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Women's Space "Inside the Haveli": Incarceration or Insurrection?

By Daphne Grace[i]

Abstract

While the Hindu and Muslim veiled woman may respectively appear to be relics of traditional class and religious values, or as icons of the eroticised female body of colonial desire, she still appears as a powerful – and ambiguous – indicator of meaning in contemporary literature. Both Asian and Euro-American theorists have recognised the equation in imperialist through between the feminised nation and the trope of the veiled woman. Yet how far is the figure of the Indian woman invisible as well as silent? This article discusses how gendered representations of women represent the changing role of women in terms of the traditional place of women behind the screen of purdah, within the confines of the haveli (harem). Ironically, while women are placed in restricted gendered spaces within certain Islamic cultures and in upper castes of India – struggling to find agency and identity outside such spatial definition – western feminists have advocated the creation of "women-only" spaces. This article will challenge traditional concepts and debate the implications of both first and third world feminisms.

Key Words: third wave feminism, haveli, veil

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Feminist geographers have proposed how space is a complex web of relations of domination and subordination, a "power-geometry" of difference. While feminist and postcolonial theories explore notions of nomad identity, exile, hybridity and marginality, maps of postmodern social space elaborate the politics of representation in terms of the "geopolitics of location" (McDowell 29). The web of power that constructs everyday life is spatialized, and women are both actively and passively influenced by space in their constructions of identity. Segregated space has been described variously in binary terms of material/social, geographic/cultural, metaphorical/actual, real/symbolic, and real/non-real. As Gillian Rose elaborates, the difference between real and non-real spaces is constructed through terms of sexual difference (57). Thus the coincidence between material, symbolic and discursive constructions of space influence and determine the gendered construction of space versus non-space in social, spatial and metaphoric terms. While such concepts are indicative of patriarchal society in general, they are perhaps nowhere more overtly – and controversially – expressed than in cultures in the Arab and Islamic worlds and in India.

This article problematizes concepts of female space by way of two examples from literature – one from India (as an example from the Hindu world), and one from Algeria (as an example from the Muslim world). It analyzes representations of the role of women in terms of the "traditional" place of woman behind the screen of purdah, within the confines of the harem or haveli. The harem is traditionally a space that both protects and imprisons, an extension of the veil, the enforcement of literally "forbidden" (*haram*) space.[ii] Placing such concepts of women's literal positioning in society in the framework

of East/West feminisms involves a re-examination of the apparent discrepancies or similarities of feminist theory. While second wave feminism emphasized issues of difference, of a deconstruction of the category "woman" according to sexuality, class and color, third wave feminists must now – in the light of globalization – foster a stance in which the personal is once again formulated to meet contemporary political agendas. As Sara Suleri argues, euro-centric economies of representing and adjudicating between disparate cultural and ethnic realities have remained patriarchal, so that "it is surely the task of radical feminism to provide an alternate perspective" (756). Feminists active in countries dominated by the political powers of religious extremists, whether Hindu or Islamic, are aided by their awareness of the work and achievements of feminists elsewhere and of the possibility of appealing to universal principles of human rights and international law.[iii] Elaborating on the dichotomy between secular (Western) and religious (Hindu and Muslim) feminisms, this article will seek to determine how far issues of women's space and agency in fact overlap. The question, therefore, of "incarceration or insurrection?" mobilizes a new focus of feminist debate: that of similarity rather than difference. It necessitates not only the situating of the perceiver (here as a Western and white female) in order to locate "from whose point of view?" but also an interactive analysis of positionings in the postmodern and the "traditional."[iv]

In her book *Real and Imagined Women*, Sunder Rajan delineates how in the context of India negotiations of identity, agency and even daily safety (in terms of rape, sati and dowry-murder) revolve around conflicts between the state and feminism, and between tradition and modernity. While the Hindu and Muslim veiled woman may respectively appear to be a relic of traditional class and religious values, or an icon of the eroticized female body of colonial desire, despite the impact of modernization/globalization, she still appears as a powerful – and ambiguous – indicator of meaning. In contemporary literature, differing representations of the veil are found in writers as diverse as Rama Mehta and the "postmodern" Salman Rushdie, and from Ruth Prawer Jhabvala to contemporary social activists such as Ginu Kamani.

Theoretical approaches (as well as the media) in the Western world have focused on the veil and veiled space as an Islamic phenomenon, although, as analyzed here, the veil is also a feature of high-class Hindu families. In the Muslim world, the veil is the garment most frequently associated in Western minds with the cultural and social oppression of women. The veil is usually stereotyped as a signifier of female enslavement or as a means of controlling and confining women's space. Yet for centuries the Western colonizers' view of the harem has been both distorted and erroneous. The harem is the part of the house designated for women, and often refers to the women themselves. While European writers often designated aspects of Muslim life, such as the veil, the harem and polygamy as signifiers of Islamic "inferiority" and the subordinate status of women, Shirley Ardener argues that men and women, either individually or collectively, also live in separate worlds in Western cultures. Perceptions, experiences and social constructions, according to Ardener, are all determined by differing gendered "reality" (19). Leila Ahmed constructs the harem as a women's "protected space" where a sense of collective bonding and companionship are increased: a reasoning that has also been hotly disputed by critics such as Haidah Moghissi, who claims that those who argue for an empowering dimension of purdah are those who do not live in regimes where such incarceration is enforced. These discrepancies in the perception of the harem and

women's space, which inform my discussion of the possible experiences within gendered space in the light of examples from literature, are therefore not clearly drawn across an East/West dichotomy, nor is there agreement between all Islamic/Arab feminists on the issue.

The gendered space of purdah (literally life "behind a curtain"), the veiled space that has been theorized as delineating and enforcing an inside/outside, private/public, female/male dichotomy, is an extreme form of sex role differentiation that contentiously provides both "separate worlds and symbolic shelter" (Lateef 133). Yet veiling is not a phenomenon restricted within cultural or religious limits: it is a widespread and dominant feature of many societies that seek to maintain a rigid enforcement of obedience to male authority. A return to veiling has been described as "turning back the clock" (Sharpley-Whiting 60) in Islamic societies, but many Arab thinkers (male and female) regard it as a step *forwards*. In its multiple socio-cultural contexts, some Arab feminists regard veiling as a step *towards* agency and identity, in direct opposition to a traditional Euro-American "Orientalist" viewpoint. Rosi Braidotti, for example, speaking as a Western feminist, identifies mobility as one of the prime determinants of freedom and agency. She also stresses that the physical dimension is only one aspect of mobility, another being the intellectual space of creativity: freedom of mind (256).

The veil, although seeming to define boundaries of invisible borders and impose rules of space and sexual difference (a "prison" according to writers such as Fatima Mernissi), nevertheless allows some women *increased* mobility within their social and spatial world. Ironically, as Shahida Lateef describes, a lack of purdah in Indian families may imply greater control over all aspects of women's lives through other means; for example, a refusal by parents to send their daughters to school (135). While the veil seems to achieve aspects that promote agency within this specific cultural milieu, by providing access to "male" public space, as well as in the context of providing a protection against harsh climatic conditions in the geographical context of desert life, it is "instructive to see how an item of clothing with so many positive, practical uses has, over many years, been hijacked as a means of controlling the female sex" (Buonaventura 97). In her interviews with Indian women from Muslim and Hindu backgrounds, Anees Jung documents instances of purdah within both religions – based on the concept of *fitna* (woman's influence of chaos on society) and a woman's *dharma* (sacred duty) respectively. Jung questions whether within these contexts a woman's "home" means a haven or a prison (49). In these varying contexts, the veil can be discussed as bearing meanings ranging from statements of class status to debatably outmoded religious dogma.

As Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak points out in her famous essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" the voice of subaltern woman remains silent and irreclaimable. Yet how far is the figure of Indian woman also invisible as well as silent? In contrast to an American-based feminist writer such as Spivak, who regards the power of speech as synonymous with agency, Jung suggests that "silence could be a language through which women in this land realised themselves" (20). She refers to the secluded havelis, such as that in which her mother still lives, as "energy-filled spaces of silence," the "microcosms sustaining quality of life within the macrocosm of a vast land" (*ibid*). Jung's fascinating account of encounters with women across India is written in ambiguous terms, where often, instead of disempowerment, the veil, harem (*zenana*) and purdah are regarded as features of "psychic empowerment" and possibility rather than social oppression. The

texts examined here will be used to ascertain how far literary representations of purdah and the veil portray purdah as either liberatory or as crippling to human life and agency, as some feminist critics argue.

In Hindu India, the figure of the veiled woman is indicative of a high-class family, one in which the women are not required to help in agricultural labor. The woman is confined in, and defined through, her relationships within a strict patriarchal authority. Many Indian women writers themselves tend to uphold this traditional women's world, advocating its positive qualities of communication, security and protection. Others portray both purdah and "purdah mentality" as means of social control, reinforced through fear and a strict hierarchy. As Leigh Minturn discusses, the major function of Indian purdah is to enforce obedience to authority in the form of both husband and mother-in-law. It is disguised in a discourse that "honors" wives. Women are harassed and vilified for not conforming to these restrictive norms (76). The system is justified as a way of protecting women from rape and seduction, although, as Minturn points out, purdah produces a paradoxical double standard since women are rendered more mysterious and therefore attractive – and more vulnerable – to men.

India: Separate Worlds and Symbolic Shelter

Sociologists Indira J. Parikh and Pulin K. Garg describe the traditional state of purdah in India where upper-class women live mostly indoors:

> They come as brides and leave only for the funeral pyre. The husband's home is their prison, their castle, and their palace. They believe, or are made to believe, or have no other choice but believe, that this is all for their good.…However, within the walls of their home, within the feudal system of a large joint family, run parallel themes of exploitation, intrigue and counter-intrigue, all revolving around the control of resources through legacy and heritage. This is the only life they know as wives. (90)

Rama Mehta's novel *Inside the Haveli* (first published in 1977) has been hailed as a classic that maintains strict authenticity to the life it portrays. The author herself was both a novelist and a leading sociologist, whose insight into the lives of women was based upon her own experiences of life in Udaipur (Rajesthan). Her novel is built upon information contained in one of her non-fiction texts "From Purdah to Modernity," a fascinating study that reflects Mehta's concern with women and her country's coexisting and conflicting trends of time. The novel portrays the educated heroine's journey from modernity back into the traditional world behind the veil, where the severe restrictions of etiquette and subservience dominate life. She experiences the shift between two eras, and two geographical space-time dimensions, leaving behind the modernity of her parents' home for the traditional household of her aristocratic in-laws. While apparently typifying "silenced woman," Mehta's heroine Geeta finds fulfillment in observing without being observed, and she finally not only accepts the power of the patriarchs – the "towering tree under which the family sheltered" (262) – but ultimately perpetuates its values in the next generation.

The main theme of the novel concerns Geeta's alienation from the life of the haveli and her gradual acceptance of its mores and rules. She is forced to live by its rigidly enforced codes of behavior which centre on the ritual avoidance of both men and older women through veiling, learning that in order to retain her respectability, she must keep

her head covered, even when no men are in sight (18). Mehta describes that "in the haveli, men were regarded with awe as if they were gods. They were the masters and their slightest wish was a command" (21). In such patriarchally restricted physical and intellectual space, veiled woman, like the subaltern woman Robert Young describes, "is a signifier, whose distinction is that she is shifted from one position to another without being allowed any content" (164). From the viewpoint of a feminist psychoanalyst, Luce Irigaray writes that female space granted by men is "the place which is appropriate for the need you have of me…the place you have positioned me, so that I remain available for your needs" (47). Similarly, Martha C. Nussbaum argues that women as traditional givers of care and love can be abused by the family structure in India so that women's abilities are undervalued and wives often treated as domestic servants (243).

Hindu feminists reject such aspects of their religious tradition that involve superstitions sanctifying the rigid codes of conduct required of women. Nussbaum scrutinizes how seclusion is incompatible with fully human functioning, addressing how traditional principles of female modesty and purity may negate female agency and "freedom." In Mehta's novel, the heroine Geeta begins her re-education in the traditional behavior of "respectable" women when she first lifts back her sari from her face to look at the vast walls of the haveli. "No, no, you cannot do that," she is told as the sari is pulled down over her face. "In Udaipur we keep purdah. Strange eyes must not see your beautiful face" (17). Defining the rigidity of the class system within parameters of social avoidance/restricted physical and social access, Mehta depicts here how purdah reduces women's access to other women (since all cross-generational and cross-class contact or friendship is proscribed). Since contact with the rest of society is also barred, purdah women are institutionally insulated from social change: an effective way of disallowing any feminist activism or knowledge of changing values or attitudes outside the walls of the haveli/harem.

In the haveli of this novel, along with physical veiling, emotions must also be hidden. Geeta finds that although the other women thrive on gossip, they "never expressed an opinion and never revealed their feelings" (87). At times of extreme crisis, Geeta burns with rage, anger or frustration, yet remains silent.[v] Veiling the face is the overt symbolism of masking of inner emotion. In terms of the traditional Indian theory of aesthetics, this concealment could be compared to an externally imposed denial of *rasa*, or aesthetic emotion. *Rasa* is defined as a dynamic process of aesthetic response through which an individual perceives both the inner meaning of an art object or performance, and an appreciation of the particular *rasa* (emotion) it evokes. This leads to an ultimate transformation in her awareness towards emotional, intellectual and intuitive integration: an experience traditionally associated with higher consciousness (Dehejia 33). Linking spatiality with visuality, the erasure of women from visual and temporal space also disallows the opportunity for aesthetic and, therefore, spiritual fulfillment. Thus, the division of space, as in the haveli, into gendered social space, justified by religious tradition, is not only a physical restriction but also a spiritual one, designed to prevent female access not only to the form (*rupa*) of scripture but also spiritual (as distinct to religious) experience through emotion (*rasa*). This is portrayed in the novel when Geeta is denied access to the male-designated rooms of the haveli, and punished for witnessing the paintings and beautiful songs that the men of the family alone may enjoy. Rajan describes the "new woman" of India, the educated woman who "has been drawn out of

the privacy and invisibility of the home" and equates her new visibility as being a measure of her *reality* (137). This corroborates the trope of a woman hidden behind her clothing or the walls of her home lacking a corporeal, intellectual or emotional existence.

The fact that Geeta eventually accepts the discipline of the haveli without protest (91; 108) highlights the possibility of choice within the traditional forms of seclusion. As Nussbaum argues, an informed choice to continue traditional modes of behavior can be viewed as a statement of freedom equivalent to a rejection of purdah. This element of choice, including the freedom to choose to veil or not, is often cited as an indication of agency (Nussbaum 236). Yet, from a euro-centric viewpoint, the emphasis on the silence of women – the necessity for Geeta not to voice her concerns or anxieties to anyone (other than her maid, who is lower down the social hierarchy), for silence before her mother-in-law and any older relatives, and for the taboo on speech at all in front of a male relative[vi] – indicates that Indian women in purdah are effectively silenced from within the social system.

As indicative of the way such patriarchal /androcentric attitudes are imbibed unwittingly by women, Mernissi cites how women have been convinced by the male elite faction of society that "their mediocre view of culture and society has a sacred basis" (*Islam* ix). Cultural traditions such as Islam are not the predetermining factor in the utilization of the veil as a means of oppression; it is social institutions such as the family which are designed to restrain women's power. In Mehta's novel, the upper-class family censor behavior and freedom of action by way of a hierarchical strategy based on gender and age, endorsed through reference to religious tradition and cultural taboos. Traditionally, one reason in Hinduism for the seclusion of women in purdah was to limit access to women since sexual activity was thought to sap men's strength, in much the same way as a disease. Another basis for the sanctioning of women is sacred texts, such as the laws of Manu, which state that there can be no freedom for women. These laws, for example, reject woman as a temptress, claiming her to be unworthy to be trusted with her own life, but one who must be under the care of her father, then husband, then son (Minturn 207).

While the silencing and invisibility of woman in these circumstances may seem overwhelmingly negative to a Western feminist, Mehta's novel does not play upon such binary judgments. Silence, like veiling, is ambivalent. Geeta, for example, soon discovers positive aspects of veiling: "She came to love the veil that hid her face; this allowed her to think while others talked. To her delight she had discovered that through her thin muslin sari, she could see everyone and yet not be seen by them" (22-23). In terms of feminist space, in Mehta's depiction of purdah, the distinction between geographical and metaphorical space is collapsed as the performance of power that distinguishes real from non-real space invades both. Women are incarcerated by both actual and symbolic patriarchal power, a discourse that limits both creative and dynamic action, a characteristic of "real space," and enforces immobility and stasis, which characterize "non-real space" (Rose 59). Equally, it could be argued that the women in this novel have their existence on a border zone of being/becoming. Positioned on the edge of the patriarchal world, they live literally behind the curtain, on the far extremity of the courtyards, behind the lattice wall, concealed beneath the veil. Homi Bhabha speaks in terms of "in-between spaces [that] provide the terrain for elaborating new strategies of selfhood – singular and communal – that initiate new signs of identity and innovative

sites of collaboration, and contestation" (2). Here, a pertinent question is whether the in-between spaces occupied by the haveli woman can be a space of elaborating any sense of selfhood, or if all sense of identity is prescribed and predetermined.

When Geeta discovers "to her delight" that she can see while not being seen, she places herself on that border threshold of not belonging in either world. Furthermore, as we have seen, she is at home neither in the world of the women, nor the world of men, which is forbidden to her. Woman's position is both at the border of male space and at a border of time, situated in a non-time between past tradition and present modernity. Her only role in life is to support the superior males of the family, whether by preparing food or supplying male offspring. To use a transcultural comparison, her role is not that dissimilar from that in Jean Baudrillard's *On Seduction* in which woman's function is to protect man from the void (as will be elaborated on later).

Women's roles and their "life space" are circumscribed from birth by their gender. From an early age a female child is made to feel her inferiority to male children: "She experiences no space for herself and learns to be *invisible*, obedient, conforming…She learns to accept herself as unwanted, or as a *transient* to be cared for, but never to belong" (Parikh and Garg 101; emphasis added). This description of the female sense of transience and non-belonging fits into Bhabha's terminology of liminality, or existence on a threshold. The restriction upon space is one way of ensuring a woman's conformity and obedience. A woman is "always in somebody else's space. There is no space which [she] can call her own" (*ibid* 102). Beliefs that women have to endure the denial of human freedoms in this way must and can change as women themselves forge changes in stereotyped patterns of human conduct.[vii]

Denied physical, personal and spiritual space, many women in India must learn to live within the system without any legitimate space for the self. However, while women living within patriarchies in South Asia are still fighting to earn access to male public space,

> [m]any feminists today believe that the goals of earlier generations of feminists who sought greater access for themselves and for "Others" to this elite male-dominated public sphere need to be reformulated. We now recognise that there can be no pure public spaces in which the liberal ideals of equality, impartiality and universality are achieved (Duncan 2).

Parikh and Garg argue that a woman's "search is for a place where she can be without being pushed around or without having demands made on her. In the absence of such a place, she often hides behind her prescribed role-idealism…or tends to fantasise" (36). This positioning complements arguments of initiatives for "women only" spaces, where women are able to renegotiate identity through "third space" locations. Such spaces could be the location for the third wave of feminist thought and activism, a feminism that encompasses religious and cultural issues worldwide.

The Muslim World: Algeria

The relationship between women and Islam and the position of women within Islamic states is both volatile and ambivalent. While Western feminists once took up the veiling argument to illustrate the oppression of women in Islam, it is no longer viable to talk in such dualistic terms while women all over the world are actively choosing to veil as an expression of their own religious, sexual, and national identity. Ania Loomba

points out that in "fundamentalist" discourse (that is to say, where Islam assumes a political agenda) women are subjects as well as objects, "targets as well as speakers of its most virulent rhetoric" (227).

Speaking from a "secular" Muslim standpoint, the feminist sociologist Mernissi argues that veiling and the institution of veiled space are both visible and invisible (*Harem* 68), just as the Algerian writer and filmmaker Assia Djebar cites that "there is no seraglio any more. But the structure of the seraglio attempts to impose its laws in the new wasteland: the law of invisibility, the law of silence" (*Fantasia* 151). In situations devoid of choice, a woman may be coerced by male (or older female) relatives, or indoctrinated by phallocentric arguments related to either "religion" or "traditional culture." The Egyptian writer and activist Nawal El Saadawi links the practices of veiling to international politics, connecting the revival of fundamentalism in certain parts of the world and "the increasing demands that women be excluded from public life, secluded and kept at home. This fundamentalism is not unrelated to colonialism and neo-colonialism" (El Saadawi, *Reader* 67). Arguing that neo-colonialism/religious fundamentalism are two sides of the same coin, she cites capitalist neo-colonialism as a system that corrupts both men and women into being oppressors. Feminism, she claims, is not aimed at fighting men, but at what makes men oppress women.[viii]

A continuing debate about the positive and negative aspects of the veil again raises the question of women's identity and the problem of oppression versus freedom of choice for women in an Islamic world. The veil remains a highly contentious symbol, especially in Algeria. Marnia Lazreg concludes that in Algeria the colonial legacy has effectively prevented the emergence of a sense of self "that could transcend the boundaries of Islam" (225). As the rising religious movements use women to embody the specificity of Islamic culture (just as the colonial powers had equated "the Orient" with woman), so both the state government and the religious parties use women for the furtherance of their own political interests. At the same time, women themselves are being forced to veil, as a process, according to Lazreg, of "violent silencing" (226). For example, in her most recent novel, *So Vast the Prison*, Djebar sees Algeria now as a land of tears – and blood. Women are forgotten because they have no writing (like the *satis* discussed by Spivak) and no voice.

The Vietnamese writer Trinh T. Minh-ha concludes that veiling, like the use of silence, "has many faces," and can be either subversive or oppressive depending on the context:

> Difference should neither be defined by the dominant sex nor by the dominant culture. So that when women decide to lift the veil one can say that they do so in defiance of their men's oppressive right to their bodies. But when they decide to keep or put on the veil they once took off they might do so to reappropriate their space or to claim a new difference in defiance of genderless, hegemonic, centred standardisation (73).

The veil thus appears in terms of a complex series of meanings: opportunity, privacy and respect versus repression and anonymity. Even within Islam, the veil has a variety of nuanced meanings and connotations beyond stereotyped cultural/political tropes, also implicated within other religious traditions.

A Postmodern Veil

If, as Moghissi argues, the character of Islamic patriarchal institutions such as the veil is enforced through coercion rather than choice, then it is useful here to delve into the possible mentality behind such enforcement. Despite the varied and changing nature of the veil in both its external manifestations and its iconic functions, it remains one method of reinforcing the control of both individual men and the state against women.

The so-called "clash" of the Islamic with the postmodern world has been an issue of recent debate and controversy. Yet the two are not as diverse as they may initially seem. Frequently, the postmodern world is active in actually colluding with fundamentalist discourse in, and solutions to, crises of modernity by validating Muslim women's experience as ethnically "traditional." Both worlds also continue to exploit women's bodies in reinforcing models of male dominance. Women have been frequently cited in the West as an "absence," either of truth, reason, or being. Similarly, in Islam women are frequently defined in terms of "lack." In the context of my discussion here, one theory within the postmodern world will be analyzed to ascertain how far it is instructive in the analysis of contemporary women in Islamic as well as European masculinist hegemony.

In traditional metaphysics the function of the veil is to define the difference between surface and depth, appearance and reality. Baudrillard takes up Nietzsche's critique of truth, in which he challenged these metaphysical notions in his attempt to dismantle a philosophy of truth. Baudrillard proposes a culture of "hyperreality" that is defined by the loss of any distinction between the real and the imagined, or reality and illusion. Within a Nietzschean dialectic of surface and depth, in which the surface is everything, woman's role is that of being never quite real or true. She exists as an ambiguity, a missing dimension. In *On Seduction*, Baudrillard opens by agreeing with Freud that "there is but one sexuality, one libido – and it is masculine.…The feminine, however is, and always has been, somewhere else" (6). For Baudrillard, woman is "all appearance, and it is the feminine as appearance that thwarts masculine depth" (10). Woman can never accede to truth or meaning. He proceeds to claim that "the masculine possesses unfailing powers of discrimination and absolute criteria for pronouncing the truth. The masculine is certain, the feminine is insoluble" (11). Here he equates the feminine with the status of the simulacrum, for there is no other femininity than that of appearances. Since all depth and power belongs to the male, the "only and irresistible power of femininity is the inverse power of seduction" (15). In a universe that can only be interpreted in terms of play, appearances and simulacra, the feminine has a power to seduce because of its unlocatability.

Women's great mistake, for Baudrillard, is to want to become real. Only man can ever be the subject, everything else is merely the object of his desire. "Seduction cannot exist in the world of men and things; occult and mysterious, it is the enigmatic, the insoluble and must remain so if it is to remain at all" (Plant 88). However, identity is only possible in relation to the Other, to that which lies beyond it. In the postmodern world, all that lies beyond is the void, nothing, meaninglessness. Woman's role as seductress is to stand between man and the void. Since everything is only appearance, seduction stands like a door "which is never opened" between something and nothing. Feminine seduction becomes the limit beyond which there is nothing, the border that can be safely occupied, which preserves the subject from death (*ibid* 96). The abyss, or radical other, the mysterious, unknowable, unbounded outside acts as a foil against which

man obtains his identity. Baudrillard writes that "at the edge of this black hole the point of no return becomes a point of total reversibility" (128). Seduction makes the fall impossible.

Seduction hides the void from man and thereby protects him from what he fears most, the death of the subject. The seductive feminine maintains but also shields the abyss from man, acting like a veil. It provides a border that can be safely known and occupied. Like the reassurance of seeing a woman veiled, man need look nor inquire no further. The female remains the object of male desire, and his safety against the threat of the unknown. Man maintains the boundary that he has constructed, a feminine that *he* defines as seduction. However, at the basis of the feminine as protective boundary is the suggestion of woman *as* the void. In Baudrillard's "seduction," the masculine is again defined as the exclusive "real," condemning the feminine to a precarious "identity" *as part of* the void, and thus a threat to man's power and identity. Women become a secret society, share a language unknown to men – and in their strange and indeterminate fluidity become a threat to men. Sadie Plant summarizes: "Baudrillard's man needs the unidentifiable in order to define himself; mystery to provide him with certainty…he needs to know the unidentified, the mysterious and insoluble, but they are of course unknown, the horizon of fear beyond which there is only the void" (105). Clearly, this relates to why man needs to veil woman, in order to retain her "mystery" and unidentifiability against which he can define himself as the only subject. The female represents the border of fear. As long as man has control of this border, the level of female seduction, then both the feminine and the void are in his control, and his fear is minimized. Man wants to set the parameters, establish the boundaries: he wants to control woman's "games" and limit her sphere of activity – he wants, in fact, to veil her. As Plant concludes: "Baudrillard's seduction reassures the subject that the feminine will always be there, a border zone of protection, a challenge that is never made, mystery safely ritualised and secrecy made intelligible." (105) By veiling woman, man achieves these desires: the unknown of woman is contained and made comprehensible. Baudrillard warns of the dangers of feminism and maintains that the exclusion of the feminine is to its own benefit.

This type of argument is comparable to the mode of patriarchal thought that maintains the veiling of women in Islam, a hegemony that distorts traditional concepts to uphold masculinist notions of supremacy and control. These ideas about seduction and the role of the feminine in the light of traditions of seclusion of Islamic women are illustrated by another literary example: Djebar's *A Sister to Scheherazade*, which deals with the relationship of a man with his two wives. The first, a liberated "Westernized" woman, leaves him, despite the passionate and loving nature of their marriage. After she leaves, he takes a second wife through an arranged marriage. This second wife is a traditional, veiled woman, who exchanges the confines of life in a slum for imprisonment in his luxury apartment. The husband (who remains nameless) insists that she stay at home to look after his two children. His first wife, Isma, plays the games of seduction and sexual availability, but she becomes a danger to him when she eventually wants to make the rules. As Plant writes, man's greatest fear is that "seduction takes itself literally, and begins to make the rules and operate careless of man's needs." There is the "danger that it might transgress his sacred horizon of appearances and make holes in the walls of his world…for holes, according to Baudrillard…mean the abyss" (105). The

husband chooses his second wife, Hajila, so that he can veil and control her, bringing order to his life and his environment, so that the feminine will once gain act as a border zone of protection. However, Djebar shows the dangers of maintaining this masculine control (with its obvious similarities to colonialism) and of relegating "dangerous," "free-thinking" woman to the "forbidden zone" of the void. (The "forbidden zone" of course, in traditional Islamic culture and in the Arabic language, *is* the realm of the female.) The husband, in acting out his prescribed patriarchal role, has ignored the role and needs of emotion. His body responds by being temporarily impotent. He turns to drink, and eventually rapes – in order to deflower – his second wife.

This scene introduces another important symbol of the veil as hymen. This symbol of the veil is of course behind the ritual wearing of a veil by a bride during marriage. His sole right to gaze on her face symbolizes the husband's unique ownership of her sexuality and right to remove the bride's "purity." Theoretical notions confirm cultural definitions of the veil as trope of both cover and segregation. As outlined in Jacques Derrida's *Dissemination*, the "hymen" functions as mimesis (representation/imitation), occupying a space between inner and outer worlds, a place of "conceptual opposition" demarcating public and private space. This in-between character of the hymen acts as a sign of "(con)fusion between identity and difference," between play and appearance, an inter-medium coming between binary terms of opposition. Conversely also simulating sameness, the hymen "abolishes the difference between the gaping void of absence and the fullness of presence"; it is – like Draupadi's endless sari in the *Mahabharata* – "a play of signs over the abyss" (Gebauer and Wulf 161). Derrida formulates the hymen as both token of virginity and symbol of marriage. He situates the hymen as a boundary between inside and outside, through which Manichaean opposites are produced and reproduced. Thus, while on one hand promoting assimilation (in the context of marriage), it also articulates difference (through its function of separation). The hymen as dividing line is at the basis of economies governing inside/outside, sameness/difference, and public/private.

In her turn, the second wife refuses to play by the patriarchal rules. She discovers a means of claiming her identity by leaving the house unveiled to walk around the city. In traditional Algerian society this is tantamount to going out naked. The husband's response to this violation of his rules is to attack her.

> He struck at the word "naked." He struck blow after blow accompanied by
> the repetition of this word as if he recognised it.…He strikes you across the
> face. He takes an empty bottle, breaks it on the edge of the sink and mutters,
> listening to his own eloquence, "I'll put out your eyes and then you'll never
> see again! And no one will ever see you either" (86-87).

Since the ownership of the gaze is traditionally male, it is crucial here to note that it is her face, and her eyes in particular, that he attacks. She has violated the rules and has been seen by other men without her veil – she has abandoned her role of guarding the junction point to the abyss.

The narrator comments about the wife's response: "It is the moment after the pain that you have to face. The real wound that cannot be healed! Wide-eyed you look around for answers. By staring into the void you hope to find out why…why the exile? As if the exile were something visible!" (89). Baudrillard's "seduction," the relegation of woman to the borderline function as door or veil, to the void, is a way of "making death

safe" – but this is obviously only true for the male. By veiling woman, by restricting her (as in this story), man makes mystery safely ritualized and secrecy intelligible. As with seduction, the patriarchal male argues that the exclusion of the feminine is for her benefit. (Although, paradoxically, positioning women in this way may invest them with a lot of power, particularly as removing the veil is physically – if not symbolically – an easy act.) Like the husband in *Sister to Scheherazade*, when this system fails, man is threatened and in fear, and resorts to anger and violence. Perhaps this is why Baudrillard warns of the dangers of feminism: that the void and the feminine must remain secret and concealed, or women must risk the consequences.

If, in a theoretical situation, the feminine role of seduction acts like a door to protect man from the void, then by extension, in "real life," if we equate the veil with this door then the void that is hidden by the veil is woman herself – whether we want to determine "woman" as an essence or an individual person. The being of woman as herself is, as Djebar suggests in *A Sister to Scheherazade*, "to refuse to veil one's voice and to start shouting," for this is real dissidence. Those who do not cry out in protest are in "a prison without reprieve" (204). Once women have spoken out, they move away from being "generalized woman" to being woman as an individual.

That the veil is to hide women's "secret" is a common theme in Islam, although what the secret is remains undisclosed. Once Hajila has dropped her veil, she is "a stranger whom no one knows" and she can walk about with "open eyes" (41). Ironically, it was the veil that gave her an identity: when she drops it, she becomes anonymous. It is this sense of invisibility once she is *unveiled* that is liberating. In this light, it is interesting to consider Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's theory that the process of becoming-woman is a phase in a journey of diminishment, a step on the road to becoming-*imperceptible*: "imperceptibility is the immanent end of becoming" (279). This process of "erasure" is highly problematic. Deleuze and Guattari ask: "But what does becoming-imperceptible signify, coming at the end of all the molecular becomings that began with becoming woman?…A first response would be: to be like everyone else" (279). This theory has understandably alarmed some feminists (see, for example, Fleiger 40).   In the context of my discussion, if imperceptibility is the "immanent end of becoming, its cosmic formula" as Deleuze intends, then this theory could be considered another masculinist theory designed to relegate woman to the realm of the invisible, the veiled.

Undergoing her own process of "diminishment," Hajila not only feels she cannot be seen when she is unveiled, she also believes she cannot be heard. When a man stops her in the park to ask her a question, she is seized with panic, for not only does she not hear what he says, but she has also lost the power of speech. Isma comments:

As if you were able to speak! Don't people realise that you are out of doors?…when you throw off the woollen veil, when you roam around, your voice seems to have left you behind. It catches up with you again at the very last minute, when you have wrapped the cloak around you again (42).

This passage details a reversal of the Islamic understanding of woman's voice as *awra* (shameful), and is another instance in which Djebar subverts the use of the veil. While women are famously silenced by Islamic patriarchy – and by the "religious" tenet of veiling – here Hajila is mute since she is caught in the gap between identities, veiled and

unveiled, while in the process of negotiating a new identity. The gap, for Hajila, is a gap in space/time; in terms of patriarchy, it is a gap of morality.

One could propose here that the veil and physical seclusion are not used to protect women, but to protect men. If women remain inside and unable to see men, they cannot judge them. The husband's violence when he discovers that Hajila has been leaving the house unveiled exposes that the "real wound…cannot be healed.…By staring into the void you hope to find out why, why the exile? As if the exile were something visible!" (89) Exile, pain, and the real "veiling," Djebar suggests, are all invisible, and internal. Exile, both physical and mental, is a recurring theme in postcolonial writing and one that especially epitomizes the location of veiled, secluded, woman.

Is it possible, however, for Arab and Hindu feminists to posit or fantasize, in the manner of Irigaray, a female space that transcends the confines of time and space? In her increasingly relevant critique of American attitudes towards Islam written over twenty years ago, Ahmed outlined her fantasy that Arabia could become the "feminist headquarters of the world" (532). Refuting the assumption that women who are secluded from the company of men are thereby deprived, and that societies that segregate the sexes are inherently oppressive and inferior, Ahmed argues the case that "protected" and "holy" women only spaces are in fact a desired goal for feminists in the West. Irigaray envisions such a place of female escape in "La mystérique" as an underground world combining mystery, hysteria and mysticism, a place where "the feminine finds its natural home" (193). Irigaray describes this underground world as being hidden from the surveyor's gaze, a world where women might whirl and dance out of the glare of the (patriarchal) sun. While Mernissi (and others) argue for the *hammam* (the public bath) rather than the harem/haveli as a place conducive to female bonding, Mernissi also projects a hope for the future of Islamic cultures in the female-centered space of the Simurgh: a spiritual world where every individual recognizes themselves for what they truly are, the whole planet "soul and body…completely" (*Islam* 132).

Ironically, perhaps, to conclude: while women are placed in restricted gendered spaces within certain Islamic cultures and in upper castes of India – struggling to find agency and identity outside such spatial definition – Western feminists are advocating the creation of women only spaces with the rationale that "it is, after all, such hard work living with 'the enemy' all the time" (McDowell 44). Arguments for a spatialised feminist politics – women only spaces – are based on arguments about solidarity, comfort and safety, but, as McDowell concludes, however appealing such ideas may be, it is hard, if not impossible, to defend certain separatist geographies while denying others. While acknowledging the need for a reformulation of gendered space, I argue here for the importance of a third wave movement being a global feminist perspective based on integration. Such a movement is the only way of opposing the divisive structures of patriarchal domination and destruction that are rapidly bringing our planet to the point of self-destruction. Perhaps an analysis of gendered space, which seems to deny both social, and often spiritual, agency, suggests the need for a further integration of space, rather than risking further alienation of the sexes through separation. True insurrection, perhaps, lies in understanding and empathy, not further division.

In exploring the elaboration of the postmodern interpretation of a traditional "religious" phenomenon, this article suggests a direction that third wave feminism should take in this new millennium, as it strives to comprehend and assimilate apparently

clashing social and religious agendas. Feminists must, at this strife-ridden point in time, when masculinist hegemonies and discourses in both East and West, North and South advocate violence as the only viable method of cultural interaction, propose an alternate *modus vivendi*. Women and feminists must move in a new direction – that of a united voice speaking out against patriarchal aggression. From having addressed and tackled individual women's harassment, degradation and social disadvantaging (especially in the areas of education and employment), the second wave rightly highlighted individual differences of class, color, and sexuality. By the end of the twentieth century, feminism in the West had achieved much in terms of raising public awareness and in gaining women more visibility in the democratic process. Now, however, with the blatant failure of democracy – exemplified by the US's abandonment of the practice of installing an elected president based on a majority vote – the role of the feminist movement has changed. Far from being now obsolete, the women's movement must counteract current patriarchal trends in government of fear and terror. The third wave must be one in which the victimization and demonization of races and peoples of the world is stopped. It must be one of a unification of feminists from the Global North and South in the context of a globalized revival of the human right for dignity and freedom from fear. This article addresses just one of the issues that a new unification of the religious/secular trends in feminism must resolve.

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[ii] The word *haram* (with the root h/r/m), meaning something taboo or forbidden, is linked etymologically with the words *harem* and *mahram,* which indicate the family members with whom one may associate without restrictions, such as purdah or veiling (see El Guindi).

[iii] See Carter's discussion of feminism and globalisation in *The Political Theory of Global Citizenship* (216-20).

[iv] The different theoretical positionings of feminists in the Global South or North, I would argue, are now situated to offer a reconstructive, rather than deconstructive, critique of the postmodern age. If the second wave coincided with the political and academic refutation of the certainties of religious hegemonies and the loss of faith in grand narratives, the third wave surely offers an opportunity to reformulate social and religious constructs on the feminist stance of a global ethic of care and compassion. (I refer to concepts of a global feminist ethic such as that proposed by Charlotte Bunch *inter alia*.)

[v] As Parikh and Garg point out: "The misery of the upper class woman is more poignant as she cannot express her anger in public or make a scene." (91)

[vi] For example, we learn that "[e]ven after two years her father-in-law and his father were strangers to her. She had never spoken a word to them. The men, including her husband, seemed to disappear as soon as it was daylight." (19)

[vii] Nussbaum cites instances where women negotiate or bargain to claim their religious and social rights (236 *inter alia*).

[viii] Significantly, El Saadawi also blames postcolonial academics for glorifying cultural difference: cultural relativism being dangerous in denying transcendence of individual differences of culture and colour and "the celebration of our similarities" – a process she refers to as "veiling the brain" by academia (Keynote Address).

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