

Edith Wharton's Maghreb: Identity Politics and Dis/Conjunctive Encounters

Selma Mokrani

Badji-Mokhtar University, Annaba, Algeria

mokrani37@yahoo.com

In her *In Morocco* (1917), Wharton uses geographical symbolism to stage America's encounter with North Africa. Emerging from her inland Moroccan peregrination, she is relieved to see the metonymic Atlantic breakers wipe off "the sense of the immensity and immobility of Africa [which] descends on one with an intolerable oppression." On the other hand, Wharton superposes the image of a respectable American Professor's family, decorously attired for an Arabian Nights' college pageant, to dust the picture of the Fez Harem, subsuming it by a similar-but-not-quite idiom. In Algeria, the "beauty" and "nobility" of the locals seen in the flashes of lantern light quench her thirst for the exotic and picturesque. But, their "black savageness" collapses all conjunctive possibilities, except perhaps fragile ones in relation to the figure of the Red Indian as a "noble savage." Memories of Barbary captives, kindled by her experiential repertory of other travelers' accounts, further cultivate discontinuity and division. In Tunisia, Wharton inadvertently yields to the ethnographic impulse in her judgment of Tunisian women waiting at a local train station. She deploys disjunctive categorization to enframe them within the binary available at hand—that of the New York women socialites with their exhibits of wealth and leisure on Fifth Avenue and Central Park in the New York of the late 1880s. In this paper, I discuss Edith Wharton's vacillation between disjunctive and conjunctive categorizations in her encounter with the Maghreb in 1888, 1914, and 1917. I argue that such vacillation springs from a psychical desire to place America in a global cultural co-tenancy with Old-World civilizations.