
Men Speaking to other men: Western representation of the Arabian Peninsula Women in the 19th Century Travel Writing

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“An Englishman who read *Arabia Deserta*ⁱ knew more about the Bedouin than a town-bred Arab did” (Kathryn, Tidrick). Tomas Edward Lawrence also echoed a parallel statement in his introduction to a later edition of the book disclosing that it “was not like other books, but something particular, a bible of its kind.” The Arabian Peninsula was mostly represented by travelers, writers and missionaries. Likewise, travel writing is considered to be an ostensibly realist, non-fictional style of journalism, which is a means of representation that intends to publish for the public’s consumptions. British explorers such as Charles Doughty, Richard Burton, and William Palgrave have sought to provide accounts of the Arabian Peninsula and its inhabitants. Such travelers according to Edward Said have allowed writers during the early years of the twentieth century to “say what they said, in the way they did, because a still earlier tradition of Orientalism than the nineteenth century one provided them with a vocabulary, imagery, rhetoric, and figures with which to say it.”ⁱⁱ Therefore, those initial travelers have established a system of knowledge on the Arabian Peninsula region and became a point of reference for colonial administrators seeking to expand influence on the region. The Arabian Peninsula in all accounts is depicted as a man’s land, the empire as a male space, and the locus of male character-building, resulting in women seldom appearing in travel narratives. The travelers were men operating within a male tradition, imitating men’s ideas and behaviors subsumed in the hegemonic cultural apparatus. This research will aim to examine the manner in which European writers helped perpetuate the image of the harem as passive, sexually exotic, and an inferior “other,” while proclaiming that this is a problematic study for the reason that there is limited access to portrayals of women in the Arabian Peninsula during the 19th century.

The Western travelers selected for this research share certain historical and educational background. Doughty graduated from Cambridge, and is best known for his 1888 travel book *Travels in Arabia Deserta*. He acquired Arabic in Damascus, and on his hajj pilgrimage was masquerading as a Syrian with simple fortune. Moreover, Palgrave was an Arabic scholar, who graduated from Oxford university, he journeyed to the Arabian Peninsula disguised as a Syrian physician, supporting the French emperor, Napoleon III, to gain a better knowledge for imperialistic schemes of Africa and the Middle East publishing *Personal narrative of a Years’ Journey Through Central and Eastern Arabia*. Burton on the other hand, aborted his university studies, yet was proficient in many languages including Arabic. His best known achievement is the documentation of his journey to Mecca in *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al-Madinah and Meccah*, while in guise, at a time where Europeans were not allowed access to the holy places of Mecca and Al-Madinah.

Stereotypes of Middle Eastern women have been crucial to negative depictions of the region and its cultures. Many travelers tried to reveal the complex realities of gender and women in the Arabian Peninsula. According to Jeffery Dyer in his essay on “Desert Saints or Lions Without Teeth?”ⁱⁱⁱ roughly every reference to the “Bedouin” was in the singular or to the Bedouins as a group, the travelers indicate that they are referring to the males of the society.” This impression is indirect and is only noticeable when women are explicitly mentioned in the text. For instance Doughty in *Arabia Deserta* references “a Bedouin and his wife” or “the fugitive Bedouin wife.” But never the descriptor alone without an adjective. Hence, the “Bedouin” descriptor is used only for the males, and in the few cases where both sexes appear together, another adjective is added deliberately to feminize them and to separate them. In addition, Doughty paints a romanticized patriarchal world describing the relationship between husband and wife; “we should think their harem less modest than precious. The Arabs are jealous and dissolute; and every Moslem woman since she may be divorced with a word, fears to raise even a wondering cogitation in such matter.” (Doughty) The extract reaffirms Said’s remark where travel writers highly sexualize the role of women in which they were the “[creators] of a male power fantasy.”^{iv} Muslim women are revealed as objects who constantly fear the disapproval of men.

Doughty continues to depict situations where he defines the image of women dedicating an entire chapter on females who never speak but remain passive and salient, echoing one of the Bedouins, Abdullah, proclaiming on the attributes of a suitable woman; “who is the best of women? I shall tell you- and mark well these be the words of the Neby- it is she that can keep silence!” (130p). Perpetuating an image of Arabian Peninsula as monolithic and fixed, namely a strict set of rules that prevents Muslims from progressing and that keeps its women in a state of slavery. As the narrative progresses Doughty mentions another Bedouin who was hosting him and is speaking of his relationship with his wife; “I snub my wife because a woman must be kept in subjection, for else they will begin to despise their husbands.” Doughty follows no negative critique of the behavior of beating women rather he seems to only narrate the event as he viewed it. However, another incident followed, in which a father was striking his child and Doughty comments: “these are the uncivil manners of the town- rise to strike his son!” It is significant that Doughty adds no comment on the uncivil manner of whipping a woman which perhaps indicates his approval, but condemns the attitude of striking children.

The inaccessibility of the Bedouin women could explain why Western men have circulated the image of the harem as sexual in nature and contributed to discourse that have positioned the East as inferior to the West. According to Said; the product of such writing “conceptualized the Orient as feminine, erotic, exotic, and savage, allowing the West to accede to a position of superiority as Christian, civilized and moral”^v For instance, Doughty Speaking of a harbwoman “she approached with the grace of the desert and which is seldom seen, with some dewy freshness in her cheeks, it might be of an amiable modesty; and she was a lovely human flower in that inhuman desolation. She asked, with a young woman’s difference” (p283). The woman is conceived as simply a visual icon representing the fragile being that needs saving from the backward “inhuman desolation”. Said suggests that within the travelogues, the travelers transposed their own ideas and pre-conceptions of the East, thus creating and mythologizing a view that belonged not to reality, but to a colonial concept representing domination. Many of these Orientalist works project an image of the East as different, the “Other”, and objectify and scrutinize all its elements.^{vi} Travelers attempts to comprehend and represent Bedouin society

were influenced and shaped by their ability to relate what they were observing to what was already familiar to them. That is to say, in orientalist works, the progress of an Eastern society is measured by the position of women.

The mystery of the veiled women who lived in segregation was to be deciphered by Burton who claimed “that he risked instant death so prepared his disguise with precision.” In his second volume, he rarely mentions women in most of his narrative, his accounts abstains from using the word Bedouin as a modifier of women but instead he uses harem, maidens, or nomads’ women, amongst other descriptors. Burton narrates in *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al-Madinah and Meccah* of his stay at one of the houses that hosted him in Al-Madinah describing Shaikh Hamad’s house “...was quiet, but not disagreeable. I never once set eyes upon the face of woman, unless the African slave girl be allowed the title.” (p297) His curiosity of seeing is revealed, along with his desire to see the veiled woman. Another instance where he continues this masculine adventure, his companions stop to eat “whilst [they] were eating, a Badwi woman passed close by the tent, leading a flock of sheep and goats, seeing [that he] expressed a desire to drink milk” (p246) his escorts have exchanged bread for milk with the man not the women of the house. Not having contact with the Badwi women, perhaps fed his hunger and need to conquer the passive, subordinate female even more. The unseen is unknown, thus is unlikely to be controlled, therefore this caused a reversal of the power relationship between the gazer and the object. The Western subject, having constructed his image as superior and civilized, was already subject to lose his power.

Burton’s manly adventure was carried with the female conquest, as he narrates that he finally succeeded to glimpse behind the veil of a lady that belongs to the upper class. “Seeing that my companions were safely employed, I entered upon the dangerous ground of raising hand to forehead. She smiled almost imperceptibly, and turned away. The pilgrims was in ecstasy” (Pilgrimage II). This reflects the male pursuit of women, which indicates that Burton does not write for a female audience, rather a male one. Which, according to Pamela Nichols^{vii}, reveals that Burton’s pilgrimage was about male bonding and the extension of boyhood games and was not intended for females. Women readers were, he hoped, barred from reading the complete discoveries of his journey by his use of Latin in footnotes about subjects in relation to female circumcision.

Burton’s pilgrimage goes hand-in-hand with Elaine Showalter’s description of the ‘male quest romance’ in *Sexual Anarchy; Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siecle*.

In various ways these stories present a yearning for escape from a conforming society, rigidly structured in terms of gender, class, and race, to a mythologized place elsewhere where men can be freed from the constraints of Victorian morality. In the caves or the jungles, or mountains of this place, the heroes of romance explore their secret selves in an anarchic space which can be safely called ‘primitive.’ (Showalter 81).

Hence, Burton wrote for other male members and for fellow male adventures of the clubs, and followed the darkness in himself. The Arabian desert hence, represented a nostalgic idea of unchanging patriarchy, longed for by men afraid of increasing democracy and changes in the social order brought about by increasing industrialization. His Pilgrimage, Nichols comments, powerfully describes the “cathartic effect of visiting Mecca for Moslems, Burton could feel this because his flight from the feminine and his friendships...^{viii}” with the Bedouins mirroring that

catharsis. He was reported as being an unreliable agent of the empire, for the reason that he does not always follow orders. A review in Edinburgh in 1893 wrote; “the boy became a man without the most elementary nations of discipline and obedience.” Said points out that Burton thought of himself both as a rebel against authority, where he identifies with the East as a place free from Victorian morality, “and potential agent of authority in the East.”^{ix}

Furthermore, Palgrave’s *Personal narrative of a Years’s Journey through Central and Eastern Arabia* caused a public sensation in 1866 and publishers became eager for any works which dealt with travel in Arabia. He is probably the least to represent Bedouin women of the travels, and when he did, it was in a demeaning or objectifying context. For instance, Palgrave narrates of his time spent in Hassa where he begins by describing Arabian women as he theorizes a beauty-scale;

The ladies of the land enjoy a remarkable share of those natural gifts which no institution, and even no cosmetics can confer. Might I venture on the delicate and somewhat invidious task of constructing a ‘beauty-scale’ for Arabia, and for the Arabia alone, the Bedouin women would, on thos kilometer, be represented by zero, or at most 1; a degree higher would represented the female in Najed; above them rank the women of Shomer, who are in their turn surmounted by those of Djowf. The fifth or sixth degree symbolizes the fair ones in Hessa; the seventh those of Kater; and lastly, by a sudden rise of ten degree at least, the seventeenth.... The beauties of Oman (p266).

In this exceptional occasion where there is any mention of women, Palgrave’s epistemological authority allows him to describe women in relation appearance rather than tradition or culture. It also permits him to define them in some situations, as “ugly hags.”

As a result, Palgrave attained a position of authority through mastery of a system of knowledge in which his “expertise was hybrid, not an exterior intelligence applied to the world, but another artificial body.” One notices a pattern in the way Palgrave describes the Bedouin women in certain regions of the Arabian Peninsula. Any references to women in the area that applies a Wahabi Islam, is condemned and thus critiqued.

Furthermore, during his stay in Ri’ad he narrators of Syrian women who were unveiled “and quite forward as the men, or forwarder.” Where he describes a pretty girl and a joyful marriage occasion, where he expresses approval and acceptance of the Muslim Syrian women. However, in another occasion, he compares Omani women and Bedouin women in Najd:

“Oman for instance, and its provinces, it is barley in use. Nor are Bedouin women apt to impose on their grimed and wizened faces a concealment that might on the whole be for their advantage. Among the rigid Wahhabees alone the veil and the harem acquire something like exactness, and the Arab liberty consents to inflict on itself something of the ceremoniousness of Islam.” (156).

Hence, a conclusion could be made, which is that his depiction reflects that Bedouin women in the Najed and other regions close to it, become a metaphor for not Islam but Wahabi Islam. As a result, Palgrave who is a Jesuit cannot escape his personal prejudices when he is describing women.

In conclusion, though the three travelogues differ in their approach and subject matter, their accounts have a lasting impact on later readers. Their writings were to be a fresh new repository of oriental experience. Although the authors carry a unique background in terms of class, religion, and academic focus, their representation of the role of the Bedouin women is astonishing for its consistency with the social and behavioral element of idealized masculinity in Victorian England. Doughty compared the progress of a patriarchal nation with the position of women, hence it is through this martial imagination that he was able to define and possess knowledge of Oriental women. Burton turned his pilgrimage into a boyhood game in which his conquering an unveiled women feeds into the voice of European ambition for ruling over the Orient. While Palgrave's voice reflects the highly idiosyncratic master of knowledge over the Orient, and his prejudices against Wahhabi Islam is highlighted through his animosity against the women of the region.

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ENDNOTES

ⁱ Doughty, Arabia Deserta

ⁱⁱ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 41

ⁱⁱⁱ Desert Saints or Lions Without Teeth British Portrayals of Bedouin Masculinity in the Nineteenth-Century Arabian Peninsula

^{iv} AimilliaMohd Ramli, "Contemporary criticism on the representation of female travelers of the Ottoman herem in the 19th century: A review," *Intellectual Discourse* 19 (2011), 3.

^v Lewis, "only women"

^{vi} **"Orientalism and Representation of Muslim Women as "Sexual Objects"**

Hazel Simons

^{vii} Pamela Nichols "Force and charm in the Desert: Manly Adventure and Gentlemanly Behavior in the Middle Eastern travel Writings of Richard and Isabel Burton and Wilfrid Scawen and Ann Blunt.

^{viii} (160).

^{ix} Edward Said *Orientalism* p 195