



Feminist Research

Homepage: www.gathacognition.com/journal/gcj2

<http://dx.doi.org/10.21523/gcj2>



Original Research Paper

Orientalizing Arab Migrant Women: Faten and Reema as Sexual Fantasies in Laila Lalami's *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* and Susan Muaddi Darraj's *The Inheritance of Exile*



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Abstract

The orientalist discourse is characterized by the discursive conceptualization of an uncivilized and sexualized East. Eastern women are portrayed as sexual objects and fantasies whose purpose is the satisfaction and obedience of the brown men. This discursive representation has affected the Westerner's perception of migrant women as the novels suggest. This article probes the sexualizing and objectifying of Arab migrant women as a result of their ideological representation by the orientalists in the context of diaspora. Faten in *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* as a Moroccan female migrant in Spain and Reema in *The Inheritance of Exile* as an American of Arab descent are perceived by the Spanish customer and American boyfriend respectively as harem and sexual objects who can fulfill their fantasies. The agency Lalami and Darraj associate with their female protagonists does, however, dismantle the fixed representation of orientalism as Faten and Reema are given voice to rewrite the discursive narratives and to present alternative representations of Arab female migrants as being heterogeneous and independent individuals with freedom and control over their choices and decisions. The two studied novels as postcolonial diasporic literature disrupt and debunk the discursive orientalist discourse on Arab women.

Article History

Received: 13 May 2022

Revised: 30 August 2022

Accepted: 01 September 2022

Keywords

Agency;
Arab Female Migrants;
Orientalism;
Representation;
Transnational Feminism.

Processing Editor(s)

Soud Slaoui

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1 INTRODUCTION

Drawing on postcolonial feminism, this article studies the sexualizing of Arab women by westerners in Laila Lalami's *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* and Susan Muaddi Darraj's *The Inheritance of Exile* as a consequence of the ideological and homogenizing orientalist representation of eastern women. This article argues that Western feminists and orientalists have to recognize the dissimilarity of Arab women and their plurality as the noun *per se* suggests. There is no single depiction that can adequately encompass any group of people. The denial of heterogeneity and plurality of Arabs by the orientalist affects the westerner's perception of easterners regardless of being different as it is the case with Faten, in Lalami's novel *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits*, who is a Rifi woman from

Morocco, and Reema in *The Inheritance of Exile* by Darraj who is an American of Arab descent as her parents are Palestinians, but their experiences and engagements with Spanish and American men respectively are similar because of their ideologically driven representation. Faten and Reema are expected to adhere to norms and patterns drawn for them in order to fit and fulfill the westerners' fantasies. However, they refuse to be labeled as the passive harem as they negotiate their gendered identities as independent agents. Reema and Faten's disruption of the conventional image drawn for Arab women through exercising their agency and freedom over their bodies, choices, and decisions debunks the submissiveness and harem traits and questions the Western and orientalist discourses that homogenize Arab women and render them isomorphically identical. Lalami and Darraj, as

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<https://doi.org/10.21523/gcj2.22060201>

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Arab female migrants and writers are aware of the indispensability of providing alternative representations of Arabs in general and Arab women in particular to prove their heterogeneity and plurality.

A number of contemporary Arab migrant narratives reflect this heterogeneity of Arabs and their experiences, and the novels the present article studies are among. More than just migration narratives that present a diversity of Middle Eastern and North African migrant experience that is “usually overlooked and seen as collective in the West, these new contemporary Arab female writers also present different cultures in dialogue in their works by exploring a wider worldview through women’s individual experiences both in their home countries and in the West” (Ouhiba, 2017: 56). Additionally, Anglophone Arab literature, as Ouhiba (2017) contends “was marked during the last decades by the significant contribution of Arab women writers in carving out creative spaces to foster a better understanding of Arab diasporic experience and literature.” She adds, “The increase interest in Arab women’s writing led to the growing body of scholarship on Arab women’s writings, including Arab, Muslim, Woman: Valassopoulos’ *Contemporary Arab Women Writers: Cultural Expression in Context* (2007), Gauch’s *Liberating Shahrazad: Feminism, Postcolonialism and Islam* (2006), Mehta’s *Rituals of Memory in Contemporary Arab Women’s Writing* (2007), and *Voice and Vision in Postcolonial Literature* (2008) by Moore, provide examples of important critical engagements with Arab women’s literature” (95).

Arab American writers are distinguished in terms of generations as Cohen-Mor (2005) argues “the pioneers who published in the 1940s and 1950s, through the younger generation who followed in the 1960s and 1970s, to the present generation whose literary output appeared in the 1980s and especially the 1990s, thus providing a broad spectrum of works of fiction by Arab women” (1-2). The pioneer’s writings covered multitudinous issues including “the status of women within the contexts of the traditional family structure, of new educational opportunities, and of society at large” (Allen, 1994).

Al Maleh (2009) argues that “three trends can so far be identified: the Mahjar (early-twentieth-century émigrés in the USA); the Europeanized aspirants of the mid-1950s; and the more recent hybrids, hyphenated, transcultural, exilic/diasporic writers of the past four decades or so who have been scattered all over the world” (11). The first generation was mainly Christians, while the second were Muslims and educated under the British colonial rule, as Al Maleh contends, they were, “Arab students, who were mostly the products of missionary and foreign schools that were flourishing in the Middle East, began trickling into British universities or seeking employment on British soil” (Ibid., 6). The third generation following the 1970s, including Lalami and Darraj, is characterized by the diversity of its

Anglo-Arab writers. On the one hand, “There were those –second-, third-, even fourth-generation hyphenated Arabs– who were born and raised on the no longer foreign soil of their immigrant forebears; and there were those who were new immigrants working out of an experience of transculturation” (Ibid., 11). On the other hand, “The latter came from diverse intellectual and social backgrounds, faiths, vocations, and political inclinations, and, settling in Canada, USA, Britain, and Australia had a diverse or divergent connection to the homeland” (Ibid., 11).

Arab women diasporic literature works towards the unsettling and changing of constructions of otherness and the common stereotypical images of the “Other” women. Ouhiba (2017) argues, “The unsettling of these constructions is achieved through various narrative techniques that counter oppressive, often de-historicized, and decontextualized images and identities” (63). Arab women diasporic narratives, as Ouhiba maintains, “are literary attempts of resistance to constructed histories of their cultures. These writers seem to share with Harriet Jacobs a deep frustration with the common representations of their culture and people and the determination to write their own histories” (Ibid., 63). Anzaldúa (1981) addresses Third World women writers in a letter in which she states, “Because the world I create in the writing compensates for what the real world does not give me. By writing I put order in the world, give it a handle so I can grasp it [...] I write to record what others erase when I speak, to rewrite the stories others have miswritten about me, about you. To become more intimate with myself and you” (169). These authors, thereby, “struggle to find a feminist space in which they are not restricted by the cultural and patriarchal norms set by the hegemonic culture nor their own” (Ouhiba, 2017: 64) in the host country. They as well seek to disrupt and rewrite the orientalist and western feminist discourses for white women participated in the process of colonization in conjunction with their male partners. In that, Loomba (2005) tells us “Within colonial spaces, white women participated with varying degrees of alienation and enthusiasm in imperial projects; as teachers, missionaries, nurses, and the help-mates of colonial men, their roles varied both structurally and ideologically” (144).

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Abdel Wahab (2014) in describing the features of contemporary migrant literature of Arabs argues that:

“new immigrant literature recombines the generic elements and stereotypes of the English literary canon along with the non-canonized content and language of Anglophone writing to suit the alternative context of post bio-polar politics and culture. In that sense, it is a literature that is basically translational, interweaving several discourses, texts, literatures, and cultures” (223).

Majaj (2008) postulates that the representation of Arab men in the United States of America as “inherently patriarchal and oppressive” and Arab women as “either exotic or oppressed” positions “Arab culture as inferior to Western culture and therefore [...] perpetuat[es] colonial relationships between east and west, Arab and American/European.” This, in reference to Majaj, results in creating “a double bind for Arab-American feminists” who, “must struggle against the notion that they need ‘liberating’ from their own culture,” and simultaneously try, “to suppress their feminism in order to claim a sense of home in their Arab communities and avoid the charge of community betrayal”. Nevertheless, Arab American women writers, however, as Majaj maintains, “have continued to expand their exploration of the conjunctions of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, and politics”. In the targeted novels, Arab migrant women voice out their concerns and stories which are dissimilar and this suggests their plurality as the noun *per se* suggests. Their migratory journeys and experiences in America and Spain are heterogeneous as their subjectivities.

The homogeneity with which Arabs are associated denies them the ability to change and transform. The cynical spirits of Arab female diasporic writers, however, push them to provide an alternative representation of Arabs either in the context of diaspora or in the old countries. Their representation of Arabs in the context of diaspora represents an alternative to the orientalist portrait of Arab men and simultaneously disrupts the discursive generalization of Arab fathers as being patriarchs and oppressors and Arab mothers as being complicitous with the disenfranchisement of their own daughters. Faten and Reema’s exercising of their agency in the context of diaspora and their challenging of the representation of the colonized subjects as Said (2000) defines them “Fixed in zones of dependency and peripherally, stigmatized in the designation of underdeveloped, less-developed, developing states, ruled by a superior, developed, or metropolitan colonized who was theoretically positioned as a categorically antithetical overlord” (295).

Khalid (2011) argues “Western constructs of easterners as ‘other’ have been used to justify conquest and colonialism for over two centuries. These constructs have been both racialized and gendered and continue to function in contemporary times” (15). The same orientalist logic is rejuvenated in the context of war on terror by the American government. Installing democracy and rescuing Arab women from their male partners are the new slogans of the civilizing missions as Khalid (2011) postulates:

Gendered orientalism creates categories of people according to race and gender, defining through these categories what ‘men’ or ‘women’, ‘us’ and ‘them’, ‘Afghan/Arab/Muslim’ and ‘Western’ are and do [...] orientalist logic constructs the ‘Other’ hierarchically according to gender. ‘Other’ women are constructed as being in need of

salvation and ‘Other’ men are demonised, feminised and dehumanised (27).

Loomba (2005) believes that “European colonialism often justified its ‘civilizing mission’ by claiming that it was rescuing native women from oppressive patriarchal domination” (144). She adds that “from the beginning of the colonial period till its end (and beyond), female bodies symbolize the conquered land. This metaphoric use of the female body varies in accordance with the exigencies and histories of particular colonial situations” (129). It is the American colonialism in this context. Arab women, therefore, are vulnerable to the repercussions of orientalist or neo-orientalist discourse and its demolishing consequences. Arab women are passivized, victimized, and in need of rescuing. In the same line of thought, Darraj (2005) argues that:

Arab and Muslim women continue to be used as a means of justifying the “spreading of liberty” doctrine across the Middle East. At a time when East and West are allegedly at odds, Arabs in America –and especially Arab women– have become key players and, too frequently, pawns. In fact, the image of the oppressed, silenced Arab woman is frequently used by some as proof of the barbarity of Arab culture, and even to justify the West’s foreign policy toward the East (159).

The orientalist discourse portrays Arab women as an identical group sharing the same experiences and fate of passivity, docility, and domesticity, and Arab men as the oppressors of their fellow women with an unmalleable patriarchal mindset. The homogenizing rhetoric of the discourse has instigated Arab women to speak for themselves and voice their concerns as they are misrepresented. They answer back the discursive delineations to which they are subjected through their literary and fictional works. The authors of the targeted novels in this article use their characters as reflections of Arab women who are independent and autonomous which are at strong odds with the doctrines and rhetoric of the orientalist discourse. They, as Lamghari (2021) contends, “look forward to shaking the homogeneous and essentialist ideologies that have reigned diaspora for a long time through highlighting differences” (3). Lalami and Darraj, as diasporic writers, “have sought to recuperate the other women’s voices via representing them as being independent, transcendent, reliable, intellectuals, and resourceful” (Lamghari, 2021: 10).

Lalami and Darraj, *inter alios*, indulge in:

A form of writing back to patriarchy with mounting self-confidence. These women writers have reclaimed the art of storytelling by recasting the role of women in a tradition which is mainly a ‘male’ prerogative. Their appropriation of tradition is intended as a subversion of existing orders that limit women’s freedom (Suyoufie, 2008: 247).

In the same line of thought, Gana (2008) postulates that “Muslim and Arab-American literature and cultural

productions have been remarkably counter narrative, reactionary, and corrective” (1577). This literature, nevertheless, manages to disrupt not only “sanctioned racism and licensed visual and cultural vilification of Muslims and Arabs,” but also “a residual neo-orientalist political economy of publishing and reception that conceives Muslim women’s or men’s writing almost exclusively along the lines [...] [of] victim[hood] or escapee narratives” (Gana, 2008). The authors, therefore, answer Darraj’s (2005: 165-166) call for the necessity of “Arab American women must find a way to articulate the hypocrisy of the Western notion of Arab women and translate it back to Western culture, to uproot the deeply implanted stereotype of the Faceless Veiled Woman” and they do that through “giv[ing] voice to female protagonists to demonstrate their own concerns and speak for themselves” (Lamghari, 2021: 4).

Due to the homogeneity associated with Arabs, Westerners, Alex and Martin in the studied novels, assume the supposed identicalness of Arab women as the orientalist represent them and unconsciously adhere to the western feminists’ claim on eastern women as identical and isomorphic with similar concerns, priorities, experiences, oppression, and the like as they claim the universality of women’s experience. All Arab women, for instance in America, are, “either represented as erotic, romanticized, magical, and sexualized, as with most images of belly dancers or harem girls, or they are portrayed as helpless, silent, and utterly dominated by an excessive Arab patriarchy, as in representations of the veiled woman or harem slave” (Jarmakani, 2008: 4). Mohanty (1991) critiques the Western feminist construction, including Alex and Martin’s, and by extension orientalist, of a singular monolithic subject she terms the ‘third world woman’ in large part because this “western feminist discourse, by assuming women as a coherent, already constituted group [...] defines third world women as subjects outside social relations, instead of looking at the way women are constituted through these very structures” (72). Western feminists, and I add orientalist, have to recognize the dissimilarity of women and their plurality as the noun *per se* suggests. There is no single depiction that can adequately encompass any group of people.

3 METHODOLOGY

This study draws on postcolonial feminist theory as it examines the orientalist/neo-orientalist and the Western feminist discourses in relation to Arab female migrants. The orientalist knowledge, as Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* (1979) contends, plays a role of utmost importance in representing the easterners and in narrating their histories. Eastern women are as well represented as passive harem confined in the private space that need rescuing from the brown men. Arab women in this context, hence, are objectified and depleted from their agency in reference to orientalist/neo-orientalist and western feminist doctrines. Contemporary Arab American authors, however, have brought this discursive representation into question and problematize it through providing

heterogeneous images of Arabs in general, and Arab women and their experiences and subjectivities in particular as the analysis in this article confirms. Postcolonial feminism cherishes heterogeneity and plurality and simultaneously disavows the universality of women’s experiences; hence, it is helpful in problematizing and reconsidering the conventional forms of Western domination i.e. Arab women are given voice to deconstruct their ideological representation and simultaneously to present alternative portrayals of themselves as heterogeneous individuals with dissimilar experiences and subjectivities unlike the monolithic discourses which render them isomorphically identical.

4 ORIENTALIZING ARAB MIGRANT WOMEN

Darraj’s *The Inheritance of Exile* tells the diasporic experiences of four Arab American women: Layla, Lamis, Siham, and Huda and their struggles with their daughters Hanan, Aliyah, Nadia, and Reema, respectively. They are caught in the cultural gap that exists between the United States of America and Palestine as the mothers were born in the latter, while the daughters in the former. The characters have dissimilar experiences and negotiations of their gendered identities even though they are Arabs and from the same region. Even though they are from the same bloodline, the mothers and daughters are represented differently in the novel which suggests the plurality and heterogeneity of Arab women.

In *The Inheritance of Exile*, Reema is subjected the most to the ramifications of the orientalist/neo-orientalist discourse on Arabs in general, and Arab women in particular. Unlike Hanan, Nadia and Aliyah, Reema is the only Muslim among her friends as they are Arab Christians. Her religious identity plays a tacit role in determining her diasporic experience unlike the other characters who are still seen as Arabs, but not with the same diminishing and loathing effects. Reema, according to her boyfriend Alex, is a spokeswoman and a representative of the Arabs and Muslims as she shares the same cultural and religious background with them i.e. Alex believes Arabs and Muslims to be isomorphic and identical and, therefore, denies them the potentiality of diversity and heterogeneity.

The portraits and representations drawn by the orientalist for Arabs and Muslims are still vivid and effective in the consciousness of many westerners like Alex who seems to be a loyal conformist to the discursive and ideological doctrines of orientalism and neo-orientalism by extension. He asks Reema, “Isn’t it true that Arabian men can marry four women? That Islam permits men to have harems [...] and seraglios?” (Darraj, 2007: 169) even though it is true that Islam allows men to marry four women, the word ‘seraglios’ is added to serve the only purpose of polishing the question with an intellectual coat of wax to show his superiority and master-like mindset inherited from his orientalist ancestors. “Arabian men can marry four women” suggests that, in reference to Alex, all Arabs are Muslims, thus, denying the religious diversity in the

Arab world and, therefore, giving legitimacy to the sweeping generalizations and stereotypes about Arabs. Reema answers “Muslim men can technically marry four women, according to the Koran, but they don’t really do that anymore. And harems are a thing of the past.” She adds, “There are a lot of historical reasons for it. It’s not reducible to sexism” (Darraj, 2007:169-170). Reema’s answers suggest that Arabs, like other races, are capable of transformation and change i.e. Arabs are not stuck in the past as the orientalist discourse represents them. Having harems in the past, Reema contends, does not mean doing so in the present as people move forward, and so are their cultural practices, in that, certain traditional practices of Arabs in the past are no longer done. The very malleable and pliable nature of humans applies to Arabs as well. According to orientalism, however, the East represents the past of the West and, therefore, it is unable to repudiate the practices of the past unless it develops, which it cannot do without the supervision of the enlightened West: the civilization missions.

The obsession Alex has with what he refers to as Arab harem is manifested in his comments, practices, and requirements from Reema. His insistence on “she cook Middle Eastern food” reflects the exoticism with which Reema, as a Muslim girl in the United States of America, is associated. In Alex’s consciousness, Reema is not an independent individual, but part of a group with collective cultural practices and beliefs. He fantasizes her as his harem or houri as he declares, “he was “in paradise with a houri.” “You’re *my* houri.” “When they had dinner with his friends for the first time, and he introduced her as Reema, his “beautiful harem girl” (Darraj, 2007:173-174). Reema cannot be an autonomous individual, for she represents a whole race and a whole religion. The descriptions Alex links to Reema, harem and houri, render her a sexual object he fantasizes about to fulfill his exotic presumptions about Arab women. For him, Reema, *inter alios*, is a sexual machine whose ultimate purpose is to produce children and serve their male partners i.e. passive harem who satisfy their masters’ fantasies and sexual needs. Such portraits emanate from the doctrines of orientalism which depict Arab women as passive, docile, and dependent bodies. Reema is at strong odds with such ideological and discursive portraits as she is an independent Arab female migrant with full control over her choices, decisions, and body. She moves out to live on her own away from her family, she has a job, goes out, and she is a PhD student. She even has a boyfriend which is not accepted in reference to the gendered religious teachings. This said, Reema dismantles the validity of the discursive representations of Arab women even though in reference to the monolithic discourses, her relationship with Alex is an extension of the perpetual desire for the white master. In the same line of thought, Shohat and Stam (1994) postulate that “the sexual interaction of white men and black or Arab women *cannot* involve rape (since black or Arab women are in perpetual heat and desire the white master)” (157).

Media is used as well to convey images that serve the agendas of the empire since the beginning of its tropes deployment in the East. As a result, the images available for westerners about the East are the ones produced by the adherents of Orientalism. Alex’s falsified knowledge about Arabs in general, and Arab women in particular originate partially from the movies he watches. To Reema’s inquiry about the oldest movie he owns, Alex answers “*The Sheik*, made in 1921” which is

“A silent movie, where this desert sheik lusts after an English girl and kidnaps her. He keeps her in his tent and basically makes her his sex slave, although it’s not as obvious as that. It turns out well,” he reassured her. “They actually fall in love at the end” (Darraj 2007: 172-173).

The movie, thus, draws a distorted image of Arabs and Alex takes it to be an authentic one from which he makes his own assumptions and beliefs about Arabs. The Sheik is a barbaric Arab male kidnapper who lives in the desert in a tent and whose purpose is to have white female slaves. The oriental man in the Renaissance era was and is now “effeminised, portrayed as homosexual, or else depicted as a lusty villain from whom the virile but courteous European could rescue the native (or the European) woman” (Loomba, 2005: 129). Fadda-Conrey (2014) contends that:

derogatory and essentialist stereotypes about Arabs and Muslims, replete of lascivious Arab Sheikhs, villains, harem girls, and belly dancers, become the shared vocabulary used to reify the vast differences between a ‘civilized’ US culture on the one hand and a ‘barbaric’ and backward Arab and Muslim landscape on the other hand (2).

The oriental men are as well the oppressors of their fellow women and ready to kill them to preserve the collective honor as Alex postulates when he inquires about Reema’s family reaction to their relationship “I’m disgracing the family or some crap like that and then your brother would have to kill me to preserve everyone’s honor” (Darraj, 2007: 176). Alex shares the same rhetoric of the empire with regard to Arabs in general and Arab women and sexuality in particular. When the film was over and Alex wants to know what Reema thought, she protests that “Alex, it’s horribly racist. Why is there not one decent Arab in the whole movie?” “Oh, Alex-men who kidnap women or buy them at bride auctions? That’s not Arab culture? Come on.” “You know that’s racist, don’t you? They didn’t understand Arab culture then” (Darraj, 2007: 174). Reema then urges Alex to get rid of his prejudices because they are ideologically driven and do not reflect an objective image about Arabs who are as human as any other race with heterogeneous cultures, assumptions, religions, and the like. Her rejection to satisfy Alex’s desires suggests her agency and noncompliance with the Eurocentric male conceptualizations of Eastern women.

Reema in *The Inheritance of Exile* encounters a number of derogating situations because of her Arabness:

Since she had been old enough to understand it, she'd been bothered by the fact that people told her that she looked "exotic" (which, until the age of fourteen, she'd confused with "erotic"). The clerk at the post office, the police officer who'd stopped her for running a red light, people at school, such as the classmate who'd insisted that the shape and darkness of her eyes made him imagine "what Cleopatra must have looked like. It was all very silly-but she tolerated it because it never seemed appropriate to be offended (Darraj, 2007: 175).

The exoticism with which Reema is associated finds its roots in the orientalist romanticizing of the East. Reema's friend, Aliya, experiences the same, "We've all gone through stuff like that," Aliyah told her one day. "I hate it when white guys tell me I'm 'mysterious' or something like that. It's different once they get to know you" (Darraj, 2007: 175). Exoticism and mysticism are some of the characteristics associated with the East in the orientalist doctrines since its very beginning. The critical, however, is the rejuvenation of such derogatory portraits in the context of diaspora on Arab female migrants and the entailed repercussions such as viewing them through the discursive monolithic lenses through which the early orientalists viewed and pictured them. Alex seems to fail to repudiate the ideological representations of Arabs in general, and Arab women in particular even though he encounters them day in and day out and even his girlfriend is an Arab Muslim who has nothing to do with the portraits drawn for Arab women.

Hanan, Reema's friend, is supposed to know the culture, geography, history, and the like of the Middle East simply because she is assumed to be an Arab. It is the same rhetoric of homogeneity which Reema encounters. She is supposed to know the cultures of a whole region composed of many different countries simply because her skin color earns her being labeled as an Arab. Hanan comes across similar situations, by way of example, when her husband, John, invites her to go with him to meet the chair of the sociology department, John's PhD supervisor, she tells Hanan that she works on a book "So the book is about the ways in which Arab women-especially Muslim women-learn about or enter into politics in the Middle East." And she wants Hanan to read it "for *authenticity*. I want an Arab woman's perspective on how *real* my writing is, how genuine and *accurate* my observations [are]" (Darraj, 2007: 139). According to the chair of the sociology department, and regardless of being an intellectual academician with a PhD and who "spent ten years studying gender issues in the Mideast and South Asia," (Darraj, 2007: 138) Hanan is first automatically an Arab Muslim because her parents are from the Middle East, and second because her name is a Middle Eastern one as she implies. This said, the chair of the sociology department is convinced

of the homogeneity of the Middle Easterners as it is portrayed by the orientalists. Hanan is not a Muslim, she and her parents are Christians, and as she says "I've never been to the Middle East in my entire life" (Darraj, 2007: 139). She protests, "John, that woman, she wanted me to be an expert on her new book. Do I look like a walking almanac on the Middle East?" (Darraj, 2007: 142). Hanan, therefore, answers back the homogenizing statements of the chair of the sociology department and debunks them. "A walking almanac on the Middle East" suggests Hanan's awareness of the identicalness with which she is associated, and she protests that she is not a spokeswoman of the Middle East or for Arabs, for heterogeneity characterizes the Arab countries just as the rest of the world. Hanan thereby speaks for herself as an independent individual, and not as part of a group as the orientalist discourse portrays Arabs to be.

5 ARAB MIGRANT WOMEN AS SEXUAL FANTASIES

Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits by Lalami unearths the experiences of illegal migrants crossing from Morocco to Spain. The novel starts with the four protagonists Murad, Faten, Aziz, and Halima and other African migrants on the boat to Spain. Murad who is the narrator and sometimes a guide tourist is an educated young man who graduated from the university but did not manage to get a full time job. Faten Khatibi is a young fanatic university girl who is obliged to migrate because of the statements she made on the king. Halima Bouhamsa is a mother of three children who is the victim of her drunken and irresponsible husband. Finally, Aziz Ammor is a husband with academic failure and mechanic training taking his second chance to Spain.

The experience of Faten in *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* is similar to that of Reema in *The Inheritance of Exile* as they are both expected to perform roles assigned to them by the orientalists owing to being Arabs. Faten used her body to seduce one of the guards whom he by his turn showed an interest in her. Since her landing in Spain, the journey of selling her body to foreigners started with that guard, and Faten will earn her living in Spain from that. In her relation with her favorite Spanish client, Martin, it seems at first glance that the new generation in Spain has gone beyond the dichotomy and the duality that the orientalist discourse has produced: they no longer despise nor belittle the so-called other, as they believe that they both belong to a postmodern and postcolonial world where the borders have been blurred with the collapse of the nation state in its traditional sense. Even though she is a prostitute, Martin at the beginning shows respect to Faten; however, later his orientalist perception of eastern women is revealed as it will be analyzed below.

Martin seems at the beginning to have trespassed the dichotomy of us versus them and treats Faten as an equal human with dignity. When Faten asks Martin about his father, he replies that, "He was a pig." "Why do you call him that?" "Because he was a fascist," he said. He leaned back against the headrest as he spoke,

telling her about his father, a retired army lieutenant who had served under General Franco when he was a young man” (Lalami, 2006: 132). Martin, hence, detaches himself from his father whom he calls a fascist who hates migrants, ‘Martin said his father hated the immigrants... “But I’m not like him,” he said. “I like you” (Lalami, 2006: 133) and he defines himself as a philanthropic person who does not hate nor despise migrants. The rhetoric Martin use is a pretext to get special treatment from Faten because of her supposedly Arabness and the entailed responsibilities women have toward men according to orientalism.

Martin’s adherence to the conventional teachings of orientalism and its discursive representations of Arabs in general and Arab women in particular is revealed through his description of Faten, “I like the smell of your skin-salty like black olives...and your breasts-ripe like mangoes” (Lalami, 2006: 132). The exoticism associated with Arab women by the orientalist is manifested in Martin’s description as objectifies Faten and compare her skin and breasts to black olives and mangoes to which Faten replies “You’re making me sound like a dish” (Lalami, 2006: 132). Even though Martin claims to be different from his fascist father, his words and deeds are the direct outcome of the orientalist discourse which resembles his father’s and their likes because migrants are unequal to them and being a migrant and simultaneously Arab means being exploited as in the case of Faten. This is further clarified in his inquiries about her background and his expectations. In his inquiry to know where she spent her childhood, Martin asked a variety of questions:

“Where did you live in Rabat?”
 She shrugged. “An apartment.”
 “With your parents?” he asked
 “My mother.”
 “Any brothers or sisters?”
 “No.”
 “That’s unusual, isn’t it?” he asked. “I mean being an only child, in your country.”
 “I guess.”
 “And did you wear those embroidered dresses. What are they called? Caftans?”
 “Not really.”
 He seems disappointed. (Lalami, 2006: 133)

The nature of questions that he poses reflects in his perception of the Moorish women particularly, and Arabs in general. It seems that he considers the Eastern women as a harem that must be invaded and explored. He asks her whether she lived with her parents, whether she has brothers and sisters, and finally whether she wears the traditional clothes. It is the Western stereotypical representation of the East that drives him to think in that way, as Western legacy claims that Easterners are collective, and being so means they live in groups and they are isomorphic. The same thing goes to the traditional clothes as they indicate a traditional and old fashion way of life. Martin feels disappointed because Faten does not fall into the frozen image that he was visualizing her with. Faten according to Martin, hence, is supposed to live in large extended families and

to wear traditional clothes because that is what she is supposed to do and be according to him because that is the supposed norm. The homogeneity linked to Arabs in general and to Arab women in particular by the orientalist is what frames Martin’s understanding and perception of Arabs, and this is confirmed through his questions to Faten i.e. she is supposed to be part of a collective culture which denies heterogeneity and diversity because she is of Arab origin. The heterogeneity is as well explained in Martin’s assumption that Faten is an Arab simply because she is from Morocco, while in fact a Rifi like her grandfather who is “a proud Rifi” (Lalami, 2006: 133).

Now, she is certain that he is no different from his father and grandfather, and that the fantasized image of her country is fossilized and immutable, she responds to his questions in a different way:

“Where did you grow?”
 “In a Moorish house,” she said.
 “With your parents?”
 “I didn’t see much of my father. I spent all my days in the harem.”
 “With your siblings?”
 “With my six sisters. They initiated me into the art of pleasing men.” (Lalami, 2006: 142)

Faten decides to go in parallel with his discourse because she thinks he can help her to be legal and naturalized in Spain. Her unconscious self-orientalizing is an attempt to please Martin because she thinks he is different from his father, and he can aid her. On the following dialogue between Faten and Martin, the orientalist discourse is crystal clear, as the way Martin puts it confirms that he has not gone beyond the dichotomist approach of the colonial legacy:

“Why do you come to me?” Faten asked.
 “There are a lot of girls out there. Like Isabel, and-”
 “Women in this country,” he said, shaking his head. “They don’t know how to treat a man. Not the way you Arab girls do.”
 Faten felt anger well up in her. She wanted to slap him.
 “I’ve been reading up,” he said. “About the duties of the woman to the man and all that. It’s a fascinating subject.” (Lalami, 2006: 142)

It is the frozen image that renders ‘the other woman’ exotic and relegates them to a lower status that Michael Foucault calls “docile bodies”. Put differently, the orientalist discourse and the Western feminist discourse perceive African, Asian, Latin American, etc. women as passive beings who are meant to serve men and render them satisfied. Women, thereby, are depleted from their freedom and human autonomy as they cannot be subjects by and for themselves, but always as the other or the object that identifies in relation to the self (men) or the subject. Eastern women are, “homogenized and rendered isomorphic with similar experiences” (Lamghari, 2021: 4). It is the orientalist discourse that has sought since its outset to objectify dissimilar others and maintain dominion over them. In this case of Faten

and Martin, it does epitomize the point at its culmination, as Martin representing the refined decent western self-opposed to Faten who is an illegal female migrant from the periphery. When she, however, figures out that he is a duplicate of his fascist father, she decides to dismantle his fantasies and counter his discursive assumptions and perceptions. Her status and belonging render her in a perfect position of exploration and exploitation.

To her amazement, she watched his clear and “open face become excited as he told her that he knew things about her and her people” (Lalami, 2006: 143); however, his cognition and lore about the other and their countries -Morocco in this case- may not be definitely true nor objective as the books that he reads about them do not necessarily reflect the real image and reality of the indigenous. The literature has been conducted from one-sided approach which gives a vantage position to the self at the expense of the people that are being studied. The problem with Martin is that all his studying and all his declarations of understanding are not different from his father; hence, he does not know anything (Ibid.); otherwise, he would not have thought nor perceived Faten and her people that way. Faten tries to visualize herself in the way he sees her, the way he wants her to be because his perception is ideologically driven. She then realizes that is the price she has to pay every time if she wants to see him, in the sense that, she has to accommodate and imagine herself as an object from the other side of the Mediterranean who is sexually objectified. When Martin starts talking again about how he would help her to get her immigration papers in order, how he cares about her, she raises her palm to stop him. “I don’t need your help”. She said (Lalami, 2006: 143) because she is aware now that he is not different from his father “Martin was no different after all” (Lalami, 2006: 125). He is not different as well from the orientalist in their supposedly philanthropic desires to help the natives. The pretext of the civilizing mission the orientalist used is the same as the one Martin uses at the beginning of his relationship with Faten to only reveal himself and his intentions and perceptions of Faten and her people as being the other.

Faten’s decision to stop seeing Martin “I think you should find yourself someone else next time” (Lalami, 2006: 133) confirms her freedom and control over her body, choices, and decisions. She is not the supposedly prototypical passive Arab woman who is submissive and silent and whose job is the satisfaction of men, but rather an independent agent with human autonomy. Her initiative to cease her relationship with Martin is a counter narrative that dismantles Martin’s assumptions about Arab women and simultaneously it unearths Faten independence and agency. Even though she is expected to satisfy men and obey them as Martin states in his comparison between Spanish and Arab women “Women in this country,” he said, shaking his head. “They don’t know how to treat a man. Not the way you Arab girls do” (Lalami, 2006: 142), she refuses to be categorized and labeled as a passive sexual object even though at the beginning she goes in parallel with Martin’s fantasies.

The shift from playing along with Martin’s stereotypical assumptions to countering them reflects Faten’s exercising of agency.

The sexualizing of Faten in *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* and the orientalizing of Reema in *The Inheritance of Exile* is the direct outcome of their supposedly Arabness and their religion. Due to their homogenizing, Arabs are considered Muslims and hence isomorphically identical and that is partially the reason behind Alex’s defining of Reema as his harem and Martin’s expectations from Faten. The denial of heterogeneity and plurality of Arabs by the orientalist affects the westerner’s perception of easterners regardless of being different i.e. Faten is a Rifi woman from Morocco and Reema is an American of Arab descent as her parents are Palestinians, but their experiences and engagements with Spanish and American men respectively are similar because of their ideologically driven representation. They are, nevertheless, different in terms of cultural background, language, migration experiences, and their diasporic abodes. Faten and Reema are expected to adhere to norms and patterns drawn for them in order to fit and fulfill the westerners’ fantasies. They, however, refuse to be labeled as the passive harem as they negotiate their gendered identities as independent agents.

Reema protests that she is not a sexual fantasy nor object and Faten counters Martin’s ideologically driven assumptions. Martin and Alex’s perception of Faten and Reema, respectively reflects their inability and failure to trespass the conventional discursive representation of Arab women as they hold beliefs and assumptions that are essentially orientalist in essence. Even though Martin shows affection and respect to Faten at the beginning and Alex jokes about Reema being his harem girl, still their intentions and expectations of Arab harem are concealed through their philanthropy and sarcasm. Laila Lalami and Susan Muaddi Darraj’s representations of their female protagonists as independent and autonomous serve as counter narratives to the orientalist and western discourses. The diasporic experiences of their protagonists and encounter with American and Spanish men are different and heterogeneous and suggests the plurality and diversity of Arabs and simultaneously deconstructs the monolithic and one-sided lenses through which they are seen.

6 CONCLUSION

The orientalist representation of the easterners in general and of eastern women in particular has been ideological to justify the penetration of the supposedly civilized side of the colonial divide in the allegedly uncivilized. Eastern women’s saving from brown men is of the pretexts that the empire uses to legitimize its imperial expansionist projects. The passivity associated with Arab women by the orientalist renders their saving a philanthropic necessity the white master has to do. The passivity, docility, and submissiveness attributed to Arab women in conjunction with their representation as sexual objects has still its effect and consequences on migrant women as they are supposed to fulfill their role

and satisfy their supposedly white masters in the context of diaspora. Alex's obsession with Reema and his naming of her as his harem and Martin's expectations from Faten are the outcome of the orientalist representations of Arab women i.e. Martin and Alex and regardless being educated individuals in the postcolonial era still hold the orientalist beliefs and portrayal of Arab women and, hence, expect Reema and Faten to confirm the discursive teachings and ideological representations. The homogeneity attributed to Arabs in general, and Arab women in particular is dismantled as Reema and Faten are represented as independent individuals with control over their bodies and choices. Their refusal to confirm the biased representation and fulfill their Spanish and American male partners' fantasies confirm their agency and heterogeneity as they believe the expectations awaited from them are not objective, but rather the doing of the orientalists. Reema and Faten's disruption of the conventional image drawn for Arab women through exercising their agency and freedom over their bodies, choices, and decisions debunks the submissiveness and harem traits and questions the Western and orientalist discourses that homogenize Arab women and render them isomorphically identical. Lalami and Darraj as Arab female migrants and writers are aware of the indispensability of providing alternative representations of Arabs in general, and Arab women in particular to suggest their heterogeneity and plurality. Arab female migrants are plural as the noun *per se* suggests and attempting to render them isomorphically identical is invalidated through the representation of Reema and Faten in the studied novels.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author thanks the reviewers and the editors for rigorous reviews and suggestions for better draft.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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