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Orientalist Conceptions of Muslim Women: A Critical Analysis of Selected Orientalist Discourses

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Abstract:

The current study is a scholarly epistemological and postcolonial feminist study of orientalist discourse that focuses on the historical, theological and ideological dimensions of the construction of the "Muslim woman". This study reveals a common tendency of classical Orientalist scholars (Ernest Renan, William Muir, and D. S. Margoliouth) to exhibit scriptural essentialism and textual decontextualization. It is important to remember that these methodological errors were not merely academic missteps but were tools used in creating a unified image of Muslim women as passive, oppressed subjects that were used to justify the colonial framework of civilizational superiority and imperial intervention. The paper compares these colonial narratives using a qualitative comparative hermeneutical approach and the critical perspectives of Said, Spivak and Lila Abu-Lughod, postcolonial thinkers. Moreover, it brings in the Muslim feminist counter-hermeneutics of Fatema Mernissi to reveal the fallacies in the orientations of the Orient. The results show that classical scholarship on the Orient has adopted a highly epistemological one-sidedness, and that it was deliberately overlooked to conform to a comprehensive imperialist programme. This study has been intentionally limited to the analysis of classical vs. modern hermeneutics and has avoided the complicating factors of localized regional practices or state-legal aspects of the analysis of the 21st century. It methodologically challenges gendered Orientalism, adding to the more complex landscape of representational politics, interpretive authority and subaltern agency in Islamic and Gender Studies.

Keywords: Gendered Orientalism, Scriptural Essentialism, Postcolonial Discourse, Muslim Feminist, Hermeneutics, Representational, Politics, Epistemological, Bias, Colonial, Discourse, *Asbab al-Nuzul*, Subaltern Agency.

Introduction:**The Epistemic Production of the "Muslim Woman"**

The Muslim woman's role in the complex history of the West's relationship with the Orient is a highly politicized and discursively charged one. In the past, Western epistemology of the Orient had been strongly shaped by an Orientalism which was characterized by the systematic cataloguing, classification and evaluation of the Orient from the imperial and Eurocentric perspective. In this discursive structure, the "Muslim woman" became not an autonomous agent who lived in an "existential" reality but as an ideological formation that is manipulated according to other hegemonies. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the absolute oppression of women in Islamic societies was a frequently used empirical gauge by such foundational Orientalists as Ernest Renan, Sir William Muir, and D. S. Margoliouth during the high tide of European imperialism to establish Western civilization and morality as the absolute standard.¹

This orientalism created a widespread and binary image that seeped into both academic research and popular colonial imagination: the Islamic woman was hyper-sexualized as a slave to the lofty Harem-like landscape of the romanticized East, and equally victim to the oppressive veil. Most importantly, these images were not just scholarly or an ethnographic objective observation but rather served as the groundwork on which the colonial discourse was built. Muslim woman was presented as the ultimate subaltern victim of the indigenous, religiously sanctioned patriarchy and thus received the moral justification necessary for imperial intervention under the guise of the mission *Civilis trice*. The military and economic domination of Islamic lands, then, was rhetorically purified, changed from a project of political control and exploitation to one of salvation.

Over the last few decades, postcolonial criticism has shifted in several ways and has come to a clear realization that the histories depicted were based on an epistemological paradigm that was fundamentally flawed. The paradigm was based on textual decontextualization, that is, the intentional removal of specific verses from Islamic scripture from the rest of the verses used as a context for their jurisprudential (*Fiqh*) application and historical context. Thus, there is an urgent need for a critical deconstruction of the hermeneutical methodology of the classical Orientalists and a robust critical engagement with it by modern postcolonial theory and Muslim feminist counter hermeneutics.

Research Problem and Methodological Gap

The core research problem centers on interrogating how classical Orientalist scholars deliberately constructed an essentialized, monolithic image of Muslim women through intersecting colonial, theological, and civilizational discourses. This construction actively obscured the lived realities, historical diversity, and localized agency of women across various Muslim-majority societies. The problem further extends to recognizing the enduring legacy and structural half-life of these textual constructs in modern geopolitical narratives, necessitating a rigorous, methodology-driven examination of how contemporary postcolonial theorists and Muslim feminist scholars dismantle these enduring historical tropes. The critical study of Orientalist textual methodologies, when

¹ Ernest Renan's lecture at the Sorbonne in 1883, *L'Islamisme et la science*, is frequently cited as the intellectual bedrock of the nineteenth-century thesis that Islam and modernity were fundamentally irreconcilable. Renan's racial and linguistic determinism laid the groundwork for later Orientalists to treat Islamic texts as static artifacts rather than living theology

compared to the contemporary media stereotypes of "oppressed Muslim woman," is in a state of methodological disarray with extensive literature available on Said's general theory of Orientalism, but few studies that present a critical examination of the classical Orientalist textual methodologies and the Muslim feminist counter-hermeneutics' epistemology. Most of the scholarship on the Orientalist image today focuses on its political or sociological aspects and often ignores the underlying theological arguments and literalist hermeneutics that informed Orientalist image. This research is a bridging of the methodological gulf between a general postcolonial discourse analysis and a very specific textual, theological deconstruction. It reflects epistemological tensions between Orientalist scriptural essentialism and the complex and dynamic Islamic historical exegesis. There are two approaches employed here: Postcolonial Hermeneutics and Epistemological Critique. These are two ways in which this is done: Postcolonial Hermeneutics and Epistemological Critique. The design is critical epistemological research with qualitative and comparative hermeneutical approach. It juxtaposes postcolonial discourse analysis with cutting-edge interpretive theory systematically challenges the analytical optics and teleology of the classical Orientalist representational politics. This design sees the Orientalist archive as more of a discourse of power built upon the process of decontextualization, rather than an archive of objective facts, for the systematic analysis of the process of misrepresentation of Muslim women.²

To ensure a high level of epistemological purity, this study has a methodological perimeter that is very narrow and limited: it deliberately and explicitly avoids the analysis of contemporary regional state-legal apparatuses or case studies of geopolitical regions. Rather, the discussion is wedded exclusively to the conflict between classical and modern hermeneutics. The research separates out the textual interpretation mechanisms from religious doctrine, which avoids the problem of mixing up religious doctrine with local cultural or legal oddities.

Its principal sources of history are the lectures on Islam and science by Ernest Renan (1883), *The Life of Mahomet*³ (1861) by Sir William Muir, and the early twentieth century works of D. S. Margoliouth. These texts are analysed qualitatively using discourse analysis and rigorously analysed to expose the dominant trends of scriptural essentialism and cultural determinism. The academic counter-narrative rests on the theoretical work of Edward Said and extends the critical postcolonial work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Lila Abu-Lughod. In addition, the internal theological critique is supported by methodological innovations of Fatema Mernissi, including her forensic deconstruction of classical Hadith literature.

The methodological approach consists of a demystification of the epistemological conditions of the discourses selected, under the three thematic axes: (a) localization of sociopolitical practice in a situation of theological dogma, (b) the weaponization of the veil and of the harem, (c) the discourse of the "salvation" of the colonized as a mark of imperial power. The analysis should begin with an attentive comparative hermeneutical study to clarify the difference between the static and literalist interpretation, favored by Orientalists, and the dynamic and contextual one of interpretive

² Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's analysis of the British abolition of *sati* in India serves as the theoretical archetype for understanding the "rescue narrative." This paradigm seamlessly transferred to the Middle East and North Africa, where the veil replaced the funeral pyre as the ultimate symbol of subaltern female suffering requiring European intervention.

³ For full detail see: Ali, Farman, and Humaira Ahmad. "Early Christian Sirah writings of Subcontinent: A comparative study of their methods, impact and cogitating on new contemporizing methodology." *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization* 8, no. 1 (2018): 129–143.

authority (Ijtihad), and occasions of revelation (*Asbab al-Nuzul*) within classical Islamic interpretation.³

The Invention of Tradition Classical Orientalism as Discourse of the 'Other'.

The theoretical basis of this critique is no longer in question, and it is the seminal work of Edward Said (1978), entitled *Orientalism*, which has set the paradigm that the concept of Orient was an ideological construct, serving the interests of Western hegemony. Said's lens is essential for engaging in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholars' works as products of imperial power production and knowledge production. In this larger framework, European historians and philologists engaged in the study of Islamic culture with a very essentialist and frequently racialized epistemological approach. Ernest Renan, for example, suggested that the Islamic religion was fundamentally anti-rationalism, anti-science and anti-modernity, and that this stagnation was directly caused by rigid social norms and absolute isolation of women. Renan's arguments were able to directly link theology with the decay of society and thus set up a discursive structure that made Western secularism the sole means for human progress.

British scholars, like Sir William Muir, reinforced this epistemological bias. As a leading colonial administrator in India, Muir applied a very selective literalism in his monumental *Life of Mahomet* (1861). In what amounted to a "scriptural essentialism" (as Muir called it), he read Islamic scripture (Qur'an and Hadith) as a fixed and unyielding code of behaviour. He claimed that the subordination of women, polygyny and the veil were theological requirements that were made without apology and had to be accepted without question; these were basic requirements of Islam that demonstrated its basic incompatibility with civilized norms. In the early twentieth century, D.S. Margoliouth used a similar philological arrogance, a text-a-thirsty western mind to dissect the texts.

Important, these scholars were unaware of the centuries of legal development under several different legal jurisdictions (Fiqh), and of the extensive jurisprudential history of Muslim legal discussion and the many geographical and cultural adaptations. They deliberately cut the text away from its interpretive tradition – abolished the essential separation between normative religious ideals and actual, socially and politically determined practices, thus discursively creating a permanent slave of her religion: the quintessential "Muslim woman"

The Epistemology of Salvation and the Erasure of Subaltern Agency

A central pillar of the Orientalist discursive architecture is the representation of Muslim women as uniformly passive subjects, awaiting external liberation. This narrative transitions seamlessly from a theological critique into a political imperative: the colonial discourse of "saving" the Muslim woman. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal articulation of the colonial rescue fantasy summarized as "white men saving brown women from brown men"⁴ provides the critical vocabulary necessary to deconstruct this phenomenon. In the writings of Muir and Margoliouth, the veil (hijab) and the physical segregation of women are rarely analyzed as culturally contingent, economically driven, or socially complex phenomena; rather, they are flattened into ubiquitous, ahistorical symbols of Islamic civilizational backwardness.⁵

By framing the Muslim woman as a silent, invisible entity completely devoid of localized agency,

⁴ Spivak, 1988, p. 296

⁵ Lila Abu-Lughod critiques the post-9/11 resurgence of colonial feminism, arguing that the rhetoric of "saving Afghan women" functioned as a moral shield for military invasion. Her work insists on recognizing "different grammars of personhood," challenging the Western monopoly on defining freedom and female agency

colonial discourse established an absolute binary between the "liberated," rational Western woman and the "enslaved," irrational Eastern woman. This erasure of subjectivity was not merely an analytical failure but a strategic necessity for the imperial project. As anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod (2002) incisively argues, the Western obsession with "saving" Muslim women inherently presumes that Western secular liberalism is the ultimate teleological endpoint of human development. This framework actively dismisses the possibility of indigenous, Islamic, or alternative paradigms of female empowerment.

Furthermore, Abu-Lughod demonstrates how colonial and neo-colonial narratives weaponize the veil, failing to recognize that for many women, forms of modest dress signify piety, social respectability, or even localized resistance, rather than passive submission to patriarchal tyranny. The Orientalist epistemology thus forces the Muslim woman into an impossible paradox: she must either assimilate to Western norms to achieve legibility as a "liberated" subject or remain eternally categorized as an oppressed victim of her own faith.⁶

Sexuality, Harem, and the Paradox of Gendered Orientalism

Orientalist discourse paradoxically produced a hyper-sexualized, exotic fantasy of the Muslim woman, spatially enclosed in the imagined harem, while at the same time producing the image of a veiled, oppressed woman. Historical and philological scholarship was subtly infused with this gendered Orientalism that was clearly articulated in the art, literature, and travel accounts of the nineteenth century. The East was built as a geographical place of unrestrained, despotic sexuality, in contrast to Victorian European prudery. The harem was conceived as a place of ultimate tyranny for men, and as an exotic source of eroticism.

In this dualistic construction, the woman is both a pitiful victim of the religious domination of the Orient and an objectified product of sexual excess, it becomes evident that the Orientalist enterprise is a fragile epistemological construct. It underscores the degree to which knowledge production was orientalist, rather than empirical or sociopolitical, and the degree to which it was westerner psychological projection than cultural anxiety. After the Muslim woman's body was made a game of European scholars with their complicated preoccupations with race, gender, and power, it was neglected from their perspective of the actual domestic architecture, kinship network, and economic roles of women in the historic Islamic societies on this body. The text became a battleground of European scholars as they projected their preoccupations with race, gender, and power onto the body, and women's domestic architecture, kinship network, and economic role were systematically ignored.⁷

Classical vs. Modern Hermeneutics and Interpretive Authority

However, the strongest critique of the classical Orientalist essentialism comes neither from secular postcolonial theory, but rather from the Islamic tradition itself, namely in the form of contemporary Muslim feminist counter-hermeneutics. The Orientalist error is 'methodological' in

⁶ Lila Abu-Lughod critiques the post-9/11 resurgence of colonial feminism, arguing that the rhetoric of "saving Afghan women" functioned as a moral shield for military invasion. Her work insists on recognizing "different grammars of personhood," challenging the Western monopoly on defining freedom and female agency

⁷ The harem, as a spatial and discursive construct, was heavily mythologized by European travelers who rarely, if ever, had actual access to these domestic spaces. Scholars like Mayda Yeğenoğlu have extensively analysed how the veil and the harem functioned in the European imagination to signify the impenetrable, exotic, and inherently threatening nature of the Orient.

that it equates 'goodness' and 'equal treatment' in scriptural law with 'historically bound' and 'patriarchal' sociopolitical practices. The Qur'ān and the Hadith were read by the orientalist only to get some evidence of the backwardness of Islam. One way for scholars to attack it is to break it down using a sophisticated internal critique, as in the case of Fatema Mernissi (1991) who uses the classical tool of Islamic jurisprudence to retake the interpretive authority.

In her pioneering work, Mernissi has vividly illustrated the importance of the distinction between divine text and human interpretation. In a careful re-reading of the *Asbab al-Nuzul* (occasions of revelation) and using classical Hadith verification methodologies (*Ilm al-Rijal*), Mernissi reveals how the male interpretive elite has traditionally imposed its own sociopolitical agendas on the foundational texts. She, for example, exposes the significant misogynistic Hadiths that were quoted by classical Orientalists and conservative Muslim traditionalists, and shows that they are unreliable in their historical context or have been misinterpreted.

Mernissi states that the scholars, such as Muir, have discovered systems that are restrictive and oppressive that did not form the essence of Islamic theology during the life of the Prophet but rather were imposed on it by the institutions of the patriarchy after his death. This hermeneutical intervention is essential, a demonstration that the Islamic tradition does have the flexible methodological internal machinery to change in an egalitarian manner, and that the Orientalist claim of a static, misogynist religion is completely wrong. The focus on this hermeneutical rupture, in other words on the move from classical male-centered tafsir to modern feminist epistemology, avoids the 'noise' of the region-specific legalities to attack the epistemological foundations of textual authority itself.⁸

Conclusion:

This academic study concludes that the classical Orientalist view of the Muslim woman is an ideological fiction based upon a discursive process of power, not a real historical or religious truth. Foundational Orientalist scholars used techniques of deliberate decontextualization and deep epistemological bias to create a paradigm of gendered Orientalism, which was conducive to the geopolitical interests of the European empire. The passive, veiled victim waiting for Western salvation gave justification to colonial intervention and a polarizing shadow over current global geopolitical debate. This essentialist approach is however analytically indefensible as shown by the severe postcolonial deconstruction of Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Lila Abu-Lughod. Moreover, the strong internal counter-hermeneutics of Orientalist readings of Islamic texts has been demonstrated by scholars such as Fatema Mernissi who show that the Orientalist reading of Islamic texts is basically wrong, in as much as it leaves out the dynamic, interpretive pluralism of Islamic jurisprudence. Academic research in Islamic studies and Gender studies should go beyond the reductive binary opposition of clash of civilizations in the future. It requires a very sophisticated, historically informed perspective that is both conscious of the various forms of representation politics involved and unconventional in its rejection of scriptural essentialism and its recognition of the historical agency and the authority of Muslim women in the field of interpretation.

⁸ Fatema Mernissi's *The Veil and the Male Elite* represent a watershed moment in Islamic feminism. By utilizing traditional Islamic sciences—specifically the rigorous authentication methods of *Ilm al-Rijal* (the science of the men/narrators)—Mernissi beat classical traditionalists at their own methodological game, demonstrating that patriarchy, not theology, was responsible for the codification of gender inequality in *Fiqh*.

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