



Oriental women, body and image

On the representation of the female body and the perception of its image in East and West



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Abstract

The body image of Oriental women has long captivated both Eastern and Western audiences. This article delves into the portrayal of Oriental women across various contexts and historical periods. Orientalist painters frequently depicted them as exotic and enticing figures, often far removed from the harsh social realities they faced. As highlighted by Fatema Mernissi, the depiction of harem women, for example, frequently diverges from the lived experiences where they may not always be subservient to their masters. Idealised and sometimes unrealistic representations of the administered body, the unveiled body, and the body in conflict with reality contribute to shaping an unreal image of the subject under study. Cultural norms, temporal dynamics, and geographical constraints influence these depictions.

Keywords

Oriental Women;
Image;
Representation;
Frantz Fanon;
Fatema Mernissi.

الكلمات المفتاحية

المرأة الشرقية ؛
صورة ؛
التمثيل ؛
فرانز فانون ؛
فاطمة المرنيسي.

المرأة الشرقية: جسد وصورة حول تمثيل الجسد الأنثوي وإدراك صورته في الشرق والغرب

ملخص

قد أسرت صورة جسد المرأة الشرقية لفترة طويلة الجماهير الشرقية والغربية. يتعمق هذا المقال في تصوير المرأة الشرقية عبر سياقات وفترات تاريخية مختلفة. وكثيرًا ما صورها الرسامون المستشرقون على أنها شخصيات غريبة وجذابة، وغالبًا ما يكونن بعيدين كل البعد عن الواقع الاجتماعي القاسي الذي واجهوه. وكما أوضحت فاطمة المرنيسي، فإن تصوير نساء الحريم، على سبيل المثال، غالبًا ما يختلف عن التجارب الحياتية حيث قد لا يكونن دائمًا خاضعات لأسيادهن. الصراع مع الواقع يساهم في تشكيل صورة غير حقيقية للموضوع قيد الدراسة. تؤثر المعايير الثقافية والديناميكيات الزمنية والقيود الجغرافية على هذه الصور.

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Introduction

"An image is the mental reproduction of a perception or impression in the absence of the object that gave rise to it." - René Descartes.

The Oriental woman, once overlooked, has long been a subject of fascination, giving rise to numerous myths through artistic and literary expressions. Orientalist paintings, extolling the passive beauty of Muslim women, perpetuated the notion of women belonging entirely to their masters, captivating the imaginations of those eager for oriental exoticism.

Objects of desire and fascination, as well as depictions of Scheherazade from the 19th and 20th centuries, were co-opted during the Second Empire to promote the perceived docility of North African women. Through the lens of Orientalist painters and writers, we observe a European male gaze that starkly contrasts with the lived realities of Oriental women, who navigate their lives with agency and autonomy, albeit often under different circumstances.

In "The Harem and the West," Moroccan sociologist and author Fatema Mernissi explores the portrayal of the harem in Eastern societies, interpreting it as a symbol of seclusion where women leverage their intellect for emancipation. At the same time, in the West, it is viewed as a realm of pleasure where naked, sensual women frolic. Mernissi questions the disparity between Muslim men's inclination to cover women and Western men's desire to expose them.

Deeply rooted in her cultural identity, Mernissi challenges both Eastern and Western male-dominated narratives that objectify Oriental women as mere subjects of desire.

The female body often appears as an object subject to male control, dictating norms of feminine modesty dictated by time, place, and fashion. Media frequently report on incidents where women in burkinis are denied access to French public beaches or where men in the Maghreb attempt to restrict women from swimming in bathing suits. Regardless of religious or cultural considerations, the debate surrounding women's attire unfolds in public forums without adequate consideration for the women themselves, whose images are scrutinised without their input. Do pictures genuinely belong to us? Not. This article explores the perceptions of women in both Eastern and Western societies and from alternative perspectives.

1. The Body at odds

Discourses, or rather "confrontations," regarding women's attire have consistently been central topics of discussion across various societies, whether Western, Oriental, Indian, or American, spanning historical and contemporary contexts. This subject has been extensively debated and dissected, generating significant discourse over time.

Hailing from a Muslim-majority country where women are acutely aware of the significance of their appearance, I witness daily the adeptness with which women navigate the art of remaining inconspicuous. Whether veiled or not, their primary desire is to carry out their daily activities without attracting unwanted attention from onlookers, ranging from family members such as fathers, brothers, husbands, or even mothers to vigilant neighbours who might scrutinise their attire. In essence, Algerian women exhibit remarkable skill in "going unnoticed."

I engaged in the questionnaire during an encounter with a French anthropologist conducting interviews with Algerian women in their natural milieu. She posed a probing question at one juncture: "Do you not feel the urge to dress attractively, wear a short skirt, and venture out?" I hesitated before responding, as wearing a short skirt had never crossed my mind,

neither in Algeria nor elsewhere. This prompts a pertinent inquiry: Why is the concept of feminine beauty so closely intertwined with that of nudity? This scenario epitomises a fascinating intersection where image and perception emerge as indispensable factors, contingent upon the context, time, and individuals involved in the discourse.

My unequivocal response to the anthropologist was a firm "No!" This stance is emblematic of the prevailing sentiment among women in my country - or the majority thereof, with inevitable exceptions - who cherish their freedom of movement above all else. To seek attention by adopting revealing attire would counter their fundamental pursuit of freedom.

2. An Oriental look

Fatima Mernissi, a renowned Moroccan sociologist and novelist, adopts a humorous yet profound approach to address the intricate issue of female freedom, pitting the Eastern and Western perceptions of the female harem against each other. In her work *"Le Harem et l'Occident"* (Mernissi, 2001), Mernissi embarks on a reflective journey prompted by a striking observation. While discussing her book *"Rêves de femmes"* (Mernissi, 1996) set within a harem, she noticed a peculiar smile on the faces of European men. As she questioned, this reaction left her perturbed: *"The smiles took me aback. How can one smile when referring to a word synonymous with confinement (...)." Recalling her grandmother's perspective, she elaborates, "For my grandmother, the harem epitomised a cruel institution that robbed women of their rights, beginning with the basic right to freedom of movement and the opportunity to explore Allah's magnificent creation."* (Mernissi, 2001, p. 8)

During her grandmother's final moments, she imparted wisdom to young Fatima Mernissi, emphasising the importance of upholding tradition and recounting her favourite tale from the Arabian Nights: *The Lady in the Feathered Dress*.

Scheherazade's narrative delivers a profound message: *"A woman must live her life like a nomad, ever vigilant and prepared to depart, even in the throes of love. For love, too, can ensnare and confine."* (Mernissi, 2001 p. 10) Freedom emerges as the central motif in Scheherazade's tale, transcending the allure of wealth or the splendour of Arab textiles.

Arab women perceive Scheherazade as more than a mere storyteller; she embodies their aspirations, intellect, and resilience. Above all, she symbolises feminine sacrifice, epitomised in the legendary tales of the Thousand and One Nights, wherein Scheherazade sacrifices herself to save the women of her community from certain doom.

Mernissi recounts a poignant conversation with a close classmate who harboured unspoken affection for her but disapproved of her frequent travels. He remarked, *"Why do you think our ancestors constructed palaces within gardens? Only profoundly fragile men, convinced of women's ethereal nature, would resort to such extreme measures as the harem—a prison cloaked in the guise of opulence."* (Mernissi, 2001, p. 14)

In the tale of *The Lady in the Feathered Dress*, a free-spirited woman eludes the grasp of any man, including her spouse, by her indomitable spirit. Even upon discovering her stolen garment, she chooses flight with her children over captivity, disappearing forever from the confines of conventionality.

3. The Western view

In Europe, the reactions elicited by the mention of the word "harem" conveyed to Mernissi a distinctly sexual undertone. This prompted her to recognise that Westerners, much like Orientals, held their perceptions of the harem, which she aptly characterised as follows:

"The Western conception of the harem appears to be an orgiastic realm where men achieve an unprecedented feat impossible in the East: unrestrained indulgence in the multitude of women they have ensnared! Within their harems, women do not seek retribution for their assault, enslavement, or reduction to the degrading status of captives. Conversely, in Eastern harems, men anticipate fierce resistance from the women they have subjugated, expecting them to thwart their pursuit of pleasure in retaliation for the initial aggression inflicted upon them." (Mernissi, 2001, p. 20)

Mernissi finds it utterly nonsensical that Westerners, who secured their rights through revolutions, could harbour a fantasy of Oriental women devoid of intellect, incapable of discerning situations or defending themselves.

The genesis of this Western male perspective on the harem lies in artistic representations—be it paintings or films—glorifying the passive sensuality of harem captives. While Mernissi acknowledges the historical basis of Orientalist depictions of the harem, she observes that the Western viewpoint is primarily shaped by artworks by renowned artists such as Delacroix, Ingres, Picasso, or Matisse.

Through her exploration, the author unveils the visual representations prevalent in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Orientalist paintings, Hollywood films replete with scantily clad dancers who dance and smile at their captors, as well as operas like Verdi's *Aida* and ballets inspired by *Scheherazade*. (Mernissi, 2001, p. 21)

4. The art of miniature

Muslim miniaturists diverge from Western portrayals by offering a more realistic depiction of harem life. Their miniatures vividly illustrate the defiance of women who, cognizant of their oppression, refuse to acquiesce to confinement. Notably, female nudity in these miniatures symbolises liberation, as only a woman imbued with freedom and self-assurance would dare to expose herself without trepidation. Such an act signifies her strength and intellect, enabling her to defend herself assertively.

Miniature painting, an art form that emerged in the eighth century within Muslim societies, flourished under the patronage of Muslim sultans, caliphs, and emperors. Miniaturists skillfully depicted scenes inspired by poetry or romantic narratives from ancient legends, giving voice to the fantasies and desires of their patrons.

Contrary to the lascivious and idle depictions found in Western paintings by artists like Matisse, Ingres, or Picasso, harem women in Muslim miniature paintings are portrayed as dynamic and elegantly attired, if not armoured. These representations often feature women draped in heavy cloaks, mounted on swift steeds, and armed with bows and arrows, exuding an aura of activity and empowerment. (Mernissi, 2001, p. 25)

The prevailing notion that the harem serves as a domain where numerous women are confined solely for the pleasure of a single master starkly contradicts historical reality. Fatima Mernissi exposes a different truth: the harem is a space inhabited by women possessing intellect and emotions. History recounts instances of jealous women, ensnared by love,

resorting to drastic measures such as poisoning or suffocation to eliminate rivals. Mernissi cites the example of Al-Mahdi, the founder of the Abbasid dynasty, who was poisoned in 785 by a fervently enamoured favourite. (Mernissi, 2001, p. 42)

Although physically confined, these odalisques wield significant influence, concealed out of desire and fear. Many have counselled their sultans from behind the lattice screens of their moucharabieh, while others have effectively led entire tribes without leaving the confines of the harem. While these portrayals may lack the sensuality often associated with Western depictions, they offer a far more authentic representation of harem life.

5. The female body administered

The female body, when objectified, has become a topic of discussion, debate, and analysis and has even been instrumentalised as a tool. An example of this instrumentalisation can be found in Bousaada, Algeria, where the community, punished for its insurrection against French colonisation, witnessed the establishment of an entire village of women in the town centre, available to soldiers from nearby barracks. In October 2016, during an interview on the American Ottoman History podcast, Aurélie Perrier discussed "Prostitution in Algeria during the Ottoman and French periods." In it, she comments on the evolution and changes experienced by the Ouled Nails, the concubines described by Christelle Taraud as:

"They represent the quintessential oriental 'femme fatale' (...) Considered as 'temptresses' of 'savage' beauty and unusual morals since the early days of Algerian colonisation, the Ouled Nails are best known for their captivating dexterity in dance and the opulence of their attire, which includes splendid diadems (arsa) adorned with ostrich feathers, headdresses embellished with circular sun-shaped brooches (chemmassa), imposing gold louis necklaces (chentouf louiz), heavy chiselled bracelets covered with pointed nails (dhauh), and remarkably large silver fibulae..."

Perrier reports that these women were already functioning as courtesans under Ottoman rule. These rather erudite women were educated in song, poetry, and dance. They had to possess these qualities before becoming courtesans, often by choice and within their homes. They were not merely regarded as sex objects, stigmatised as such, or marginalised; instead, they held a social function within the population and were invited by families to familial or religious events.

Ouled Nail women could return to a more traditional lifestyle if desired. They could be married by a man, relinquishing their role as concubines and reverting to a more conventional way of life.

When the town was colonised in 1845, Barkahom Ferhati, director of research at the CNRPAHD in Algiers and author of a study on the Ouled Nail, reported that the presence of these women in Bousaada rendered the town "unsuitable for colonial development." (Ferhati, 2006) Indeed, a decree had been issued as early as August 1830, barely a month after the capture of Algiers, classifying public women as "clandestine."

In 1845, a military garrison of 500 men was stationed in Bousaada, close to the local community of 5,000 souls. The soldiers encountered these women, prompting the establishment of a morality police force in 1850. Their role was now institutionalised, and they were allocated a specific area to conduct their profession, consequently being required to vacate their homes. They were registered administratively, obligated to pay taxes, obliged to participate in a weekly health program at their own expense, and entirely stigmatised as women of questionable virtue, "illegals" within their own country. Consequently, the mobility they once enjoyed, allowing them to depart from this position at will, became

impossible. The erudition that was a prerequisite for membership in the Ouled Nail group vanished, leaving only dance and costume as their distinguishing features. Their image was distorted, leaving only a distorted representation of these women.

Their bodies were now administered, functionalised, and legislated under the surveillance of an unforgiving morality police.

Their presence subsequently became a tourist attraction, enticing future settlers to a place rich in every sense of the word. Sex tourism emerged in Bousaada, with the women attracting an increasing number of visitors, initially to the region and then to Algeria. This gave rise to Orientalist advertising, with texts, paintings, postcards, and correspondence extolling the beauty and compliance of women waiting to be gratified. For young European men, all that remained was to board a boat and join these temptresses from another era.

6. Historical Odalisques, the unveiling in progress

Towards the end of the colonial era, one might be tempted to suggest that the Odalisque ventured out of the harem to engage in her daily activities. The concept of unveiling, symbolised by the removal of the veil, could be perceived, superficially and for a particular segment of society, as a progressive step for Muslim women towards liberation at the threshold of their native harem. To support this perspective, I refer to Frantz Fanon's seminal work on decolonization, "Sociologie d'une révolution". (Fanon, 1966) While Fanon's work is undeniably a cornerstone in sociology, it also carries a solid anti-colonial ideological stance, which was prevalent during that period.

In his book, Fanon dedicates a portion of his analysis to Algerian women, who remained confined to their harems until the advent of the revolution.

He commences his discourse by delineating the distinct dress codes characteristic of each civilisation. In the Maghreb, the veil is an integral component of the traditional attire, serving as the sole outer garment permitted for women until that juncture, thereby establishing a clear and definitive demarcation between Algerian and European women. At the time of the book's publication in 1959, it was uncommon to encounter an Algerian woman without her white veil, known as the "Haïk." According to the author, it was "a uniform that admits no alteration," and "the Haïk demarcates colonised Algerian society." (Fanon, 1966, p. 18) Among other functions, this attire allowed Muslim women to remain incognito, affording them a degree of freedom of movement in anonymity.

Fanon elucidates how the veil, emblematic of Algerian identity, became the focal point of a grandiose struggle initiated by the colonial administration, ostensibly aimed at emancipating women ensnared in the grip of male domination within Muslim society. For the occupying power, every unveiled woman symbolised a transition towards a Western lifestyle. Consequently, men were encouraged to embrace this more modern lifestyle.

Various French aid and support societies for Algerian women emerged. Social workers, armed with provisions, frequented Arab neighbourhoods. Within workplaces and offices, men were encouraged to participate in national or Christmas festivities accompanied by their "small family" or spouse—an uncommon practice in Muslim society, where couples seldom ventured beyond the private sphere, preferring segregated gatherings at public events.

For Algerians at that time, attending such events with one's wife implied capitulation, a display of one's spouse, and an

abandonment of resistance. Conversely, refusing to comply with the employer's requests amounted to defiance, potentially leading to unemployment and job insecurity.

Fanon, a staunch critic of colonisation, posits the issue of the veil as an indelible emblem of Algerian identity. Renouncing it would signify surrendering one's principles, a capitulation in the ongoing struggle.

Fanon states, "In response to the colonialist campaign surrounding the veil, the colonised populace upholds the cult of the veil." (Fanon, 1966, p. 29). "Confronted with the colonialist's emphasis on various aspects, the colonised react vehemently (...) resisting the occupier on this particular front results in a resounding failure". (Fanon, 1966, p. 29)

Nevertheless, the unveiling occurred concurrently, not due to the colonial administration's directives but rather due to the exigencies of the conflict situation.

7. The instrumentalised body

Until that moment, women had been conspicuously absent from the spirit of the Algerian revolution. Discussions, uprisings, and gatherings were exclusively male affairs. The revolution necessitated absolute secrecy, resulting in the separation of families and directives for men to refrain from discussing their missions with their wives.

However, the exigencies of the revolutionary struggle called for innovative solutions. Consequently, women began to join the fight and discard the veil, symbolising the assimilated woman coveted by the occupying forces. Liberated from their Haïk, Algerian women assumed roles as intermediaries, bearers of arms, guides, and scouts, as they were not subjected to searches by the occupying army.

In the revolution, women were expected to display the same self-sacrifice as men. They had to possess exceptional psychological fortitude, as they faced not only physical danger but also the departure from the sheltered and protective world they had always known. Additionally, they had to confront rumours and criticism from conservative factions and confront the occupiers, whom they had been taught to view as rapists, potentially making them helpless victims.

The concept of corporality, encompassing physical and psychological aspects of being, was strategically employed. Women, cognizant of the image they projected to the enemy, utilised their bodily representation as a tactical tool. Their bodies and images became instrumental in advancing the cause: "*Corporality expresses the personal psychophysical wholeness and unity of the individual, who, in representing themselves, manifests their bodily existence and integrates it into their being.*" (Veldman, 2007, pp. 173-217)

Throughout the Algerian revolution, women became indispensable in military operations. Contrary to initial concerns, these women experienced a change in status within their own families, gaining the right to sit among the men during clandestine gatherings, a previously unheard-of practice.

Women were often betrayed or identified, resulting in their inclusion in files and their induction into the maquis to tend to the wounded or take up arms alongside their male counterparts. If caught, they faced brutal interrogations where torture was commonly employed to extract information. However, the prospect of rape was the most dreaded ordeal for women involved in the revolution. To an Arab man, a raped woman is irreversibly defiled.

During the trial of General Aussaresses in 2001, numerous women, including Louise Ighilahriz, testified to instances of torture, including rape, inflicted upon them during interrogations.

Apart from the physical and psychological anguish, a woman raped in Muslim society faces ostracism. If she manages to survive torture, rape, or execution, she risks repudiation if married or a life of perpetual celibacy if unmarried. Additionally, leaving her familial home exposes her to the scrutiny of her reputation and virtue. Many women chose to forsake the notion of a conventional home by joining the Algerian revolution, dedicating themselves entirely to the cause.

Beyond political and moral allegiance, the Arab woman's Body remains contentious. Even when emancipated from patriarchal constraints, she remains a woman but often forfeits her feminine identity in societal perceptions.

Concerned that emancipated women without veils would become subject to routine searches, the occupying army witnessed a resurgence in the wearing of the Haik, which obscured the face. Initially a traditional Algerian garment, the Haik became, by circumstance, a revolutionary accessory to be donned as required.

Algerian women, previously sheltered within their familial cocoons, shielded from external scrutiny, emerged as strong and resolute fighters in their newfound roles. Simultaneously, they attained parity with male revolutionaries, embodying the social ideal of the era. They gained the right to sit alongside their fathers and male relatives, a privilege denied to other women in the household, albeit at the cost of relinquishing certain aspects of their feminine identity.

8. The Body in the Making

Ghania Mouffok, an Algerian author and journalist, delineates two levels of discourse prevalent among Algerian men today, each corresponding to distinct feminine images. The unconscious level perceives women as either bodies to be claimed or defended, relegating them to objects of historical narratives rather than active agents. Conversely, the conscious level extols women, lauding their bravery in the struggle for national liberation during the civil war. (Mouffok, 2006, p. 13)

Mouffok characterises this discourse as "ambivalent", frequently employed in Algerian media to portray Algerian women as victims. They are depicted as "women victimised by terrorism" (Mouffok, 2006, p. 71), "mothers of the disappeared," or "women oppressed by the family code." Consequently, the image of the Algerian woman becomes intertwined with that of a religious icon. Mouffok cites "La Madone de Bentalha" as an illustrative example, a photograph captured in September 1997 by Hocine Zaourar, which has since become an emblematic symbol of photojournalism. Despite being reproduced in various art forms, encapsulating female suffering, this image perpetuates the perception of Algerian women solely as victims.

Nevertheless, despite this portrayal, Algerian women persistently strive for their freedom and emancipation. Both men and women are engaged in this endeavour, as society as a whole scrutinises and judges the presence of women in public spaces, often deeming it excessive.

Conclusion

As society recognises that the veil no longer provides absolute protection from external scrutiny, we are witnessing another transformation in clothing representation. Veiled and non-veiled women now intermingle in various spheres, sharing the same occupations, streets, and university settings.

Irrespective of attire, role, or social standing, the contemporary female body evokes a distinct image—a being inclined towards emancipation beyond social divides, particularly in public spaces. While women's images, apart from their bodies, increasingly project strength and authority gained through education, employment, and financial autonomy, they gradually assert themselves in modern society, moving beyond the traditional roles of being cared for or protected.

However, to claim that women have entirely emancipated themselves from their bodies, transcending bodily constraints to become individuals free from physical limitations, would be unrealistic. Regardless of the societal context, women remain vulnerable despite malicious intent. Despite their belief in controlling their image, how others perceive it may not always align with their intentions.

In psychology, it is posited that the formation of an image relies on reciprocal interaction between the sender and receiver (Feral, 2015, p. 48). "The psychologist engages with the image that the other person reflects, considering its sensory aspects, interpretive meanings in clinical contexts, as well as their self-image, which they project onto others, entangled within the dynamics of transference and counter-transference." (Feral, 2015, p. 52)

As demonstrated, the Orientalist portrayal of women, as depicted by Orientalist painters or romanticised in narratives of the Aurès maquis or Eastern palaces, often diverges from reality and has been manipulated over time for personal, collective, or imperialistic agendas. Despite these challenges, women have persistently strived to shape and redefine their images, a process likely to endure for the foreseeable future.

To assert that the image of women is unequivocally clear and definitive in its corporeal and existential essence, whether in the East or West, would be a misinterpretation.

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