

An Orientalist Masquerade: The Self-Exoticizing Gaze in the Works of Elissa Rhaïis

EDWIGE CRUCIFIX

BROWN UNIVERSITY

Abstract. An author of popular exotic novels, Elissa Rhaïis was a Jewish Algerian woman who set out to ‘narrate [her] country in the French language’ in the 1920s. Celebrated by her contemporaries for the authenticity of her exotic depictions from the inside, Rhaïis’s literary debut was nevertheless done under an enticing and problematic disguise since she was presented as a Muslim woman having escaped from a harem. To many scholars, Rhaïis is therefore somewhat of a phony oriental, whose deceptive presentation was nothing less than a ‘masquerade’ employed to sell conventional exoticism. Considering the complex historical position of Algerian Jews, this paper argues that Rhaïis’s authorial persona should be understood less as a commercial lie and more as the result of an impossibility for the colonized subject to situate herself, to be seen accurately, in France’s imperial culture, due both to her gender and to her ethnicity. As a result, this paper proposes to consider Rhaïis’s reflective treatment of the exotic gaze as a self-designating gesture, pointing at its own playfulness and artificiality, as can be seen in her novels *Le Mariage de Hanifa* (1926) and *Le Sein blanc* (1928). The exotic ‘masquerade’ is rather a resounding *larvatus prodeo*, which implicitly questions the validity of orientalist dichotomies.

* * * * *

The year 1919 saw the publication of a seemingly unexceptional novel: *Saâda la Marocaine*, a book similar to countless other exotic narratives released at the height of France’s colonial power. The book, however, provoked quite a stir in the Parisian world of letters. The novel was introduced as the first ever written in French by an Arab woman and, what is more, by an Arab woman who had escaped from a harem, thereby providing an unprecedented account of female life in the mysterious Orient. The commercial success of *Saâda la Marocaine* launched Elissa Rhaïis’s career, with an oeuvre generally focused on the intimate lives of North African women. Celebrated by her contemporaries for the authenticity of her descriptions ‘de l’intérieur’,¹ Rhaïis was credited for breathing new life into orientalist literature by developing ‘une nouvelle forme

¹ Alfred de Tarde, ‘L’Islam Littéraire’, *France-Maroc*, 4 (1920), 81–84 (p. 82). ‘[F]rom within’. All translations from French are my own.

d'exotisme' attributed explicitly to her identity and background.² As an insider, Rhaïs, 'une de ces femmes si longtemps et si durement claustrées par l'islam' was thought to finally reveal the Orient to Westerners who had only seen it 'au travers d'un faux orientalisme littéraire'.³

The peculiarities of Rhaïs's literary project and writing style have long ceased to impress critics, due to the dwindling appeal of exotic narratives and, more significantly, to a reassessment of Rhaïs's colonial identity. Contrary to the harem story propagated by her publisher, which suggested that she was a Muslim Arab woman, Elissa Rhaïs was in fact the pen-name of an Algerian Jew, whose literary debut relied on an enticing and problematic disguise. To many scholars, Rhaïs is therefore something of a phony oriental, whose deceptive presentation was nothing less than a 'masquerade',⁴ or an 'imposture'⁵ employed to sell conventional exoticism.

Rhaïs's authorial persona, however, should be understood as the result of the double impossibility for the colonized subject to situate herself and to be situated in France's imperial culture. Rhaïs's presentation as a Muslim 'évadée de harem'⁶ is a response to a colonial blind spot, to the logic of orientalism whereby a woman writer from North Africa could hardly be seen as anything else than an imperial stereotype. And it is, I argue, this very impossibility that is at the core of her fiction.

Rhaïs's exoticism, rather than simply conforming to commercial demand, is in fact often turned back upon itself, revealing such colonial blind spots through an experimentation with the visual dynamics of orientalism. In particular, Rhaïs's reflective treatment of the exotic gaze, often conflating gazer and object of the gaze, blurs the orientalist dichotomy — between East and West, between self and other — on which it is expected to rely. The self-exoticization of Rhaïs's novels can thus be read as an attempt to articulate the impossible positionality of colonial subjects like herself and even, as a *mise en abyme* of her own biographical predicament. Pointing at its own playfulness and artificiality in a self-designating gesture, the exotic 'masquerade' is rather a resounding *larvatus prodeo*, a designation of the orientalist mask itself, which invites the contemporary reader to question the imperial identity categories on which it relies.

² Firmin Roz, 'Une nouvelle forme d'exotisme, Mme Elissa Rhaïs', *Revue bleue*, 11 (1920), 342–44 (p. 344).

³ Louis Jalabert, 'Une romancière algérienne, Mme Elissa Rhaïs', *Etudes*, 58.167 (1921), 314–19 (p. 315). '[O]ne of these women so lengthily and so harshly cloistered by Islam'. '[T]hrough a fake literary orientalism'.

⁴ Emily Apter, 'Ethnographic Travesties: Colonial Realism, French Feminism and the Case of Elissa Rhaïs', in *After colonialism: Imperial Histories and Postcolonial Displacements*, ed. by Gyan Prakash (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995) and 'Ethnographic Travesties, Alibis of Gender and Nation in the Case of Elissa Rhaïs', in *Continental Drift: From National Characters to Virtual Subjects* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

⁵ Mireille Rosello, 'Elissa Rhaïs: Scandals, Impostures, Who Owns the Story?', *Research in African Literatures*, 37 (2006), 1–15.

⁶ Jalabert, 'Une romancière algérienne, Mme Elissa Rhaïs', p. 511.

The Performance of Authenticity

The most commonly accepted account of Rhaïs's life, told by Jean Déjeux,⁷ is this: Elissa Rhaïs was born Rosine Boumendil⁸ on 12 December 1876 in Blida to an Algerian Jewish family of modest means. She attended communal school until she was twelve and received no further education. She married twice: first to Moïse Amar, a rabbi with whom she had three children, then to Mardochée/Maurice Chemouil, a rich merchant with whom she moved to a more affluent neighborhood of Algiers. It is there, in her 'Villa des Fleurs' where she held a literary salon, that she took the pseudonym 'Rhaïs', supposedly a declension of رئيس (Arabic for master, leader, or chief). At this time, she gained the admiration and support of Louis Bertrand, who helped her publish her first story in the prestigious *Revue des Deux Mondes*.⁹ She moved to Paris with his assistance, accompanied by her children and Raoul-Robert Tabet, a nephew she introduced as her son, and signed a five-year contract with the editorial house Plon.

Plon was responsible for crafting her sensationalist literary debut as a Muslim woman who had escaped from a harem, a story first told in the communiqué accompanying *Saâda la Marocaine*.¹⁰ For Plon, Rhaïs's success depended primarily on a performance of authority, what Patricia Lorcin calls the writer's 'authenticity', which had to conform to metropolitan expectations and desires.¹¹ Although it does not seem that Rhaïs herself ever explicitly reiterated the harem story, she did nothing to correct it. Her preface to *Le Café Chantant* (1920) provides one of the rare depictions of herself in the first person as a 'pauvre petite Orientale, le cœur étroit d'angoisse' moved by nothing else than 'l'ardent désir de conter en langue française [son] pays'.¹²

In spite of Plon's fabrication of her authorial persona, Déjeux believes that it is highly unlikely that anyone in Algeria or any of her circles in France would have believed the harem story: Rhaïs is mentioned by André Spire in his panorama of Jewish literature¹³ and Déjeux even quotes a passage of a 1930 novel, where a Muslim character rages against a woman that stands unmistakably for Rhaïs: 'une vieille juive, ancienne femme de rabbin, qui se fait passer pour une arabe

⁷ Jean Déjeux, 'Elissa Rhaïs, conteuse algérienne (1876–1940)', *Revue de l'Occident Musulman et de la Méditerranée*, 37 (1984), 47–79. For a more detailed though more partial biography of Rhaïs, see Joseph Boumendil, *Elissa, ou Le mystère d'une écriture* (Paris: Séguier, 2008).

⁸ The copies I have found of her birth and death certificates read 'Baumendil'.

⁹ Louis Bertrand was a major literary figure of colonial Algeria and was even admitted to the *Académie Française* in 1925.

¹⁰ See Déjeux, *Femmes d'Algérie: légendes, traditions, histoire, littérature* (Paris: Boîte à documents, 1987).

¹¹ Patricia Lorcin, 'Manipulating Elissa: the uses and abuses of Elissa Rhaïs and her works', *The Journal of North African Studies*, 1 (2012), 903–22.

¹² Elissa Rhaïs, 'Preface', in *Le Café-chantant. Kerkeb. Noblesse arabe* (Paris: Plon-Nourrit, 1920). '[P]oor little Oriental, [her] heart beset by fear having nothing to her name but the ardent desire to narrate [her] country in the French language'.

¹³ André Spire, 'Un conteur judéo-arabe d'Afrique du Nord, Éliassa Rhaïs', *Illustration juive*, 9 (1919), 20–22.

et raconte d'une manière fausse des histoires sur notre race et nos traditions'.¹⁴ By the end of the 1920s, it appears that the mask had fallen and that Rhaïs, revealed for who she really was, lost her authenticated, exotic appeal, becoming a 'literary has-been'.¹⁵

The Rhaïs case, however, was far from closed. The revelations made public by the time of her death were themselves called into question when in 1982 Paul Tabet published his own version of the imposture in *Elissa Rhaïs*, presented as a 'récit authentique' but intermittently subtitled a 'roman'.¹⁶ In his book, Tabet argued that it was actually his own father, Raoul-Robert Tabet, the nephew that Rosine introduced as her son and her suspected much younger lover, who authored Rhaïs's oeuvre. While deviating from the consensus on Rhaïs's identity, Tabet's story, which he argued was based on a confession of his dying father, rekindled some of the lies propagated by Plon. Indeed, Tabet presented Rosine (renamed Leïla), as the daughter of a Jewish mother and a Muslim father and reiterated the harem story. Following Tabet's allegations, it seemed that a new mask had fallen only for the old one to be put back into place.

Because of its easily disproved facts, Tabet's thesis was discredited by scholars as a 'piètre scandale'.¹⁷ The affair nevertheless resuscitated debates around Rhaïs's authenticity and confirmed two things: first, that the identity beyond her authorial persona remains crucial in the way readers and scholars apprehend her work, and second, that we are still unable to look past the mask to do so. Questioning who she was seems unavoidably mired in accusations about who she pretended to be and, as a result, any attempt to authenticate Rhaïs has the effect of pointing to her shortcomings rather than asserting her legitimacy. Because of the mask she was wearing, she is doubly guilty of misrepresenting Arab women in general and her own people, thoroughly inauthentically.¹⁸ This self-defeating process of authentication even forced other scholars to discard concerns with her identity altogether, contending that such polemics in fact 'brouillent l'accès à l'écrit plus qu'elles ne l'éclairent'.¹⁹

As can be sensed from our sustained obsession with it, it is the mask itself that is perhaps the most revealing about Rhaïs, her career and her novels. Indeed, the reiterated disguise of her identity brings into focus what Albert

¹⁴ Lucienne Favre, *Orientale 1930* (Paris: Grasset, 1930), p. 12. '[A]n old Jew, who used to be married to a rabbi, who pretends to be an Arab and tells false stories about our race and our traditions'.

¹⁵ Lorcin, 'Manipulating Elissa', p. 903.

¹⁶ Paul Tabet, *Elissa Rhaïs* (Paris: Grasset, 1982). Paul Tabet, *Elissa Rhaïs: Roman* (Paris: Grasset, 1982). Paul Tabet, *Elissa Rhaïs* (Paris: Grasset, 1993).

¹⁷ Denise Brahim, 'Lire Elissa Rhaïs', in *Actes. Congrès mondial des littératures de langue française. Negro-africaine, nord-africaine et québécoise en méditerranée: Lieu de rencontre de l'art poétique*, ed. by J. Leiner, G. Toso-Rodinis and M. El Houssi (1983), p. 471.

¹⁸ In an early article published in Hebrew by Abraham Elmaleh, the author suggests that Rhaïs was not well-liked in Algerian Jewish circles, both for having lied about her identity and for her negative comments about this community. Abraham Elmaleh, 'L'écrivain contemporain Elissa Rhaïs, sa vie et son oeuvre littéraire', *Mahberet*, 97.100 (1964), 26–32.

¹⁹ Marie Virolle, 'Elissa Rhaïs ou l'imposture rééditée', *Algérie Littérature Action*, 3 (1996), 243–44 (p. 244). '[B]lur the access to writing rather than clarify it'.

Memmi called the ‘pénible et constante ambiguïté’ of those hybridized by colonialism — and that of North African Jews in particular.²⁰ Part of the colonial strategy of the French in North Africa consisted in identifying and distinguishing local populations into various groups, based on more or less contradicting criteria (including language, religion, way of life, history, etc.), often with an utter disregard for their intersections and porosity.²¹ In spite of its scientific pretenses, this ethnographic labeling enterprise was mostly the result of a ‘divide and conquer’ colonial policy. Jews, considered to be the most likely candidates to assimilation, were identified as a distinct group and incorporated into the fabric of the imperial state.

The infamous *Décret Crémieux*, signed six years before Rhais’s birth, officially granted Algerian Jews the status of French citizens, distinguishing them from other autochthonous populations and effectively ‘exiling’ them from their land and history.²² Thus, Rhais belonged neither among the *indigènes*, a word that came to designate Algerian Muslims in the colonial context, nor among the class of French settlers, who named themselves ‘Algerians’ on purely geographical grounds. As an Algerian woman who had accessed education and publication through French institutions, communication channels and language, she found herself in a thoroughly ambiguous position within the socio-cultural structures of the Empire — ‘une espèce de métis de la colonisation’, as Memmi described himself.²³ Similarly, as a writer, Rhais had circulated in both the *Algérieniste* circle and the Parisian world of letters while not strictly belonging to either.²⁴ Her descriptions ‘de l’intérieur’ were in fact only possible at the price of remaining, in actuality, an outsider: superficially assimilated by the Empire but actually never accepted by it.

Scholars attending to Rhais’s ethnicity have convincingly explained the ‘Muslim masquerade’ as a response to raging anti-semitism in France and Algeria²⁵ or normalized it by noting the proximity between Muslim and Jewish populations in Blida, suggesting that ‘she was only partially straying from her authentic roots.’²⁶ However correct, these observations betray our enduring inability to understand the masquerade outside of an imperial framework, as if there were indeed an ‘authentic’ identity to uncover. They fail to account for the artificiality of ethnic distinctions and thereby, for the impossibility of

²⁰ Albert Memmi, *Portrait du colonisé précédé de Portrait du colonisateur* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985), p. 40.

²¹ For a succinct overview of this process, see Ann Thompson, ‘La classification raciale de l’Afrique du Nord au début du XIXe siècle’, *Cahiers d’Études Africaines*, 129 (1993) 19–36.

²² See Benjamin Stora, *Les Trois Exils Juifs d’Algérie* (Paris: Stock, 2006).

²³ Memmi, *Portrait du colonisé*, p. 19.

²⁴ The *Algérieniste* movement was a self-designated group of intellectuals from the Algerian settler society formed during the 1920s and brought together by a series of literary and political commitments. While supportive of the colonial enterprise, the *Algérienistes* were also advocating for autonomy from the metropolis.

²⁵ Paul Siblot, ‘Décoloniser l’imaginaire’, *Révolution*, 119 (1982).

²⁶ Lorcin, ‘Manipulating Elissa’, p. 906.

hybridized colonial subjects to situate themselves. By seeing the mask as a lie (even a necessary or a 'partial' one), as a voluntary deception rather than as a product of colonial policies, we fail to see just how much it corresponded to Rhaïs's colonial experience — and maybe to that of many other colonized individuals. Rhaïs's mask, far from being an imposture, embodies a colonial reality which betrays the social limitations put upon her and forced her to perform a pre-established role in order to be made visible in colonial France.

The Mask of Self-Exoticism

While much of Rhaïs's work depicts Maghrebi Jewish communities (see *La Fille des Pachas*, *Les Juifs*, *Le Sein Blanc*), the ambiguity of colonial identity is actually embodied in her novels by a vast gallery of female characters, belonging to diverse communities while not properly fitting into any. The central topic of her novels, then, is neither an apolitical 'affrontement de désirs passionnels'²⁷ nor simply 'l'extraordinaire tabou qui sépare les Juifs et les Musulmans dans l'Algérie coloniale',²⁸ but rather the inadequacy of these women within their communities, their disturbing — and generally tragic — hybridity, often explicitly a result of French colonialism.

One of the most striking examples is the eponymous protagonist of *Le Mariage de Hanifa*, a novel set during the First World War recounting the demise of three women enamored of the same man. As a child, Hanifa is forced to attend French school, to help with her father's business. Hanifa fears this episode will make her lose her femininity and cultural identity, exclaiming: 'Apprendre à lire et à écrire, moi? Comment? Je ne suis pas un garçon. [...] Nous ne sommes pas des étrangers, des mangeurs de porc, ou des Turcs!'²⁹ While Hanifa's passage through the French school is an opportunity for Rhaïs to celebrate the glory of France and express her support for the French education system, it also allows her to depict the petty racism of the French children who mock Hanifa for her speech, for her clothes and even for the style of her imagination. The butt of every joke, Hanifa takes her revenge (a revenge that seems to play into the hands of imperialism) by becoming the best of her class and showing her peers what it means to be a subject of the Republic.

In spite of this exemplary colonial debut (one that mimics Plon's introduction of Rhaïs), Hanifa never fully crosses over, and her cousin Saïd, whom she hopes to marry, is in fact seduced by her hybridity, as she is at the same time

²⁷ Déjeux, 'Elissa Rhaïs, conteuse algérienne', p. 55. '[C]onflict of passionate desires'.

²⁸ Denise Brahimî, *Femmes arabes et soeurs musulmanes* (Paris: Tierce, 1984), p. 40. '[T]he extraordinary taboo that separates Jews and Muslims in colonial Algeria'.

²⁹ Elissa Rhaïs, *Le Mariage de Hanifa* (Paris: Plon, 1926), p. 10. 'Learn to read and write, me? How so? I am not a boy. [...] We are not foreigners, pork eaters, nor Turks'. The mention of Turkey refers to the Kemalist reforms granting women the right to vote in the 1930s, which Rhaïs herself was not favorable to.

‘Mauresque’ and ‘européenne’, themselves vague descriptors.³⁰ Assimilation is thus revealed as essentially fraught: a process that can never be completed and, in fact, necessarily implies a symbolic movement of return. While Hanifa never forgets her French education, she eventually goes back to live with her traditional aunt’s family and becomes ‘la jeune fille arabe parfaite’.³¹ France has left on her an invisible layer that can neither change her (much less save her) nor even hide her true identity. A recurring motif in Rhaï’s work, this French disguise — a mask that does not hide — is even credited as the central focus of her oeuvre when she describes her literary ambitions:

J’ai essayé dans mes œuvres [...] d’expliquer le complexe caractère oriental [...] Ils viennent s’instruire à Paris, ces hommes, ils portent alors avec aisance le smoking, dansent parfaitement, deviennent en apparence des Occidentaux. Mais leur âme ne change pas [...] Ils reprennent avec leurs vêtements habituelles leur mentalité véritable et intacte.³²

Cultural assimilation, identified as a process (‘deviennent’) remains nothing more than an ‘appearance’.

Whereas so much of the period’s colonial literature is obsessed with revealing the hidden intimacy of Muslim women, or, to use the cliché of the time, ‘lifting the veil’ — a trend that goes from orientalist literature and colonial rhetoric to visual art — there is no veil to begin with in Rhaï’s fiction. On the contrary, the deceiving garments are Hanifa’s school uniform or the pashas’ ‘dinner jacket’. They are revealed as fantasies imposed on the subject by her contact with colonial France. Rather than unveiling, Frenchness covers up and therefore paradoxically reveals the ‘true and intact mentality’ of the colonial subject.

For many of her characters, the transparent layer of Frenchness carried by the hybrid colonial subject, a garment that covers without hiding, is in fact suspect or even dangerous. This is precisely what Lalla Nefissa, Hanifa’s beautiful rival, points out when shaming her for having revealed her face to Saïd, implying that she has tricked him into loving her. Saïd’s attraction to Hanifa, Nefissa implies, is meaningless because, by revealing herself, she has appeared masked in orientalist exoticism. Being ‘made visible’ to Saïd through a foreign mediation, Hanifa has been eroticized unduly. In a novel filled with disfigurements (Saïd loses an eye in France during WWI and a Spanish police officer is heavily mutilated by the bandits that killed Hanifa’s parents), Hanifa’s invisible but revealing Frenchness, although it makes her more desirable in the eyes of Saïd, also marks her as threatening in her own female community. Rhaï’s supposed belief in what Roy called the ‘illusion coloniale’³³ might not be so naïve, since

³⁰ Ibid., p. 71.

³¹ Ibid., p. 193.

³² Huguette Champy, ‘Elissa Rhaï’, *La Française*, 18 February (1928). ‘In my works, I tried to explain the complex oriental character [...] They come to Paris, these men, where they wear a dinner jacket with ease, dance perfectly, become in appearance Westerners. But their soul does not change [...] They go back to their true and intact mentality as they do to their clothes’.

³³ Jules Roy, ‘Le mythe d’une Algérie heureuse’, *Le Monde* (4–6 June 1982).

the illusion always announces itself through the theatrical *larvatus prodeo* of Rhaïs's orientalism, and ultimately punishes those who embrace it. Hanifa, after all, is murdered by her two rivals on the eve of her wedding day.

In the act of writing as in the novels themselves, the female Orient — both familiar and exotic — becomes a stage where the author displays the foreign mediation of her own gaze and where it is precisely this mediation that is exoticizing. Instead of a movement from the outside to the inside, Rhaïs's orientalism practices a voyeurism from within, particularly striking in a passage of *Le Sein Blanc*, one of her later novels. In this scene, Henri S., a Jewish Algerian educated in Paris and dressed in European fashion, is visiting Morocco with his lover Rachel, a married woman he has seduced. The lovers have been invited by Sid Jamaï, a deposed Moroccan prince, to visit his apartments. Sid Jamaï then presents them with a telescope engraved with the phrase '*Made in England*'³⁴ through which they can admire the entire city of Fez:

à travers la lentille puissante, un spectacle nombreux, chaotique, s'offrit à sa vue amusée. Entre le fouillis de constructions, il découvrit l'oued Fass, roulant sur des cailloux gris. Quelques moutons broutant une herbe rare; des teinturiers rinçaient leurs laines. [...] Il faisait basculer l'appareil, son regard revenait vers la ville [...]. A côté de masures minables, il apercevait des intérieurs féeriques: cours à piliers de marbre, luxe des mosaïques, blanches terrasses sur lesquelles des femmes assises, demi-nues, dans un rayon de soleil séchaient leur corps enduit de pâte épilatoire. Il voyait des maisons de joie où des orchestres faisaient danser des femmes, les seins frémissants, le ventre rebondi [...] Et Henri se demandait: 'Comment donc, sur la ville farouche, Sid El Jamaï peut-il impunément user de cet appareil profanateur?'³⁵

Culminating in Henri's moralizing judgments, the whole scene is improbably exotic, moving from broad geographical views to extremely minute details in a dizzying alternation between wide angles and close-ups, open spaces and the intimacy of private apartments. More than a scientific object, the English telescope becomes a voyeuristic kaleidoscope, an instrument of exotic eroticization, a 'profaning device' that prompts the viewer to rely on his sensuous imagination, more than on his senses. The seemingly ethnographic compulsion of this passage never *focuses* on the vignettes that it assembles. In fact, at the end of the passage, the spectacle of the city only serves to bring Henri

³⁴ Elissa Rhaïs, *Le Sein Blanc* (Paris: L'Archipel, 1996), p. 108. In English in the original.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 108–09. '[T]hrough the powerful lens, a varied, chaotic spectacle was offered to his amused eye. Through the jumbled buildings, he caught sight of the Fez river, gushing over grey rocks. A few sheep grazing the scanty grass; dye workers rinsing their wool [...] He tipped the device and his gaze went back to the city... Next to miserable hovels, he discovered fairytale interiors: courtyard with marble pillars, luxurious mosaics, white terraces upon which seated women, half-naked, were letting their bodies, covered in depilatory wax, dry in a ray of sun. He could see brothels where women were dancing to the sound of orchestras, with shivering breasts and rounded bellies... And Henri asked himself: "How can Sid El Jamaï, with all impunity, make use of this profaning device on this fierce city?"'

back to focus on the telescope. The profanation then does not lie in the act of spying itself but rather in spying on one's own people, and therefore on oneself, through the objectifying mediation of the other.

By staging — and often explicitly problematizing — the exoticizing gaze, Rhais's novels point to their own facticity. As Henri steps back to look at the telescope, so does the reader peer back at the page and ponder about the mediating object between his hands. Rhais's self-reflexive exoticism serves to highlight the fragility of the orientalist relation and the ambiguous identity and position of her characters. Dramatically revealed, the exotic visual impulse in turn sheds light upon the otherwise invisible reality of colonial life and, rather than pretending to unmask its cross-cultural dwellers, points more forcefully to their painful positionality. By conflating the two sides of the orientalist relation, self-exoticization points to the limitation of the assimilationist lie. Both imposed by colonial contingencies and claimed, the mask — be it a dinner jacket or Rhais's own reimagined lineage — allows the colonial subject to be seen while condemning her to be seen inaccurately.