

Fatema Mernissi

## Vacances Berlinoises



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What have I achieved during my year-stay at the Wissenschaftskolleg (*Wiko pour les intimes*)? This question troubled me for weeks and ruined my delicious 1995 July sunset swims in Berlin's ponds. Not that I did not work hard enough, but many colleagues at Mohamed V Rabat University predicted, when I kissed them good-bye in October 1994, that all I would gain from a year in a prosperous Western academic institution would be weight. I am indeed 10 kilos heavier and do not at all fit the image Arabs have of a serious scholar tortured by metaphysical problems: a skinny fellow with pale hollow cheeks.

But my physical "opulence" would not have been so damaging if my intellectual performances were as impressive as I expected them to be. Not that I did not achieve much, but the results I am taking back home are neither ones I expected nor those I planned for. If gastronomic risks of my German adventure became evident as soon as I tasted the first Wiko's chocolate dessert, coming as I do from a country where low-calorie oranges are the major "sweets", intellectual dangers were not as obvious. And it is my major longterm academic project "Arabs and Time" that was ruined by my "participation-observation" among one of the most enigmatic sects of the Northern tribes of Europe: German academics.

I came to Berlin with an extremely attractive space-time "hypothesis" of cultural identity-marking in the Moslem world which I crafted over the years and which made many of my Rabat colleagues so envious that

I felt encouraged to promote it as a theory. Dominated cultures such as that of the Arabs, I argued, define themselves in terms of space. *Had* (pl. *hudud*: frontier) is the key concept for both ethics and law, and time is negligible if not totally absent from such self-definitions. Sexual ethics is built in architectural terms, that of *hudud* (frontiers), separating the *harem*, a sacred private space identified as female, from the outside space identified as male. In this *harem* vision, the Western notion of public space is inconceivable, because there is no such a thing as a neutral space: All spaces are sexualized, including streets, offices, and political arenas, which are perceived as male privileges.<sup>2</sup> *Shari'a*, the religious law and the cornerstone of Moslem civilization, means literally "the path" and relies heavily on spatial references. *Imam*, the word for leader, is also spatial; it means "person standing in front".

<sup>1</sup> This explains why sexual harassment is standard behavior in our Medina streets and work places, why it is not punished as an infringement of laws and regulations, and why fundamentalists today are successful in selling the idea that sexual segregation of space in the West is chaotic animal-like promiscuity. This was the key argument of my Ph.D. dissertation *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in a Modern Muslim Society*. Cambridge, Mass.: Schenkman Pub. Co., 1975; rev. ed. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1987; German translation: *Geschlecht, Ideologie, Islam*. München: Antje Kunstmann, 1987. I wrote it in my early thirties after three years in „puritan" Boston, where I enjoyed walking in the streets with men behaving as if I did not exist when I crossed their path. I learned in Boston, however, that in fact men did look at women in public places — but in an indirect way so that you could never catch their eyes, unlike focused stare of the Medina. However, since rape was more frequent on American campuses than on Moroccan ones, I argued that male behavior in public places tells us more about the notion a civilization has of space than about management of sexual aggressivity.

<sup>2</sup> In *Sultanes oubliées: femmes chefs d'Etat en Islam* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1990; English translation: *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*. Cambridge, Polity Press, 1993; German translation: *Die Sultanin. Die Macht der Frauen in der Welt des Islam*. Darmstadt/Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1991), which I wrote when Benazir Bhutto was elected prime minister of her country in 1988, I argued that politics is perceived as a Moslem male masculine privilege, not because of any inequality between the sexes (the principle of equality is central to Islam), but because of the space vision at the roots of that civilization. The fact that classical historians record 16 women as having ruled Moslem states from the eleventh century onward, with their names coined in local currency and chanted in Friday official mosque sermons, was totally irrelevant for those who opposed Benazir Bhutto, because the overriding determinant factor is the space division, not historical records.

It is in *Le Harem politique: le Prophète et les femmes*; (Paris 1987) and *Islam and Democracy: Fear of the Modern World* (Reading, Mass. 1992) that the time element and, more exactly, the absence of the future in cultural identity emerged as intriguing. Why, I wondered, do Arab politicians take a huge dose of space and a tiny dose of time when they are concocting their cultural identities cocktails? Why do they mutilate themselves by cutting themselves off from claiming a future? Is it because time is experienced as a cyclical phenomenon (an eternal return to the origin), or because they perceive it as the privilege of the West, the overpowering conqueror, or is it because of both? Why do Arab politicians, regardless of claims (revolutionary or reactionary, regimes or oppositions), choke themselves on past grandeur and castrate themselves rejecting the future as a voluntary deliberate prospective project?

After a few months engulfed in the Wiko's academia, my "theory" was smashed to pieces, because I discovered that Europeans had *harems* in their minds: In post-wall Berlin, people defined themselves in space terms just like Arabs, and they were totally confused about their future. This was a little too much for me, and I turned to my archaic hobby, making bead necklaces, and started running away from Wiko and hanging around Savigny Platz cafés, worrying about what would become of my reputation when I went back to Morocco with 10 kilos more around my hips and no convincing "theory" in my hands.

In fact, my Berlin year unfolded like one of those devastatingly sudden and unexpected love affairs whose extreme turbulence, roughness, and unusual intensity is only tolerable because one is certain it is doomed to be short-lived. As always happens in this kind of passionate and ephemeral encounters, you realize that the most enigmatic stranger is not the foreigner you loved, but your own self. What I learned observing the German scene did not so much increase my understanding of Germans as it modified my perception of Arabs. It is true that the collapse of the Berlin wall and the Gulf War alerted me that somehow my nice space-focused/dominated Arab societies and time-focused/dominant Western cultural identities "theory" was seriously damaged, but I did not yet grasp fully how and why. In *Islam and Democracy*, an analysis of the Gulf War as an apocalyptic eradication of spatial *hudud*, I outlined the archaic aggressivity potential of frontier-referentials and predicted that the occupation of Mecca by American troops was bound to unleash an unprecedented cosmic violence. When a group defines itself in terms of space, that is homogeneous inside/heterogeneous outside, a strong potential for the legitimation of violence can be manipulated by politicians at any time to channel aggressivity toward "sacrificial" victims (women, minorities or/and foreigners). The consequent flare-up of

extremism in the Arab world did not surprise me, but its spread in the "Powerful West" remained an enigma until I became a resident of Wallotstraße 19.

After a few months at the Wiko, listening here and there, but also strolling in streets and browsing in cafés, it became clear that the Berlin population defined itself in the most archaic spatial framework, that of the *harem* [*in* — homogeneity/*out* — danger] and a *hudud*, a frontier in-between, and also that, due to economic trends (the shadow of massive unemployment), the notion of the future was, like that in dominated societies, a bleak field of anxieties. The usual arrogant "West" I held in my cherished "theory" was nowhere to be found: Fear of the future made me feel at home in 1995 Germany. A second space-linked discovery was that there is no such thing as "Europe"; what you have are two tribes running around with two mental maps: a Southern European tribe (Spain, France, Italy) which sees the Mediterranean as a constitutive part of its identity and a Northern tribe which has no clue who this animal (the Mediterranean) is. These space discoveries would not have been so devastating if they were not complicated by another, having to do with time: Germans' perception of death was peculiar.

I thought that only Arabs had a disturbed relationship to time, since they not only deprive themselves of a future, but also have a phobia of their origin. They call the time before Islam *jahiliya*, the time of ignorance, literally black hole. This *jahiliya* syndrome, or decision to negate the origin, is central to all my recent cogitation on the manufacturing of cultural identities because I suspect it to be somehow linked not only to the fear of women (the veil of the uterus), but also to the hysteria scientific inquiry of the past produces. Censorship of the past as a heresy by extremists, as in the Abu Zeid case, is ferocious, but a more prominent indicator of the fear of the past is the absence of significant museums and archives in the oil-rich Arab world.

In Berlin, I discovered that "Europeans" have a psychologically disturbed relation to time just like us Arabs, but their phobia is not focused on the origin (they have a bustling museum industry), but on their end: They refuse to see death and degrade it instead to a medical incident. Germans, who believe themselves to be highly rational, worship youth excessively and dread old age, a strange attitude for a powerful nation whose majority is elderly, and whom one would expect could mobilize innovative energies in designing new relationships bridging gaps between generations. Coming from an Arab world, where 60 % are under age 25, I was eager to come across creative approaches to generation reconciliating. This death phobia, this time problem proved to be catastrophic for my "Arabs and Time" theory and smashed what

remained of it forever. I needed "my" Westerners to have a healthy attitude towards time in order to convince "my" Arabs that they have a sick one towards theirs, but if everyone is sick on this planet, no comparison is possible, and my envious Rabat colleagues will be thrilled to see me return intellectually empty-handed and physically prosperous.

I then decided to throw myself in the nearby Wannsee. But to my amazement, I discovered first that I was too tall to achieve such a project, because the ponds are shallow and unlike the Rabat beaches where you can always entertain suicidal hopes and expect to be swept away by the unpredictable Atlantic waves. I was about to dive into an immense despair, when I noticed Berlin's nude beaches. They were a fantastic illustration of what I call a neutral "public space", something inconceivable in an Arab city. These Berlin beaches operate on the same principle as the *hammam* (public baths), with one slight difference: The two sexes share the same space. And, wonders of the times, no erotic stares and no sensuous glances. Everything works as if sexual attraction is either absent or totally mastered and its manifestations beautifully auto-censored. I then designed a new project called "Fatema's Berlin", where, with the help of Mrs. Ruth Ward, a German photographer, I would describe the sexual dynamics in Berlin public spaces (streets, cafés, nude beaches, saunas). The major problem was to recruit Fellows to pose for me, because academics perceive themselves as being as de-eroticized as extra-terrestrial mummies.

However, now that I am sitting on my terrace, 300 meters away from Harhoura Beach Mosque, I see a problem with this project. It would confirm my Mohamed V fundamentalist colleagues' stereotypes that all Westerners are sexually promiscuous. I decided to keep this beach business secret for the time being. I could always flaunt the other project I had in my luggage when I left Rabat, which has a strong nationalistic tone likely to enchant them.

"Arab Women's Rights and the Flow of Oil" was the initial title of this project, which focused on the peculiar relationship Westerners entertain between space and responsibility: Do Western liberal democracies, I wondered, whose economies rely heavily on Arab oil, see themselves as ethically responsible for the human rights violations in the Arab region, or do they see themselves as miraculously innocent? A revelation descended upon me while in Berlin: Although Westerners claim they are rational and modern, they still can "work" miracles. One of these miracles has to do with their maintaining two supernaturally separate maps: an economic capitalist map covering the entire planet, which it reduces to a global market, and an ethical map which shrinks their responsibility to their national frontiers. In so doing, Westerners

see themselves not only as innocent of the violence linked to the capitalist imperatives (In my view, Westerners are responsible not only as consumers of Arab oil and, therefore, as de facto supporters and defenders of mediocrally despotic Gulf Emirs, but also because, during the cold war, they fought democratic forces in the region as pro-communist and because they dump arms in our jobless societies.), but also as the only democracy-worshippers on the planet earth. The rest of us, mostly Moslems, thrive on despotism. This revelation forced me to shift focus.

Instead of studying Arab Emirs, I decided to train my lenses on the Europeans and my post-Wiko title is "The Westerner's Miracle: Profit-Worshippers and 100 % Ethical". The only problem with this project is that instead of going back with an almost finished manuscript, I am landing in Rabat with a brand new *problématique*, which needs at least six more solid months of research. Fortunately, during my aborted attempts to instill some guilt about Arab oil-consumption and human rights in German souls, I got into a heated debate with Birgit Schwartz, a *Spiegel* journalist, to whom I complained about the German media biases concerning Arabs and their excessive coverage of terrorism and neglect of democrats' endeavours, and was confronted by a challenge. "Show us", she told me, "these democratic forces in the Arab world we are unable to see!" That startling and unexpected confrontation, which was identified to me later as "very German", pushed me to take up the challenge and design "Vanishing Orient", the only new project I gained from my Wiko's retreat, which is almost ready and will be shown in Munich in May 1996.

"Vanishing Orient: Papa's Harem is Shifting to Mama's Civil Society" is a word-image exhibit, where I try to show with a combination of short texts and photos (shot by photographer Ruth Ward in Morocco during January 1995) that yearning for civic participation is as prominent in today's Moroccan cultural landscape as the minarets, and that aspiration to self-empowerment, which is the essence of democracy, is far from being specifically European.

Finally, I realized that the only project which really thrived during my Wiko's pilgrimage is "Painted Harems", which compares how Western men (painters of *harems* such as Ingres and Matisse) and Eastern men (Moslem miniaturists; mostly Iranians, Mughal, Turkish, and Azerbaijani) depicted attractive women, erotic encounters, and sensuous bliss. Not only did I enrich my collection of Moslem miniatures by identifying those in German and Central Asian museums, but a project to collaborate with Hans Belting on a book on "Ingres' Harem" is among my future delights. But just like the nude beaches project, I cannot claim this one either, not because it has to do with sex, but because unlike

Hans Belting, who is an art-historian, I am paid by my university as a sociologist. The vital topics Moroccans expect their sociologists to talk about, I realized since I landed in Rabat on August 10, 1995, are drought, desert-advance, rural migration, and urban decay. After a few days meditation at Tamara beach, swimming in the mornings and drinking minted tea at sunset, I decided that I am left with two options:

—The first is to tell my colleagues exactly what happened during my yearlong-stay at the Wissenschaftskolleg, and then I will ruin two reputations: that of the Wissenschaftskolleg as a prestigious academic institution and mine, of course.

—The second is to make up a beautiful story about how solid are still my previous "theories" and book projects still are, and that means that for the next 15 days I will have to fabricate "academic" lies instead of taking 15 gorgeous morning swims and looking at 15 spectacular Atlantic sunsets.

It is at this dramatic moment that another revelation descended upon me (I think, in my next reincarnation I will be a prophet!): instead of fabricating lies, which is rather boring, I decided to devote myself totally to writing to fiction and I am starting the first chapter of "Tales from the Beach". If it is a bestseller (you will have noticed that I have left the scientific arena and am happily drifting into mysticism and fantasy), I could regain my lost glory among my peers. Because one thing is certain: East and West may differ on many grounds, but since the Crusades they share at least two things: both adore profit and vanity.

Tamara Beach, September 1995