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# "(En)gendering Orientalism: The Representation of Women in Amin Maalouf's Samarkand"

By Hussam Helmy

Under the supervision of Professor Angelica DeAngelis

American University of Kuwait

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(En)gendering Orientalism: The Representation of Women in Amin Maalouf's *Samarkand*

Published in France in 1988, Amin Maalouf's *Samarkand* is a historical novel written from the perspective of Robert O. Lesage, an American frame narrator of French descent. Lesage chronicles the life of 11th century Iranian mathematician, astronomer and poet Omar al-Khayyam in the first half of the novel, particularly the period during which Khayyam, over many years, compiles an anthology of his poetry, the fictional "original" of Robert FitzGerald's (1859) "translated" *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*. For the second half, Lesage chronicles his own quest to track down this *Manuscript* through 19th century Iran. In both parts of the novel, the political events take up significant portions of the narrative. The first half delves into the creation and expansion of the Seljuq Empire, while the second deals with Iran's 1906 Constitutional Revolution and the sabotage of its nascent democracy by colonial powers. Considering that this novel's original publication followed in the wake of Iran's 1979 revolution, it is not a stretch to postulate that it expresses a postcolonial de-centering and didactic ethos, especially give the juxtaposition of the original audience and the contra-imperialist subject matter. In light of this, an augmented reader-centric approach, drawing on postcolonial, feminist, reader-response criticism and rhetorical narratology will help assess the project's success, particularly in terms of rhetorical structures that contribute to, detract from, or even undermine it.

*Samarkand* is similar to Maalouf's earlier work, *The Crusades Through Arab Eyes*, which has been termed both by reviewers and its author as a "historical essay," that is nonetheless narrativized to read like a novel. According to Carine Bourget, Professor of French and Francophone Studies at the University of Arizona-Tucson, both the title and the choice of sources for the subject matter "problematize objective historiography" (263). Furthermore, Bourget presumes that, since Maalouf writes in French, his target audience is a "Western reader to whom he wants to show a different version of the facts [...] derived from the events [of the Crusades]" (264). His choice of events, for having "shaped the West and Arab world alike," their effect on "relations between them even today," reflects

"ideological, political, or cultural [...] preoccupations contemporary to its writing" (265, 264). Contemporary concerns, therefore, are projected onto the past as it is discursively rewritten. In the same vein, *Samarkand*'s events resonate with the events in the wake of its publication. It constructs an Islamic medieval past, primarily during the reign of the Seljuq Empire in present-day Iran, based on the works of Arab/Muslim chronicles such as Ibn al-Athīr. It showcases the appreciation for literature, poetry, philosophy and science that was prevalent in that zeitgeist, even among the clerical classes. It also showcases the lasting contributions of Muslim polymaths, like Khayyam, that persist into the present. A corrective effort is also made in the novel in terms of inaccuracies perpetuated by Orientalist histories and cultural texts, including FitzGerald's translation of Khayyam's poetry. The second part of the novel, a fast-forward into the 20th century, deals with the exploitation of Iran by imperial powers, as well as the sabotage of its nascent democracy by those powers, implicitly comparing it to the state of Iran in the 21st century as an autocratic theocracy.

*Samarkand*'s postcolonial didacticism is unfortunately deflated by its representations of women as characters. While some of these characters are ostensibly represented with more agency than others, I argue that at its best, the novel presents its “empowered” women in the service of pandering to a liberal, Eurocentric notion of empowerment. At its worst, these representations Orientalize, exoticize, and objectify the women to the sexual gratification of an implied white, male and heterosexual French reader. This effectively undermines the postcoloniality of the text by perpetuating the very erasure that the text is trying to uncover, ultimately creating a hierarchy of concerns wherein decolonization takes precedence over gender equity. Carine Bourget, Professor of French and Francophone Studies at the University of Arizona-Tucson, notes the very same pattern in his earlier *Crusades Through Arab Eyes*, writing that the “agenda driving his rewriting of this historical period leads him to partially repeat what his book is supposed to undo, witness the erasure of women in a book whose goal is to unearth a neglected perspective” (Abstract). While a case can be made that *Samarkand* casts some doubt over the

frame narrator's reliability at the very end of the novel, it does not offer enough to recapitulate the events in a way that allows for a reclamation of the women's denied agency.

I will begin with an overview of the methodological approaches informing my reading of *Samarkand*. In order to offer an effective critique of their representation, I will first offer the most sympathetic readings of the novel's most prominent women while giving a synopsis of their respective arcs. I will then show that despite these readings, these women are still subjected to Orientalized representations to a point that undermines the text's decentering, postcolonial-didactic ethos.

In her foundational essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey, a feminist film-maker and film critic, uses a psychoanalytic framework to argue that major-studio Hollywood films cater predominantly to a male audience. Specifically, she argues that the non-erotic focus on the main controlling male figure spurs the male audience members to identify with this character. On the other hand, the sexualized representation of female characters, the focus on their physicality rather than their internality, coupled with their character arcs almost always revolving around the male figure's, serve a dual function of reinforcing the aforementioned male-male identification while simultaneously allowing the male viewer to experience control, domination or ownership over the represented female vicariously through the male protagonist (2084-95). Though Mulvey's discussion of the male gaze "laid the foundation for an entire field of critical inquiry," its investment in a psychoanalytic model that designates woman as lack has brought it under scrutiny, particularly with regards to whether the analytical ends justify the methodological means (Columpar 28). Mulvey is also criticized for not maintaining sufficient critical distance from psychoanalysis, thus "reifying more than problematizing" Freud's ideas about femininity, particularly in her 1981 follow up essay, "Afterthoughts on Visual Narrative" (29). Furthermore, scholars such as Jane Gaines have argued that a “feminist film theory grounded in psychoanalysis operates ideologically insofar as it perpetuates a white feminist perspective and agenda by failing to address structures of oppression other than patriarchy" (32-33). Despite this

being a shortcoming of Mulvey's framework, we cannot (yet) look past a certain "confluence" of demographics between "Visual Narrative" and *Samarkand*. On the one hand, the "pleasure in looking" that "Visual Narrative" wishes to deconstruct and destroy is experienced by white male spectators (Mulvey 2086). On the other hand, Samarkand's (homodiegetic) frame narrator, for the first two of the novel's four "books," and its (autodiegetic) narrator-protagonist for the last two books, is one Robert O. Lesage, a 20th century American man of French heritage (Maalouf vii). For the 11th century epoch, Lesage acts as a traditional omniscient narrator while Khayyam is the protagonist; for the 20th century epoch, the reader experiences the world of the narrative, for the most part, through Lesage's experience as Lesage experiences it – Lesage's perspective *is* the reader's perspective. For a reader to be offered the experience of the novel's world as a "Lesage" is for them to inhabit a white male perspective on it. Consequently, at least as a useful point of departure, "Visual Pleasure" can help uncover the way in which the women portrayed in the novel seem, at points, to be tailor-made for the sexual gratification of an implied white heterosexual reader. That being said, given that the explanatory power of Mulvey's work relies on the particular logistics or strictures of film-viewing experience, it is necessary to supplement her work with reader-response criticism, particularly with Wolfgang Iser's concept of the "implied reader."

According to Iser's *The Act of Reading*, the implied reader is a phenomenological construct that "anticipates the presence of a recipient without necessarily defining him" nor "predetermining his character [nor] his historical situation" (35). As a role offered to the reader, it is defined as both a "textual structure" and a "structured act" (36). As a textual structure, it consists of textual perspectives (narrator, characters, plot, etc.), their place of convergence, and the vantage point of the reader (36). This structure can only fulfill its potential when it induces structured acts in a real reader. As the reader's perspective diachronically incorporates the textual perspectives, the meaning of the text begins to actualize into a "gradually evolving pattern" when these perspectives begin to converge (37). Thus

we can conceive of the textual structure as a response-inviting structure that induces response-projection from the reader.

While useful in helping to identify Samarkand's most problematic structures, in not "predetermining the reader's character [nor] his historical situation," Iser's concept neglects the absolute necessity for the author-to-be to postulate a certain "schema" for their work's addressee, one conceived prior to and thereby constitutive of the work's implied reader. In other words, an author cannot simply construct an implied reader without such a presumed "addressee" in mind. Conversely, this does not necessarily make a text unreadable nor unenjoyable to a real reader whose experiences do not intersect with the text's presumed addressee, whether historically, demographically, or otherwise. Dostoevsky's later novels, for example, assume a whole host of things about their readers: that they can "read Russian, [know] how to read a novel, but also [have] a command of all the language's registers, [...] know the dominant philosophical positions of the century [and] have an overview of the history of ideas in Europe" (Schmid 55). While this host of expectations may stymie an "unfamiliar" real reader, it goes without saying that reading is possible and that meanings are actualizable by real readers whose lived experience does not intersect with a text's presumed addressee. This applies whether or not the real readers attempt to bridge this epistemological or experiential gap. It is precisely a condition of partial intersection, in my case of having read *Samarkand* in English rather than the original French, that puts me in a better vantage point to locate what Peter Rabinowitz calls the "authorial audience" of the novel (21). According to Rabinowitz, a prospective author is usually not privy to concrete knowledge about the demography of his or her future readers, yet cannot begin the process of writing without at least having some preconceived notion about his or her presumptive readers' “beliefs, knowledge, and familiarity with conventions” (21). The resulting compromise necessitates that an author “design their books rhetorically for some more or less specific *hypothetical* audience, […] the *authorial audience*” (21). The artistic success of the work depends to some extent on these authorial

assumptions, on the congruence between the authorial audience and the work's actual audience. This "authorial audience" represents the presumed addressee(s) around which Samarkand's implied reader is constructed. I will henceforth referring to members of the this authorial audience as "preferred reader(s)." The particularities of this audience as white, French, male and heterosexual can be inferred through the totality of the novel's representations of women, not only because these cater rhetorically to that audience's scopophilic gaze, but also to its Orientalist one.

First elucidated by Edward Said in his landmark work of the same name, Orientalism is a recurring pattern of representation of the Middle East, North Africa and the Indian sub-continent, as manifested in 18th, 19th and 20th century European art and literature. This pattern sees the "East" as a spatially and temporally homogenous region that essentially needs to be "civilized" by the "West." This mode of representation also serves to aid the "West" to define itself by conceiving in the "East" its binary Other (Jhally). Indispensable as it was for creating the field of postcolonial cultural studies, Said's work has been subjected to feminist interventions by academics such as Meyda Yegenoglu, who in *Colonial Fantasies* critically engages with his "relegation of the questions of gender and of sexuality to a sub-domain of Orientalism" (10). This relegation leaves us with a distinction between representations of the "Orient and Oriental cultures" and "representations of Oriental women and of sexuality" that elides the simultaneity of sexual and cultural modes of differentiation as they constitute the representational process of othering. Neglecting to consider the centrality of the images of women and of sexuality to how Orientalist discourse is structured creates a mirroring of the "divisional, disciplinary, and expertise-oriented structure of Orientalism" *within* Orientalist/colonial discourse studies (25-6). Yegenolgu's interrogation of Orientalism as an ethic is "[organized] around the figure of the veil," particularly as represented in 19th century Orientalist travel writing. She proposes that this ethic be understood as being "structured by the fantasy framework in the Lacanian sense," particularly as regarding the latent, unconscious site of Orientalism, to the effect of the Western subject "securing

an identity for itself mediated by the other" (26). As a challenge to the (positionally) Western gaze and its motivating will-to-knowledge/power, the veil and "veiled" spaces are subjected to "relentless investigation" in an effort to "reveal the hidden secrets of the Orient," metonymically coded by the veiled "Oriental" woman (39). Since the novel does not present an awareness of the gendered nature of Orientalized othering, it ends up validating its Western addressees' desire for knowledge of the Orient, metonymized by knowledge of Oriental women, through placing the addressees in a position of exercising the gaze upon an Orient "unveiled" for that purpose. Since the novel does not critique the underlying will-to-power that drives this will-to-knowledge, any didactic effect this novel may have achieved functions to *reify*, rather than to challenge, Orientalism.

Before demonstrating this reification through a feminist reading of the novel, it is important to acknowledge the fatalistic attitude engendered by the sort of feminist criticism that simply seeks to "find the example of misogyny" (Zare 175). To that end, I will follow Bonnie Zare's example in her analysis of John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, and will attempt to locate what Patrocinio Schweickart calls "moments of liberatory potential" within the text (Zare 175, 176). Schweickart contends that "*certain* (not all) male texts merit a dual hermeneutic: a negative hermeneutic that discloses their complicity with patriarchal ideology, and a positive hermeneutic that recuperates the utopian moment [...]" (272). In other words, "feminist readers can wrest control from a patriarchal text and align themselves with the liberating moment, while simultaneously condemning the narrative's implied sexism" (Zare 176). Thus, in order to avoid discursively foreclosing on any liberatory potential, I will first present a reading for each character that embosses this positive hermeneutic, before showing how these readings are necessarily oppositional to the rhetorical grain of the text, codes them for a heterosexual male and Orientalist gaze.

**11th CENTURY: JAHAN AND KHATUN**

In Book 1, Jahan is introduced to Khayyam and the reader as a poet in the court of Nasr Khan, historical ruler of 11th century Transoxania, who is passing through Samarkand (today a part of Uzbekistan). Jahan and Khayyam then develop a romantic relationship for some time until she chooses to leave with Nasr Khan and his entourage to their next destination. Their relationship resumes when they reunite in Isfahan, where Jahan is now attached to the court of Malikshah, Sultan of the Seljuq Empire. They get married and live together for seven years. After the relationship between Malikshah and his vizier Nizam ul Mulk begins to sour and they have each other assassinated, Jahan supports Terken Khatun, Malikshah's widow, in her quest to fill the power-vacuum created by his murder. Ultimately, she meets her end with Terken Khatun when the palace is surrounded by the allies of Malikshah's eldest son, Barkiyaruk. Jahan ostensibly has the makings of an independent woman. She displays political shrewdness, ambition, does not seek romantic attachments for security or validation, in fact even recognizes a repressiveness in them, yet is also sexually assertive.

Her introduction serves to show an example of each of these traits. During the scene at Nasr Khan's court, his chamberlain announces the Khan's dissatisfaction with the repeated "pompous [eulogies] to [his glory]," and instructs the twenty-odd poets in assembly to depart if they have "nothing else to say" (Maalouf 24). In response, Jahan steps forward to deliver a "pleasantly worked poem in which, strangely, the Khan's name was not mentioned a single time. Praise was given to the Soghd river which dispenses its bounty to Samarkand and then to Bukhara before losing itself in the desert since there is no sea worthy of receiving its waters" (24). This poem gains Nasr Khan's approval, and he rewards her with gold. This turn of events, as well as the poem's content, is meant to signal that Jahan was seizing on the opportunity afforded by the other poets' failings, namely, that they were explicitly praising Nasr Khan. In response, her tactic was to metonymize Nasr Khan as the Soghd river, which is supported by the fact that Bukhara was a city ruled by the historical Nasr Khan's dynasty (Maalouf 31). Effectively, praise of the river was praise of the sovereign, who was approved and

rewarded her with gold. Khayyam and Jahan lock eyes as she is retreating, before Khayyam is introduced to the Khan by his host Abu Tahir.

Later that night, as Khayyam reaches his quarters, he is surprised to find Jahan waiting for him in his quarters. So surprised, in fact, that he is speechless for several moments. Jahan remarks on his silence by saying that he "[refuses] to believe that a woman could dare to force her way into [his] room like this" (29). Finding him still speechless, Jahan continues speaking since "[she is] the only one who has made a move so far," telegraphing her intention to readers that she is here to consummate her attraction to Khayyam (30). She goes on to explain how she found out where he lived and how she covered for her own absence from Nasr Khan's harem, where she stays. In elaborating on why she is allowed to stay with the harem, Jahan lays out her priorities:

> They do not see me as a rival as they know that I have no desire to be a wife to the Khan. I could have seduced him, but I have spent too much time with kings' spouses for such a fate to tempt me. Life, for me is so much more important than men! [...] If ever he dreamt of marrying me, he would start by locking me up. (30)

Finally reviving from his stupor, Khayyam remarks at his disbelief that a "look or a smile" he had received had "[become] corporeal, [...] a beautiful woman, a poetess moreover, and available" (30). Needless to say, Jahan and Khayyam sleep together. These scenes initialize Jahan as a woman who is politically shrewd, ambitious, and while sexually assertive, will always choose independence over companionship in service of her ambition. The latter is better articulated in her subsequent interactions with Khayyam.

Jahan and Khayyam develop a discreet romantic relationship out of this encounter, yet it is cut short by the imminent departure of Nasr Khan's retinue. Choosing to follow Nasr Khan rather than stay with Khayyam, Jahan both demonstrates her ambition and that it is "so much more important than men," even wounding Khayyam in the process (30). When he asks whether she could "not stay in

Samarkand with [her] cousin," she replies, "[if] only it was a question of finding excuses! I have my place at court. I had to fight like ten men to gain it and I will not give it up today for a frolic in the belvedere in Abu Taher's garden" (Maalouf 55-56). Khayyam then asks if Jahan would "not share his life," to which she responds that "[there] is nothing to share!" (56). While they do reunite later in the narrative, Jahan's actions continue to be authentic to her ambition. During a temporary reprieve in the conflict between Nizam ul Mulk and Hassan Sabbah, his one-time "spy-master" and the future founder of the Order of the Assassins, Jahan and Khayyam reunite in Isfahan and enjoy seven years of marriage. This marriage remained childless by agreement, but for different reasons: his out of a desire not to burden children with existence, "too heavy to bear" in his experience, and her's out of an "excess of ambition" (87). Her ambition, in fact, drives her to the bitter end, along with Terken Khatun. As Malikshah's widow, she jockeys for power in the wake of his murder in order to safeguard the throne for her son, at the expense of Barkiyaruk, Malikshah's oldest son. After Khatun is murdered by Nizam's faction, who backed Barkiyaruk, Jahan calls Khayyam to the palace to help her in her stand-off with Barkiyaruk's faction, who had surrounded the city. After saying that he had "just been told about Terken Khatun," he attempts to caress her hair when she "[pushes] him away," admonishing him by saying that "[if] I had summoned you here it is not so that you can console me, but to consult you on a serious matter!" (126). Giving his counsel that Jahan abandon her stint as Sultana, he tells her that he might be able to protect her, and failing that he would be resigned to die by her side. Jahan responds by saying, "I will not resign myself! I am here in this palace, surrounded by troops who are faithful to me, in a city that is now mine, and I shall fight to the end. If I die here, it will be as a Sultana" (127). Such is her ambition that Jahan chooses the bitter end rather than giving up power.

Unlike Jahan, Terken Khatun is a historic figure. At times referred to as the "Chinese woman," the oldest "wife of [Malikshah]" is introduced as the climax of Nizam's conflict with Sabbah approaches (77). At this point in the narrative, Jahan and Khayyam reunite, but with Jahan acting as an

intermediary between Khatun and Khayyam; in the interest of resolving the conflict without resorting to bloodshed, Khatun proposes to Khayyam that she recommend him to Malikshah as the next vizier. Though Khayyam refuses and the conflict continues through its course, it is far from the last time that Sabbah directly affects the empire's political climate. In the aftermath of his defeat and disgrace, he eventually infiltrates Samarkand, Jahan's city, and converts Ahmed Khan, its ruler and her nephew. Seeing it as an opportunity to strike against Sabbah, and keeping from her the fact that Ahmed had been converted, Nizam manipulates Khatun into convincing Malikshah of the necessity of attacking Samarkand to save Ahmed. She discovers this manipulation after all is said and done and vows to avenge herself, and that is when her political ingenuity is truly displayed.

Capitalizing on the opportunity of Malikshah's wounded pride, Khatun begins convincing Malikshah of the threat that Nizam poses to him. She tells him that while it was necessary for Malikshah to be under Nizam's tutelage after his father's death, as he was still seventeen, Malikshah was now thirty-five, accomplished, and could not “leave the management of affairs indefinitely in [his hands],” especially since Nizam was now “trying to impose his will” (Maalouf 104). Emboldened by being diagnosed with a tumor that would not leave him long to live, Nizam's takes a reckless tone with Malikshah over another conflict, even telling him that “the fate of [his] head is tied to that of my inkwell” (105). This pushes Malikshah to finally agree to get rid of him. Khatun colludes with Sabbah, who has Nizam assassinated. The Nizamiya, a faction of officers loyal to Nizam, retaliate by poisoning Malikshah on a hunting trip. After he is brought back to her in the royal camp, barely alive, Khatun sends away all onlookers, keeping only Jahan, the court doctor, and a handful of trusted courtiers. She then speaks, for the first time in the novel,

> “Might the master recover?” the Chinese woman inquired.
>
> “His pulse is weakening. God has blown on the candle and it is flickering before going out. Our only hope is prayer.”

> "If such is the will of the Almighty, then listen to what I am going to say."
>
> This was not the tone of a widow-to-be, but of a mistress of an empire.
>
> "No one outside this yurt must know that the Sultan is no longer with us. Merely say that he is recovering slowly, that he needs to rest, and that no one may see him" (121).

Not only did Khatun hide Malikshah's death from his troops long enough to consolidate power, she even disposed of his corpse on the way back to Isfahan lest its "decomposition betray its presence" (122). By the time word had gotten out that the Sultan had "disappeared," Khatun had positioned her infant son as the next heir, winning the support of Caliph in exchange for reprieve from future attack.

The Nizamiya, however, were "opposed to the Sultana," as she was "second on their list of outlaws" (122). They gave their support to Baiyaruk, Malikshah's eldest son, eventually forcing the armies of Terken Khatun back and placing Isfahan under siege. Nonetheless, she was "not a woman to admit defeat and to defend herself she was willing to use tricks that would long be famous" (123). For instance, she wrote appeals for aid to several governors in Azerbaijan and Syria, promising that if they come and lift the siege, they would be rewarded with her hand in marriage and "complete power" (123). Failing to break the siege, they nevertheless bought her time. She also contacted Sabbah, offering him Isfahan as well, and imploring him to tell his many followers in Samarkand to come out of hiding and convert freely, promising them arms and gold. This led to the formation of "armed militias on behalf of the Sultana" (123). Her final, boldest tactic was to lure the eleven-year-old Barkiyaruk out of the Nizamiya's camp and to take him hostage. She sends some of her officers to his camp to tell him that they are abandoning her, that her troops were "on the verge of revolt," and that if he were to return with them, they would "give the signal for an uprising: Terken and her son would be massacred, and Barkiyaruk would be able to establish himself firmly on the throne" (123). While she succeeds in luring him, her success was short-lived – before deciding whether to blind him or to kill him, she is killed herself by a eunuch who was "introduced into the harem some years earlier upon Nizam ul Mulk's

recommendation" (124).

Like Jahan, Khatun expertly maneuvers within the constraints of the patriarchal and patrilineal system under which she lived, in a way that can be said to anticipate Deniz Kandiyoti's idea of the "patriarchal bargain" (Kandiyoti 275). Overused and undertheorized, the term "patriarchy" is frequently employed, according to Kandiyoti, to signify an "overly monolithic conception of male dominance," without regard to specificities like historical, material, or other contexts (274-275). Consequently, she proposes that the strategies available to women for passive or active resistance within concrete constraints actually "reveal and define the blueprint" of what she terms the "patriarchal bargain" of a given society (275). To demonstrate the idea of the bargain, Kandiyoti's article uses a preliminary contrast between two systems of patriarchy: sub-Saharan patriarchy, and classic patriarchy, the latter which manifests, among other places, in the Muslim Middle East. While using Kandiyoti's concept to analyze the representations of 11th century Turkic and Iranian women may seem to fly in the face of her original impetus of temporally grounding and contextualizing patriarchal systems, the underlying impulse to maneuver within the "rules of the game" that she identifies in her analysis can be said to exist whenever/wherever the "game" (274). Within a liberatory hermeneutic, working from this premise allows us to avoid discursively foreclosing on occasions of resistance (where possible), whatever the patriarchal context.

In Khatun's case, the narrative paints the picture of a woman who was very adept at "taming" Malikshah. Not only did she manage to get two of her sons successively anointed as his heirs to the throne, she is stated to wield enough power over Malikshah so as to scare him, a fact which Nizam uses to manipulate him. When he is assassinated, she keeps the news of his passing under wraps, thus maintaining the guise of systemic intactness while working to wield its power from within. To that end, she has her youngest son anointed Sultan and secures the support of Baghdad's Caliph, maintaining intact the performative aspects of the system by wielding its power through a masculine figurehead.

What ultimately delegitimizes the performativity of the system is not that power was being wielded by a woman, per se, but that the woman happened to be on the Nizamiya's list of outlaws. All in all, Khatun's actions in the novel demonstrate self-preservation, ambition, and the political ingenuity needed to realize them, and while her reign was short-lived, her actions won her mention in the history of an otherwise exclusively patriarchal epoch. Having mapped out what had earlier been referred to as the most “sympathetic” reading of the scenes, the analysis will move next to some of the problematics the scene suggests. This structure will be repeated for the 20th century setting of the novel.

Jahan's introduction portrays her as politically savvy and ambitious, yet this agency is simultaneously undermined by the point of view supplied to the reader, as well as those responses the reader is prompted to supply. To reiterate, this scene takes place after a surly Nasr Khan is unimpressed with the eulogizing poetry of the assembled poets, prompting Jahan to step forward and recite a "pleasantly worked poem" (Maalouf 24). The problems start soon after she finishes, when the Khan speaks:

> You have spoken well. Let your mouth be filled with gold, said Nasr, pronouncing his usual phrase.
>
> The poetess lent over a huge platter of golden dinars and started putting the coins in her mouth one by one as the audience counted them aloud. When Jahan hiccupped and almost choked, the whole court, with the monarch at the fore, let out a laugh. The chamberlain signaled to the poetess to return to her place. They had counted forty-six dinars.
>
> Khayyam alone did not laugh. With his eyes fixed on Jahan, he tried to work out what emotion he felt towards her. Her poetry was so pure, her eloquence so dignified, her gait so courageous, but here she was stuffing her mouth with yellow metal and being subjected to this humiliating reward. Before pulling her veil back down, she lifted it a

> little more and cast a glance that Omar noticed, inhaled, and tried to hold on to. It was a moment too fleeting to be detected by the crowd but an eternity for the lover. (24-25)

Echoing a plot pattern Mulvey identifies in masculinist film that begins with "the woman as object of the combined gaze of the spectator and all male protagonists," with the proviso of "reader" instead of "spectator," this scene can only be described as fellatic (2090). Jahan approaches a platter of gold dinars, bends over, and starts putting gold coins into her mouth, one at a time, with the crowd counting. As if this was not fellatic enough, she even chokes on one, to the mirth of the crowd. Perhaps the most disturbing thing about this scene is that it is introduced to the reader along with, and happens to, the only female poet; even if this was Nasr Khan's "usual phrase," this is the reader's first encounter with it. What's more is that her humiliation is immediately juxtaposed with Khayyam's refusal to do the same. He not only gets away unscathed with a prideful refusal, but inspires in Nasr Khan “such an esteem that he invited [Khayyam] to sit next to him on the throne” (Maalouf 25-27). There is absolutely no exigency for Jahan to have been the person upon whom the reader first witnesses the custom of putting gold in mouth. We cannot simply dismiss this as being done to maintain a historicizing ethos: the text did not have its “hands tied,” so to speak.

In terms of the reader's vantage point, consider that the reader is gazing onto this scene through Khayyam's eyes. Not only that, but the reader's reaction to Jahan is negotiated by Khayyam's own reaction of "trying to work out what emotion he felt towards her" (25). Yet the reaction is somewhat steered towards judgment, rather than sympathy or compassion, since after declaring his admiration for her eloquence, dignity, and courage, his thoughts refrain with, "but here she was stuffing her mouth with yellow metal and being subjected to this humiliating reward" (25). Khayyam's appraisal of the gold as "yellow metal" rhetorically highlights his asceticism while implicitly condemning Jahan's worldliness. This is compounded by a later scene in the narrative where Abu Tahir explicitly compares the two in that regard, causing Khayyam's perception of Jahan to become tempered to a point where

she notices and comments upon it in their subsequent encounter (51, 54).

While the reader watches Jahan's court scene unfold, it is notable that her poem is not provided for the reader, while Khayyam's ultimate refusal to take the gold is communicated to Nasr Khan as a poem, which *is* provided to the reader: "It was not poverty that drove me to you/ I am not poor, for my desires are simple/ The only thing I seek from you is honor/ The honor of a free and steadfast man" (26). This contrast steers Jahan into what Mulvey would deem "[connoting] *to be looked-at-ness*" (2088). Echoing another plot pattern that Mulvey identifies in some masculinist films, a love interest is initially presented as "on display," and "sexualized," but she nonetheless "loses her outward glamorous characteristics, her generalized connotations," since when she "falls in love with the main male protagonist," her "eroticism [becomes] subject to the male [protagonist] alone" (2090). This begins immediately after Jahan is finished "taking" the gold, with the glance she cast at Omar, and culminates in the seduction scene that follows a few pages after, after which her eroticism becomes subject to Khayyam alone.

Later that night, when Khayyam returns to his quarters, he is surprised by a voice of "sweet reproach" coming from the dark of his room, a voice saying "I was expecting you earlier" (Maalouf 29). His immediate reaction is to ask himself if he had "thought about this woman so much that he could hear her," then closing his door and looking in the dark for a silhouette, all while saying nothing (29). Jahan continues speaking, saying, "[you] are keeping quiet. You refuse to believe that a woman could dare to force her way into your room like this [...]" (29). At this point, Khayyam suspects (hopes?) that this is Jahan, but does not know that it is her, and neither does the reader, until she confirms it by referring to the palace and the look they shared. Khayyam still does not respond, and Jahan continues speaking, again by commenting on his silence first, then by explaining that she found out where he lived and telling him about her own living situation, in the previously treated soliloquy about how "life [to her] is so much more important than men" (30). When Khayyam finally speaks

again, this is how he is described as reacting:

> Emerging with difficulty from his torpor, Omar had grasped nothing of Jahan's words, and, when he decided to utter his first words, he was speaking less to her than to himself, or to a shade:
>
> "How often, as an adolescent, or later, have I received a look or a smile. At night I would dream that that look became corporeal, turned into flesh, a woman, a dazzling sight in the dark. Suddenly, in the dark of this night, in this unreal pavilion, in this unreal city, you are here – a beautiful woman, a poetess moreover, and available." (30)

Khayyam retreats from expressing himself to such a degree that it strikes me as an Iserian "response-inviting structure," a "gap" or "blank" that stimulates the reader to project into (Iser 35). While projections are usually of the form that "[animates] what is linguistically implied, though not said," the projection that is prompted in this case from the presumed reader is *his own self* – Khayyam's silence creates a space that allows the reader a more direct, thorough experience of the scene (37). I say "his" because this scene contains the first clear attributes (beyond their being French) that characterize *Samarkand*'s authorial audience, the one around which the novel's implied reader is constructed: masculinity and heterosexuality. Through Khayyam, a reader would get to know Jahan at the same time as Khayyam, would get to experience this scene while Khayyam does. In fact, it is even plausible that he creates such a space that Jahan seems to be speaking *to* the reader directly when she says, "You refuse to believe that a woman could dare" to take the action she took (Maalouf 29). There is a much more explicit example of this in Book 3 of the novel which will be discussed with the character of Shireen. In any case, if the reader were heterosexual, masculine-identified, I believe the "fantasy" that Khayyam spoke about, and primarily to himself, serves to strengthen this reader's identification with Khayyam.

Supposing, for example, having taken Jahan's presence in stride, Khayyam had just accepted

that she was there as a matter of course, without being surprised, and had proceeded to kiss her – a heterosexual male reader would likely have felt that the scene was "empty" and unrealistic to their own expectations and experiences. With their vantage point occupying Khayyam's point-of-view in this situation, Khayyam's reaction as it stands would not break the preferred reader's suspension of disbelief, but would enhance it. In fact, his prolonged silence allows this reader, for example, to react to the scene without having to take Khayyam's reactions into account. When he finally speaks about how he had always had this very fantasy that was being fulfilled for him, I believe that it would strike a chord with the preferred reader as an experience that would accord with theirs. In other words, he would experience the scene as verisimilitudinous because of Khayyam's reaction and experiences mirror his own.

This fantasy evoking the scene's verisimilitude itself represents an impulse to objectify women, especially due to the way that it is worded. For a "look or a smile" at night to be "turned into flesh, a woman" suggests a certain valuation of women in purely sexual terms. To qualify, the aim of this reading is not to come down excessively on attraction, even purely physical attraction. However, without an attempt to exposit some internality to the attractive character, the text is rhetorically coding them to be purely objectified. Though the narrative introduces Jahan as a politically savvy and capable poet, it does not present her poetry to the reader, instead subjecting her to the demeaning treatment of the gold scene. More importantly, Khayyam does not really interact with Jahan in a very substantive way before they sleep together. She does exposit some of her values while she is in his room, but this is after the fact of her decision to find him and sleep with him, and comes off as something of a non-sequitur since nothing about their interaction really prompts or justifies such an extended soliloquy. In short, Jahan's introduction empowers her to immediately disempower her, subsequently placing her in the role of fulfilling Khayyam's, and by extension the preferred reader's, fantasy.

For the remainder of her arc, her empowerment can similarly be recapitulated, myopically

coding her through a Eurocentric feminist lens. In choosing to break off her relationship with Khayyam to follow Nasr Khan's retinue, in choosing not to have children out of an "excess of ambition," and in choosing to try to maintain power as a Sultana, Jahan is being coded as a "career woman." This may be an attempt a cultural translation of empowerment for a Western audience, yet it ends up perpetuating the hegemony of a very narrow conception, hence coding, of empowerment. The other unintended consequence is that coding this narrow conception into Jahan is a validation of the East using a Western metric of values. Whatever the case may be, this empowerment, as with her introduction, is still followed by disempowerment manifested by her short-lived career as a Sultana. Admittedly, for the narrative to have had her take the reins and continue ruling after Terken Khatun's death would have undermined the novel's historically realist ethos. On the other hand, as will become clear with the discussion of Terken Khatun's representational problematics, this ethos is not entirely set in stone for the text. In the case of a female character, the novel is not above diverging from the historical chronicles it draws heavily on for source material, while otherwise faithfully conforming in the case of male characters.

Terken Khatun is first introduced, in passing, as part of a "matrimonial alliance" between Samarkand and the Seljuq Empire, the purpose of which was to somewhat shield Samarkand from Malikshah's father and Sultan of the Seljuq Empire, Alp Arslan, who had plans to conquer it (42). The first time she is portrayed taking any action is later in the narrative, when she is ostensibly trying to ameliorate the conflict between Nizam and Sabbah before it reaches its climax. This conflict comes about when Hassan attempts to replace Nizam in the court. Seeking to drive a wedge between Malikshah and Nizam, Hassan exploits Malikshah's resentment of Nizam's overbearance and appeals to the former's avarice by the latter's. To that end, he convinces Malikshah of ordering Nizam to prepare a "detailed summary of everything that goes into [his] Treasury and the precise way that it is spent" (75) Overwhelmed by the request, especially given the size of the Empire, Nizam responds that it would

take two years. Hassan seizes this opportunity to interject, offering to produce a complete report in forty days if he is provided with the means, and more importantly, with Nizam's authority over the court. Malikshah agrees, forcing Nizam to "hand over his offices to Hassan," creating a ripple of instability through the empire so acute that it threatened civil war (76). Attempting to a final mediation between the two, especially since he was the one who introduced Hassan to Nizam and recommended his employ, Khayyam tries to speak to Hassan three days before the "fateful day," but is told to come back later (77). As he steps outside, Khayyam is bidden by a eunuch to follow him as "he is expected." Coming into a large room with a "vaulted niche protected by a curtain, which fluttered indicating someone's presence behind it," Khayyam is soon addressed by a woman's voice from behind the curtain. He does not understand her Turkish dialect, but soon another voice takes over in Persian, which Khayyam recognizes as Jahan's. Jahan translates for Terken Khatun, telling Khayyam that "[she] is worried about the struggle unfolding within the *diwan* [court]," that she knows he is trying to mediate, and that she is offering to help him succeed (78). To that end, she proposes that she suggest to Malikshah to dismiss Nizam and appoint Khayyam as vizier instead. Balking at the notion, Khayyam remarks that he is ill-suited, to which Jahan replies that "[his] role will simply to be there [...]," and that the "decisions will be taken and carried out by others" (78). To that, Omar responds saying, "In other words, you will be the real Vizir, and your mistress the real Sultan. Isn't that what you are after?" "And how would that upset you? You would have the honors with none of the worries. What better could you wish for?" replies Jahan. At this point, Terken Khatun qualifies her proposal, saying that "he has all the qualities of an excellent vizir." Khayyam reiterates his refusal, and the narrator writes that "[for] the moment, the two women's projects were at a standstill" (78-79).

It seems, in this scene, that Terken Khatun is attempting to capitalize on the conflict in the court to functionally overthrow Malikshah. That much is suspected by Khayyam, the reader-surrogate in this situation, and it is confirmed by Jahan when he voices his suspicion. Although Terken Khatun qualifies

her proposal to make it seem like she is interested in Khayyam for his qualities and not just for his token presence, the statement in the narrative that "[for] the moment, the two women's projects were at a standstill" reaffirms Khayyam's suspicion, revealing that the preferred reading of this scene is that it is a power-grab, rather than an honest attempt a mediating the conflict in the court. The statement also foreshadows Terken Khatun's later actions in the novel. There is also something to be said about how Terken Khatun's ambition is first presented. Abstracting from the scene, her ambition is not plausibly explained, justified, nor contextualized. Hassan Sabbah, who desired the very same thing – to depose Nizam ul Mulk – is treated to a very different characterization. His attempt at deposing Nizam gradually unfolds in the text: he becomes employed by Nizam, quickly establishes his efficacy as a spy-master, develops a camaraderie with Malikshah, after which the narrative begins building up to the attempt, describing Hassan as,

> [Adept] at feeding the sovereign's every sign of resentment towards his Vizir. Upon what did the Vizir pride himself? His wisdom, his learning? But Hassan could make short shrift of both these qualities. The Vizir's capacity to defend the throne and the empire? Hassan very quickly had shown himself equally competent [...].
>
> Above all, Hassan knew how to cultivate Malikshah's proverbial avarice. He constantly spoke to him of the Vizir's expenses, and brought to his attention the new robes of the Vizir and his associates. Nizam liked power and its apparatus, but Hassan liked only power and was rigorous in its pursuit. (73-74)

While not explicitly justifying that Hassan should replace Nizam, Hassan's characterization establishes his competence, resourcefulness and cunning, normalizing his ambition as unsurprising given his cerebral competence. What is also notable is that the narrative does not tarry long before revealing Hassan's true motivations, that he "desires to destroy Turkish power" (89). Hassan's power-grab "arc" is described from page 73-81, and his true motivations are revealed soon after he is thwarted, on page 89,

even though the narrative jumps seven years forward in time. In contrast, Terken Khatun's first attempt at a power-grab, first presented on pages 78 and 79, is not contextualized until much later, on page 113. The pains that the story goes to in describing Hassan's competence, his slow manipulation, and the build-up of his scheme, in contrast with Terken Khatun's abrupt and easily stymied first attempt, reveal that the narrative codes her attempt as threatening, not only for her time, but more importantly, for the preferred reader. Furthermore, it established her as inherently manipulative, especially since the narrative is in no hurry to justify her ambition or her actions.

A further contrast between both characterizations is how Hassan's manipulation is portrayed as a product of his intellect and learning, while her manipulations are portrayed as inherent, as attributable to her person, inseparable as far as the narrative is concerned from her womanhood. While her arc does contain some of the raw material required to support a reading of her sexuality as an expression of empowerment, it needs to be in the service of goals that go beyond wanting "power for power's sake." The narrative is slow to reveal her ultimate motivations, and when it finally begins contextualize her actions in Chapter 19, the first sentence does not bode well for a liberatory reading either: "In the Seljuk empire, at a time when it was the most powerful empire in the world, a woman dared to take power with her bare hands" (111). "Daring," for one thing, can support positive and negative connotations, but in the case of Terken Khatun, everything points to a negative connotation. It begins with the phrase "bare hands," as though this power was wont to burn her, and ends with a characterization that ascribes her manipulative actions to her essence as a person, without missing an opportunity to subject to her a male Orientalist gaze.

Described as Malikshah's "oldest wife by far," she had married him when he was nine and she was eleven (112). She "waited patiently for him to mature," "surprised the first spring of desire in his body," and "[saw] his limbs grow out and his muscles swell up as he turned into the majestic windbag whom she soon learnt to tame" (112). After a long day,

> Malikshah would, find peace in the arms of Terken. He would peel off her diaphanous silk covering, snuggle up to her bare skin, play about, bellow, and tell her about his exploits and what was tiring him. The Chinese Woman would throw her arms around the excited lion, cocoon him, and give him a hero's welcome in the folds of her body, and hold on to him long and tight, only letting go so that she could pull him back again; he stretched himself out with all his weight, conquering, breathless, panting, submissive, and bewitched. She knew how to take him to the very limits of pleasure.
>
> Then, gently his thin fingers would start to trace her eyebrows, her eyelashes, her lips, her earlobes, and the lines of her moist neck; the lion was subdued, he was purring, growling sluggish, smiling. Terken's words would flow into the hollows of his soul. She would speak of him, of herself and their children. She would tell him anecdotes, whisper parables laden with teachings [...]. In his own rough, childish, and animal way he loved her and was to love her until his last breath. (112)

For one thing, her "waiting patiently for him to mature" implies an inherent licentiousness that is a trope identified by Orientalist discourse studies, one that suggests, to quote Meyda Yegenoglu on Edward Said, "not only fecundity but sexual promise (and threat), untiring sensuality, [and] unlimited desire [...]" (25). That licentiousness is used as a representational ethic for the purpose of presenting Terken Khatun to connote, as with Jahan's representation, "to-be-looked-at-ness," although to a different end that to just titillate the preferred reader (Mulvey 2088). In this case, the point is to imply the danger of female sexuality, "bewitching" the reader, showcasing Malikshah's captivation, and setting up for his eventual betrayal. Through being coded as transgressive, the scene uses women's sexuality to both seduce, but also to intimidate, the preferred reader. The seduction is accomplished by objectifying turns of phrase like "the folds of her body," which reduces Terken Khatun's subjectivity to a utility as an object, yet when there is a return to "subjectivity" it is to one that finds purpose in

manipulation – after she is "done" with him, he becomes "subdued," and "sluggish," and her words "flow into the hollows of his soul," words like whispered "parables laden with teachings" (Maalouf 112).

After the narrative treats Terken Khatun's source of power, it goes into a discussion of her sons, who are anointed by Malikshah as heir only to die of a fever, one after the other. Her desire to have her youngest anointed pits her against Nizam, and at this point in the narrative, her main ambition is stated to be for her "lineage [to be] duly assured," and that, going forward, Nizam was the main obstacle to that (113). However, the previous chapter begins with Terken Khatun already plotting against Nizam over his manipulation of her for the attack on Samarkand (104). How can these reasons be reconclied? It actually does not matter for the reasons to be reconciled because, according to novel's timeline, Terken Khatun was trying to depose Nizam *before* either presented justification for doing so. Working backwards, the narrative states that in November 1092 CE, when Malikshah had died, Terken Khatun's infant son Mahmoud was "four years and a few months" (122). This must mean that he was born sometime in 1088. The other date we are given, for Malikshah's attack on Samarkand, is 1089 CE (99). Yet the timeperiod containing both events, the one during which Book 2 is set, is stated to be seven years after Hassan Sabbah is expelled from Samarkand (85). What this can only mean is that Terken Khatun was vying for Nizam (and Malikshah's) power from a time, within the novel, *before* the events that ostensibly motivated her grudge against Nizam had occurred. Effectively, this means that a preferred reading of Terken Khatun's characterization actualizes or ascribes a structurally and rhetorically potentiated “essence” to her as a licentious, power-hungry manipulator in the *femme fatale* mold. Her immediate reaction to Malikshah's death and her subsequent conduct also reinforces this reading.

Soon after he is poisoned, Malikshah is carried to Terken Khatun's tent; with the exception of a a few individuals like Jahan and the court doctor, she quickly sends onlookers away. Her first question,

mind, her first instance of speaking for herself, unmediated, in the entire novel, is to ask, "Might the master recover?" (121). One potentiated interpretation of the question is for her to be asking for reassurance that he will recover, and that is the intention assumed by the doctor, but the next few lines, after his response, recapitulate that intention – she is asking for reassurance that he will *not* recover:

> "His pulse is weakening. God has blown on the candle and it is flickering before going out. Our only hope is prayer."
>
> "If such is the will of the Almighty, then listen to what I am going to say."
>
> This was not the tone of a widow-to-be, but of the mistress of an empire.
>
> "No one outside this yurt must know that the Sultan is no longer with us. Merely that he is recovering slowly, that he needs to rest, and that no one may see him."
>
> What a fleeting and bloody epic was that of Terken Khatun. Even before Malikshah's heart had ceased beating, she demanded her handful of faithful courtiers to swear loyalty to Sultan Mahmoud, whose age was four years and a few months. (121-122).

In its successive context then, the word "might" takes on a rhetorical dimension that spurs an interpretation of almost sociopathic coldness, encouraged by the subsequent phrase "even before Malikshah's heart had ceased beating [...]." A trace of gender-norm transgression can also be inferred from the phrase "[this] was not the tone of a widow-to-be," subtextually implying "as was her place" by "widow-to-be." The same trace continues on the next page: after she is defeated by Barkiyaruk's faction and is forced to retreat to Isfahan, she is described as "not a woman to admit defeat [...]," again subtextually implying "as would have been expected *of a woman*." Returning to the aforementioned double-standard viz. Hassan Sabbah, the rest of the line continues with "[...] and to defend herself she was willing to use tricks that would long be famous," going on to explain the previously treated actions

that could have supported an empowering reading (123). Said reading, however, necessarily needs to be an oppositional one against the "grain" of the text: instead of using a word like "tactics," which has militaristic, yet validating connotations that reflect positively on the performing agent, they are described as "tricks," a word with a connotative baggage apt to evoke stereotypes of "woman-as-manipulator." It is not surprising, then, that like Jahan, Terken Khatun's transgression into a patriarchal sphere of power is ultimately not allowed to stand, being already discursively invalidated by the text's linguistic double-standards. When it comes to her death, the novel even goes as far as taking liberties with one of the chronicles from which it draws very heavily, in sharp contrast to the fidelity it demonstrates for the arcs and deaths of Nizam, Malikshah, and his father Alp Arslan.

For many events in Books 1 and 2, *Samarkand* seems to be drawing very heavily on Ibn al-Athīr's *al-Kāmil fit-Tārīkh* (*The Complete History*), particularly on Volume 8, *The Beginning of the Seljuq State and the Crusades*. For the story of Alp Arslan's attempted conquest of Samarkand and his subsequent death, treated from pages 43-46, the novel provides the following details which are almost unchanged from pages 231-232 of Volume 8 of Ibn al-Athīr's *al-Kāmil*: the number of cavalrymen Alp Arslan took with him on his campaign (200,000), the name of the river they needed to cross on the way (the Jayhun), the name of the commander of the fortress that stymied their progress (Yousef of Khawarizm), how Alp Arslan ordered that he be put to death (hammering four posts into the ground and having him quartered), how Yousef responded by calling Alp Arslan "effeminate," how Alp Arslan tried to kill Yousef with a bow and arrow, missed, how he was killed by Yousef with a hidden dagger, and finally, Alp Arslan's last words.

For Malikshah and Nizam ul Mulk's conflict, several details also match up with Ibn al-Athīr. Nizam's grandson publicly insulting a Turkish emir in the novel is reported in Ibn al-Athīr as the grandson having "arrested him, and humiliated him" (Maalouf 104; Ibn al-Athīr 354). The date of Nizam's death, the tenth of Ramadan, 1092 CE in the novel, matches Ibn al-Athīr's tenth of Ramadan,

485 AH (Maalouf 114; Ibn al-Athīr 354). The location of his death, Nahavand in Iraq, is consistent (Maalouf 108; Ibn al-Athīr 354). The disguise of the killer, who is stated to be an assassin, and how he killed Nizam, also matches up (Maalouf 114-115; Ibn al-Athīr 354). As for Malikshah's death, Ibn al-Athīr states that Malikshah went out hunting and returned sick on the third of Shawwal, 487 AH (1094 CE) (359). Terken Khatun's concealment of his death is also mentioned in Ibn al-Athīr; furthermore, the novel's proclamation that "'[n]ever,' said the chroniclers, 'has there been told of such a powerful sovereign dying without anyone to pray or weep over his corpse,'" is almost taken verbatim from that same volume of *al-Kāmil* (Maalouf 122; Ibn al Athir 360). Finally, the number of days between their deaths, thirty-five, is also consistent (Maalouf 121; Ibn al-Athīr 356).

Ibn al-Athīr also states Malikshah's youngest son by Terken Khatun, Mahmoud, was "four years and a few months" when Malikshah died, a detail present in the novel (Ibn al-Athīr 362; Maalouf 122). Terken Khatun's correspondence with emirs, propositioning marriage in exchange for them attacking and defeating Barkiyaruk, is also mentioned in *al-Kāmil* (371). Additionally, he refers to the troops of Isfahan as the "armies of Terken Khatun" during the interregnum, presumably being the one of the "chroniclers" that the novel refers to, although the novel adds a peculiar qualification when quoting him (Ibn al-Athīr 362; Maalouf 122). "The chroniclers of the time," the novel goes, "make no mistake. When speaking of the imperial troops, they henceforth say 'the armies of Terken Khatun,'" (122). Rhetorically, the emphasis that the chroniclers made "no mistake" presupposes a reaction of disbelief in the preferred reader, and attempts to assuage that by displaying a perception or awareness of the aberrance of a phrase like "the armies of a woman," preempting a potential rupture in that readers' suspension of disbelief. It is not surprising for the novel to mediate the chronicle in this way, since it loses all fidelity to *al-Kāmil* when it comes to Barkiyaruk's siege of Isfahan and Terken Khatun's death.

According to *al-Kāmil*, "in Ramadan [487 AH/ September/October 1092 CE], the royal Terken Khatun died [...] in Isfahan, [...]. She had left Isfahan to travel to Taj ul-Dawla Tutush [Barkiyaruk's

paternal uncle] to marry him, falling ill, returning and dying, [...] and she only had Isfahan and ten thousand Turkish cavalrymen left in her possession" (386). This implies that she had managed to resist Barkiyaruk's siege, which is corroborated by a recent study of Turkish historiography of the Seljuq Turks by Aziz Başan, who states that "[Barkiyaruk] lifted the siege in return for money, ceding Isfahan and Fars to Terken Khatun" (35). Another deviation is from *al-Kāmil*'s description of the hostage-taking of Barkiyaruk. Ibn al-Athīr related that "in this year [487 AH], in Shawwal [October/November 1094 CE], Barkiyaruk was defeated by the troops of his paternal uncle Tutush [...], subsequently [Barkiyaruk] made his way to Isfahan. *The mother of his brother, Khatun, had been dead*, as we will relate, those inside Isfahan preventing him from entering, then *allowing him as a ruse to capture him*, and so when he approached Isfahan his brother Mahmoud left to meet him, and he entered the city, and they surrounded him" [emphasis added] (380-381).

The hostage-taking of Barkiyaruk, however, is attributed in *Samarkand* to Khatun herself, as her "last ruse, [...] the most ingenious and most audacious" (Maalouf 123). She sends out emirs from her army to his camp, pretending they were defectors. They were then instructed to bait Barkiyaruk to return with them to Isfahan to trigger an uprising among her troops, already "on the verge of revolt," after which he could kill her and win the city (123). The emirs are successful, and he is taken hostage in Isfahan. On the cusp of victory, and yet to decide whether to "have him strangled or just blinded," Khatun is "discovered dead in her bed with an instrument of the crime at her side – a large, soft cushion with which she had been smothered. A eunuch with sturdy arms had disappeared and a servant girl remembered that he had been introduced into the harem some years earlier upon Nizam ul Mulk's recommendation" (124). Like with the hostage situation, the novel dramatizes her death by making it occur as she is about to secure victory, and at the hands of her arch-nemesis Nizam ul Mulk. For her death to have been dramatized in this fashion, for it to have happened on the cusp of her victory was the novel's way of maximizing dramatic tension, yet the very existence of this tension is contingent

upon the preferred reader's proclivity to feel threatened by Khatun's existence, ascent and impending victory. As though to soothe this reader, the novel has Khatun killed in gleeful restoration of a patriarchal status quo, rather than in condemnation of its resilience. This is more likely when we consider that his being dead *still did not stop* her arch-nemesis Nizam ul Mulk, whose name literally translates to "Order of the Kingdom," from successfully machinating her death.

**19th – 20th CENTURY: SHIREEN AND THE THREE WOMEN**

Shireen and the three unnamed women are first introduced in the Book 3 of the novel, evincing a dramatic shift of setting from the 11th to the 19th century. The half-French, half-American Lesage, seeking the *Manuscript* that Khayyam had been writing in Books 1 and 2, begins his journey in Constantinople. He seeks out Jamaladin al-Afghani, the 19th century decolonial pan-Islamic activist and reformist, to ask him about it. While waiting for an audience in the waiting room of Jamaladin's residence, Lesage notices a young woman seated there and admires her beauty (Maalouf 172). As she leaves, she speaks to him, saying “[you] never know, our paths might meet” (173). When Lesage meets with him, Jamaladin informs him that the *Manuscript* was last in the possession of one of his disciples, Mirza Reza. whom he describes as “unbalanced and obsessive” (179). He advises him to go to Tehran to track him down, and hands him three letters addressed to Mirza, the Iranian consul in Baku, and Fazil, another disciple who would help Lesage to track down the vagabond Mirza Reza. Jamaladin also informs him that the young woman who was sitting in the waiting-room was in fact Princess Shireen, the Shah of Iran's granddaughter, and that he should get in touch with her should he face “obstacles” he needs to overcome (180). Lesage finds Mirza Reza through Fazil, gives him Jamaladin's letter, and asks him about the *Manuscript*. Mirza tells Lesage to come back in a few days, when Mirza would recover it. Unfortunately, Jamaladin's letter indirectly spurs Mirza Reza to kill the Shah of Iran, who was responsible for Jamaladin's exile in Constantinople. Fazel quickly warns Lesage that he was now

implicated: the soldiers who arrested Mirza had found the letter from Jamaladin on him, and Lesage's name was written on it. He tells him to seek refuge in his legation. Lesage attempts to make his way there but his way is barred by soldiers and checkpoints. He is almost caught were it not for the help of three unnamed women living in the neighborhood (192). A mother and her two daughters who resented the Shah for having their husband and father wrongfully executed, they incorrectly assume that Lesage had killed the Shah, and decide to hide him in their home when they hear the ruckus of the search outside. Relieved at being safe, Lesage does not disabuse them of their belief. For the mother to diffuse the potential impropriety of having a strange man stay with herself and her daughters, she symbolically adopts him as her son. They keep him safe for forty days, until his stay is cut short when visiting grandparents stumble upon Lesage sleeping in the women's quarters. The mother manages to justify Lesage's presence, and while they are satisfied, the grandparents nonetheless make it clear that he must leave. Lesage then turns to Shireen for assistance to smuggle him out of the country.

Through the mother, Lesage relays a message to Shireen, who comes to his rescue, smuggling him through the barricade of soldiers and arranging his escape from Iran (197-200). Before they part ways, Lesage asks her about the whereabouts of Khayyam's *Manuscript*, and she responds by saying that she would investigate and write to him. She writes to him within a year of his escape to inform him that she had found the *Manuscript* within the belongings of Mirza (206). Seven years after that, she begins to correspond with Lesage again, this time to keep him informed of the political intrigue engulfing Iranian society, the prelude to the 1906 Constitutional Revolution (210, 211). Lesage eventually returns to Iran when he is cleared of suspicion in the regicide, becoming involved in the resistance to the Russian-backed coup to revert the country back to being an absolute monarchy. Later on, Shireen plays a part in the resistances' conflict with the Cossack forces in Tabriz, using one of the Shah's abandoned palaces in Tabriz as a hub for their leaders (245). Before the fighting between the resistance and the Cossack forces intensifies, Shireen and Lesage sleep together (247). Later on, during

a respite from the fighting, they meet again in private, with her showing him the *Manuscript* and them reading it together (254). Shireen does not appear again until the penultimate chapter of the novel, just after the Iranian government is forced to expel Morgan Shuster, offering Lesage her perspective on the sabotage of Iran's democracy (291-293). In the final chapter, Shireen is now married to Lesage, and they make their way to the United States on board the Titanic with the *Manuscript* (294-295). Shireen and Lesage are not immediately aware of the moment they hit the iceberg, but are told by the crew to head to the top of the ship. Once there, they notice that passengers are being "directed towards the lifeboats," but Shireen refuses to head there with Lesage, insisting that she would not "leave without the [*Manuscript*]" (298). A steward interrupts, telling them that there is "no question of leaving," and that the crew were "getting the passengers off the ship for an hour or two" (299). This somewhat mollifies Shireen, and she gets onto a lifeboat with Lesage, who as an experienced rower is allowed on. It is only after they are in the ocean that they realize that the Titanic is in fact sinking; Shireen "[gives] out a cry" when the "*Titanic* was now in a vertical position" before solemnly "plunging towards her destiny" (299). In the aftermath, Shireen does not say a word to Lesage, her eyes "avoiding [him]" (300). Soon after they are rescued and make it to shore, Shireen disappears without a trace, never to be heard from or seen again (300-301).

In terms of a positive, liberatory hermeneutic that a feminist reader can ally themselves with, both Shireen and the three women share two commonalities. Both save Lesage's life, and both share in a didactic motif, representing voiced, emic perspectives. In terms of their roles in saving Lesage, both groups of women can be seen as subverting two traditional, intersecting power hierarchies: that of men and women, and that of East and West. In both cases, Eastern women are saving the life of a Western man, inverting an Orientalist trope of the "white man's burden," of the West saving the Orient. For Shireen, she smuggles him out of Iran through routes unknown to caravans, even giving him money to make sure he has enough for the journey (198). For the women, the significance for the three women is

deeper: their action of saving Lesage can be read as their attempt at influencing the governing politics of a sociopolitical system that actively excludes them. While it is true that Lesage did not actually kill the Shah, nor was he even an accomplice, he was implicated, however, and had become wanted, and as far as most people could know at the time, he was considered an enemy of the state. In taking advantage of the opportunity to save him, these women can be read as active and as possessing agency. In light of the fact that they hid Lesage in the women-only "inner house," which, as a structure of gender segregation, can be considered a hallmark of the particular patriarchal culture in which they live, their action can even accommodate a subversive quality. By appropriating a patriarchal structure used to exclude them for the purpose of rebelling against the state that sanctions said structure, the women can be read as subverting the system from within – in short, though they may be victims of the system, they do not necessarily have to be interpreted as *succumbing to* victimization.

In terms of their roles in teaching Lesage, the text's situating of women of color as teachers to a white man can, to different extents, be read as an affirmation and a validation of the women's perspectives and authority, subverting the aforementioned intersecting power relationships. In the case of Shireen, her later role in the narrative is to provide Lesage, and the reader by extension, with the bulk of the historical and political context for Iran's Constitutional Revolution. Moreover, the text codes her as credible through Lesage's implicit trust of her veracity, deferring to her authority when some of the details seem "superfluous" to his "vulgar eyes" (211). This can be read as validating perspectives or histories that do not depend for their credibility on being andro- or Eurocentric, effectively furthering the novel's ethos of postcolonial decentering. The text can also support such a validation through Lesage's stay with the three women, in that they provide him with a first-hand, unmediated, emic experience of living in Iran. In his words, he owes them "the immense steps [he] made in understanding and speaking idiomatic Persian" (195).

To presume that the gender segregation enforced by the harem as *prima faci*e oppressive would

be to fall prey, as Chandra Mohanty has observed, to the discursive effects of a Western feminism that constructs the "Third World Woman" as an "always-already constituted group" defined by their status as victims (338). Leila Ahmed echoes this point with the contention that "harem [is] almost always synonymous with female oppression" for Westerners (523). Rather than being defined as a "system that permits males sexual access to more than one female," the harem can also be defined, "and with as much accuracy, as a system whereby the female relatives of a man – wives, sisters, mother, aunts, daughters – share much of their time and their living space, and further, which enables women to have frequent and easy access to other women in their community, vertically, across class lines, as well as horizontally," and more importantly, "a space for women forbidden to the male" (524, 529). While it may seem like that is exactly what they do, using the "space [...] forbidden to the male," to hide Lesage, the functionality of the space in the context of the narrative is anything but empowering for them because it reveals and unveils this very "space forbidden to the male" to a decidedly male authorial audience, in spite of and in challenge to its forbidden nature. By sating – and neglecting to critique – their desire to gaze into this space, the text acknowledges and validates the preferred reader's presupposition that the "real essence" of the Orient lies therein.

On the morning of the day after he is taken in, Lesage reports that he is summoned by the mother, whom hails his courage and reiterates her joy at taking him in, after which he elaborates that,

> [H]aving observed some moments of silence, she suddenly started to unhook her bodice before my started eyes. I blushed and turned my eyes away but she pulled me towards her. Her shoulders were bare and so were her breasts. With word and gesture she invited me to suckle. The two daughters giggled under their cloaks but the mother had all the solemnity of a ritual sacrifice. I complied, placing my lips, as modestly as possible, on the tip of one breast and then on the other. Then she covered herself up, without haste, adding in the most formal tones:

> "By this, you have become my son, as if you were born of my flesh."
>
> Then, turning towards her daughters, who had stopped laughing, she declared henceforth they had to treat me as if I was their own brother. (193-194)

Though initially finding it "grotesque," in hindsight he declares as encompassing "all the subtlety of the Orient," (194). Needless to say, it is problematic on Lesage's part to be reifying and essentializing such an entity as the "Orient," regardless of the fact that this scene is far from "subtle." It is worth noting that a person located in such a positionality (white, male, Western) as Lesage, being placed in a space such as a harem, will likely be oblivious to the deleterious effects that his subjectivity and subsequent discursive act of representing/constructing the experience has on the agency of these women, their space, and their culture. However, the particular juxtaposition of such a narrator and such a space was to a large extent an authorial choice by Maalouf, and one that is so insidious it is apt to recapitulate the entirety of the novel's postcolonial ethos. The subsequent erasure of the women's voices during the remainder of the scene is the first irrefutable indication that the postcoloniality of this novel is merely superficial.

For people who not only saved Lesage's life but sheltered and taught him for forty days, it is dehumanizing of the text not to represent them as named. The alienization of these women is reinforced when he refers to himself as having "landed on a women's planet […]" when he finds himself in their space, but nothing denies them agency quite like Lesage speaking for them, particularly when interpreting the mother's actions without indicating that she was even consulted. After writing that the "ceremony seemed both moving and grotesque," to him, he indicates that after reflecting, after "[t]hinking back over it," he could "see in it all the subtlety of the Orient" (194). "In fact," he continues, "my situation was embarrassing for that woman" (194). Beyond the self-centered qualification that this was only "his" situation, the transition between sentences from "thinking back" to "in fact" leaves no space for the mother's input on her own motivations – these two sentences are

written in such a way as to imply that this strictly a conclusion on his part. Moreover, his own worldview, his capacity to interpret the actions of another person, and the authority of his subjectivity constitutes his inferences as “fact,” irrespective of her agency or input. This is in spite of the fact that he was in a position to be able to communicate with the family. In fact, he declares that "[i]t is to them I owed the immense steps I made in understanding and speaking idiomatic Persian," and that after some effort on the mother's part to speak some French on the first day, he continues that "all our conversations were henceforth carried out in the country's vernacular" (194). Not relaying *any* of these conversations to the reader and even implying that they *did not* inform his reasoning for why the mother acted the way she did effectively subalters her. There is no self-awareness on Lesage's part that this representational mode is problematic, and the text does not provide a higher narrative level that subsumes his own, one through which his perspective can be challenged or destabilized. This means that Lesage's narration will be trusted and taken at face-value as far as the preferred reader is concerned. Effectively, the text does not challenge the premise that a white male narrator is entitled to speak for and about others with this much authority and conclusiveness.

As self-serving as this is, it does not compare to some of Lesage's conduct towards them during his stay. After he deigns to infer her motivations for adopting him, that it was to avoid "some incident" occurring as a result of him living with them, Lesage relates that "everything became simple, clean, pure," after the adoption. However, he immediately clarifies, in the next line, that "[t]o say desire was dead would be telling a lie, everything about our relationships was eminently carnal; yet, I reiterate, eminently pure" (194). It is telling that Lesage chose to precede the carnality of the relationships syntactically, a carnality circumscribed by the fiction of adoption yet which reveals the sexualization and exploitation of these women. Soon after relating that their conversations were carried out in vernacular Persian, he describes these conversations as “animated or casual, subtle or crude, often *even flirtatious, since in my capacity as elder brother anything was allowed as long as I stayed beyond the*

*bounds of incest*" [emphasis added] (195). Lesage's conduct in this situation descends quite literally into the realm of the predatory. He takes advantage of the women's precarious and vulnerable situation while simultaneously recognizing how "embarrassing" (to say the least) it was for them. "Staying beyond" the line of physical incest does not magically negate the incestuousness of his behavior, while he behaves as though it is permissible because the adoption is a temporary "fiction." All adoptions are fictions, yet they institute the same incest taboo between adopted siblings as biological ones. Lesage on the other hand sees this fictional adoption, a humiliating compromise for the mother designed to protect her daughters, as carte blanche for him to engage in entitled, predatory and exploitative behavior. It is no wonder they are unnamed – they are being progressively coded as objects for the consumption of Lesage and of the preferred reader. A defense may perhaps be mounted that Lesage, given his positionality and temporally-mediated subjectivity, would not know any better than to act in such a way, nor know better than to represent these women in such a uni-dimensional way. That it would be "unreasonable to expect any different" from him cannot be a valid defense for the text to fall back on. Beyond the intellectual cowardice of "neutrality," to say that the text was just being "realistic" is particularly egregious as a defense since this text simultaneously makes the case for the mediatory nature of the "past" as it is discursively constructed.

The ritual of the fictional adoption as represented in the novel is *itself* a fabrication, particularly as concerns an overwhelmingly Shi'a-majority country like Iran. While Morgan Clarke reports on a strikingly similar, "tactical" use of milk-kinship, "instituted in a symbolic manner such as by a grown man putting his lips to a woman's breast" to create marriage prohibitions (292). However, the context in which this occurs is quite different: in the 19$^{th}$ century "Hindu Kush" kingdoms of Chitral, Hunza, and Nager (Parkes 759). Whether this was practiced within a Sunni or Shi'a framework is not addressed by Parkes, who does not really make the distinction, yet it still remains that this practice was limited to a geographically, temporally and politically distinct context. It is more likely that this "symbolic

adoption" ritual reinforces what Leila Ahmed calls the "prurient speculation" that "recurs in Western men's accounts of the harem" (524). It doesn't go as far as "downright assertion about women's sexual relations with each other within the harem," though the hubris of "downright assertion" remains (524). It is speculation because milk kinship creation between adults is not practiced nor sanctioned in Twelver Shi'a jurisprudence. In her 1992 ethnography on milk kinship practices in Shi'ite Iran, Jane Khatib-Chahidi finds instead that,

> A wet-nurse/milk mother always appears to have been taken for an infant when it was thought to be absolutely essential: that is, in the case of the death or illness of the mother or the onset of another pregnancy while the child was being breast-fed. *There were no examples of the use of the relationship to circumvent strict veiling or to prevent marriages. In fact, my informants found the suggestion that it could be made use of for such purposes highly bizarre* [emphasis added]. This was presumably because there exist, in Shi'ite Islam, much easier ways of effecting the former by means of fictitious marriages (Khatib-Chahidi, 1981:125-8). For example, servants in Iranian households where there were devout Muslims were made into *mahram* [non-marriageable] relatives by means of temporary marriage contracts: the servant was 'married' to the son or the daughter of the head of the household [...]. The servant then became like a son- or daughter-in-law to the household head and to the other members of the family. This permitted practising Muslim to carry out their devotions with a clear conscience in the presence of servants of the opposite sex. (119)

Khatib-Chahidi notes that the Shi'ite Islamic rulings, based on Ayatollah Khomeini's work, "differ very little from those of other religious leaders in the present day [...], or from those of religious leaders living in the previous centuries" (114). This means that the letter of the religious law regarding this matter is continuous over the last century, applying to the time 20th century timeframe during

which Book 3 of *Samarkand* takes place. Notable as well is that the rulings as excerpted from Khomeini's work presuppose that the milk relationship is created between a *child* and a wet-nurse, that milk will be ingested by the child, and that the milk relationship will be instituted on that basis (115-118). There are no rulings on adults, as both Khatib-Chahidi and Clarke explain, since the need to institute fictive kinship between adults in Shi'a jurisprudence is provided by the practice of "contracting 'fictitious,' temporary marriages […], an exclusively Shiite Islamic institution" (Clarke 293).

Temporary marriages, referred to as "*mut'a* or *sigheh*," are "contractual arrangements [between Muslim men and women] that legally unite them for a designated amount of time and for which the temporary wife is paid" (Ghodsi 645). There are several differences between mut'a marriages and their more "permanent" counterparts, the most relevant of which are the following. The first is that the mut'a contract must "state the precise duration of the marriage term, which can range from one hour to ninety-nine years" (667). The contract must also "state the consideration to be paid by the husband to the wife, […] comparable to the *mahr* [bride-pride] paid to the bride in the permanent marriage" (668). The contract can also be "formed by a simple oral agreement," which does not require a father's consent if the woman in question is a widow or divorcee (682; 669). This contract, in contrast to a permanent marriage, "does not require witnesses as to its formation, nor is it required that the contract be registered," and "the parties themselves may perform the acts of contractual formation and the marriage ceremony" (667). In terms of terminating the *mut'a* marriage, the couple may wait until the "expiration of the duration of the contract," the husband may terminate it unilaterally, or the couple may "mutually agree to terminate the marriage contract before it expires" (670). In the context of the harem scene, these conditions would have made it an ideal and more importantly, a historically representative response from the mother towards her predicament with Lesage. As a divorcee, she could have autonomously created an oral *mut'a* marriage contract with Lesage, without the need for witnesses, contract registration, nor her father's consent. This marriage would have had the same

narrative function of creating a marriage-prohibition between her daughters and him as the “symbolic adoption ritual.”

As Meyda Yegenoglu outlines in *Colonial Fantasies*, the "methodological problems of Orientalism cannot be delineated by simply claiming that the 'real' Orient does not correspond to the image depicted in Orientalist texts," and decrying *Samarkand* on that basis is not the aim of discussing the incongruence of the ritual to the context (18). Rather, it is to uncover the fantasy-fulfillment that this ritual and the entire scene effectively provide for the preferred reader. Malek Alloula identifies this same variety of fantasy-fulfillment in *The Colonial Harem*, a semiological study of French postcards from early 20th century colonial Algeria depicting, rather, *constructing* Algerian women and "the harem." As Barbara Harlowe remarks in the introduction, those postcards "no longer represent Algeria and the Algerian woman, but rather the Frenchman's phantasm of the Oriental female and her inaccessibility behind the veil in the forbidden harem,” metonymizing "Western desires on the Orient" (Alloula xiv). Veiledness itself, Alloula infers, "threatens [the Western subject] in his being and *prevents him from accomplishing himself as gazing gaze*" (14). In response, he will "unveil the veiled and give figural representation to the forbidden," enacting "symbolic revenge upon a society that continues to deny him any access and questions the legitimacy of his desire" (14). Yegenoglu also finds that the veil's placement of Oriental woman's body "out of reach of Western desire and gaze" frustrates this desire to the point that it "subjects this enigmatic [...] 'sartorial matter' to relentless investigation" (39). The "countless accounts and representations of the veil and veiled woman in Western discourses, all made in an effort to reveal the hidden secrets of the Orient" are thus unsurprising (39). The veil, she argues, is a "multilayered signified which at once refers to an attire which covers the Muslims woman's face, and to that which hides and conceals the Orient and Oriental women from apprehension," and it serves as a “screen around which Western fantasies of penetration revolve" (47). This is why the "Western subject [...] is always fascinated by the veil or harem, the truth of the culture in the space of

the woman, in the body of woman" (56).

Catering to, rather than critiquing this fascination, is *Samarkand*. It is continuous with an established textual history of Orientalist travel writing that, regarding the spaces and bodies of Oriental women, is both fascinated and seduced, speculative and ascriptive. It positions Lesage in the harem, granting its reader a vantage point from which to gaze onto unveiled women's bodies and into their unveiled spaces. Lesage's comment that his "attachment to the Orient would have remained short-lived and superficial" were it not for his stay with them implies a certain authenticity to that space that cannot be found elsewhere (Maalouf 194). This perpetuates, rather than critiques, an Orientalist equivalence between the "essence" of the Orient and the bodies and spaces of Oriental women, and validates the Western subject's will-to-knowledge through the gaze, without critiquing its underlying will-to-power. Being so steeped in the doctrine of unveiling and invested in sating this gaze, the harem scene has crucial implications for the rest of the novel's didactic ethos. Whatever didacticism the novel effects is suspect, at the very least, since it is complicit in the reification of the Orientalist chain of signification, where the "veil signifies not only the (Oriental) woman, but also the Orient itself" (Yegenoglu 48). The novel's discourse about the "Orient," then, does not escape the paradigm of unveiling, and appeases a Western subjectivity's entitlement to "know" while mollifying its anxiety at veiled-ness of this "Orient." From this frame of reference, even the text's reliance on historical chronicles is itself revealed as native informancy, as collaboration with a neo-Imperialist project that reassures Western subjectivity of its supremacy.

Shireen's representation also displays this equivocation between the essence of the Orient and femininity. Her aforementioned didactic role in the narrative, which can be read as empowering, has to first be decontextualized from its rhetorical and diegetic contexts, since Shireen's representation is made for the male gaze from the very beginning, and when that is not the focus, her characterization is reduced down to a function as an objectified plot-device. In the scene where Lesage first meets her, he

is waiting for an audience with Jamaladin. He relates that,

> As I entered, I noticed the silhouette of a woman. This induced me to lower my eyes; I had been told too much about this country's customs to walk forward beaming and cheery with my hand outstretched. I simply mumbled a few words and touched my hat. I had already repaired to the other side of the room from where she was sitting to settle myself into an English-style armchair. I looked along the carpet and my glace came up against the visitors shoes, then traveled up her blue and gold dress to her knees, her bust, her neck, and her veil. (172)

In a striking resemblance to a tilt-shot where the camera ascends as it beholds a subject, Lesage "looked along the carpet and [his] glance came up against the visitor's shoes, then traveled up her blue and gold dress to her knees, her bust, her neck, her veil" (172). Again, with the proviso of "reader" rather than "spectator," this is what Mulvey would deem a "mode of representation [...] associated with a look: that of a spectator in direct scopophilic contact with the female form displayed for his enjoyment" (2090). Lest the preferred reader's expectation of vicarious possession be threatened, Lesage finds that "it was not the barrier of a veil that [he] came across but that of an unveiled face, of eyes that met [his], and a smile (Maalouf 172). A reader's first encounter with Shireen places their point of view in a position whereby this reader is impelled to visualize Shireen's body, then subsequently to be presented with an indication from her that the attention is not unwelcome from Lesage, to the reassurance of the preferred reader. Reinforcing that is the position of her veil, "a fine silk kerchief which could be pulled down over her face should a stranger appear. *However, the stranger was there and her veil was still drawn back*" [emphasis added] (172). This connotes a licentiousness that serves to get the preferred reader on tenterhooks, whom the text continues to cater to by how it words her behavior, which contains echoes of Jahan.

As Lesage continues to gaze at her, she was "offering her profile for me to contemplate," as she

looks into the distance. Projecting his desire onto her, he words her innocuous acts of staring as being done for his benefit, while he continues to describe her with very Orientalizing language:

> If sweetness had a color, it would be hers. My temples were throbbing with happiness. My cheeks were damp and my hands cold. God, she was beautiful – *my first vision of the Orient* – a woman such as only the desert poet knew how to praise: her face was the sun, they would have said, her hair the protecting shadow, her eyes fountains of cool water, her body the most slender of palm-trees, and her smile like a mirage. [emphasis added] (172)

The association between the essence of the Orient and between unveiled Oriental women that Yegenoglu identifies emerges again, and is followed by a lowest-hanging-fruit, Orientalist choice of lexical units, such as palm-trees and mirages, in praise of her beauty. Finally, and to foreshadow them having sex in the future, Shireen speaks to Lesage. While trying to decide whether or not he should go speak to her, he is interrupted:

> Our eyes met again, and then parted as in jest when the servant came and interrupted us [...]. A moment later he bowed to the ground to speak to her in Turkish. I watched her stand up, veil herself, and give him a small leather bag to carry. He went quickly towards the exit and she followed him. However, as she reached the door of the sitting room she slowed down, leaving the man to distance himself from her. Then she turned towards me and stated, in a loud voice and in a French purer than mine:
>
> "You never know, our paths might meet!" (172-173)

Lesage's proclamation that Shireen spoke "in a French purer than mine," is something of an oddity (173). The hyperbole in this kind of complement rests on an assumption that the person doing the complimenting is a native speaker of the language, using their proficiency as the benchmark to compliment a presumed non-native speaker of the language. Though presumably an "American citizen

and a native of Annapolis in Maryland," by employing this expression, Lesage is actually being coded as a French subject with full command of the language, which is diegetically (and conveniently) believable since his mother was French (155, 157). This obscures the subliminality effected by Shireen *all but speaking* to the reader through Lesage, especially when one considers how she was being represented up to that point and where the reader's vantage point was in relation to her. What also obscures this subliminality is the ubiquity of French as a *lingua franca*, especially among the nobility and educated classes in the contemporaneous Middle East. The immersion effected by Shireen's perlocution will be felt most profoundly by a preferred reader, since this scene satisfies the preconditions that its reader be male, heterosexual, and French. This is not the only way that Shireen is a means to the reader's end – she is also reduced to function as a plot device to provide exposition to the reader, with just enough plausibility so as not to immediately stress a reader's suspension of disbelief.

As previously mentioned, Lesage is saved by Shireen from the authorities and smuggled out of Iran. Before he makes his way back to the United States, he asks Shireen to track down the *Manuscript*, last in the possession of Mirza Riza before his arrest (199). She tells him that she will inquire and asks him to leave his address but also that he not reply when she writes to him. A few months after his return, in 1897, Shireen writes to him that the *Manuscript* was in her possession and that he "may consult it at [his] leisure when he [returns] to Persia" (206). Fearful, Lesage does not return until 1906. In the meantime, Lesage acquires an "undeserved reputation as a great explorer of the Orient" due to him being spotted taking a walk in exotic, "Oriental" garb, around Annapolis (207). This leads the director of the local newspaper to suggest that Lesage "write an article about his experiences in Persia," which leads Lesage to eventually take charge of the foreign affairs section of the *Annapolis Gazette* (208, 209). Seven years after her letter to him about the *Manuscript*, Shireen begins writing to him again, on a monthly basis, relaying the day-to-day lead-up to the Constitutional Revolution (211). He

does not publish these letters, as she had requested his "absolute discretion," yet she does authorize him to "use the information contained in them," which he does in the *Gazette* (211). Lesage's placement as a journalist covering foreign affairs, and Shireen's correspondence with him, form a relationship that functions as a way for the novel to organically, at least plausibly, provide exposition about the lead up to the 1906 Constitutional Revolution in Iran without stressing the reader's suspension of disbelief. This relationship is quite convenient for Lesage, and the text does not provide anything in terms of justification for her to have begun writing to him again. At the very least, Lesage does not relay any reason she may have expressed to begin reporting, and in “painstaking detail,” on the events unfolding around her (211). This relationship is quite convenient for Lesage and for the reader, yet it ends up relegating Shireen to a mere plot device. Firstly, the text does not provide any reason or justification on her part for why she suddenly started corresponding again with Lesage, and with such detail. This is especially important given that there was no way she could have known that Lesage was now placed in a capacity to relay her information to other reader as a journalist. She also preemptively authorizes him to use this information, without having the foreknowledge that he would want to use the information in the capacity that he so happens to conveniently possess. This level of serendipity is a tell-tale sign of Shireen's role as mere plot device.

The next time Shireen appears in the novel is during the extended conflict borne out of the Constitutional Revolution, during which the Russian and British Empires collude to depose the newly elected Prime Minister, annul the constitution and revert the country back to an absolute monarchy. Specifically, Shireen participates in the resistance in Tabriz, with Lesage, Fazil, and others leading the fight against pro-Shah militias and the Cossack Brigade, a contingent of the Russian military tasked by the Empire to effect a coup restoring the Shah's old powers. Having destroyed the parliament building in Tehran, they were on the way to Tabriz, the final stronghold of Constitutionalists in the country. She is referred to by Lesage as the “most precious recruit beyond a shadow of a doubt,” which, taken along

with an earlier statement (a la her letters) that he was “in love with her wonderful intellect,” reveal a very patronizing attitude on Lesage's part (245, 211). While it is true that she turned one of her grandfather's old palaces into something of a headquarters for the resistance, it is notable that her resurfacing in the novel occurs almost forty pages, or three chapters, after her last quoted letter to Lesage. Not two pages after she resurfaces, on the same day they reconnect, Shireen shows Lesage the *Manuscript*, and they sleep together, further reinforcing her sexual objectification for the preferred reader (247). As for the ending of the novel, Shireen's inexplicable disappearance after the loss of the *Manuscript* leaves Lesage to question briefly his memory and sanity, rather than to display any grief, mourning, or loss. This is the final death-knell both to Shireen's characterization and to the novel's decentering effect, since the only thing that is centered throughout the entirety of the scene, and the only thing that remains at the end, is his Western subjectivity.

*Samarkand* is a provocative novel that, along with its author, commands significant purchase, especially as a cultural emissary to Europe on behalf of Arabs. The novel thus requires a deeper interrogation since the scope of its impact will be proportionate to the positioning of its author, now an award-winning novelist and public intellectual in France. The discourse surrounding the novel, and particularly the praise it receives, needs to be reexamined in light of a reader-centric, feminist interrogation. The importance of this reexamination lies in the influence it can have on the course of future postcolonial cultural works, particularly, in highlighting the pitfall of the vicious cycle that *Samarkand* falls into, as it perpetuates a colonization while trying to critique another. The centrality of gender to the constitution of colonial discourses must take a central stage in decolonial cultural artifacts if cultural decolonization is to meet the transformational effect it sets out to achieve.

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