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WOMAN IN THE "FEMINIZED" EAST: BREAKING THE WALL OF VEIL WITH SCHEHERAZADE

"Dişileştirilmiş" Doğu'da Kadın: Şehrazat ile Peçe Duvarını Yıkmak

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ABSTRACT

Orientalism is portrayed by Edward Said within the context of how cultural differences have made the West construct an image of the East with the dichotomy of Orient/Occident. Numerous writings have been engendered depicting Eastern culture, tradition, and religion that shaped the West's perceptions of the East. These writings have revolved around not only ethnicity and religion but also gender, hence leading to the juxtaposition of the dichotomy Orient-Occident with that of feminine-masculine. This alignment has brought forward the most common stereotype pertaining to the place of woman, in other words, the veiled woman which is a predominant symbol of the East. Thus, the East can be said to have been "feminized" by the West. Initiated by the cultural, political, and religious divide between the West and the East, this "feminization" was deepened by ongoing representations of Oriental women by Westerners in the history of Orientalism: how veiled woman has been kept "silence" in the East. Unlike these representations, there is a powerful woman who broke this silence and inspired Oriental women: Scheherazade. Through her stories, Scheherazade encouraged men to look past their own ignorance and biases, recognize the existence and value of women, and encourage women to remove their own veil to demand their rights. In this paper, the aim is to explore how Scheherazade in *The Tales of One Thousand and One Nights* (The Arabian Nights) inspirited Oriental women through the art of storytelling to fight for emancipation from the engrained stereotypes.

Keywords: Scheherazade, *The Tales of One Thousand and One Nights*, Orientalism, woman, East.

ÖZ

Şarkiyatçılık, Edward Said tarafından, kültürel farklılıkların Batı'yı Şark/Batı ikiliğiyle nasıl bir Doğu imajı inşa ettirdiği bağlamında resmedilir. Batı'nın Doğu algısını şekillendiren Doğu kültürünü, geleneğini ve dinini tasvir eden çok sayıda yazı ortaya çıktı.

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Bu yazılar sadece etnisite ve din etrafında değil aynı zamanda toplumsal cinsiyet etrafında da dönmüştür, dolayısıyla Doğu-Batı ikiliğinin dişil-eril ikiliği ile yan yana getirilmesine yol açmıştır. Bu dizilim, Doğu'nun baskın bir simgesi olan örtülü kadının, yani kadının toplumdaki yerine ilişkin en yaygın klişeyi gündeme getirmiştir. Bu bağlamda, Doğu'nun Batı tarafından "dişileştirildiği" söylenebilir. Batı ile Doğu arasındaki kültürel, politik ve dinsel bölünme tarafından başlatılan bu "dişileştirme", Şarkiyatçılık tarihinde Batılılar tarafından Doğulu kadınların ardı ardına yapılan tasvirleriyle derinleşti. Bu tasvirlerin mesajı "Doğu'da peçeli kadının nasıl "sessiz" tutulduğuna dikkat çeker. Yapılan tasvirlerden farklı olarak, bu sessizliği bozan ve Doğulu kadınlara ilham veren güçlü bir kadın vardır: Şehrazat. Şehrazat hikâyeleriyle erkekleri kendi cehaletlerini ve önyargılarını geride bırakmaya, kadının varlığını ve değerini tanımaya ve kadınları haklarını talep etmek için kendi peçelerini çıkarmaya teşvik etti. Bu yazıda amaç, Şehrazat'ın *Binbir Gece Masalları*'nda Doğulu kadınlara öykü anlatma sanatı yoluyla, kökleşmiş basmakalıplardan kurtulmak için mücadele etmeleri için nasıl ilham verdiğini keşfetmektir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Şehrazat, *Binbir Gece Masalları*, Şarkiyatçılık, kadın, Doğu.

Introduction

Western authors contributed to Western colonialism through their representations of Oriental women as twice inferior, stemming from both their preconceived notions surrounding and confirming the standard prejudice, namely the subordinated status of women to men, and being Orientals, particularly in the Muslim context. This should be investigated within the framework of Orientalism, a process by which the West conceptualized the Orient as feminine. Western expression and perspective of the Orient are nothing more than stereotypes and a problem of representation defined as "Orientalism" by Edward Said, who is a pioneer in indicating the West's domination of the East through a discourse of false images and depictions resulting from their dreams, fantasies, and assumptions. Thus, the Orient came into existence by the representations fashioned by Westerners as "man-made" (1978: 5). The discourse of Orientalism calls for a consideration of these writers' role in constructing a) the image of the Orient as primitive, savage, irrational, and feminine that needs to be civilized, ruled, and represented by the Occident – namely the West, and b) the image of Islam as a powerful force that was believed to ban its societies to emulate the developments in the West. This demanded the intrusion of Westerners. An intrusion that rationalized Western domination, control over, possession of them and their land, and ultimately remaking of them as Said defined: "Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having

authority over the Orient" (1978: 3). Said's broad perspective covers Western writers' misrepresentation of the Orient - predicated on fallacious contact - in Western literary, philosophical, and political discourse. Comprising a myriad of branches of criticism within the academic arena, Orientalism penetrated the art world too depicting Oriental women either in the street in their daily garments or partially clothed in the harem, which is, on the surface, construed as authenticity in woman's real life, but at a deeper level, her sexual objectification. Said argued that the West manifested a fascination toward the harem and the veil; Oriental women's oppression in a patriarchal society and eroticism was a reiterated symbol and pivotal in numerous texts, in other words, in Orientalist literature. It is acknowledged that both Orientalist writers and artists carried out roles in the construction and configuration of colonial and imperial discourses that wittingly subordinated the East to the West, and it becomes more evident when one peruses this in Western depictions of women in the harem.

As widely known Orientalism is about power relations: The West, seen as essentially superior and masculine, consciously dominated and controlled the East by representing it as inferior and uncivilized through a set of stereotypes. These recurring stereotypical images effectuated a gendered discourse, extending beyond the narrative of power relations to deeper dynamics of female identity in the Orient: The West as imperialist masculine power/discourse feminized and subordinated the East to the Other:

> Orientalism itself, furthermore, was an exclusively male province; like so many professional guilds during the modern period, it viewed itself and its subject matter with sexist blinders. This is especially evident in the writing of travellers and novelists: women are usually the creatures of a male power-fantasy (Said, 1978: 207).

Considering that the Orient is the creation of Western fantasies, this feminization led to the emergence of sexual vocabulary made available for the West while describing their experience in the East as John McLeod argues in his book *Beginning Postcolonialism* (2010: 45): "The Orient is 'penetrated' by the traveller whose 'passions' it arouses, it is 'possessed', 'ravished', 'embraced' ... and ultimately 'domesticated' by the muscular coloniser". Examining the ways in which the West allegedly reformed but in truth dominated the East by generating an attitude of "Westernization" of the East, which includes a broad investigation of a discourse created and spoken out merely by men, Said's canonical work *Orientalism* offers the

possibility of exploring the gender and sexuality in Orientalist discourse and thus giving rise to the feminist debates. The fact that Orientalism is presented as a male discourse that "conceptualised the Orient as feminine, erotic, exotic, and savage, allowing the West to accede to a position of superiority as Christian, civilized, and moral" (Lewis, 2004: 54) and calculatedly "feminized" the East was intricately associated with woman's deviance, aberrancy, and exoticism (Weber, 2001: 125). So, exoticised Oriental women were depicted as transgressive, offering a plenitude of erotic delights. Playing a fundamental role in the expansion of representation of Oriental women, European travel writers created a range of images of women that have reflected and confirmed the fact that Oriental women are twice inferior to both women and Oriental character. This is "a double colonisation", a term coined by Holst Petersen and Rutherford in *A Double Colonization*: *Colonial and Post-Colonial Women's Writing* (1985), which denotes the way(s) in which women have been subjected to both colonialism and patriarchy's oppression (McLeod, 2000: 175). Quite germane to the term is Anne McClintock's argument in her essay "The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term "Postcolonialism" noting "Women and men do not live 'postcoloniality' in the same way" (1994: 261).

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, because of Islamic injunction prohibiting the interaction between unrelated men and women, male travellers were not granted access to the harem; thus, they just wrote about nature, landscape, flora, and culture. That harem world, in reality, is a blank page for them; therefore, they imagined and depicted it accordingly, which derived from their source of fantasies to suit and cater to their imperialist discourse. So to say, their writings are prone to be defined as fictitious and flawed concerning Oriental women. The texts that are purely based upon the deep-rooted and thus conventionalized beliefs of Western culture totally ignored Eastern culture. One finds that women, in an exotic world, were represented as lewd, insatiable living objects who were forced to live in seclusion, in the designated domain, under male hegemony. For this reason, the sanctuary of the harem and Oriental women became the product of a male fantasy in Orientalist discourse as advocated in Said's words "creatures of a male power fantasy" (1978: 208), in other words, one of the facets of Orientalism, demonstrably engendered by the West, which has helped perpetuate the image of women as a sexual object while oiling the wheel of imperialism.

Contrary to their male counterparts, Western female writers were allowed to enter and observe the culture and women in the harem, furnishing an opportunity to highlight and re-evaluate preconceived and reconceived definitions surrounding the gender and sexuality of orientalist discourse. Since including both harsh criticism and admiration of harem culture and women, their writings have been construed as nebulous, as Herath stated, "whether these accounts catered to or challenged the normative imperialist discourse of the day remains controversial" (2016: 31). Whether this privilege of access entrenched the processes of exploitation of native women or debunked the culturally mythologized image of the harem and women by male writers or artists is enigmatic; however, the fact that these accounts as Lewis argued have created "gendered counter- discourse" (2004: 1) tinge with more certitude. In *Rethinking Orientalism*, Lewis cited one of Zeynep Hanım's experiences, a Turkish woman who sent a letter to Grace Ellison, a journalist:

> But my dear, why have you never told me that the Ladies' Gallery is a Harem?... How inconsistent are you English! You send your women out unprotected all over the world, and here in the workshop where your laws are made, you cover them with a symbol of protection. (2004: 223).

Lewis's approach mirrors Western conceptualization of the harem and its odalisques by refuting the accusations about despotic males and supposedly suppressed Eastern women, stemming from long-standing anxieties and preoccupations regarding the concept of woman and the East: both are defined as inferior, irrational, exotic, mysterious, and uncanny, yet enticing to irresistible pleasures in the unknown as in Kiernan's words "Europe's collective daydream of the Orient" (1972: 73). Evoking an ambivalence of desire and disdain, posing threat and danger, this mysterious unknown should be controlled and suppressed.

It should be pointed out that the presence of inconsistencies in the accounts of harem women, causing potential unreliability, merely marks and contributes to the credibility of the fact that Oriental women – including odalisques – cannot represent themselves, they should be represented. The cultures of the colonized - as a powerful factor - that Oriental women are part of invariably define and shape their gender as inferior thereby entitling them to fewer rights and freedom, even disregarding their presence completely. This is well endorsed by Holst Peterson and Rutherford: "The colonial world was no place for a woman, let alone a lady; it was a man's world,

demanding pioneering, martial and organisational skills and the achievements of those in the shape of conquered lands and people were celebrated in a series of male-oriented myths: mateship, the mounties, explorers, freedom fighters, bushrangers, missionaries" (1985: 9). A melange of writings highlights that women all over the world have always been in a constant struggle to rise, earn an identity, and demand their rights, notwithstanding women in the East have always put much more effort to accomplish all these as being part of the "Other" world, in an Oriental world, which has been "constructed", and "feminized", and then "represented" by the patriarchal West.

Discussion

The aim of this study is less concerned with the feminine and submissive version of the East within the framework of Orientalism than how suppressed women in the 'feminized' East have striven to achieve full equality with men after having been muted for centuries. Serving as a mythical hallmark for the Orient since its first encounter with European readers, *The Book of The Thousand Nights and One Night (*well known as *The Arabian Nights*), first translated by Antoine Galland and published 1704-1717 and then by Richard Francis Burton between 1885-1888 introduces the compelling female protagonist Scheherazade[1] who "is identified with the embodiment of Oriental femininity" (Mamet-Michalkiewicz, 2011: 15). She stands out with her powerful inspiration through the art of elaborate storytelling. Not only have Western women travellers challenged Orientalist discourse doubly victimizing women in the East, which came to be known as "Oriental femininity", but also Eastern women themselves have contributed to this "gendered counter-discourse" (Lewis, 2004: 1), performing art of storytelling. This, undeniably, adds to the web of discourse with a view to gaining independence. This is rendered with the power of knowledge as a political weapon, in this context, the deployment of talent, merits of orality, and storytelling, by breaking the wall of veils, subverting the patriarchal power, traditional roles, and gendered stereotypes, and ultimately leading to her empowerment. Scheherazade paved the way for the political aspect of storytelling when she valiantly offered herself to the King:

> I wish thou wouldst give me in marriage to this King Shahryar; either I shall live or I shall be a ransom for the virgin daughters of

[1] Shahrazad is sometimes spelled Shahrazad, Shahrzād, in the West as Scheherazade. The spelling will be written in accordance with Western use.

> Moslems and the cause of their deliverance from his hands and thine." ... "make me a doer of this good deed, and let him kill me and he will: I shall only die a ransom for others" (Burton, 1888: 15).

Fateme Mernissi's elaboration on Scheherazade's fortitude in *Scheherazade Goes West* reads:

> ... Scheherazade insists on sacrificing herself and confronting the King in the hopes of stopping the killing. This is why Scheherazade can be seen as a political hero, a liberator in the Muslim world. ... She has a scheme in mind that will prove to be successful: to weave spellbinding stories that will captivate the King, leaving him hungry to hear more – and save her life (2001: 46-47).

Scheherazade's secret lies less in holding the dictator King in thrall with her stories than "her use of imaginal and archetypal tales" (Willis, 2011: 111); in other words, they are less grounded in historical reality but more on the presentation of the power of imagination as they are the combination of the magical, the mystical, and the mythical, with the real and the historical, pointing to her being cognizant of the power behind good *storytelling* as much as a good story. She embodies the first significant active and powerful female character that refutes the widely held misconception of the passivity of Eastern femininity. In the prevailing gendered aspects of claiming ownership over women, she seems to be possessed by the King, her husband, correlating her position as a wife to a degree with that of a slave, yet she challenges the sexual and cultural power relations and sabotages the notion of "double colonization". The subversion of power relations is further highlighted when Kahf speculates on the metamorphosis of the image of Eastern femininity in *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman*: "they [Muslim heroines] are not merely passively seductive; they are active seducers. Thus, their sexual confidence is often linked to superior scientific, technical, and supernatural knowledge. It is an active sexual quality rather than one which would render them objects of the gaze" (2002: 36).

Drawing from Mine Sevinç's contention that Scheherazade "intertwines narrative desire with sexual desire" (2020: 3), one may conclude that Scheherazade's "active sexual quality" is achieved through her intellectual capacity operating on three strategic skills: "vast store of information, psychological nature, and her cold-blooded capacity to control her fear" (Mernissi, 2001: 47-48). Seemingly, the hierarchy is distorted when the

woman eventually takes over absolute power denoting that she performs the role of master by escaping the King's disdain and animosity towards the feminine, *viz.* the Other, and transforming it into desire and adoration:

> By Allah, O Shahrazad, I pardoned thee before the coming of these children, for that I found thee chaste, pure, ingenuous and pious! Allah bless thee and thy father and thy mother and thy root and thy branch! I take the Almighty to witness against me that I exempt thee from aught that can harm thee. ... Since there befel the Kings of the Chosroes more than that which hath befallen me, never, whilst I live, shall I cease to blame myself for the past. As for this Shahrazad, her like is not found in the lands; so praise be to Him who appointed her a means for delivering His creatures from oppression and slaughter! (Burton, 1888: 54-55).

When accurately scrutinized in her political context, the fascination she generates as a role model becomes quite clear and overarching since she gradually changes the King's decision, saving not only herself but all the ladies in the entire country, thus testifying to her place of unique importance.

Weaving her tales in Shahriyar's palace, Scheherazade breaks the cycle of victimization in a patriarchal realm implicating a deviation from a medley of standard prejudices and norms. Bereft of any physical description, she surfaces in many European texts with her intelligence and wit, the essence of her sexual attraction, cracking the perspective of her as a metaphor for Oriental femininity. Even though the tales she narrates are heavily imbued with issues of sex and sexuality, she, knowing that the most powerful weapon to enchant a man is words, exudes charm by intellectual penetration, conveying a political message. In doing so, she asserts a manifesto purporting a philosophical approach to confrontation and rebellion striving for equality or superiority in the face of the opposite sex. This summons a way of teaching, more than that it points to guidance for women to know that "sex without brain, never helps a woman change her situation" unlike "Western artists' fantasies of Scheherazade" (Mernissi, 2001: 51), it can only be achieved by developing their brain, the ultimate purpose of which is to encourage women to break out of the cycle of a violent and oppressive relationship inflicted by the patriarchal system. Mernissi contributes to this observation in *Dreams of Trespass*: "Scheherazade's women... did not write about liberation, they went ahead and lived it, dangerously and sensuously, and they always succeeded in getting themselves out of trouble. They did

not try to convince society to free them; they went ahead and freed themselves" (1995: 133).

From this perspective, it would be convenient to conclude that woman has evolved into a storyteller within a communal atmosphere. These tales, other than the sexual or entertainment motivation, suggest a deeper intellectual motive that corresponds to a central passage to reach out into the world, showing their existence, and gaining their rights by jumping off the walls of the harem and unveiling their mouths. The role models like Scheherazade inspire women to reconstruct themselves and the European image of femininity; otherwise, their identities would be limited to prescribed roles such as mothers and housewives. Her scheme to convey a political message is imbricated with the determination of terminating the unrelenting atrocity that is persuading the King, as Malti-Douglas reflects, to "change the dynamics of the male/female sexual relations, in redefining sexual politics. When she consciously takes on her shoulders the burden of saving womankind from the royal serial murderer, she had taken on a much more arduous task: *educating this ruler* in the ways of a nonproblematic heterosexual relationship" (1997: 52, emphasis added).

Representing a counter-stereotypical image of Oriental women in the Muslim realm, the persona of Scheherazade sheds light on sexual power dynamics and serves as a gateway to a more culturally and historically aware view of the gender question and for the evolution of the image of Oriental women. Suzanne Guach's insights into works that focus on a Scheherazadean tradition present her:

> as a speaking agent whose stories have never ended and whose resolve has only increased in the face of both rising fundamentalisms and proliferating Western media images of Arab and Muslim women as silent, oppressed, exploited, and uneducated victims... her stories bit by bit overcome what were once seemingly insurmountable boundaries (2007: xi-xviii).

This observation serves as an index showing that Scheherazade's allure should not be ascribed to her body image as a standard Western manifestation of beauty ideals, yet her physical features are not described but should be attested to her mind. This recalls once more Western predilection for dichotomous thinking based on the Orient/Occident and highlights the dualism of mind and body. Orientalism has done much to inspire many authors to translate her stories and draw from her features in creating new

narratives, be it as a powerful female and storyteller or less alluring. Although the image of the protagonist may display slight discrepancies, notwithstanding, the wit and intelligence embodied in a powerful and determined woman have invariably become dominant characteristics in the translations of Galland, Burton, Lane, Payne, and Haddawy which are underpinned by Burton's description of her:

> [...] Shahrazad and Dunyazad hight, of whom the elder had perused the books, annals and legends of preceding Kings, and the stories, examples and instances of men and things; indeed, it was said that she had collected a thousand books of histories relating to antique races and departed rulers. She had perused the works of the poets and knew them by heart; she had studied philosophy and the sciences, and she was pleasant and polite, wise and witty, well read and well bred (2002: 19).

Her image corresponds to strong and independent femininity taking its root in her gained agency through the power of both being endowed with the role of protagonist and the narrator. Through the tales of this storyteller, it is observed that there is a parallel relationship between the realization of phasic empowerment and jettisoning the negative images of Shahriyar. A close perusal presents the fact that she not only transforms the Sultan but also leads to a huge impact in the alteration of the perception of femininity in a patriarchal realm.

During the period of European colonization of the Orient, the colonial system of governance either terminated many lives or severely traumatized the colonized, particularly damaging women. It has been recorded that the colonized men exposed to colonial violence, be it physical or verbal, demonstrated a high likelihood of using violence against their family members or partners, thus allying indirectly with the colonizer in stripping of women's sense of self and agency. Drawing from Said's revelations concerning the way how the West constructed its identity by establishing upon the Other/East, it is appropriate to utilize this dichotomy for Oriental men's identity or power agency which is based on Oriental women's control and oppression. This recalls Frantz Fanon's deconstruction of colonial oppression suggesting that the colonized being oppressed by the West ends up suffering from irrevocable psychological damage which results in an extreme inferiority complex and unceasing but futile struggle to question and escape from his/her black body: "O my body, make of me always a man who questions!" (Bhabha, 1952: vii). As Bhabha professed in Fanon's ca-

nonical work *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), "The Negro enslaved by his inferiority, the white man enslaved by his superiority alike behave in accordance with a neurotic orientation" (1952: xiv). The violated individuality brings about confused thoughts but more ruefully physical and sexual violence towards women of his own race. This analysis of the detrimental effects of colonization can plausibly be typified by Toni Morrison's character Cholly Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye* (1970), one of the ground-breaking postcolonial novels. Humiliated by white men during his first sexual intercourse when 14-year-old, Cholly rapes his own daughter Pecola when he is drunk, ultimately ruining his own daughter's life forever. Returning to *The Arabian Nights*, Oriental women's oppression is undoubtedly illustrated by power-ridden Sultan's persecution of his new wives by executing them all the next morning out of his revenge.

A closer scrutiny shows that Oriental women's double colonization is "tripled" since the patriarchal white hegemony depersonalizes her as the colonial subject and as the female, and also the colonized men contribute to her subversion. The 'triple colonization' boils down to the fact that men – white or black – have undoubtedly felt obliged to control women, contextually Oriental women, however, this has whimsically occasioned a divergence between reality and imagination.

The fact that men have wanted to control women undeniably has shaped the way they fantasize about women and subsequently represent them in narratives, be it textual or visual, which is well illustrated by French artist Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres's paintings. He unceasingly rendered passive women placed on sofas exhibiting their nudity. Despite that, such divergence between reality and imagination is in vehement denial of Ingres's fantasy of passive harem women, representing the Western treatment, in Mernissi's account:

> Ironically, in the Orient – land of harems, polygamy, and veils – Muslim men have always fantasized, in both literature and painting, about self-assertive, strong-minded, uncontrollable, and mobile women. The Arabs fantasized about Scheherazade of The Thousand Nights and One Night; the Persians painted adventurous princesses like Shirin, who hunted wild animals across continents on horseback; and the Mughals, or Turco-Mongols, from central Asia, gave the Muslim world wonderful erotic paintings filled with strong, independent-looking women and fragile, insecure-looking men. (2001: 164).

This contrast in views sheds light on some justification in perceiving behind the façade which bears the essential gender: women, who strive for their freedom in all aspects of their lives, are willing to take chances in expressing their inner rebellious thoughts and communicating their message of protest.

Scheherazade's capacity to combine wit and intelligence to enthrall audiences with her captivating tales for hundreds of years makes her such a powerful role model and calls for others to follow her footsteps. One of these followers is Princess Nur-Jahan (1577-1645), a stunning and revolutionary female character in history. The meaning of her name is "Light of the World", who developed a name for herself as markswoman featuring her superior skill in hunting tigers, but the epithet of the most powerful woman in the Mughal empire makes her stand out. A woman with distinguished accomplishments such as eloquence, poetry composition, and martial arts, adorned with a refined cultural taste in art, painting, and architecture, but above all things undisputed political savvy culminated in a compelling female figure who was not only unmistakably in control but also had an army including only women. She was rendered against the grain; in a miniature with her husband Jahangir, Prince Khurram, adding to her unorthodox femininity. As a Muslim queen, expected to be secluded in an ivory tower, notwithstanding, she opposed being left in the dark and suppressed by sitting along with her husband, signifying a woman image who broke the walls of the harem and the veil to inspire other women to join her in asserting a firm presence in a patriarchal society.

What Scheherazade and Nur-Jahan have done for all women is to encourage them to be aware of or cultivate their ingenuity and prowess to demand their rights in the public domain by holding posts in scientific fields:

> If women invade public space, male supremacy is seriously jeopardized. And in actually, modern Muslim men have already lost their power base, as their monopoly over public space has been eroded with the massive entrance of women into scientific fields and the professions (Mernissi, 2001: 192).

Women in the East/Orient have always been caught between gender and identity crises intensified by colonial invasions and conflicts, which has led to a general tendency to portray them as inferior and immured by their colonized patriarchal norms and cultures. It was/is beyond possibility for

them to have academic pursuits, refuse to marry, and assert control over their own lives in a patriarchal society. However, Hanan al-Shayk, a Lebanese author, presented a hard-edge picture of female characters, resembling Scheherazade, grappling with a narrow-minded and oppressive society in the Arab world, trying to get rid of the deprivation of self-expression in their communities in *The Story of Zahra* (1980), *Women of Sand and Myrrh* (1989), and *Only in London* (2001). The excerpt below, taken from an interview with Hanan al-Shayk conducted by Christiane Schlote, presents her insights into the portrayal of her female characters:

> Would you say that over the course of your career as a writer, you've endowed your female character with increasing power? For example, starting with the relatively powerless Zahra from The Story of Zahra to Amira in Only in London? And if so, would you attribute this to your last novel being set in London?
>
> I tell you what to start with. I never thought, like the readers thought, that Zahra is hopeless. I mean, according to the West, she was very hopeless, she couldn't do anything. But in her own society, she tried to really say no, like even going to Africa, spiting her father in telling him that, although she was not beautiful, beauty wasn't everything. I mean, if she were hopeless, she wouldn't have had a miscarriage, she would have somebody killing her from the family. So, in a way, I mean, she's tragic. But she also tried her best within her limits. She was, I think, stronger than others within her limits. Of course, you know, nowadays, if in twenty years the position of women hadn't changed, we should really lament our situation and our world [laughs]. So in a way, my characters have more, I wouldn't say integrity, but they're more pushy in a way. Even Lamis [the other of the two main female protagonists in *Only in London*] to just divorce her husband, knowing she has no money and that she will really suffer economically, but she went ahead and did it regardless. (H. al- Shayk, personal communication, September 2003).

This dream of freedom for women, implicated in this excerpt, comes to be through traveling which definitely caters to growth and opportunities by discovering and eventually empowering them. Mernissi's grandmother Yasmina was an uneducated harem woman who claimed that ladies should concentrate on and attempt to comprehend strangers. She advocated for women to travel borders, even if doing so causes them to become anxious

because the greater information about a stranger gives you greater power and knowledge about yourself. The fact that women take big risks means they use their wings or just the opposite; however, if they hesitate to use them, they should be prepared for the pain it inflicts (Mernissi, 2001: 1-4).

Conclusion

The narratives told by Scheherazade originated from a tradition of women's oral storytelling. When men transcribed the stories, gender differences became evident. In certain versions of the tales, Scheherazade's role has been downplayed, reducing them to mere accounts of sexual exploits and adventure. Despite this gender disparity, Scheherazade utilized her intelligence to challenge this gender bias, demonstrating how the power of words can effect change by transforming not only the mindset of a king and husband but also an entire community. Through her actions, she served as a role model, inspiring women to take charge of their own lives and destinies, ultimately altering the perception of women in the Western realm.

Scheherazade reappeared in a plethora of cultures and times in a plenitude of forms and portrayals, both as a protagonist and a storyteller acting as a recorder of the phases of the metamorphoses of her image. The flow of her metamorphoses is against the tides of the misrepresentations and misperceptions of Oriental femininity shown in the Orientalist discourse. Given that Said refers to Marx's words in the epigraph of his *Orientalism*: "They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented", it appears that Scheherazade responded to Spivak's title question "Can Subaltern speak?" by speaking for herself and for all women, not only Oriental but also for non-Oriental women who are spoken for by those in power. If the subaltern can speak, here, then the more acutely relevant question to pose is "Can the subaltern be heard?" This is achieved with Scheherazade's recreated image through the unprejudiced and/or transparent translations of *The Thousand Nights and One Night* by authors who eschew culturally conditioned modes of thinking based on dichotomies.

Orientalism proved to be too strong to resist, that much is clear. Although they have never been referred to as equals, Western and European women's travel writings show affection for and a similar affiliation with Eastern women. In comparison to the West, which still has prejudices about the East and Eastern women, the victims of the 'feminized' East, the women in the East are seen as being less rational, less contemporary, and less civilized. History records numerous revolutionary women depicted in literary

works as being in a perpetual fight to alter the system with a view to (re)possessing their rights. Scheherazade pioneered this movement and followed by Princess Noor-Jahan inspiring all women by demonstrating to them how to break through barriers with her intellectual prowess, strategic acumen, and the power of the written and spoken word.

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