

THE UTOPIA OF THE HAREM: REPRESENTATIONS  
OF THE HAREM IN MONTESQUIEU'S *PERSIAN  
LETTERS* AND FATIMA MERNISSI'S *DREAMS OF  
TRESPASS: TALES OF A HAREM GIRLHOOD*

A UTOPIA DO HARÉM: REPRESENTAÇÕES DO  
HARÉM NAS *CARTAS PERSAS* DE MONTESQUIEU E  
EM *NASCI NUM HARÉM* DE FATIMA MERNISSI

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**Abstract:** The harem has long been depicted as representative of the Orient in Western imagination. For some, a place of despotic rule and (female) oppression; to others, a feminist utopia of female freedom and protection. This paper analyzes two fundamental works that focus on the harem, Montesquieu's 18th century *Persian Letters*, and Fatima Mernissi's 20th century *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood*. It will do a comparative and exploratory reading of the harems presented in these two works, while focusing specifically on issues of agency and power—all departing from the concept of despotic power, female and authorial agency, and the gaze.

**Keywords:** despotism, harem, agency, gaze.

**Resumo:** O harém tem vindo a ser, há muito, retratado como representativo do Oriente no imaginário Ocidental. Para alguns, é um lugar de despotismo e de opressão (feminina) e, para outros, uma utopia feminista de liberdade e proteção feminina. Este ensaio analisa duas obras fundamentais com enfoque no harém: as *Cartas Persas*, de Montesquieu (séc. XVIII) e *Naschim Harém*, de Fatima Mernissi (séc. XX). O ensaio desenvolverá uma leitura comparatista e exploratória dos haréns representados nestas obras, focando-se, especificamente, nas temáticas da agência e poder, partindo dos conceitos de poder despótico, agência feminina e agência autoral e o olhar.

**Palavras-chave:** despotismo, harém, agencialidade, olhar.

# 1 Introduction

Although the writing about the Orient, and specifically about the harem, is not exclusive to the 18th and 19th centuries, it is possible to see a rising effort to represent these places, its peoples, and associated cultural spaces during these two centuries. These representations are oftentimes stereotyped and have left an almost everlasting imprint in Modern Western imaging of the Orient. Through the arts, from literature (e.g., Montesquieu, Lady Montagu, Eça de Queirós, the desert novel as a genre, among others), to painting (Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingres, John Frederick Lewis, Rudolf Ernst, among others), and photography (F. Meissner, Félix Bonfils, among others), the West has developed a set of ideas on the Orient, a structured narrative based on supposed facts. Studying the narrative about the Orient elaborated by the West, Edward W. Said wrote his influential work *Orientalism*, defining Orientalism as being threefold, interdependent, and interconnected in its dimensions. The first refers to the academic studies and institutions that research the Orient (SAID, 1979, p. 2). The second and third definitions are the most relevant for this paper, as they directly refer to the sources of analysis undertaken here: narrative. They refer to the “ontological and epistemological” distinctions between ‘Orient’ and ‘Occident,’ ‘East’ and ‘West’, and, consequentially, to

the narrativization of the Orient as “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (SAID, 1979, p. 2-3). It is important to keep Said’s work in mind throughout this paper; not only for the definition of the term used here, ‘Orientalism,’ but also because Said questions the validity of the work of those Western authors who have developed work—both academic and fictional—on the East, its peoples and cultures, questioning authorial power and authorial gaze. The latter is one of the main arguments to be presented throughout this paper, as it aims to analyze two literary works under the lenses of authorial and gendered agencies and power.

Particularly interesting to the analysis of such a narrative is the portrayal of the harem. It is often depicted alongside the Oriental woman, who seems to be the epicenter of many of the representations mentioned above. Often and simultaneously associated with despotism and lascivious sexuality, the harem<sup>2</sup> has been used as an example of how the oppressiveness of a despotic regime can function (see, for example, Montesquieu’s (2008 [1721]) *Persian Letters*<sup>3</sup>). However, men could not have had actual access to these places, as they were exclusively female, forbidden to men, regardless of them being Western or Eastern. As

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<sup>2</sup> For a complete and well encompassing review of the portrayal of harems and Oriental women in Western narratives, see: Tayyen (2017), Ahmed (1982), and Schmidt (2014).

<sup>3</sup> *Letters* henceforth.

none of the male painters or writers either travelled to Eastern lands or, if they did, did not have access to harems and *hamams*, this raises a compelling question on authorial agency and power over narrative. It also calls into question the right to look. The gaze as theorized much later by Laura Mulvey in 1975<sup>4</sup> refers to the role of the audience (in this case, the readers) as the observer, the one who has the power to gaze upon an objectified (usually female) ‘Other,’ a power that has tended to be male. In this case, one could argue that the writers constitute the first ‘audience’ of these harems and these women, then make the reader an ‘audience’ as well. The relevance of Mulvey’s work for this paper is not so much related to the role of the audience but to the act of gazing—an act that, as will be explored throughout this paper, is intrinsic to narrative depiction, authorial agency, and readership.

Other 18th and 19th century writers, who had been overlooked until the emergence of recent

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4 Mulvey’s work is seminal in feminist film studies as it was one of the first texts to establish the relation between the audience’s gaze and the screen to a patriarchal system of repression. The fact that the text is disproportionately older than most of the texts used as bibliographic support in this paper is connected to both this author’s work in the field of film studies and, most importantly, to the subsequent important body of work on Mulvey’s theory. For more on Mulvey’s work, see: Oliver (2017), Chaudhuri (2006), and Laing and Wilson (2020). Her theory, which she has revised from the late 80s onwards, is not free of criticism. The most relevant piece of criticism asserts that Mulvey postulates essentialist views of cinema and of gender identity, particularly when she only considers the white, heterosexual, cis-gendered male as the audience. See: Gamman and Marshment (1988) and hooks (1992). However, it remains a very useful and insightful tool to use when looking at patriarchal systems, power dynamics, and the representation of women.

studies, have also written about harems and *hamams*, particularly women travelers (RENK, 2020) who had access to these places, such as Lucie Duff Gordon or Lady Montagu (1763) and her *The Turkish Embassy Letters*<sup>5</sup>. Writers like Lady Montagu often portray quite a different picture of the harem, sometimes even suggesting that the harem might be the closest thing to a female utopia (RENK, 2020, p. 171); a place where women were not victims of despotic rules, but had freedom and rights that British women did not have at the time (STILL, 2009, p. 93-94). That is not to say, of course, that female Western writers like Lady Montagu were exempt from a colonial, Western gaze—they only presented a different gaze from that of their male counterparts, but which is nevertheless informative on different accounts<sup>6</sup>. Once more, this brings the focus to issues of the gaze, especially that of gendered gaze. On the other hand, and in more recent literature, the harem has been portrayed as a complex place, both as a family home and of female companionship, but also a place where borders—the *hudud* Fatima Mernissi talks about in her *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood*<sup>7</sup>—are deeply felt as constraining and limiting. This results in a complex and multifaceted reading of the harem, that has the potential to subvert depictions

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5 For a complete reading on Lady Montagu's view on the harem and its hospitality, see: Still (2009).

6 For a critical reading of Lady Montagu's work, see: Yeğenoğlu (1998). For a comparative reading of Lady Montagu and Montesquieu's work, see: Lowe (1991).

7 *Dreams* henceforth.

of the despotic and sexually overcharged harem but can also reinforce Western stereotypes of imprisoned and limited Oriental women.

This paper seeks to do an exploratory and comparative reading of such representations, particularly those presented in Montesquieu's *Letters* and Mernissi's *Dreams*, from the lenses of the gaze and agency, and anchored in the notion of despotism. It is important to establish that the notion of agency used here will be twofold; it will evoke gendered agency to analyze the role and status of women in the harem in the writings of these two authors and address authorial agency to focus on narrative issues and on Mernissi's work, that is presented as an autobiography, allowing for this discussion. First, it will introduce the concept of despotism based on Alain Grosrichard's work. Next, it will examine the representation of the harem as a despotic place with a particular emphasis on the power dynamics of gendered authorship and consequently gendered gaze. This representation is more evident in Montesquieu's *Letters*, although also present, even if less evidently, in Mernissi's *Dreams*, as some authors suggest. Afterwards, it will consider the notion of female utopia raised by Lady Montagu, among other authors, and the supposed subversion of Montesquieu's writings on the harem and Oriental women by Mernissi and how this can also be questioned. Finally, it will conclude with a brief



reflection on the harem as a complex and contentious place of meanings and narrative-building, with special focus on these two literary works (Montesquieu's and Mernissi's), questioning the notion of Western gaze, namely that of the academy, over the Orient and the narratives that have been built around it.

The main goal of this paper is not to do an exhaustive and close reading of both texts, but to contribute to the extensive debate on the representations of the harem, bringing up issues that are not raised too often in association with it, namely that of the gaze and the power that it produces. This is an exercise common in painting and filmic analysis but not in literature<sup>8</sup> as the gaze is usually taken literally. Thus, one of the original contributions of this paper to the debates surrounding the harem is the application of Mulvey's concept of the gaze to literature, employing it from its more typical uses in cinema, painting, and photography. This paper argues that the harem can simultaneously be seen as place of repression and limitation and a place of liberation and female utopia, but that above all is a contentious place in which Western male and female voices can agree or clash with Eastern authorial voices, often feminine and feminist.

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<sup>8</sup> This reading of the gaze is heavily influenced by Laura Mulvey's essay on the male gaze associated with cinematic and television productions. Because of this, her work has usually been used in filmic analysis, only recently being brought over to literary studies.

## 2 Harem as a Despotic Place

### 2.1 Despotism

Despotism is not a straightforward concept, as it offers many possibilities and has been conceived of in many ways. In summary, it has long been related to power dynamics, whether at the State/National level or at the family level, and has often referred to totalitarian and absolutist regimes that self-serve at the expense of the welfare and will of their peoples. According to Alain Grosrichard's (1998) seminal work *The Sultan's Court: European Fantasies of the East*, there is a first approximation between the public and political and the private and domestic spheres, as the power to rule had been previously linked to the father figure in the nuclear family, particularly by Aristotle. Both are considered to have natural or divine origin, something that is later brought back by absolutist kings such as Louis XIV. This also implies the essentialization of one's place in society, as nature has determined who could be ruled and who could rule (Grosrichard, 1998, p. 8). However, according to Grosrichard's reading of Aristotle, when twisted and perverse, this power would become despotic, but only over enslaved people, as this is a relation in which the self-servicing goal of the master is inherent (Grosrichard, 1998, p. 8). In the same vein, one could

say that paternal power over his family becomes despotic when the welfare of his children is no longer considered, and the unit of ‘family’ becomes self-servicing to the man who leads it (Grosrichard, 1998, p. 5). Thus, Grosrichard (1998, p. 6) affirms “what originally had significance only in the domestic and private sphere comes initially to be used to describe the abuses and perversions of a royal power which is itself likened to paternal power”. Yet, Grosrichard (1998, p. 8) indicates that political power is only to be considered so when applied by a master to free people: “it is over free persons that the powers of the father and the husband, like those of the king and the man of state, are exercised,” as opposed to that of the despotic power which is applied over people who are “deprived of freedom”. Be that as it may, this can be a complicated sentence to interpret as not just enslaved people were lacking freedom; women, for example, have almost always had an inferior status than men in Western societies, including that of Ancient Greece in which Athenian women lacked freedom in most areas of their lives—albeit not entirely like enslaved people, they were close in status and rights (FOXHALL, 2013; LORAUX, 1993; WINKLER, 1989). This calls into question the nature of political power as it is presented by Grosrichard’s reading of Aristotle, as the gendered aspect of domination and being dominated seems to be overlooked. This aspect will prove relevant to the following discussions of

authorial agency on the narratives of the harem and the gaze that one casts upon it.

According to Grosrichard (1998, p. 11), Aristotle points to despotic power as to any that represents a deviation from the welfare of the people the despot rules over, distinguishing three types of despotic power, all divergent forms of different types of governance. Oligarchy, a deviance from aristocracy, can be labelled as despotic because it is corrupted by greed as its goal is the material enrichment of the despot—and, by extension, the same goal is observed in its people, but to their own profit, not their suzerain—thus implying an increased feeling of distrust and envy between peoples, rulers, and rulers and their peoples (GROSRICHARD, 1998, p. 11-12). Democracy, a deviance from the republic, is marked by conflicts between its peoples, especially those of notable repute and importance, potentially resulting in their destruction or exile (GROSRICHARD, 1998, p. 12). Finally, tyranny, a deviation from monarchy, is indicated as the worst form of despotic power as it results in a mixture of the characteristics of oligarchy and monarchy (GROSRICHARD, 1998, p. 11, 15). It enslaves its people through legal and social disempowerment. Another characteristic of despotic power, also connected to this notion of tyranny, is the delegation of power to the point where the despotic figure itself can barely be present but have others do their work (GROSRICHARD, 1998, p. 9).

Despotism has long been associated with the Orient. Grosrichard (1998, p. 17) points to Aristotle's theory that Eastern people were 'naturally' inclined to be servants, hence ruled over. This notion slowly developed and travelled to the 18th century when despotism was increasingly connected to tyrannical kingship and political corruption, having as its displaced epitome in the East, namely the Ottoman Empire (GROSRICHARD, 1998, p. 18-19). While this discourse is particularly familiar as a justifier for imperial expansion and the invasion of other countries under the guise of 'civilizing' the 'Other,' the connection between despotism and the Orient (and the harem) is quite present in Montesquieu's (1989 [1748]) work. As made evident by his *The Spirit of the Laws*, Montesquieu envisioned a separation of powers, thus contemplating the nullity of the feudalistic system and directly criticizing despotic monarchies such as those that had devastated France and other countries. Considering Grosrichard's definitions of despotism, it can be hypothesized that feudalism would also stand out as a despotic system as it sought only the enrichment of the Lord who ruled over the lands leased to its people, who were neither in a position of freedom nor benefitted from these enrichments and improvements. This notion was equally important as it decentralized power, preventing that one ruler or institution alone could enact tyrannical actions. Thus, Montesquieu asserts that despotism is guided and imposed through fear (1989 [1748], p. 28).

## 2.2 Despotism in the Harem

In Montesquieu's epistolary work, the reader has access to accounts of the East, particularly Ispahan, through travels to the West, namely to France and Italy, of Usbek and Rica. The novel seeks to comment on the political regime prevalent in France through the displacement of authorial voices and the space where most of the action occurs. It is Usbek and Rica, two Oriental subjects, who, one more pronounced than the other, examine Western society and place evident criticism onto their societies and political systems; nevertheless, always recurring to the examples they know of, that is, that of Ispahan and its political and social regimes. This is a literary tactic that allows Montesquieu to both be critical of French ruling while commenting on despotic Oriental 'Others,' but positioning these 'Others' as the main narrative authors instead of subjects—a double criticism, anchored on the millennial narrative of association between Orient, despotism, and the harem, constituting “an inverted ethnography” that places “European, and particularly French, society within an alien conceptual frame” (HUNDERT, 1990, p. 103)<sup>9</sup>.

The harem is presented as the privileged space for despotism (SANDERS, 2020, p. 1; THOMAS, 1978,

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<sup>9</sup> On the comparisons Usbek makes between Western and Eastern social and political regimes, see: Groot (2006). For a comparison between the harem, in an Orientalist narrative, and monasteries as prisons see: Thomas (1978).

p. 36). To the eyes of a Western audience, it not only evokes the notion of close proximity between family units and political power but also functions as a place of repression, especially female oppression<sup>10</sup>. The man in charge of the harem is absent—as made evident by Usbek’s journey—and delegates his power, mercy, and wrath onto others—in this case, truly ‘Othered’ men, the eunuchs, who are enslaved<sup>11</sup>, and must watch over the women who live in Usbek’s harem, his wives. Two important aspects should be evidenced when considering the content of Usbek’s letters. The first is his despotism, made most evident in his letters addressed to or that talk about his wives and the harem. In Letter 24, for example, Usbek reinforces the need for the captivity of the harem—“You live in my seraglio as in the home of innocence, safe from the evil intent of all humans” (MONTESQUIEU, 2008 [1792], p. 35). He also refers to the raping of Roxane, focusing “on his own immediate interests and pleasures while completely ignoring the moral and ethical dilemma and consequences of raping his wife Roxane” (SANDERS, 2020, p. 5). Particularly relevant for this analysis is E. J. Hundert’s (1990, p. 105)

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<sup>10</sup> Power is frequently related to male assertion, hence the connection often made between patriarchal regimes, power, and male assertion that are usually entailed in despotic systems. For more on gendered power and how it can be stretched see: Sanders (2020).

<sup>11</sup> There is a differentiation of rank between eunuchs defined by their ethnicity and duties, and their ‘freedoms’ are also dependent on their ranks. See: Junne (2016), Hathaway (2018), and Gaião (2020). For more information on the relationship between the eunuchs and their perceived ‘lack,’ or ‘emasculatation,’ and the power it gives them over women, inclusively of looking at them, see: Hundert (1990).

reading of Montesquieu's *Letters* as the author poses the gaze, especially the male's, as one of the privileged means through which power is imposed: "Usbek's wives fully exist only insofar as they are permitted to see and be seen by Usbek himself". This is the importance of the veil<sup>12</sup> and the harem as symbols and objects that 'protect' Usbek's wives from unwanted eyes. Relating the act of gazing to sexuality, Hundert also affirms that the dominion of Usbek's own sexuality, and, by extension, his despotic power, are only maintained by his ability to gaze or to keep his wives from being gazed upon (1990, p. 107). Furthermore, Jennifer Epley Sanders (2020, p. 1) also sees Usbek's despotic power in the environment of "fear, force, jealousy, and suspicion" that he imposes over the harem. This echoes Montesquieu's (1989 [1748], p. 28) assertion that despotic power is exerted through fear. He makes it evident in Letter 140<sup>13</sup> when he grants the eunuch permission to solve rebellions with violence: "may fear, may terror be your companions; hasten from room to room bearing punishment and retribution; may they all pass their days in dread, may they all weep bitterly in your presence" (Montesquieu, 2008 [1721], p. 206).

However, the letters that Usbek receives from his wives seem to contradict the image Usbek has of himself—for as much as the reader may think Usbek to

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12 The veil plays a vital role in the discussion of female agency, right to gaze, and oppression. For more on this subject, see: Macdonald (2006) and Nelson (2015).

13 Letter 146 also attests to this, as well as Letter 148, written by Roxane, Letter 157, written by Zachi, and Letter 158, written by Zelis.



be a despot, he considers his actions as appropriate of a good husband (as evidenced, for example, in Letter 24, in his conviction that he is keeping his wives safe by secluding them). The letters from Usbek's wives question his validity as a fair ruler since his actions seem to be only self-servicing and not towards the best interest of the wives, enhancing only his power and not theirs (SANDERS, 2020, p. 5). This reinforces Usbek's characterization as despot. They also question the institution of the harem as essential and beneficial for women. Specifically, the women slowly but steadily rebel against Usbek's despotic rule, exercised through the eunuchs, culminating in letters admitting disgust, a sense of imprisonment, and ultimately, of a life that is not worth living but that, through suicide, becomes freer than that of Usbek's. This means that Usbek is as dependent on the harem and his wives for the exercise and expression of his power as the women supposedly are of the harem and their husband for their secure lifestyle—"though despot, Usbek slowly emerges as the singularly restricted subject of his own despotism" (HUNDERT, 1990, p. 109). Although the point Hundert is making is understandable, it must be questioned. Hundert (1990, p. 109) maintains that these rebellious actions give the wives their selfhood again. However, Hundert's argument implies that the lives of the wives, who were evidently unhappy, suffering, and imprisoned, as well as Roxane's death, were not a direct product of Usbek's despotic regime (SANDERS,

2020, p. 10). It does, nonetheless, reinforce the whole narrative as one about despotic power anchored in male power since

the dehumanization that stems from patriarchy in a despotic system can permeate society at all levels, even down to a seraglio and the private interactions between a husband and wife. Society's existing power structures continuously reinforce Usbek's patriarchal status, authority, and control over others, and in turn, his ongoing oppressive and exploitative behavior toward his wives strengthens the larger despotic system (SANDERS, 2020, p. 1).

These letters can reinforce several stereotypical narratives: the harem as a place of despotic power, violently oppressive and imposed even, and perhaps especially, in the absence of its ruler; the victimhood of Oriental women, confined and imprisoned by the harem walls and veils; and the harem and its Oriental women as dangerous places of conspiracy and treachery, if one follows Usbek's narration of his wives' rebellion (GROOT, 2006, p. 76). Yet, these letters can also represent some level of female agency and resistance. For instance, in Letter 24, Usbek describes how Roxane, despite being raped, did not yield mentally nor sentimentally to him; in Letter 139, Zachi is caught with a lover, thus controlling her body and sexuality; in Letter 139, Usbek also learns that Zelis unveiled herself on the way to the mosque; in Letter 143, the eunuch complains about the wives' behaviors as being

improper and out of the eunuch's control. Such actions of rebellion continue on to Letters 148, 150, 157, and 158, culminating in Roxane's suicide. Roxane's death presents a delicate topic of discussion connecting suicide and agency. On the one hand, her death can be seen as a recovery of agency, as she chooses to renounce her life and further agency. On the other hand, it can also be argued that Roxane's suicide is a direct product of her living conditions, which begs the question of how limited in her agency Roxane was to actually choose this route. Furthermore, it can also add to the narrative of women's agency being almost dependent on their death, as if death is the only way through which women can fulfil their agential power.

### 3 Harem as a Feminine Utopia

Some two centuries after Montesquieu's work, Mernissi's narrative of the harem, accompanied by Ruth Ward's photography<sup>14</sup>, complicate these already complex narratives. She presents the harem as a family home where several generations live, instead of just one husband with multiple wives. This rapidly desexualizes the harem and confronts Western notions (such as Montesquieu's) of the harem as a sexual place and/or a prison, where the Oriental woman is but a sexual object

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<sup>14</sup> For a detailed analysis of the photography that accompanies Mernissi's book, see: Abdo (2007).

to be gazed upon and used, limited in her freedom, and deprived of any social contact. The harem is also where female kinship can be developed, where women have a space for themselves, as the harem is described to have places where men are not allowed to enter, and where several generations of women of different social classes meet to tell stories, engage in free conversation, artistic activity, and the education and care of children and each other, the *hanan* (MERNISSI, 1994, p. 159).

In her narrative, Mernissi does address the strict delimitations of space in the harem. Some are to women's benefit, as was seen before, since they allow for free conversation, exchange of ideas, storytelling, and learning. She affirms that "women and men rule in their own realms, which must not be equated with a western view of gender equality" (ZHALNER, 2021, p. 547), while also delimiting male space and rituality. For example, Mernissi (1994, p. 122) refers to the circumcision dance as a "man's affair," stating that "the woman had no voice in this matter". However, some of these limitations are criticized for restricting women's freedom, especially their freedom to become educated and independent people. In Mernissi's narrative, it is at times opposed to "the original Islamic ideals of freedom and equality" (ZAHNER, 2021, p. 546).

Nevertheless, Mernissi's narrative, written through the lens of a child who is trying to understand the space that surrounds her, particularly the limitations of that space, the *hudud*, that is, "man-made divisions"

(ZÄHLNER, 2021, p. 546), implicitly hints at some *topoi* frequently used to describe harems and the women within. For instance, some characters manifest their distaste for such an institution (the harem), preferring to live with just their nuclear family—for example, Fatima’s mother would rather live with her husband and daughter (MERNISSI, 1994, p. 6)—or by representing Yasmina who, despite living in a harem without apparent walls, as it is situated in the countryside, manifests her awareness that not all *hudud* are physical, and thus they are *qa’ida* and disproportionately imposed on women when compared to what limits men: “a mathematical law or a legal system was *qa’ida*, and so was the foundation of a building. *Qa’ida* was also a custom or a behavioral coda. *Qa’ida* was everywhere ... ‘Unfortunately, most of the time, *qa’ida* is against women’” (MERNISSI, 1994, p. 62).

It also becomes evident that, despite women’s apparent freedom—especially when compared to the women presented in Montesquieu’s *Letters*—women’s freedom is also dependent on men’s leniency, mostly evident in Fatima’s father who is constantly torn between what he wants to do and what he ought to do, be it socially or in a familial setting. This tension is amplified by his position as a colonized man: “we live in difficult times, the country is occupied by foreign armies, our culture is threatened. All we have left is these traditions” (MERNISSI, 1994, p. 201). Education comes via colonization from the French, which allows

Fatima to go to school for the first time (ISHAQUE, 2019, p. 291)—a factor that is also very present in the characterization of Fatima’s mother and what she wishes for her daughter. The problematic of the colonizer vs. the colonized is of special importance as it is also referenced by another female voice, Aunt Habiba, who, despite sharing some of Fatima’s mother’s rebellious ideas, shows her support towards colonization. Aunt Habiba takes colonization as a sign of Allah’s anger for the disrespect of women’s *hudud*, saying that is “unlawful to hurt the weak” (MERNISSI, 1994, p. 3). This is a particularly telling example of the double colonization in which women may encounter themselves, first as national subjects, then as women, viewed as weak both by themselves and by men, foreign or not.

Another relevant aspect to consider is the issue of authorship and female agency in storytelling. Both agency and authorship relate to issues of power, which are central to the discussion of this paper regarding the harem and despotism. Montesquieu had never been to a harem, and his characters are not Eastern as he himself is not. He also frequently uses

strategies of linking fantasy and narrative with displays of scholarly expertise, of combining the presentation of ‘authentic’ material from another culture with the shaping of that material to European taste or expectation, and of deploying exotically entertaining representations for ‘philosophic’ purposes (GROOT, 2006, p. 67).

This calls into question the claim of factuality of the authors of the time—which today has been debunked but continues to be of relevance because at the time and throughout time served as a text of authority for the development of Orientalist narratives.

On the other hand, Lady Montagu's (1763) *Turkish Embassy Letters* serve as a quasi-contemporary piece to Montesquieu's, in which female authority over the text confers it more authenticity and agency. Unlike Montesquieu, Lady Montagu did enter harems and *hamams*, writing on the relative freedoms of Turkish women when compared to those of British women, on Turkish women's knowledge and relevance, the baths and harems as non-sexual places, and female kinship (GROOT, 2006, p. 79-82). This helped to dispel some of the Orientalist structures that mine Montesquieu's accounts (and others), even if not completely free of exoticism and universalization. This sheds light on the power to gaze because in Lady Montagu's case, we see not a male subject gazing on a female, but two female subjects (Lady Montagu and Turkish women) gazing on each other.

As a non-Western female writer, Mernissi has been lauded for her authorial agency and feminist view of the harem, subverting Western stereotypes and presenting the harem as a possible female space, perhaps not completely of utopia, but where kinship, rebellion, and change are possible (ABDO, 2007; ISHAQUE, 2019; ZHALNER, 2021). However, others

have denounced Mernissi for pandering to Western Orientalist narratives (BOURGET, 2013; LEBBADDY, 2005; MOORE, 2014). Mernissi admitted to having invented some of the characters, namely Chama and Aunt Habiba (BOURGET, 2013, p. 34). This raises questions about the voices Mernissi seeks to represent as autobiographical, especially when connected to characters that are often less represented (e.g. older, divorced women): “Mernissi is drowning out illiterate women’s voices by filling it [*sic*] with her own because she is not solely trying to reconstruct what she heard from the illiterate women of her childhood: she invents characters that long for a Western lifestyle” (BOURGET, 2013, p. 35).

It can also be considered that she writes for a Western audience, as the book was first written in English and then translated into French, containing explanatory footnotes that are different from the English to the French version (BOURGET, 2013, p. 31). However, Zhalner (2021, p. 539) admits that this can also be a strategy of “re-appropriation and re-imagining of identity and culture”. This would present Mernissi’s authorial agency and power to gaze and consequentially her power to invite others to gaze, in a delicate balance between Orientalism and re-appropriation and subversion of stereotypes about the harem.

The narratives surrounding the harem, oftentimes even producing it, are not straightforward or completely



despotic, especially considering that 1) despotism is a Western concept heavily anchored in stereotypes about the Orient, and 2) these authors, particularly Mernissi, who could prefigure an Oriental (female) voice, can be argued as both sabotaging their own enterprise for their lack of authorial agency and truthfulness and inviting the reader for a more conscious reading of the harem and those within them. Perhaps most importantly, they reconsider the configurations of despotism, its multifaceted and ever-encompassing nature. Sanders (2020, p. 6) reminds that “it must be noted that it is the seraglio structure (i.e., despotism) with patriarchy as an ideology and practice that by and large frames and supports those characteristics and behaviors”, thus clearly demarcating the space of despotic harems as not despotic *by nature*—it is useful to recall Grosrichard’s assertions on Aristotelean nature here—but marked by a particularly oppressive system, patriarchy, that both feeds and is fed by despotism.

#### 4 Final Remarks: Harem as a Contentious Place of Meanings

This paper attempted to do a brief comparative reading of two seminal works on the construction of the narrative on the harem, Montesquieu’s *Persian Letters* and Fatima Mernissi’s *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood*. It focused on issues related to

the agency of narrative and the power to gaze, while critically engaging with the concept of despotism as not only a political and social system but a gendered structure as well.

As with any research, this paper presents limitations. Due to a language barrier, it was not possible to have access to feminist writing that is not written for Western audiences. Critics like Carine Bourget (2013) see this as essential for debating these issues so as to not risk perpetuating the voices of Western, white authors who are foreign to the realities and practices surrounding the harem—such is the case of the author of this paper.

The author hopes that future research delves more deeply into the implications of Mernissi's depiction of the harem and female agency, considering Bourget's criticism of the book's supposedly autobiographical nature. It would also be fruitful to consider all relevant aspects of both books with a closer reading, especially when concerned with issues of the gaze and its intertextuality with other areas of production (like photography, painting, and music). Furthermore, it could prove interesting to further the study of masculinity, specifically in its potentially limiting relation with despotic regimes (are the men depicted in both narratives, Usbek and the men in Fatima's family, all also limited by a bigger, invisible despotic system?). Similarly, it would be worthwhile to further examine the role of the eunuchs and the connection between

sexuality, lack of it, and the power to gaze, especially in comparison to that of women.

Finally, anchored on the reading of the Muslim feminist writings available in English (e.g. AHMED, 1982; MACDONALD, 2006; NELSON, 2015; TAYYEN, 2017; ISHAQUE, 2019), it is important to conclude this paper by asserting that the harem (as well as the veil), which are usually symbols of oppression in Western narratives, can and should be further problematized. Since they can give women the power to look back without being looked upon, they can also be seen as spaces and objects of female empowerment. It becomes apparent and urgent that Western narratives on these matters (in which the academy is included) become less polarized and adopt a discourse of non-binarism. In this case, it is safe to argue that—even if surprisingly, and without questioning authorial intention—both Montesquieu and Mernissi present accounts of binary harems as oppressive and as propellers of female rebellion, exclusion, and companionship. Mernissi offers a nuanced vision of the harem while Montesquieu’s readers will likely have to take on that endeavor for themselves. Most importantly, and echoing Sanders’ (2020, p. 6) assertion on patriarchal despotism, it is possible to hypothesize that Mernissi denounces a despotic system pervasive to all systems, regardless of Western or Eastern, that of patriarchy, which can take many forms. If anything, Mernissi’s and Montesquieu’s (even if implicitly) work, suggest that

the West is incapable of recognizing oppressive systems within itself (one of the reasons why Montesquieu chose to displace his criticism of French political and social systems, perhaps), so it relocates them onto the 'Other,' forgetting that the 'Other' is always an integral part of the 'Self'.

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