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Women behind walls and the subversion of Colonial photography

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Introduction

“Postcard photographers depict women in large groups and in varying states of undress- a mingling of skin, costume, and exotic jewellery. Exposed behind the harem curtain beneath the veil”¹

Karina Eileraas’ description of the photographer’s depiction of the oriental women in the postcard as ‘collective assemblage’, multi-race and featured behind the walls, coincides nicely with the pattern postcards I am considering in this article. Picturing the Moorish in their harems is a recurrent theme in the colonial postcard. There is a wide variety of postcards representing women in their harem. My reading of these postcards I selected from Delcampe website is clearly an argument which holds the view, that photographing women behind walls and inside the harem in groups unfolds their rebellious and collective engagement in the colonial visual discourse by oppositional look. In other words, in addition to their togetherness, women use the wall, the veil, and the gaze to vehemently resist and reject colonialism at large. On the rooftops, Women stand on a high position behind walls and look down on the powerless, western photographer. Inside the harem, women heroically repel photography with confrontational looks and fierce facial expressions. This view is what I will stress in this article. And to be in a good position to do so, I shall start with a brief theoretical framework for the question of female agency in the colonial postcard.

In fact, the colonial postcard was used to misrepresent the oriental women and enhance the colonial stereotypes particularly in North Africa. Women were usually seen as meekly submissive and easily surrender to the western greed. This article, of course is a new reading of colonial postcards

¹ Karina Eileeras, “Disorienting Looks, Ecarts d'identité: Colonial Photography and Creative Misrecognition in Leila Sebbar's *Sherazade*” In *After Orientalism*, Ed: Inge E. Boar. Rodopi B.v., Amsterdam-New York. 2003, p. 25.

representation of women in the context of Morocco. I will deconstruct these common clichés about the misrepresentation of women in postcard. By using a postcolonial feminist approach, the article demonstrates women's active contribution to visual anti-colonial discourse.

Critics have developed a number of theories about the representation of the oriental Muslim women inside the harem. Malek Alloula has allotted an article entitled "Women's Prison" in which he suggests a critical reading of the French photography picturing the harem. According to him, the imprisonment of women in their own harem reveals the inaccessibility of these women. Because women are out of sight and out of reach, the scopic instinct of the photographer will be frustrated². The veil also symbolizes the absence of photography and leads the photographer's desires to an unaccomplished satisfaction. Because of this unavailability, the photographer will supersede his artistic frustration with other techniques such as linguistic eroticism: for instance "les plus beaux yeux du Maroc". The studio too becomes "a pacified microcosm where the photographer's desires and instincts can find satisfaction"³. In her "Identity photographers" Leila Sebbar dissects the female resistance and affords the possibility of the women's agency in the colonial postcard. For her the camera is considered to be a gun and phallus that infiltrates into the private life of the Algerian women. Expanding on this idea, she describes the anger of an old woman who calls the camera "Satanic apparatus" and "swears that anyone who sits for the machine from France, that devil's device, will be cursed"⁴ this old woman then expresses her total refusal to be photographed and sees the camera as a symbol of the devil. In *Sherazade*, Sebbar talks about women who resist the lens of the camera. In her words: "these Algerian women all faced the lens as if they were facing a machine-gun, with the same intense- savage look a fierceness that the image could only record without ever mastering or dominating"⁵. The eye of the woman is for Sebbar to some degree resistant

² Malek Alloula, "Women's Prison," In *The Colonial Harem*. University press, United Kingdom. 1987. pp 24-25.

³ Ibid., p. 26.

⁴ Quoted in Karina Eileeras, "Disorienting Looks, Ecarts d'identité: Colonial Photography and Creative Misrecognition in Leila Sebbar's *Sherazade*" In *After Orientalism*. (Amsterdam-New York. 2003), p. 27.

⁵ Leila Sebbar. *Sherazade*. (Missing: Aged17, Dark, Curly Hair, Green Eyes). Trans. Dorothy Blair. London: Quartet Books.1982. p167.

to the discourse which seeks to master and regulate it”. By problematizing the Western visual discourse, Leila Sebbar renders women heroines of the visual discourse in the colonial era. Situated between these theoretical frameworks, my essay endeavours to reconsider the female agency in the colonial postcard.

Analysis

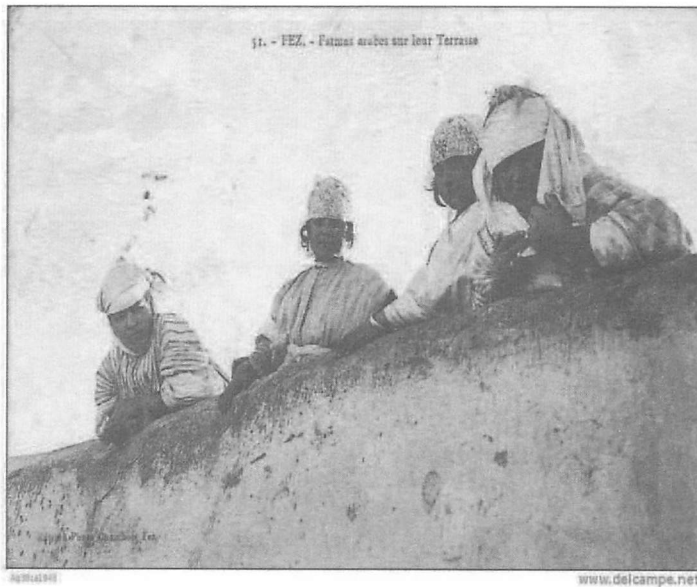


Figure 1

This postcard is captioned under “Fes, Fatmas Arabs sur leur terrasse”. It shows a group of old and fully clothed women standing on the rooftop and facing the viewer with a reluctant gaze. Thus, this postcard dramatizes what Alloula refers to as *imaginary scenario* that causes frustration in that it frustrates the voyeuristic impulse. It also exemplifies somehow the inaccessibility of the harem women, because it does not satisfy any voyeuristic impulse.⁶ These women dramatise what Deleuze refers to as ‘collective assemblage’ looking down on the photographer from above. We can read their blank expressions with which they face the viewer as a form of resistance. None of the women invites the viewer with a seductive smile. Rather, they shun the camera and refuse to be photographed, they look at the photographer from below. For example, the two women in the middle

⁶ Ibid., p21.

look superstitious, their reclining back, and their gloomy mood, is perhaps an attempt to withdraw from the postcard. As result, the photographer becomes the object of the women's gaze; his standing down locates him in a powerless position *vis a vis* the potent women. The architecture too exerts tremendous power on the viewer; the walls become an excessive trace and barrier that prevents the photographer from entrance and thus thwarts his scopic instincts.



Figure 2

The next model (figure 2) simply captioned under “Groupe de Mauresques” represents group of young women behind a wall. The women hold each other amorously and face the photographer with multiple looks. The word ‘group’ heralds the unified women, their plurality of the gaze marks the multiple forms of resistance. In a comparison between the two postcards, the wall in this model is high and more cemented so that the viewer can see only the women's faces but not the entire bodies. If these young women here are neither sexually visible nor submissively possessed by the Western man, it is because they are imprisoned beyond the wall. In fact, these two examples grant women power by absorbing moments of female agency via depicting them in groups and beyond reach, this account leaves no room for the photographer's manipulation. As a result, it diminishes possibilities for the photographer infiltration and sexual appropriation.



Figure 3

This postcard captioned simply “Type du Maroc-Femme du Souss” represents an Amazigh woman behind the wall and from a vantage position, she adorned herself with jewellerys (rings, bracelets...etc). Her eyes are directly fixed on the camera; her facial expression does not show any invitation. This is a type of postcard that reveals the ethnic belonging; it “posits the woman as belonging to a recognizable ‘type’ that can be labelled, classified”⁷

The fierce anxieties and acts of resistance are blatantly visible in the next two postcards. In the first one entitled “Fez, pèlerinage au cimetière de Bab-Guissa” the model shows dozens of women in their *Hayks* sitting in open air in the medina of Fes. They are completely clothed, they refuse to be seen, and heed no attention to the photographer. This picture is taken from long distance. Significantly enough, the uniform (the veil) is but an act of unique rejection of photography. The veil is also a symbol of collective identity and a physical impediment that distances the viewer from the female body. Yet, like the wall, the veil ultimately frustrates the colonial dream. Women heroically resist the camera’s gaze, their togetherness

⁷ Jennifer Yee. “Recycling the Colonial Harem: Women in the Postcard From French to Indochina,” (French Cultural Studies. 15, 2004), p.9.

vindicates their collective identity and strengthens their scathing indictment of colonialism, noted that, this postcard is postmarked to indicate its wide circulation. The second one shows a group of veiled women on the top of the Casbah's wall. The caption reads: "Fez, Bab Dakaken, un jour de fête" an: holiday at Bab-Dakaken" first, this model challenges the Western assumption which understands the Oriental woman as confined only to the interiors. In contrast, the Muslim women as the postcard says can attend and participate in festivals outside the harem. Second, this postcard shows the anxieties of women who rebelliously gaze at the photographer with melancholic mood; their gazes coincide nicely with what Alloula refers to as "a gaze of a particular kind".⁸ The three other women shun the camera, as if unaware of the photographer; they turn their faces to the other side facing the camera only with their back and clothes. Here, women are clearly beyond reach because of the veil and their confinement within the Casbah's walls.



Figure 4

⁸ Ibid., p14.



Figure 5

Now we will move from the outside into the interior following the footsteps of the photographer. Here, I shall be arguing that yet although, the harem is where more carnal and sexual fantasies are displayed for the voyeuristic impulse, the interior is the womanly place where more urgent dynamics of the gaze are noticed. In other words, the more the photographer ventures to zoom in on the harem women, the stronger the woman's gaze becomes. Though, the harem scenes, as Graham Brown explains, “were studio reconstructions composed by the photographer. In this respect, photography, like painting, was a figment of imagination”⁹.



Figure 6

⁹ Quoted in Fadwa El Guindi. *Veil Modesty, Privacy and Resistance*. (150 Cowly Road, Oxford, 1999), p. 37.

Figure 6 shows a group of women in their interior. The caption is entitled “Scenes et types group de Mauresques” this scene is taken in the studio, with traditional accessoire such as rug, old chairs...etc. we see two categories of women. Those who stand in a line at the back with hand on their hips, and the two others sitting on the rug. The western photographer has got these women posed just the way he/she wishes. Therefore the model goes hand in hand with what Brown refers to as studio reconstruction. Yet although, this postcard shows women inside the harem; it conceals the flesh more than it exposes it. Apart from their heads and hands, the women are fully clothed. By depicting the Oriental harem in a traditional, antique scene, the postcard demonstrates the discourse of exoticism and presents indigenous way of living inside the harem. Hence, what is more significant about this model is the women’s facial expressions. For example, the woman standing on the left expresses her anger and strength with her melancholic looking at the viewer. Likewise, the woman sitting down on the rug, to the right of the photo; she shuns the lens of the camera and immerses on a contemplative thinking and expresses her deep resentment. Thus, all the women here refuse to show any invitation and submission.



Figure 7

Figure 7 is apparently a portrait of a trio of women in their harem as the caption reads "Mauresque dans leur interieur" again this postcard is postmarked as an indication of circulation. We can read it as filled with discourse of racism as Alloula contends "the postcard is filled with discourse".¹⁰ It shows two white women standing and a black woman sitting behind them; the dark woman is the most clothed and most secluded at the back of the picture. She gazes at the viewer with a resentful expression. The young white woman too frowns at the camera pushing her face forward. Although, it seems that these women are inviting us with tea to join them in their harem, none of these women accepts to yield to the photographer's tendencies; their lips are tightly closed.

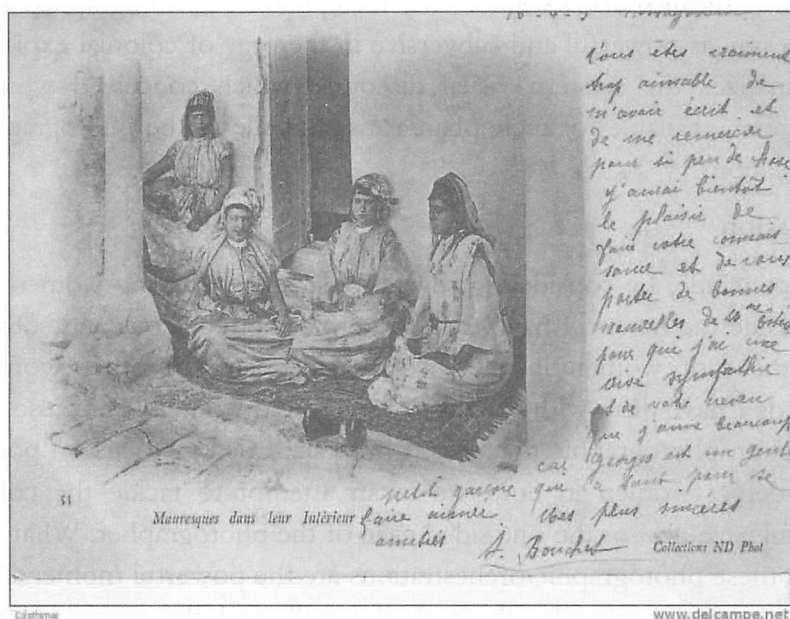


Figure 8

This postcard can be nicely compared to figure 8 under the caption "Mauresque dans leur interieur". It shows four women sitting in their interior. This photo is produced by ND (Nuerdine Frères photographic studio), one of the famous and the largest French postcard producers funded by the government. This company used to send photographers to Algeria to take photographs. It contains a written message from a sender to

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 130.

a recipient. The absence of food is what distinguishes this postcard from the previous one. Here, women look at the photographer with blank expressions that reveal anger and deep resentment. The woman posing at the back frowns at the viewer, while the two other women sitting on the right of the picture turn their faces, as if unaware of the camera. In these models representing the interior as Leila Sebbar contends that the camera violates the private space and unveils what is meant only to be seen by family members.¹¹ In Aloula's terms "the soldier photographers enter into the holy of holies and lift the curtain".¹² In so doing, the photographer constructs the harem images the way they suit his/her imagination, and thus invites us to enjoy them. Yet, "trespassing women's space does not necessarily mean transgression".¹³ My recognition of photographed women in this essay as powerful and subversive in the orgy of colonial exploitation problematizes the western visual discourse which conceived women as subservient, available for male phantasms, and allows the photographer no manipulation.

Conclusion

To conclude, by considering several postcards depicting women within and outside the harem, I have tried to unfold the rebellious and subversive engagement of women in the visual mainstream. In other words, the postcards I have dealt with sought to foreground women. They also violate the western photographic practices. I have also tried to focus on postcards which depict women in numbers in an attempt to tackle the collective powerful gaze *vis-a-vis* the one sided gaze of the photographer. What we see then in these photographic orchestrations are the powerful moments of the female resistance whereby the veil, the wall, and the gaze become the weapons with which the subject resists and refuses any submission to the lens of the colonial camera.

¹¹ Ibid., p.169.

¹² Ibid., p. 68.

¹³ Rebecca J.Deroo. "Colonial Collecting: Women and Algerian Cartes Postales," In *Colonialist Photography Imag (in) ing Race and Place*. Eleanor M. Hight and Gary D. Sampson, (ed) (Rutledge, 2004), p.164.

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