Postcolonial Orientalism

A Study of the Anti-Imperialist Rhetoric of Middle Eastern Intellectuals in Diaspora

MAHMOUD ARGHAVAN

Edward Said’s Orientalism lays out the idea that longstanding representations of the East by European travellers, writers, artists, missionaries, and academics have constructed a sense of superiority of ‘the Occident’ over ‘the Orient’. This projection has aided the domination of Europeans over the people of the East. Said conceptualizes this ‘Orientalism’ thus:

a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident.’

[...] Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.1

Among other constructed contrasts between ‘the West and the Rest’, which, according to Lila Abu-Lughod, disseminated a “new common sense,” “Muslims are presented as a special and threatening culture – the most homogenized and the most troubling of the Rest.”2 In this Orientalist imaginary, Muslim women, particularly, have been consistently subjected to a long tradition of Orientalist representations. According to Abu-Lughod,

In the nineteenth century, the depictions took two forms: women of the Orient were either portrayed as downtrodden victims who were imprisoned, secluded, shrouded, and treated as beasts of burden or they

appeared in a sensual world of excessive sexuality – as slaves in harems and the subjects of the gaze of lascivious and violent men, not to mention those looking in.\(^3\)

The mysterious images of women in Oriental harems and the purported exoticism of the veiled women of the Islamic world were to simplify an “unbridgeable chasm between the West and the ‘Rest’”\(^4\) and to “symbolize just how alien this culture is.”\(^5\)

Said’s *Orientalism*, as John Carlos Rowe argues, is “predicated on the European ‘feminization’ of the ‘Orient’, as well as on the projection of European homophobia onto the ‘exotic East’.”\(^6\) According to Rowe, Said acknowledges feminism, throughout his intellectual activism and academic career, “more gesturally than substantially,” and rarely pays attention to gay studies and queer theories. Nonetheless, Said’s *Orientalism* has turned into an indisputable reference for postcolonial scholars of the recent debates centred on the issues of “the Muslim women” and “IslamLand.”\(^8\)

After 9/11 ‘the Muslim women’s rights,’ as a homogenized phenomenon, has been utilized to rationalize an American and European ‘moral crusade’\(^9\) to save “the oppressed Muslim women” who “live caged in their cultures.”\(^10\) Responding to generalized portrayals of Middle Eastern women as ‘passive, silent, and oppressed,’ many Middle Eastern scholars, writers, activists, and artists have attempted to counter this image by suggesting how ‘active, practical, powerful, and resourceful’ Middle Eastern women actually are. In this way, the Middle Eastern woman’s rights as a ‘multivalent signifier’\(^11\) have been constructed at this intersection of plural discourses that are actively engaged with this topic, such

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\(^3\) Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*, 88.

\(^4\) *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*, 6.

\(^5\) *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*, 6.


\(^7\) As Rowe reports, “As early as 1982, Gayatri Spivak challenged Said to take more seriously both feminism and post- or neo-Marxian theories by contending that Said’s ‘calls for a criticism that would account for “quotidian politics and the struggle for power” must be supplemented by “feminist hermeneutics”, which already “articulate the relationship between phallocracy and capital, as well as that between phallocracy and the organized Left’” (“Edward Said and American Studies,” 37).

\(^8\) Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*, 88.

\(^9\) *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*, 26.

\(^10\) *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*, 26.