The Negative Image of the Arab Woman
In The Western Literature

By

Hibah Aburwein
**Introduction**

Anyone who pays attention to the image of the Arab woman in the Western literature* and culture will notice a unique articulation between the oriental woman and negativism. When I say Arab women, I refer to millions of women who reside in, and the many more millions around the world who are from, the 22 Arab states. The woman in the Arab world, as a result of Western misinformation and lack of awareness, are unfortunately victims of the stereotyping process. There is little understanding of their status as women and the total context of their lives. The hetero image of Arab women, "imprisoned behind a veil of powerlessness, oppressed by their patriarch society and strict religion or on the other hand, belly dancers or the exotic images of women in the harem", is not yet eradicated in Western literature. Most of what is written about the Arab woman is based on exotic imaginary landscape, generalization of personal experience or Orientalist perceptions. In Brief, the Arab woman is used only as a sexual symbol and is observed as manifestation without deep recognition of her actual character. Throughout the essay, I try to find out possible reasons behind this image.

First of all, I discuss Edward Said’s theory, in which he criticizes the structure of Orientalism as a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident'." Said states that the relationship between the Orient and the western is based on power and most of the time reflects the colonial political view. I would discuss the part of the theory in which he was trying to prove Orientalism as a western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the orient. I would then specify it to the Arab woman’s situation. Next, I would discuss any other possible reasons that helped in implanting the negative image in the western Literature. Finally, I would give different examples of the negative image of Arab women in the Western painting and cinema.

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* I mean European and American Literature. I would mostly concentrate on the British and French Literature, as the main Literature that discuss the issue of Arab woman and are related to Edward Said’s theory.
The Negative Image of Arab Women:

Arab women were always victims of the stereotyping process. There is little understanding of either their status as women or the total context of Arab woman lives. There is also very little understanding about the Arab woman’s role in the social, political, academic, and practical life. The Arab woman’s image is usually used as a sexual symbol and has appeared in different forms of literature as bosomy belly dancers leering out from their clear veils, or as disposable harem maidens, closeted in the palace’s women’s quarters. They also appear as shapeless bundles of black veiled from top to bottom that you hardly see their eyes, and some times even their eyes are covered. This image could be true of some Arab women in limited areas or for a specific period of time, but this image has been widely generalized that it became a reason to overlook those women’s character. Over all, Arab women in Western literature have been represented as a plain image. They have no sound, no soul and no identities. They are represented as uncivilized non-entity, either caring of their beauty by bathing, combing as in many painting of the eighteenth-century, or on the other hand imprisoned behind a veil of powerlessness, appendage to her husband and they're always mute.

When looking at those hetero images, there is on one hand the ideal image of the woman in the harem or the belly dancer, and on the other hand the image that represents severity of Oriental veiling, that must be kept hidden behind the mask. These contrasting images of the Orient are striking because they point to contradictory stereotypes of Oriental life represented so abundantly in European painting, postcards, and travel writings since the mid seventeenth century. There are stereotypes such as the harem as a site of eroticism, the Oriental woman as an object for voyeurism, and the veil as a repressive mask. The Oriental paintings are also interesting for the way they represent the exposed gap between maximum visibility and total inscrutability, the division between a desire to indulge in corporality and a profound repression of the body.

‘This spilt in representing the Arab woman could be a sign of the Orientalist’s imagination as well as his/her concentrating on the image of the woman only. Chateaubriand’s statement in the preface to the first edition of his Itinéraire de Paris a Jerusalem (1811), ‘I was searching for images nothing more’, Provides an appropriate example of the Orientalist desire that implies observation and
representation without any personal participation in the social reality of the Orient. The speaking subject is caught between a fantasy of the Orient as a dream world where his desires are realized and an image of Oriental society as unattainable, concealed domain of absolute repression. But these paradoxical views of the Oriental woman are not merely textual or subjective contradiction, or even dualities, as most of Nerval’s critics have pointed out. Rather, they disclose a historical split in the discourse of mid-nineteenth century Orientalism. (Behdad, A. 1994 PP 20-21). It is very gloomy that even in the latten Orientalist writings and in the modern films, the image of Arab woman is never changed. “Arab women are still never in the work place, functioning as doctors, computer specialists, school teachers, print and broadcast journalists, or as successful well-rounded electric or domestic engineers. Movies don’t show charitable Arab women such as those who belong to the Mosaic Foundation, which donates millions to American hospitals. The media definitely never refers to women like Camelia Anwar Sadat. Women using their right of voting and participating in political life as Syria and Egypt gave women the right to vote as early as Europe did—and much earlier than Switzerland. Today, women make up nearly one-third of the Egyptian parliament. You would never guess from what is been written in the books or portrayed in films that Arab women are as diverse and talented as any others.” (Shaheen J. 2001 P 14)

Why Stereotype:
Edward Said’s Observation:

As I referred to the general images that have been, and are still, used to represent the character of Arab women in the western society, it became essential for me to discuss the possible reasons that formed this image, and why such hetero images continued to pass and repeat themselves throughout the time and places. At first, I would like to mention the main points of Edward Said’s theory about the Orientalism, simply because Orientalism played a big role in drawing such an image. Edward Said, in his book The Orientalism disagreed with the way the Arab or (Orient) was represented in Orientalist writings that are considered an essential framework of Arab character for Western literature. Said argues that, “Orientalism can be found in current Western depictions of Arab cultures. The depictions of ‘the

* See also Homi Bhabha’s theory in this regard, Yegenoglu, M. 1998P56
Arab’ as irrational, menacing, untrustworthy, anti-Western, dishonest, and perhaps most importantly, prototypical, are ideas into which Orientalist scholarship has evolved. Said’s critical reading of the discourse of Orientalism, that is of the revealed and epistemology and rhetoric of ethnocentric and racist stereotypes that has remained virtually unchanged to the present day.” (Barfoot C.C. and D’haen, D. 1998). In his book, Edward Said attributes the misrepresenting of Arab and their cultures to many reasons that I would declare in the following few lines:

Said defines Orientalism as, “a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident'.” (Said. 1995. P2). Said states that the relationship between the Orient and the Western is based on power and most of the time reflects the colonial political view. When he describes Orientalism, he says, "It is a distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts." (Said. 1995. P12). He also says about Orientalism, “t is also particularly valuable as a sign of European-Atlantic power over the Orient than it is as a veridical discourse about the Orient.

Said says, “Cultures and histories cannot seriously be understood or studied without their force, or more exactly their configurations of power, also being studied. He thinks that the relationship between the Orient and the Occident is relationship of power and domination, and he says that the structure of Orientalism is for having control over the orient. What I can summarize from his theory that the Orientalism is A Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.” (Said. 1995. P3).

Said marked the late eighteenth century as a very roughly defined starting point in which Orientalism can be discussed and analysed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient. Dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, and ruling over it. In short, Orientalism became a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. Edward Said is saying that without examining Orientalism as a discourse, one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage, and even produce, the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period. (Said. 1995 P5). Moreover, so authoritative a position did Orientalism have that I believe no one writing, thinking, or acting on the
Orient could do so without taking account of the limitations on thought and action imposed by Orientalism. In brief, because of Orientalism the Orient was not a free subject of thought or action.

Although Said’s theory is mainly criticizing the structure of Orientalism in general as a system of having authority over the orient, I may specify his theory to the image of the Arab woman. Achieving this, I would examine the veil as one of the most important issues that the Orientalists write about in their analysis of the Arab woman. It is obvious that there are lots of similarities between the colonial discourse and the Orientalist writings in regard of the desire to unveil the Orient woman. Yegenoglu, M. 1998 P 62 says, “The invisibility the veil secures for the colonial other is simultaneously the point at which desire is articulated and the ground upon which the scopic drive of the subject is displaced, for there is always the threat of the return of the look of the other.” In Fanon’s words, “It was the colonialist’s frenzy to unveil the Algerian woman. It was his gamble on winning the battle of the veil. In this battle, the occupier was bent on unveiling Algeria, because there is in it the will to bring this woman within his reach, to make her a possible object of possession.” (Fanon, 1965. PP 46-47). But what explains the obsession with lifting the veil is something that is always already inscribed in this unique sartorial matter”. It is odd that many Orientalists hold the same sort of desire and discourse. Meyda Yegenonglu described this process by saying that, “change behind the veil is being made along lines of Western imitation in clothes with a steady improvement in taste and more discrimination as to suitability in dress. Social life within the harem now definitely follows the European model.” (Yegenoglu, M. 1998 P 98)

Hardly any Western writer recognizes that Arab women have adopted the veil by choice. Yegenenoglu quotes the following from Juliet Minces, a 1980’s writer, “What is particular and problematic is that while women elsewhere gradually liberated themselves, to some extend, from the total supremacy of men, most women in the Muslim world continued to be totally subordinate. They live under a system which has barely changed despite the undeniable evolution of their societies and of certain would be ‘revolutionary’ governments to grant women greater equality and rights, in keeping what we would call desire for ‘modernization’ There could be a different explanations in each case, but the most important thing is that there is a very similar image of the Arab woman in regard of the way she had been looked at her body is the only part that is been represented, and in the other hand there is feeling of
superiority and authority over her. And also, looking at her tradition from the western mentality in comparing her to the western lady, who is the module for liberality and modernization.” (Yegenoglu, M. 1998. P 99)

Misconception of The Religion:

As most of Arab women are Muslims living in Islamic societies, they are always misunderstood with other Muslim women living in other parts of the Muslim world, like Pakistan or Afghanistan. In those countries, there are costumes and traditions that are not related to Islam and opposing to the teachings of Islam most of the time, like the arranged marriage in some parts of the world. These traditions are part of culture in those countries rather than religion. Arranged marriage, for example, is practiced frequently in India although the common religion is not Islam. There is also misconception of the status of veil in Islam and it has been categorized as oppression of women. There is a great ignorance of the purpose behind the veil in Islam. Although, Islamic law does not require the veil, many Muslim women choose to veil in public. They feel that veil gives them privacy and freedom rather than oppression. This is the general attitude in Islamic societies where the veil is not enforced by law. I may also discuss the term of harem, which is widely used to describe the life style of the Oriental woman in the Arab countries and so often was accompanied with the enslavement and oppression of women. The harem lifestyle existed for a period of time in the past, in very narrow places in the Arab world and was limited to specific levels of these societies. This term is not in anyway associated with Islam. Islamic teachings are all against oppression and enslavement in general and especially in the case of women. I also note that most of the things that happened in the harem does not reflect the Islamic lifestyle. This lifestyle has been illustrated in many Orientalist paintings and writings as narrated by Montagu, “To tell you the truth, I had wickedness enough to wish secretly that Mr. Gervase could have been there invisible. I fancy it would have very much improved his art to see so many fine women naked in different postures, some in conversation, some working, others drinking Coffee or sherbet, and many negligently lying on their cushions while their slaves, generally pretty Girls of 17or 18, were employed in braiding their hair in several pretty manners.” (Secor, A., 1999. P391). This image of lifestyle only expresses the woman as a sexual tool of entertainment-although Mary was narrating it
as an evidence of freedom that Turkish women enjoy - is completely unacceptable in the religion of Islam.

Islam indicated that whosoever deals with women with integrity and respect possesses an integral, healthy and fully composed personality. On the other hand, a man who abuses women, mistreats them, or humiliates them is a mean, dishonest and disrespected man. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: “Only an honourable man treats women with honour and integrity and only a mean, deceitful and dishonest man humiliates and insults women.” (Aalalbane, M. 1988. Hadeeth No 2333).

Islam entitles women to the same rights as men in terms of education. Prophet Muhammad said, “Seeking knowledge is compulsory for each and every Muslim, male and female.” (Ibn Maja, M. 1995. Hadeeth No 220). Similarly, Islam gave an extra reward for the parent who looks after his daughter, and the Prophet often mentioned that women are delicate and must be treated with delicacy and respect. Islam also forbade all the forms of oppression and severely detested customs like burying the baby girls alive, which was a custom practiced by ignorant people in the pre-Islamic era. Prophet Mohammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) is reported to have said: “He whosoever has a daughter and he does not bury her alive, humiliate, insult or degrade her and does not give preference to his son over her, such a person will be granted entry to Paradise.” (Ibn Hanbal, A. 1955. Hadeeth No 24).

Islam places women in an equal situation to that of men in terms of the responsibility of reforming the society in general. Males and females, men and women, equally shoulder the responsibility of enjoining good and forbidding evil in society. It is mentioned in the Quran which the meaning of is translated as: “The believers, men and women, are helpers, supporters, friends and protectors of one another, they enjoin all that is good, and forbid all that is evil, they offer their prayers perfectly, give charity and obey Allah and His Messenger. Allah will bestow Mercy on them. Surely Allah is All-Mighty and All-Wise.”

Residency in Arab Countries:

The limited number of travellers that have been to Arab countries in the past served as a factor in transferring negative stereotypes. Many Orientalists wrote about Oriental people without ever visiting the east, and so they did not have a first hand experience with native Arab women. Orientalists such as the German poet Goethe,
who never even travelled to the East, novelist Flaubert, who undertook a brief sojourn in Egypt, as well as many writers who didn’t spend enough time to learn enough about the culture, depended a lot on the previous knowledge that has been written before. Edward William Lane, who spent only two years in Egypt, came back with a book entitled *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, which was widely circulated, read, and believed throughout Europe. This book was relied on by people like Burton who based his studies previous Western studies. Further travelers and academics of the East depended on this discourse for their own education, and so the Orientalist discourse of the West over the East was passed down through European writers and politicians. (Said.1995. P57-58).

**Lack Of Communication With Arab Woman:**

Lack of communication was another great factor for this negative image. Most Orientalists do not speak the Arabic language. It is obvious that the language is the main method to understand the cultures and the mentality of its people. This could be the reason why most of Orientalists characterized Arab women in their writings as mute. Said portrays a good example of this when he writes, “The fact that Flaubert’s encounter with an Egyptian courtesan produce a widely influential model of the Oriental woman; she never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence, or history. He spoke for and represented her. He was foreign, comparatively wealthy, male, and these were historical facts of domination that allowed him not only to possess Kuchuk Hanem physically but also to speak for her and tell his readers in what way she was typically Oriental”. (Said. 1995. P6).

In another place, when Flaubert describes his stay with Kuchuk Hanem, the mindless coarseness, according to Flaubert, Said writes, “As for me, I scarcely shut my eyes. Watching the beautiful creature asleep she snored, her head against my arm. I had slipped my forefinger under her necklace; my night was one long, infinitely intense reverie that was why I stayed. I thought of my nights in Paris brothels, a whole series of old memories came back, and I thought of her, of her dance, of her voice as she sang songs that for me were without meaning and even without distinguishable words.” (Said. 1995. P187)

On the other hand, the typical Arab woman is usually not accessible for sexual relationship because of her culturally and religious modesty; this made an Orientalist

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* see also Barfoot C.C. and D’haen, D. 1998.PP 211-213
like Flaubert take his Knowledge about the Oriental woman from prostitutes and
dancers, who do not, by any means, reflect the attitude or the lifestyle of the Arab
woman.

Edward Said was not the only person who referred to Flaubert’s false quest for
the sexually active Oriental woman. Behdad says about Flaubert, “The phantasm of
Oriental sexuality with its lure of boundless pleasure and perennial lasciviousness
represented so abundantly in Western literature, made Flaubert the victim of a
pathological search for the lost object. Flaubert’s sexual encounters were at once
affirmative and transgressive, conventional, and perverse. On the one hand, like his
precursors, he associated the Orient with sex and followed their exploitative habit of
searching for the exotic referents of Oriental eroticism, and indulged as much as he
could in their endless pleasures. His celebrated encounter with Kuchiouk-Hanem, the
famous Egyptian courtesan, provides a good example of such Orientalist stereotypes.
The long, detailed descriptions of his sexual exploit recreate the imaginary scene of
the harem where heavily bejewelled female bodies become the objects of male
voyeurism and sexual pleasure.” (Behdad, A. 1994, P68)

Images Of Images Of Arab Woman In The Cinema:

Recently, the relationship between cinema and literature has been widely
studied. It is a very popular art and is watched by millions of people around the world.
Arab women had been stereotyped throughout the history of film. Jack Shaheen said
in Reel Bad Arabs that, “Arab women, meanwhile, are humiliated, demonized, and
eroticized in more than 50 feature films. Half-Arab heroines as well as mute enslaved
Arab women appear in about sixteen features, ranging from foreign legion films to
writes William Zinsser, “is a place where young slave girls lie about on soft couches,
stretching their slender legs, ready to do a good turn for any handsome stranger who
stumbles into the room. Amid all this décolletage sits the jolly old Caliph,
miraculously cool to the wondrous sights around him, puffing his water pipe. This is
history at its best.” In films such as , (1985) Directed by Arthur Joffé, the idea
of harem in north Africa keeps expressing the image of enslaving women in the
Harem in the Arab world. In another film, (1990), Directed by
Bernardo Bertolucci and is a filmed adaptation of the novel of the same name by Paul
Bowles, Arab women appear as shapeless bundles of black, a homogeneous sea of covered women trekking silently behind their unshaven mates. In this movie the Arab women were used as background only and the main characters were Westerners. The whole idea the viewer would get about the Arab women is those images of black dressed ladies. Many more movies in old and modern cinema keep repeating these images over and over as if the Arab woman’s situation or life is a single image that dose not change, while the whole world does. *

Images of Arab Woman in the Western Paintings:

Painting as one of the seven recognized arts is a very important factor in reflecting the image, especially if it was realistic and easily recognized by any simple person. Some times the paintings can be clearer in transferring knowledge than the text. The Orientalist paintings, which were largely based on imagination, played a big role in portraying the image of the Arab woman as a sexual figure. In those paintings, the Arab woman is dancing, taking care of her self, or sitting doing nothing in her own woman space. The famous paintings of the harem in sultans’ palaces that have been massively generalized, had also participated in reflecting the image of enslavement of Arab woman within the Society. The Next few paintings portray the Arab woman in the same negative way.

Otto Pilny

* see also Barfoot C.C. and D’haen, D. 1998.PP 214-217
The Entertainer

Otto Pilny
Tambourine Dancer

Giulio Rosati
The Dancing Girl
Frederick Arthur Bridgman

Oriental Interior
John Frederick Lewis

Woman
Conclusion

In conclusion, the hetero image of the Arab woman in Western literature has created a wide gap between the West and the Middle East. This image was most of the time negative and focused only on the external appearance. Like most stereotypes this image is not merely wrong or insulting, it is ludicrous most of the time and it was built on weak basis, as it was clear in the essay. The oriental discourse that is based on dominant Western view to the Orient in general, and Arabs in specific, had a big role in transmitting this image of Arab women to the Western culture. All cultures have a view of other cultures that may be exotic and harmless to some extent, but this image has been repeating itself and was taken by a dominant culture against another. The Western stereotypes towards the Arab woman has lead to harmful results, widening the gap between the nations and creating sensitivities in each side. Arab women, like any other women in other societies, have their own ethnic and national identity. This identity might be slightly different, but differences in cultures should not be looked at negatively. Women in the Arabian culture are respected and have a great role in their societies. Arab women participated and continue to participate in enriching the Arabic society. As we live in the age of multiculturalism, I think it is essential for the scholars of literature to abandon exaggerated criticism of other cultures and instead try to understand and cooperate with other cultures. Literature should be employed to approach the different cultures through the similarities not the differences. The differences could be also used in a positive way by celebrating them and explaining them in an understandable manner. Western literature has failed to understand the Arab woman, instead the Arab woman was criticized most of the time. Due to ignorance of her religion, language and culture, the Arab woman was, and is still, greatly disrespected and misrepresented.
Bibliography


*Glorious Quran.*


Harem Paintings online paintings: [http://www.orientalist-art.org.uk/harem.html](http://www.orientalist-art.org.uk/harem.html)