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The Western Stereotype of Arab Women (1)

Samir Abu-Absi

Two women, veiled in black, with the one facing the camera peeking through narrow eye-slits, appeared on the cover. The caption read, *Women and Islam: the title of the story in the July, 1993 issue of the publication of the Catholic Near East Welfare Association.* The image conformed to the stereotype of Arab and Muslim women as mysterious, marginal, faceless entities who have been enslaved by a tyrannical religion and abusive culture. In contrast, the text of the article itself deals with Muslim feminists and portrays ways in which women activists all over the Middle East are pushing for rights beyond those which have already been attained in many countries. The story includes a number of photographs showing Arab women in modern western dress, presenting a very different impression from the one conveyed by the cover picture.

It seems that the traditional stereotypical image on the cover was too powerful to resist in spite of the fact that it contradicted the content of the story.

The October 1987 issue of the **National Geographic** featured a cover story, *Women of Arabia*, by Marianne Alizera. The cover photograph shows a woman on a beach with a long *qafstan*, head covering, and facial veil standing next to a young

girl on a swing. The story sensitively deals with historical and social conditions and with the efforts of Saudi women to improve their lives. The pictures on the inside include that of a Bedouin woman driving the tribe's water truck, a woman clad in western clothes who operates a contracting business in Jeddah that employs 40 men, a woman physician examining a baby, and Saudi women in leotards at an aerobics class.

The article quotes a professional Saudi singer proclaiming, "We women have stretched our boundaries to the limit!" It contains an account of several Saudi women speaking for themselves about their lives and changing roles and concludes with a debate in which one woman states, "And I don't like the condescending attitude of some who say 'You poor women here, you can't drive; you poor women, you can't talk to a man; you poor this or that.' I wouldn't change for millions, and who asked them? It's my world and I accept it."(2)

The cover picture, instead of presenting an image of Arabian women as educated, articulate, agents of change, appeal to the comfortable stereotype that readers are familiar with. Similarly, a story by Thomas Aber-combie, *Ibn Battuta: Prince of Travelers*, in the December, 1991 of **National Geographic**, featured on the cover the picture of a woman's head completely covered except for one eye peeking out from under a white veil. The story dealt with the travels of the famed 14th century Muslim scholar through Africa and Asia. The cover photograph, which has no direct connection to the substance of the story, represents a gratuitous use of a distorted image

which has been unfairly propagated in popular culture.

Another less blatant example perhaps, but no less offensive, appeared in *Vogue* (April, 1992) and some other fashion magazines. A **Bijan** perfume advertisement portrays, on adjoining pages, the picture of a woman, presumably Arab or Muslim, veiled in a *Hijab* and a casually dressed woman the reader can easily identify as being American by the American Flag in the corner of that page. The caption under the picture of the veiled woman read, "women should be quiet, com-

negative labels, the veil was used as a symbol to be contrasted with the American ideal of fun, freedom, and liberation.

One reason stereotypical images of Arab women seem to be accepted at face value has to do with the introduction of these images in textbooks and other educational materials when children are at an impressionable age. Once such images are accepted, they become difficult to challenge, particularly as they are reinforced in popular opinion in a variety of ways.

Studies of text books used in the United States



posed, obedient, grateful, modest, respectful, submissive, and very, very serious." Accompanying the American woman's picture, who sported a **Bijan** baseball cap, was the caption, "women should be bright, wild, flirty, fun, eccentric, tough, bold, and very **Bijan**."(3) The advertisement created a contrast between two different women and, by extension, two different cultures. Thus, without the use of any explicitly

have uncovered the existence of biased, inaccurate and false information regarding the Arab world. One such example concerns a sixth grade social studies text book entitled **People and Culture**. The chapter on the Middle East, which contains pictures of camels, tents, and veiled women, includes statements such as, "Traditional Muslim girls do not go to school... Women cannot own property or vote... A man can divorce his wife

by saying three times 'I divorce you.'" these statements are then followed with the rhetorical question "Would you like to be a woman in the Middle East?"(4)

Another example is found in **The Oxford Children's Reference Library**, The Arab World volume. The author, Shirley Kay, asks, "What is an Arab?" Among the answers one finds the following: "a peasant... who rides a donkey, while his wife, in a long black robe, walks behind carrying the bundles." She adds, "Teenagers are not expected to have fun,... In fact in some parts of the Arab world if a girl thought to have behaved badly, her brother may kill her, and the neighbors will admire him for doing his duty."(5)

In cartoons, comic strips, movies, television programs, and popular fiction Arab women, when not portrayed as veiled nonentities, are depicted as seductive, scantily clad belly dancers. Such contradictions do not seem to matter as situations and plots are contrived to reinforce these images. Below is an example of an episode entitled *The Surrogate* from the popular television series, **Trapper John, M.D.**, as quoted in Jack Shaheen's **The TV Arab**.(6) The scenario concerns a patient, an Arab sheikh, who offers his daughter Aliya as a gift to Dr. Gonzo. Gonzo returns to his trailer to find Aliya waiting for him in a skimpy "harem" costume. The following dialogue takes place:

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(1) I would like to thank my wife, Lucy Abu-Absi, and my friend and colleague at the University of Toledo, Janet Bradley, for reading an earlier version of this article and offering valuable criticism.

(2) **National Geographic**, October 1987, p.453.

(3) I am indebted to Leila Gorchey, Media Coordinator for the American-Arab-Anti-Discrimination Committee for bringing this example to my attention. See **ADC Times**, June 1992, p.33.

(4) Ayad Al-Qazzaz, Ruth Affi, and Audrey Shabbas. *The Arab world Notebook: A Handbook for Teachers*. **Najda**: Albany, California, 1978, p.5.

(5) Jack Shaheen. "The Influence of the Arab Stereotype on American Children." **ADC Issues**, Issue #2, p.5.

(6) Jack Shaheen. **The TV Arab**. Bowling Green State University Popular Press: Bowling Green, Ohio, 1984, p.69.

(7) Janice J. Terry. **Mistaken Identity: Arab Stereotypes in Popular Writing**. Arab American Affairs Council: Washington, D.C., 1985, p.25-26.

(8) **Al-Raida**, Spring, 1992, p.9.

(9) **Al-Raida**, Fall, 1992, p.3.

Even though Arab women, like women all over the world, have not yet attained equality on a number of fronts, they have certainly carried out their struggle in an admirable fashion.

sheikh, has sent me here. I am yours.

Gonzo: My what?

Aliya: Your wife, maid servant, slave. Whatever you wish. My father has given me to you as a gift.

Gonzo: That's one hell of a gift. Don't you have anything to say about it?

Aliya: Your will is my will. (She begins to remove Gonzo's clothes.)

Gonzo: C'mon. I'm taking you back.

Aliya: No! My father would be highly insulted.

Gonzo: Aren't you insulted by this kind of treatment?

Aliya: You don't know my father. He's capable of terrible things.

In analyzing the Arab stereotype in popular fiction, Janice Terry observes that "The plots of popular novels often focus simultaneously on the alleged mistreatment of women in the Arab world and on the provocative, cunning nature of Arab women. The juxtaposition of contradictory traits, in this case submission and treachery, has already been noted as a technique common in racist and sexist propaganda." Terry goes on to say, "Although Arab women, like their Western sisters, are victimized by male chauvinism and prejudice,

they are by no means as subjugated or oppressed as most Western popular literature would indicate. (7)

It is doubtful that any popular work of fiction contains a more blatant stereotype of Arabs than Leon Uris' **The Haj**. A significant portion of this viciously negative stereotype is devoted to Arab women, who in one sense are victims of rape, incest, adultery, polygamy, prostitution, female circumcision and a myriad other physical and mental abuses. Women are ignorant, powerless, humiliated, sexually frustrated, oppressed, dirty, lazy, and superstitious. They are obsessed with revenge against their husbands, who are not capable of love or intimacy, and continually plot to turn their children against their father. This state of affairs, according to Uris, is to be blamed on the Arab culture and the Muslim religion. While one hopes that readers would see through this attempt at creating a grossly distorted picture of a whole culture, the reality is that the perpetuation of such negative stereotype reinforces already existing prejudices.

The popular Western image of the Arab woman suffers the double burden of belonging to two groups which have traditionally been associated with negative stereotypes: Arabs and women. Arabs have been stereotyped as

backward, militant, bloodthirsty, greedy, and anti-Western. Women, in spite of recent gains on a number of fronts, have been stereotyped as sex objects who are weak, emotional, and irrational. Arab women are doomed to endure both of these stereotypes. They are never heard from, although they are constantly being talked about. When they are not marginalized as insignificant, faceless, voiceless creatures, they are portrayed as the objects of oppression of Arab males who veil them, abuse them and make them suffer the indignity and cruelty of sharing a husband with at least three other wives.

In spite of the existence of good scholarly works on Islam and Arab culture and history, very little of that information has filtered into the media and popular culture. It is difficult for the average Westerner to accept the fact that historically Islam improved the status of women and preached fairness and equality. Islam limited the pre-Islamic practice of polygamy, required the testimony of four witnesses to prove a woman's adultery, and made Adam and Eve equally responsible for their sins. Early Muslim society had many prominent women and the Arab world today is full of women who do not fit the stereotype: artists, writers, journalists, scientists, physicians, nurses, teachers, and politicians.

AL-RAIDA

Future topics in Al-Raida include Arab women's educational status; women's health care and habits in the Arab world; income generating activities and credit for women in the Arab world; women in agriculture. We invite you to submit articles and share information if you feel you can contribute.

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Even though Arab women, like all women all over the world, have not yet attained equality on a number of fronts, they have certainly carried out their struggle in an admirable fashion. There is tremendous diversity—which exists among Arabs and Muslims depending on the country of origin, level of education, and family structure. It would undoubtedly come as a surprise to Western readers of *Al-Raida* that women comprise 25% of the Syrian Parliament and 40% of the professors at the Syrian University (8) and the highest number of votes in the last Lebanese parliamentary elections went to two women: Bahía Hariri and Naila Mouawad.(9) And although most Americans recognize Hanan Ashrawi's name and admire her eloquence and diplomatic skill, I suspect that they think of her as an aberration, a rare exception to that deeply ingrained image of the Arab woman.

The sad reality is that racism and sexism exist, to varying degrees, in all cultures. Fortunately, even the most powerful stereotypes are subject to change. This required time, concerted effort, and a great deal of education. The image of Arab women as portrayed in the examples above, particularly the photographs of the veiled women, is disturbing and hurtful. But in spite of the stereotypical pictures, the content of some of the stories I discussed was fair and presented a balanced characterization of Arab women as agents of change who are taking responsibility for shaping



their own destiny and that of future generation.

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