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NORTH AFRICAN ACROBATS IN THE WEST: TOWARDS AN ARCHIVAL MEMORY AND OCCIDENTALIST COUNTER-LITERATURE

TRITHA ABDELAZIZ¹

ABSTRACT

Though hidden in plain sight and aesthetically relegated to the margin of history, North African acrobats to the West are critical terrains that shift the spotlight downwards, signal new versions of the inscription of Otherness and recreate the absent/present agency of North African acrobats as active interlocutors and “dissenting voices”. They remain valuable archival material that particularly challenge orientalist orthodoxies and Western clashing tropes; they are emphatically alternative discourses of difference that run counter to the binary mainstream trope and the fixed taxonomy of East versus West. My particular interest is in Hassan Ben Ali’s Troupe, Zahra Kader’s experience in America, and Zahra Ben Tahar’s conception of otherness. These North African acrobats have various and culturally inspired accounts. I argue that these acrobatic experiences formulate a parallel Occidental discourse that tries to create a counter-discursive narrative or rather a North African “voyage in”. It shows how the acrobats have turned into examiners and eyewitnesses from within Western contexts. Using a postcolonial micro-historicist approach, this paper aims at undermining both the orientalist discourse and the Occidental thesis premised upon Hassan Hanafi’s *Muqaddima fi Ilm al-Istighrab* (An Introduction to Occidentalism).

Key Words: Orientalist orthodoxies 1, binary mainstream 2, Occidental discourse 3, active interlocutors 4, Occidentalism 5.

INTRODUCTION

An interesting and thriving literature seeking to chronicle the Western presence in the Orient had an undeniable impact on shaping, constructing, and framing the image of the Oriental Other. Writing on the Orient as subject of study gave rise and free rein to aesthetically homogenising and reductionist views varying across a wide spectrum of genres, such as cinema, literature, and travel writing. With various and oscillating degrees of hostility towards the different Other, the Orientalist vision, as maintained by Said (1978), predicated more on the essentialist premise than on a direct cultural encounter, shrouds the question of Otherness within normalising, formulaic, and clashing tropes. Only very recently has interest has been paid to Muslim representations of the West. Extensive academic research has been carried out on Western representation of the East, whether in fiction, anthropological studies, or the cinema. The Orientalist vision dominated the eighteenth, nineteenth, and the twentieth centuries.

Said (1978) stresses also that writing on the East as a subject of study generated a series of stereotypes and tropes, ranging from a strong condemnation of the natives’ culture to an admiration of their exoticism and “exceptionalism”. He explains that an admiration of the natives’ culture stems from the very fact that it represents something lacking in the West and its condemnation is best attributed to backwardness and “pastness”. Against such a mundane orientalist vision that relegates the natives to the margin and essentialises them within fixed

¹ A doctoral student at the Faculty of Art and Humanities, El Jadida, Chouaib Dokkali, El Jadida, Morocco. Email: trithaabdelaiziz@yahoo.fr. He is currently conducting doctoral research on North African travellers and acrobats to the West. His major interest is in cultural representation, travel writing, and anthropology.

adamant taxonomies, the alternative discourse of difference in North African acrobats' accounts runs counter to this validated orientalist thesis. This is in fact the other side of the dyad that aims at re-reading the orientalist discourse against its emanating source. My article limits its concern to the study of North African acrobats' experiences in Western circuses, starting from the mid-nineteenth century, focusing on Hassan Ben Ali's Troupe, Zahra Kader's experience in America, and Zahra Ben Tahar's conception of Otherness.

The rationale behind this limitation is as follows. First, much critical focus has been devoted to the Arab representation of the West, without a single allusion to the fact that North African acrobats' accounts subscribe to the Occidentalist vision of the West beyond the orthodoxies of orientalist discursive practices. Second, to define Occidentalism on the basis (as Hanafi (2000) claims) of cultural animosity, antagonism, and clashing signifiers is to deny degrees of cultural cross-over and criss-crossing between the Islamic Self and the Christian Other, reinstalling the same fetishised and epistemic hierarchies. Enmeshed in their historical junctures, the nature of the acrobats' experiences, and their religious and cultural background, these accounts are critical terrains attesting to the fact that Occidentalist discourse is heterogeneous and ambivalent. It is worth noting that North African acrobats' cultural rendezvous with the Western Other is a counter-consciousness to both Lewis's (1982) belated version of orientalism and Hanafi's (2000) nationalistic and binary premise.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In his book *The Muslim Discovery of Europe*, Lewis (1982) claims that Muslim travellers, after the Crusades, showed no intrinsic curiosity to become more enlightened about the secrets of the infidel Other. Muslim travellers were riveted to their curatorial vision, celebrating their pride, bravery, and pomposity. He goes so far as to allege that this lack of curiosity is ascribed to the general abstractions and the conclusions that Muslims drew about a remote Orient. In this vein, Lewis (1982, p. 415) states:

Even the rapid growth of commercial and diplomatic relations with Europe after the Crusades seems to have evoked no desire to penetrate the secret of the mysterious occident, as may be seen from the scarcity and vagueness of information about Europe in the late Medieval Chronicles, even in the manual of chancery scribes.

Bernard Lewis sets the seal on Muslims' lack of interest in the Occidental knowledge and draws barricades between the Occident/Orient, following the recurrent paradigmatic binarism of orientalist discourse. General abstractions and vague information, according to him, foster Muslims' mutiny to investigate the Occidental culture. His use of such a loaded term as "mysterious" suggests that, for an Eastern culture to be acknowledged, the East must converge to the Eurocentric referential culture to discover its wonders and mysteries. More provocatively still, the Occidental and the Oriental cultures are put at odds; the first is known for its wonders and mysteries, and the second is frozen in "pastness" and parochialism. The image that Bernard Lewis tries to perpetuate and validate is an Islamic culture that calls for war instead of cross-cultural dialogue and engagement. Henceforth, the main argument of Bernard Lewis is to confirm the Muslims' lack of interest in the Occidental culture and to curtail Islam to a religion of contention and fervour.

On another level, Nabil Matar's response to the Lewisian theory has come at the right juncture to dissolve and neutralise the accusation that Muslim travellers lacked interest in the Christian Other's culture and civilisation. Matar (2009) highlights the very idea that Muslim travellers were eyewitness reporters and from within – immediate onlookers. They showed not only their interest in exploring the Other's culture, but, more importantly, they also showed a diametrical glorification and valorisation of the Other's civilisation. Muslim ambassadors were not just individuals passing by; they decided to stay and decipher from

within the Christian world. Matar's *Europe through Arab Eyes (1578-1727)* invites us to see the great exuberance that Arab travellers did show while investigating the Other's cultural realms. In this trajectory, Matar (2009:99) states:

Although he and other ambassadors realised that they were in unfamiliar, and not always friendly, territory, they did not see themselves in enemy land. Nor did they feel that they should not enjoy themselves: actually, many relished the social interactions, the dinners and the galas.

Nabil Matar demystifies the Lewisian approach by giving viable instances that show the deep engagement of Arab travellers with Western civilisation. This interaction surfaces the very fact that Arab travellers were active participants without any sense of hatred or prefixed tablets of infidelity. They, to use Deleuze's concept, de-territorialised their culture and rendered the Other's context familiar to them. The Other's land was neither a territory of the dwelling infidels nor an un-ubiquitous sphere of enemies. They rejoiced the convivial moments and expressed their admiration of Western civilisation. That azure of cultural contact made them reconsider their cultural habits and rituals. Having dinners with Westerners and attending festivals tell us much more about the internal curiosity and the intrinsic desire to imbibe from the Other's cultural staples. Arab travellers have managed to demystify images of hesitation held about them. The other's space becomes a site for cultural negotiations, contestation and cross-cultural fertilisation. Matar's project gives credit to Arab travellers and makes their voice decipherable, heard and listened to. It exhumes their archives from amnesia and makes them valuable material to be deployed in the analysis of cultural encounters.

Nabil Matar's contribution to the archival of Arab travellers' memories and journeys covers an early period that spans the late sixteenth century up to the turn of the eighteenth century. This tremendous interest in Arab journeys suggests his straightforward commitment to the fact that Arabs have, throughout history, been culturally and politically in contact with Europe. Be they travellers, ransomers, captives, traders, or envoys, Arabs have established routes of alliances with Christendom. Let us not deny the fact that these Islamic travel accounts should not be detruncated from their historical conditions, geographical dimensions, travellers' personal backgrounds, and the nature of their missions. My major assumption is that the Muslim views of the Christian Other varies across the aforementioned parameters. Their views are complex, ambivalent, and heterogeneous. They cannot be pinned down to one single monolithic discourse, entailing the Other's acceptance. Their views of the West are marked by *Mahabba* (affection) (Matar, 2009) as well as discursive patterns that refute the Other's excellence in earth sciences. I will try to show how both Bernard Lewis and Nabil Matar overlooked some workable elements that enrich Muslim travels to the West.

Beyond this orientalist discourse that draws demarcations between East and West as two entities at odds, Occidentalism as an alternative discourse of difference tries to foster another form of representation that runs counter to the orientalist one. In his book *Moqadima Fi Ailm Al Istighrab (An Introduction to Occidentalism)*, Hassan Hanafi traces the emergence of Occidentalism as a science that attacks the process of Westernisation (2000: 19):

Occidentalism was developed to attack Westernisation, which has strong influence not only on our cultural life and imagination of the world but also on our daily practices, purity of language, artistic productions and all aspects of life. Each Arabic word makes up for its semantic lacunas by being added to another Western word or rather by transferring some French words to the Arabic ones. Thus, the standard Arabic has lost its meaning and overlapped with dialect.

It becomes clear that Hassan Hanafi focuses on Occidentalism as a new form of Westernisation and a counter-narrative that stresses local national values. He reinstalls binarisms in the sense that most of Western cultural influence to the Arab states asunder. Hassan Hanafi's main attempt is to see degrees of Western cultural influence on the Arabs' national values and heritage; from a purely nationalistic perspective, he sees the West as a form of cultural domination that has radically changed the linguistic domains and architectural designs. He (Hanafi, 2000) goes so far as to suggest that Occidentalism is a form of "alienation" that strips Arabs' cultures of their local specificities and values. Occidentalism for him is a counter-discourse that tries to subvert the colonial cultural legacies and relocate agency on the basis of an anti-Western discourse; Western cultural influence has to be challenged from within Arabs' cultural context through stressing national values and turning the West into a subject of study. In this sense, Hanafi (2000, p.100) claims that "the Islamic thought gives example of how we should preserve our identity against any form of alienation. The Quran has forbidden alliance with the enemy and the tendency to win his trust." Thus, relying on religious maxims, Hassan Hanafi sees Western cultural influence as a form of alienation that stripped Arabs' culture of its "authenticity".

Based on a strongly nationalistic view, Hassan Hanafi sees in Occidentalism a way of undoing Western hegemony and domination. Limiting the scope of Western cultural legacies is what Hassan Hanafi is interested in. He considers Occidentalism as a science that sets the seal on both the East and West for fear of cultural contamination. Hassan Hanafi's project investigates the relationship between the Self and the Other and how the Arabs, who have long been othered, could turn Western culture into a subject of gaze. However inspiring his book is, his focus on Occidentalism as an anti-Western discourse eclipses the degree of cultural flows between East and West. Turning the West into a subject of study does not necessarily mean dispensing with its culture. In still another, we have to look at the heterogeneous views of Arabs towards the West. Images of the west vary according to historical junctures and individual experiences. Taking the example of Arab acrobats' attitudes towards the West varied according to their personal convictions and individual experiences. To judge Occidentalism (as Hanafi does) as a process of undoing Western culture and articulating the Arab Self is to deny cultural translation and the degrees of cultural flows.

North African Acrobats' History in Western circuses: from racial and cultural difference towards a parallel counter-discourse

Though eclipsed from the leading grand narratives, the presence of North African acrobats in Western circuses has a literature of its own to be narrated and rich histories worthy of resurrection. Their complex itineraries foreground degrees of cultural interaction, encounter, and criss-crossing. With various experiences (different from the official canonical and ambassadorial journeys) and relying upon their cultural, educational, and (significantly enough) the historical junctures wherein their migratory adventures saw birth, they managed to transcend the mere aesthetic and physical performances they were assigned. They emphatically formulated complex and ambivalent views in relation to the Self/Other interplay. Not only were they keen on establishing cultural alliances with the western Other, but they were interestingly eyewitnesses and active participants from within western circuses. This passage from mere exhibitionist and performing formalities into cross-cultural fertilisation is yet configured through interracial marriage, comments on Western daily life and civilisation.

It is worth noting that North African acrobats' presence in Western circuses, namely in the United States, Britain, and to a lesser extent Germany, was interwoven in multifarious historical conjunctures that reshaped and constructed the image of the Other in a context of increasing commercialisation, trade, exhibitionism, and consumerism. As the circus appeals

much to the spectators' sensational side and teases out distraction and entertainment, it is also an arena wherein cultural and identitarian subjectivities are formed and fashioned. A glimpse at the turn of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries crystallises North African acrobats' roots/routes, migratory experiences, and their performing expertise in fairs.

The mid-nineteenth century saw a significant flow of Arab acrobats to Western circuses for various reasons, ranging from their search for a better life to a long-sought hope to develop their expertise and flair. The question of whether they were conscious of the cultural representation of their home countries is taken up with reservation. To begin with, and precisely in Britain, it goes without saying that the nineteenth century was marked with the Victorian reign, which spawned values of moral conduct, seriousness, and honour. As historically put by Aasel (1998, p. 1) in her PhD research, the circus's development as a commercial setting, in the Victorian period, "was intricately tied to a widespread demand for circus acts by a broad range of classes in this society and so the Victorian's interest in the circus as an artistic form within the context of a vibrant (and sometimes not so respectable) consumer market". More importantly, that historical era formed the pinnacle of a passage from an agrarian society to a highly-industrialised arena whereby the means of transportation facilitated commercial transactions and consequently cultural cross-over. It is within this vibrant historical context of dynamism and industrialisation that North African performers formed their trajectories. Imbibing from archival websites and historical journals, such as *Fulton History* and the *Brooklyn Eagle*, and deploying other historical magazines, unravels the intricacies of Arab acrobats' performances in British theatres and stages. Recurrently labelled as "Arab Bedouins", "Sons of the Desert", or "Mohamatans", Arab acrobats' performances in British circuses took the form of pyramid-building and bodily contortions. Appealing to a wide spectrum of audiences (especially during the Victorian age with high consumerist demands) entailed the fact that the Circus at that time represented outlets from the mundane hectic daily life.

Though left out from the Eurocentric exclusionary historiography, Arab acrobats' presence in British fairs and circuses was not for the sole aim of garnishing the British dominated stage. It was equally an interesting contribution to the production of acrobatic cultural artefact. Back in the year 1843, a group of Moroccan troupes found their way to the Victoria Theatre and thrilled British audience with their spectacular and amazing acts. The troupe comprised various categories of acrobats according to their age (boys, mature boys, and adults) and physical bodies, as is clearly shown by the *Illustrated London News* (1843):

Their most surprising feat is that of forming a column or pyramid of four piled up, as in the engraving, the stouts stand the tallest occupying the place of the base; besides which, he bears another Arab around his waist, and one upon each shoulder, while the topmost figure can touch the proscenium curtain. We assure the reader that their entire performances are worth the attention of all who woo the wonderful.

In that thrilling entertaining arena where suspense, merriment, and delight were guaranteed, Moroccan acrobatic troupe managed to identify their niche as active agents and dexterous performers. They were also able to articulate their agency as North African exhibitionists in a completely different British metropolis. Beyond Bernard Lewis's curatorial mind-set and negating premise that bereave Arabs of curiosity and keenness to know the Western Other, the Moroccan troupe's performance in the Victorian theatre turns his ad hominem argument into hollow evidence.

Another salient testimony of Arab acrobats' zeal and eagerness is best configured in the German circuses, where rendezvous with the Other made their locus. This is an illuminating story of Arab acrobats in German circuses that traces their itineraries with all the

metaphors of turn, return and crossing borders. With an inspired alacrity to discover the other shore, Arab acrobats in German circuses demystify the long-held tropes of Arabs' inability to trespass the threshold of their domestic sphere. It runs counter to the Lewisian claim and Hassan Hanafi's nationalistic vehemence. The mid-nineteenth century represented a springboard for Arab acrobats to flourish and make their distinctive Oriental performances known. Escher (1997, p. 249) subtly puts it in his article "Les Acrobates Marocains dans les Cirques Allemands":

On se demandera à quel moment dans l'histoire du cirque, les acrobates Marocains apparaissent-ils la première fois en Allemagne ? Ernest Renz qui, vraisemblablement en 1852 et pour la première fois en Allemagne présente les acrobates Marocains. C'est à partir de 1852 qu'apparaissent les acrobates Arabes.

Though the beginning of their performance in German circuses cannot be pinned down to a specific year, it could be conjectured through reference to the well-established circus figure, Ernest Renz, who first introduced them to the German audience in 1852. That year marked the starting point of a long-standing Oriental tradition in Western fairs as agile performers and cultural representatives of their countries' civilisational repertoire. This is to argue against Edward Said's thesis that the oriental Other succumbs to Western hegemonic practices and therefore remains a silent interlocutor incapacitated and unable to write against the backdrop of colonial history. Arab acrobats stultified within German circuses and turned the hierarchical dogmas of East vs West upside down. They forged their own proper theatrical, acrobatic, and cultural register that did not validate the status quo, but rather gave rise to a parallel Occidentalist literature based on their daily experiences and life journeys.

A general historical documentation of Arab acrobats' performances in western circuses will not be complete without tracking down routes of their contribution to the development of such artistic display in American stages and fairs. Radically counter to the Orientalist travellers' clichés that draw demarcations between the Self and the Other and capitalise on the clashing tropes, Arab acrobats and dancers occupied much attention and offered another Occidentalist version of travelling literature, nurtured by direct contact and daily experiences. Endowed with their cultural assets akin to their national belongings and their incarnated expertise as "displaced" performers, Arab acrobats, right after 1870, started supplying the American circuses, as maintained by Nance (2009, p. 112):

In the meantime, after 1870, Arab entertainers began contributing their own expertise and energy to the arts of playing Eastern. They helped make the desert horsemen and then the Arab stock Characters in the public options for consumer individuation...these democratic venues presented the Arab man in the person of the "Bedouin Horseman", a more secular, masculine free spirit and heroic villain.

Endeavouring to satiate the American consumers, Arab acrobats appeared in Eastern personae as a marker of their cultural individuation. However atavistic and backward they might seem for American audiences, they only used their Eastern masks to strike the immediate response to the public heart. The images drawn through their performances were reminiscent of interventionist Orientalist pseudo-realities; such was the case when the Arab land was only a forlorn desert breathing silence, vacuum and lethargy. Approached from another angle, Arab acrobats' presence in American circuses, bearing their local, traditional, and Eastern attire, was interestingly a sign of spectacular resistance to a Western-dominated circus. Their presence undermined the whole Western apparatus and created a rupture within the metropolis. Playing Eastern to gain the audiences' responsiveness was an assertion of cultural exclusiveness and distinctiveness. Having to some extent delineated the historical intricacies of Arab acrobats' appearance in Britain, Germany, and the United States of

America, I argue that they are worth the documentation of their stories and experiences. What I shall develop later is their representation of the West as a counter-literature.

North African Acrobats to the West: A Literature of Their Own

Memory Re-TRACKED, and Orientalist Proclivities Revisited: Hassan Ben Ali's Troupe In American Circuses

Sie Hassan Ben Ali was born in south of Morocco and a descendant of a well-known Moroccan acrobatic group called Oulad Sidi Ahmed ou Moussa, whose founder was a member of the Sufi order. He was a prominent figure in the history of Moroccan acrobats in America and the manager of Moroccan acrobats in American circuses. Known also as “the Prince of Arabia”, Hassan Ben Ali’s first arrival in America was in 1884. Interestingly, he managed to gain fame and respect of American audience. Hassan ben Ali’s stories reverse the Manichean dyad of Self/Other upside down in the sense that he showed neither animosity nor hostility towards the Western Other. He rather formulated a parallel discourse of accepting the Other and embracing his own cultural difference. It is not surprising that the American media lingered on Hassan Ben Ali’s Acrobats and offered them the lion’s share of coverage. Many references, especially by the *New York Clipper*, were made to his troupe offering a cultural mosaic through their talented acrobatic shows. The aforementioned newspaper (1898) praised them as “Arabian Acrobatic Wonders of the World of Sie Hassan Ben Ali’s High Class Oriental Sensational Specialties and Amusing Novelist”. It becomes then clear that Arab acrobats demystified the orientalist and stereotypical dogmas that incarcerated the Oriental Other within the precincts of atavism and decadence. Their acrobatic feats are but stark proofs of cultural engagement, agility, and Oriental exclusivity.

To cite only a few incidents, Si Hassan Ben Ali’s journeys on the other shore were characterised by his propensity to articulate his Oriental agency. To reverse the direction of the orientalist spotlight, Si Hassan Ben called for offering an antidote to Christian missionaries and stultifying the already-maintained routes of European pioneering experiences of travelling to the Orient. It is extremely salient that Hassan Ben Ali, as reported by the *New York Clipper*, namely an article entitled “A New Prince of Arabia Has Just Arrived to Town” (The San Francisco Call, 1898), played a leading role in the conversion of many Christians to Islam. His goal was to turn the Occident into an arena of Islamic missionaries as a counter-religious discourse of alterity. In this vein, it is maintained that Hassan Ben Ali (The San Francisco Call, 1898, p. 25) overtly declared: “These Christians keep sending their missionaries over here to convert us. Why not give them a dose of their medicine by sending a few missionaries over to America to convert its people to Mohammedism.” With this religiously-inspired vision, Hassan Ben Ali’s propensity far transcended mere acrobatic and exhibitionist shows to formulate a counter-discursive apparatus of religious resistance.

Zahra Kader’s Spectacular Experience: Agency Relocated Beyond the Orientalist “Haremising” prejudices.

As a recurrent feature of pre-established orientalist episteme, the Oriental woman has always been an annexation to men’s chivalry and triumphalism. Even more provocatively, the Eastern woman has to acquiesce to male dominant authority. The orientalist mindset creates fixed hierarchies through which the Oriental woman is deemed to undergo a double frustration and conquest. Ensieh Shabanirad and Seyyed Mohammad Marandi (2015, p. 23) lucidly articulate it as follows: “That women in the colonised society suffer from exploitation by both colonised and indigenous power structure is well understood.” Conscious of the fact that Oriental women were put between the hammer of Western colonialism and the anvil of

patriarchy, they were subject to a double trauma. It is within this matrix of double domination that the discourse of Oriental women was more predicated on fictitious tropes than on reality.

Following the same trajectory, the Harem is a gender-constructed space whereby male and female roles are based on domination and subordination. With all metaphors of sexual fantasies and animalistic and libido impulses with which the Harem is laden, the Oriental woman's identity shrinks, following the orientalist tablets of essentialism, to a docile subservient body. As succinctly articulated in her book *Rethinking Orientalism: Women, Travel and the Ottoman Harem*, Reina Lewis (2004, p. 96) maintains that "The West's image of the secluded, polygamous oriental woman had accrued the layers of myth, rumor and stereotype of a longstanding fascination. The vision of the harem as a sexualised realm of deviancy, cruelty and excess." The Harem is an arena that harnesses all orientalist fetishised images of lasciviousness and sexual abuse; it incarcerates, following the logic of Orientalist discursive practices, the Oriental woman within the precincts of domesticity.

It is worth noting that, beyond these tropes that curtail the Oriental woman's position to a Harem-subservient being, there are equally fascinating stories stressing the other version of the dyad that document the migratory nature of Oriental women. To cite only one, Zahra Kader, a prominent Moroccan acrobat, made her first entry into American circuses as a 22-year-old girl, endowed with vigour and stamina. With a strong determination infused with enthusiasm, Zahra Kader (Brooklyn Eagle, 1950) right from the onset affirmed that "she has seen all the United States of America except Texas, California and New Mexico". Against the orientalist backdrop of "haremisng" Oriental women, Zahra Kader created a rupture within this discursive mindset and identified her niche as a self-determined Eastern girl. Her story reverses the prejudices domesticity applied to Oriental women. What makes her worth surfacing is the very secret that she gained fame and expertise due to her perseverance and educational career.

Approached from another angle, Zahra Kader's nomadic experience as a testimony of being in the midst of the American cultural arena sharply contradicts the colonial ethos founded on othering the natives and relegating them to the margin. Perhaps a digression from the American travel literature on North Africa will be serviceable in tracking down a thriving Occidental discourse that unsettles, disturbs, and neutralises the colonial apparatus. A glimpse at the American literary repertoire (be it in fiction, diaries, or travel literature) on North Africa gives us hints that the operating discourse is colonially inflected. To cite an example, Wharton's (2005) *In Morocco* exemplifies all prejudiced views as constructed by the Western inflated Self. She confirms right from the beginning that "having begun my book with the statement that Morocco still lacks a guidebook; I should have wished to take first step towards remedying this deficiency." With such a pompous declarative sentence, she grants herself a position as the "all-knowing" subject. Here, two discourses function antagonistically and diametrically juxtapose each other. Zahra Kader chronicles her story, infused with zest, to fulfil her dreams without any sense pomposity or arrogance. Contradictorily, Edith Wharton, with her colonial jargon, turns Morocco into a pacified country in need of her intervention to become geographically known. In sum, the story of Zahra Kader formulated a parallel Occidental account that challenges and writes back against the orientalist Manichean dyad. She managed to relocate her agency as a dexterous Oriental woman and assert her identity as a distinguished acrobatic figure. Her itinerary stultifies Bernard Lewis's claim that Arabs lacked curiosity to discover Western realms.

The Oriental Can Speak: Zahra Ben Tahar's Conceptions of America

The account of Zahra Ben Tahar is yet another factual narrative told from the perspective of an Eastern female acrobat, turning the West into a subject of critical scrutiny. Zahra Ben Tahar, with a steadfast resistance to Western clichés, turned American society into an object of gaze. Right from the outset, she is keen on reversing the orientalist biases. Ranging from

the description of American men to the interrogation of proximity, Zahra (Brooklyn Daily Eagle, 1894) overtly declares:

It is not true what people say that in our country women are badly treated. They are well treated. The husband is as God to his wife. They have more than one wife there. But that is well. One thing that should be strange to me is that men and women should be mixed in the seats of a place like this show trying to neutralise Western misconceptions of men/women relationship in Oriental spheres.

Zahra Ben Tahar brings to the surface a parallel corrective, crystallising the fact that the fuzzy images held about Eastern women are but “white mythologies”. With counter-discursive jargon, Zahra Ben Tahar stresses both polygamy and the high position Eastern women enjoy. They are not subject to torment but rather held in high esteem. As space is a cultural site where differences are best configured, proximity is a key element that foregrounds the management of space and regulates gender relations.

Growing up in an Oriental society where the laws of proximity are grounded in Shariaa (Islamic law), which prohibits any act of male/female promiscuity, Zahra Ben Tahar must have seen American society through her Islamic lenses. The presence of men alongside women in public spaces is an act of oddity for her. It becomes clear then that Zahra Ben Tahar is not a silent interlocutor but rather an active participant who offers a remedial to a longstanding constellation of Orientalist myths. She asserts her identity as an Oriental female, infused with zest to discover and learn about the Other’s secrets. She undermines both Bernard Lewis’s argument premised upon the negation of Muslims’ curiosity to learn about the Christian Other and Hassan Hanafi’s Hostile version of Occidentalism predicated on annihilating Western Cultural repertoire.

Conclusion

My overall argument is to trace the emergence of an alternative discourse of difference in three North African acrobats’ accounts, pertaining to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Being conscious of the reversal of Western Orientalist stereotypes, I have claimed that these North African accounts, as Occidentalist texts, do not try to entrench binarism in the sense that they turn Western civilisation into a subject of study to undermine it. I have tried to reorient Hassan Hanafi’s vision by stressing the fact that Occidentalism does not try to look at the West as a potential enemy that needs to be annihilated. I have shown how his vision is very nationalistic to the extent that it tries to settle the same Orientalist patterns. The alternative discourse of difference I have stressed goes beyond both Orientalist and Occidentalist paradigms. These North African texts are terrains to see how the representation of the Other varies across temporal dimensions, individual conditions and the nature of acrobats’ missions to result in a heterogeneous and complex ways of representation.

The analysis of cultural encounters remains an intriguing subject of interest. I do believe that the analysis of these North African acrobats’ accounts, as valuable documents, is extremely important to narrate their standpoints and relocate their agency as active participants. Most North African exhibitionists are relegated to oblivion and undocumented. Their analysis will enrich, redefine, and reorient the relations between East and West. They are extremely prodigious in setting the ground for a parallel ‘voyage in’ to thrive and flourish.

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