

INTIMATE EYES: A HISTORIOGRAPHY OF EUROPEAN WOMEN TRAVELERS' IMPACT ON ORIENTALISM

Ali ABDULLAH¹

Abstract

This essay explores the historiography of pre-Victorian and Victorian women travelers in the Islamic Orient and their impact on Orientalism. The major focus will be on how scholars on the subject express the ways in which the intimate gaze aided in developing the eroticism and exoticism of not only the female space but also the Islamic Orient in general. The essay is divided into two parts: the first examines authors who consider women's travel writing pivotal in shaping the Victorian preconceived notions of the Islamic Orient; and the second explores scholars who contextualize European women's travel writings as vital agents of both the Imperialist and the Orientalist agendas.

Keywords: Travel Writing, Orientalism, Victorian Age, Women's Studies

1. Introduction

Travel could be defined as physical mobility across space, whether it is moving from one room to another or from one country to another. Travel that involves contact between historically separated cultures also results in a psychological or cultural shift; thus, the traveler experiences a journey in time or temporal reality. The purpose of travel is found in what Eric J. Leed defines as the departure, which, according to Leed, "charters the journey, establishing its motives and first meanings" as well as the "initial identity of the traveler" (1991: 25). It is in the context of imperialism that European travelers ventured into the lands of the Orient. These travelers have many points of departure: exploration, discovery, imperial missions, compulsion, pleasure, or escape. In many instances, travelers left visual accounts, whether written or picturesque, of their journeys. These forms of travel expression give the audience insight into the traveler's point of departure.

Travel during the time of European Imperialism is movement through space and time dominated by inequality, power and privilege. On one hand, it is the establishment of what Mary Louise Pratt calls "contact zones"; while on the other, it is the exploration of the unknown and cultural navigation of the contact zones. Pratt prefers "contact zone" as opposed to "colonial frontier" because the latter excludes the autochthonous perspective while the former "shifts the center of gravity and the point

¹ Ali Abdullah, Community College of Qatar, ali.abdullah@ccq.edu.qa

of view” thus establishing a “space and time where subjects previously separated by geography and history are co-present, the point at which their trajectories now intersect” (2008: 8). Travel expression is the traveler’s visual interpretation of the contact zone. It is an exercise in the expression of perspectives based on the senses. In other words, it is what the eyes see, the ears hear, the nose smells, the skin touches, the mouth tastes, the mind thinks, and the heart feels. Travel writing and travel art are the largest genres in travel expression. While the former verbally describes the Orient, the latter visually captures the Orient. Their point of convergence is aesthetics, and together, they create an image of feminine beauty in the Orient. It was the aesthetics of the contact zone that captivated Orientalist in Victorian society.

Victorian society was full of interesting contradictions. On one hand, it portrayed itself to be a society of high Christian morals and family values, but, at the same time, sexual deviance was widespread. In “A Study of Victorian Prostitution and Venereal Disease”, E.M. Sigsworth and T.J. Wyke provide evidence that challenges the reputation of “respectability and rectitude” that many social historians attribute to Victorian Society (1972: 77). Furthermore, Victorian society also found its morals and values challenged as a result of its exploits and conquests of foreign and exotic lands. These lands and their people stood in sharp contrast to the morals, values, and beliefs of the Victorians, and travel expressions further exacerbated the differences, or otherness. Otherness is defined by Jean-François Staszak as “a discursive process by which a dominant in-group (“Us,” the Self) constructs one or many dominated out-groups (“Them,” Other) by stigmatizing a difference – real or imagined – presented as a negation of identity and thus a motive for potential discrimination” (2009: 2). Victorian travelers served as the eyes and ears that described the contact zones of the empire, and their written accounts and artistic expressions created a discourse of otherness, which is essential to Orientalism. Additionally, the writings, stories and art of travelers popularized Orientalism by fascinating and mystifying the Victorian public.

Edward Said describes Orientalism as “a way of coming to terms with the Orient based on the Orient’s special place in European Western experience” because “the Orient is one of its (Europe) deepest and most reoccurring images of the Other” (1978: 1). It is important to note that Said narrows the geographical range of Europe to include mostly England and France. This was necessary because the Other took different forms for other European imperial powers. For example, even though Spain and Portugal had intimate knowledge of the Orient, otherness in Iberia was dominated by the native tribes of the Americas, as well as by those African tribes with whom Iberian travels came into contact, colonized, or enslaved.

The Islamic world posed many challenges to Western travelers, but it was the Islamic feminine space that was the most frustrating and mysterious. Orientalist male explorers had little to no success in penetrating this hidden and secretive world and were thus left to conjecture and hypothesis. In her work on seventeenth century

French travel writing, Michèle Longino notes, “One of the remarkable (if not surprising) features of travel journals describing the Levant at this time is that women are almost totally absent”, and that in his descriptions of Turkish women, the French ethnographer Jean de Thévenot, “expands only on those parts occasionally exposed—their eyes and their hands” (2015: 43). However, by the eighteenth century, European women started to travel to the Orient, and they would prove to be a major ally in the Orientalists’ quest for the unknown pleasures hidden behind the veil. The religious restrictions that forbid men from entering female spaces like the harem and bath house did not apply to women; thus, the contact zone that Victorian women experienced in the Muslim Orient was more intimate than that experienced by men.

The result is an intimacy in their writing that could only be experienced by women writing about feminine space. To put it in simple terms, European women were able to get up close and personal with Muslim women. In some instances, they were even able to pass into Oriental space, and thus, in a cultural or even spiritual sense, were “transported” back in time. Barbara Hodgson describes the Orient as “a living museum filled with people, objects, and traditions, recalling a heroic and idealized past” that served as a “magic door” to the *Arabian Nights*. To demonstrate a more intimate perspective, Hodgson opens the section “Escape to the Arabian Nights” with Countess Ida von Hahn-Hahn’s quote, “From the world that is, I want to go to that which was. From the West of today to the Orient of yesterday (1844)” and later notes that Lucie Duff Gordon never lost the feeling that she had “entered the dreamlike world of Harun al-Rashid” during her six years living in Egypt (2005: 18-19). In other words, the contact zone of the Victorian Orient was a shift in temporal reality.

At the same time, women’s travel expressions reflected the concerns and issues that they dealt with as women in a gender-repressive Victorian Society. It was a society that placed great value on the notion of femininity, or the “perfect lady”, who developed into the “perfect woman” and became the “cornerstone” of the Victorian family structure (Vicinus, ix-x). Clothing was a symbol of status in Victorian society, and after femininity and family, it was even more important than food in the life of young working-class ladies. Peter N. Sterns demonstrates that even though many working ladies were undernourished, they spent a significant amount of their earnings on clothing (1972: 110-111). Consequently, much of the gaze of Victorian female travelers focused on family, femininity and clothing. While Oriental men dominated the Orient and European men explored most of the spaces in the Orient, there were spaces that were female dominated and off limits to the male gaze, especially that of the European male. The bathing houses and harems are examples of what Mary Louise Pratt defines as “idealized worlds of feminine autonomy, empowerment, and pleasure” or “feminotopias” (2008: 163). Women travelers were agents of Orientalism who could explore these feminotopias whereas their counterparts could not. Furthermore, it was European women travel writers and

artists, e.g., Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Elizabeth Marsh, Lucie Duff Gordon, Henriette Browne and Elisabeth Jerichau-Bauman, who were able to open the secrets of the feminotopias to the European public.

Travel expressions on femininity depict the otherness between women and, at the same time, objectify the Oriental woman. There are writings and paintings that illustrate the female bath house and harem, both representing space to which the male gaze, Oriental and British alike, would have never had access. Expressions about clothing not only focus on the general otherness between Oriental and Victorian clothing but also on the three levels of clothing in Oriental feminine space: the nudity of the bath house, the elegance of clothing for the private space, and the dual nature of clothing for the public space. Thus, the intimacy of the female gaze opened the Oriental female space whereby making the Oriental female the subject of eroticism and exoticism for Victorian society. As a result, European women writers, artists and orators were essential to the Orientalist agenda because they were the intimate eyes that penetrated the contact zone of empire and created a more comprehensive account of the Other.

This essay explores the historiography of pre-Victorian and Victorian women travelers in the Islamic Orient and their impact on Orientalism. The major focus is on how scholars on the subject express the ways in which the intimate gaze aided in developing the eroticism and exoticism of not only the female space, but also the Islamic Orient in general. The essay is divided into two parts: the first examines authors who consider women's travel writing pivotal in shaping the Victorian preconceived notions of the Islamic Orient; and the second explores scholars who contextualize European women's travel writings as vital agents of both the Imperialist and the Orientalist agendas.

2. Putting the Intimacy into Orientalism

2.1 Women and Orientalism

Meyda Yeğenoğlu's work *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism* (1998) stands out as a highly representative work for the intimate gaze. As mentioned in the title, she offers a feminist approach to the understanding of Orientalism by questioning Edward Said's neglect of the role of women in the development of the Orientalist perspective. By doing this, she does not reject Orientalism but rather brings to light the crucial role that Western women played in shaping the phenomenon. She establishes that Orientalist men had limitations to what they could observe and experience in the Islamic Orient.

In the chapter "Supplementing the Orientalist Lack," she investigates the role and status of representations of the Orient and its women by Western women in the formation of Oriental imagery (1998: 72). Yeğenoğlu establishes that the West's

desire for the Oriental other is mediated by its desire to have access to the space of Oriental women, to the body of its women, and to the truth of its women. “The Orient,” contends Yeğenoğlu, “seen in the embodiment of sensuality, is always understood in feminine terms and accordingly its place in Western imagery has been constructed through the simultaneous gesture of racialization and feminization” (1998: 73). This is consistent with Anderson’s amalgamation of the female body, imperialism, and territory.

Yeğenoğlu proceeds to put the intimate gaze into its proper context within Orientalism. The intimate gaze fulfilled the Orientalist desire to penetrate the mysteries of the Orient by providing the ability to see and have access to the interior space of the Oriental woman. She reports that Orientalist Théophile Gautier expressed that “the only method to employ, in order to really obtain any authentic information, is to request some European lady, who is well introduced and has access to harems, to recount to you faithfully that which she has seen” (1998: 75). This demonstrates how the privilege of access allowed European women to enter into the intimate female space of the Muslim Orient and to act, voluntarily or involuntarily, as agents of eroticism and exoticism.

Yeğenoğlu treats women’s travel writings in the Orient as the supplement to their male counterparts. They lifted the veils from and drew back the curtains to the intimate space. They supplied the Orientalists with what Yeğenoğlu calls the secrets to the details and mysteries of the harem and the lascivious sexuality the other-sex enjoys behind that closed curtain (1998: 74). Therefore, it was the gaze of women travelers that functioned as authentic depictions of the true nature of the Islamic Orient.

2.2 Women in the colonial discourse

In *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women’s Travel Writing and Colonialism* (1993), Sara Mills explores the specific nature of women’s travel writings within the colonial discourse; yet at the same time, she also considers the ways in which women’s travel writings were similar to those of men. Although she does not include a narrative about the Islamic Orient, the theoretical framework that Mills establishes backs the general study of women travel writers and their impact on imperialism. Mills chooses discourse as opposed to context because this places women’s travel writings under the scope of language instead of time and space. She contends that within the colonial context, women’s writings are judged and categorized differently because of gender (1993: 5-6). While analyzing the criticism that women travel writers faced, Mills says that “critics also lack an overall perspective of the role of women’s travel texts and the discourse of Orientalism, since they insist on treating these women’s texts as expressions of personal endeavor and individualism rather than as part of a larger enterprise” (1993: 34). This

observation supports the feminist rethinking of Orientalism and gives women travel writers their proper status within the context of colonial discourse.

Mills' arguments shed light on an important point. Orientalist men during the time understood the critical role that women travel writers played in the opening up of the Islamic Orient; however, male dominated scholarship on the topic of Orientalism gave little importance to the role of women writers. This can be attributed to the two issues that marginalized women travelers during the colonial period. First, as Mills argues, women travelers were viewed as trying to escape the constraints of Victorian society, and second, imperialism was perceived as constructing a masculine British identity rather than a national identity (1993: 3). The feminist rethinking of Orientalism has shown that the intimate gaze of women allowed the masculine identity to mature because Orientalists were able to confirm their preconceived notion of the feminine nature of the Islamic Orient.

3. Laying the foundations: Pre-Victorian travelers

3.1 Protected gaze

The travelers and explorers from Victorian society traversed the Orient with romanticized notions of the East that resulted from the literature and art of pre-Victorian society. In *Viewing the Islamic Orient* (2006), the Indian scholar of English, Pallavi Pandit Laisram, contends that the British descriptions of the Orient are the fulfillment of exotic and erotic emotional needs, a place of freedom and abandonment of repressed desire, and a sensuous and luxurious Arabian Night (2006: 12). Although the majority of Laisram's research is about the travel writing of men, in the chapter "Viewing the Islamic Orient", she includes the bathing house description by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu as an example of both the objectification of the Oriental female and the eroticization of the Orient. She describes Montagu's depiction account of "exactly proportioned naked women with white shiny skin and beautiful hair walking about with majestic grace (Montagu, 1893: 258)" as sensuous (2006: 12). This erotic account sexualizes the space of the Oriental Muslim woman in a way that is possible through the intimate eye of a woman and later becomes the stimulus for an eroticized Orient. Laisram later explains that Montagu labeled the "poetical" bathhouse description of a "languishing, feminine, luxurious East" of exoticism and eroticism as "Mahomet's paradise" and that it was the catalyst for new forms of lascivious attacks on Islam (2006: 13). Lady Montagu's account is a pre-Victorian example of the intimate eye that played a crucial role in the overall process of Orientalism and imperialism by shaping the preconceived ideas that Victorians had of the Orient.

3.2 Captive gaze

Lindy Colley, in “The Narrative of Elizabeth Marsh: Barbary, Sex, and Power” (2003), presents one of the few accounts of a woman taken captive by Muslims. In her critique of *The Female Captive*, Elizabeth Marsh’s 1769 autobiographical narrative of being held captive in Morocco, Colley brings to light two important issues in relation to the writings of these “travellers”. The first is the issue of femininity in the form of sexuality. Colley writes that, while male captives were sent to the galley, forced into labor, or sold to a private owner, female captives, on the other hand, became the sexual property of her owner (2003: 140). Throughout the chapter, Colley continues to mention how Marsh referred to her sex being exposed to danger. Colley expresses some skepticism as to the authenticity of Marsh’s account; however, she does not doubt her captivity but rather the degree of “danger” to which her sex was “exposed.” She suggests that Marsh was influenced by Mary Montagu’s romantic accounts of Turkey; consequently, causing her (Marsh) to display hostility in almost all aspects of Moroccan society (2003: 141-42). Marsh did this, argues Colley, to sell a story about a land and people who had begun to be viewed as less frightful. Colley then gives Marsh’s story context by including it with other captive accounts that were published during the time. These accounts played into the general fears of a British Christian society by exaggerating the nature of captivity among the Muslims.

The second is the impact of class and status. Class also played an important role in the experiences of Victorian women and had a major impact on their travel writing. Elizabeth Marsh, as Colley points out, is a lower middle-class woman who neither entered the Islamic realm by choice nor possessed protection (2003: 147). Her intimate gaze may have been involuntary; nonetheless, it was just as pivotal in its effects on the process of Victorian Orientalism and imperialism. As Colley concludes, “At one level, then, *The Female Captive*, must be situated on the cusp of what would prove to be a long, drawn-out, and always partial shift away from residual British apprehension of Islam to low regards for, and condescension toward, at least some of the states associated with it” (2003: 147).

Colley draws attention to the dichotomy that existed between the privileged, protected, and voluntary intimate gaze of Montagu and that of unprivileged, unprotected, and involuntary intimate gaze of Marsh when she writes:

Yet whereas Montagu had been conspicuously admiring of some Islamic societies, often contrasting them favorably with the West, the former Elizabeth Marsh was almost invariably negative. Whereas Montagu made a point of wearing Turkish costume during and after her travels, and famously had herself painted thus attired, Marsh claimed repeatedly to have resisted during her captivity all suggestions that she should adopt Moroccan dress. Whereas Montagu sought out and savored the company of elite Ottoman women, Marsh’s references to Moroccan females were

almost invariably scathing, regardless of their social rank and relationship to the Moroccan sultan's court. Whereas Montagu has questioned Western presumptions about Ottoman despotism, Marsh's verdict in her captivity was that it had reduced her "to passive obedience and non-resistance," the worst possible fate for a Whig like herself (2003: 142).

This passage expounds on a juxtaposition of class that existed between two pre-Victorian accounts published around the same time. Lady Montagu exemplifies the intimate gaze of a woman who is free, privileged and protected; whereas, Elizabeth Marsh epitomizes the intimate gaze of a woman who is taken captive, underprivileged, and unprotected. While different in their circumstances and perspectives, the travel writings of both women played important roles in shaping how Victorian society would perceive the Orient.

4. Extending the gaze: Victorian travelers

4.1 Opening up the Other

Monica Anderson's *Women and the Politics of Travel, 1870-1914* (2006) examines women travelers during the late Victorian period. Her approach is to explore women travel writing as a reflection of the changing status of women in British society. Although Anderson is also very keen to maintain the perspective that British women travelers were agents of empire and expressed themselves in the language of the colonizer, she stresses the importance of women having their own "gender-specific terms" to express their gaze (2006: 29).

The chapter "In the Choice of Their Dress: Self-Representation and the Nineteenth-Century Woman Traveler" is of particular interest for this essay. This chapter explores the female gaze as it applies to British women, their dress, and the environment in which they traveled. Anderson entertains the notion that clothing symbolizes femininity in the travel writings of some Victorian women. She demonstrates that there were some women travellers who admired and even adapted Oriental dress because it was less restrictive and more feminine; yet, others rejected Oriental clothing because it symbolized the colonial subject. Some women even rejected "mannish New Women" Western clothes because they were viewed as less feminine. (2006: 200-04).

British women travelers had to navigate a dual reality within the contact zones. On one hand, as women, their femininity was displayed by the way they carried themselves and dressed in the public space. Anderson calls these "conventional dress codes" and suggests that British women used them for shields as well as for weapons (2006: 199). She poses the question of whether or not clothing was a visible declaration of authority and borrows Joanne Finkelstein's phrase "semiotic

battered (1996: 44)” to explore British woman’s clothing as a cultural marker or badge of authority displayed to evoke national pride or “Britishness” (Anderson, 2006: 200).

On the other hand, as agents of Empire, British women travelers were tasked with using their privilege of mobility to penetrate the Oriental feminotopias and to use their intimate eye to “open” or unveil the Oriental woman. As Anderson states, “The whole tradition of imperial travel writing reiterates this image of the gaze as a collection of otherness” by “specifically exhibiting something previously covered or hidden to the eye” (2006: 206). The irony is that while femininity for the British woman was measured by her clothing, femininity for the Oriental woman was defined by her nudity. It is interesting to note that the unveiling of the Oriental woman became the basis for movements to “civilize” her, thereby civilizing the Orient as a whole. As Anne McClintock states, “North African, Middle Eastern and Asian women were, all too often, trampled by the iconography of the veil”, and thus, “Arab women were to be “civilized” by being undressed (unveiled)” (1995: 31).

Later, Anderson refers to dress being linked to the “opening up of both the mysteries and the riches of a traditionally feminized Oriental male other” (2006: 206). In this representation, Oriental men are viewed as effeminate, and thus, the Orient may be read as a feminine space in general, one ready for penetration, rape, dominance and exploitation. Anderson demonstrates this point by amalgamating the female body, imperialism, and territory when she writes:

The argument is that a particular mode of control over a woman’s body through the display of dress is linked to colonizing and to dominion in two broad ways. First, it is linked to conquest of territory traditionally figured as female and controlled by its partition or division into areas on an imperial colonial map. Second, the influential nineteenth-century tradition of right dress, already present in the language of Great Britain’s own self-exhibition, suggests a link with such gendered territorialization. When Isabella Bird writes of the Kling women’s drapery as being “a mystery” (GC 117) her language performs a very display at work within the imperial colonial explorative traditions of opening or unfolding something hidden, consequently bringing it forth to light and view. There is, then, a link in the discourse itself between nineteenth-century female dress and its form of discursive display in the tradition of opening the woman to view as “the ultimate object of Conspicuous Consumption,” and in the language of the discovery of a feminized new land, opened to its Euro-imperial developer. In the new land of knowledge, it would seem clothes are to be the vouchers or evidence of things (2006: 208)

It should be noted that this “opening” of the woman could only be done by the intimate eye. Only the women travelers could spend countless hours observing Oriental Muslim women without attracting unwanted attention. Anderson concludes

by linking the success of female travel writing to the critical male cultural gaze (2006: 220).

4.2 Portraying the Other

Julia Kuehn's "A Female Poetics of Empire: From Eliot to Woolf" (2014) explores the relationship between fictional and non-fictional women's artistic expressions and the exoticism of the Orient. What sets this work apart from the others is that Kuehn uses travel writings, fiction, and paintings to demonstrate the exotic nature of British women's representations of the other. Although this essay does not look at fiction, it is interesting to note the impact that women's travel writings had on women novelists. This impact is especially important in the case of a novelist who didn't travel to Orient but rather relied on travel writings to build an exotic perception for her novel.

The other interesting point that Kuehn raises is the relationship between the woman artist and the woman travel writer. She denotes the relationship between the "actually witnessed" and the "representation" when she mentions that travel writer Mary Adelaide Walker took painter Henriette Browne to the harem that became the subject of her painting (2014: 19). In this relationship, the writer witnesses the painter's representation of the other and the painter also depicts the writer's description of the other. They mutually confirm each other's intimate gaze of the exotic mysteries of Oriental female space.

Kuehn also confirms how the intimate gaze separated reality from fantasy when she concludes,

"'Enlightened' male writers and painters of the nineteenth century—without firsthand knowledge, of course—envisioned the harem as a tyrant's arena for willful political and sexual power games. The tyrant's alleged acts of violence against his slaves and his women coupled with the sexual licentiousness enabled by the rules of Muslim polygamy allowed the male western 'observer' to at once fantasize about and, owing to his cultural superiority, condemn the 'Eastern ways of life'" (2014: 69).

This assertion draws attention to the importance of the intimate gaze of women travel painters. They also played a crucial role in the exoticism and eroticism that characterized the Islamic Orient. Kuehn also makes mention of Théophile Gautier, who was a fellow traveller of Browne's, and his claim that "only women should go to Turkey" because for them "the *odalisque* (female slave or concubine) opens herself, the harem has no more mysteries; those faces, doubtless charming, for which the bearded tourist searches in vain under the muslin of the *yashmak* (veil), she contemplates stripped of their veil, in all the brilliance of their beauty (Gautier, 1861:

72-73)"(2014: 75). This "opening" of the "mysteries" of the female space was in reality a fulfillment of the Western male's exotic and erotic fantasies of the Islamic Orient.

Paintings served as a more satisfying form of fulfillment for male 'observers' because it left nothing to the imagination. Writing could 'paint' a more vivid and fluent image, but it still required imagination on the part of the writer and reader. There is always the issue of language and interpretation in writing and reading. In paintings, on the other hand, both the painter and the audience are observers. In other words, the painting was an exact representation of the intimate gaze of the painter. Browne, as well as other women painters, was able to penetrate hidden space and to portray her intimate gaze on the painter's canvas; and thus, she "received almost nothing but praise" (Kuehn, 2014: 75).

In the chapter "Veiled Narratives, Double Identities," Kuehn turns her attention to women travel writers and introduces the concept of the veil and double-consciousness. The veil, according to travel writer Isabel Burton, is "both an identity marker" of womanhood and femininity and "a protective shield" against being seen. Kuehn adds later that the veil "masks, hides, disguises, blurs, and obscures," making it difficult to distinguish between truth and appearance (2014: 95). Double-consciousness is a concept borrowed from W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* and, according to Kuehn, relates to the constant struggle of dealing with "polarities, opposites and reference points" (2014: 96). Where the veil was a barrier between the female space and male space, it posed no problems for the intimate gaze of Western women; however, double-consciousness was a social phenomenon that had a stronger effect on women travel writers than it did on men. Men, as expressed by Gautier, knew their limits, and thus, the double-consciousness was minimized. Women, on the other hand, had the ability to be immersed into the Oriental space, but at the same time, they were faced with the realities of being white, non-Muslim, traveller, observer in a space of non-white, Muslim, resident, observed.

5. Conclusions

Following the perception of the 18th and 19th centuries Westerner, Orientalism fueled exotic and erotic images of bath houses filled with feminine nudity, of harems filled with beautiful women who were at the sexual desires of their men, of streets filled with graceful women and effeminate men dressed in elegant clothing, and even of a society of devout men who desired nothing more than a Paradise of naked women and everlasting sexual fulfillment. Traditional studies in Orientalism did not place much attention on the true manner by which these images came to dominate the Western perspective of the Orient.

In contrast, recent feminist revisions of Orientalism and studies in women's travel writings demonstrate that women were the true agents of Orientalist eroticism and

exoticism. They were the eyes and ears of authenticity for the male Orientalists who found nothing but frustration in their attempts to unlock the keys to the mysteries behind the veil, harem curtains and bath house doors. Women travelers had the privilege of access to these feminotopias, and through their travel writings and art, played a pivotal role in perpetuating the images of feminine exoticism and eroticism that came to define the Orient.

Some may view this as an abuse of privilege while others may interpret it as women simply observing and writing about those topics that dominated the life of Victorian ladies: family, femininity, and clothing. Either way, these intimate descriptions of the female space allowed Orientalism to penetrate a space that was both mysterious and forbidden to the male gaze. Thus, European women served as agents, voluntarily or involuntarily, of Orientalism and their writing served as the catalyst for an erotic and exotic perception of the Islamic Orient.

The irony to this phenomenon is that women became the agents of oppression and objectification for other women. Actively or passively, they served in the process of transforming Oriental women into a sexualized other and they aided in portraying the Islamic Orient as an exotic and erotic space of endless worldly pleasures and treasures. European women travelers were in a social quagmire. On one hand, they were women of their times whose gaze focused on the feminine interests of Victorian society. Yet, on the other, they are agents of empire whose travel expressions were in conformance with the views and perspectives of the time. Their writing played a vital role in legitimizing the discourse of otherness in the Orientalist agenda. In this sense, European women were the intimate eyes of Orientalism.

Further studies could explore the impact of the intimate gaze on the current stereotypes and perceptions of women in the Arab and Islamic world. This is especially true in the Arab Gulf States where wealth and modernity have helped to establish the notion of the carefree, lazy and pampered Gulf woman (*Khaleejyah*) who spends her time gossiping and being pampered in the modern feminotopias: the female *majlis*, the spa and shopping malls. Although there is a level of truth to these perceptions, the reality of life for the *Khaleejyah* revolves around navigating the complex relationship between traditional roles and religious beliefs in a modern state. They struggle not only with the State for equality and justice but also against Orientalist-based stereotypes that delegitimize their agenda. This study can revolve around the following questions: how have these misrepresentations persisted, even into the present? How can a balance be established between myth and reality of female life in the Arab Gulf States?

Next, there is a need to investigate the relationship between the intimate gaze and the movement to “civilize” the Muslim woman. Today, the word civilized has been replaced with more palatable terms like modernize or liberate. However, that does not take away from the fact that the movement is rooted in the need to unveil the

Muslim woman. An organic discourse based in cultural relativity and regional needs has to be considered, as opposed to simply importing and borrowing feminist practices from Western societies. The following questions can be considered: to what extent is womanism a more natural fit for the region? What is the role of the government in establishing and supporting organizations that seek gender equity and justice within the framework of the State and religion?

Lastly, there is room for studies on how the intimate gaze feminized the Islamic Orient and the impact that feminization had on masculine geopolitical power struggles to dominate the region. This study is a complex examination of the psycholinguistics and the social linguistics of the dynamics of imperialism, gender and sexuality. It calls for a close reading and criticism of Orientalist travel writing and political rhetoric and aims to explore three basic aspects of the feminization of the Orient: What was process of feminizing the imperial unknown in the Orient? How did sexually charged language encourage imperial exploration and conquest? What are the dynamics within the power relations between a male Europe and a female Orient?

References and bibliography

- Anderson, M.** 2006. *Women and the Politics of Travel, 1870-1914*, New Jersey: Associated University Press.
- Colley, L.** 2003. "The Narrative of Elizabeth Marsh: Barbary, Sex, and Power", in Felicity N. (ed.), *The Global Eighteenth Century*, Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press: 138-150.
- Hodgson, B.** 2005. *Dreaming of East: Western Women and the Exotic Allure of the Orient*, Vancouver: Greystone Books.
- Kuehn, J.** 2014. *A Female Poetics of Empire: from Eliot to Woolf*, New York: Routledge.
- Laisram, P.** 2006. *Viewing the Islamic Orient: British Travel Writers of the Nineteenth Century*, New Delhi: Routledge.
- Leed, E.** 1991. *The Mind of the Traveler: From Gilgamesh to Global Tourism*, New York: Basic Books, Inc.
- Longino, M.** 2015. *French Travel Writing in the Ottoman Empire: Marseilles to Constantinople, 1650-1700*, New York: Routledge.
- McClintock, A.** 1995. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Context*, New York: Routledge.
- Mills, S.** 1993. *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism*, New York: Routledge.
- Pratt, M. L.** 2008. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, New York: Routledge.
- Said, E.** 1978. *Orientalism*, New York: Vintage Books.

- Sigsworth, E. and T. Wyke.** "A Study of Victorian Prostitution and Venereal Disease", in Martha V. (ed.), *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 77-99.
- Staszak, J.** 2009 "Other/otherness", in Kitchin and Thrift (eds.), *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, Oxford: Elsevier Science.
- Sterns, P.** 1972. "Working-Class Women in Britain, 1890-1914", in Martha V. (ed.), *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 100-120.
- Vicinus, M.** 1972. *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Yeğenoğlu, M.** 1998. *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

The author

Ali Abdullah earned a Master of Arts in Language and Literature with a focus in Spanish Literature and Latin American Studies from Purdue University. His research interests are travel writing, imperial and colonial space, and otherness. He is currently a Spanish instructor in the Department of Languages and Literature at the Community College of Qatar.