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The Emancipation of a Harem Girl: Resisting the Gendered Division of Space in Wafa Faith Hallam’s *The Road from Morocco*

By Rachid Lamghari

Abstract

This article examines the challenging of Orientalist and Western discourses and of patriarchal authority over Eastern women in Wafa Faith Hallam’s memoir *The Road from Morocco*. The conventional representation of these women is revisited as Saadia in the memoir debunks the passivity and docility with which they are associated by exercising her agency and trespassing the sacred cultural and physical frontiers. Regardless of being introduced to confinement in the private space of a harem since her infancy, Saadia manages to liberate herself first through leaving the allegedly sacred frontiers of the house and trespassing in public space which is discursively assumed to belong to men, and second through dismantling the patriarchal authority of her husband by applying for a divorce and starting a business in spite of his refusal. This article argues that the representation of Saadia invalidates the discursive portrayals of Moroccan women as being passive and confined in the domestic private space of harem and deconstructs patriarchal authority.

*Keywords*: Moroccan Women, Orientalism, Space, Patriarchy, Harem, *The Road from Morocco*, Wafa Faith Hallam

Introduction

Arab women have been victimized by the early Orientalists’ representation in art, fiction, travel writing, and later in cinema. They are mostly depicted as passive beings confined in the private space of the home and oppressed by men (Ahmed, 1992). This biased discursive portrayal is supported by patriarchy and its adherents who seek to perpetuate their advantage through erasing women’s voices and depleting their agency. In other words, the traditional mindsets of the patriarchs aid in the justification of the empire’s claim as they consider women to be inferior, without agency, and merely commodities to be shaped according to social conventions. In Wafa Faith Hallam’s *The Road from Morocco* (2012), which is a composite memoir that narrates the stories of the author and her relatives, the patriarchal figures in the story consider women unable to choose and decide for themselves as it is the imperative of their male relatives to do so in order to preserve and perpetuate the allegedly normal and natural ways of life. The patriarchs and the Orientalists, therefore, are similar in their use of women to serve their agendas and propaganda. The claim that Eastern women are passive and unable to take control over their lives and bodies is invalidated by postcolonial feminist literature such as Hallam’s work, which is strongly at odds with the orthodox conventional portraits of women.

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With feminism revolutionizing multitudinous aspects of life including academia, Arab women have reclaimed their voices through their literary works. Arab women realize the indispensability of representing themselves and their fellow countrywomen to provide alternative images and portrayals to counter monolithic ones. Arab women’s literary narratives, hence, are a site of challenge, deconstruction, transformation, and reconstruction of experience and subjectivity, and they illuminate new ways of understanding Arab women’s agency. This article, thus, seeks to analyze *The Road from Morocco* as one of these narratives; it problematizes and disrupts the conventional representation of Arab women as harem confined in the domestic private space, while simultaneously aiming to dismantle patriarchal authority. Hallam’s memoir argues that Arab women, particularly migrants, make use of their vantage position as subjects in transit to write back to the monolithic discourses that present them as victims with no control over their lives, choices, or bodies. This article aims at contributing to the ongoing scholarly debate on the role of postcolonial feminist writings in problematizing universalizing and exclusionary discourses and offering alternative images and portrayals of Arab women. *The Road from Morocco*, according to Majid (2011), “upends the notion that women from Arab and Muslim backgrounds are helplessly trapped in male-dominated structures.” The memoir is hardly studied, and this article thus attempts to fill a gap in literature by Arab women by bringing the work of a less famous Arab female writer into discussion and unveil her contribution in disavowing the universalizing Orientalist and patriarchal discourses on Arab women.

This article draws on postcolonial feminism because it interrogates the validity of the universalizing discourses and simultaneously questions the supposed normality of conventional gender imperatives which are supported and championed by patriarchy. Postcolonial feminist theory is used in this article as it dismantles the homogeneity attributed to and associated with Arab women by stressing the particularities of these women’s subjectivities and struggles. In other words, Western feminists often believe that third world women are suffering and it is their duty to rescue them, ignoring the distinct and particular needs of those women. Western feminism thus may reiterate the rhetoric of Orientalism and the pretext of the civilizing missions as both “the military-imperialist and feminist imperialist stances collude to reify stereotypical notions of Arab and Muslim womanhood as monolithically oppressed” (Jarmakani, 2011, p. 228). As a consequence, postcolonial feminist scholars claim that it is time for white women to listen to subaltern women. They call for plurality and heterogeneity with regard to women’s subjectivities, experiences, particularities, and narratives. Similar to its dismantling of Western feminism’s discourse on Eastern women, postcolonial feminism deconstructs the homogeneity associated with Arab women. It is, therefore, applicable in this study which aims to stress the heterogeneity and agency of Arab women denied by the Orientalists and patriarchs.

**Patriarchy and Harem in Morocco**

As in many other countries worldwide, patriarchy in Morocco is a way of life that confines women in private spaces and naturalizes this as the norm which must be preserved. It is historically manifested in multitudinous aspects and organizations of social, religious, cultural, and political life. Its dominance is manifested in giving men privileges by virtue of their gender and denying women the same privileges because of their gender. In Morocco, the presence of men in public space and productive sectors and women in the private space and the reproductive sector of the home is propagated as the norm as it serves patriarchy and its adherents. The rationale behind this discursive division of space and roles is the protection of women, while in fact it is a pretext disguised as philanthropy. Patriarchs fear the emancipation of women and how such empowerment
could affect their own status and authority, and for this reason, they seek to perpetuate gendered practices and roles to guarantee their privileged position. Moroccan women have been marginalized and written out of history regardless of their undeniable role in obtaining independence after Morocco was a French Protectorate from 1912 to 1956 (Mernissi, 1994; Baker, 1995; Colligan, 2000).

After independence, Moroccan women have continued their struggle against the gender-based injustice suffered at the hand of their fellow Moroccan men after they were both united against French colonization. Immediately after gaining independence in 1956, Morocco institutionalized the first family code which was based on the Islamic Sharia law\(^2\) and Islamic jurisprudence. This was a disappointment to Moroccan women as Fatima Mernissi argues in Beyond the Veil (1987); the family code confirmed and perpetuated conventional patriarchal beliefs which suffocate and curtail women’s freedom especially with regard to public space, work, and education. Many articles in this code unearth the patriarchal mindsets which were behind its drafting. Regardless of endorsing gender equality, the Moroccan constitution of that period had reservations with regard to women’s total freedom. The family code of 1957 has been amended a number of times. The 2004 modification, which disavowed many articles in the previous versions that were unfair to women, is regarded “as a great step forward for women’s rights domestically and as a model for the broader Muslim world” (Zoglin, 2009, p. 964). For instance, in article 24 of the 2004 modification, women now have the right to marry without the approval of male kin unlike in the previous version. They also have the right to be in public space and do productive work.

The ideological division of space into private and public spheres has served the patriarchal system for a long time as women are confined in the domestic private space of home with its reproductive gendered responsibilities, while men enjoy the privileges of the public space under the pretext of being the breadwinner. The confinement of women in private spaces and depleting them of agency is similar to the Western portrayal of the “harem” which refers to women’s quarters in houses. As defined in the Oxford Dictionary, a harem refers to “(in former times) the separate part of a Muslim household reserved for wives, concubines, and female servants” (English Oxford Living Dictionaries, n.d.). It is also designated as a “physical distance between men and women in public and private spheres” (Hamdan, 2009, p. 213). Harems also insinuate inaccurate conceptualizations and stereotypes about Muslims, as they are linked with the Islamic religion. Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that harems historically existed before Islam in the Middle East, but they were associated with Islam in Western conceptualization and representation of Arab cultures during the expansion of colonization (Ahmed, 1992). These harems were the Sultan’s wives and concubines, and they were noticed as well in the Ottoman’s empire. It was during that period that Westerners encountered the harem and wrote prejudicially about them through the Orientalists’ lens which eroticized them. The definition of this period’s harem has been revised for a modern Muslim context as Ahmed (1982) writes, “The harem can be defined as a system that permits males sexual access to more than one female...[or] as a system whereby the female relatives of a man—wives, sisters, mother, aunts, daughters—share much of their time and their living space” (p. 524). This second definition of a harem as women’s space is harmonious with the experience of Wafa Faith Hallam’s mother and her childhood harem.

\(^2\) Sharia law is a religious law that constitutes a part of the Islamic tradition. It lays down the rights and duties for Muslims and it states a broad set of principles for physical and spiritual behavior for Muslims to follow to lead an ethical life. (See Mernissi, 1987, 1991, 1994, 2002; Sadiqi and Ennaji, 2006).
According to Edward Said in his groundbreaking work, *Orientalism*, the harem is used by the early Orientalists to suggest Eastern women’s absolute oppression and disempowerment and simultaneously the backwardness of the East in comparison to the civilized West. This pretext is used to justify the invasion of the colonial empire into the supposedly uncivilized side of the colonial divide under the pretext of the civilization mission to rescue brown women (Said, 1978). The Western construction of the harem is also perceived in sexualized fantasies of enslaved women whose purpose is the sexual satisfaction of men (Ahmed, 1982; Hassan, 2005). Harem is also perceived as a space of confinement as Michalkiewicz (2001) argues, “Even the etymology of the word ‘harem’ metaphorically refers to a jail, as *harām* means ‘the forbidden’ in Arabic, whereas ‘seraglio’ which is derived from Italian, literally means ‘a cage for wild animals’ … the harem consists of a house or set of houses surrounded by gates (in the case of the imperial harems, guarded by doorkeepers who were usually black eunuchs)” (p. 152). This discursive and ideologically driven depictions of harem insinuated Arab women’s disempowerment and Arab men’s control, while Arab men are represented as barbaric and “Terrible Turks” (Goffman, 2002). Similar to the approach of the Orientalist discourse on the Other/Eastern women, Western feminism believes Eastern women to be passive victims who need to be saved from their males. It constructs “third world women” as a homogeneous “powerless” group often located as implicit victims of particular socioeconomic systems” (Mohanty, 1991, p. 57).

According to Mohanty (1991), Western feminism erased, silenced, and overlooked the experiences of many women who were not white, middle-class, or Western. Postcolonial feminists criticize their Western counterparts for their ethnocentric assumptions about the singularity of feminism, the homogeneity of women’s experiences, and the universality of their struggles; they alternately pluralize feminism and assert the plurality of their voices and the heterogeneity of their colonial and postcolonial identities. They also answer back to the Western feminist discourse, noting that white women were involved in the colonial project. As Loomba (2005) postulates, “Within colonial spaces, white women participated with varying degrees of alienation and enthusiasm in imperial projects; as teachers, missionaries, nurses, and the help-mates of colonial men, their roles varied both structurally and ideologically” (p. 144). Mohanty (1991) rearticulates the discourse of Western feminism from a pluralist perspective and stresses the priorities and concerns of what she terms “Third World feminism,” defined as “a socio-political designation for people of African, Caribbean, Asian, and Latin American descent, and native peoples of the United States. It also refers to ‘new immigrants’ to the United States in the last three decades: Arab, Korean, Tai, Laotian, etc.” (p. 7). Postcolonial feminism counters the discursive structures and doctrines of Orientalism and Western feminism and their universalizing discourses which render women isomorphically identical through denying them heterogeneity.

Postcolonial feminists study the tools through which ideologically driven and biased constructions of Arab cultures as uncivilized and oppressive are created through exclusionary lenses and homogenized representations of Arab women. They also problematize the sweeping generalization that the harem is exclusively a space of women’s oppression. Ahmed (1982) maintains that the harem can be empowering for women: “The very word ‘Harem’ is a variant of the word ‘Haram’ which means ‘forbidden’ and also ‘holy,’ which suggests to me that it was the women who were doing the forbidding, excluding men from their society and that it was therefore women who developed the model of strict segregation in the first place” (p. 529). Saadia’s life in the harem in *The Road from Morocco* confirms this argument. Her encounter with other females in this space encourages her to emancipate herself and to deconstruct the patriarchal authority of her husband and her elder brother.
Saadia’s experience of the harem is similarly represented in Mernissi’s *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood* (1994) in which the author presents different types of harem: one is submissive and enslaved, and the other rebellious and dissident. The former connotes shrinking and essentializing women into wombs and sexual objects, and there are many characters that fit this stereotype, namely Lalla Thor and Lalla Mani. On the other hand, a rebellious harem is presented in the work as agents of change who call for equality and liberation of women like Mernissi’s mother, her cousin Chama, and her grandfather’s wife Tamou. Mernissi (1994) as well represents the harem as being protective of strangers, as she narrates that it, “protected us from the foreigners standing a few meters away, at another equally busy and dangerous frontier—the one that separated our old city, the Medina, from the new French City, the Ville Nouvelle” (p. 22). Harem, therefore, is not only oppressive as the Orientalists represent it, but it can also be a site of resistance and liberation as it is with Saadia in Hallam’s *The Road from Morocco* (2012) and some of the female characters in Mernissi’s *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood* (1994).

**Moroccan Women’s Literature**

Protesting their exclusion and silencing, Moroccan women through their narratives demand to be heard. They seek to narrate their own side of the story in which they are participants in society instead of being in the shadows as the Orientalist and patriarchal discourses portray them. Arab women’s awareness of the unnaturalness of patriarchy encourages them to rebel against it. As a counterstrategy, Moroccan women resort to literature to voice their concerns and to make themselves heard, similar to the Egyptian feminist El-Saadawi (1997) who contends that, “The pen was an effective weapon that I could use against injustice and oppression” (p. 4). However, in the decades following independence (1956 onward), illiteracy was high among women especially in conservative rural areas where boys “outnumber girls in school at a rate of over 2 to 1: boys at 71 percent, girls at 29 percent” (Spratt, 1992, p. 123), owing to the patriarchal cultural belief that women’s place is in the home, and the kitchen to be exact. Thus, the emergence of Moroccan women’s literature was delayed until the eras of national anti-colonial struggles and post-independence in which more girls attended school especially in urban areas. Even though Moroccan women participated in the struggle of independence, their contribution was relegated to oblivion because of the patriarchs who archive and write history from their own perspectives (Mernissi, 1994; Baker, 1995). Their agency, however, instigated early Moroccan female writers, especially those educated in Europe, to dismantle these discursive narratives, as Berrada (2008) contends:

> Since the late 1960s, women writers have appeared in the Arab North who no longer want their works to simply echo prevailing ideologies and discourses. The stories of Khunatha Bannuna and Rafiqat al-Tabia in Morocco have a different tone… In other words, North African women’s literary discourse has illuminated and continues to illuminate women as real people, not merely as simultaneously exemplary and degraded symbols. (p. 237)

Leila Abouzeid’s *Year of the Elephant: Moroccan Woman’s Journey Toward Independence* (1989), Fatima Mernissi’s *Scheherazade Goes West: Different Cultures, Different Harems* (2001), Leila Lalami’s *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* (2006), and Wafa Faith Hallam’s *The Road from Morocco* (2012), among others, epitomize this type of discourse. Moroccan women writers unearth the ideologies of patriarchal exclusionary discourses which sustain gendered power relations. In other words, the features of Moroccan women, “previously hidden in the folds of
political discourses, began to take shape in texts that addressed women’s depths, emotions, moods, dreams, and stifled rebellions” (Berrada, 2008, p. 237). They take refuge in writing which gives them more liberty to narrate their own subjectivities away from the censorship and surveillance to which they were subjected.

Wafa Faith Hallam’s (2012) memoir, The Road from Morocco, exemplifies this type of writing by narrating a woman’s selfhood from her own perspective. It reflects on the Moroccan patriarchal society and its curtailing rules that restrict women’s movement, agency, and presence in public space. She endeavors to unearth and reflect on various cultural practices and stereotypes that victimize women and justify this victimization. Mamet-Michalkiewicz (2001) argues that Mernissi’s Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood (1994), “adroitly deconstructs the myth of the harem as paradise, an exotic place populated by nude, voluptuous women, as perpetuated in the Orientalist literature and paintings,” and simultaneously, “The novel advances fantasies of mobility that are diametrically opposed to both Western and Eastern notions of paradisal permanence” (p. 145). These arguments can be similarly applied to Hallam’s The Road from Morocco (2012) as it dismantles the traditional Orientalist representation of the harem and patriarchal authority. In other words, the memoir deconstructs the stereotypical representation of Moroccan women as, “a silent beast of burden or that of a capricious princess, half naked odalisque or the shapeless figure of the woman wearing the veil” (Mehdid, 1993, p. 25). In this sense, writing narratives is a tool of self-empowerment. Writing means being; Moroccan postcolonial feminist writers use the medium to vindicate their rights and enfranchisement, assert their identities, counter the colonial discourse, and most importantly reflect on their own societies.

To make sense of one’s life, s/he must construct a narrative. Bhavani and Haraway argue that “We repeatedly re-historicize ourselves by telling a story; we relocate ourselves in the present historical moment by reconfiguring our identities relationally […] we re-historicize our identities all of the time through elaborate story-telling” (1994, p. 21). In this line of thought then, narratives allow Moroccan women to resist any attempt to fix their identity as passive: “Muslim women were not, after all, the passive creatures, wholly without material resources or legal rights that the Western world imagined them to be” (Mehdid, 1993, p. 149).

The Road from Morocco is, thus, an answer back to the discursive colonial and patriarchal representation. As postcolonial feminist literature, the memoir aims at subverting formally and thematically the literary products of empire. In this vein, Boehmer (2005) argues that postcolonial writing is a counter discourse: “Rather than simply being the writing which ‘came after’ empire, postcolonial literature is generally defined as that which critically or subversively scrutinizes the colonial relationship. It is writing that sets out in one way or another to resist colonialist perspectives” (p. 3). Moroccan postcolonial feminist writings humanize the natives who were once muffled and silenced (Boehmer, 2005; Tiffin, 2006).

**Reflecting on Patriarchal Authority**

The Road from Morocco by Hallam tells the stories of the author and her relatives in the context of home and the diaspora. Saadia, Wafa’s mother, is married at the age of thirteen against her will to a man double her age. Her struggle to get a divorce and emancipate herself from the confining and restricting gender imperatives paves the way for her children, especially her daughters Wafa and Nezha, to migrate to America in the hope of realizing the American dream and living freely without the traditions and cultural practices of the old country. Wafa succeeds in male-dominated Wall Street and achieves agency and freedom in her life. Unlike their mother, Wafa and Nezha did not have to deal with the conventional gender roles of the old country.
In the patriarchal Moroccan context, virginity is associated with honor and the family name, and thus it has to be preserved until after marriage because “heterosexuality and compulsory virginity before marriage are traditionally understood as ideals for a ‘good’ Arab girl, a ‘good’ Arab family and, consequently, a ‘good’ Arab society” (Abboud et al., 2019, p. 1). Similarly, El Aissi (2020) advances that “Girls are indoctrinated by their families to believe that they have no authority over their bodies or their sexuality. They are advised during their puberty to protect their bodies and their genital organs more than their own eyes, not for their own sake, but for the sake of future husbands” (p. 58). Girls are, therefore, indoctrinated to see themselves and their bodies as property of their families and community. Their sexuality is surveilled and controlled to avoid potential disgrace and dishonor. Commenting on her mother’s virginity on her wedding night and virginity in general, Wafa states that,

Later that day, the women would be pleased to display the bloodstained sheet and gown in a big round copper tray-proof of her virginity, her sacrifice at the altar of family honor, which would thence be preserved. She had done her daughterly duty. She had endured this unspeakable humiliation as was expected of her. (Hallam, 2012, p. 4)

In reference to conventions and traditions, women are supposed to keep their virginity to preserve the collective honor because “the chastity of a girl represents not only her honor but that of her entire family. It is therefore imperative for a girl to preserve her virginity until her first marriage” (Cohen-Mor, 2005, p. 12). Men as well are supposed to be virginal until marriage, but the disgrace that results from a woman’s lack of virginity is far greater: “the deflowered virgin becomes a lost woman, but the man, like the legendary phoenix, emerges from the fray purer, more virile, better respected” (Mernissi, 1982, p. 186). Such double standards are the direct outcomes of the conventional gender imperatives of patriarchy which “reduces women’s identity to their sexual organs” (El Aissi, 2020, p. 59), and gives males privileges it denies to females. As Davis notes, “Since girls will ultimately marry out of the family, and also represent a constant source of danger to the family honour, they are less desired than boys” (Davis, 1978, p. 19).

In the Moroccan patriarchal context, women are suffocated and restricted with regard to their sexual freedom. Wafa’s mother was married at an early age to a man older than her. She had to perform her daughterly duty by preserving her virginity and getting married in spite of her rejection of the suitor. As Hallam relates: “my mother had repeated, at every opportunity, and to everyone that would listen, that she had been forced into marriage when she was thirteen…forever outraged by the revolting immorality and injustice of it” (Hallam, 2012, p. 5). Her brothers on the other hand are not as restricted because of the double standards that Obermeyer describes: “While it is considered natural that men have strong sexual needs and can seek satisfaction with many women, good women remain virgins until marriage and have limited interest in sex afterwards” (Cited in El Aissi, 2020, p. 61). Such a double standard emanates from the biased cultural, religious, and social conventions inspired by patriarchy.

Even though two of Saadia’s brothers express their disagreement and try to have their father change his mind about marrying her off at an early age, Wafa tells us, “but no one fought very hard for her, for whatever the patriarch decided was to be; as simple as that. She was taken out of school immediately in preparation for her new life” (Hallam, 2012, p. 7). Patriarchal authority is not to be questioned, even in personal matters. Girls like Saadia, hence, “enter marriage without any emotional feelings for the future husband, for it is the father (the wali) who has the authority to choose the suitable man for his daughters” (El Aissi, 2020, p. 60), and their societies’
needs are prioritized over their “rights as individuals” (Zuhur, 2003, p. 17). The decision to marry her off at an early age is an act of control, as Carla Makhlof argues: “the need to control women is traditionally addressed in Morocco by premarital seclusion, early marriage and a wedding ritual that requires proof of virginity” (Cited in El Aissi, 2020, p. 60).

Saadia’s journey towards emancipation and liberty starts when she is still in Morocco. She manages to set herself free from the private space of home and have a job which was not very common at that time. As Wafa recounts, “to the consternation of my dad, she’d started wearing Western clothes when she ventured outside the house and in the store” (Hallam, 2012, p. 29). Saadia’s bodaciousness counters the patriarchal discourse as she trespasses cultural, social, and religious boundaries by exercising her freedom and agency. Even though her husband objects to her doings, she is still determined to enact her beliefs in gender equality and equity regardless of the potential repercussions such as exclusion and perhaps violence. Wearing Western clothes and disobeying her husband are sufficient transgressions to provoke people’s gossip and eventual disgrace for her family’s name. Her oldest brother expresses his concern about her deeds as he believes it to be his responsibility to discipline his female relatives in accordance with conventions and traditions.

The law in patriarchal societies is occasionally employed to perpetuate the dichotomous division of genders’ rights and duties. Women, therefore, suffer and their subordination is in the name of the law. Talking about her mother’s experience, Wafa postulates, “The trip was to last almost two months, and Mom had to ask my father for his written authorization to apply for a passport. No woman could then get one without the consent of her spouse, father, or brother. None of her sisters had owned one or traveled abroad” (Hallam, 2012, p. 37). Saadia needs one of her male relatives’ authorization to get her passport because going outside of the space of home requires the authorization of a male relative. Patriarchy, therefore, is omnipresent and it even affects the legal system.

Saadia’s sisters’ lack of voice is the outcome of women’s complicity with patriarchy. They are similar to the passive harems in Mernissi’s Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood (1994). Saadia, on the other hand, questions the normality of gender imperatives and thereby attempts to dismantle them as “she was intent on following a path that was to lead her out of the course that had been preordained for her by her gender” (Hallam, 2012, p. 35). Her emancipation is more complex as Morocco was at that time “a country where the only freedom possible for a woman required that she immersed herself in a foreign culture and embraced it” (Hallam, 2012, p. 38). She is unconcerned with the consequences of her cultural transgressions. Unlike her sisters, she is determined to change the course of her life and her children, especially her daughters. Saadia’s agency is similar to that of Mernissi (1994), as they both question the naturalness of conventional gender imperatives and patriarchy.

Religion is used in Morocco, like law, to legitimize gender imperatives through the patriarchal interpretations of its texts. Mir-Hosseini (2015) argues that,

At the heart of the unequal construction of gender rights in Muslim legal tradition is the idea that God has given men authority over women. Defenders of male authority frequently invoke, as their main textual justification, Qur’anic verse 4:34,3 from which classical jurists

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3 This verse from the Quran reads, “Men are qawwamun [protectors/maintainers] in relation to women, according to what God has favored some over others and according to what they spend from their wealth. Righteous women are qanitat [obedient], guarding the unseen according to what God has guarded. Those [women] whose nushuz [rebellion]
derived the concept of qiwamah, developing it into a guiding principle to define and regulate gender relations. (Mir-Hosseini, 2015, pp. 37-38)

The patriarchs in Saadía’s life get their sovereignty from the patriarchal interpretation of Islam. Saadía could not get her divorce because “Family laws were entirely governed by traditional Islamic Sharia Law, and a woman could not get a divorce unless her husband decided to grant her one or simply repudiate her” (Hallam, 2012, p. 54). The religiosity of gender roles thus facilitates their spread and acceptance and even internalization because of the sacredness associated with them.

Not only religious authority but also law restricts a woman’s access to divorce. Saadía’s husband has the right to divorce her or just repudiate her because of the biases of the law, as Cohen-Mor (2005) contends “While men who are dissatisfied with their wives can obtain divorce by the simple act of oral repudiation, women find that their right to divorce is severely limited” (p. 12). Similarly, Mir-Hosseini (2015) argues that “Whereas the husband has the unilateral and extra-judicial right to terminate the contract by talaq or repudiation, a wife can only terminate the contract with her husband’s consent or the intervention of the court—if she produces a valid reason” (pp. 39-40).

Despite these legal and cultural restrictions, Saadía’s determination to set herself free affects her children’s lives, especially her daughters. Wafa and her sister Nezha are not indoctrinated with the traditional and conventional teachings of their native country because their mother inspires them to be free individuals with full control over their lives, choices, and bodies. Regardless of the traditional upbringing of Saadía and her encounter with gender roles since her infancy, she manages to set herself free by getting a divorce, wearing Western clothes in the conservative context of Morocco, playing tennis, going to clubs and cafés, and eventually moving for a job to the United States of America. She, thus, problematizes El Aissi’s argument that, “traditional customs invade the girl’s consciousness from the onset of her puberty and render her submissive and obedient to male authority” (2020, p. 59). In the diaspora, her daughters are unburdened from gender conventions, and they succeed in their professional lives, especially Wafa who penetrates the masculine domain of Wall Street. Saadía witnesses something that

She could not, in her wildest dreams, have ever imagined. The frightened little girl whose hand she once held to school, some three-and-a-half decades earlier, had turned into a successful Wall Street advisor managing million-dollar portfolios and reaching the pinnacle of American society in a transformation that baffled her mind (Hallam, 2012, pp. 66-67).

Saadía’s daughters’ liberation from the suffocating traditions and conventions of their native country presents them with multitudinous opportunities to excel in occupations that were exclusively male in Morocco. Their mother’s liberation saves them from going through the same hardships and deprivation of rights. As Oakley argues, “In early upbringing, in education and in their adult occupations, males and females are pressed by our society into different moulds” (Oakley, 1985, p. 156); however, Hallam’s memoir shows that since gender is a social, cultural, and religious construct, it is malleable and mutable.

you fear, admonish them, and abandon them in bed, and adribuhanunna [strike them]. If they obey you, do not pursue a strategy against them. Indeed, God is Exalted, Great” (Mir-Hosseini, 2015, p. 38).
Trespassing in Public Space

Saadia, as explained above, is oblivious to gender codes even though she is introduced to them and the discursive division of space since her childhood. The harem as a space is a crucial determinant of Saadia’s life. At the beginning, she adheres to the dichotomous division of women’s private space and men’s public space. Any cultural transgression committed through trespassing outside the sacred frontiers of the house results in exclusion and even punishment. Saadia’s journey toward emancipation first begins when she realizes the unnaturalness of her subordinate position and confinement in the private space under the pretext of protection from the outside world. The act of trespassing into public space and leaving the private space of the harem is liberatory as Saadia debunks and dismantles the patriarchal ideology that governs it. She simultaneously disregards the Orientalist discourse on Arab women as passive followers of their male relatives. Saadia’s challenge to space is met with disapproval by her eldest brother. She does not fulfill her daughterly duty when she objects to marry a man twice her age, goes out without her husband’s approval, and eventually files for divorce. Saadia’s agency is reinforced and strengthened after her migration and so is that of her daughters Wafa and Nezha, who chose to side with their mother against their father.

Being exposed to the life of the harem is not sufficient to render Saadia a passive conformist of its discursive structures and teachings. It is, however, conciliatory as “what made the first years of her marriage bearable…was the fact that she lived in the company of women in the big traditional patriarchal home in the medina, serving all the men of the house their meals and attending to the daily chores” (Hallam, 2012, p. 8). The harem, thus, can provide solace, but the problem comes when one internalizes its discriminatory reproductive and domestic practices as Saadia’s mother, sisters, and her female relatives do. Saadia’s eclectic and selective approach renders her able to assess and criticize harem life and its entailments. She takes advantage of it to make the first years of her marriage bearable through socializing with the other women and simultaneously begins to negotiate her right to public space as she believes she is as much entitled to it as her brothers and her male in-laws. The harem, hence, is not exclusively oppressive as propagated by the Western discourse. Even though Saadia serves men of the house meals and attends to the daily chores, she knows it is temporary until she can manage to set herself free and negotiate her agency in public space.

The fact that Saadia “was taken out of school immediately in preparation for her new life” (Hallam, 2012, p. 7) does not discourage her from pursuing her path towards emancipation. The act of taking her out of school epitomizes the patriarchal division of public vs. private space. Women are supposed to stay in the private space of home and learn their reproductive roles; even when they are allowed to go to school, as in Saadia’s case, it is only temporary until someone asks for their hand in marriage. The decision to take Saadia out of school immediately after giving her hand in marriage suggests the insignificance of women’s education. It also suggests the supposedly collective honor that must be preserved, as Cohen-Mor (2005) postulates: “The overwhelming desire to safeguard her chastity—and the family honor—may lead to her withdrawal from school and the end of her education” (p. 8). The pretext of women’s protection veils the actual motive which is the maintenance and perpetuation of patriarchy and its sovereignty.

The priority for women according to patriarchy is performing domestic chores and confining themselves in the space of home. As Wafa tells us about her mother and the women in the harem:
Being permanently confined to the sheltered universe of their traditional family homes, [women] were entirely ignorant of anything that did not have a direct link to feeding and caring for their loved ones… only men had any notion of the world around them, and rare were those who bothered to share the news or otherwise inform their wives and daughters of any development outside their households. (Hallam, 2012, p. 11)

Depriving women of news from outside the home, men are threatened by the potential struggle and rise of their female relatives if exposed to the freeing alternative that the public space provides. The confinement of women in the private space of home and their lack of awareness of what is going on in the outside world perpetuates the patriarchal system and simultaneously sustains the peripheral position of women. In other words, “This gender based spatial division reflects the society’s hierarchy and power allocation, or more simply, the subordination of women to men” (Abudi, 2011, p. 10).

Mernissi (2002) discusses Muslim men’s use of “space to establish male domination by excluding women from the public arena” (p. 213), and she adds that the Muslim system “fears [women’s] growth and involvement” (Mernissi, 1975, p. 8). Patriarchy, hence, is intimidated by women’s power and presence in public space. Women’s trespassing of sacred cultural boundaries is a threat to the patriarchs as it offers women the opportunity to negotiate their confinement in the harem and liberate them from men’s surveillance. Saadia’s eventual presence in public space is inspirational to her daughters who are independent, autonomous agents oblivious to the Moroccan gendered division of space. Wafa narrates that she and her sister “met other teenagers and young people at the movies and then later in the small town’s disco, where we smoked, kissed, and pretended to be cool” (Hallam, 2012, p. 56). This would not have been possible had their mother not asserted herself as an independent individual entitled to the same rights to enter public space regardless of one’s gender.

The critical moment in Saadia’s emancipation is her rebellious entry into public space in Morocco. She starts a business as a hair stylist that earns her independence and other privileges to which her husband objects. She is “one of the first Arab women in Morocco to play tennis,” and this was all too much for her husband “who could not believe his eyes when he saw her out on the court, shamelessly flaunting one of those short white tennis dresses” (Hallam, 2012, p. 41). Saadia’s acts are perceived as cultural transgressions that dishonor the family and the community because she disregards conventions which dictate appropriate clothes and roles for women: “Good girls stay home, take care of their brothers and sisters, and only go out to go to school. Those who … dare to wear make-up, to go out, or to smoke, quickly earn the reputation as ‘little whores’” (Courtier, 1989, p. 5). The labeling of women like Saadia as “little whores” reflects the intimidation of patriarchy. Saadia’s husband is a faithful conformist to traditions as they privilege him as a man, whereas Saadia is a deconstructionist who disowns patriarchy in her assumption of rights to public space. The public space is, therefore, redefined as the norms and customs that govern and render it an allegedly masculine preserve are brought into question.

Upon her arrival in the Moroccan city of Sidi Kacem, Saadia “noticed and applauded the way Western women were free to interact with men outside their homes…they seemed to be in control of their lives in ways she could never imagine her sisters could control theirs” (Hallam, 2012, p. 32). The encounter with women from different cultural backgrounds and the visit to Madrid, where she “breathed, in deep gulps, the free air of a completely different society…and its budding social liberation” (Hallam, 2012, p. 37), inspires her to compare her and her sister’s lives with that of Western women. As mentioned earlier, men, including Saadia’s husband, seek to
confine their female relatives in private space to deprive them of knowledge about the potential alternatives represented by these Western women.

Patriarchy as a collective culture threatens women in public space, because men consider it their duty to discipline women with derogatory statements and even sometimes with violence. Behind this pretext lies the actual motive of confining women in the private space—a threat to patriarchy. Regardless of the particular challenges of having to interact with derogatory and discouraging comments and gazes from strangers due to her presence in public space and supposedly shameful clothes, Saadia is determined to follow a path that leads her out of the allegedly natural place in the house that has been preordained for her by her gender. As Wafa tells us, “she [Saadia] had to be constantly fending off the implicit condemnation of all sorts of people around her… she had to learn to live with a disapproving society and ignore the ever-so-pervasive cultural concept of shame” (Hallam, 2012, p. 38).

In the United States of America, Saadia’s presence in public space is not met with the same hostility. Talking about her own trip to Spain before migrating to the United States, Wafa narrates that “in Spain, I did not have to be concerned with prying, condemnatory looks from men in the street and everything around me felt exciting and open-minded” (Hallam, 2012, p. 104). The experience of a dissimilar space geographically and socially exposes Wafa to an alternative one in which women are entitled the same rights as men regardless of their age, gender, and occupation. She is also free to wear what she wants without fear of judgment as the norms that govern space in Spain are totally different from the ones of her native country. Hence, “different times and places produce different and changing gender systems as these intersect with other different and changing societal stratification and movements” (Friedman, 1998, p. 28).

The space of diaspora is not always liberatory, however, since patriarchy and misogyny are sometimes encountered by Saadia and her daughters in the US. After migrating to the US and joining a branch in a company on Wall Street, Wafa tells us, “As well-publicized class-action gender discrimination lawsuits later revealed, it turned out I had joined one of the firm’s most chauvinistic branches, managed by a man who felt no remorse over ignoring his flailing female consultants and hired them only because he was under great pressure to do so” (Hallam, 2012, p. 260). The manager is similar to the patriarchs in Wafa’s native country in his belittling of women’s role and competence, and he hires females only because it is an obligation. The feeling of superiority to his female co-workers emanates from his traditional beliefs and assumptions about women’s rightful place. He, therefore, affiliates with hegemonic masculinity, “which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (Connell, 2005, p. 77).

As there are the likes of Wafa’s father in America, there are also the likes of her mother: “Linda was one of an unconventional breed of female managers who took Wall Street by storm. A tall woman with…boundless energy, and an imposing yet down-to-earth presence, she at once charmed and conquered” (Hallam, 2012, p. 261). Gender discrimination and hostility towards women’s presence in the public sphere seems then to be a universal issue with different degrees of intensity in different countries. Women’s agency and fight for their rights and access to the public sphere is common throughout the world. Wafa as an independent subject in transit and her determination to assert herself as an equal is strengthened. Wafa’s exposure to patriarchy in Morocco renders it easier for her to deal with misogynists and prove herself as competent and entitled to the same rights and privileges as men, especially through encountering other female agents like Linda.
Wafa’s and Saadia’s negotiation of space in the context of their native country and in the diaspora is revolutionary, especially in the case of Saadia as she dismantles the prejudices associated with the harem, first by realizing the unnaturalness of the conventional gender imperatives and second by questioning the ideological division of space. Saadia’s efforts to leave the supposedly sacred frontiers of the house expose her to the multitudinous alternatives provided in the public sphere, unlike the limited reproductive domestic chores which she is supposed to diligently perform. Her perpetual quest for emancipation results eventually in her liberty from the cultural chains that deprive her of agency and human autonomy. As second and third generations of Arab migrants, Wafa and her daughter Sophia are similar in that they dismantle the Orientalist portrayal of Arab women as being passive, confined in the harem, and “oppressively submissive to their patriarchal and fundamentalist societies” (Guven, 2013, p. 90). They simultaneously invalidate the dichotomous binary of space through guaranteeing their presence in the public sphere.

Conclusion

A close reading of The Road from Morocco reveals that Saadia, as an Arab woman who is introduced to the life of the harem and the conventional division of space inspired by patriarchy since her childhood, is a dissident who resists the social conventions which deplete her autonomy and simultaneously seek to render her passive and obedient to her fellow men. The assumed authority of Saadia’s father and husband is due to the patriarchal system which privileges men over women, and they seek to maintain it through denying women the right to independence and to participate in public space. They seek to contain Saadia’s emancipation and her rebellious thoughts and deeds in an attempt to perpetuate their patriarchal dominance and their privileged position. Saadia’s awareness of the unnaturalness of patriarchy and the ideological division of space instigates her to break from the chains of traditions even though her actions are perceived as cultural transgressions that disgrace the family’s honor and name. She is not considered an individual, but rather part of a group whose honor is preserved as long as women are confined in the private space of the harem and diligently perform domestic chores.

Saadia’s emancipation disavows completely the patriarchal authority of her father, elder brother, and husband, and thus she confirms that patriarchy is constructed and can be dismantled. Saadia’s representation invalidates the ideologically driven portrayal of Arab women as all being passive members of a harem whose ultimate purpose is the satisfaction of men, giving birth to children, and doing the reproductive activities that the private space entails. Hallam’s feminist views are reflected in her advocacy and encouragement of women’s liberation and trespassing in public space in conjunction with dismantling the patriarchal system and authority. They are also manifested in her rejection of universalizing discourses which present identical portrayals of Arab women to bolster the supposedly civilized colonizers under the pretext of saving brown women from an allegedly backward society. Saadia’s emancipation and dismantlement of Orientalist and patriarchal discourses and systems invalidates the homogeneity associated with Arab women and questions Western feminists’ claims about the homogeneity of Eastern women. Saadia and Wafa are independent agents who exercise their agency and human autonomy in defiance of patriarchal authority. Through providing celebratory images of Moroccan women, Wafa Faith Hallam’s memoir can be considered a postcolonial feminist counter-narrative to universalizing discourses and representations of Arab women.
References


