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The Harem: Looking Behind the Veil

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THE HAREM: LOOKING BEHIND THE VEIL

In the eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries, Europeans traveled to Eastern countries, like Egypt and Istanbul, the seat of the Ottoman Empire, for diplomatic reasons and tourism. Men wrote travelogues describing the sites, landscapes, fauna and flora, culture and customs for the curious back home in Europe who were insatiable when it came to consuming information about exotic, foreign lands. However, one aspect of Eastern culture that European men were not permitted to observe was the harem due to Islamic custom. Thus their writings regarding Eastern women and customs were flawed and fictitious, based purely on the hegemonic beliefs of their Western culture, religion and ignorance of Eastern culture. They drew erroneous conclusions regarding uncontrolled male sexuality and repression of Eastern women who they believed were forced to live in seclusion in a segregated, polygamous culture. The harem was a blank which European men could not investigate firsthand, so they filled in that blank with what they imagined. Their erroneous assumptions became common “knowledge” to the Western world. Thus harems and Eastern women were sexualized by European male fantasy and became one more facet of Orientalism--the construct of the East made by the West.

However, during this same time period, European women were permitted into harems and soon began writing about their actual observations in the form of personal letters, which evolved into publications known as harem literature. For example, Sophia Poole, an Englishwoman, accompanied her brother explicitly to write about harems in

order that his own travel writings would be more informative and accurate. Her observations were published in 1844. The eyewitness observations written by women eventually diverted harem literature away from previously male-dominated travel literature and into a women-dominated genre, particularly when travel to the East increased after the Crimean War in 1861. During this time, harems became a must-see attraction for upper class European women tourists. As a result, more women wrote about their firsthand experience of harems and their interactions with Eastern women. These travel writings dispelled some of the mystery and false assumptions of harems, which had been propelled by the fantasies of uninformed European male writers. Harem literature became a women's literary genre and was very popular from 1850 until after World War II.

The opinions and observations of European women writers regarding the culture of the harem and Middle Eastern women range from admiration to harsh criticism. Even with the commonality of gender, European superiority seeps into their writings, as they never seem able to totally leave the Western hegemonic culture and its patriarchal attitudes aside. The barriers of culture and constructed class distinctions of the West made European women spectators and most never really became free to be participants while visiting these exotic lands. However, women writers dispelled many of the erroneous assumptions of sexualization and objectification of Muslim women in harems. Billie Melman states that women travel writers “normalized and humanized the harem . . . a challenge both to traditional notions of the Orient and to middle-class gender ideology in the West.”¹ At the same time, the assumption of oppression due to the customs of

¹Billie Melman, *Women's Orients*. (London: Macmillan, 1992), 62.

polygamy, segregated living and wearing the veil in public prevailed, and many European women (and men) found these customs offensive to their Western, Judeo-Christian sensibilities. Ironically, due in part to hegemonic beliefs, European women critical of the cultural differences which they viewed as oppressive to Eastern women were blind to their own similar oppression put forth by their own Western culture.

In this essay, I will look at some contradictions of Western thought pertaining to assumptions of repression of Eastern women by pointing out equally repressive Western practices. I will also look at how women's travel literature dispelled the overt sexualization of harems, constructed by Western male fantasy, and how European women infused their writings with their own magical fantasies of the Orient inspired by the popularity of *Arabian Nights*. In time, women's travel/harem writings evolved into the lucrative desert romance genre of literature. However, while this genre was entrenching negative Oriental stereotypes in Western thought, the novels were a means of liberating early twentieth century European and American women from sexual repression.

This topic is relevant because it reveals the historic pattern of Anglo-European hegemonic attitudes that do not always embrace diversity. Instead, these attitudes have continually constructed and fortified barriers by categorizing people and cultures and establishing non-European cultures as the Other. Establishing the Other has given legitimacy to civilizing missions meant to assimilate the Other into the Western culture, which has been seen over and over. This topic is also interesting because travel writing about Eastern culture and customs gave European women their break into book publishing and eventually other literary genres, namely desert romance novels. Europeans were interested in reading about all things exotic, and the Orient was chief

among them. Writers began to see that writing about the East had great moneymaking potential. However, readers (especially women readers) preferred the fantasy that anything could happen in the Orient rather than reality. Fantasy provided escapism, innocent voyeurism and exploration of female sexuality for women within the safe pages of a book without actually stepping out of the boundaries of Western convention. However, as a negative byproduct, these novels promoted latent aspects of Orientalism and entrenched inaccurate beliefs and misunderstanding of Eastern culture more firmly within the Western mind.

The primary sources used for this paper are excerpts of a few travel writings written by Englishwomen who visited Turkey or Egypt in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries contrasted by a few comments made by Eastern women writers. The purpose of this paper is to look at the European women's attitudes concerning foreign women and their customs and point out similar forms of repression in their own lives, which were another Western male construct. Is it possible that European women were envious of some of the aspects of Middle Eastern culture and life in the harem? Could that be a factor in the success of the desert romance novels published in the early twentieth century? These questions may not be answerable, but they are interesting to contemplate.

ORIENTALISM

To begin a study of this subject, it is important to give a definition of Orientalism. To put it concisely, Orientalism is the Western perception or construction of the East. This is a one-sided interpretation, which does not examine the Eastern point of view at all and is based on superficial observations, which do not consider the deeper cultural significance or meaning of the Oriental. This includes all of the stereotypes that come to

the Western mind when thinking about the people of Eastern lands during this time period, i.e., backwardness, laziness, despotism, barbarism, exploitation of women and brutality. This constructed “knowledge” has become interwoven with the reality of the Eastern culture. These constructed beliefs are aspects of latent Orientalism, which have become stereotypes (i.e., rampant sexuality of Arab men) and are so closely related to aspects of manifest Orientalism (i.e., the harem) that they are sometimes hard to extricate or differentiate.

When travel writers began writing about the Middle East and North Africa, the Orient was transformed into the “Other,” by way of the Western constructed beliefs about the East. While the Orient was considered dangerous, foreign, and many aspects were culturally taboo to Europeans, it was also tempting and they were secretly desirous of it. Desire and the act of exploration were and still are metaphorically acts of penetration—which represent the very domineering, controlling and masculine. The country being explored, or penetrated, represents the submissive feminine—the Other. However, according to Billie Melman, “Women travelers . . . did not perceive Oriental women as . . . the ultimate ‘other.’” Rather, oriental *women* became the feminine West’s recognisable [sic] image in the mirror.”² Eastern women were recognizable and not seen as totally “other” to European women because of their common bonds of being women, i.e., being culturally subservience to men, being mothers and overseers of the home and other compatible gendered interests, such as fashion, cosmetics, music, cooking, sewing, etc. On the other hand, male observers would only see the “other,” both in the feminine gender and in the foreign culture.

² Melman, *Women’s Orients*, 316.

THE HAREM: AN EASTERN BORDELLO--THE WESTERN MALE FANTASY

(For Men Only)

The customs of segregated living (and its extension outside the home by women wearing the veil), polygamy, and a slower-paced lifestyle (which Westerners perceived as laziness) were contributors to the atmosphere of mystery that was the East/Orient. These concepts were misunderstood and found to be perplexing and abhorrent to Western men because they were not permitted access to harems or even to look at an Eastern woman's face. Western males incorporated aspects of their sexual fantasies into their writings in which they visualized harems as being either prisons of unwilling sexual captives or bordellos filled with willing wanton female accomplices.

Contrary to the assumption (or fantasy) that there was constant indiscriminate sex with multiple wives and concubines, sex was not random or necessarily purely for pleasure, especially within the imperial harem in the Ottoman Empire. This was due to politics and the succession of heirs to the throne. The structure of the (imperial) harem controlled the outcome of the ruler's sexual activity.³ Also contrary to Western assumptions, only imperial rulers or the very rich had more than one wife because of the financial burden of all the extended female family members, children and servants. In large households, some wives were even given separate households from each other. In fact, wives had the power to refuse conjugal rights and their husbands could gain entrance to the harem only when given permission.

As far as Western claims of Oriental male despotism and domination over women are concerned, Leila Ahmed points out the Western double standard in that historically

³Leslie P. Peirce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 3.

Christendom has promoted male superiority and their rightful control of women, and questions why these Western men are shocked and outraged that Muslim men might be doing the same thing to their own women.⁴ The focus of Westerners on liberating another culture from oppression is a familiar theme when launching a civilizing mission to assimilate other cultures to Western customs, religion and politics. This is a form of black and white thinking and does not celebrate uniqueness or attempt to understand another culture, but instead passes on negative judgment. These are the roots of discrimination, racism and xenophobia, which are also diametrically opposed to the Christian ethic that many Westerners profess to adhere to. (Incidentally, the inequality and subordination of women within the Westernized Christian religious tradition is also a male construct, which would be interesting to explore further, but is beyond the scope of this paper).

Grace Ellison was a feminist journalist who wrote about the East in the early 1900s. She disputes the Western misinterpretations about Oriental males in the following:

Poor Turks! How we have humiliated them! The Turk loves his home and he loves his wife. He is an indulgent husband and a kind father. And yet we judge him from the books, which are written, not to extend the truth about a people, but only to sell; the West expects to hear unwholesome stories when it reads of the Eastern homes . . .⁵

Reina Lewis cites the experience of Zeyneb Hanoum, a Turkish women, who corresponds to Grace Ellison about her observation of the Houses of Parliament in 1913, as follows:

⁴Leila Ahmed, "Western Ethnocentrism and Perceptions of the Harem," *Feminist Studies* 8, no.3 (Autumn, 1982), 524.

⁵Reina Lewis, *Rethinking Orientalism: Women, Travel and the Ottoman Harem*. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004),100.

But my dear, why have you never told me that the Ladies' Gallery is a Harem? . . . How inconsistent are you English! You send your women out unprotected all over the world, and here in the workshop where your laws are made, you cover them with a symbol of protection.⁶

The above excerpts give counter arguments to the impressions of Westerners about Eastern society. The accusations about despotic, highly sexed males, and the keen attention to the supposed repression of Eastern women were topics used to fortify the barriers of separation between Western and Eastern societies. A more objective narrative, free of hegemonic bias, describing the similarities of the East with the West might qualify the East as being unique and equal. The above excerpt about the Turkish home is in sharp contrast to negative stereotypes and describes an Oriental husband and father who cherishes his home and his wife and children, much like any other (Anglo-European) male would. Accenting the differences of cultures in travel writing supported and confirmed the hegemonic perception of superiority of the West and backwardness of the East within the European mind.

These travel writings were written by European elites primarily for other European elites. I come to this conclusion because these European travelers were going to the Orient on diplomatic missions and/or as tourists, and I do not think many working class people at that time would have had the leisure time or finances to travel, and any exceptions to this would be few. I also assume that the working class people during this time may not have access to the travel writings unless they were published in inexpensive formats, and I wonder if they would have had the leisure time when not working or taking care of their families to dedicate to this type of reading material.

⁶Lewis, *Rethinking Orientalism*, 223.

THE HAREM: THE CENTER OF THE EASTERN HOME

Yet another Orientalism inherited from the Western male fantasy is that a harem is a man's stable or collection of women. It is not. The harem is actually a place within an Eastern household, designated for the family. Alev Lytle Croutier states that the Arabic meaning of harem is "unlawful," "protected," or "forbidden," and is the separate and protected section of a Muslim household where women, children and their servants live in seclusion and privacy.⁷ According to Reina Lewis, segregated living was common in Middle East and Mediterranean ethnic communities and the harem was the domestic or family part of the household. She states, "For most families those living in the harem would include the wife of the eldest man (head of the family) and any daughters, daughters-in-law and their children. Children of both sexes had access to the *selamlık* [part of the house reserved for men], girls only being secluded when they took the veil at the onset of puberty."⁸ Leila Ahmed argues against the notion of harems being a holding ground for women, and states that harems were the living space shared by female relatives of a man, and enabled them to have frequent and easy access to other women in their community.⁹ In keeping with Grace Ellison's opinion about the Eastern man cherishing his home and family, instead of perceiving harems as prisons, perhaps they were originally intended as the central, fortified area within the household to gather all the women and children in one place to safely guard them from outside danger or intrusion.

⁷Alev Lytle Croutier, *Harem: The World Behind the Veil*. (New York: Abbeville Press, 1989), 17.

⁸Lewis, *Rethinking Orientalism*, 97.

⁹Amira Jarmakani, *Imagining Arab Womanhood: The Cultural Mythology of Veils, Harem, and Belly Dancers in the U.S.* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 37.

The imperial harems housed the wives, children and women relatives of sultans and caliphs. These women were educated and involved indirectly in matters of state and politics. Women spoke freely about state matters shared with them in private by their husbands, and harems became hubs of information and news, which traveled quickly between women of different harems/households. According to Lewis, “Women’s communication networks were more than mere gossip circles; they constituted a recognized and unofficial part of the structure of communication and power.”¹⁰ The harem trope was well known to Eastern women and they tried to dispel this myth by presenting the harem as a home and not a brothel.

As far as Muslim women being complete subordinates, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (whose husband was the Ambassador to Istanbul) wrote in 1717 that rich Muslim women owned and maintained control of their own properties even after marriage and seemed to be better placed and in less fear of their husbands than European women.¹¹ This is in complete contrast to European norms where as soon as women were married their property was placed in the control of the husband. There might be a few exceptions where a wealthy father might make special arrangements to protect a daughter from an unethical opportunist. But the seclusion of harem life and wearing the veil were still universally viewed by the West as being oppressive; however, many women living in the East did not view them in that way at all but rather felt protected by these customs. In fact, foreign presence was a precursor to increased seclusion, i.e., harems and veils, as resistance to foreign imperial intervention.¹²

¹⁰Lewis, *Gendering Orientalism*, 154..

¹¹Ahmed, “Western Ethnocentrism,” 525.

¹²Lewis, *Rethinking Orientalism*, 98.

In 1913, Emily Ruete, an Arab woman who grew up in a harem and married a European man, commented on Western perceptions of the subordination of women in the following:

. . . it is quite a fallacy to think that woman in the East is placed socially on a lower level than man. The legitimate wife . . . stands in all respects on a par with her husband, and she always retains her rank, and all rights and titles emanating from it, to their full extent.¹³

When the Europeans were focusing on the repression of the segregated Eastern society, particularly the seclusion of women living in the harem, they failed to look at the concept of seclusion of Western women. Western culture has practiced seclusion and coverture of women since the dawn of European history. For example, females lived in their father's household until they were married and then came under the control of their husbands. Women of higher class historically have been used as pawns and married off for economic and political reasons, either strengthening family (clan or tribe) connections or alliances between feudal lords or sovereign countries. Up until the twentieth century, women were expected to stay primarily within the private sphere/domain--the home--while men were permitted anywhere. Women had very limited access to the public sphere, designated as the male sphere, because it was considered profane and women needed to be protected from that by staying safely within the confines of the home.

The following sections are a few subcategories of the Muslim culture, which were very foreign and controversial to Europeans and viewed as oppressive to women. These topics include polygamy, women's dress, Turkish baths and wearing the veil. These also became focal points, which contributed to negative, inaccurate Muslim stereotypes—Orientalism--put in place by the Western culture.

¹³Emily Ruete, *Memoirs of an Arabian Princess From Zanzibar*. (New York: Markus Wiener Publishing, 1989), 145.

Polygamy

In many agrarian societies polygamy was a necessity and became a part of many religions. According to Croutier, Mohammed sanctioned polygamy as a solution to the increased ratio of females to males and to avoid the pre-Islamic practice of female infanticide.¹⁴ Contrary to popular belief, polygamy was practiced by Muslim kings and rich men, as it was expensive to support multiple wives and children, along with their extended female relatives and slaves/servants. The hegemonic Western version of polygamy not only influenced the European male's fantasy of ownership, control and sexual access to women, it also became a focal point to condemn Islam as barbaric and unchristian. It also promoted latent Orientalist stereotypes of Arabic men being insatiable sexual brutes and the women as being either prisoners and victims or very willing partners.

Lewis cites two Muslim women writers with opposing ideas about the effects that polygamous relationships had on families. Halide Edib hated polygamy and wrote about the negative stress caused by polygamy in her own home when growing up. She believed that polygamy created a state of mind that was not healthy in the harem. Vaka Brown stated the end of old ways was part of the sad decline of the Ottoman empire.¹⁵

Additionally, Lewis cites the writings of Emily Ruete, an Arabian princess from Zanzibar, who wrote in 1888, “. . . compared polygamy favourably with the hypocrisy of Christian marriage . . . and argued that the benefits of Muslim family life outweighed the evils of polygamy.”¹⁶ In referring to “the hypocrisy of Christian marriage,” she was alluding to men in monogamous cultures marrying and then taking mistresses, which was

¹⁴Croutier, *Harem: The World Behind the Veil*, 20.

¹⁵Lewis, *Rethinking Orientalism*, 110.

¹⁶Lewis, *Rethinking Orientalism*, 99.

morally hypocritical and deceitful, especially when the Christian standard was lauded as being superior to other religious beliefs. In this sense, Western men could have “hidden wives,” which was dishonest and disrespectful of the “true” wife. The argument was that at least in Islam, the wives knew of each other and frequently lived in the same household (harem).

Mary Wortley Montagu was very open-minded for her time and wrote letters to her friends regarding her experiences in the Ottoman Empire, known as her Embassy Letters. Regarding polygamy, she writes,

’Tis true their Law permits them 4 Wives, but there is no Instance of a Man of Quality that makes use of this Liberty, or of a Woman of Rank that would suffer it. When a Husband happens to be inconstant (as those things will happen) he keeps his mistress in a House apart and visits her as privately as he can, just as tis with you. . . I know the Treasurer that keeps a number of she slaves for his own use . . . and he is spoke of as a Libertine, or what we should call a Rake, and his Wife won’t see him, tho she continues to live in his house. Thus you see, dear Sister, the manners of Mankind doe not differ so widely as our voyage Writers would make us believe.¹⁷

Montague is making a comparison and stating that Eastern society is not that different from Western in that an Eastern man (who is not a high-ranking official or sultan) with more than one wife or who had sexual liaisons with many women was also considered to be lecherous.

Oriental Dress

Lady Montagu goes into a lot of detail about the jewels, style of dress and makeup worn by Eastern women. She expresses deep admiration of her hostess, Lady Kahya, and her gracious manners and her natural beauty. She indicated that if compared to Lady

¹⁷Mary Wortley Montagu, *The Complete Letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu* Vol 1. Robert Halsband, ed., (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1965), 329-30.

Kahya, “the most celebrated English beauties would vanish.”¹⁸ Montagu and Poole commented on the loose, more comfortable clothing the Eastern ladies wore. Montagu states that instead of dresses, the women wore loose trousers, which actually provided more coverage than a petticoat. She also described vests with long sleeves and girdles (sashes) that were either intricately embroidered or studded with jewels or shawls that were worn around the waist. Montagu wrote the following amusing experience when she was undressing to change into some clothes that her hostess offered her to try:

The Lady . . . entreated me to sit by her and would fain have undress’d me for the bath. . . I was at last forc’d to open my skirt and shew them my stays, which satisfy’d ‘em very well, for I saw they beleiv’d I was so lock’d up in that machine that it was not in my own power to open it, which contrivance they attributed to my husband.¹⁹

In 1741 when she related this same episode, Lady Montagu quoted the lady as saying, “The Husbands in England are much worse than in the East; for that they ty’d up their Wives in little Boxes, in the shape of their bodies.”²⁰ This statement is insightful and shows the contradiction of Europeans in their objections to Eastern women repression and civilization missions. European women wearing corsets to contort and control their bodies was also brutal. We see that not only were the European women gathering information to share back home, but the Eastern women were also gathering information about European women and forming their own impressions of European culture. To Westerners, the corset symbolized control, discipline and proper demeanor. It was constricting and showed a sign of status. Women who did not wear corsets were considered of low status or “loose” women. It was believed that corsets produced girls

¹⁸Montagu, *Letters*, 350.

¹⁹Montagu, *Letters*, 314.

²⁰Montagu, *Letters*, footnote 314-15.

entirely bound up by conventional expectations.²¹ Corsets not only controlled the body physically, they also psychologically controlled women's minds, behavior and sexual desires. From a Western point of view, controlling the behavior of women was important because uncontrolled women were thought to be dangerous.

In looking at some of the philosophy behind corsets, one can see that Eastern women were looked at as being uncontrolled and undisciplined or loose because they did not wear restrictive corsets. In contrast, their clothes were comfortable, loose-fitting and allowed more freedom of movement. Corsets made with whalebone or metal stays made it difficult for European women to exert themselves physically and often caused them to faint because of limited lung capacity, which prevented deep breathing and resulted in lack of oxygen. The squeezed and compressed ribcage and abdomen could potentially cause internal organ damage as well. The character Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone With the Wind* had a 16-inch waist. The crinoline cages layered with petticoats and bustles, worn in the nineteenth century, no doubt helped emphasize the small waist and made the bosom and hips appear larger. One might wonder who was more modestly dressed, English women who were poured into their corsets or Eastern women in their trousers, tunics and vests. When looking at the grotesquely contorted bodies of women in corsets, it is interesting to reflect which women were truly controlled and brutalized.

Clothing also showed rank or class in the East and West. When Sophia Poole, accompanied her brother to Cairo in 1844, she was introduced to the most distinguished homes in Cairo by Mrs. Sieder, a missionary. Poole insisted on being introduced to the

²¹Wendy Dasler Johnson, "Cultural Rhetorics of Women's Corsets," *Rhetoric Review* Vol 1. No. 3 / 4 (Autumn, 2001), 206-18. An extreme example of the corseted wasp waist is actress, Polaire (Emilie Marie Bouchaud), who had a 14-inch waist.
http://www.corsetheaven.com/forum/printer_friendly_posts.asp?TID=1118

better homes, and one household was of a former governor of Cairo. Poole also commented on the more comfortable Eastern style of dress, however, she was very conscious of class distinctions. She spoke of wearing her English dress to “avoid subjecting herself to humiliation.” English dress represented European superiority. If she wore Eastern style clothes, she states, “. . . the manner of my salutations must have been more submissive than I should have liked; while as an English woman, I am entertained by the most distinguished, not only as an equal, but generally superior.”²² She would wear the Eastern style when at her lodgings. Poole appears to be very conscious of her status and superiority as an English woman. On the other hand, perhaps being in Egypt allowed her to indulge in the freedom of taking her corset off and to dress in the Oriental mode at home. Perhaps when entertaining other Europeans “dressing up” gave her the chance to impress (or shock) them with her display of foreign fashion trends.

When comparing the comments made by Montagu and Poole, there appears to be more acceptance of the Eastern culture and customs on Montagu’s part. Her explanations and descriptions give the impression that she is gracious, complimentary, curious and open-minded. Poole seems to convey more of a superior Western attitude, which at times seems condescending. Poole states, “Believe me, there is much to fascinate and much to interest the mind in observing the peculiarities in these people which have no parallel in the West.”²³

Turkish Baths

The baths were public and made up of a series of several rooms, some hot rooms, like saunas, and others were cooling rooms with fountains. The hot vapors/steam would

²²Sophia Poole, *The Englishwoman in Egypt*. (London: Charles Knight & Co., 1844), 210.

²³Poole, *Englishwoman*, 215.

cause perspiration and then attendants/slaves would buff the skin with cloths or pumice stones, and then the ladies would retire to a cooling room where there were fountains or wading pools. Poole commented that the baths were very hot and oppressive.

In 1650 Robert Withers wrote *The Grand Signior's Serraglio* and suggested that women had sex with each other in the baths. Lady Montagu states she went to a bath when there were about 200 women present (she stayed dressed). She stated they were all nude and there was no distinction of rank. She complemented their natural beauty, grace, and commented that they were unashamed of their bodies. She refuted the claims of Withers' by stating, ". . . yet there was not the least wanton smile or immodest Gesture Amongst 'em."²⁴ The women would go to the baths once a week and stay four or five hours. Montagu states this was a social gathering where women were involved in conversations, braiding hair, drinking coffee and sharing the news of the town. She said that it was like a women's coffeehouse. Even after women refuted the false claims of male travel writers regarding licentiousness among women in harems and bath houses, Western painters continued to depict titillating scenes like Ingres' *The Turkish Bath* (1863) with sensual caresses.²⁵ It would appear that fantasy was more popular than accuracy and boosted art commissions in the West.

In their observations, European women were confronted by increased physical exposure. Many were uncomfortable with the way Eastern women were unashamed of their bodies, used to nudity and the unself-conscious way with which they carried themselves in the baths, in the harem and the dancing they performed for entertainment. Western norms of propriety and civilization, conformity and religion made a lot of

²⁴Montagu, *Letters*, 313.

²⁵Ahmed, "Western Ethnocentrism," 525-26.

Anglo-European women ashamed of their bodies. The rigid Western cultural and religious teachings of modesty and conformity made it hard to accept this aspect of Eastern culture.

The Veil

According to John Esposito, “The customs of veiling and seclusion of women in early Islam were assimilated from the conquered Persian and Byzantine societies and then later on they were viewed as appropriate expressions of Quranic norms and values.”²⁶ The custom of Muslim women was to wear bulky outward garments and veils that concealed their faces when going out in public so that no men were permitted to look upon them or bother them. This custom does not necessarily mean that women were subordinate to men. Rather, it would appear that the veil was a means to protect women from harm and unwanted male advances and to protect their reputation. The veil took the place of the structural seclusion of the harem when women in public and became more prevalent with the presence of foreigners. Veiling could also present a sign of status and class. Impoverished women who had to perform work did not use elaborate coverings and some did not wear the veil in public. The Qur’an states the following:

O Prophet, tell your wives and daughters and the believing women that they should cast their outer garments over their bodies (when abroad) so that they should be known and not molested.²⁷

When looking at the history of the veil, in actuality, women of all cultures and during all time periods from ancient to modern have worn head coverings or veils. This includes Eastern and Western cultures. This includes religious orders, particularly Catholic nuns who were required to wear habits. In medieval Europe, women wore veils,

²⁶John Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path*, 3rd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2005), 98.

²⁷Qur’an 33:59.

caps, headdresses, and in the nineteenth century, fashion replaced veils with hats. It is still customary that brides and widows wear veils today. Thus, one can argue that wearing the veil was not necessarily used to target, degrade or oppress Muslim women during the time of the Ottoman Empire. Veiling can be thought of as a boundary and protection against the humiliation or disgust of women being ogled by strange men.

To those born and raised within the Western culture, polygamy, the harem and veiling appeared to be blatantly repressive to Eastern women. The Western counterparts of these, i.e., extramarital relationships and the women's private sphere, were subtle and less glaring. Europeans were more vocal with their hegemonic opinions; however, Eastern women were able to see through the double standard and criticisms of their culture while Europeans appeared to be blind to their own inconsistencies. The Eastern woman might have been "confined" to the seclusion of a harem or behind the veil, but European women were just as confined and controlled within their corsets and hats.

HAREM LITERATURE TRANSITION TO THE ROMANCE NOVEL

(For Women Only)

Women travel writers dispelled a few of the maligning images of harems being Eastern bordellos and brought forth a less exciting version of the harem and other aspects of Muslim life. Their work was published and read by many women, and books on Eastern culture were popular, even if a bit more tame sexually. However, European women had their own preconceived notions about the East and harems sparked by the *Arabian Nights*, and these stories influenced their travel writing. Mary Roberts indicates women transformed their experiences into a feminine version of the imaginary Orient. She states:

The exotic décor, women's beauty, luxurious clothing, and sensory experiences propelled them into the *Arabian Nights* fantasy, while what transpired during their visits enabled the diarists to playfully imagine themselves as participants in exotic adventures. This notion of the exotic "rendered suitably 'respectable'" for a feminine audience.²⁸

The fantastic tales told by Scheherazade about Ali Baba, bands of thieves, slave girls, magic carpets and genies coming out of lamps provided the excitement and escape of fantasy situated within exotic Eastern lands. The East was still foreign and savage to the Western mind, but now it was also magical--open to the possibility that anything could happen. And it did in the desert romance novel.

The first desert romance novels were published as books in the early 1900s when Western women were beginning to challenge cultural and religious norms and rethinking their sexuality as natural and autonomous. However, desert romance was not put on the map until 1919 when E.M. Hull published *The Sheik*. Leaping out of its pages, riding a fierce desert charger, was Sheik Ahmed Ben Hassan, the ultimate dark, handsome, commanding, brutal, insatiable Arab lover wearing flowing robes who could consume a woman with a single penetrating look of his smoldering eyes, taking captive women's hearts wherever copies of the book were sold.

Concerning English women and romance novels in the 1920s, Karen Crow states, "The changing attitudes were reflected in the numbers of postwar women who actively participated in the creation and consumption of popular sex-novels and films, exercising both economic and sexual freedoms at once."²⁹ Authors like Hull gave women an escape

²⁸Mary Roberts, "Contested Terrains: Women Orientalists and the Colonial Harem," *Orientalism's Interlocutors: Painting, Architecture, Photography*. Jill Beaulieu and Mary Roberts, Eds. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 181.

²⁹Karen Crow, "Popular Sexual Knowledges and Women's Agency in 1920s England: Marie Stopes's Married Love and E.M. Hull's *The Sheik*," *Feminist Review* No 63, Negotiations and Resistances (Autumn, 1999), 64.

where they could experience excitement and emotion, even if only vicariously, by identifying with the abducted and ravaged heroines in their novels. These were escapist fantasies in which European or American women met an Oriental hyper-masculine “Other” who was determined to possess them.

These desert romances reinserted a lot of the notions that had previously been expelled by women’s travel writings with a new spin in the form of a role reversal, which was more exciting than the truth. Instead of the feminine Oriental being the object of desire by the Western male, the Western female is the object of desire by the masculine Oriental. This is similar to the trope of the black rapist, but now the rapist is an Arab. Women could indulge in voyeurism by reading about adventures of forbidden love and sex outside the confines of marriage with a man of foreign race and not feel guilty.

The following is an excerpt from *The Sheik* (1919) when the heroine, Diana Mayo, a young, modern/independent English girl, is abducted while riding her horse in the desert outside of Biskra in Algeria:

What had happened was so unexpected, so preposterous, that no conclusion seemed adequate. Only rage filled her—blind, passionate rage against the man who had dared to touch her, who had dared to lay his hands on her, and those hands the hands of a native. . . She had been outridden, swept from her saddle as if she were a puppet, and compelled to bear the proximity of the man’s own hateful body and the restraint of his arms. No one had ever dared to touch her before. No one had ever dared to handle her as she was being handled now. How was it going to end?³⁰

These romances were a form of resistance and rebellion against cultural patriarchy and established conventions, and in an odd way were empowering to women (even while at the same time, they objectified them). Women in the United States were on the brink of suffrage. Young women were becoming more independent and coming

³⁰E.M. Hull, *The Sheik* (New York: Paperback Library, Inc., 1963), 37

out of the private sphere by taking jobs. With money of their own, they could use discretionary income for entertainment and the romance novel was one form. In the desert romances, women could identify with and imagine themselves as being the attractive protagonists of the story who travel to exciting places and cannot help the fact that their beauty inflames the passion and lust of a handsome Arab who, after her obligatory struggle where the heroine tries to stave off the inevitable physical conquest, steals her virtue. With this act (rape) she is no longer a girl, but is transformed into a woman—his woman and his possession. The following is another example from *The Sheik*:

The flaming light of desire burning in his eyes turned her sick and faint. Her body throbbed with the consciousness of a knowledge that appalled her. She understood his purpose with a horror that made each separate nerve in her system shrink against the understanding that had come to her under the consuming fire of his ardent gaze, and in the fierce embrace that was drawing her shaking limbs closer and closer against the man's own pulsing body. She writhed in his arms as he crushed her to him in a sudden access of possessive passion. . . . Numbly she felt him gather her high up into his arms, his lips still clinging closely, and carry her across the tent through curtains into an adjoining room. He laid her down on soft cushions. "Do not make me wait too long," he whispered, and left her.³¹

At the same time these "innocent" novels were vehicles of escapism, they also reinforced the blatant stereotypes and latent Orientalism, as follows:

He was pitiless in his arrogance, pitiless in his Oriental disregard of the woman subjugated. He was an Arab, to whom the feelings of a woman were non-existent. He had taken her to please himself and he kept her to please himself, to amuse him in his moments of relaxation. . . . When not engaged in killing their neighbors she visualized them [Arabs] drowsing away whole days under the influence of narcotics, lethargic with sensual indulgence. The pictures she had seen had been mostly of fat old men sitting cross-legged in the entrance of their tents, waited on by hordes of retainers, and looking languidly, with an air of utter boredom, at some miserable slave being beaten to death.³²

³¹Hull, *The Sheik*, 40.

³²Hull, *The Sheik*, 62-63

The plot line of these stories consistently promotes Western subordination of women by portraying the heroine being taken captive and (forcibly) being deflowered by a virile, unmarried, rich, non-white (in this case Eastern) male. He imprisons her within his *empty* harem. He is cruel to her, objectifies and humiliates her, but in spite of herself, the heroine soon falls in love with him. This love is forbidden and taboo because they have had sexual relations outside of marriage, and marriage would never be acceptable because he is not of her (Caucasian) race.

Her heart was given for all time to the fierce desert man who was so different from all other men whom she had met, a lawless savage who had taken her to satisfy a passing fancy and who had treated her with merciless cruelty. He was a brute, but she loved him, loved him for his very brutality and superb animal strength. And he was an Arab! A man of different race and colour, a native . . . A year ago, a few weeks even, she would have shuddered with repulsion at the bare idea, the thought that a native could even touch her had been revolting, but all that was swept away and was nothing in the face of the love that filled her heart so completely. She did not care if he was an Arab, she did not care what he was, he was the man she loved. She was deliriously, insanely happy. She was lying against his heart, and the clasp of his arm was joy unspeakable."³³

This genre is fraught with constant conflict of will, power struggles and misunderstanding between the characters (i.e., master/servant, secret affection masked by pride of one or both characters, leading to misinformation and frustrations of assumed unrequited love). To advance the plot and resolve the conflict, something happens where the heroine is in danger and in the act of rescuing her (his prize possession), the brute realizes that he is in love with her—but is he too late to save her; can he ever hold her in his arms again and profess his undying love for her? With this revelation, the masculine character becomes less powerful by relinquishing some of his power to the woman

³³Hull, *The Sheik*, 88-89.

because of his affection for her. She has succeeded in taming and civilizing (an act of redemption) the savage beast through her love for him. However, there are still some insurmountable problems concerning, premarital sex, and misogyny which could lead to bastard children. Western women readers cannot accept the story ending this way, so the ending is eventually “sanitized” for delicate Western (Puritanical) sensibilities. There must be a happy and conventionally acceptable ending for the heroine (and the reader). This is usually accomplished by a sudden plot twist in the end, i.e., previously undisclosed information that comes to light that the Arab’s father is really a European aristocrat; however, both parents die and the orphaned child is adopted by an Arabian prince who is, in fact, a friend of the family. What a relief--all is now well! The villain-turned-hero can now marry the heroine, make an honest woman of her, their children will be legitimate, and they can live happily ever after.

CONCLUSION

In the 1700s through early 1900s Europeans traveled to the East for diplomatic, exploration or tourism purposes. Travel writing became a popular genre. The first travel writers were men, but when they visited the Eastern countries, they were not permitted entry into the part of households known as harems and they were not even permitted to look at the faces of Oriental women. To the European, this prohibition was mysteriously suspicious, and their inclination was to perceive harems as either prisons or brothels, particularly since the Eastern culture practiced polygamy. These assumptions were more thoroughly investigated by European women who were permitted to visit the harems and wrote their own, more accurate observations.

However, even in women's writings, the superior attitudes of Europeans came through and continued to promote a Western constructed Orientalism. Some of the differences of custom and thought were too much for unbending Europeans, and their attitudes put up barriers and Europeans categorized Orientals as the Other. Ironically, Western women were so focused on pointing out the differences and repressions of Eastern women by their men that they were unable (or unwilling) to see their own repression and the hypocrisy constructed by the men of their own culture. Thus, many Eastern repressions had corresponding Western ones.

Harem literature was very popular, even though the travel writings of women desexualized harems. But European women infused their own fantasies into the travel literature, originated from the stories in *Arabian Nights*. These fantasies of the magical Orient were the bridge between travel/harem literature, which became the desert romance novel. However, while these novels had plot lines that were compelling and exciting for women readers as a form of entertainment and escapism, they also reinforced the misconceptions and stereotypes of latent Orientalism. Desert romances were sexually liberating for women readers because they were able to indulge in fantasies of exotic lands by stepping outside of cultural norms and conventions by stepping into the pages of romance literature where they could vicariously identify with white heroines who were desired and abducted by non-white males.

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