Hammam Najah: A Third Space for Moroccan Women

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Throughout the years of accompanying my mother and sister (sometimes against my will) to our usual bathhouse, Hammam Najah, I have overheard stories and conversations and witnessed both fights and celebrations. A derivative of the Roman bathhouse throughout the Mediterranean, the Moroccan hammam takes from Islamic notions of hygiene and purity (Belahmar Louazani, 2023), providing a unique experience of physical and spiritual rejuvenation. It is neither fully public nor entirely private; neither the street nor the home, but something in between. The hammam is a gendered, communal space that resists dominant notions of both Western capitalism and domestic cultural patriarchy.

The cultural diversity of postcolonial Morocco, positioned at the crossroads of numerous cultural movements throughout history, makes the Moroccan hammam a compelling field for studying linguist scholar and critical theorist Homi K. Bhabha's (1994) theory of the Third Space while relating it to Oldenburg and Brissett's (1982) definition of the third place. This theory presents the hammam as a site of resistance to dominant economic and patriarchal narratives, helping a marginalised group, in this case, Muslim Moroccan women, form community networks for exchanging knowledge and labour.

Through the postcolonial lens of Bhabha (1994) and Wolf's (2000) feminist interpretation, complemented by my own experience as a Moroccan woman visiting the hammam for nearly three decades, this essay explores how the hammam functions as a Third Space, offering a homosocial zone of cultural mixing and resistance for the marginalised. To understand how the hammam embodies this theory in practice, we must first unpack what constitutes a Third Space.

So What Constitutes a Third Space?

Third places or spaces exist outside the home and the 'work lots' of modern economic production. A third place is a public setting accessible to its inhabitants and appropriated by them as their own, a local stage for popular habitual practices (Edensor, 2002). The dominant activity is not 'special' to the eyes of its inhabitants, it is a taken-for-granted part of their social existence. (Oldenburg & Brissett, 1982)

Homi K. Bhabha's (1994) Third Space adds a postcolonial layer to this, defining hybridity in terms of identities, cultures, and languages. Geohistorical movements made Morocco, much like other countries in the region, a fertile ground for cultural mixing which, according to Bhabha (1994), is one aspect of cultural hybridity present in many traditions special to Morocco and more generally North Africa (Belahmar Louazani, 2023). On another level, the hybridity of a construct (space, culture, identity) lies in borrowing features from distinct polar entities (Bhabha, 1994). The hammam, a mundane space and practice, calls for exploration through the theory of the Third Space in order to understand and highlight the various rituals that sustain postcolonial communal societies. It is an essential practice in Moroccan culture and a pillar of its collectivist society.

The hammam, in essence, presents a place where both the body and spirit are taken care of, offering women equitable access to a third place (Oldenburg, 1999), home being the first, and the street (work, market, school, administration) being the second. It allows women to thrive when they cannot exist freely outside the privacy of their homes, constrained by patriarchal customs and expectations. Free from daily obligations and societal constraints, it offers segregated private spaces for people to bathe; some make it a weekly habit, others a treat (Belahmar Louazani, 2023). It guarantees equitable access to hygiene, as it is present in most neighbourhoods and charges only a small fee, while also providing additional services by women working at the bathhouse. The hammam safeguards principles of community living at a time when individualist values, arguably rooted in capitalism and patriarchy (hooks, 2000), are spreading.

As discussed in theories of space and domesticity, the boundaries between the private and public are culturally constructed and not always rigid (Edensor, 2002). The Moroccan hammam borrows elements found in the home as Rybczynski (1988) described as 'a place of convenience, leisure, intimacy and privacy'. Yet, it is subject to social protocols organising the public sphere, making it a Third Space where one finds comfort and relaxation while abiding by social rules and conforming to a collective rhythm. It is an environment where strangers share resources (water and space) while being mindful of one another. These unspoken rules nurture mutual responsibility, which contributes to their collective well-being (hooks, 2000).

Resistance to Dominant Structures

Research (Lee, 2022) on third places related to eating and drinking has shown that they contribute to psychological well-being. The study concluded that these spaces were visited as destinations for relaxation, had many psychological benefits, and helped combat loneliness (Lee, 2022). Considering that bathing is a fundamental need, similar to eating and drinking, it can be argued that the hammam offers similar well-being benefits.

Michaela Wolf (2000), a scholar in translation studies and feminist theory, interprets Bhabha's Third Space through feminist postcolonial translation theory and defines the 'space-in-between' as:

> the desire for representation beyond the traditional male/female binarity. Women in different societies have been relegated to the position of the 'Other.' In this respect, a parallel might be drawn between women and colonized cultures: both have experienced oppression, and both are obliged to express themselves in the language of their oppressors.

In this case, Moroccan women embody the convergence of this parallel as they experience oppression both as women and as the ex-colonised. This calls for a feminist postcolonial theorisation of the hammam as a site of hybridity and resistance, a feminist interpretation of Bhabha's Third Space theory. The hammam also provides a space to question Western knowledge systems that centre binaries such as White/Other, male/female, and spirit/body. It is a space-in-between where spirit meets body, allowing different cultures to interact and subvert the dominant culture, thus resisting Western patriarchal practices of polarity (Wolf, 2000).

Cultural Hybridity & Interclass Fluidity

The hammam also resists Eurocentric marginalisation and erasure of alternative forms of knowledge sharing, such as oral history (Anderson et al., 1987). It constitutes one of the spaces where Moroccan women exchange stories, practices, and transmit knowledge otherwise left out in formal education institutions. Beyond chatter and gossip, the tiled walls and steamy rooms echo knowledge carried from one generation to another like sex education (often taboo in formal schooling or at home), body care, alternative remedies, and mothering advice. The hammam remains a place for

informal education and raising awareness about different issues affecting women (Belahmar Louazani, 2023).

The hammam is one of the few spaces in Morocco where women of different classes, ages, and backgrounds come into close contact in a way that can lead to solidarity, intimacy, and negotiation of social roles. These interactions challenge the idea that class is always a rigid divider, stripping away most class signifiers. That space can also be considered a manifestation of the fluidity of African identity and culture (Kalua, 2009). In a multicultural country such as Morocco, the hammam creates a hybrid cultural space where religious, ancestral, and embodied forms of knowledge coexist. Knowledge shared in the hammam sits somewhere between the practical and the spiritual, shaped by lived experience, formal education, religious rituals, and cultural beliefs. It is neither strictly traditional nor modern; it is a blend, a hybrid. The hammam becomes an unofficial archive of multicultural female knowledge. It is a space where superstition, oral history, practical know-how, and even gossip hold value.

Non-transactional Labour & Community Networks

On top of sharing knowledge, women in the hammam tend to share opportunities and inquire about other prospects, especially between social classes. Word-of-mouth is an important factor in finding domestic work, landing an interview, or getting an appointment with a booked-out doctor. Oldenburg and Brissett (1982) describe third places as sites of socialising and opportunities. The hammam is a space that validates female experiences regardless of age, ethnic background, class, and education. Brides go there before their wedding as a celebration with their loved ones, and widows to mark the end of their public mourning. It is so ingrained in our culture that even isolated women from conservative households can interact with and seek advice from their peers.

Drawing from bell hooks' notion of collective well-being, willful sacrifices are manifested in the hammam in the sharing of resources and acts of service that 'reflect our awareness of interdependency', which in turn levels between classes (2000). While hammams do charge entry fees, inside, the dominant etiquette or unspoken code of conduct is mindful, reciprocal and communal. Acts of service are a foundational principle of Islam promoting social equity (Alotaibi, 2021). These values shape the Moroccan culture of giving and communal support (Elmostafa, 2018), embodied in

labour that isn't transactional in the hammam; women helping each other scrub their backs or watch the children. In addition to that, as bell hooks (2000) suggests, service can be a dimension of many women's humanity. A humanity sustained by community, making the hammam an example of a space where communal love is expressed through service, where the body is collective. It is cared for in community, and vulnerability is normalised, not hidden. This idea stands in stark contrast with the Western capitalist ideals of individualism and productivity.

Conclusion

Having to wake up early on a weekend, to then be subject to painful hair brushing and body scrubbing, made me despise going to the hammam as a child. That mundane experience I dreaded so much turned into a relaxing ritual I look forward to as an adult. More than that, it is something I crave and long for when I am abroad for months at a time. More than a weekly escape, the hammam is an (implicitly) anti-classist space of communal empowerment, cultural and social fluidity where alternative or informal forms of knowledge thrive. It is a space that holds grief, celebration, fatigue, and replenishment. In a time where capitalist values seep into every aspect of our lives, the hammam preserves a different rhythm for its visitors, one that doesn't demand output but offers restoration. It is deeply personal and fundamentally communal. And, for Muslim women especially, it offers an alternative kind of public sphere, one that respects the nuances of our embodiment, our faith, and our privacy. Beyond bathing or shedding a layer of dead skin, along with the week's weariness, the hammam is about reclaiming space. Space for our softness, our tiredness, our knowledge, and our joy, all deserving of a room of their own.

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