The Colonial Harem

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This essay, which owes much to Wardiya and to Hayyem, is dedicated to the memory of Roland Barthes

Chapter 1

The Orient as Stereotype and Phantasm

Arrayed in the brilliant colors of exoticism and exuding a full-blown yet uncertain sensuality, the Orient, where unfathomable mysteries dwell and cruel and barbaric scenes are staged, has fascinated and disturbed Europe for a long time. It has been its glittering imaginary but also its mirage.

Orientalism, both pictorial and literary,[1] has made its contribution to the definition of the variegated elements of the sweet dream in which the West has been wallowing for more than four centuries. It has set the stage for the deployment of phantasms.[2]

There is no phantasm, though, without sex, and in this Orientalism, a confection of the best and of the worst—mostly the worst—a central figure emerges, the very embodiment of the obsession: the harem.[3] A simple allusion to it is enough to open wide the floodgate of hallucination just as it is about to run dry.

For the Orient is no longer the dreamland. Since the middle of the nineteenth century, it has inched closer. Colonialism makes a grab for it, appropriates it by dint of war, binds it hand and foot with myriad bonds of exploitation, and hands it over to the devouring appetite of the great mother countries, ever hungry for raw materials.

Armies, among them the one that landed one fine 5 July 1830 a little to the east of Algiers, bring missionaries and scholars with their impedimenta as well as painters and photographers forever thirsty for exoticism, folklore, Orientalism. This fine company scatters all over the land, sets up camp around military messes, takes part in punitive expeditions (even Théophile Gautier is not exempt), and dreams of the Orient, its delights and its beauties.

What does it matter if the colonized Orient, the Algeria of the turn of the century, gives more than a glimpse of the other side of its scenery, as long as the phantasm of the harem persists, especially since it has become profitable? Orientalism leads to riches and respectability. Horace Vernet, whom Baudelaire

justly called the Raphael of barracks and bivouacs, is the peerless exponent of this smug philistinism. He spawns imitators. Vulgarities and stereotypes draw upon the entire heritage of the older, precolonial Orientalism. They reveal all its presuppositions to the point of caricature.

It matters little if Orientalistic painting begins to run out of wind or falls into mediocrity. Photography steps in to take up the slack and reactivates the phantasm at its lowest level. The postcard does it one better; it becomes the poor man's phantasm: for a few pennies, display racks full of dreams. The postcard is everywhere, covering all the colonial space, immediately available to the tourist, the soldier, the colonist. It is at once their poetry and their glory captured for the ages; it is also their pseudoknowledge of the colony. It produces stereotypes in the manner of great seabirds producing guano. It is the fertilizer of the colonial vision.

The postcard is ubiquitous. It can be found not only at the scene of the crime it perpetrates but at a far remove as well. Travel is the essence of the postcard, and expedition is its mode. It is the fragmentary return to the mother country. It straddles two spaces: the one it represents and the one it will reach. It marks out the peregrinations of the tourist, the successive postings of the soldier, the territorial spread of the colonist. It sublimates the spirit of the stopover and the sense of place; it is an act of unrelenting aggression against sedentariness. In the postcard, there is the suggestion of a complete metaphysics of uprootedness.

It is also a seductive appeal to the spirit of adventure and pioneering. In short, the postcard would be a resounding defense of the colonial spirit in picture form. It is the comic strip of colonial morality.

But it is not merely that; it is more. It is the propagation of the phantasm of the harem by means of photography. It is the degraded, and degrading, revival of this phantasm.

The question arises, then, how are we to read today these postcards that have superimposed their grimacing mask upon the face of the colony and grown like a chancre or a horrible leprosy?

Today, nostalgic wonderment and tearful archeology (Oh! those colonial days!) are very much in vogue. But to give in to them is to forget a little too quickly the motivations and the effects of this vast operation of systematic distortion. It is also to lay the groundwork for its return in a new guise: a racism and a xenophobia titillated by the nostalgia of the colonial empire.[4]

Beyond such barely veiled apologias that hide behind aesthetic rationalizations, another reading is possible: a symptomatic one.

To map out, from under the plethora of images, the obsessive scheme that regulates the totality of the output of this enterprise and endows it with meaning is to force the postcard to reveal what it holds back (the ideology of colonial-

ism) and to expose what is repressed in it (the sexual phantasm).

The Golden Age of the colonial postcard lies between 1900 and 1930.[5] Although a latecomer to colonial apologetics, it will quickly make up for its belatedness and come to occupy a privileged place, which it owes to the infatuation it elicits, in the preparations for the centennial of the conquest, the apotheosis of the imperial epoch.

In this large inventory of images that History sweeps with broad strokes out of its way, and which shrewd merchants hoard for future collectors, one theme especially seems to have found favor with the photographers and to have been accorded privileged treatment: the *algérienne*.[6]

History knows of no other society in which women have been photographed on such a large scale to be delivered to public view. This disturbing and paradoxical fact is problematic far beyond the capacity of rationalizations that impute its occurrence to ethnographic attempts at a census and visual documentation of human types.[7]

Behind this image of Algerian women, probably reproduced in the millions, there is visible the broad outline of one of the figures of the colonial perception of the native. This figure can be essentially defined as the practice of a right of (over)sight that the colonizer arrogates to himself and that is the bearer of multiform violence. The postcard fully partakes in such violence; it extends its effects; it is its accomplished expression, no less efficient for being symbolic.[8]

Moreover, its fixation upon the woman's body leads the postcard to paint this body up, ready it, and eroticize it in order to offer it up to any and all comers from a clientele moved by the unambiguous desire of possession.

To track, then, through the colonial representations of Algerian women—the figures of a phantasm—is to attempt a double operation: first, to uncover the nature and the meaning of the colonialist gaze; then, to subvert the stereotype that is so tenaciously attached to the bodies of women.

A reading of the sort that I propose to undertake would be entirely superfluous if there existed photographic traces of the gaze of the colonized upon the colonizer. In their absence, that is, in the absence of a confrontation of opposed gazes, I attempt here, lagging far behind History, to return this immense postcard to its sender.

What I read on these cards does not leave me indifferent. It demonstrates to me, were that still necessary, the desolate poverty of a gaze that I myself, as an Algerian, must have been the object of at some moment in my personal history. Among us, we believe in the nefarious effects of the evil eye (the evil gaze). We conjure them with our hand spread out like a fan. I close my hand back upon a pen to write *my* exorcism: *this text*.

Chapter 3

Women's Prisons

At this point, the harem must no longer be considered as some exotic curiosity but must be recognized as a phantasmic locus the fascinating powers of which can be apprehended only if it is related to its deep, metaphysical, roots.

Alain Grosrichard, *Structure du sérail*

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, in the wake of the conquest and the subsequent overturning of traditional structures, affects men as well as women (invariably propelling the latter toward prostitution).

Dressed for the occasion in full regalia, down to the jewels that are the indispensable finishing touch of the production, 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. In her semblance on the postcard, the model is simultaneously the epiphany of this absent woman and her imaginary takeover. The perfection and the credibility of the illusion are ensured by the fact that the absent other is, by definition, unavailable and cannot issue a challenge.

Since it fills this absence and this silence, the postcard sets its own criteria of truthfulness for the representation of Algerian women and for the discourse that can be held about them.[10]

Even more advantageously, the existence and the efficacy of the model allow the postcard to conceal the essentially mercantilistic character of its enterprise. For indeed, it must be admitted that the lucrative end of the operation is never apparent on the mercenary bodies displayed

on the postcards. It is hidden in at least three ways. First and foremost, by the iconic message, that is, by the photographed subject as such, who must be acknowledged to possess an undeniable power of attraction (one always selects one postcard in preference to another). Second, by the caption, which is meant to be informative; the information it conveys is supposed to amount to "knowledge" and thus be disinterested. Finally, it may occasionally be hidden by the senders' comments with their pretensions to enlightened views.

In her role as substitute, the model presents three distinct and yet closely related advantages: she is *accessible, credible,*[11] and *profitable*. This is the three-legged foundation upon which will come to stand the whole of the enterprise pursued so relentlessly by the colonial postcard.

As the locus for the setting of the illusion, the studio, for its part, must complete the initial illusion created by the model. By virtue of this function, it becomes the scene of the imaginary, indispensable to the fulfillment of desire.[12] It becomes the embodiment of the propitious site.

The whole array of props, carefully disposed by the photographer around and upon the model (trompe l'oeil, furnishings, backdrops, jewelry, assorted objects), is meant to suggest the existence of a natural frame whose feigned "realism" is expected to provide a supplementary, yet by no means superfluous, touch of authenticity. For the mode of being of this counterfeit is redundancy.

Indeed, if the double, or rather the stand-in, is always an impoverished version of the original—its schematic representation—it is because it saturates the meaning of the original by the plethoric multiplication of signs that are intended to connote it. Paradoxically, this would constitute an instance of degradation through excess. The photographer, caught up in his own frenzy, however, cannot stop to consider this paradox, busy as he is with attempting to make something more real than the real and developing an almost obsessive fetishism of the (sign's) object.

S. 2 - Nº 11 — Mauresque chez elle

Moorish women at home.

Moorish women at home.

Brimming over with connotative signs, every photographer's studio thus becomes a versatile segment of urban or geographic landscape. Whereas the model is a figure of the symbolic appropriation of the body (of the Algerian woman), the studio is a figure of the symbolic appropriation of space. They are of a piece together.[13] This double movement of appropriation is nothing more than the expression of the violence conveyed by the colonial postcard, a violence that it speaks of in all innocence, yet cynically.

But beyond such larger considerations, there remains the ineluctable fact that the intromission of model and studio constitutes, for the photographer, the only *technically adequate* means of response to ensure the "survival" of his desire, which means that a structure of substitution is set in place in such a way that it gives the phantasmic faculty access to "reality," albeit an ersatz reality.

In this manner, the theme of the *woman imprisoned in her own home* will impose itself in the most "natural" fashion: by the conjoined play of reverse logic and metaphorical contamination, both determined by the initial frustration.

If the women are inaccessible to sight (that is, veiled), it is because they are imprisoned. This dramatized equivalence between the veiling and the imprisonment is necessary for the construction of an *imaginary scenario* that results in the dissolution of the actual society, the one that causes the frustration, in favor of a phantasm: that of the harem.

The postcard will undertake to display the figures of this phantasm one by one and thus give the photographer the means of a self-accomplishment that he cannot forgo.

Young, then older, girls, and finally women will be made to pose behind bars, their gaze resolutely turned toward this other gaze that looks at them and may bear witness to their confinement. The pose is conventional, hackneyed, and the decor is limited to the obvious signs of incarceration, namely a crisscross of metal bars firmly embedded in wall casings.

SCÈNES et TYPES. — „Aïcha et Zorah"

Scenes and types. "Aicha and Zorah."

Scenes and types. Moorish woman.

Young Moorish woman.

But, in barely perceptible fashion, the meaning of this imprisonment will lose its fixedness and progressively glide toward an even more explicit expression of the sexual nature of the phantasm.

For indeed, these women are first going to be stripped of their clothing by the photographer, in an effort to render their bodies erotic. These bodies may be out of reach, but their very remoteness reveals the voyeurism of the camera operator. This supplemental connotation allows us to consider the colonial postcard, in its "eroticized" form, as the *mise-en-scène* by the photographer of his own voyeurism. To ignore this aspect, this index of obsessiveness, is to risk endowing the colonial postcard with a meaning that was never its own, except in masked form.

One of the cards provides dramatic illustration of the sexual connotation of confinement that is overdetermined by the phantasm of the harem. In it, the imprisonment of women becomes the *equivalent of sexual frustration*. On the other side of the wall, a man is desperately clutching the bars that keep him from the object of his unequivocal yearning. The grimacelike countenance of his face, the mask of suffering that is imprinted on it, leave no doubt about his intention to be united with the prisoner, the woman in the harem.

Moorish woman.

Algerian types. Moorish woman. (Written on card: I am sending you a package to be picked up at the railway station. The babies are doing well; they have just taken a walk by the beach. I shall write you shortly at greater length. Warm kisses to all of you. [signed:] Martha.)

This "elaborated" staging (the tell-taleness of the postcard), which presupposes that the photographer is inside the place of confinement, is highly revealing. *It is the imaginary resolution of the hiatus that differentiates the inside from the outside*; these two spatial categories are perceived as the respective loci of the fulfillment and nonfulfillment of sexual desire. It is also, for the photographer who must have gained access to the female world on the other side of the bars, that is, must have penetrated the harem, the most powerful expression of the symbolic overcoming of the obstacle.

In the paltry space of its representation, the postcard at long last offers the photographer the possibility of roaming through the site of his phantasms, and it melts away the anxiety that attends the inability to achieve self-realization.

18. See N. Coulson and D. Hinchcliffe, "Women and Law Reform in Contemporary Islam," and Elizabeth H. White, "Legal Reform as an Indicator of Women's Status in Muslim Nations," in *Women in the Muslim World*, ed. Lois Beck and Nikki Keddie (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978).

19. Gérard de Nerval, "Voyage en Orient," in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978).

20. Albert Camus, *L'Étranger* (Paris: Gallimard, 1942). The novel was written in 1939 in Algeria but was not published until after Camus's arrival in Paris.

21. See Sir Richard Burton, *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to al-Meccah and al-Medinah* (New York: Dover, 1964), and A. W. Kinglake, *Eothen* (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1970).

22. For general but informed histories of the Maghrib, see Abdallah Laroui, *The History of the Maghrib: An Interpretive Essay*, trans. Ralph Mannheim (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), and Jamil M. Abu-Nasr, *A History of the Maghrib* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975). Jacques Berque, *French North Africa: The Maghrib Between Two World Wars*, trans. Jean Stewart (London: Faber and Faber, 1967) deals with the French period of Maghrib history.

23. Laroui, *History of the Maghrib*, p. 305.

24. Cited in David Gordon, *North Africa's French Legacy, 1954–1962* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Middle East Monograph Series, 1962), p. 36.

25. Abdelkebir Khatibi, *Le Roman Maghrébin* (Rabat: SMER, 1979), p. 70. My translation.

26. Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, p. 39.

27. Cited in a forthcoming work on the production of the colonial subject by Gayatri Spivak. I am grateful for the opportunity to have benefited from presentations of this material in seminars at Wesleyan University, Center for the Humanities, in 1983–84.

28. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *The River Between* (London: Heinemann, 1965).

29. Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, pp. 37–38.

30. André Gide, *Amyntas*, trans. David Villiers (London: The Bodley Head, 1958), p. 40.

31. André Gide, *The Immoralist*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Knopf, 1970), p. 161.

32. Rachid Boudjedra, *La Vie quotidienne en Algérie* (Paris: Hachette, 1971), p. 13.

33. See Pierre Bourdieu, "The Kabyle House or the World Reversed," in *Algeria, 1960*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

34. Cited in Gordon, *North Africa's French Legacy*, p. 32.

35. Abdelkebir Khatibi, *Maghreb pluriel* (Paris: Denoel, 1983), p. 47n.

36. Alain Grosrichard, *Structure du sérail* (Paris: Seuil, 1979), p. 156. My translation.

37. Assia Djebar, *Les Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* (Paris: Des Femmes, 1980), p. 37. See also Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil* (Cambridge, Mass.: Schenkman, 1975), and Fadela M'rabet, *La Femme algérienne* (Paris: Maspero, 1969).

38. Djebar, *Les Femmes d'Alger*, p. 73.

39. Khatibi, *Maghreb pluriel*, p. 47–48.

The Colonial Harem

1. There is a large literature of unequal value on Orientalism in the broad sense. I refer the reader to a good synthesis by Philippe Jullian, *Les Orientalistes* (Paris: Office du Livre, 1977). The clarity of the presentation is supplemented by a remarkable iconography.

2. In *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, translated by Donald Micholson-Smith, J. Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis define phantasm as an "imaginary scene in which the subject is a protagonist, representing the fulfilment of a wish (in the last analysis, an unconscious wish) in a manner that is distorted to a greater or lesser extent by defensive processes," p. 314. [From the translators: this definition appears under "phantasy" rather than under "phatasm" in the translation.]

3. On the phantasm of the harem, discussed in the light of psychoanalysis and the history of men-

talities, I refer the reader to the work of Alain Grosrichard, *Structure du sérail* (Paris: Seuil, 1979).

4. As proof of what I am stating: in October 1980, a Parisian weekly, quite expert in the shock of images, if not in shocking images, was quite explicit in stating nostalgic regrets when it compared photos of colonial Hanoi with the Hanoi of today, the Vietnamese Hanoi. One more step (perhaps in the next issue) and the Hanoi of the B52 bombings will be the object of nostalgia. Nostalgia has such inconsequences. (*Paris-Match* no. 1639, 24 October 1980.)

5. The postcards gathered here are dated from the first twenty or twenty-five years of the century. They stop circulating after 1930, that is, once their mission is accomplished. Colonial cinema and tourism will take their place.

The bulk of the postcards is divided into two large categories: "Landscapes and Sites" and "Scenes and Types," head and tails of a complex reality into which the postcard introduces its false and simplificatory order. From this point of view, the postcard takes on the appearance of an "inspection tour" by the owner, a balance sheet of accomplishments, an illustrated journal of the progress of civilization.

6. [From the translators: the author distinguishes typographically between Algerian women in their historical reality and in their representation in the postcard. The first is the *Algérienne*; the second is the *algérienne*. Since this typographical convention cannot be maintained in English, we translate the first as the "Algerian woman" and keep the French term for the second.]

7. During the same period, the "Bretonne" and the "Alsacienne," in traditional garb, are not required to display their bosoms on the postcards that represent them, although they are typifications just as much as the Tlemcen woman or the 'Uled-Nayl woman.

8. A strict academic distinction ought to be made between the colonial postcard and the exotic postcard. I would say that the first is the extension of the second through violence. Colonialism is exoticism *plus* violence. On the colonial postcard, the barrel of the canon sticks out behind the palm tree.

9. In the countryside, where it is worn little or not at all, the veil does not constitute an obstacle in the sense that is meant here. But the harem, which in its phantasmic form haunts the photographer, can be urban only by the refinements and the luxuries it implies. The countryside is another reservoir of types for the exotic postcard.

10. What the postcard proposes as the truth is but a substitute for *something that does not exist*, at least not photographically. If it establishes its existence in such an arbitrary manner, it is because it has been preceded by another arbitrariness: the colonial one. Abstracting itself from the real, the postcard embarks upon a process at the end of which the native no longer exists as such. He or she disappears. Colonialism is also an *attempt at a general disposal of the native, who will reappear in the guise of the colonized*. This reductive itinerary is visible, or better, readable, in the colonial postcard.

11. The *credibility* of the model – the illusion – is undoubtedly one of the more important factors for the existence of the so-called exotic postcard. After all, it is meant to be sent from the colony to the mother country, that is, to a *public incapable of questioning its truthfulness*. Exoticism is always established by the gaze of the other.

12. The accomplishment of desire, or wish fulfillment, is defined as "a psychological formation in which the wish seems to the imagination to have been realised. The products of the unconscious – dreams, symptoms, and above all phantasms – are all wish fulfilments wherein the wish is to be found expressed in a more or less disguised form." Laplanche and Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, p. 483 [translation slightly modified].

13. The meaning of *studio* here is a notion of somewhat wider extension than in current usage. It is the use of the model (her physical presence) that constitutes the studio, and it does so even when the photos are shot in a natural decor (exteriors). It vanishes in its own reality, that is, in nature or landscape, to be no more than a connotation or a reference.

14. To say that the postcard is the *degree zero of photography* is to say that, though it is of a piece with photography, the postcard relies only upon the latter's capacity to represent reality, its technology. The postcard is also a perverted photography, an inverted one. It is perverted by its apologetic aims. *Meaning preexists the icon*, the representation. For the postcard, photography exists foremost as something that can be manipulated. The card is an empty photo that comes to be filled with a discourse. It is *photographed discourse*.

15. There is nothing accidental or unexpected about this "failure" of the postcard. The colonial postcard is nothing more than an *innocuous* space in which the sexually repressed characteristic of colonialism can surface or pour itself out at any moment. In no way can the accidental be a mode of functioning of the postcard, since it is entirely based on its mastery by means of models and studios.

16. The postcard photographer may be the first victim—the dupe—of his machination, because he is perhaps but the simple executive agent of a *Photography* elaborated outside his studio and without him. He duplicates only the stereotype; that is his *raison d'être*, his whole métier.

17. The photographic exception (the "success" or "achievement" of photography) is sufficiently rare to deserve mention. In this infinite production of images (an entire industry), the law of numbers occasionally manages to produce a happy coincidence, an unexpected happenstance. But such a happy occurrence only draws attention to the irremediably mediocre character of the bulk of the output.

18. All representation is the expression of a distortion. But the distortion introduced by the colonial postcard achieves a certain degree of absolutism. Even its reality is, at the outset, a pseudo-reality. But this distortion raises other, much more complex and more theoretical questions. The reader is referred to the recent work of Michel Thévoz, *L'Académisme et ses fantasmes* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1980), for all necessary theoretical clarifications.

19. In the rhetoric of images, or rather, in their rhetorical hierarchization, it appears that the snapshot (that is, the fixation of the fugitive) is the bearer of truth par excellence: *it is life captured at the very moment when it dissolves and escapes*. This snapshot quality—instantaneity—is beyond integration into the postcard because it *generates fuzziness*: the moving shot. The postcard, for its part, works in broad and sharp strokes: *it outlines its subject*. All fuzziness is excluded from it. The only fuzziness it allows itself is that of the *soft focus*: the *metaphorical fog*.

20. The postcard as a catalog is the counterpart to numerous monographs illustrated with engravings of Algerian dress and ornament. It repeats them, copies them, as if this would confer upon it some "scientific" seriousness (ethnography).

21. The *passivity* of the model is her seemingly infinite capacity to mimic the original, whose presence she is supposed to illusively recall. Such a passivity defines the good model as a being without individual will and capable of infinite malleability. The initial violence inflicted by the photographer is borne, in all its consequences, by the model. Her image is never her own. She redoubles it with another image which she imposes over it and which masks her.

22. Painting constantly haunts the postcard photographer. He composes his scenes in the manner of still lifes or of tableaux scenes. By this reference to a pictorial model, the postcard admits that it is an *image beyond itself, that is, without originality*. Other images *dispossess it of itself and pull it toward something that is no longer photography but certainly not the equivalent of painting*.

23. [From the translators: the French word *mouquère* connotes both an Arabic woman and a prostitute.]

24. The word *odalisque*, which begins to appear in French at the beginning of the seventeenth century, comes from the Turkish *odaliq*, meaning chambermaid (from *oda* = chamber). Initially a chambermaid or a slave in the service of the women of the harem, the odalisque was metamorphosed by Orientalist painting (see Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres) into the sublimated image of the one enclosed by the harem. This jewel