly different social formations into a single metaphor of domination, reinforcing the idea that gendered enclosure is both inherently oppressive and culturally backward. What remains striking across these examples is not simply inaccuracy, but a persistent demand for legibility; women's lives must be readable according to liberal norms of visibility, autonomy, and resistance to count as meaningful.

Rather than staging women's spaces as spectacles for external judgment, both Fatema Mernissi and Soraya Altorki narrate enclosure from within as social worlds

governed by rules, hierarchies, affections, conflicts, and forms of power that cannot be reduced to domination alone.

THE *HAREM* IN FEZ & JEDDAH

“I was born in a Harem in Fez.” Thus starts Fatema Mernissi’s memoir, signaling that she was born in a time of “chaos [...] where women were protesting boundaries and constantly crossing them.”¹³ Living in this *harem* were her mother, her uncles’ wives and children, and the matriarch, the paternal grandmother Mahani. Mernissi’s novel created a stir when it was published as it unveiled the intricate lives and worlds of women in Mernissi’s family *harem* in the city of Fez and her maternal grandfather Al-Tazi’s *harem* in the Moroccan countryside. Mernissi further demonstrates that the *harem* as an institution is not monolithic. Al-Tazi’s countryside *harem* differed vastly from her family’s *harem* in Fez. In the countryside, Mernissi’s grandmother al-Yasmine and her co-wives enjoyed the freedom of going outside the space of the walled *harem* and were able to ride horses, fish in the river, and take strolls along the greenery of the village. In contrast, in Fez, Mernissi’s mother and aunts were stuck within the walls of the *harem* and did not see anything beyond the door of the house.¹⁴ In the countryside, the *harem* was a conceptual boundary where the women of Al-Tazi were free to roam, but others were not allowed to come near them. In the city, the women of Mernissi’s father’s *harem* were bound to the inside of the house as protection against the French colonial forces that roamed Fez, with their enclosure being rationalized as protection.¹⁵

Writing her own memories and historical recollections of Saudi Arabia almost 30 years after Fatema Mernissi’s account, anthropologist Soraya Altorki provides a window into the much-stereotyped private lives of Saudi women. As one of the first Saudi women to study at the American University in Cairo (AUC), and a renowned anthropologist of cultural and social life in her country, Altorki writes her memoirs in layers, contextualizing the opportunities that allowed her to travel abroad and explore the world. Her memoirs, which can be read as a continuation of Mernissi’s legacy in writing about gendered spaces, reveal Altorki’s inner world through layers of memory. Altorki talks first about her parents, sisters, and the women in her life who navigated the societal and religious restrictions imposed on them. Altorki’s father hailed from ‘Unayzah in Najd and settled in Jeddah, and her mother originated from Hijaz. She was illiterate, yet she had a deep love for music and songs, representing for Altorki the guile and quick-wittedness of Saudi women who were able to influence men’s decisions indirectly.¹⁶ Her scholarly work on the private lives of elite Saudi women in Najd,¹⁷ her hometown, is one of the few “informed accounts that have appeared to alter Western stereotypes” of women in the Gulf.¹⁸

COVERT TRANSGRESSION THROUGH EVERYDAY ACTS

Both Mernissi and Altorki show that the most persistent form of resistance within the gendered space is not confrontation but concealment, where the creation of a hidden counterworld operates within, and depends upon, the structures it quietly subverts. Mernissi explains that she first began to understand the boundaries that were set around women, and how quickly the women in her family would cross them, during an incident involving the family's radio. In the 1940s, the only source of entertainment for the family, especially the women, was the radio. Mernissi's father and uncle believed they were the only ones who had the key to the cupboard which held the radio inside. However, the women had found a way to open the cupboard and routinely listened to the radio while the men were outside the house, dancing to the voice of the singer Asmahan and listening to the news from Cairo.¹⁹ The women's transgression was revealed when Mernissi accidentally told her father that she had listened to the Cairo news station when he asked her how she had spent the day. Her mother and the other women in the *harem* punished her for revealing their secret key to the men by excluding her from their merrymaking, giving her a lesson in how transgressing gendered space often meant knowing how to operate within its confines.²⁰

Altorki's memoirs show similar accounts to Mernissi's about women transgressing the boundaries set by patriarchal norms. Despite singing being considered a forbidden form of entertainment, Altorki's mother was famous for her love of music. Whenever family or friends visited, she sang for them. However, the women made sure a servant notified them when Altorki's father was returning home, so they could stop and hide any musical instruments.²¹ The structure of the two scenes is almost identical, as it depicts how pleasures are practiced covertly within a domestic space converted into a counterworld, with a figure – child or servant – responsible for guarding the boundary between the hidden and the visible. In both households, the arrangement was always fragile, negotiated, and never simply free. However, what this counterworld evokes is not the silent, motionless femininity of Orientalist fantasy previously discussed, but rather an active and resourceful navigation of the space from within.

INTERNAL HIERARCHIES & WOMEN'S POWER OVER WOMEN

Neither memoir depicts the gendered space as a unified front of women against patriarchy; instead, Mernissi and Altorki insist on its internal stratifications of class, temperament, and family position as generative forces in their own right. For example, Mernissi narrates an incident that sheds light on how women within the *harem* could

push against gendered power imbalances, both by exerting power over the male head of the *harem*, and by contesting the social class disparities between the wives.

Mernissi recounts how a dispute erupted between al-Yasmine and another of al-Tazi's favored wives, Tahir, who was "not only strong, but she was one of the only wives to have come from an aristocratic family from Fez and who on her wedding night arrived with a diadem inlaid with emeralds, pearls, and black jewels."²² The other wives were upset with Tahir's upper-class airs, her refusal to participate in household chores, and for believing she was better than the other wives, many of whom had been bought from slave markets, or were daughters of villagers and farmers. The mischievous al-Yasmine, herself the daughter of a humble villager, was the most antagonistic towards Tahir. Al-Yasmine told Mernissi that she does not "consider anyone better than me, just because they own a tiara,"²³ and that "no matter how rich [Tahir] is, she is also trapped within the walls of the *harem*, just as I am."²⁴ To get back at Tahir for the disparity in social class, both apparent outside and inside the walls of the *harem*, al-Yasmine named her large goose after Tahir to humiliate her.

Tahir's anger reached the patriarch al-Tazi. At first, he dismissed her anger at a goose being called after her and jokingly suggested she name her own dog Yasmine as revenge. She threatened a divorce if he did not berate al-Yasmine, a clear offsetting of the power dynamics of the *harem*, adding that if he did not take a stand against al-Yasmine's insolence, the latter would "buy a donkey and call him al-Tazi. This woman respects no one." Hurriedly, al-Tazi goes to al-Yasmine and requests that she kill the goose and cook a meal for Tahir as an apology. Al-Yasmine quick-wittedly replies that she cannot kill the goose called Tahir as this "would surely be a bad omen" for his pretty wife. By exerting her mischievousness and outsmarting the patriarch of the family within the walls of the patriarchy, al-Yasmine offset the balance of power between wife and husband, and lower-class peasant wife and upper-class aristocratic wife.

Altorki also dedicates a sizable section of her book to her sister Latifa, whom she viewed as a symbol of rebellion against family traditions, and who "transgresses boundaries in order to gain whatever is beyond acceptable for a woman in a conservative and traditional society."²⁵ Latifa rebelled against schooling and what was expected of women in terms of beauty standards and code of conduct, to the point of leaving home and moving in with the neighbors. Altorki found that "the more they punished Latifa, the more she became powerful, and she would punish them back with more defiance. She was never broken, she only upped her game."²⁶ Her characterization and portrayal of her family members within the gendered space of their home in Saudi Arabia shows how each generation of women within the household – mother, sisters, and herself – are subject to various difficulties and expectations from society and yet they strategically set out to either gain or preserve a sense of autonomy from patri-

archal constraints. What both al-Yasmine and Latifa reveal, across the two texts, is that power within the *harem* or household is not simply held by men and resisted by women, but circulates unpredictably, and that the most disruptive figures can often be those with the least investment in the existing order.

THE PATRIARCH AS A NEGOTIATED FIGURE

Perhaps the most quietly radical move both memoirs make is their refusal to render the patriarch an absolute authority; in both texts, male power is shown to be performative, contingent, and consistently outmaneuvered. Tahur threatened that she would ask for a divorce if her husband did not berate al-Yasmine for naming an animal after her, a clear offsetting of the power dynamics of the *harem*. But as previously mentioned, al-Yasmine refused the patriarch's request for her to change the animal's name.

Altorki offers glimpses into how even her father, the patriarch of the family stereotypically cast as the preserver of the status quo, transgressed some of the boundaries set by his society. While insistent on common Arab cultural practices, he displayed a more relaxed approach to other matters, for example in allowing his youngest daughter, Soraya, to study abroad in Cairo and to pursue a bachelor's degree at AUC. When visiting her after three years into the program, he finally asked the question he had dared not ask when she first suggested studying abroad: "Do you have any boys with you at school?"²⁷ Altorki writes that "he would never have asked me this question when I first applied, for if he had he would not have agreed to it!"²⁸ Meanwhile, the role of Altorki's beguiling and quick-witted mother within this gendered space is very similar to Mernissi's own mother, who continuously fought battles with Mernissi's father and uncle to allow Mernissi to pursue a formal education unlike herself. Both Mernissi and Altorki present the negotiation of power from within these gendered spaces in its full complexity, resisting its flattening into a one-dimensional account of either oppression or liberation.

CONCLUSION

Fatema Mernissi's *Nisa'ala ajnihat al-hilm* and Soraya Altorki's *Hayati kama 'ishtuha* reject the ways in which Arab and Muslim women's lives have often been historically represented to the West. Instead of portraying scenes of rescue, exposure, or confession, both works focus on gendered space as lived, connected, and shaped by a push and pull. The spaces in both memoirs are defined by limitations but are also shaped by the women's ability to negotiate, make light of dire circumstances, and subtly subvert forms of power.

Mernissi and Altorki's texts challenge the Orientalist idea that women's freedom must be shown through visibility, dramatic change, or agreement with liberal feminist

views. The memories evoked by Mernissi and Altorki acknowledge patriarchy, isolation, and inequality while shifting feminist awareness into the local frameworks of kinship, class, and care that create everyday forms of resistance. In our contemporary moment, when imperial violence is often justified by claiming to save ‘the Other,’ revisiting such texts shows us that women’s lives do not need to be made clear, unique, or in need of saving to hold value.

About the Author



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