

## The deterritorialization of the body in *Women of Sand and Myrrh*

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One important aspect of the novelistic discourse in Hanan Al-Sheikh's *Women of Sand and Myrrh* is its dependence on *fixity* and the *stereotype* as modes of differentiation in the ideological construction of otherness. The concepts of fixity and the stereotype, as Homi Bhabha explains, are in themselves intrinsically paradoxical and ambivalent, since they are generated as a form of knowledge and identification "that vacillates between what is always 'in place', already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated" (Bhabha, "The Other Question" 66). Repetition, however, entails difference and involves a multiplicity of responses to any attempt at stereotypical fixity. In addition, the ambivalence at the heart of repetition works to question and challenge any deterministic or dogmatic concepts of Otherness, which are posited as unquestioned universal truths. In *Women of Sand and Myrrh*, this destabilizing element is apparent in the constant movement from one narrative line to another which constitutes the text as a complex field of discourse, and presents it as a world of consciousnesses whose several facets mutually illuminate one another. This paper attempts to explore and analyze the dialogic interaction between these different fields of discourses and the process of ambivalence in the construction and reconstruction of the cognitive codes which construe the stereotype as a form of knowledge in the novel.

With its four main characters, Suha, Nur, Tamer and Susan, reporting different versions of the same events, the novel sets up an exploration of various cultural preconceptions that are based on dualistic oppositions. This could be traced to the stereotypical creation of the desert and its native people, in a pattern of endless inscription and reinscription.

After her immediate contact with the desert and its people, Suha remarks, "I felt disillusioned: this wasn't the desert that I'd seen from the aircraft, not the one I'd read about or imagined to myself..." (9, emphasis mine). At its outset, Suha's discourse construes an image of the Other as entirely known and visible. For her, the desert has to be recognized as a totality, "The camel hair tents, the

wide moon, the stars so near to earth, the oases, the mirages, the thirst and the pervasive fragrance of cardamom..." (30), all that which has, to a large extent, been textualized and made factitious in "history and geography books would come alive" (30) to haunt a hybrid scene that largely conflicts with Suha's attraction/repulsion to the desert, which intrinsically vacillates between contempt for what is familiar and a certain delight in novelty which mainly works to contain the Other within the domain of fantasy: "I was enthusiastic about the local people: I'd come here to find out what there was in the women's wooden chests and imagined green and blue and red and white cashmere shawls and rubies and diamonds, one for every finger, but I'd been wrong" (35). What Suha longs for is the Orient as a European invention, that which has been since "antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes" (Said 87). When reality fails to conform to, and instead dismantles, the preconceived positioning of the Bedouin subject, Suha attempts a rearticulation of its representational system: "I knew deep inside me that the way I was handling my life was doomed to failure... to counter this I began to defend the way of life here... I told them [Arab and foreign women] that they were lucky because they were seeing how cities were built, and witnessing the transformation of man from a Bedouin into a city-dweller" (12). However, Suha continues, "Despite what I said, I myself thought that time was wasted in searching for and constructing what existed and was recognized as *normal or obvious anywhere else in the world*" (emphasis mine).

Suha's ambivalence towards the desert and its people is revealing in its mirroring of colonial discourse as it attempts to establish, through a repetitive process of signification, the populace in the desert as degenerate and uncivilized. This is most notably shown in a series of events that reflect Suha's position in relation to the people in the desert. Two incidents are particularly telling in view of Suha's paradoxical discourse, especially in relation to native women. The first is when she visits Nur who feels completely oppressed by her confinement in the house and by the fact that she has no access to her passport. When Nur starts sobbing hysterically Suha reflects: "I didn't know what to say to her... I wasn't moved by her tears now... Then I justified this by imagining that my reaction would have been different if I'd seen *one of my friends in Lebanon crying*" (43). Nur's hysterical sobbing does not differ from Suha's in an earlier episode when she screamed in anger at her husband over the phone, "'And when are we going to leave this country?... I can't go on like this'... I started to cry... still crying I shouted at him, 'I want to know how much longer we're staying in this bloody country'" (31). Suha's behaviour seems to force a geographical demarcation in the oppression of Arab women in general, which echoes to a great degree the colonial differentiation of Us/Them, Self/Other. She would identify with the suffering of women in her country but not with the native women in the desert, not realizing that when the 'hysteric' speaks (Cixous and Clement 154), she echoes the cries of all women, as indeed her own voice does. Although Suha is quite aware of the oppressive patriarchal system incarcerating Nur among many other women, since she [Suha] herself is trapped within its boundaries, yet her discourse betrays a continuous attempt to evade any kind of identification with the

native women. At one point she refers to them as "those god-forsaken helpless women", while she remains always "different from my neighbours..." (9) a determining pattern that privileges a certain hierarchy which prevents her from perceiving that the situation of the native women might require a very different model of reading.

The same incident recurs when Tamer recounts to Suha her struggle to achieve permission from her family to start a dressmaking business. Tamer wonders for a moment about Suha's response, "But instead of sympathizing she stood up to pour more tea, then as if the words had been on the tip of her tongue for a long time and came tumbling out all at once, she asked, 'Why don't you go abroad to live and be free of all this?'" (95, emphasis mine). Suha's proposed solution to Tamer is central to an overall debate about women in the Islamic world, that any kind of improvement in their status can only be achieved by abandoning the misogynist native culture in favour of the customs and beliefs of another culture, usually the European. In relation to this Layla Ahmed argues in *Women and Gender in Islam* (151) that it is no accident "that the abandonment of native culture was posed as the solution for women's oppression only in colonized or dominated societies and not in Western ones." Ahmed explains that the issue of women in Islam gained centrality and prominence as a result of a fusion between a number of strands of thought that had developed in the Western world in the latter half of the nineteenth century. This fusion was created between the issues of women, their oppression, and the cultures of Other men, when the rhetoric of colonialism utilized the idea that "Other men, men in colonized societies or societies beyond the borders of the civilized West, oppressed women", and hence rendered morally justifiable its project of "undermining or eradicating the cultures of colonized peoples".<sup>1</sup> In this sense, Suha seems to align herself with and to occupy what Gayatri Spivak refers to as "the space of the imperialist's self-consolidating Other" (Spivak, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism" 254), in which we have a continuous recycling of European discourse through discursive strategies which impose and maintain Europe's codes in non-European environments. This does not mean that Islamic societies do not oppress women. They did and do, but what is in dispute here is the misperceptions and the political manipulation of women's oppression in such societies by the West, which seems to assert that the only feminist agenda for Muslim women is to abandon their native culture and adopt that of the West to improve their status.

Unlike Suha who unaccommodatingly rejects the desert and its people, Susan seems to ultimately embrace and emulate the Bedouin subject. Both Suha and Susan represent to us a non-native perspective of events as they progress in the novel. However, despite Susan's apparent admiration and adoption of certain aspects that are peculiar to the desert, her narrative discourse is saturated with contradictions that constantly work to articulate the Bedouin subject within the stereotypical image of the Other in its fixity and phantasmatic quality: mainly, in this case, the Other's bestial sexuality or stupidity which has to be compulsively 'repeated'.

Susan's voice unfolds at the outset of her narrative in recounting her attempt to regain Maaz's fading sexual attention. Already married with one son, Susan's trip to the desert becomes a trip of sexual discovery. It is noteworthy how this self-indulgence becomes a distinctive aspect in governing Susan's relationship with the desert and its native people. Susan speaks about the attention her presence evokes when she visits Maaz's family with her son, "My sense of my own importance began to increase, as if my yellow hair which hung lifelessly round my face had turned into shining gold... I thought to myself that at home in my own country I had never been spoken to or even looked at admiringly like this" (178). Furthermore, Maaz's insatiable desire for her is continuously contrasted with her husband's disinterestedness: "The idea that David's lack of interest in me was related to my stomach or to my plumpness in general seemed more remote, as it certainly had not the slightest effect on the harmony of my relations with Maaz" (184-85). In fact Susan's celebration of her body in the desert becomes evident from the beginning in a moment resonant of that primal scene of bodily exposure and sexual awe: "My life here was different, and had been since my third night in the desert when I'd opened my eyes in alarm... [and] *found myself naked in a garden* surrounded by a high wall" (79, emphasis mine).

This emerging awareness, however, reveals a problematic need to control and contain this ensuing relationship with the Other. This is shown in the entrepreneurial discourse which pervades Susan's narrative each time she comes into direct contact with the native people, and serves, to a great extent, to determine her position there, "Nothing was hard for me in this country; it was as if I owned it" (223). On her first visit to Maaz's house, for instance, and upon his inquiring on the possibility of installing an American kitchen just like the one she has, Susan remarks, "An idea flashed into my head: why didn't I order a kitchen for him from the States and benefit financially, be a trading link between the desert and America?" (176). And later, when Susan pays a visit to Sita, the folk doctor, following the advice of Suha to resort to black magic in order to marry Maaz, Susan reflects, "Into my head there floated a vision of rows of bottles bearing my name and a picture of me in the main stores in America, and I saw myself talking on television about the time I'd spent going between desert and village and from tribe to tribe to collect prescriptions that could be classified under the heading 'Love'. Then I see myself in my own private clinic, wearing a white overall, with medicines and lotions all around me like Sita had, but mine would be in containers looking like bottles of French perfume. *I'd be just like the foreign women who collected old silver jewellery and Bedouin clothes and produced books with their pictures on the cover*" (173, emphasis mine). Susan's discourse exposes what Edward Said calls "the flexible *positional* superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand" (Said 90). It is a relationship based on power, and on varying degrees of hegemony. This can be traced in Susan's established views of the Orient before her arrival in the desert, especially in terms of what constitutes visibility and recognition. In contrasting her past and present, Susan recalls her first meeting with the American Barbara. A successful entrepreneur and owner of

a gallery, Barbara is an optimization of the female adventurer who lived in India “where she’d been a teacher” and who took “two train journeys round the sub-continent” (190), leaving Susan with a bitter realization about her life and herself: “For the first time I was unable to sit indolently, my mind undisturbed by anything but the most obvious domestic duties; I began to think about Barbara and her way of life and her liveliness... This feeling led me to another feeling which I can’t describe but it was as if I’d lost something” (191). Barbara exhibits in her gallery engraved wood, copper and brass, paintings on silk, treasures of far-away places which Susan has never heard of before. As Barbara begins to explain to Susan about the necklace of precious stones which she wears round her neck, and how she bought one single stone at a time as she managed to win over the Indian jewel merchant, we can not help but recall Suha’s fantasy about the native women’s wooden chests, the rubies and diamonds locked up there waiting to be dis-cover-ed. It is only when Susan’s husband is offered a job in “an Arab country in the desert” that she goes to visit Barbara again. The latter’s reaction to the news serves to reaffirm the link in Susan’s mind between the Westerner’s position and the attainment of visibility and recognition: “[you] would live like characters in *A Thousand and One Nights*”. Then Barbara tells Susan “about the riches, the palaces, the jewel-studded fabrics” while Susan looks dreamily at the gold Barbara is wearing, thinking that she will surely “buy similar things” once she gets there. Indeed, when later on in the novel David is made redundant, as the company he works for is declared bankrupt, Susan states, “They made the fantasy of *A Thousand and One Nights* come true to me.... I’d become like Barbara, jangling with gold bracelets and confidence and security, even spiritual and material security for years still to come” (231-34).

Another significant aspect in relation to Susan’s character is the process of naming and renaming which she undergoes in the novel. The Arabic utterance ‘Suzanne’ which represents the heading title for Susan’s narrative discourse in the novel, and which reflects a variation that almost replaces the name ‘Susan’, is but an attempt at signaling difference at the heart of similarity. It is a doubling and dissembling. Susan herself seems to be caught in the ambivalence of this naming which simultaneously points to itself and to an-other, “I seemed to be a different Suzanne now, and I found myself speaking my name: ‘Suzanne. Susan.’ Then in a louder voice: ‘Suzanne. Suzanne.’... I was calling myself, asking if I was the same Suzanne or Susan who’d sat in Texas, a woman in a house like any other house” (189).

After Susan applies Sita’s magical drops to Maaz’s glass of whisky, Maaz indeed comes back to fulfill Susan’s wish for marriage, but most importantly to declare, “[your] name was Maryam not Suzanne.... Maryam. The wife of Maaz al-Siddiq. And if anyone calls you Maryam the American woman I’ll break his neck” (186). As if Susan’s demand for identification entails her representation in the differentiation order of otherness. In fact Susan herself delights in this re-naming since it definitely moves away from the ambivalent distortion of Suzanne/Susan, and bestow on her a completely different and new identity: “I



draped the bed cover over my head and let it hang down around me just like an abaya. I smiled, wishing I could get used to an abaya and cover my face with a black handkerchief and become like the others, wrapped up because I was precious and easily damaged and had to move about from place to place" (186). Susan at this point in the novel considers settling in the desert and becoming a second wife to Maaz. But all this readiness, and what might seem like a self-fulfilling prophecy, is indicative more than anything else of the ambivalence of Susan's representation as she moves on two planes, splitting her presence, distorting her world and breaching boundaries. Nevertheless, the conditions which underlie this ambivalence become self-reflexive as Susan faces the horror of going back to the States when David is made redundant, and when those who once sought her for their pleasure abandon her:

Going back to America was going back to being a speck among the millions, while here I felt aware of my importance every minute of the day... What does a woman in her forties do in a country swarming with others like her when she's been used to being the one and only? Who'd look at a fat woman in her forties with a lisp which made her hard to understand? Who'd call her on the phone except someone who'd dialed a wrong number?... I could picture exactly what was going to become of me: in the car on the way to the airport I would revert to being a woman with rather a round face, hair hanging on a podgy neck, two fat arms, slack breasts and a stomach protruding over two short fat legs. (234)

The authorial construct of binary opposition can also be seen in characters like Nur and Tamer, where class difference is made the basis for juxtaposing two intrinsically distinct views in relation to women's status and dreams in the desert. Nur's overwhelmingly lavish surroundings highlight an illusive and presumably decadent life style which portrays the desert as a self-destructive 'body', feeding on its own hallucinatory projection of alternative domains in the confines of a seemingly alien existence. These alternative ways of life have as their objective the immediate abhorrence and shock which become their stylized stigma. The leather wear, the motor-bike race in the huge spacious high-fenced gardens, the coloured 'abayas', the feverish lust for the latest fashion from the West, and the libidinal essence governing all relationships, are all fetishistic,<sup>2</sup> reflecting the state of loss and the absence of any coherent view of life which seems to distinguish a significant number of the post-oil era generation.

In contrast to this we are presented with a totally different paradigm in Tamer, who becomes an example of the native woman who through perseverance manages to change the conditions under which she labours as a woman and hence manifest through painstaking effort the inevitability of change and that culture is intrinsically a human construct. When Tamer makes her demands as a native, she challenges the boundaries and the terms of power/knowledge. She does this under the eye of authority by setting up 'partial' knowledges and positionalities; Tamer,

in this sense, manages to, "change [her] conditions of recognition while maintaining [her] visibility" (Bhabha, "Signs Taken for Wonders" 160).

Despite their ideological implications, both Nur and Tamer present us with that "third space" which Bhabha made the precondition for the articulation of cultural difference. Having been exposed to other cultures, either through travel or education, they both acquire a certain consciousness that is directly linked to their situation as women in the desert. And it is this exposure, the translation of certain aspects in a specific culture, the negotiation and the dialectical reorganization of thought whether consciously or unconsciously, that make these characters bear a hybrid identity, and hence become the initiators of instability and change.

It has to be noted though, that this ideologically charged positioning falls into contradictory representation when the same juxtaposition is applied to the two main male characters in the novel, mainly here Saleh and Maaz.

Despite the fact that Saleh can be seen as a representation of the intellectual who plausibly works for productive change within his own culture, yet his character remains strikingly ambivalent as he oscillates between two unmediating positionalities: at one point he is portrayed as self-conscious and undogmatic, and at another as an unrelenting and domineering husband. Granted that Nur made impossible demands, the emphasis here is on the use and misuse of power which Saleh exhibits in his capacity as a husband in a patriarchal society.

Maaz's character on the other hand, poses a deeply problematic discourse. He is presented from the start as a stereotypical image of native men in the desert, who are mostly portrayed in the novel as hypersexualized stalkers. Susan's discourse about her relationship with Maaz undoubtedly works as I have argued above, to reinforce the West's rhetoric about the Other's simple-mindedness and untamed bestial sexuality. What is important about this representation is the emphasis yet again on the naiveté and stupidity of men of other cultures, inferior to that of the West. Maaz's life, in this sense, becomes a paradigm of the kind of sphere encompassing the male's realm in the desert. Yet this same discourse reveals other conflicting aspects as the class issue becomes paramount, especially when we notice that Maaz's prototypical naiveté and bestial sexuality is covertly contrasted to the wisdom of the rich, well-educated and self-controlled Saleh. Is it any coincidence then that it is the simple, uneducated Maaz who contracts syphilis at the end of the novel? A disease closely associated with the ignorance and the social backwardness of certain societies which have been labeled Third World Countries.

Within a framework that emphasizes the 'despotic' structure of life in the desert, we are faced with yet another setting, where the sexual and the erotic call into consideration another space of representation, and the splitting of the subject disrupts through a whole process of disavowal the stability of identity and identification and any disciplinary place that is ideologically or institutionally posed. The desert, in this sense, offers a completely new mechanism of signification, as

it reveals a space that transcends and eludes any discursive strategy which aims to inscribe and frame the subject within an establishment that negates and attempts to subjugate *difference* as such. These two planes as represented in the desert do not exist in isolation from each other, rather they are dialogically interrelated. Thus, the state which undertakes to police the sexual, for example, as it is shown in the novel, and reinscribe already constructed and inherited meanings of masculinity and femininity, is simultaneously mediating a political economy of desire in its adoption of globalization, where the society is infiltrated by other cognitive modes of sexualization which destabilize that same policing. In this sense, what is considered traditional or constructive of the Bedouin identity as such cannot be represented as a "plenitude or a 'full' presence" (Bhabha, "Signs Taken for Wonders" 149), since it is determined by the destabilizing (economic in this case) colonial experience. Hence, we cannot really speak of a national identity independent of its implication in the European historical enterprise, as Spivak points out: "One must nevertheless insist that the colonized subaltern *subject* is irretrievably heterogeneous" (Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 26). And it is this hybrid structure as the "effect of colonial power" (Bhabha, "Signs Taken for Wonders" 154) which saturates the novelistic narrative with the ambivalence and subversion that we are attempting to analyze and examine more closely.

Susan's house as represented to us, for instance, seems to transgress the boundaries of marital constitution, 'appropriate' sexuality, and the familial domain. With two of her daughters in boarding school in the States, a non-existent family life with her husband and her son, an extra-marital affair with Maaz, and a homosexual Asian servant, hers is far from the mundane ordinary life she used to lead as a housewife in Texas. As if by coming to the desert, she has been stripped of her secure shell of archetypal existence, and introduced instead into a new site where the 'body' is impregnated with complexity and ambivalence. However contradictory, Susan's status remains ambiguously marginal and volatile – goddess/slave, since despite the series of sexual adventures during which she implements herself as the "Marilyn Monroe" of the desert, she is simultaneously accommodated to the sexual needs of the men there. And Maaz's rejection of her "wanting more" registers the final agonizing contradiction and the inescapable sexual complexity the desert presents.

In addition, we find that Suha's rejection and denial of any kind of identification with the desert and its people is ultimately subverted by the kind of relationship that ensues between her and Nur. The rigid façade of the life in the desert is significantly contrasted with the interior of Nur's house which was "like a peep-show where servants and nannies of different races milled around with children, gazelles and saluki dogs... a delicate perfume... and Arab and foreign music reverberated through the spacious rooms" (39-40). This scene in Nur's house unsettles any simplistic polarities or binarisms in identifying the exercise of power –Self/Other– which Suha's discourse asserts. The scene also erases the analogical dimension in the articulation of sexual difference. It is in this place of



hybrid race and sexuality that Suha gains a deeper insight into herself as she experiences for the first time the allure of the feminine:

Nur's face was no longer on my shoulder but against my neck. I ignored the butterfly fluttering and stayed quite still. I felt a moist warmth, then a light-headedness that made me tremble... the warmth of her breathing made my heart pound and a feeling surged through me that scared me... Shutting out everything else, I said to myself, 'Nur's kissing me,' and I didn't think as I did in real life 'A kiss is between a man and a woman', but just wanted more. (50)

Suha's sexual encounter raises a chasm between the oppression she experiences as a woman and a floating desire that is unhindered by its surroundings. The desert offers her simultaneously two distinct worlds which are different yet entwined: one which prevents her from realizing herself as a separate entity, the other which opens up an infinite space of self-discovery. The threat that arises is very profound as it is a threat to powerful embedded signifiers of appropriate sexuality. Hence, we have Suha's emerging memories of betraying her friend Aida: "It was the smell of him perhaps, or the cold and being drunk, that made me squeeze up against him. He turned and reached his hand out to the back of my neck then moved it down my back and rested it there. I felt confused, comprehending all at once the sort of relationship which Aida and Suhail must have, but I let his hand reach under my skirt" (53). What is evoked in Suha's sexual encounter with Nur is the kind of sexuality that imperils the inherited notions of appropriate sexuality. It is the pursuit of sex for pleasure which has to be contained, a sex that is non-procreative and of no economic gain, especially when we consider that respectability is still premised upon heterosexuality and principally upon heteromascularity.

Within such a perspective, it becomes imperative to address another narrative discourse, one which is almost hidden, folded within the leaves of Tamer's story, one that seems to be contained and compartmentalized within the narrative discourse of the daughter, who reluctantly unfolds the story of her mother, Taj al-Arus: "[She] could never resist telling the story of her life, and I'd threatened more than once not to accompany her over the threshold of a house" (139). Taj's habit of recounting the story of her life is obviously a compensation and revenge for the role assigned to her. According to Barbara Hardy, talkative women "are subordinate figures who dominate the scenes in which they appear, asserting talkativeness as power" (Hardy 24). One could argue that Taj's narrative is the most gripping narrative of all, a discourse on displacement and dismantled memories which keeps reconstructing itself through a repetition of events that become part of the fantastic and the magical. Yet, we keep asking ourselves all the time, what is imaginary and what is real in the story of Taj al-Arus? As we listen, we seem to hear the voice of the frightened little girl still at a loss since that day her father gave her away as a gift to a passing 'Sultan' in return for a gold watch and a diamond ring.

The most important aspect about Taj al-Arus is that her discourse escapes the authorial construct of binary opposition we find between characters like Suha and Susan, Nur and Tamer, Maaz and Saleh. Her narrative, which is located at the margin of the daughter's story, becomes central to and exemplary of the utter estrangement from which the four women protagonists suffer. Unlike them though, Taj al-Arus has no middle ground, she reconciles herself neither to her present situation nor to her past. Even when she decides to visit her village after forty years, she is struck by the change, by the fact that her memories and the place as it then exists are so alien to each other:

She was taken to a number of villages, and in the village squares the people gathered around her old and young, men and women, wearing clothes very different from how she'd remembered them. She could no longer see the pathways which she'd seen in her dreams, nor the trees, nor the houses which she'd remembered stone by stone (156).

She is a misfit in both countries, unable to leave behind the idea that one day she was married to a Sultan and that she was so close to becoming a Sultana herself, the fairytale romance of a fourteen-year-old girl still cocooned in her own fantasy:

She knew for sure that the Sultanas in this place were different from the Queens she'd heard about. Here a Sultana ate, drank, prayed, slept, danced, sang, and didn't work, unlike a Queen in a story who sat on a throne with a crown on her head and a whip in her hand, ordering the sun to set and the moon to shine. (145)

For Taj al-Arus that moment of transformation from a village girl to a Sultan's wife has to be repeated; what she has been deprived of, her daughter must have. Thus, Tamer's marriage to a certain 'Sheikh' is in a sense, a reconstruction of her mother's wedding with all the missing erotica which are supposed to lure and ensnare the sheikh's heart for ever:

My aunt Nasab had brought embroidered cloth back from Iran to make a nightdress for my wedding night, and [my mother] herself had insisted that the cloth be cut in the shape of a big heart at the navel and a little heart at each breast, and then that there should be henna patterns in each of these openings. (138)

Despite the failure of Tamer's marriage, Taj al-Arus remains to the end of the novel imprisoned within the idea that yet another Sheikh would pass Tamer's way.

On her first arrival to the Sultan's house, Taj al-Arus is represented with a setting that is significantly symbolic of the heterogeneous set up encompassing what might at first sight be labeled as purely monolithic in structure: "Taj felt as if she was in the middle of a market: [surrounded by] movement and noise; women, girls, and boys of every race, age and colour" (143). This a-familial and

extra-familial grouping displaces the conventional context of the family and enables a form of subversion, founded on the ambivalence which turns the conditions of dominance represented in the Sultan as a figure of authority into the grounds of uncertainty in his household. This could explain why some of his many wives, who seem to await the confirmation of a possible pregnancy so that they can claim a certain social status, seek a more realistic means than the contingent reliance on a single night spent with the capricious Sultan. When Taj like the others starts questioning her chances of getting pregnant, Mouza advises her, "She would have to lean against the door after the rest were asleep, and when she heard a rattling, she should lift her nightdress and drop her pants down around her feet and press up against the door just where there was a big wide hole, and there would be a man outside ready" (148). In this sense, the Sultan's house resembles and replicates the condition of the State itself which in its attempt to integrate into a world economy as I have argued above, invites other cognitive modes of desire which work to destabilize the very traditional and inherited social forms which the State constantly asserts. This subversive element is also shown in the way the Sultan's house is presented to us as a kind of maze where 'Mauza' has to lead Taj by the hand through "a corridor with numerous other rooms opening off it" (141). Taj herself reflects uneasily that "She would lose her way as soon as she went out of the room" (141). The maze which leads to/away from the center remains intrinsically peripheral, yet the labouring activity constituent of its own structure which questions every passage and turn shifts our focus in a continuous reconstruction and deconstruction of center. And it is this process of weaving and reweaving which marks Taj's discourse, leaving always in the making the answer to statements like "She wanted to know how she was going to live, what she was going to do" (144). This could explain the necessity of Taj's dream-world as the only available means through which she can surpass her painful alienation, as if by constant narration Taj is conjuring the power and magic to turn her dreams into reality.

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### Notes

1. In relation to this Layla Ahmed explains how the Victorian colonial paternalistic establishment appropriated the language of feminism in the service of its assault on the religions and cultures of Other men, in order to give an aura of moral justification to that assault at the very same time as it combated feminism within its own society. Lord Cromer for example, who presented himself as the champion of the unveiling of (Egyptian) women, was, in England, a founding member and sometime president of the Men's League for Opposing Women's Suffrage.

2. It is not surprising, in this sense, that Nur's narrative, which ends in an agonizing questioning of her monotonous life, should also coincide with her receiving the latest Punk style clothes, a style which has long been employed as a form of cultural protest.

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#### **The Deterritorialization of the Body in *Women of Sand and Myrrh***

Εντοπίζοντας τη διαλογική διάδραση μεταξύ των διαφορετικών φωνών στο *Women of Sand and Myrrh*, το άρθρο εξετάζει τον τρόπο με τον οποίο το μυθιστόρημα ενορχηστρώνει τις γραμμές της ιστορίας του όπως παρουσιάζονται στο αφήγημα των τριών βασικών χαρακτήρων. Το *Women of Sand and Myrrh* είναι ένα μυθιστόρημα για το περιθωριοποιημένο, αποκεντρωμένο ή εκ-κεντρικό 'άλλο', με την ευρεία έννοια της λέξης. Ωστόσο, η κίνηση στο μυθιστόρημα από τη μία αφηγηματική γραμμή στην άλλη αποτελεί ένα περίπλοκο χώρο λόγου, όπου το κείμενο παρουσιάζεται πολυφωνικό, ένας κόσμος από συνειδητότητες που φωτίζουν αμοιβαία η μία την άλλη. Το απόκεντρο ή το περιθωριοποιημένο δεν αποτελεί απλώς θέμα γένους, φυλής ή εθνικότητας, αλλά και κοινωνικής τάξης. Αυτή η μελέτη επιδιώκει να αναλύσει το δεσμό και τις διασυνδέσεις μεταξύ αυτών των εκφορών και της διαλογικής τους διάδρασης. Εστιάζεται σε δύο κύρια σημεία: Το πρώτο ασχολείται με τον τρόπο που η έννοια του 'άλλου' συγκροτείται στο μυθιστόρημα για να βασιστεί στα δύο συγκεκριμένα αναφερόμενα, είτε αυτό της ανατολής είτε αυτό της δύσης. Η Αμερικανίδα Σούζαν και η Λιβανέζα γαλλικής κουλτούρας Σούχα, για παράδειγμα, επιβάλλουν μια στερεοτυπική εικόνα των συστατικών στοιχείων της ζωής και της παράδοσης των Βεδουίνων. Ωστόσο, η διαλογική διάδραση μεταξύ της αφηγηματικής τους δομής και αυτής των άλλων χαρακτήρων φέρνει στην επιφάνεια την αντίφαση που είναι συμφυής με τέτοιες καθιερωμένες αντιλήψεις,

καθιστώντας προβληματική την ιδέα της καταγωγής και των γνήσιων φυλετικών ριζών. Το δεύτερο σημείο επικεντρώνεται στη συνάντηση των χαρακτήρων με την έρημο, που παρουσιάζεται σε κάποια στιγμή σαν τύραννος που αφομοιώνει το 'σώμα' και το μειώνει σε απλή μηχανή παραγωγής και σε κάποιο άλλο σημείο σαν ένα έδαφος όπου είναι δυνατός ο εκτοπισμός του 'σώματος', με την ευρεία έννοια του όρου.