

# The Orientalization of Gender

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## Abstract

Said's critique of Orientalism provokes a comprehensive review by post-colonial theorists of the bulk of western knowledge regarding non-western countries. This Orientalist literature buttresses the colonial notion of a civilizing mission, which is also supported by many western feminists who provide theoretical grounds to such colonialist perceptions. Such post-colonial feminists as Gayatri Spivak, Chandra Mohanty, and Rajeswari Rajan analyze western feminism's ideological complicity with Orientalist and imperialist ventures.

## Introduction

Edward Said's (1935-2003) seminal *Orientalism* (1978) launched an assault on Orientalism and characterized it as a tool for establishing western imperial hegemony. This establishes a clear link between his idea of colonial power-knowledge and the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci's (1891-1937) notion of "hegemony." Actually, Said draws on Michele Foucault's (1926-84) concept of power-knowledge relations and argues that western disciplines of knowledge and imperial governance were intertwined. Thus, he exposes western knowledge's complicity with western power. Such arguments go back to the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), who dispelled the objectivity of knowledge and claimed that knowledge always serves some interest or unconscious purpose, the most obvious one being *the will to power*. However, in representing Arab-Islamic cultures, the western Orientalist discourse was further driven by the slant of the Christian West and the Islamic East, which provided an added fantasy in the Orientalist mind – the "othering" of the Muslims.

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This essay examines how Orientalist representations of subaltern, Muslim women further calcified and institutionalized their subhuman identity and subalternized them to both local patriarchy and their western sisters. It also analyzes how a section of mainstream western feminism itself maintains an unholy complicity with the Orientalist, imperialist project of depicting and fantasizing non-western cultures, especially Muslim societies. Special attention will be given to western feminist descriptions of the Islamic world, which feminist Orientalism represents as having a *lack* and an *absence*. Its demonizing of Muslim societies as repressive to women and its portrayal of Muslim women as passive victims (who are veiled, shackled, and secluded) maintain clear links with the “Orientalist descriptions” of Eastern societies. I contend that if Said’s perception of Orientalism denotes upholding a “basic distinction between East and West” and presenting a “contrasting image” of the two against each other,<sup>1</sup> this is equally true of the way Orientalists and some western feminists represent Arab Islamic societies and their women.

## Said and Orientalism

According to Said and the subsequent critics of Orientalism, this discourse’s fundamental concept is to devise a theory and practice of dividing the world into two equal halves on the basis of what he calls “ontological and epistemological distinction”.<sup>2</sup> While *Orientalism* heralds the post-colonial literary theory, western knowledge and intellectual domains, which are particularly related to non-western societies, have been critiqued by the critics of former and neo-colonizing countries and those belonging to the subject nations. The dichotomy between the theory of “we” and “they,” “center” and “margin,” “metropole” and “periphery,” and “European” and “Oriental-African” that pervaded European knowledge, especially canonical literature, has been criticized so strongly that the colonized are reshaping their intellectual links with European cultural hegemony by locating their place in the canon and finding their indigenous engagements with it. The introduction of postcolonial theory has furnished the theoretical underpinnings for this defiance of western literary Orientalism and the West’s cultural and political polarization of the world between “center” and “margin” and between “dominant” and “marginalized.”

Said perceives a generation of conditioning in the western mentality, which has interiorized the notion of western superiority and eastern inferiority. Over time, this supposed essential difference between the hegemonic

West and the subjugated East assumed the coloring of “scientific truth”<sup>3</sup> that impelled westerners to go to the furthest lands to civilize and save native women from patriarchy. The imperialists used this trope to implant a perceived necessity among westerners for going to distant lands to undertake the “white man’s burden” of civilizing subject races. Among the natives, it sought to create an urge of surrendering themselves to the rule of the West, which will supposedly rescue them from a subhuman status and reinstate them, according to the 1850s narrative of monogenesis, to proper human status, that is, “the perfect Edenic form incarnated in Adam.”<sup>4</sup>

Although Said’s incisive analysis of Orientalism stirred up huge intellectual critiques of Orientalist literary practices covering a range of disciplines, his treatment of this discourse is mainly political, for he unveils the underhand links between the Europeanization of knowledge (Orientalist studies) and colonial adventure. Said maintains that these two have maintained a long-time formidable alliance. Despite his groundbreaking review of how Orientalists have treated eastern nations, the attention given to gender orientalization, the gendering of imperialism, and the imperialist gendering of women in *Orientalism* or *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) does not meet the extensive ravages that Orientalists, colonial travel writers, and, later on, western imperialist feminists have done to the images of non-western societies and the dignity of native women.

If Orientalism, as Billie Melman writes, is “a representation of the other that is based on a hierarchical relationship between hegemonic and subordinate group,”<sup>5</sup> institutionalizing Manichean polarities between western/European women and women of subaltern cultures by western feminism should receive the same critical examination that western cultural imperialism has. Said admits that his critiquing of metropolitan Orientalism is just an “instalment” that should be followed by other critics who would continue to interpret the Orientalist project as it relates to colonial dispossession and political subjugation. His theoretical foregrounding has created a huge space for intellectual discussion to review how western feminists have treated subaltern races and gender orientalization, wherein Orientalists have been engaged with an added fascination.

Despite Said’s critique of Orientalism remaining the point of reference for all subsequent debates about western literary imperialism, one of the most important limitations of *Orientalism* is that it relates the Orientalist project only to the “masculinist nature of colonial discourse.” Moreover, unlike Spivak, Said does not detail “the interrelations between empire and issues of gender.”<sup>6</sup> His avowal that Orientalism is just “one instalment”

makes the omission of gender orientalizing defensible. Otherwise, evading such a vast area of orientalizing Eastern women and homogenizing them by both Orientalists and some modern feminists alike would have rendered his thesis incomplete.

But this hypothetical indictment of incompleteness *apropos* feminist Orientalism notwithstanding, Said's *Orientalism* gives theoretical foundations to a post-colonial literary theory that explores "the inability of European theory to deal adequately with the complexities" of colonized societies and dismantles the European construction of its thoughts as "the universal."<sup>7</sup> By taking a critical look at the East's position, which western knowledge has reduced to the Arab Islamic world, Said marks the beginning of a potentially extensive research project that would enable subaltern societies to reshuffle their relationships with metropolitan centers. The feminization of the "Orient" and the essentialization of its women by Orientalists and feminists alike is a potential area of discussion, which this study will elaborate to some extent. Such debate has been provoked largely by Said's ideas, which are thoroughly encapsulated in *Orientalism*.

### **Orientalism, Western Feminism, and Eastern Women**

Homogenizing non-western societies and women and then essentializing them without appreciating the cultural differences and historical specificities inherent in the East's material culture and in eastern women's experiences is rife in both Orientalist and western feminist discourse. Therefore, western feminist dialogues have become a matter for observation and serious scrutiny by post-colonial theorists and non-western feminists alike.

The Orientalists divide the world ontologically into two groups, westerners and "Orientals," and define them in an essentializing dichotomy and concept of culture that the West is fundamentally opposite the East. Some colonialist feminists also pit the two worlds against each other in their gender representations. Representing non-western women as "ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.," and western women as "educated, modern [...] having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decisions" simply widens the already huge gap in global sisterhood.<sup>8</sup>

This "distinction between western feminist re-presentation of women in non-western cultures, and western feminist self-presentation"<sup>9</sup> agrees completely with the Orientalists' self-presentation and stereotyping of eastern societies with definitional attributes. In the following quotations, A. L.

Macfie demonstrates how an Orientalist representation of the West and the “Other” carries an East-West divide in an essentializing and homogenizing move:

Europe (the West, the “self”) is [...] essentially rational, developed, humane, superior, authentic, active, creative, and masculine, while the Orient (the East, the “other”) (a sort of surrogate, underground version of the West or the “self”) is [...] irrational, aberrant, backward, crude, despotic, inferior, inauthentic, passive, feminine, and sexually corrupt.<sup>10</sup>

That orientals, unlike occidentals, are by nature mysterious, menacing, irrational, demonic, and sexually corrupt.<sup>11</sup>

Colonizers presented a villainous picture of eastern men as “traders in female bodies. They are the cruel captors who hold women in their avaricious grasp, who use them as chattels, as trading-goods, with little reverence for them as human beings.”<sup>12</sup> Such a negative depiction was designed to construct an artificial contrasting image of eastern men as barbaric and of western men as “civilized.” Orientalist representations of women, on the other hand, have all along been intended to convey a particular impression of them as passive, incapable of raising their voice, and always waiting for westerners to advance their causes. Said reviews Flaubert’s treatment of an “Egyptian courtesan” who “never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence, or history.”<sup>13</sup> Thus eastern society was pitted against western civilization and eastern women against their western counterparts, the intention being to propagate the western nations’ supposed superiority and the eastern ones’ putative inferiority.

Despite the fact that patriarchy subalternized western women within metropolitan societies, feminist Orientalists spread the common impression that just as western/European society is superior to African/Asian society, and just as western men are superior to eastern men, in the same way western/white women are superior to black/Asian women. In addition, western women are conscious of their rights, while eastern women are passive, submissive recipients of patriarchal domination. Homogenizing the differences and essentializing the indigenous women of subject nations depreciate the struggles of local feminist protagonists by ravaging their cultures’ rich intellectual heritage. This echoes the colonizing project of “suppression of a vast wealth of indigenous cultures.”<sup>14</sup> Just as the European imperial propagandists stifled local languages and wiped out local cultures by exporting “European language, literature and learning as part of a civilizing mission,”<sup>15</sup>

feminists also wreak the same havoc on indigenous women's experiences by imposing western feminist agendas that are not always consonant with their societies' material realities.

The concept of double colonization concocted by feminist discourse in the 1980s was actually a result of a double orientalization pursued by the Orientalists along with the colonial administrators. Patriarchal oppression coupled with Orientalist manipulation of native women foregrounded the postcolonial feminist notion of double colonization and gave it theoretical credence. The Orientalists wrote sensationalist tales and depicted eastern women, especially those in Islamic countries, with a marked vulgarization. Already oppressed by local patriarchy, women were represented in a demeaning manner by the Orientalists and thus wore two badges of humiliation: as women and as "Orientals." The West's already deep-seated fantasy about eastern women was intensified by such representations, for the Orientalists were always on the look out to satisfy the West's preconceived, imaginary perceptions about the East and the Islamic world.

One specific feature of this representation is the excessive sexual titillation caused by their description, namely, that non-western women in general and Muslim women in particular were preoccupied with sex and that they "spent their time in sexual preparation [...] and in sexual intrigue."<sup>16</sup> In addition, they were so nymphomaniac and their gargantuan sexual appetite was so uncontrollable that, in the absence of men, they used to dally with each other.<sup>17</sup> Such fanciful representations demonstrated eastern women's perceived sexual deviancy and rendered them objects of enjoyment for European men, who could enjoy them without any moral qualms, as these women were already mad with sexual excitement and vehement desire. The Orientalists' depictions of the harem and the seraglio deepened the western belief that eastern (Muslim) women were nothing more than chattel for men's use and sexual gratification. This distinctive picture of eastern women, so materially different from western ones, made them more appealing – ready for sexual use. As Burton puts it:

I am told they have no balls, drums nor operas in the East, but then they have got a seraglio [...]. Besides, I am told, your Asiatic beauties are the most convenient women alive, for they have no souls; positively there is nothing in nature I should like so much as ladies without souls; soul, here, is the utter ruin of half of the sex.<sup>18</sup>

Although western women were not treated any better by western men, as "the Victorian age's official method of viewing women" reduced "them

to body, to possession, to physical object,”<sup>19</sup> the colonial presence made native women more vulnerable, as they were objectified and commodified along with other colonial spoils. The harem and seraglio fantasies, which highlighted eastern women’s putatively excessive carnal nature and presented them to the West as promiscuous, increased the colonialists’ desire, because women were depicted as an added incentive. Women “were part of the goods of the empire, the living rewards that white men could, if they wish to, reap. They were there to be used sexually, and if it could be suggested that they were inherently licentious, then they could be exploited with no qualms whatsoever.”<sup>20</sup>

As eastern women were worse than “European prostitute[s]” in promiscuity and sexual dalliance, as Edward William Lane portrayed Egyptian women in his *Manners and Customs of Modern Egyptians* (1836), eastern lands appeared through western lenses as brothels, where “sexual desires could be gratified to the hilt”<sup>21</sup> and whose inhabitants were only for enjoyment. So, the colonizers received a free license from the Orientalists to venture upon their (political, economic, and sexual) exploitations of distant lands. Distracting European men’s sexual gaze from western women to vulgarized eastern ones encouraged colonialists to form a relationship of sensual desire with native women, but one of “platonic love” with superior western women.

The Orientalist representation of Muslim women added another fold to the feminist construction of “double colonization,” and thus we can talk of a triple colonization or a triple orientalizing. In this case, the Orientalists portrayed Muslim women according to a three-fold mental image in mind: “Oriental,” woman, and Muslim. This can be compared with Spivak’s construction of “poor, black, and female.”<sup>22</sup> This triple orientalizing becomes evident in the multiple fanaticisms found among the champions of western literary Orientalism in their portrayals of Muslim women. Along with Muslim lands, the Muslims’ paradise has been portrayed as a place of sexual indulgence and “endless sensual gratification.”<sup>23</sup> This only reinforces western Orientalism’s double-faced tactic, because a similar image of sensual enjoyment is present in “the Christian Paradise itself” that “promised rivers, gardens, milk and honey.”<sup>24</sup> But the Christian paradise did not find an equal depiction in Orientalist/European literature.

Said is very particular in his critique of the Orientalist project’s “web of racism, cultural stereotypes, political imperialism, dehumanizing ideology,” which gives an “Arab” or a “Muslim” a debased political identity.<sup>25</sup> Its treatment of Muslim women, especially those of the harem fantasy, is

much deeper and carries a motive of political maneuvering like occupying distant lands on the plea of emancipating indigenous women, perhaps from the harem and Muslim patriarchy. Said explains this point when he talks about “cultural representation of women” and how “the institutional forces in modern western societies”<sup>26</sup> developed a system of objectifying and subordinating subaltern women.

### **The Christian West vs. the Muslim East**

The spread of Islam from the seventh to the twelfth centuries, as well as its ingress into Europe itself in the eighth and the ninth centuries, created a phobia among large sections of Europe’s intelligentsia. Both Christian missionaries and Orientalists considered Islam to be a negation of Christianity and a threat to western dominance. The resulting religio-political and cultural rivalry, widely reflected in the Orientalists’ treatment of Islam, eventually led to the East’s synecdochical representation in western eyes. In some cases, the Orientalists reduced the entire East to the Islamic Arab world in order to study it, and thus Islam has become the East’s “latest embodiment.”<sup>27</sup> Islam has been associated “with terror, devastation and an apparently irrational unwillingness to acknowledge the evident truths of Christianity.”<sup>28</sup> This complex relationship between Islam and the Christian-dominated West instigated a large amount of (fictional and non-fictional) intellectual works in western literary Orientalism. Kabbani details Islam’s general representation therein:

Islam was seen as the negation of Christianity; Muhammad as an imposter, an evil sensualist, and Antichrist in alliance with the Devil. The Islamic world was seen as Anti-Europe, and was held in suspicion as such. Christian Europe had entered a confrontation with the Islamic Orient that was cultural, religious, political, and military, one that would decide from then on the very nature of the discourse between West and East.<sup>29</sup>

Macfie argues that western Orientalism underwent radical changes and lost its crude manifestation when the older, overt colonial domination ended. Many internal struggles, especially the two world wars and prolonged periods of political upheaval within the West, along with other reasons, “led many western scholars to adopt a more sympathetic approach to the study of alien cultures.”<sup>30</sup> But, Macfie maintains, this has not happened *apropos* “Islamic Orientalism,” whose pursuers “remained for the most part impervi-



ous to change, continuing to preserve the mythological and ideological backwardness of their subject.”<sup>31</sup>

This impermeable attitude is related to the gendering of Muslim societies and the portrayal of Muslim women. An Orientalist anti-Islamic polemic has found fertile ground in the treatment of Muslim patriarchy and of Muslim women in western Orientalist literature, which presents a “simple demonization of Islam.”<sup>32</sup> An enormous amount of fanciful intellectual Orientalist literary production gave such a pejorative picture of Islam and Muslims that modern society transformed them into misfits and their religion into a nightmare.

Said disapproves of such damaging caricatures of Islam by feminist Orientalist discourses and commemorates the emergence of works by Muslim writers, such as Lila Abu-Lughod’s *Veiled Sentiments* (University of California Press: 1986), Leila Ahmed’s *Women and Gender in Islam* (Yale University Press, 1991), and Fedwa Malti-Douglas’ *Woman’s Body, Woman’s Word* (Princeton University Press: 1991), that embody “a very different sort of idea about Islam, the Arabs, and the Middle East” and that challenge “the old despotism.”<sup>33</sup> In fact, since he made this statement in 1993, works on women’s position in Islam and in Muslim societies have increased both in volume and variety. Especially since the 1990s, the discourse of Islamic feminism has undergone rapid growth as a formidable academic discipline. The recent International Congress on Islamic Feminism in Barcelona (27-29 October 2005) signals the climax of this new, emerging brand of Islamic feminism.

The fanciful representation of Muslim women by many European travel writers created an impression about the Arab Muslim world as one of insidious sexual indulgence. Muslim women are depicted as lusty and Muslim men as repulsive in the sight of Muslim women, who are always looking for western/Christian heroes to satisfy their libidinous desire. A. R. Kidwai critiques some western travel writers for creating such a caricature of the Arab Islamic world and uncovers the venom in their works.

Kidwai alludes to British writer Thomas Hood’s *A Tale of the Harem*, which provides readers with a “titillating fascination” when it describes the supposed “sexual licentiousness, and debauchery” of Muslim society.<sup>34</sup> According to Kidwai, Hood combines his assault on the Muslim’s image by asserting the western intellect’s outwitting sharpness over the natives’ gullibility. Kidwai observes that Victorian writer Julia Pardoe’s *The Romance of the Harem* harps upon the same description of the Muslims as lascivious and inherently lewd.<sup>35</sup> Kidwai refers to C. Meredith Jones’ “The

Conventional Saracen of the Songs of Geste,” which delineates Muslim women’s perceived (sexual, psychological, and religious) unhappiness with Muslim men and Islamic patriarchy in order to present Christian knights as superior, inferiorize Muslim men, and eventually establish Christianity’s supposed superiority:

She seems to have no other objective in life than to fall in love at first sight [...] with a Christian knight whom she will eventually marry and for whom she is eager to relinquish her religion. These ravishing and highly sensual ladies are not secluded or sheltered, but pitch their tents in the forefront of the armies so as to display their charms to the Christian heroes whom they are unable to resist. They are ready to sleep with them at once. They ceaselessly engineer opportunity for intercourse.<sup>36</sup>

Such representations are intended to establish Muslim women’s supposed irresistible sexual desire; Christian heroes’ gallantry and glamor; Muslim men’s repulsiveness, unattractiveness, and loathsome appearance; and Christianity’s supposed superiority. Moreover, Islam is represented as an unstable phenomenon, for Muslim women can relinquish it for such flimsy reasons as having sexual requital.

The Orientalists portrayed Muslim men as loathsome to women and as entities that degrade women. Therein lies a striking similarity between the orientalist representation of western men and the imperial policy of presenting colonial administrative officers before the natives. As Said puts it:

When it became common practice during the nineteenth century for Britain to retire its administrators from India and elsewhere once they had reached the age of fifty-five, then a further refinement in Orientalism had been achieved; no Oriental was ever allowed to see a westerner as he aged and degenerated, just as no westerner needed ever to see himself, mirrored in the eyes of the subject race, as anything but a vigorous, rational, ever-alert young Raj.<sup>37</sup>

The same radical difference and dichotomy pervades Orientalist representations of Islam and Muslims: western men (Christians) are adventurous, gallant, energetic, saviors, and rescuers, whereas eastern men (Muslims) are lethargic, slothful, inactive, oppressors of women, and readily concede to western heroes. Colonialists may appear old, decrepit, and fragile at home, but not in the colonies. We see this pattern in the colonialist account of women as well. Whatever their actual status in the metropolitan society, western women in the colonies should always have the image of difference and presence: difference from eastern women and the presence of rights denied to eastern women.

In order to justify their colonial civilizing mission, European colonizers highlighted localized issues to sustain a perceived need for colonial intervention for women's emancipation (e.g., suttee in India; genital mutilation, polygamy, and a fetishistic narrative of veiled women in the Arab Muslim world; and foot-binding in China) which would, in turn, perpetuate their imperial presence. In this way, they tried to establish the "perceived backwardness, illiteracy, and promiscuity of native women" in contrast to the "Victorian ideals of womanhood, such as education, hygiene, and sexual restraint."<sup>38</sup> They also paraded western "moral superiority" in order "to accumulate 'surplus morality'" against the natives' supposed "moral inferiority."<sup>39</sup> However, they remained evasive in their exposé of women's underdog status within the metropole's gender ideology, that is, "male Victorian iconography" that "abounds with the alliances between woman and faery, women and goblins, women and vampires, women and all the crawling and slithering panoply of creation's mutants."<sup>40</sup>

According to Said, colonialist cultural representations of colonized women, based on the myth of saving brown women from brown men, will be better understood if we consider how Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936) and other colonialist writers treated indigenous women in their works of colonial setting. Kipling's Indian women are, as Said observes, "debased or unsuitable for male attention – prostitutes, elderly widows, or importunate and lusty."<sup>41</sup> Kipling's connivance with patriarchy and his condoning the hoodwinking of Indian women becomes manifest in his short story "Lispeth."<sup>42</sup> This conforms quite well with the Orientalist portrayal of Arab Muslim women as being repressed by a putative local Islamic patriarchy and living in a suffocating cage, always ready to come out to meet European men.

### **Western Women in the Victorian Era**

Through a tactic of reticence as regards the status of Victorian women in metropolitan centers and one of vociferousness in relation to native women, the colonizers tried to foreground an imaginary need for Europeans to civilize the natives. Kabbani critiques this double standard and segmental approach in colonialist self-presentation and in re-presenting the "Other" by alluding to how Richard Burton (1821-90), who left no stone unturned in his effort to typify the East as "an illicit space and its women [as] convenient chattels who offered sexual gratifications denied in the Victorian home for its unseemliness,"<sup>43</sup> treated Arab Islamic society and its women. Kabbani strikes a decisive blow against this hypocritical western gendering

policy: “While Burton was presenting his readers with accounts of sexual mutilation practised abroad, his medical compatriots were performing sexual mutilation of a similar kind at home.”<sup>44</sup>

Sally Shuttleworth undertakes a detailed analysis in her *Charlotte Bronte and Victorian Psychology* (1996) regarding women’s customary treatment in the Victorian medical discourse at the time of colonialism’s heyday. Victorian medical experts ravaged women’s very human identity by linking many diseases with female sexuality:

The discourse of disease in the Victorian era drew directly on notions of polluted internal space. Cholera, which seemed to pass mysteriously and invisibly across all known barriers, was associated with syphilis which could lurk invisibly within the female body, turning even the innocent wife into a diseased receptacle who would unwittingly poison her children [...]. Sexuality, and specifically female sexuality, appeared to lie at the heart of the corruption of the industrial social body.<sup>45</sup>

The idea of feminine fragility was rampant in Victorian-era medical treatises, as this literature was dominated by a gender ideology that viewed the female body as having a delicate constitution and being most susceptible to mental disorder because of its being subject to the monthly menstrual cycle. Shuttleworth states: “Psychiatry, or as it was then known, mental science [...] focused on female hysteria and insanity and the unstable processes of the female body.”<sup>46</sup> In nineteenth-century Britain, women were denied higher education out of fear that those pursuing it would suffer a complete breakdown of their health.<sup>47</sup> The notion of the monthly cycle, which was considered a blemish for women, was linked with a psychosomatic trend in women’s consciousness. Femininity and “insanity,” under the guise of medical science, were branded as synonymous.

During the Victorian era, a constructed notion of women’s lesser cerebral capacity continued and took a sophisticated turn in the medical discourse: Being intellectually less capable, it was thought that women’s endeavors to seek higher education might cause amenorrhea (suppression of the menstrual discharge), which subsequently might result in the eruption of nymphomania. On the same ground of supposed mental deficiency, women in Victorian society were told that it was “improper” for them to be involved in creative pursuits. For example, in 1837, Poet Laureate Robert Southey advised Charlotte Brontë: “Literature cannot be the business of a woman’s life and it ought not to be.”<sup>48</sup> In Victorian England, women were thought to be intellectually inferior and thus were barred from intellectual

pursuits and other avenues of human endeavor and prosperity. Although such negative notions of female sexuality were rife in metropolitan society, Victorian colonial propagandists did not bother to talk about this; rather, they publicized the eastern woman's dismal condition in order to validate and perpetuate their civilizing mission.

### **Muslim Women and Christian Men**

Orientalists tried to establish Christianity's superiority by giving fictitious accounts of Muslim women converting to Christianity. In Kabbani's view, romance narratives between Christian knights and Muslim princesses present the latter as sex-hungry seductresses who were always wooing men. They proffered their bodies to Christian heroes, whose virtuosity does not touch them. The Christian knights agreed to have sexual relations with these inherently lusty Muslim princesses only when the latter intended to make that the price of their religious conversion. The missionary zeal gives the Christian heroes a good reason to condone the sin of illicit sexual relations, because through it they save a heathen and make her a "good" Saracen.<sup>49</sup>

This construct of "good" Saracen or "good" Muslim is consistent with the colonial concept of "good" native. As Said says:

It does not occur to Balfour, however, to let the Egyptian speak for himself, since presumably any Egyptian who would speak out is more likely to the "the agitator [who] wishes to raise difficulties" than the good native who overlooks the "difficulties" of foreign domination.<sup>50</sup>

As a native cannot achieve the definitional attribute of being "good" without coming under the colonizers' rule and embracing colonial subjugation without reservation, a Muslim has to follow the same course of accepting colonial rule through embracing Christianity to be defined as "good" by the colonizers and the Christian missionaries.

The religious bigotry and antagonism that produces such "Oriental" scholarship appears more distinctly in the contrasting representation of Muslim and Christian princesses.

While the Muslim princess is represented as treacherous, lewd and selfish, the Christian heroine of the Romances is self-sacrificing and virtuous. In the *Romance of The King of Tars*, a Christian princess, in order to save her people from destruction, resignedly agreed to marry a Saracen king who is portrayed as black and heathenish.<sup>51</sup>

While the sexual union between Christian knights and Muslim women was putatively spurred by the latter's vehement desire for sexual enjoyment (stirred by the attractiveness of Christian heroes), the marriage of "black and heathenish" Muslim men with Christian heroines has been described as motivated by their virtue, fellow-feeling, and self-sacrifice. Thus, the Christian missionary zeal joined with Oriental studies and eventually abetted colonial occupation.

### Western Feminism and Colonialism

During the imperial expansion, women and other disadvantaged groups among the subject races suffered from deprivation. Colonial propagandists obsessed over their plight and thus enabled imperialists to form a complex relation with feminists. As Said argues, both feminists and many lobbyists for various basic human rights, as well as environmentalists and campaigners for animal rights, became merged in the colonial project of civilizing and "othering" alien and subject races. Hinting at this merger in his *Culture and Imperialism*, Said observes: "Eurocentrism penetrated to the core of the workers' movement, the women's movement, the avant-garde arts movement, leaving no one of significance untouched."<sup>52</sup> Said's thesis of Eurocentric penetration has been better reflected in feminist Eurocentrism, because western feminism itself is deeply involved with this civilizational "othering" and demonizing eastern societies and indigenous women.

If we consider the practice of western feminism and how it deals with non-western women's experiences, we find the same Orientalist procedure of "dominating, restructuring, and having authority" and "ruling over"<sup>53</sup> the feminist thinking of subaltern women. The same cultural practice of representing eastern women and ideologically dominating them by prescribing what to do puts the badge of Orientalist-imperialist domination on Eurocentric western feminist thinking. As in the political and cultural spheres, the "relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony."<sup>54</sup> If we judge how eastern feminist philosophy is related to western feminism, we can see the latter's domineering attitude via-`a-vis the former. The "hegemony" of western feminist theories and movements over those of the rest of the world reflects the Orientalists' intellectual disposition of "reiterating European superiority over Oriental backwardness," which Said outlines succinctly in *Orientalism*.<sup>55</sup> In this way, the relationship between western feminism and "Oriental" feminism seems to have been influenced by the binary pairing of "Occident" and "Orient."

Feminist involvement with Orientalists in orientalizing eastern societies and indigenous women, and thus jointly sponsoring colonialism, dismantles, among other things, the hypothesis of men being the colonizers and women being the colonized. Laura E. Donaldson writes:

Ironically, an exploration of women's actual historical experience within colonialism and our own era's representation of that experience problematizes the man=colonizer, woman=colonized metaphor that feminism has often used to analyze women's oppression. For example, in *Women, Resistance, and Revolution: A History of Women and Revolution in the Modern World*, Sheila Rowbotham perceives that certain similarities exist between the colonization and the underdeveloped country and female oppression within capitalism.<sup>56</sup>

This dispels the established assumption that masculinity is inclined to oppression, whereas femininity is the recipient of patriarchal oppression – or, to put it more succinctly, men tend to colonize and women to become colonized. Eastern women experience double (both external and internal) colonization, whereas their western sisters are under a single (internal) colonization. Thus, colonization has become a trope to recount the sufferings of women and the subject races. Eastern women were already under patriarchal subjugation before the colonial invasion. With the European colonialist incursion, however, they received one more apparatus of oppression, in which they shared the same fate with men.

While western women experienced local patriarchal domination, they shared the sin of colonizing eastern/African societies with male colonizers. For this reason, postcolonial feminist theorists locate “the complicity of white women in colluding with the colonial stance.”<sup>57</sup> Anne McClintock deals extensively with this complex engagement of colonial women with the colonial process, even though they were not involved in its direct, external military, economic, and administrative machineries. She concludes that “white women were not the hapless onlookers of empire but were ambiguously complicit both as colonizers and colonized, privileged and restricted, acted upon and acting.”<sup>58</sup> Even Victorian gender and domestic ideologies assisted the colonialist venture: Women looked after men's domestic interests, which gave European men the extra impetus to conquer exotic lands and peoples.

Like Orientalist colonial writers, some western feminists essentialize eastern cultures and generalize their gender issues. They tend to prescribe feminist advice by imposing “colonial gender ideology upon the colonized

space” without understanding the specificity of gender oppression and without appreciating the subject races’ “material realities of gender roles.”<sup>59</sup> Feminist sermonizing regarding the plight of eastern women, without recognizing the indigenous society’s realities and needs, echoes the imperialist notion of independence for indigenous people. As imperialists imagined their own version of independence for the colonized, many western feminists dictate a western model of the feminist agenda that would be, in most cases, unsuitable in a different cultural setting.

In making Oriental people, especially women, an “object of study” with an “othering” mentality, feminists join the Orientalists who study the East from a preset outlook that essentializes them.<sup>60</sup> Leading western feminists pursue the same Orientalist methodology of assessing the natives with their western perception of feminism. As Kabbani says: “Descriptions of distant lands peopled by fantastic beings have universally abounded, as one dominant group became able to forge images of the ‘alien’ by imposing its own self-perpetuating categories and deviations from the norm.”<sup>61</sup> Assessing the experiences of eastern women through western lenses and then making it the basis of directives to remove their wrongs shows western feminism’s linkages more with imperialist theorization than with global sisterhood.

Western feminism thus maintains a correlation with a colonial high-handed manipulative outlook, and hence has come under serious scrutiny and reexamination by such postcolonial theorists as Spivak, who critiques “western feminism for its failure to ‘dehegemonize,’ even decolonize, its own guiding presuppositions.”<sup>62</sup> This necessitates the emergence of a postcolonial feminist theory that would look at the feminist aspects of non-western women in terms of “a differentiation from mainstream [western] feminism.”<sup>63</sup> It would also dispel the western notion that “‘Woman’ is implicitly [...] white”<sup>64</sup> and posit the notion of womanhood in a global perspective, giving proper consideration to subaltern women’s specific needs and demands.

Postcolonial feminist theorists are against the western idea of universalizing women and of “the reification of the Third World woman.”<sup>65</sup> They propose to western feminists the hard, but necessary, task of “uncovering and contesting global power relations, economic, political, military, and cultural-hegemonic,”<sup>66</sup> which Said calls “power political,” “power intellectual,” “power cultural,” and “power moral,”<sup>67</sup> and how these power relations influence feminist theorization vis-à-vis eastern women. Mainstream feminists have to explore indigenous women’s experiences and determine whether these power relations propel feminism in any way.



To dissociate themselves from the Orientalist and colonialist attitudes of western hegemony, feminists have to “recognize differences, acknowledge the historical specificity of women in other places and times, and abandon their unexamined ethnocentrism and the reproduction of Orientalist categories of thought.”<sup>68</sup> The workings of the feminist mind and the nature of its agendas suggest that it should cast off any mentality of valorizing the dominant or the center, and of stereotyping or vulgarizing the weak or the marginal. To disaffiliate feminism from any oppressive power machineries, western feminists should seek to dispel their “Oriental” counterparts’ misgivings by clearly delinking themselves from western imperialism.

### **The Media s Role**

In colonialism’s heyday, imperialists had a direct physical administrative and cultural presence in the colonies. Travel writers visited the colonies and fed their compatriots preconceived images of eastern societies. After the official cessation of direct colonial rule, the colonizers maintained intricate systems of political and cultural domination. One of the most important tools of remote domination is the “New World Information Order,” which has “an international media presence that insinuates itself, frequently at a level below conscious awareness, over a fantastically wide-range.”<sup>69</sup> In the same way, feminist Orientalism also exploits this media manipulation to orientalize eastern women.

Some western media play a significant role in giving a distorted picture of subaltern societies. Rajan cites some vivid examples of how western media, claiming to save brown women from local patriarchy, exaggerates isolated incidents to vulgarize eastern women and present the Manichean opposition of “West” and “East.”<sup>70</sup> The burning of a woman in the Indian interior and the stoning of another woman in a “Middle East country” made the front page of the *New York Times*. Such “monolithic” media representation creates a characteristic negative feeling among readers, who form the mistaken impression that such happenings are endemic and thus present a radically opposite image about a culture of which they have no first-hand knowledge. What such sensational news stories miss, according to Rajan, is the struggle of local lobbies to resist patriarchal oppression, for they depreciate the role of “local women’s groups and other sections of the population”<sup>71</sup> struggling for women’s causes.

By reducing the entire East to a particular horrifying constituent of its social system, western media gives an added impetus to the colonizers, who

take such episodes out of context and make them a moral pretext for their colonial venture, the main goal of which is economic exploitation. Rajan points out that such highlighting wreaks havoc upon eastern society's cultural mosaic and suppresses its dynamics. She reveals a colonial fad in alienating one particular social feature in order to demonize it, using the Hindu practice of suttee and representing it from within:

To repudiate ancient scripture as a basis for modern practice is to invite the charge of alienation; to designate sati as crime rather than ritual, and by such designation seek to intervene through legislative prohibition, is to merely replicate the move of the colonial ruler [...]. It is within the problematic of "tradition" versus "modernity" that the opponents of sati have had to negotiate their position even as they seek to call the very terms into question.<sup>72</sup>

Though ruthless in economic exploitation and insensitive to many fundamental issues of a colonized society, the colonial and neo-colonial media have shown a conspicuous concern for women's issues and ameliorating their plight. Displaying sensitivity, though superfluous, to women's sufferings gives colonizers a way to form a sympathizer-sympathized relationship with the colonized and thus present "an index of cultural, even racial, superiority" of westerners over natives.<sup>73</sup> This demoralizes the natives and eventually helps the colonizers dominate them. By exaggerating patriarchal oppression in the East, western feminists aid the colonialist identification of "third world women as 'victims' of 'native' patriarchal structures as a first diagnostic, or analytic, step, followed by benevolent intervention as a second (political) move."<sup>74</sup> For example, the East India Company's outlawing of suttee in 1829 "served as the moral pretext for intervention and the major justification for colonial rule itself."<sup>75</sup> Britain's direct political control after the 1858 Sepoy Mutiny was a logical consequence.

## **Western Feminism and the Hijab**

Feminist Orientalist representations of Muslim women have reduced the Muslim social system to the veil, now considered an icon of cultural backwardness, and "its lifting" as "the most important sign of reform and modernization."<sup>76</sup> A hijab-clad woman appears to be a misfit among her western and "modern" sisters. To assume her place in western "modern" society on an equal footing, she has to make her body "visible," which will make her "capable of being recodified, redefined, and reformulated according to new, western codes."<sup>77</sup> Apart from becoming culturally assimilated, Muslim

women who shun Islamic cultural identity and abandon Islamic dress serve the imperial purpose of creating “docile, obedient subjects.”<sup>78</sup> While analyzing the imperialist penchant for reducing Muslim society to the veil, Miriam Cooke supposedly presents an insider’s view of the veil experience:

For the outsider, it is the emblem of Muslim women’s oppression and marginalization. While this may be accurate in the cases where women did not choose to veil, it is not necessarily true for those who have chosen to mark themselves out religiously. For many of these women, the veil can be empowering [...]. In the growing conservatism of their environment, working women must beware of the accusation of moral looseness when away from their homes. Wearing the veil assures everyone that these women will not be harassed in the streets and in the workplace, but also that they have become honorable women.<sup>79</sup>

So there are many practical reasons for Muslim women’s preference to observe their religiously mandated dress code. The problem is with the coercive mentality of those societies and regimes that try to impose it. Equally offensive is the western attitude to strip Muslim women of their dress code under the pretext of modernizing them. If Muslim women see this dress code as a protective measure against “the accusation of moral looseness” and a mark of religious identity, as their compliance with a religious code of conduct and as an affiliation to their faith, western feminists should not feel any reservations about accepting them as co-workers to achieve shared feminist objectives. Using pejorative terms when representing the Muslim dress code, as quoted below, has little to do with promoting women’s causes.

In South Asia, Muslim women in purdah wear the burqa, a clumsy garment meant to conceal the female face and body. Wearing the burqa is what is usually described as “being veiled,” but this term is really a misnomer: Many people unfamiliar with purdah think of a veil as a transparent piece of gauze over the face that adds to a women’s allure. The burqa is more like a tent, worn over a woman’s clothes like an overcoat. It covers the person from the top of the head to the wrists and ankles. There are various designs for burqas, as fashions change quickly; thirty years ago, in the cities of Pakistan, the more traditional white cotton model was worn by poorer women while middle-class *pardanishin* wore dark blue or black, models made of synthetic fabrics.<sup>80</sup>

What Hanna Papanek describes here is nothing but a very extreme manifestation of the Islamic dress code, which some Muslim women follow due to their own interpretation of religious precepts. But the majority of Muslim

women who dress Islamically do not wear such clothing. Papanek does not mention the hijab's moderate form, which may appear agreeable. Moreover, her use of "clumsy" does not help to form a mental bridge between western feminists and Muslim women. Aligning the veil or the Islamic dress code with patriarchal repression and Muslim women who follow it with backwardness and passive reception of patriarchal control seems to rule out the possibility of Muslim women being involved in feminist lobbies to such an extent that the very term *Islamic feminism* sounds oxymoronic. Wearing a particular outfit seems to constitute a distinction between a *feminist proper* (western) and a *feminist bizarre* (Muslim).

Such a divisive western mentality, based on a relatively peripheral issue, gives Muslim feminists sufficient grounds to distrust their western sisters' motives. The very issue of wearing or not wearing Islamic dress seems to negate the prospect of bridging global sisterhood – if it is meant to incorporate women of all ethnic and religious denominations. On the other hand, the fear of losing their religious identity makes Muslim women apprehensive of "coalition building and networking"<sup>81</sup> with western feminists. The demarcation and non-alignment between western and Muslim women for sartorial differences bars the potential of realizing their mutual goals. Cooke mentions this mistrust and misgiving:

The challenge is how to collaborate on behalf of women "without losing the specificity of the concrete struggles of different women." Their concern to remain imbedded in their own cultural, religious, and political realities has made Islamic feminists suspicious of appeals to universal feminist activism, which smack of western cultural imperialism. Told by generations of men that to fight for women's rights was to line up with western imperialist women and to betray their culture, they have had to tread very carefully in their relations with women from Europe and the United States.<sup>82</sup>

Another issue that divides Muslim and western feminists is the former's colonial experience. While a feminist protagonist from Algeria or Tunisia may agree with "antipatriarchal goals" and mainstream feminism's campaign against religious extremism, the West's history of colonial exploitation makes them question the feminist agenda's motive: Is it to bring covert colonialism, or to alienate them from their indigenous culture and religious links? Muslim women in particular, and women from colonized cultures in general, experienced oppression from both imperialists and the local patriarchy. Muslim women's misgivings about the western feminist agenda are reflected in Malawian poet Felix Mnthali "Letter to a Feminist Friend":

I will not pretend  
to see the light  
in the rhythm of your paragraphs:  
illuminated pages  
need not contain  
any copy-right  
on history

My world has been raped  
looted  
and squeezed  
by Europe and America  
and I have been scattered  
over three continents  
to please Europe and America

AND NOW  
the women of Europe and America  
after drinking and carousing  
on my sweat  
rise up to castigate  
and castrate  
their menfolk  
from the cushions of a world  
I have built!

Why should they be allowed  
to come between us?  
You and I were slaves together  
uprooted and humiliated together  
Rapes and lynching –  
the lash of the overseer  
and the lust of the slave-owner  
do your friends ‘in the movement’  
understand these things?

...

No, no, my sister,  
my love,  
first things first!  
Too many gangsters  
still stalk this continent  
too many pirates  
too many looters  
far too many  
still stalk this land –

...

When Africa  
 at home and across the seas  
 is truly free  
 there will be time for me  
 and time for you  
 to share the cooking  
 and change the nappies –  
 till then,  
 first things first!<sup>83</sup>

In the current world scenario, many Muslim countries maintain a complex relationship of political and economic subordination with the neo-colonizers. Some still have western soldiers on their soil. So, a similar sense of mistrust among Muslim feminists cannot be overruled. To create trust and confidence in the Muslim women's minds, western feminists have to disaffiliate themselves from the civilizational othering of Muslim women and search for the dynamics of unity instead of highlighting differences.

France's recent (2004) move to ban Muslim headscarves from public schools, which French feminists supported, just buttresses the existing binary opposition of the West and Arab Islamic world. The same we-they dichotomy is visible in the theoretical position of French [white] feminism. The subhuman status of Muslim women has been reinforced, as a we-know-better-what-is-good-for-them attitude has overshadowed the choice of Muslim women to wear hijab. The same Orientalist mentality permeates some elements of modern feminist thinking that non-western women belong to "a subject race, dominated by a race that knows them and what is good for them better than they could possibly know themselves."<sup>84</sup>

The same attitude of considering the non-white [Muslims] as a puerile or lesser breed has been calcified by the joint move of the French government and the feminist groups there. That the French feminist lobby is complicit in the French government's repudiation of Muslim women's right to dress as they please further calcifies Muslim women's misgivings about western feminism. Instead of demanding a basic right for Muslim women, the French feminists bolster the post-colonial indictment that western feminism's central concern is to establish the rights of "white" women and of those non-white women who are ready to accept the ethos of white western culture. The supposition that Muslim women who wear the hijab are suffering from patriarchal suppression belies their sartorial preference. The assumption that the hijab is a sign of female oppression dictated by men covertly entails the following two presuppositions: First, all Muslim women are passive recipients

of patriarchal subjugation; Second, Muslim men are, in general, women's oppressors; western men are, on the whole, women's liberators.

The idea that educated and uneducated Muslim women in both the West and the East wear the hijab, and thus are oppressed, is totally illogical. To hijab-phobic western feminism, the hijab appears to be a conjuring piece of clothing that can transform even highly educated women into a passive and fettered beings who do not know their rights and submit to patriarchy.

Contrary to the French feminists' representation, the dominant voice of Muslim women suggests that they wear it not out of compulsion, but out of religious belief and to distinguish themselves in a multi-cultural society. The presumption that Muslim women robotically suffer silently under the hijab homogenizes them and ignores the strong voice of many educated and progressive Muslim women who wear it due to a strong moral and ideological principle and who consider it a symbol of liberation. Such presumption also demonizes Muslim society, including Muslim men who fight for women's rights. The sugar-coated slogan of "liberating" Muslim women by making them choose between wearing the hijab or giving up their right to an education just echoes the colonial slogan of "civilizing" the "Other," a slogan that caused the natives' political, economic, and cultural dispossession.

Colonialism tried to unveil Muslim women to link them and the colonialists, at least culturally. The colonizers knew that this would bring them, among other things, the benefit of disengaging Muslim women from their religious and cultural affiliations and thus ultimately bring them closer to the colonizers' home cultures, remove them from the men's control, and put them under colonial control. So the travesty of unveiling women was actually "a ruse for achieving 'a real power over the man.'"<sup>85</sup>

But such propaganda was not of much help to the colonizers. For example, the French mistook Algerian women for "pieces of 'sound currency' circulating between the casbah and the white city, mistaking them for the visible coinage of cultural conversion."<sup>86</sup> Referring to Franz Fanon's "Algeria Unveiled," McClintock shows how the "colonial gendering of women" works "as symbolic mediators, the boundary markers of an agon that is fundamentally male."<sup>87</sup> The colonizers represented native women erotically and also tried to use them as colonial tools. They were seen as the "living flesh of the national body," and the colonialists' control over them would ensure a long colonial presence.<sup>88</sup> Though many Muslim women, Algerian women in Fanon's mind, did unveil, and though in the fictitious realm the Orientalists tried to present a putative apostasy of Muslim women, no emotional attachment or cordiality happened between the emancipators and the emancipated.

The European, after all, had occupied her land, oppressed her people, and imposed his personal will upon her. Her emotional detachment was her only defence – feeble as it was – against total victimization. He had the power to enslave her, but he could not make her love him.<sup>89</sup>

The Orientalist preoccupation with portraying women and its slogan of saving native women from local patriarchy in order to disaffiliate them from their indigenous culture and, if possible, assimilate them to the western ethos, has a marked colonial motive.

### **Muslim Women and the Media**

Recent upheavals in international politics give us some arresting examples of the colonialist feminist gendering of (Muslim) women. Colonizers (men), equipped with heavy missiles and other weaponry, go to distant lands. As the troops carry weapons, some print and electronic media carry on their own colonialist feminist projects of portraying the native society as repressive to women. In the first Gulf War (Operation Desert Storm) when, along with the beating of war drums by the troops, one media outlet brought the issue of the “absence” of Saudi women’s right to drive cars to serve the imperialist military presence in two ways: It distracted public attention from the immeasurable human suffering and the casualties of war atrocities to a lesser issue, and it created a notion that a western presence in the Middle East is needed – at least for the supposed emancipation of women. This feminist media coverage foregrounds the East-West binary classificatory system on the basis of “the freedom of North American women to use their cars versus the inability (and failure) of Muslim women to obtain the same privileges.”<sup>90</sup>

During Operation Desert Storm, the colonialist media focused on the Saudi refusal to let women drive. During the war in Afghanistan, preceded by 9/11, the media represented the veil as “the concrete embodiment of the Islamic tradition’s inherent oppressiveness.”<sup>91</sup> Thus, although the “gendering of imperialism took very different forms in different parts of the world”<sup>92</sup> and imperialists and colonialists applied different methods and tactics at different places and in different historical periods, we notice a pattern of media complicity with imperialist projects. Before the days of BBC and CNN, the civilizing mission’s religio-cultural slogan of saving the heathen performed what some media are doing today:

If military troops were deployed to serve imperialistic interests in those days, the “Christian forces” were commissioned under much nobler



causes. One such cause was to save brown women from brown men, which some have called “colonialist feminism.”<sup>93</sup>

Missionary propaganda that presents Christianity as a better alternative to indigenous faiths supported colonizers in a hidden way, as Donaldson and Kwok explain in *Postcolonialism, Feminism, and Religious Discourse* (2002). In a world now swayed by a strong media presence, feminist issues are used to provide “the ideological justification for colonization and the imposition of a colonial culture.”<sup>94</sup> The plight of eastern women helps the media present a grim picture of “other” societies to the West, which, along the way, earns popular backing for colonial invasion. On the other hand, a contrasting image of women’s position in the West and the East gives a dashing impression about western cultural assumptions and a scandalous image of eastern and indigenous cultural expressions. This eventually promotes western cultural imperialism, for “criticism of the cultural practices and religious customs of Oriental societies”<sup>95</sup> artificially creates a desire among Orientals to emulate the dominant western culture, deemed to be true for all, as they find something that the West achieved long ago missing from their own society. Thus, the clandestine project of globalizing the West’s hegemonic culture and provincializing eastern-Islamic cultural practices continues with impunity.

Selling metropolitan notions of “modernism” overseas has been another imperialist apparatus of the global divide. The modernist attitude of aligning eastern-African societies with “tradition,” “backwardness,” and “bondage,” and metropolitan societies with “modernity,” “progress,” and “emancipation,”<sup>96</sup> spreads a sugarcoated Orientalist idea far and wide. Modern feminists’ use of similar divisive terms when describing white women and colonized women foregrounds subaltern feminists’ misgivings vis-à-vis the unholy complicity between western feminism and imperialism. As both imperialism and modern feminism are western concepts, such misgivings are further buttressed by the propinquity of their origin. By giving a “demonological representation”<sup>97</sup> of eastern patriarchy, modern feminism promotes the colonialist enterprise by constructing a hypothetical moral foundation for ruling eastern countries in order to civilize them and rescue their women from patriarchy, as their emancipation requires western “intervention as intermediaries in the civilizing mission.”<sup>98</sup>

A section of western feminism’s ideological link with western Orientalism and the colonial theorization of non-western cultures points to the affiliation of some (white/western) women with imperialism and of some other (black/Asian) women with the colonized subject races. This counteracts the

potential of forming a global sisterhood, which such postcolonial feminist theorists as Spivak advocate, because it puts female identity in the problematic of both oppressor and oppressed. As patriarchy and imperialism are two systems and implements of oppression, any alignment of western feminism with western imperialism, either in theory or in practice, *apropos* the treatment of subaltern societies, gives the former the same label as European Orientalism: a cultural tool for containing non-western nations.

## Conclusion

Forming a universal sisterhood of women from all national, ethnic, and religious backgrounds needs an accommodative approach. White women have to disaffiliate themselves from racial or imperial domineering implements, or, as Mohanty advocates, “decolonization [...] within the women’s movements.”<sup>99</sup> If the woman implied in the term *feminism* is not solely white and western, and if feminism at its core denotes a “consciousness of all sources of oppression – race, class, gender, homophobia – and resists them all,”<sup>100</sup> feminism should have no affiliation with neo-colonialism or neo-racism. Western feminism’s homogenization of differences intrinsic to the East’s cultural variety just replicates the Orientalist-imperialist treatment of the “Orient” that “Orientals were almost everywhere nearly the same.”<sup>101</sup>

For the sake of forming an international sisterhood that accommodates women of all denominations, “European and Euro-American women must first decolonize their minds and recover themselves from the state of unknowing. Like the unbinding of our feet, this is indeed a long, long process.”<sup>102</sup> Non-western women should be given equal standing in mainstream feminism, and this should be achieved via the decentering and deterritorialization of feminism so that the brand of “Eurocentrism” does not taint the long history of feminist struggle, especially in Europe. To disaffiliate feminism from Orientalism and colonial ideology, Landry and MacLean suggest:

Our [western feminists] privileges, whatever they may be in terms of race, class, nationality, gender, and the like, may have prevented us from gaining a certain kind of Other knowledge: not simply information that we have not yet received, but the knowledge that we are not equipped to understand by reason of our social positions. To unlearn our privileges means, on the one hand, to do our homework, to work hard at gaining some knowledge of the others who occupy those spaces most closed to our privileged view.<sup>103</sup>

The intricacy of exposing native patriarchy by modern feminism lies in its colonial affiliation, as it provides a way for Orientalists and imperialists to propagate their theory of globalization and of ruling distant lands. Otherwise, there is no harm in writing about eastern women or describing their plight under patriarchal subjugation. Mohanty distinguishes between objective representations of subaltern women and eastern patriarchy by western feminism and representations prompted by the Orientalist stance:

I do not question the descriptive and informative value of most western feminist writings on women in the third world [...]. In the context of overwhelming silence about the experiences of women in these countries, as well as the need to forge international links between women's political struggles, such work is both pathbreaking and absolutely essential.<sup>104</sup>

A panegyric appreciation of western scholarship regarding eastern society is important to check any counter-homogenization. To prevent prejudice against western intellectual production in general, we should not muddle up "the descriptive and informative" study of western intelligentsia with the Orientalist project.<sup>105</sup> MacKenzie differentiates between these two types of "Oriental" studies as "scholarly Orientalism," which is academic, and Orientalism as "imperial instrumentality."<sup>106</sup>

The concept of global sisterhood demands that western feminists should come forward to rescue their eastern sisters from patriarchal oppression and vice versa. To do this, feminists need to have a clear idea about the plight of women in both western and eastern societies. But non-western feminists' misgivings regarding western feminists' representations of subaltern feminist experiences lie in the distorted representation of eastern women by many western feminists. As Said says: "My two fears are distortion and inaccuracy, or rather the kind of inaccuracy produced by too dogmatic a generality and too positivistic a localized focus."<sup>107</sup> Non-western feminists in general, and Muslim feminists in particular, share his apprehension *apropos* colonial feminist representations of eastern women. Nevertheless, the caricatures of eastern societies produced by some western feminists should not provoke a counter-caricature by eastern feminists and thereby generalize western academic scholarship, which is not necessarily affiliated with the Orientalist project as an integral whole.

Despite a serious indictment of western feminism's unholy complicity with Orientalist and imperialist projects, during colonialism's heyday many Victorian women travel writers formed a rapport of sisterhood with indigenous women. Their treatment of native women in their writings is totally dif-

ferent from that of many male writers, among them Burton and Lane. “Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Elizabeth Craven, [...] Amelia Hornby, Lady Anne Blunt, Mary Garnett and many others” were “fully capable of establishing a personal rapport with the people among whom they lived, tolerating difference and making comparisons between morals and customs of the host community and the one from which they came,” although such women travel writers as “Harriet Martineau, Florence Nightingale, Flora Shaw, Lady Luggard, Amelia Edwards and Gertrude Bell, frequently those concerned with evangelical and scientific pursuits, did on occasion display signs of western prejudice, ethnocentrism and lack of empathy.”<sup>108</sup>

So despite eastern/Muslim women’s misgivings, this historical precedence allows us to hope that a genuine coalition between white feminists and those from subaltern societies is possible. But all of them need to recognize the specificities and differences of the world’s many cultures and “to isolate the problems which are specific to Africa or perhaps the Third World in general, and also perhaps to accept a different hierarchy of importance in which the mother/daughter relationship would be somewhat downgraded.”<sup>109</sup> The pedagogic attitude of western feminism, which prompts it to export European feminist dogmas to the East in general and to the Islamic world in particular, is unacceptable for the simple reason that feminist issues in different parts of the world carry different contextual specificities.

## Endnotes

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