

Chapter 3

Women's Prisons

At this point, the harem must no longer be considered as some exotic curiosity but must be recognized as a phantasmic locus the fascinating powers of which can be apprehended only if it is related to its deep, metaphysical, roots.

Alain Grosrichard, *Structure du sérail*

The photographer will come up with more complacent counterparts to these inaccessible Algerian women. These counterparts will be paid models that he will recruit almost exclusively on the margins of a society in which loss of social position, in the wake of the conquest and the subsequent overturning of traditional structures, affects men as well as women (invariably propelling the latter toward prostitution).

Dressed for the occasion in full regalia, down to the jewels that are the indispensable finishing touch of the production, the model will manage, thanks to the art of illusion that is photography, to impersonate, to the point of believability, the unapproachable referent: the *other* Algerian woman, absent in the photo. In

her semblance on the postcard, the model is simultaneously the epiphany of this absent woman and her imaginary takeover. The perfection and the credibility of the illusion are ensured by the fact that the absent other is, by definition, unavailable and cannot issue a challenge.

Since it fills this absence and this silence, the postcard sets its own criteria of truthfulness for the representation of Algerian women and for the discourse that can be held about them.¹⁰

Even more advantageously, the existence and the efficacy of the model allow the postcard to conceal the essentially mercantilistic character of its enterprise. For indeed, it must be admitted that the lucrative end of the operation is never apparent on the mercenary bodies displayed

on the postcards. It is hidden in at least three ways. First and foremost, by the iconic message, that is, by the photographed subject as such, who must be acknowledged to possess an undeniable power of attraction (one always selects one postcard in preference to another). Second, by the caption, which is meant to be informative; the information it conveys is supposed to amount to “knowledge” and thus be disinterested. Finally, it may occasionally be hidden by the senders’ comments with their pretensions to enlightened views.

In her role as substitute, the model presents three distinct and yet closely related advantages: she is *accessible*, *credible*,¹¹ and *profitable*. This is the three-legged foundation upon which will come to stand the whole of the enterprise pursued so relentlessly by the colonial postcard.

As the locus for the setting of the illusion, the studio, for its part, must complete the initial illusion created by the model. By virtue of this function, it becomes the scene of the imaginary, indispensable to the fulfillment of desire.¹² It becomes the embodiment of the propitious site.

The whole array of props, carefully disposed by the photographer around and upon the model (trompe l’oeil, furnishings, backdrops, jewelry, assorted objects), is meant to suggest the existence of a natural frame whose feigned “realism” is expected to provide a supplementary,

yet by no means superfluous, touch of authenticity. For the mode of being of this counterfeit is redundancy.

Indeed, if the double, or rather the stand-in, is always an impoverished version of the original—its schematic representation—it is because it saturates the meaning of the original by the plethoric multiplication of signs that are intended to connote it. Paradoxically, this would constitute an instance of degradation through excess. The photographer, caught up in his own frenzy, however, cannot stop to consider this paradox, busy as he is with attempting to make something more real than the real and developing an almost obsessive fetishism of the (sign’s) object.



Moorish women at home.



Moorish women at home.

Brimming over with connotative signs, every photographer's studio thus becomes a versatile segment of urban or geographic landscape. Whereas the model is a figure of the symbolic appropriation of the body (of the Algerian woman), the studio is a figure of the symbolic appropriation of space. They are of a piece together.¹³ This double movement of appropriation is nothing more than the expression of the violence conveyed by the colonial postcard, a violence that it speaks of in all innocence, yet cynically.

But beyond such larger considerations, there remains the ineluctable fact that the intromission of model and studio constitutes, for the photographer, the only *technically adequate* means of response to ensure the "survival" of his desire, which means that a structure of substitution is set in place in such a way that it gives the phantasmic faculty access to "reality," albeit an ersatz reality.

In this manner, the theme of the *woman imprisoned in her own home* will impose itself in the most "natural" fashion: by the conjoined play of reverse logic and metaphorical contamination, both determined by the initial frustration.

If the women are inaccessible to sight (that is, veiled), it is because they are imprisoned. This dramatized equivalence between the veiling and the imprisonment is necessary for the construction of an *imaginary scenario* that results in the dissolution of the actual society, the

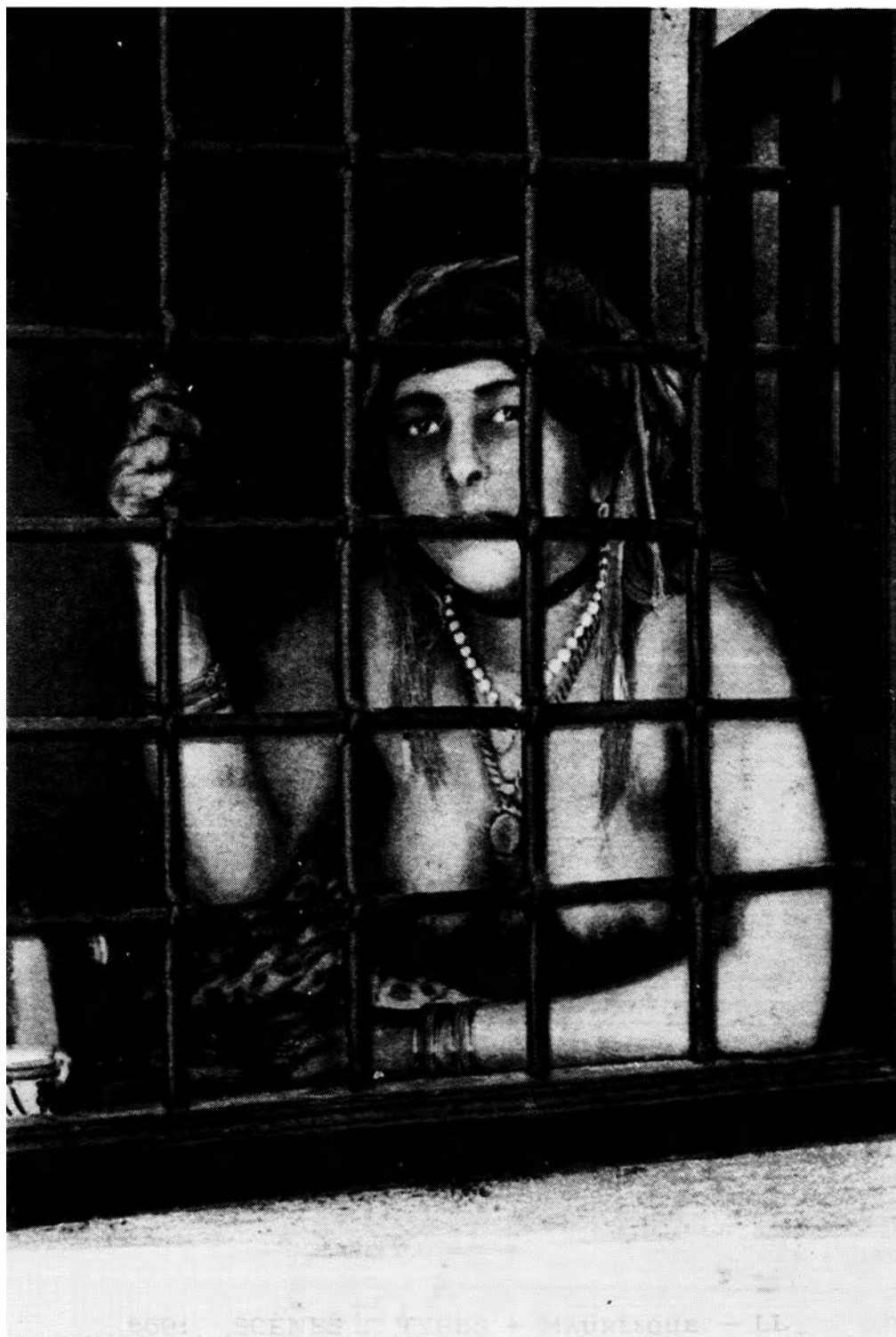
one that causes the frustration, in favor of a phantasm: that of the harem.

The postcard will undertake to display the figures of this phantasm one by one and thus give the photographer the means of a self-accomplishment that he cannot forgo.

Young, then older, girls, and finally women will be made to pose behind bars, their gaze resolutely turned toward this other gaze that looks at them and may bear witness to their confinement. The pose is conventional, hackneyed, and the decor is limited to the obvious signs of incarceration, namely a crisscross of metal bars firmly embedded in wall casings.



Scenes and types. "Aïcha and Zorah."



Scenes and types. Moorish woman.



Young Moorish woman.

But, in barely perceptible fashion, the meaning of this imprisonment will lose its fixedness and progressively glide toward an even more explicit expression of the sexual nature of the phantasm.

For indeed, these women are first going to be stripped of their clothing by the photographer, in an effort to render their bodies erotic. These bodies may be out of reach, but their very remoteness reveals the voyeurism of the camera operator. This supplemental connotation allows us to consider the colonial postcard, in its “eroticized” form, as the *mise-en-scène* by the photographer of his own voyeurism. To ignore this aspect, this index of obsessiveness, is to risk endowing the colonial postcard with a meaning that was never its own, except in masked form.

One of the cards provides dramatic illustration of the sexual connotation of confinement that is overdetermined by the phantasm of the harem. In it, the imprisonment of women becomes the *equivalent of sexual frustration*. On the other side of the wall, a man is desperately clutching the bars that keep him from the object of his unequivocal yearning. The grimacelike countenance of his face, the mask of suffering that is imprinted on it, leave no doubt about his intention to be united with the prisoner, the woman in the harem.



Moorish woman.



Algerian types. Moorish woman. (Written on card: I am sending you a package to be picked up at the railway station. The babies are doing well; they have just taken a walk by the beach. I shall write you shortly at greater length. Warm kisses to all of you. [signed:] Martha.)

This “elaborated” staging (the tell-taleness of the postcard), which presupposes that the photographer is inside the place of confinement, is highly revealing. *It is the imaginary resolution of the hiatus that differentiates the inside from the outside*; these two spatial categories are perceived as the respective loci of the fulfillment and nonfulfillment of sexual desire. It is also, for the photographer who must have gained access to the female world on the other side of the bars, that is, must have penetrated the harem, the most powerful expression of the symbolic overcoming of the obstacle.

In the paltry space of its representation, the postcard at long last offers the photographer the possibility of roaming through the site of his phantasms, and it melts away the anxiety that attends the inability to achieve self-realization.