

From Visual Culture to Visual Imperialism: The Oriental Harem and the New Scheherazades

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ABSTRACT

Drawings, paintings, photographs, moving images and the emergence of Visual Culture as a discipline can confirm the growing centrality of the visuality in our everyday life. This visuality shapes people's attitude and understanding and once constantly reproduced, constructs a fixed set of meaning for certain issues, perspectives, cultures, and groups of people. Therein lies the danger when visuality commits the misrepresentation, which is part of the process of 'Othering' and the backbone of visual imperialism. The Western representation of the East and its women has been one of these misrepresentations through which East is conceived as exotic, erotic, inferior and slave. By drawing upon Hall's definition of representation (1997), this paper explores the historical representation of Eastern women through the Oriental harem paintings and photography, and reveals how the misconception of the harem Odalisques was conceived. It examines how this stereotypical representation resurfaced in the post-9/11 contexts through life narratives written by Muslim women known as the new Scheherazade. Unlike the Scheherazade of the Oriental harem who was reduced to a submissive sexy odalisque, these Scheherazade are brave and articulate. I argue that this is a post-9/11 strategy to offset all the negative depictions of Muslim women. These brave Scheherazades have been provided with the platform to relate the plights of living in Islamic societies as a woman, and therefore their texts are, in Whitlock's term (2007), 'soft weapons' in manufacturing consent for the presence of empire in the East by corroborating the Orientalist representation of Muslim women.

Keywords: visual culture; Oriental harem; Scheherazade; women; representation

INTRODUCTION

Paintings, drawings, photographs, prints, video, films, television, advertisements, news images and science images are all visual aspects of culture which surround us in our daily lives and create the visual culture of our world. The many forms of visual culture that we encounter in our everyday life shape our opinions, beliefs and values in powerful ways. The term 'visual culture' describes a philosophical and epistemological position that endorses visuality as an indispensable element to the constitution of the world. Since visuality is identified as central to our condition and our expression of humanity, humans are visual beings in a world fraught with visual arrays of meaning. Although the emergence of images could be traced back to 40,000 years ago through the earliest cave painting, they were never as important as words today. The world which was once so logocentric has now been progressing towards a shift where images and visuality have saturated our surroundings. Martin Jay (1994, p. 3) argues that this growing centrality of the visuality in our life is "ocularcentrism" or "scopophilia" where the practice of looking help people understand the world and their surroundings (Cartwright and Sturken 2001). While the shift from lexicality to the visuality enhances the status of images and increase people's engagement with it, it affects people's understanding and produces a fear about the impact of images to form attitude and change perspectives (Zeiny & Noraini Md. Yusof 2016). Visuality is, in fact, the

way through which one sees the world and how conceiving of this sort of seeing has a dramatic impact upon “how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see” (Foster 1988, p. 9).

Conceiving of a particular sort of seeing is usually derived and informed by social, political and historical shifts. Given the fact that images have the ability to quickly influence viewers both cognitively and emotionally, these visual representations would gradually form a desired method of reading and viewing. Once reproduced repeatedly, these visual representations construct a fixed set of meaning for certain issues, perspectives, cultures, and groups of people. While giving the viewers “the power of subjectivity and judgments, these visual representations, especially if they are continuously misrepresenting, could lead to the objectification, silences and oppression of those represented” (Fotouhi & Zeiny 2016, p. 1). This misrepresentation is part of the process of ‘Othering’ which is the backbone of ‘visual imperialism.’ Visual imperialism is “the colonization of the world mind through the use of selective imagery that acts as a representation of a dominant ideology.” (Kuehnast 1992, p. 184). The Western representation of the East, Eastern way of life and Eastern women has been one of these misrepresentations through which East is conceived as exotic, erotic, inferior and slave in the colonial era. This representation began during the colonisation era when the East turned into a major preoccupation of nineteenth-century painting for Western male painters. Of particular interest to many of these painters such as Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres’ (1780-1867) and Jean-Leon Gerome (1824-1904) was the veiled Muslim women as their lives were shrouded in secrecy due to the historical gendered dichotomy in the East. From their oriental harem paintings to the post-9/11 new Scheherazades’ life narratives, Muslim women have been depicted as licentious, submissive, passive and voiceless. Before delving into the stereotypical depictions of Muslim women, a description on the emergence and development of visual culture is in order for a better understanding of ‘visual imperialism.’ It is also important to realise how representation works and how it affects our thinking because even when visual culture is consumed to be entertained, it functions pedagogically.

VISUAL CULTURE & REPRESENTATION

Although the recent growing interest in visual culture suggests it is a phenomenon of late, visual culture has roots in history. Knowledge and information began to be systematically obtained from observation and display since the Age of Enlightenment; from then onwards through the eras of industrialisation and colonisation to the current globalised world, visual culture has continued to shape the way we think and interpret the world (Kromm & Bakewell 2009). As a term, visual culture refers to visual aspects of culture and Visual Culture as a discipline. It accentuates the crucial significance and the potential power of images in cultural life. In the past, social sciences were always thought to be ‘disciplines of words’ as if there was no room for images. It was, indeed, the miniature scale of our logocentric world. The social sciences have either depreciated or relegated the use of images to simply a secondary documentation or supplementary illustrations to written text. However, over the last two-and-a-half decades, the interest in the visual aspect of social life has augmented considerably so much so that Visual Culture as a discipline has come to figure out the importance of the roles of pictures in our culture, to realise how pictures and their viewers make meaning, and to consider what it intends to negotiate a great number of images in our daily lives. As an offshoot of Cultural Studies, Visual Culture is interested in studying how a visual culture is produced, enacted and consumed.

Visual Culture which contains many forms of images ranging from fine art to film and television advertisement is now an interdisciplinary field of study abandoning its conventional practices of art historical inquiry to enjoy theories and insights from other fields such as sociology, anthropology, cultural theory, literature, gender studies and film and media studies. Marking boundary crossing between these fields of studies is vitally important to the Visual Culture Studies. For instance, it is important to realise how and why art images take advantage of commercial imagery or what it means when images improve or deteriorate the status of a group of people in a society. An example that best illustrates this sort of idea is the Western cliché representation of Muslim women, which persuades many in the West that Muslim women are passive, inarticulate and submissive. With the recent spate of images and the pertinent technologies, ‘visual culture’ is the everyday life rather than just a part of it (Lister & Wells 2000). This new phenomenon of visuality of culture has become so significant that requires its own discipline of study regarding all sorts of visual information, the meaning that these images produce, pleasure and consumption, containing the study of all visual technologies from “oil painting to the internet” (Mirzoeff 1998, p. 3). It is now clear that Visual Culture is not just the study of images but rather the centrality of vision in our everyday life and the production of meaning is a fundamental backbone of ‘visual culture’ as well.

Of essential importance in visual culture is the presence of ‘*representation, meaning and culture.*’ The key question is ‘what is the connection between these three components?’ To begin with, as a highly complex phenomenon, culture is a broad concept with a variety of definitions which keeps changing over time. In traditional sense of the term, culture was considered as an entire body of great and noble ideas represented through the fine arts such as the classic works of literature, painting, music and philosophy. This sort of notion described culture as the “best that has been thought and said” (Arnold 1932, p. 6) in a society and categorised the culture into the ‘high culture’ for the elite and the sophisticated; and ‘low culture’ also called ‘mass culture’ or ‘popular culture’ for the broadly circulated forms of television programs, popular fictions, and comic books for the grassroots. However, in the recent definitions of the term, by and large culture is considered as learned and communal values, beliefs, and customs. Culture, in terms of anthropology, is ‘a whole way of life’ containing a vast range of activities within a society. Added to this all-encompassing anthropological perspective, Irving (1984, p. 138) believes culture is “the shared and learned information people use to generate meaning and order within a social system.” In the vein of this view, culture is not inherited, but learned; it is not inborn but stems from one’s social milieus.

Drawing upon Stuart Hall’s definition of culture, I argue that culture is the shared practices of a community, society or a group through which meaning is created from the textual, aural and visual world of representations. According to Hall (1997), culture is just not a set of things such as television programs or painting but it is also a set of processes or practices which help individual and groups make sense of those things. Culture is, in fact, the manufacture and exchange of meanings between individuals in a group or a society. Thus, it is safe to argue that in any culture, there is a great diversity of meanings and interpretations about any given topic or object. People may share the same culture but differs in interpretation of a particular topic, object or image. It is exactly this diversity of meanings and interpretations that scholars of Cultural Studies are studying. The study of the patterns and practices of culture, their links to social groups and the power connections between those groups as they are made and mediated by forms of culture are what Cultural Studies scholars focus upon. Culture, in this sense, is the everyday symbolic and expressive practices that occur as we live. It is almost next to impossible to split the cultures of everyday life from practices of representation, visual or otherwise. What has come to be named as the ‘cultural

turn’ has now been replaced by the ‘visual turn’ where images and representations saturate our world.

Representation has come to seize a modern and momentous place in the study of visual culture; it connects meaning and language to culture. According to Stuart Hall (1997), the British cultural theorist, representation is the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture through the use of language, signs and images which stand for or represent things. What is of central importance to meaning and culture is language which has always been considered as “the key repository of cultural values and meaning” (Hall 1997, p. 1). Languages construct meaning and build up a culture of shared understanding because it operates as a “representational system” (Hall 1997, p. 1). They are the medium through which feelings, ideas, and thoughts are represented in a culture. Our language, now more than ever, is ultimately becoming more visual such as images, films and videos. Representation through language, in this case visual, Hall (1997) further argues, is therefore vitally important to the process by which meaning is constructed in a culture. According to this view, meaning is a matter of intervention or creation which is constructed and produced by people. Hall (1997, p. 3) puts: “it is the participants in a culture who give meaning to people, objects, and events... it is by our use of things, and what we say, think and feel about them—how we represent them—that we give them a meaning.” Thus, it becomes transparent that meaning is the result of social convention which is created and constructed through representational processes. In today’s globalised world, visual representations have become the predominant “representational system” (Hall, 1997, p. 1). That is why they can be seen as an increasingly powerful medium for the production of meaning.

VISUAL IMPERIALISM AND THE HAREM STEREOTYPES

Representing the East is not a recent phenomenon for the West as the East exerted its allure on the Western imagination long before the turn of the nineteenth century during the Renaissance era when artists such as Gentile Bellini (1429-1507), Paolo Veronese (1528-1588) and Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669) painted figures in Middle Eastern costume and depicted Middle Eastern scenes. Among them, Bellini had been to the Ottoman capital of Constantinople as a cultural ambassador and visited Mehmed’s court (Raby 1991). Veronese and Rembrandt never travelled to the East; however, the new trade contact between Europe and the East made it possible for them to observe the costumes and behavior of the Eastern people coming for trade. The popularity of paintings with Eastern elements was on the rise as Europeans wanted to see more of these paintings. Bellini included minaret and the Turkish-style hat in some of his paintings such as *St Mark Preaching in Alexandria* (1505). Veronese enjoyed utilising the Middle Eastern costume and scenes in his paintings, but he had also painted many black figures in a wide range of roles from a black man with exotic headdress to the black waiter wearing earrings and a non-European type of hat. The dark-skinned figures are never alone in the painting and are almost always depicted as entourage of the elite. Paintings that can best illustrate this are *Feast in the House of Levi* (1573) and *Monk with a Black Boy* (1588). In Veronese’s paintings, black figures carried positive roles as well.

However, his frequent paintings of black characters had gradually established a norm for the representation of black servants wearing exotic costume which later became “an artistic cliché—a visual shorthand for luxury and power of the elite over those of lesser status” (Kaplan 2010, p. 134). This artistic stereotype was becoming a common practice within Italy and beyond the borders across Europe. The Dutch painter, Rembrandt’s *Man in oriental Costume* (1632) is another instance of Renaissance painting with the Middle Eastern

elements. While the Middle Eastern figures and scenes appeared in the Early Renaissance paintings, the opulent eroticism of the harem appealed to the aesthetics of the 18th century Rococo art which was popularised by Francois Boucher (1703-1770) through his paintings such as *L'Odalisque* (1749) and *Blond Odalisque* (1752). Europeans still did not have much contact with the Middle East except for trading and sporadic military campaign. The only Middle Eastern or oriental gestures in the paintings were the occasional depictions of minaret, turban and the odalisque. This sort of paintings gained widespread popularity in the early 19th century with the Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798 which sparked considerable interest in the regions and the Middle Eastern culture. The presence of the Europeans in Egypt and all the travelers' account of the Middle East prompted many western artists travel eastward. Moreover, the *Arabian Nights* and similar literature which created an imaginary Orient of pleasures and fantasies also inspired many western artists to travel to the Middle East in search of exotica and erotica. Besides the inspired artists, many artists were recruited by Napoleon to eulogize and highlight the French military achievements (Mitchelle 2012).

As mapping and documenting have been the critical aspects of imperialism, Napoleons was careful to include one hundred sixty-seven artists and scientists whose task was to record and document the civilization of Egypt both in its ancient and modern forms; the result of conducted studies culminated in the twenty-four volume *Déscription de l'Égypte* published between 1809-18828, made up of two atlases and ten volumes of plates (Ehrenpreis 2014). They were also ordered to underscore the cultural disparities between the East and the West through their works by portraying it as barbaric, lethargic, lascivious and inferior slave (Zeiny & Yusof 2016). Many of these artists captured their impression in paint. However, ironically enough, there were also painters such as Antoine-Jean Gros (1771-1835) who had never visited the East but produced paintings on Napoleon's occupation of the Middle East. His *The Battle of Nazareth* (1801) and *General Bonaparte Visiting the Pesthouse at Jaffa* (1804) commemorate Napoleon's intrepid and dazzling deeds during the invasion of Egypt and Syria. While these paintings celebrated Napoleon's success, Theodore Chasseriau's *Arab Chiefs Challenging to Combat under a City Ramparts* (1852) was depicted to accentuate the theme of violence and savagery in the Middle East to justify the French task of civilising the East. *A Street in El-Aghouat* (1859) by Eugene Fromentine is yet another painting portraying the stagnant and primitive life of the people in the East. Thus, some of the first 19th- century Orientalist paintings were clearly intended to support French imperialism while satisfying a public curiosity about the East. This was also the era when depicting harem became the most popular oriental genre scenes and had a powerful influence in shaping Western aesthetics.

Veiled and not allowed to appear unveiled to men outside the family, Muslim women have been an ongoing source of fascination and curiosity for Westerners. The anxiety to unveil these women, and the fascination and curiosity gave birth to a great number of paintings of nude concubines, harem scenes and slave markets. Figures of the passive, oppressed, yet highly sexualised Muslim females became the pivotal figures in the paintings of Western male painters. This tendency is exemplified by Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres' *The Grand Odalisque* (1814), *Odalique with Slave* (1839), and *The Turkish Bath* (1862-63), Joseph Sedlacek's (1789 -1845) *A Harem Beauty* (n.d), Luis Ricardo Falero's (1851-1896) *The Enchantress* (1878) and *A Naked Oriental Woman* (n.d), Francisco Masriera y Manovens (1842-1902) *The Harem Beauty* (c.1890), Henri Adrien Tanoux's (1865-1923) *The Sultan's Favorite*, *Beautes du Harem*, and *Namouna* (n.d), Jean-Leon Gerome's *Dance of the Almeh* (1863), *The Slave Market* (1866), *The Harem Pool* (1876), and *The Great Bath at Bursa* (1885), Frederick J. Mulhaupt's (1871-1938), *the Daughter of the Orient* (n.d), to just name a few. Women in these paintings are portrayed as luxuriant odalisques or concubines either voluptuously reclining in nude or oriental dress or half-naked looking directly at the male

audience/viewer or evading the viewer's gaze, passive and voiceless beings for sale, looking forward to sexually entertain a male in an opulently decorated Oriental interior. Many of these painters like Ingres never visited the East but were still able to titillate the Western public by using the "harem setting to conjure an erotic ideal in his voluptuous odalisques" (Meagher 2004). To portray the harem, he had to rely heavily on travelogues and eyewitness accounts like the published letters of Lady Montague who writes that Turkish women:

...are perhaps more free than any ladies in the universe, and are the only women in the world that lead a life of uninterrupted pleasure, exempt from cares; their whole time being spent in visiting, bathing... 'Tis true, they have no places but the bagnios [Turkish baths], and these can only be seen by their own sex; however, that is a diversion they take great pleasure in. (Gutenberg Project 2006)

In another account, she writes:

...I was met at the door by two black eunuchs, who led me through a long gallery, between two ranks of beautiful young girls, with their hair finely plaited, almost hanging to their feet, all dressed in fine light damasks, brocaded with silver... On a sofa, raised three steps, and covered with fine Persian carpets, sat the kahya's lady [Sultana] leaning on cushions of white [satin], embroidered; and at her feet sat two young girls about twelve years old, lovely as angels, dressed perfectly rich, and almost covered with jewels... The first sofas were covered with cushions and rich carpets, on which sat the ladies; and on the second, their slaves behind them, but without any distinction of rank by their dress, all being in the state of nature, that is, in plain English, stark naked, without any beauty or defect concealed. Yet there was not the least wanton smile or immodest gesture amongst them. They walked and moved with the same majestic grace, which Milton describes our general mother with. There were many amongst them, as exactly proportioned as ever any goddess was drawn by the pencil of a Guido or Titian, – and most of their skins shiningly white, only adorned by their beautiful hair divided into many tresses, hanging on their shoulders, braided either with pearl or ribbon, perfectly representing the figures of the Graces. (Gutenberg Project 2006)

Painters like Gerome and a few other orientalists had the chance to visit the Near East but they did not gain entry to the women's harem. Denied access to the women's harem, the private quarters of Muslim women soon became a fantasy and an obsession for a great number of Western male artists during this era. Therefore to compensate for this inaccessibility, the male artist had to "hire prostitutes" (Bloom, 2004, p. 3) "negotiate with the male relative of the woman" (Bailey Jones 2007, p. 110) and used their imagination and conception. Amongst the Orientalist painters who had visited the East, Eugene Delacroix (1798-1863) was given a rare opportunity to see the harem during an 1832 trip across North Africa (Jopp 2010). Unlike other Oriental harem paintings, his *Algerian Women in their Apartment* (1834) is not a portrayal of nudity or half-naked women rather it portrays three women sitting in a beautiful interior with their exotic Oriental dress along with a black woman standing who seems to be a slave. It does, however, certainly suggest the lassitude of the women as they are lounging in the harem, their submissiveness, and their preparedness for lust. These male painters had the power not only to reveal what lies beneath the veiling but also the power to fabricate an exoticised and eroticised Orient to entice the Western audience with lust and adventure (Zeiny & Yusof 2014). In fact, the "slave and harem tropes provided the means for Westerners to construct their political and psychosexual images of the Eastern women" (Zeiny & Yusof 2014, p. 65).

The Eastern women were almost always eroticised and portrayed as a submissive sexual object by the Western males in their harem paintings to the extent that for people in the West, the harem emerged as a sexualised space where the Sultan or husband had an unlimited and easy access to a myriad of submissive women. This monopoly of Western male representation of the Eastern Muslim women "conceived an inferior and a slave East in the colonial era" (Zeiny & Yusof 2016, p. 131). This conceived inferior East was constructed

based on a combination of travel accounts, artistic fantasy and imagined inferiority. All the cultural backgrounds, the biasness and the then style of taste and art contaminated the representation of the Eastern women (Bohrer 2003). However, the repeated representation of the harem and the Eastern women in Orientalist paintings spawned the false impression that these were real and widespread in the East. The Oriental harem was painted as a “site of debauchery to evoke the falsity of Islam, understood as the anti-religion of Christianity” (Ma 2011, p. 15). The women’s segregation and the men’s polygamy were also depicted to serve another purpose, i.e. showing the backward customs of the East and confirming the superiority of the West. This constructed colonial knowledge was the result of the hegemonic desire of the West to cement its control through “centering native women and cultural traditions in the argument for cultural superiority” (Bailey Jones, 2007, p. 114). This sentiment can be corroborated by Lord Cromer’s detailing of the inferiority of the natives of Egypt:

Whereas Christianity teaches respect for women, and European men ‘elevate’ women because of the teachings of their religion, Islam degrade them, and it was to this degradation, most evident in the practice of veiling and segregation, that the inferiority of Muslim men could be traced. (1908, p. 153)

The harem reflected in this sort of painting is the Western’s sexual fantasies of the Oriental women and bore little relation to reality as the term ‘harem’—a family institution in Islamic societies—refers to the women’s quarters in a society. Another misconception conceived by these paintings was that women were prisoners in Muslim households. Fort (1996) argue that “in contrast to the seclusion portrayed in Orientalist paintings, many women in rural North Africa worked outside their homes as an additional source of family income and did not always wear the veil as it might impede their manual labor” (cited in Ma 2011, p. 15). The fascination with ‘harems’ was, indeed, the ‘harems of the mind’ resulting from their imagination and mental tantalization (Yeazell 2000). Sexuality, multiplicity of women, and Islamic repressive value of women were common themes in paintings to naturalise the fabrication of the exotic and erotic Orient. This sort of paintings faded gradually in the 1960’s and photography, in its stead, produced images in tandem with the Orientalist paintings (Alloula 1986). Images of the intimate scenes of the harem, the lifted veil, and bare-breasted Eastern women returning the gaze of the viewer soon became rife and pointed to the availability of Muslim women. These images turned the East into an illegitimate place where its women were readily available for sexual gratification denied in Victorian homes (Kabbani 1986). Malek Alloula’s *The Colonial Harem* (1986) confirms this sentiment and reveals the French infatuation in unveiling the Muslim women. The images of nude and semi-clad women returning the gaze conjure up the notions of visibility and power between the colonisers and colonised. The gaze of the coloniser is “part of the power of colonialism” (Bailey Jones 2007, p. 126); this is a sexualised and exoticised gaze aiming at lifting off the veil and revealing what lies beneath.

Unveiling makes the inaccessible Eastern women, available for the gaze of the coloniser and this incessant availability for the gaze of others is a form of servitude and subjugation. This sexualised vision is produced by the masculine West looking to dominate the feminised East for submission. The voyeuristic view in Orientalist paintings and photography, along with fantasies of penetrating the harem and conquering the women was suggestive of the ‘masculine’ desire of the West to enter into the forbidden harem and conquest the women both sexually and psychologically (Ma 2011). Thus, this practice of stereotypical representation of harem and the Eastern women was portrayed to bold the difference of power between the coloniser and the colonised. It is this constructed representation of the colonised that “justifies conquest and establishes system of

administration and instruction” by the colonisers (Bhabha 1994, p. 101). This sort of representation is stereotypical because of its tendency to identify subject in a fixed manner as it creates specific and conclusive depiction of the colonised through depicting differences. The repetitive and continuous representation of cultural and racial disparities conceives a racialised ‘regime of representation’ to naturalise differences and keep groups of people inferior (Hall 1997). The stereotypes are constantly reiterated to produce the “colonised as a social reality which is at once an ‘other’ and entirely knowable and visible” (Bhabha 1994, p.70-71). Thus, visual imperialism refers to the images and photographs that perpetuate the myths about race, geography and culture. These images which have been used to substantiate imperialist rhetoric to extend their colonial projects gave birth to a dominant reading of certain races and issues. What supported this particular way of reading was the Orientalist literature which reiterated the stereotypical representation of the Eastern women and the harem. The oral, written, and visual discourses work well together to reinforce the stereotypical representation of the harem and the Muslim women, and became the sine qua non in the extension of colonial rules for substantiating the imperialist rhetoric. This is arguably how representation of the ‘harem’ and the ‘Eastern women’ began and then perpetuated in the post-9/11 era.

9/11 AND THE NEW SCHEHERAZADES

Many men in the West may still smile upon hearing the term ‘harem’ for which the only description is the fascination that the harem has excited in their imagination generated by the Oriental paintings and photography. The idyllic representation of the harem and its women shaped the attitudes of many in the West towards Muslim women and the East. This Orientalist representation of women, which still dogs it today, has resurfaced after the 9/11. In the wake of 9/11, rereading the Orientalist stereotype can be justified as it is difficult to overlook its impact on Muslims and Muslim communities across the world. One of the most evident ramifications of 9/11 is the bolstering of Oriental fantasies of the Muslim women. This is the era in which the themes of nudity and sexuality of the Eastern women were on the decline but instead the representation of women as submissive, passive and victimised object of a patriarchal society gained more momentum. Once again women became the center of attention and what I would like to call the ‘Attentional Spotlight,’ to borrow the term from Cognitive Psychology. Theorised by Posner, Snyder and Davidson (1980), our attention is likened to a spotlight where it roves around and registers things of significance. I argue that Muslim women becomes the ‘attentional spotlight’ for those stuck in the rat race and hustle and bustle of the everyday life but somehow at the subconscious level, their attention registers this important visual cue of the representation of Muslim women even if they are not specifically and physically focusing on it. One of the reasons for drawing this much attention could be sought in the abundance of means of representation such as Muslim memoirs in the post-9/11 context. In what follows I do not intend to provide an analysis of any single Muslim memoir but rather I write about the effect and the role of the post-9/11 Muslim life narratives.

9/11, the following President Bush’s ‘Axis of Evil’ speech, the consequent ‘war on terror,’ and the media representation of Muslim women fueled the Western public interest and created a level of curiosity towards Islamic societies in the Middle East. Concomitant with taking punitive action for the 9/11 attack, the empire and its allies wished to free the people, especially Muslim women from the brutalities of the Islamic regimes. In one of his speeches dated December 2001, George W. Bush stated: “for several years the people of Afghanistan have suffered under one of the most brutal regimes in modern history. A regime

allied with terrorists and a regime at war with women.” Since then, an incredible flourishing canon of memoirs by Muslim women in exile and about Muslim women has emerged and took over the art and literary market of post-9/11 West. The Western market has become fraught with coming-of-age memoirs, honor-killing memoirs, victim memoirs, and escapee memoirs and still continues to accommodate them in its bookstores. As many Western movies about the Middle East begins with the sound of *adhan* from a mosque minaret, many of these memoirs start with the image of a woman’s half- veiled face, her eyes are showing either staring at the audience or evading the gaze of viewers/readers. The women in these memoirs are almost always marginalised, oppressed by Islamic *Sharia*, beaten up by a male family member, killed to save the family’s grace, or escape and leave the country for the promised land of freedom, the West. Before 9/11, there were a few Muslim women’s memoirs dealing with the same issues but they never received as much attention and acclaim as the post-9/11 Muslim memoirs. Adam (2008) confirms this sentiment and argues that ‘infidel’ (2007), the best-selling memoir of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, drew more readers and news coverage than the pre-9/11 works of the Egyptian author, Nawal El Sadawi, who has been writing about child marriage, women’s right, genital mutilation and lapidation.

This is, in fact, a post-9/11 strategy in which Muslim women themselves recount their tales of victimhood in order to convince the public in the West that the Muslim women are in dire need of liberation. These memoirs which have been written in the hope of disclosing the intimate secrets of an exotic other and unfolding Muslim women’s life provide the Western audience with the old orientalist clichés of Muslim women as veiled, voiceless and submissive. When 9/11 has traumatised the grassroots, these life narratives have given the neoconservative leaders an alibi to launch their carefully orchestrated project of imperialism (Dabashi 2011). Dabshi argues that these native writers were in high demand by the US imperialism immediately after the events of 9/11. Their principal task was to “fake— authority, authenticity, and native knowledge” (2011, p. 72). The fact that autobiographies come into the West from the East—and distribute to form grassroots’ opinion, consolidate clichés, and presents plot “custom-made for our times” shows their potentiality as propaganda (Whitlock 2007, p. 112). They are manufacturing the public’s consent for the ‘war on terror’ project in Muslim countries and reinforce the hegemonic imperialism. They adopt the Western Orientalist framework in representing the Muslim women and further the old established East/West binary. Dabashi (2011) argues that these writers “had some usefulness for a very short period of time, and it is now over” but I argue that it is not over yet as their services are still in need. If by ‘over,’ he means that the people in the West are now aware of the empire’s ulterior motive, why is it that Muslim memoirs are still being published thick and fast? There is certainly a market for this genre of literature in the West as the public curiosity has still not been quenched.

Many of these authors such as Azar Nafisi cast themselves as a contemporary Scheherazade. In her *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003), she very explicitly calls herself Scheherazade only by linking Scheherazade’s stress on “imagination and reflection” as the solution to her freedom (p. 19). She postulates that by repudiating the king’s proclivity to bestiality and using story telling in its stead as her ‘weapon’, Scheherazade projects herself as different: “this gives her the courage to risk her life and sets her apart from the other characters in the tale (2003, p. 19). Others such as Marjane Satrapi have been offered the title ‘Sheharzade.’ The endorsing blurb at the back cover of *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* (2003), by Sandra Cisneros, the American-Mexican reads “...part history book, part Scheherazade, astonishing as only true stories can be, *Persepolis* gave me hope for humanity in these unkind times.” Unlike the Scheherazade of the Oriental harem who was reduced to a voiceless and submissive odalisque, sexy adornment and slave to her master’s pleasure, these Scheherazades link themselves with the original one who understood, captured and changed

the misogynist Sultan through her intellect and masterful story telling. The contemporary Scheherazades do have the voice and power to challenge the patriarchy and the state. They are the brave and articulate women who have been provided the opportunity of recounting their experience and depicting the plights of living in Islamic societies. Their depiction of Muslim women brings forth a sentiment of sympathy in the Western readers. These life narratives are, in Whitlock's term, 'soft weapons' as these Scheherazades not only lend voices to unheard and unseen stories but also in doing so they employ strategies to elicit sympathy from the Western readers (Whitlock 2007).

Thus, these life narratives can be easily "co-opted into propaganda" (Whitlock 2007, p. 3). Their discourse considerably helps the empire and its allies to argue for the need to wage war to defend human rights. That the West has been giving a platform to these Scheherazades is a relatively new strategy to offset the overall negative depiction of women. Their story lines usually include both positive and negative portrayals of Muslims which suggests that their representation is now unbiased and authentic. The common positive portrayal of Muslims is limited to a pro-West Muslim educated woman who hates the veil but has to wear it as it is mandatory. The 'Other' is portrayed sympathetically to show that the US and consequently the West have entered a post-race era (Alsultany 2013). Scheherazade has become a "powerful trope for contemporary Arab and Muslim women writers, particularly those who address international audiences" (Gauch, 2007, p. 11). There is certainly more to their journey of recounting their experience than just satisfying the Western curiosity or a yen to unravel Muslim women's life for the western audience. Through depicting the Islamic regulations, misogynist patriarchy, human right abuses and undemocratic practices, these Scheherazades' narratives are consolidating the orientalist assumptions that veiled women are oppressed, passive, ignorant, leading to "exaggerated statements about the imprisoned existence of women in the 'Orient' (Mabro 1991, p. 3). Scheherazade's reputation in the West offers a way to gain visibility through the adoption of Western orientalism in their narratives. Therefore, the influx of Scheherazades' life narratives relating to Muslim societies cannot be regarded as just a coincidence. Rather it has been theorised as indicative of the potency of the Scheherazades role in legitimising the discourse of imperialism.

CONCLUSION

The Oriental harem paintings and photography, and the post-9/11 Scheherazades' Muslim life narratives keep forming a dominant set of stereotypes that condition the images the Western audience receive about the Other. By and large both the Orientalist harem pictures and the Scheherazades' life narratives were admired by the public and the critic for the authenticity of their representations. The Orientalist painters and photographers were extolled because of their strenuous travelling far away from home in order to bring back depictions of the East. The authenticity has been attributed to Scheherazades not only because of their nativity but also because well-known authors endorse the reliability of the texts. Arguments on legitimacy and authenticity are always of vital importance in the trajectory of representation and should be always subjected to cross-examination. The Orientalist harem paintings were mostly the result of the artists' imagination and witness' description as they were denied access to the harem. Scheherazades' life narratives, on the other hand, inherited the Orientalist narrative and visual tradition, and cultural assumptions and are replete with generalisations of Muslim women. These authors literally auto-orientalise themselves as a Scheherazade figure that provides insights into the 'harem' and reinforce the taken-for-granted assumptions of East/West cultural incompatibility through their depictions of veiled

women as inferior. The veil of secrecy of Muslim women has been lifted allowing the readers into the secret world of the veiled women. This paper is, by no means, an ad hominem and is not robbing the Scheherazades of their agency; rather I believe that one should feel empowered by the fact that these women writers can now voice their thoughts and concerns. The feeling of sympathy is truly justified as Muslim women have been subordinated to enact the Islamic regulations. However, there appears a feeling of alienation when these Scheherazades reduce and generalise all the veiled women as submissive. What makes their work vulnerable for the service of empire is their narratives' one-sidedness, out-of-context stories and generalisations.

These orientalist renderings had a dramatic impact in reducing Muslim women to their bodies. Despite the recent challenges to these orientalist renderings and the efforts in correcting the prevailing stereotypes of the subjugated veiled women by scholars and artists such as Rana Kabbani, Fatima Mernissi, Reina Lewis, Eva Alsultany, Shirin Neshat and Lalla Essaydi, an enduring mystique and disinformation continue to surround the Western perception of veiled women. The Western dominant and monopolised grip on the regime of representation leaves little space for the public in the West to look at the veiled women differently as the veiled Muslim woman stereotypes are burned deep into Western psyche. Akin to one's notion of reality, these representations are socially constructed and therefore it is essential to examine the representations that reinforce and reproduce hegemonic rhetoric. The representations of veiled women have been exploited and privileged in managing cultural diversity, differences and shaping people's attitude. Therefore, the images are produced within dynamics of social power and ideology of the empire. This ideological representation cannot be eliminated easily but a constant response to the orientalist representation can undermine the imperialist practices. Instead of producing and promoting counter ideological representations, images which bridge the East-West dichotomy can be a forcing drive in reconsidering the popular images of veiled women. While interrogating the dominant readings and troubling the singular meaning, the task of these images should be to demystify the stereotypical representations of Muslim women.

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