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## A Contested Space

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## A Contested Space

### Abstract

This paper attempts to define the Arabic term *harem*, using representations from Ahdaf Soueif's novel *The Map of Love* and Fatima Mernissi's memoir *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood*, plus visual renditions by John Frederick Lewis. While presenting the harem as positive space, both *The Map of Love* and Lewis's paintings conclude that the harem is place of peace, tranquility, and content. Yet, *Dreams of Trespass* offers more than one representation that conflicts with *The Map of Love* and Lewis's paintings: A representation of a negative nature and the other, of a neutral nature. Through the exploration of multiple representations of the harem, this research paper concludes that the *harem* is a contested space.

What is a harem? The *harem* is a place. The immediate translation of the term, *harem* seems easy enough to understand, but when considering the minor differences from place to place, the term becomes largely ambiguous. What the translation fails to convey is the term's nature. Most who consider the differences from place to place, will find themselves questioning its translation. In Ahdaf Soueif's *The Map of Love*, one may bear witness to a positive representation of the harem. Catherine Wynne in "Navigating the Mezzaterra: Home, Harem and the Hybrid Family in Ahdaf Soueif's *The Map of Love*," states that "it is through the representation of the harem as desirable domestic space that Soueif's revisionist project advances a positive vision of nineteenth-century Arab-Muslim domesticity and culture" (56). In the *Map of Love*, readers are exposed to John Frederick Lewis, an English, Orientalist painter who presents

the harem as positive space in much the same way as Soueif. However, Fatima Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood*—a memoir of her childhood in Fez, Morocco—presents the harem differently. She adds that the harem as a space can be positive, negative, and neither at the same time. One may find that the harem, in its isolation, is restrictive and oppressive. Another may find its isolation liberating and free from. Though these representations can add confusion, they can also solidify its definition. Because the harem can be positive, negative, and neutral, the *harem* as a contested space.

Neither the commonalities nor the differences between *haram*, *harem*, and *hareem* are generally understood. Even as I attempt to convey their meanings, I too, am discovering more and more alternatives to defining, viewing, and applying each of these terms. To start, the word *haram* according to Soueif, translates to “a sacred or inviolable space”; next, the word *harem*, according to Soueif, “is derived from the root h/r/m: that h/r/m loosely translates to ‘sacred,’ ‘forbidden,’ the ‘proscribed’ (522). These two terms, both *haram* and *harem*, denote something ‘sacred or ‘inviolable,’ but what is not presented in Soueif’s definitions is that these two terms carry are synonymous of one another. Mernissi adds clarification to Soueif’s definitions in her claim that *harem* is simply, “a slight variation of the word *haram*” (61). The differences between the two terms reside only within their spellings (‘...ram,’ vs. ‘...rem’) and their pronunciations. To add to each definition, Mamet-Michalkiewicz points out that “the harem is understood as both place and space, a boundary-zone between Christians and Muslims, men and women, and children and adults” (152). As presented in her memoir, Mernissi is given useful insight by her grandmother Yasmina into the definition of the harem:

“One thing that helped me see this more clearly was when Yasmina explained that Mecca, the holy city, was also called Haram. Mecca was a space where behavior was strictly codified. The moment you stepped inside, you were bound by many laws and regulations. People who entered Mecca had to be pure: they had to perform purification rituals, and refrain from lying, cheating, and doing harmful deeds.” (61)

The description from Grandmother Yasmina ties directly to how Mamet Michalkiewicz defines the harem or haram: that the harem is a space with walls, either metaphorical or physical, that demarcate a set of prescribed rules or regulations. The hareem, generally understood as the same as both haram and harem, is in fact, defined differently: according to Soueif, the *hareem* denotes “women, from h/r/m: sacred” (522). Essentially, the word *hareem* refers to ‘sacred’ women, specifically Arabic women who reside within a haram, or harem. This research paper will use the variant, *harem* to conclude its interpretations.

## I

It is necessary to provide visual context to convey my point more clearly. In *The Map of Love*, Anna Winterbourne—a woman of an eighteenth/nineteenth century London who eventually found herself within a harem in Egypt after the death of her husband—visits the South Kensington Museum regularly to view paintings by the Orientalist painter John Frederick Lewis: “a most beautiful and calming place and where I have come upon some paintings by Mr Frederick Lewis” (27). Lewis attempts to present the harem in his paintings and it is precisely his representation of the harem that draws Anna to them. The paintings reverberate evocative feelings of privacy and content. What follows, as figures 1 *Life in the Harem*, and 2 *The Harem*,

are paintings by Lewis. These examples may not be the exact paintings Anna saw at the South Kensington Museum, though they both exemplify Anna's feelings in much the same way. It is important to note that these paintings present a secluded space for women, and though these paintings are indeed a representation of the harem, the correct variation deserves mention: According to Soueif, the space specifically for women is called the *haramlek*.



Figure 1 *Life in the Harem* by John Frederick Lewis.

In Figure 1 *Life in the Harem* by John Frederick Lewis, three women can be seen in a secluded space. The woman in the foreground of the picture is smiling with her eyes shut, grasping what appears to be a bouquet of varying flowers, lounging on a couch with many decorative pillows of silken material, and appearing as if she is in a state of bliss or contentment that is unbreachable by the two women in the background. Of the women in the background, the woman closer to the foreground appears to be smiling while carrying into the harem a tray of

drinks and food while the woman behind her eagerly follows. Like the first two women, the furthest woman, though harder to see, appears to be smiling as well. Beautiful architecture is accompanied by a stunning view of a structure in the window behind the first woman, which adds to the tranquil ambiance of this painting and these places. Figure 1 presents a private space for women. Each of these women, with the help of their subtle expressions, present to observers that the place they reside in is a space of peace, of tranquility, of contentment, of beauty, is comfortable for its embroidered, silken material, and is free of men. It is precisely these images and the feelings that come from these images that drew Anna, ‘day after day,’ to the South Kensington Museum: “*they [Lewis’s paintings] are possessed of such a luminous beauty that I feel in their presence as though a gentle had caressed my very soul*” (27).



Figure 2 *The Harem* by John Frederick Lewis.

Figure 2 is Lewis's painting titled *The Harem*, and, like the previous figure, displays and creates many of the same images and feelings. Like *Life in the Harem*, *The Harem* presents women in a private space that creates feelings of contentment, tranquility, and bliss. One of the similarities and presumably one of the reasons Anna was drawn to the places in these paintings, is that these spaces are entirely devoid of men. These spaces are without men simply because they are not allowed. This space, known as a harem as well as a haramlek, is specifically reserved for women and only women. Not only is Anna drawn to the privacy presented in these paintings, she is also drawn by "the wondrous colours, the tranquility, the contentment with which they [Lewis's paintings] are infused" (46). It is precisely the feelings and interpretations—that the Lewis paintings evoked for Anna a desire to reside within a harem. Anna soon finds herself in a harem and feels much in the same way she does when she observes Lewis's paintings.

## II

Both Anna Winterbourne's understanding of Lewis's paintings and her experiences in a harem present the space as peaceful and liberating; the harem is portrayed as a possible escape for Anna and a transition from a hectic life, to a sustained and peaceful life. As Anna observes Lewis's art exhibit at the South Kensington Museum, her interpretation of a certain painting is described:

On a low bed, pressed into a pile of silken cushions, a woman lies sleeping. Above her, a vast curtain hangs, through the brilliant billowing green of which the fluid shadows of the lattice shutters can be made out, and beyond them, the light. One wedge of sunshine –

from the open window above her head – picks out the sleeper’s face and neck, the cream-coloured chemise revealed by the open buttons of her tight bodice. (26)

With minor color variations and without the other two women in the background, it is almost as if Anna is looking at the painting presented in Figure 1. Shortly after the passing of her dear Edward, Anna found herself within one of Lewis’s paintings: “I woke up from what must have been a deep and peaceful slumber and my first thought on waking was that I had slipped into one of those paintings, the contemplation of which had given me such rare moments of serenity” (134). The mere thought of Lewis’s paintings developed within Anna those same feelings of contentment that would manifest in the actual presence of Lewis’s renditions. To add, she indicates that these instances, whether she be observing the paintings or in one, are ‘rare moments of serenity.’ The fact that she elucidates these moments as ‘rare’ should signify their importance. The term ‘rare’ can have different connotations. It appears to have, in this instance, a double-meaning; first, that these moments are infrequent; and second, that these moments are of great worth: that, the term ‘rare’ connotes both infrequency and worth. Take for instance gold. Finding gold is infrequent but once found, the gold carries with it worth or value of high quality. These feelings for Anna only come every so often, but when they come, they are unparalleled in terms of worth or value. Her ideologies conflict with Mother Mernissi’s ideologies of the harem; Anna interpreted it as a free and domesticated space, while Mother Mernissi, viewed it as a restrictive and oppressive space; therefore, the harem can only be defined as a contested space.

In the memoir *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood*, Fatima Mernissi describes her childhood and her ever so confusing quest to discover the meanings of the *harem*. From the beginning to the end of the novel, Mernissi wrestles with different representations of the harem. She receives insight into its definition from the Mernissi family but more notably, from Mother Mernissi and Grandmother Yasmina. Mother Mernissi detested her harem: “Mother, who hated communal harem life and dreamt of an eternal tête-à-tête with Father” (6). Mother Mernissi despised her harem for the lack of privacy she had with her husband, for in these times, it was not uncommon for households to practice polygamy. Mother Mernissi had to share her husband with seven other co-wives, meaning, that over an eight-day span, Mother would only have one day with her husband. She found her harem restrictive and repressive. She was not free to go about town whenever she so chose, nor did she have the privacy with her husband that she desired. Mother Mernissi, as Fatima Mernissi states, belonged to the “anti-harem camp,” while Grandmother Yasmina—though not explicitly stated in this particular passage—belongs to the “pro-harem camp” (40). Mernissi describes her and her mother’s harem as a ‘fortress’ or a ‘prison’ with massive walls put in place to cut them off from the rest of the world, while she describes Grandmother Yasmina’s harem as something open, peaceful, and liberating:

Yasmina’s harem was an open farm with no visible high walls. Ours in Fez was like a fortress.

Yasmina and her co-wives rode horses, swam in the river, caught fish, and cooked it over open fires. Mother could not even step out of the gate without asking multiple permissions, and even then, all she could do was visit the shrine of Moulay Driss (the patron saint of the city) or her brother... or a religious festival. (39)

The conflicting situations between Mother Mernissi and Yasmina represent the harem as a contested space in terms of opposition: restrictive vs. liberating; the reclusiveness of a fortress vs. the openness of farms; something viewed as restrictive and oppressive, as in Mother Mernissi's case, can also be viewed as secure and protective, as in Yasmina's case. Yasmina goes on to add further support: "I needed to relax about this right-and-wrong business. She [Yasmina] said that here things which could be both, and things which could be neither," meaning, that the harem should be understood as something both good and bad and neither at the same time (61). Hopefully, what is presented in this section is clear: that the harem is a contested space. Each view a person has regarding their own harem will oppose the views others may have as mistaken or wrong.

#### IV

As presented in the previous sections, the harem can be viewed in many ways. For Anna and many on-lookers who found themselves entranced by the portraits of Frederick Lewis and Orientalist painters alike, the harem represented a space or place that was peaceful, tranquil, content, and private; the harem represented an escape from European life. Mother Mernissi found that her harem, which was secluded behind high walls with only one entrance/exit (a large gate that confined her to the harem), was restrictive and oppressive because she was isolated from the outside world and had limited time with her husband. Grandmother Yasmina had a different view of the harem than Mother Mernissi. She could recognize that the harem was both good and bad and neither, and that it was entirely dependent upon individual circumstance and opinion. Yasmina's harem, a farm without walls, is isolated from civilization in much the same way as Mernissi's harem, but what is different, is the way these two women view each

circumstance. Yasmina, for example, finds her isolation liberating and free, while Mother Mernissi finds her isolation restrictive and oppressive; therefore, the harem is a contested space.

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