

Orientalism and Representation of Muslim Women as “ Sexual Objects ”

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Edward Said's book *Orientalism* paved the way for a new discourse on the Colonial and Western interpretations of the Orient and the Middle East. During the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries especially, Europeans visiting the “East” recorded their travels in literary texts, autobiographical writing, paintings and photography. Said suggests that within these works, the creators transposed their own ideas and pre-conceptions of the East, thus creating and mythologizing a view that belonged not to reality, but to a colonial concept representing domination. Many of these Orientalist works project an image of the East as different, the “Other”, and objectify and scrutinize all its elements. Said argues that in this way, “European culture was able to manage- and even produce-the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively.”¹ Within this general discourse, the Arab/Muslim woman is subject to constant prying, de/re-construction and devaluing. She is represented, amongst other things, as an object of desire, a sexual being there to be appropriated and dominated.

As the subject of Orientalism is too vast, this essay will not discuss the art work produced by painters such as Jean-Leon Gerome and Delacroix which often concentrate on scenes of naked or half-naked women in the harem, in bath houses or women being sold as slaves.² Neither will it discuss contemporary, Western representations of Muslim women as seen in the media. Instead it will focus on the written texts by some of the European travelers to the “East” in order to make a direct comparison with those written by “Eastern” travelers to Europe. This demonstrates that the discussion of ‘native’ women was a prime tool, and provided the body on which all power/political discourses were written, seemingly regardless of culture. As Fatna Sabbagh states, “The female body as a field of writing, initiation and discourse on power, domination and exploitation seems to be a constant aspect of human societies.”³ The study will then look at some of the Arab/Muslim texts, both erotic and orthodox, which when featuring women, also appear to focus on certain sexual elements. Finally, it will

look at more contemporary information to see how these discourses have affected women in Arab/Muslim societies. As this information is limited, I have concentrated the discussion on Iran with brief mention of interviews with women in Morocco and Lebanon.

Said argued that Europe's knowledge of the East was constructed in order to gain control over it. Within the Orientalist works, he identified "manifest" or conscious, stated views about society, and "latent" views that reflect the site of the unconscious, "where dreams, images, desires, fantasies and fears reside."⁴ Adopting Foucault's ideas on discourse and power, Said suggested that Orientalists always represented the nature of the orient and the Oriental as "inferior to the west,"⁵ and the West's knowledge of the 'East' was bound with its domination over it.⁶ If the Oriental "Other" was presented as irrational, erotic, exotic and despotic then the 'west' was therefore rational, moral and justified in its actions. For Said then, orientalism was less a body of knowledge than a discursive construction, "with no necessary relation to the actual cultures that it supposedly described and understood," where the oriental "Other" is confined to fantasy and never allowed to speak.⁷ Foucault stated that "it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together"⁸ and discourse itself "transmits and produces power."⁹

Within discourse, Foucault suggested, the mechanisms of power are addressed to the body, sexuality and race.¹⁰ This seems to be true of Orientalism where women are not only the racial Other, but also female. Said writes that, "women are usually the creatures of a male power fantasy. They express unlimited sensuality, they are more or less stupid, and above all they are willing."¹¹ Because much of what is recorded is from a male perspective, Malika Mehdid, following this argument, suggests that "Orientalism becomes the narrative or visual device for the expression and the identification of male desire,"¹² where the Orient was full of sexual promise and luxuriant women. It "was a place where one could look for sexual experience unobtainable in Europe"¹³ especially during the Victorian period when sex was a taboo subject. Foucault suggests that sexuality is an especially "dense transfer point for relations of power" not just between men and women but also between administrations and population.¹⁴ Philippa Levine suggests, "knowledge of sexual habits, preferences and boundaries" enabled Europeans "to exert certain kinds of authority in the

colonial setting."¹⁵ Foucault states that particularly from the Eighteenth Century onwards, woman's body was analysed in order to construct a knowledge of sexuality concerned with "the sensations of the body" and "the quality of pleasures."¹⁶ Foucault suggests that the "deployment of sexuality has its reason for being in ...proliferating, innovating, annexing, creating, and penetrating bodies in an increasingly detailed way, and in controlling populations in an increasingly comprehensive way."¹⁷

Mehdid maintains that the constant re-working of texts, about Arab women, real or imaginary meant that the authors, through their work, were "appropriating her body and identity and possessing her again in sexual and textual terms"¹⁸ and thus perpetuating the myth surrounding her. Unlike Said, both Mehdid and Yegenoglu believe that sexuality does not take a secondary role in this discourse, but that it actually "governs and structures the subjects' every relation with the Other."¹⁹ This is perhaps illustrated by Edward Lane when on arriving in the East, "felt like an eastern bridegroom, about to lift the veil of his bride, and see, for the first time, the features that were to charm, or disappoint, or disgust him."²⁰ The 'East' then, automatically becomes female, something mysterious to be revealed, and something seductive, sexual. Just as the land becomes a colonial acquisition, so too the people in it, are appropriated but also constructed, through the discourse of Orientalist texts. The expectation of the sexuality of the Eastern woman takes great precedence in these works. As early as the seventeenth century, Jean Dumont described Turkish women as "charming creatures" who seem to be "made for love; their actions, gestures, discourse and looks are all amorous."²¹ Western writers have produced a cultural discourse which has not only mixed their own fantasies and desires in their representation of the orient and it's people in general, but has also taken the Arab woman and "systematically devalued her."²² This domination over the native women was part and parcel of European man's power and control of her native land.²³

The image of the sexual, Oriental woman was transposed into the oriental texts where in a repressive age, it was "coveted as the permissible expression of a taboo topic" in Europe.²⁴ Although set in the Congo, the tale of the *One Thousand and One Nights* is told within the plot of Diderot's "Les Bijoux Indiscrets",

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written in the Eighteenth Century. In this story the Sultan has a magic ring which allows him access to the “most intimate desires and sexual exploits” of the harem by making the “jewel”, or genitalia of the women, tell the truth about their infidelities.²⁵ It demonstrates the kind of “voyeuristic promiscuity”²⁶ which frequently appears in the texts, especially about the harem which was a forbidden, and therefore imagined space for men. Voyeurism is seen in some of Flaubert’s letters where he refers to women being used sexually by others. A letter to Louis Bouilhet recounts how Mohammed Ali’s jester sat a woman “on the counter of a shop, and coupled with her publicly” just “to amuse the crowd.”²⁷ Whether in Egypt or Turkey, Flaubert describes women purely in physical terms and often refers to his liaisons with prostitutes.²⁸ Even in the Egyptian tombs at Thebes, he concentrates on the scenes with “young girls in transparent dresses, the most whorish shapes imaginable, playing the guitar with a lascivious air. It’s a bordello scene.”²⁹

Flaubert describes the oriental woman to Louise Colet as “no more than a machine,” making “no distinction between one man and another.”³⁰ The Egyptian Kuchuk Hanem, is “a regal looking creature, large breasted, fleshy,” with “slit nostrils.”³¹ Flaubert is one European writer who describes woman in the most obvious sexual terms. She is a “creature,” sharing similar characteristics to animals “of which unbridled sexual ardour” was undoubtedly one,³² and the inability to have emotions another. Not only was she a machine, “you may be sure she felt nothing at all emotionally,”³³ she is as Said puts it, “less a woman than a display of impressive, but verbally inexpressive femininity” representing carnal temptation and “unbounded sexuality.”³⁴ She is quiet, passive, and acquiescent and “relapses into the state of nature,”³⁵ enabling Flaubert to fulfill his needs and desires. Lowe suggests she is in fact a “masculine fantasy of pure erotic service.”³⁶ It is likely that Flaubert used her as a prototype for the female characters, Salamambo and Salome in his novels,³⁷ thus perpetuating the myth surrounding her. Kuchuk represents everything the European woman he is writing to is not. Colet is cerebral, and virtuous as opposed to Kuchuk, the “machine” the “creature,” the whore. This reinforces Colet’s dominant position as a European over the Colonial Other.³⁸ Kuchuk Hanem’s image in its original and re-written form becomes projected onto other women within the discourse and becomes Arab/Muslim women as a whole.

*Women have been
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and fantasies*

Women then are described at the “level of the libido, the carnal and the irrational;”³⁹ Kuchuk Hanem like Flaubert’s fictional character, Salamambo, lacks “psychological density.” The real and the fictional women are not described as individuals and are “devoid of an active role and emotional intensity.”⁴⁰ Mehdid suggests there were two perceptions of Arab women in these texts, one carnal, like Flaubert’s woman, the other more sympathetic, like Nerval’s who rather than using the graphic language of Flaubert, wants to “unite with a guileless young girl,”⁴¹ and refers to women as “frisky,” having “natural abandon.”⁴² Some of the women travelers are perhaps more sympathetic, although even they, like Julia Pardoe, note the physical beauty of women in the harem.⁴³ In her descriptions of women she focuses on certain parts of the body, like the “bosom,” “throat” or “dimpled arm” that were “almost unmentionable in mainstream discourse” in 1830s Europe.⁴⁴ Women “as the excluded Other” of Western society, therefore, occupy a dominant, “masculine position in relation to oriental women.”⁴⁵ Mehdid suggests that although there are

slight variations in the Orientalist discourse, the “exotica/erotica element” is always “firmly present and ingrained in the mind”⁴⁶ much of it acquired from other writings and works of art.

Yegenoglu suggests the veil also took on a special meaning within the Orientalist texts, the veiled woman giving the sense of the exotic, sensual, seductive and dangerous.⁴⁷ The veil to the Western eye is both threatening, because what lies behind is invisible, unknown, and therefore an obstacle to control. Yet at the same time seductive. In

describing Turkish women, Edmondo de Amicis states that they can use the veil “to display, to conceal, to promise,” to use in the art of seduction although there is also “something virginal and holy about it.”⁴⁸ Lady Montagu wrote that the veil gives women “entire liberty of following their inclinations without danger of discovery” as their “gallants”⁴⁹ seldom know who they are. In other words, she suggests that the anonymity provided by the veil allowed them to conduct their love affairs and gave them “sexual and social license.”⁵⁰ The veil thus becomes directly related to the woman’s sexuality, where she is seen as both chaste and immoral.

But what formed the original basis for the creation of this mythical, sexual East? In part it was probably due to European exposure to *The Tales from the Thousand and One Nights*, a collection of folk stories derived

from Persian, Arabian and Indian cultures.⁵¹ This text, itself reflecting the “secular imagination of the East,” and containing fantastic tales of adventure, magic and “candid bawdry,”⁵² was introduced to Europe in the Eighteenth Century when Galland’s translation was published. Galland removed all candid references to sex as he considered it to be inappropriate for his own society. Lane’s version published between 1839-41, however, offered a more “bowdlerized selection intended for the drawing room.”⁵³ Burton’s version published between 1885-86 seems not only to focus on sexual matters within the stories, but also continues and expands his discussions on sex within the footnotes.⁵⁴ Rana Kabbani suggests that what “he felt himself unable to say about European women, he could unabashedly say about Eastern ones”⁵⁵ and in this way projected onto the Other woman, sexual drives denied to middle class women in Europe. He appears to focus on sex seemingly for his own gratification and supposedly that of his European audience. It was partly this text, read in translation, which conditioned the European mind in its perception of the Eastern Woman.

Regardless of the translations, Kabbani suggests the stories themselves showed certain “negative stereotypes” that embodied “all the vices traditionally associated with the female....they are fickle, faithless and lewd.”⁵⁶ In the prologue the Sultan sees his wife frolicking naked and being unfaithful to him with a black slave “who mounted her after smothering her with embraces and kisses.”⁵⁷ The same had happened to his brother and the two men leave town. On their return the king kills his wife and vows to take “a virgin in marriage to his bed each night, and kill her the next morning.”⁵⁸ Bouhdiba suggests the two deceived brothers believe that woman “is essentially a thieving, libidinous creature, devoid of feeling.”⁵⁹ In “The Tale of the Enchanted King”, the wife is also fickle, referred to by the slaves as a “black souled whore” and a “harlot who revels away her nights in the beds of thieves and cut-throats,” and regularly visits a Negro after drugging her husband to make him sleep. Furthermore, she humbles herself before the slave even though he insults her because she needs him to satisfy her sexually.⁶⁰ Both of these women are unfaithful because of their need to satisfy their desires.

The image of woman as sexual aggressor is also portrayed. When the Sultan leaves town with his brother they meet a young girl held captive by a jinnee who

immediately asks them to “pierce” her with their “rapiers”, (i.e. copulate with her), on pain of telling the jinnee. Afterwards she adds their rings to a collection of 98 men she had seduced in the same manner. In “The Porter and the Three Girls from Baghdad”, again it is the women who are the active agents. The three girls stripping naked in turn, pointing “down to that which was between her thighs....her delicate parts” and asking the porter to name it.⁶¹ It is clear here that the girls initiate the scene. The same is true of the women in the three tales of the one-eyed dervishes that follow. One of the dervishes spends a year with forty young girls, “reveling away the nights” with each in turn.⁶² In “The Tale of Khalifah the Fisherman”, the Caliph after spending the night with a slave girl, is “so delighted with her talents,” (presumably in bed), that he “forsook for her his wife.”⁶³

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If all these tales represent sexual acts outside of marriage, the wife too within the marriage is often portrayed as the active sexual partner. In “The Tale of Ma’aruf the Cobbler,” it is the bride who tells the bridegroom to come to bed and “gird your loins for the merry sport” on their wedding night.⁶⁴ There follows a description of their first night together where “she pressed close to him, so that tongue met tongue....the citadel was breached and the victory won.”⁶⁵ As well as being sexual predators, women are nearly always physically perfect, of “surpassing beauty.”⁶⁶ The porter notes “the roundness” of the breasts and the “graceful quivering thighs” of one of the girls.⁶⁷ Elsewhere they have “lips like rubies,”⁶⁸ and are “more beautiful than a priceless pearl” with “breasts round and shapely.”⁶⁹

Burton’s translation included footnotes that contained ‘juicy titbits’ of information concerning sexual/erotic details, in themselves often irrelevant to the story being translated. In the Prologue, when the Queen meets with the black slave, Burton notes that “debauched women prefer Negroes on account of the size of their parts.”⁷⁰ Burton also suggests that harems “are hot beds of sapphism” and seems intrigued at the idea of sexual perversity. Kabbani suggests that for him “the woman was reduced to ‘privaties’....for his articulation about sex,⁷¹ but it also seems to reinforce his dominant Colonial position. Even Shahrazad, the intelligent heroine of the story, becomes a sexual object. Fadwa Malti-Douglas, suggests that in her wedding scene in Burton’s translation, she is reduced to an object of desire, where “in place of her intellect

it is now Shahrazad's physicality that comes to the fore."⁷² The brothers are "bewitched" and filled with "amorous longing" for her.⁷³ Bouhdiba mentions Dehoi's "L'Erotisme de mille et une nuits" where Shahrazad "describes the joys of the flesh"⁷⁴ and refers to women being "driven by some irresistible desire...panting and bubbling over with so much pleasure."⁷⁵

Kabbani believes that many Europeans confused "the real East with the East of the stories"⁷⁶ and in some ways the *Thousand and One Nights* became an Orientalist text. Although the stories are Eastern, those translating and editing it were European, able to cut out or add footnotes to emphasize particular aspects of Eastern society as a whole, and its women. It was those images which influenced European perceptions of the East in general, and which other European writers picked up on and incorporated into their own work, both fictional and autobiographical.

This same kind of discourse, a kind of reverse "Orientalism," can be seen in the writing of some of the Nineteenth Century Iranian travelers to Europe. Just as the Orientalists perceived Eastern women in sexual terms, so too did the Iranian travelers about European women. Tavakoli-Targhi suggests that the female body came to serve as a metaphor for "delinquent self and other, Iran and Europe, Islam and Christianity."⁷⁷

Just as for Lane, the East was like a "bride," so Europe became "an emporium of beauty" and English women, according to Luft-Allah, "nymphs of paradise"⁷⁸ and full of mischief. An image was created of Europeans as "irrational, immoral and aberrant"⁷⁹ based mainly on their impression of women and their sexuality. Sahhafbashi, commented that "virgin women are rare,"⁸⁰ and Garmrudi that women are "generally pantsless and without veil and have a constant desire for able pummelers,"⁸¹ (ie, for sex). Mirza I'tisam al-Din suggested that a man and woman can "commit fornication...in any place whatever" with impunity.⁸² They, like the Orientalists in the East, see or imagine, the relative sexual freedom of the Other.

Garmrudi may have been responding directly to the Orientalist interpretations of Iran. He criticizes Europeans, "with all their imperfect attributes and obscene behaviours," for being unjust to the Iranian people in their books.⁸³ He warns the Iranian govern-

ment to remain distant from Europeans to prevent damaging the state and religion.⁸⁴ Tavakoli-Targhi suggests that in Iran these negative images of the West based on "the European woman as imagined by Iranian male travelers"⁸⁵ was projected onto their own women. The images entered into Islamic, political discourses on the "danger of unveiling in the twenties, women's suffrage in the 1950s and 1960s and the protest against moral corruption."⁸⁶ Unveiledness and the sexual freedom of women were viewed as the cause of corruption and the moral degeneration of Europe.⁸⁷

However, even if some of the Orientalist texts emphasize women as sexual beings, some earlier Arab/Muslim texts exist which suggest that the woman's body had already become "a pawn in the game of textual sexual politics,"⁸⁸ her personality and personhood absent or subordinated. Sabbagh suggests there are two discourses in Muslim writing, the erotic, meant for the individual, and the orthodox, coming from God and therefore compulsory for all.⁸⁹ Both of these texts present women in sexual terms.

Numerous works of erotic writing exist in the Arab/Muslim tradition some of which date back as early as the Eighth Century,⁹⁰ and most of which portray woman as sex objects and sexual aggressors. Perhaps the image of the sexual object is best found in the writing of Ibn al-Wardi and the mythical island complex of

al-Waqwaq where trees "bear fruit like women, with shapes, bodies, eyes, hands feet, hair, breasts and vulvas like the vulvas of women."⁹¹ Malti-Douglas suggests she is the "ultimate disposable woman" because the man can experience a unique sexual pleasure, fulfilling his needs, and she dies after intercourse.⁹² Two famous erotic works are Nefzawi's "The Perfumed Garden" written in the twelfth century and Ibn Sulayman's "How an Old Man can regain his youth through sexual potency" written in the fifteenth century. In both, the subject is woman, "her body, desires, wantonness and mysteries."⁹³ She is portrayed in exclusively physical terms, the perfect woman having "the thighs and buttocks hard, the hips large and full."⁹⁴ However, Sabbagh suggests the texts imply that a woman's character is basically determined by "what she has between her legs."⁹⁵ Just as Flaubert mused about Kuchuk Hanem, this woman "speaks and laughs rarely, and never without reason."⁹⁶ She exists for one thing, and one thing only; sex. She is the "omnisexual woman."⁹⁷

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In this writing, the woman's sex, becomes a force of its own, where "voracious sexes" are "able to seek out and draw the available prey"⁹⁸ and "certain vulvas, wild with desire and lust...throw themselves upon the approaching member"⁹⁹ to obtain orgasm. Within the stories women copulate not only with men, but animals, and are thus reduced to beings controlled by their sexes. Indeed, the general belief is that even if one were to copulate "night and day for years and years with a woman...her thirst for copulation is never assuaged."¹⁰⁰ In fact, "a woman only appreciates life if one copulates with her...she blooms and is rejuvenated when she smells the scent of a man."¹⁰¹ These texts represent male fantasy where social and moral barriers are eroded and men and women can copulate in freedom.

Alternatively, the orthodox Islamic discourse, sets itself up as "architect of reality" and social order,¹⁰² although women are still referred to in terms of their sexuality. Sabbagh suggests that within this discourse, the relationship between God, man and woman is defined; man serves God and women can serve God by serving man.¹⁰³ Imam Moslem cites a hadith declaring that "the world is a possession and the best possession is a virtuous woman."¹⁰⁴ Sabbagh suggests that sex and sexuality is confined to the domestic space, and within this space, woman's greatest role is in reproduction.¹⁰⁵ Imam Bukhari and Imam Ghazzali suggest that man invokes the name of God before the sexual act and at the point of orgasm "to keep the devil away" from the man and "the fruit" of the union.¹⁰⁶ It seems this is an attempt to "divert the believers attention from the female body"¹⁰⁷ which offered not only a child, but also physical pleasure and carnal desire.¹⁰⁸ God is not provoked to protect the woman, because she is seen as evil along with the desire she invokes in man. Indeed according to Imam abd al-Rahman Ibn al-Jawzi, Iblis (the devil) asserts that his surest arrow, "the one that never misses its victim, is woman."¹⁰⁹ Not only is woman desire, she is associated with the devil because she incites the believer to evil. Although Islam condemns celibacy,¹¹⁰ the sexual act is a problem for the believer because within it are revealed some of the very notions considered opposite of the divine will, and therefore likely to lead to disorder and chaos. A woman then is a constant temptation because of the pleasure she gives. As sexual union is only allowed within marriage, a man who is tempted by another woman, should follow the Prophet's exam-

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ple and "hasten to his own woman"¹¹¹ to relieve his desire.

Despite this, Bouhdiba suggests that paradise in Islam is "a place of sexual pleasure"¹¹² where every man who has observed the fast is married to a 'houri,' a perpetual virgin with an "appetizing sex."¹¹³ Here the Muslim, (male), will experience "infinite orgasm,"¹¹⁴ his sexual potency is increased and "paradise is the total and absolute satisfaction of desire."¹¹⁵ The houris are there to be sexually consumed by the male believer; they have no character and they do not think. At the same time Tarmidi asserts that, "every wife who passes the night at the side of her satisfied husband is sure to go to paradise."¹¹⁶ In other words, a woman who is able and willing to please her husband, and not refuse his sexual advances during their lifetime, will be rewarded with the gift of heaven.

It seems then that within the Arab/Muslim texts woman is expected to be both angel and virgin, seductress and sex goddess depending on their marital status. It is acceptable to present women within the erotic texts as the omnisexual woman with a voracious sexual appetite because it is voyeuristic, nourishes the male fantasy and gives men something they want, but cannot necessarily have in reality. At the same time, the society in which these texts were read would consider such behaviour by women as totally unacceptable in reality. In Bouthaina Shaaban's book, *Both Right and Left Handed*, a Lebanese woman suggests that most Arab women live in two different worlds, before and after marriage. "Before marriage they are supposed to be saints, holy virgins who never like to know or hear anything about sex," yet, once they are married "they are supposed magically to change into sexy wives."¹¹⁷

Within this context, it is necessary to neutralize, master, control and subjugate woman, the cause of desire, in order to maintain the order of society.¹¹⁸ In Nineteenth century Iran this included a text by an unknown author, entitled *Disciplining Women*. Throughout, the woman's virtues and vices are defined purely in terms of how they affect the man and in many cases this relates back to the sexual. Even the way a woman walks can be interpreted to show that she "is in quest of passing pleasure" because "only street lovers turn their heads and move their haunches as they walk."¹¹⁹ In this respect, in public, any sign of sexuality or even femininity must be avoided to prevent arousing men. In 1920s Iran, texts were designed to teach women "the duty of policing

and gendarming themselves” so as not to attract unwanted attentions or undermine the social and cultural order.¹²⁰ Najmabadi suggests this was meant to create more freedom for women in the public space, though, the implication is that woman’s body in itself needs to be controlled.

It is different when it comes to the behaviour of married women. One chapter of *Disciplining Women* is “devoted to what the wife should and should not do in bed,”¹²¹ and it is here that she is expected to become as alluring as possible for her husband. She is to be constantly ready for his advances whether it be “preceded by tender cajolery and exciting play or not,”¹²² and sometimes she should make the first move, there being “no question of reserve at such time.” Regardless, she should “excite his senses...cover him with kisses and invent him a thousand provocations.”¹²³ After being taught in the Orthodox texts about controlling desire, it is now stated, “shamelessness is better in bed than prudery.” The author of the book suggests that it be taught to young girls and followed, so that “a calm and joyous life would be assured.”¹²⁴ Moghissi suggests, women’s sexuality and her moral conduct therefore were, and still remain “a central preoccupation of Muslim men.”¹²⁵

Moghissi states that Islam sees woman as having a “pernicious seductive power”¹²⁶ which threatens “communal dignity and social and cultural continuity.”¹²⁷ The honour of the family and community is linked to woman’s body, and her ‘value’ therefore, depends on her remaining chaste until her marriage when she is subjected to “a public performance to prove her virginity.”¹²⁸ A Lebanese woman states, “if the woman was dishonourable, the whole family was dishonourable, and the woman’s virginity was the most crucial ingredient to family honour.”¹²⁹ Abu-Odeh suggests that woman run the risk of becoming a victim of an honour crime,¹³⁰ a practice which seems “targeted to pre-empt subversive sexual practices” and stop Arab society descending into the perceived, “dark pit of western sexual life.”¹³¹

Azari and Najmabadi suggest that in Iran since 1979, attempts to ‘control’ woman’s sexuality has included the sexual offences laws, sexual segregation and compulsory hijab.¹³² The image of the “sexual woman, seething with appetites and desires, externally held in check by the veil,” and seducing men, however, continued to exist.¹³³ The veil, proscribed by the Qur’an to cover a woman’s body,¹³⁴ is now used to cover her desires. A 1920s satirical poem by the Iranian Iraj Mirza reveals these conflicting images. In the poem a woman enjoys sex with the poet, yet keeps her face veiled lest she be considered a whore.¹³⁵ Bouhdiba implies that the contradictory images projected by the Orientalists of veiled woman as chaste and immoral

may still exist both in the West and in the East: “In practice, a good half of society spends its time hiding itself from the other half, while trying to imagine it or surprise it!” Voyeurism then, just as it was for the Orientalists, becomes “a refuge and a compensation”¹³⁶ for what is unavailable.

Because Islam has made sex and sexuality such a taboo subject and has presented woman as the epitome of desire, women are unable to express their sexual feelings. A survey in 1960s Iran by Paul Vieile revealed that spouses do not talk about sexual pleasure and that only the man has the right to show his desire. The man actually considers himself the “revealer of the latent erotic powers of the woman” and “if woman contains a great potential of desire, a man can use it as he wishes;” after all “he is only responding to what is awaited.”¹³⁷ Mernissi’s collection of interviews in Morocco suggests that sex is not discussed and at least one woman “felt reduced to a thing...his thing” when making love with her husband.¹³⁸ Mernissi herself asserts that, “beauty and sexuality, (in the narrow sense of seductiveness) are supposed to be the major poles around which the life of a woman revolves.”¹³⁹ Because of the taboos surrounding the woman’s body created within discourse and society, many Arab/Muslim women have become frightened of sex. For some “it is something they have to do for their husbands” and “they are relieved when it is all finished.” Some still find it difficult to “look at sex as something enjoyable, beautiful and clean.”¹⁴⁰

As Foucault suggests, woman’s body became an obsession and was exploited and appropriated physically and textually as an “object of knowledge and an element in relations of power.”¹⁴¹ Within the Orientalist discourse, it characterized Western dominance of the East. In these texts, Arab-Muslim women have been “framed, defined and understood through male projections, inhibitions and fantasies” of the harem and an “enduring imaginative tradition working on the indelible trail of the Arabian Nights.”¹⁴² Once the discourse was formulated it re-generated itself through the addition and re-working of texts. However, some earlier Arab-Muslim erotic texts also concentrated on women as sexual beings. In many, women are reduced to “genital apparatus,”¹⁴³ and are perceived as sexual aggressors that challenge the social order. Within some of the orthodox texts, women are seen as necessary for reproduction, yet at the same time, “female beauty is a bait that leads to perdition, to damnation.”¹⁴⁴ In all of these discourses, mostly constructed by men, women are generally represented as either whores or virgins. Man speaks for the woman, who is a representation “mirrored in man’s thought.”¹⁴⁵ For the Orientalists, this discourse signified their dominance over the Other; for Muslims, it seems to represent male dominance over woman.

End Notes

1. Edward Said (1995), *Orientalism Western Conceptions of the Orient*. London: Penguin Books, p.3.
2. See <http://www.orientalist-art.org.uk> for representations of many of these paintings.
3. Fatna Sabbagh (1984), *Woman in the Muslim Unconscious*. New York: Pergamon Press, p. 17.
4. Meyda Yegenoglu (1998), *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 23.
5. Reina Lewis (1996), *Gendering Orientalism, Race, Femininity and Representation*. London, New York: Routledge, p. 16.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
7. Robert C. Young (1995), *Foucault on Race and Colonialism*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, pp. 57-58.
8. Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, vol 1, an Introduction 1978, p. 100.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 101.
10. Young, op.cit., p. 64.
11. Said, op.cit., p. 207.
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