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## Representation of the Orient in Pasolini's *Arabian Nights*

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**ABSTRACT.** This article aims at studying the representation of the Orient in Pasolini's film *Arabian Nights*(1974). Since this film is a faithful adaptation of *Thousand and One Nights* it will be examined as carrying the same ideology which the text carries. The text of *Thousand and One Nights* established and legitimized orientalism in the west. Thus the movie follows suit in institutionalizing Orientalism. This is obtained by a close watching analysis and by looking at the images of the Orient, the plot itself, potential stylistic features which expresses images or attitudes in this regard. Our hypothesis is that the Orient in this movie is portrayed in accordance with notions of representation of the Other being depicted as, amongst other aspects, exotic, sexual, erotic and as a homogenous mass. Pasolini portrays Oriental men and woman as bodies in the duality of mind and body, and portrays them as a homogenous mass this is merely due to their belonging to a particular culture or race. The film represents the Oriental men and women as having a defining interest in sex and eroticism. It displays an exoticising Western view of the Oriental culture.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Antoine Galland took *Thousand and One Nights* to France in 1704. His motivation was to let French people know the Orient. In his preface he discloses his intention "Thus without suffering the fatigue of going to look for these people in their countries, the reader will have the pleasure here, of seeing them act and hearing them speak. We have taken care in keeping their characters, and not wandering from their expressions and their feelings"(Yamanaka, and Nishio, 2006:239). From the very outset Galland lays his cards on the table. He is in search of the orient. His project of taking *Arabian Nights* to Europe in the words of Ziauddin Sardar 'legitimized and institutionalized orientalism'(ibid, xi).

Galland's translation motivated others to translate *Arabian Nights* into other languages and further legitimized orientalism. In 1885-86, Burton published a ten-volume translation of the tales, *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night*, later on in 1886-88 he added an additional six volume *Supplemental Nights to the Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night*.

With the growth of cinema translation of *Arabian Nights* gave its place to adaptation. In fact from the very outset of cinema there were adaptations of *Arabian Nights* and as Irwin argues in his article '*A Thousand and One Nights at the Movies*' "the history of the *Thousand and One Nights* on film is nearly as old as the history of film itself"(2012: 224). We were about to find the adapted movies. Therefore we launched extensive internet searches. The first surprise that our search exposed was that the quantity of adapted movies had been clearly underestimated by us. We had expected to find a few examples, and not particularly significant ones. What we actually found was a great number of movies. It takes a long list to name the adapted movies of *Arabian Nights*. Among these are *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*, by Ferdinand Zecca; Georges Melies's *Palais des Mille et Une Nuits* (1905); *Aladdin or the Marvelous Lamp* in 1906; *Popeye the Sailor Meets Sindbad the Sailor*, (1932), and *Popeye the Sailor Meets Ali Baba's Forty Thieves*, (1933) by Dave Fleischer; *Arabian Nights* (1942) by John Rawlins; *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* (1944) by Arthur Lubin; *Arabian Nights*, (2000) by Steve Barron; *Sinbad: Legend of the Seven Seas*, (2003) by Tim Johnson and Patrick Gilmore, to name a few.

There are still many. What is interesting is that this work has been adapted internationally, like its being translated internationally, by all western countries from the outset of cinema. One may wonder why the history of cinema from the very onset is replete with movies adapted from *Thousand and one Nights*? Why there are so many films made from this work? Is it a masterpiece of unique quality and character? Who has written it? Is the author a canonical writer like Shakespeare, Dante, Goethe? To know the answer to these questions we have to know first the text and its origin. The book comes from the Orient. It has no significant writer since it is a collection of tales told in eastern hemisphere of the world. These tales are not significant in their own countries. They are 'a collection of unrelated bawdy tales' (Yamanaka, and Nishio, preface) and very insignificant. In the article 'The Arabian Nights in England: Galland's Translation And Its Successors' Knipp writes: "westerners mistakenly consider the *Arabian Nights* a "classic" of Arabic literature, whereas it is obscure to, and largely despised by, the Arabs themselves" (1974: 45). Rana Kabbani argues:

*In the authentic context of their native reality, the stories included in the Arabian Nights had been folktales, many of which were kept alive orally and narrated over the centuries by itinerant storytellers (hakawâtieh) who, with each retelling, larded the tales with further details and jingles reflecting their own particular tastes and backgrounds. Emerging from the oral folkloric traditions of India, Persia, Iraq, Syria, and Egypt, the stories tended to mirror the prejudices about class, race, and gender that, for a host of economic and political reasons, were popularly prevalent in those societies. Recounted in a vulgar, vernacular Arabic, the TV soap-operas of their day, they would never have been considered "cultivated" literature. In the rare instances when they were mentioned by men of letters, such as in al-Mas'ûdî's (d. 956) Murûj aldhahab, they were dismissed as entertainment of an inferior sort. Ibn al-Nadîm, writing like al-Mas'ûdî in the tenth century, believed them to have no literary merit, although he conceded rather disdainfully that they were popular among the illiterate. (Marzolph, et al, 2004: 26).*

Why therefore, it attracted the west to have this book translated and taken to the west. The answer is that when Galland translated this book it was the age of enlightenment in Europe. Enlightenment was to export west as rational, logical, and reasonable. The European needed to define themselves against the orient and hence they started to stereotype the Orient. Robert Irwin in a preface to *The Arabian Nights and Orientalism PERSPECTIVES FROM EAST & WEST* writes:

*...the reception of Galland's translation of the Arabian Nights was only one of the unexpectedly exotic constituents of the Enlightenment. European identity was in large part shaped by a widening awareness of other cultures, other sensibilities and other ways of doing things ( Yamanaka, and Nishio, preface).*

Taking the book of *Thousand and one Nights* to the west was in line with that project of stereotyping the east. The movie adaptations, like the source on which they were based, will make the western audience "without suffering the fatigue of going to look for the Orientals in their countries, have the pleasure of seeing them act and hearing them speak" (quoted above). The filmmakers, like the translators, have taken care in keeping the Oriental characters, and not wandering from their behaviors, customs, ways of lives, and their states of mind.

To see how Burton translated Arabs we used an Oriental text for comparison. I made use of a Persian translation of the Nights which is by Abdollatif Tasooji translated in 1882. From these comparison I understood that Burton translated the text while stereotyping the Arabs. For example when Scheherazade asks her father permission to marry the king the translation of Burton reads 'Oh scanty of wits! O scanty of wit, expose not thy life to such peril! How durst thou address me in words so wide from wisdom and un-far from foolishness? Burton, 1885: 15)' This is not the case in Tasooji's translation. Whereas Burton is telling the western readers that Orientals did not have any respect for women Tasooji is telling us otherwise that Scherhazade's father is a kind father who speaks to her kindly in order to change her mind. If an oriental father were like what Burton says in the text above, he wouldn't have let her do what she desired. The fact that she acts according to her

wishes is a slap on the face of Burton who shows the oriental father as a patriarchal father. This comparison shows that Burton did whatever he wanted to with the text, he presented the Orient according to his own whims and wishes. He distorted and vulgarized the text. He used his pen as a phallus( signifying power) to define the Orient to the west as its inferior other.

The result of this comparison was in fact, fruitful, because we came to this conclusion that some of the stories which were found in the western text of Burton and Galland were not found in the Persian text. In fact, the ten volumes of Burton were exactly the same as Abdullatif Tasooji's two huge volumes but it is the supplemental nights which were not found in the text of Tasooji and upon scrutiny we found out that Burton translated the supplemental nights from Galland who added the tales to the nights for which there is no source. As it is clear both Galland and Burton violated the texts doing whatever they wishes with the *Nights*. In fact, when Galland translated the *Nights* "society ladies, scholars and children read his translation. He was mobbed in the streets by people demanding more of the Arabian stories"( Yamanaka, and Nishio, preface). Since many requested from Galland for more of the Arabian stories it is likely that he added these supplemental tales to the *Nights* to satisfy their desires.

Back in England when Burton was criticized over the translation of indecent materials of *Thousand and One Nights* for the respectable British society he justified himself in the light of west's need for knowing the orient so that to rule it effectively (Kennedy, 328). This means that the text was inappropriate enough not to be published again that Burton justified himself by saying that he wished to give information about the Oriental other. Burton makes his translation political. This makes his translation as a repository of oriental lore. He immediately makes it related with power relations of the self and the other. His translations establishes the orient as a foreign other to be manipulated as an inferior. What Burton does it to make the 'pen' as an imperial means by which to define the Other. Now that Burton and Galland used the pen as a weapon to define the Orient we want to know whether adapters of the *Nights* (in this case Pasolini) used camera as a weapon too to define the Orient?

## 2. DISCUSSION

Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922 – 1975) was an Italian Marxist poet, novelist, and film director. He adapts the *Arabian Nights* in his *Trilogy of Life* series, which also includes Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and Boccaccio's *Decameron*.(Saleem, 2012:119) Pasolini's *Il Fiore Delle Mille e Una Notte*, which in English means *The Flower of the Thousand and One Nights*, or *Arabian Nights*, has a number of tales from the classic *Arabian Nights*. Pasolini's *Nights* does not start with frame tale of the original text, it has omitted the frame-story. However Pasolini preserves the element of narration. The film of Pasolini "foregoes both the renowned storyteller Scheherazade as well as the traditional frame of King Shahrayar forcing her to tell tales nightly"(ibid).

His *Arabian Nights*(1974) is a faithful adaptation of the *Nights*. This is attested to by Robert Irwine and Michael James Lundell. Irwin believes that "Pasolini, who was the most faithful of all film men to work with the *Nights*, took several authentic *Nights* stories but rearranged their structure (intelligently)"(2012: 227). Lundell in his article 'Pasolini's Splendid Infidelities: Un/Faithful Film Versions of *The Thousand and One Nights*' argues that "Pasolini's 1974 film *Il fiore delle mille e una notte* seems to be the most faithful adaptation, in its emphasis on sexuality, of *The 1001 Nights* in its oldest form"(120). This is true. In fact, the movie revolves around sex, sexuality and nudity. If we take these statements of Irwine and Lundell as true, we have to believe interest in sex defines the Orient, this is what the movie teaches us implicitly. If the movie is a faithful adaptation of the text, therefore it preaches the same ideology of the text. It is in line with the ideology of the text since the text works against the Orient and stereotypes the East and is not a true picture of the Orient. The movie is fascinated with the East, it portrays the Oriental women as body and as objects of desires; the movie represents interest in sex as a defining feature of the eastern people, likewise it views Oriental man as a shiftless man, the movie seems like a documentary which brings the Orient in front of the viewers since it was shot in Eastern regions. It

starts with strange, unusual sound which sounds like mourning a death. The sound is so vague that no one can distinguish what it really is. It brings terror and fear to mind. It is mixed with the sounds of dogs which convey an unpleasant, strange, frightening feeling to the viewers. This vague and strange sounds is chosen to show the exotic dimension of the Orient as Pasolini himself defines 'exotic' as the idea of elsewhere. How, then, do these images present the Orient to the viewer and, more particularly, given the late Edward Said's celebrated denunciation of European Orientalism as 'a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient', to what extent do they equate its otherness with inferiority

### **2.1. The Oriental men and women as body in the duality of mind and body**

The movie of Pasolini represents the oriental women as body and as objects of desires. The oriental woman Zumurrud is an object of desire and everybody is interested in her from old to young. The old Orientals men are also shown as oversexed showing a great interest in her. They are ready to pay a lot of money to possess her. For example one such old man is to pay one Thousand dinars to possess her, Zumurrud responds by saying "You have a soft candle in your pants, it rises when you sleep, and sleeps when you rise. God pity whoever lies with you" (00:03:20). She is shown as an oriental woman who is horny, hot and sexual. The men who came to view her are also attracted to her and consider her as body and wish to possess her body. What is interesting is that the movie represents Oriental men who belong to all walks of life and from all ages as sexually excited as seeing Zumurrud. It portrays them as a sexual creature who are all interested in female bodies.

The movie represents the oriental woman as the objects to lust after, in this case Zumurud is often the focus of male gaze. The movie shows Zumurud as a woman who is used for the gratification of men only. Not only is the oriental woman the focus of the male gaze but she is also the focus of the viewers' gaze or voyeurism. The bodies of Oriental women and men are recorded and the movement of the camera over the bodies of both men and women subjects the Orient to Western voyeurism. The men are not intelligent and genius they are mere bodies in the dichotomy of mind and body. They are shown and represented as to take care of satisfaction of their desires only.

### **2.2. Eastern People as a homogenous Mass**

Like the text on which the movie is based, it is fascinated with the East. Gandy in the article 'The heretical landscape of the body: Pier Paolo Pasolini and the scopic regime of European cinema' writes "despite Pasolini's desire to step outside of European cultural traditions, *Arabian Nights* resonates with the 19<sup>th</sup> century fascination for the Orient and the South Seas as places of mystery and sexual passion"(1996: 302). The eastern people are portrayed as a homogenous mass, they are always together sharing similar characteristics and features. They are defined homogeneously. They are seen wearing homogenous clothes, homogeneous turbans, homogenous weapon. It is as if they are all interested in the same social affairs without having individualistic talents and capabilities. Almost a group of Oriental men are portrayed to sit together and do nothing except talking and speaking about unimportant things. It is difficult to tell one Oriental man from another. The Orientals are portrayed as travelling on camels and sitting in bazaars and smoking hookah. They are shown as possessing no individual aspects. Almost they are shown to be interested in pederasty. A poet is portrayed to stay a night with three young men.

### **2.3. Interest in the sex defines the orient**

Interest in the sex defines the orient in the movie of Pasolini. Zumurd chooses the one who is sexually potent. It reduces the Orient to corporeality. They are slaves to moments and lack spirituality and logic. In one word the Orientals the movie, suggest, looks for pleasure. They are emotional. In the very first scene old Oriental men are gathered to buy the slave Zumurud to have her as their sex slave. In the movie there are no individual facets taken into account when describing the Oriental Other; the Orientals are portrayed as if they are a homogenous mass, driven by emotions which are determined by race rather than by personality, individuality and intentional

decision-making. In the western gaze occurs when the camera puts the audience into the perspective of a western man. It may linger over the curves of an Orient's body, for instance The Orient is usually displayed on two different levels: as an erotic object for both the characters within the film, as well as for the spectator who is watching the film. It is the real bodies of the Orient that are shown to the western audience.

The Oriental men are interested in female bodies and configurations. This is shown from the very beginning till the end. Nuredin, Aziz and many of the other men are motivated by sex and sexuality. Their only wish is to satisfy their desire and wishes. They meet and face many women in their lives. The women are also portrayed to have an interest in sex. At one scene Nuredin is taken upstairs by three girls to have sex with him. They are portrayed as horny girls who are to satisfy their sexual desires by this method of placing their basket on the ground and when a man is in their basket, they pull him up to enjoy him. In another scene of the film when Nuredin meets a girl to carry her stuff to her house, he is to have a bath with the three girls living in the house. They have a discussion in the pool about the definition of the female and male sexual organs. All the girls ask Nuredin to define their sexual organs which Nuredin defines wrongly and then each one of the girl offers her own definition of female sexual organ. The first girl answers that it is "called perfumed meadow grass"(02:00:02). The second defines it as "Peeled sweet pomegranate"(02:00:24). The third girl defines the female sex organ as "The inn of good food"(02:00:41). The Nuredin asks the three girls to define his sex organ. Each answer wrongly until Nuredin defines it himself as "This is the donkey, which grazes perfumed meadow grass, eats peeled sweet pomegranate, and spends the night in the inn of good food"(02:01:16). At his definition the three girls gather around him and kiss him a lot. At another scene Aziz is to have sex with his beloved and he used an arrow pointing to the sexual organ of his beloved. The movie is full of such nude scenes which show eastern women and men are interested in sex. Jach Shaheen in his book *Reel bad Arabs: How Hollywood vilifies a people* argues about Pasolini X-rate movie and writes: "appearing are erotic princesses, as well as enslaved boys and girls. For some viewers, the nude scenes may overshadow flimsy Arab vs. Arab sequences"(2012, 78). In fact, the movie's focal point is eroticism on the part of the east.

#### **2.4. The film looks like a documentary showcasing the Orient**

The movies of Pasolini at certain times takes the form of a documentary recording the Oriental customs, cities, buildings, houses, behaviors, bazaars, ways of lives, and standards of lives. This recommends itself very well when we understand that he recorded the movie in the Orient itself. The movement of the camera from the cities, villages of the Orient brings the Orientals cities, towns, customs, behaviors, geography in front of the European viewers. It is as if the westerners sees the real Orient in front of them. This, of course, helped Pasolini to avoid spending a lot of money to build the sets of the *Arabian Nights* cities since making adaptations of the *Nights* is very costly. His solution was to go to the Orient itself, see it, watch it, look for it, as it really is rather than use his own imagination. This was effective, as he found his buildings and natural settings ready made in Eritrea, Yemen and Nepal. Similarly, his cast was, for the most part, locally employed (Irvine, 2012: 227). This documenting the Orient based on *Thousand and one Nights* which is a fictional work poses a serious problem as to how fiction becomes a reality and exports the source on which it is based as not fiction but reality. Shots of bazaars, people riding camels, young men and women celebrating a wedding, shepherds guiding the sheep, all with oriental clothes are few examples of documenting the East.

#### **2.5. Faithfulness as a way to stereotype the Orient.**

The text of *Thousand and one Nights* as translated by Antoin Galland and Sir Richard Burton is a 'repository of orientalist knowledge' (Kennedy, 2000: 327). Terek Shamma in 'The Exotic Dimension of Foreignizing Strategies' writes:

It is evident that Burton's translation restated and perpetuated the Western age-old stereotypes about the East. Its foregrounding of the alterity of the source text and

culture only facilitated the familiar process of affirming the self in contrast to the emphasized difference – or rather eccentricity – of the Other.(2005: 61)

Now that translation was intended to be a thorough knowledge of the orient which is rather stereotypical it is highly likely to argue that the faithful movie of Pasolini ‘perpetuates the western stereotypes about the East’. This is not to say that Pasolini intentionally intended it, but since the movie should be examined as a text we have to put Pasolini’s mentality aside. The film lends itself to this kind of interpretation. Since textual *Arabian Nights* ‘legitimized and institutionalized orientalism’(Yamanaka, and Nishio, 239) its adaptation likewise followed suit and got the better of textual medium in further marginalizing the Orient by attracting a large number of western audience. This faithfulness means the Orient in both the text and the image is the same. It is interesting to know that the tales of the *Nights* are not considered great in the east itself since they do not offer a true and accurate picture of the Orient. The Europeans claim that this work gives a thorough knowledge of the Orient. As said above Antoine Galland took *Thousand and One Nights* to France to permit French people to know the Orient. He claimed that if readers read his translation, they will have a thorough knowledge of the Orient because he has been careful enough to keep their Oriental’s characters, and not going astray from their expressions and their outlooks (Yamanaka, and Nishio,2006: 239). Since the movie of Pasolini is the most faithful movie of the nights, it, like the source on which it was based, will follow suit and do the same thing which the text did. That is to say it will make the western audience without experiencing the exhaustion of going to seek the Orientals in their regions, have the chance of watching them behave and hearing them talk. It is likely to say the movie, like the text, cautiously keeps their characters, and not deviating from their ways of lives and their mental state.

## 2.6. Oriental man as a shiftless weed

Oriental men in this movie are no intelligent people. They are shiftless. From the very first scene they are bystanders either to buy a slave or to watch. They are reduced to corporeality. Indeed the Oriental people are motivated not by thought but by sensual feeling. They are shown as if they are nothing more than bodies. They are moving bodies and configurations who wish to rub flesh against flesh no matter how old they are. Indeed when one sees the scene one thinks that the Orientals as nothing but shiftless weeds. Nuredin, the one who is chosen by Zumurud is a ‘shiftless weed’(Irwine, 2012: 227). He is represented as a lazy person. He is shown as a feminized man. He does not have anything. Zumurud chooses him to have him possess her sexually and sensually. He loses Zumurud because of his laziness and his want of logic and prudishness. Another shiftless man is Aziz who is like Nuredin who is a dupe and lack the power to think deeply. Generally the Oriental man is portrayed as having no individual talents.

## 3. CONCLUSION.

To conclude this essay, we found out that both translation and adaptation were at the service of the stereotyping the Orient. The translated text itself has been used to give a full picture of the Orient while from the perspective of the New Historicism to have an objective picture of a nation, a country, a region, is a mirage. What both Galland and Burton claimed as to give a true picture of the Orient through translation is a serious problem. New Historicism teaches us that we can’t have an objective historical knowledge of a nation. Thus not only Burton and Galland’s translations are not true repository of the Orient but also Pasolini’s movie, as a faithful adaptation of the *Thousand and One Nights* can never represent the Orient accurately. Thus the movie *Arabian Nights* instead of being a real picture of the Orient is a stereotypical image of the East that has been a place of civilization with cultured people. While certain images may represent the Orient in a relatively positive light, in connection both with the choice of episodes for portrayal and the specific treatment of these scenes, there is in over-all a noticeable tendency to portray the other as simultaneously alluring and threateningly alien. A degree of stereotyping is indisputably, and perhaps ineluctably, present in Pasolini’s movie. Even though the text of *Thousand and One Nights* has textual sexual scenes, these sexual scenes are just reported in the text. But converting it into movie reduces the

whole of east to nudity, eroticism and sexuality. This sexuality, however part of Pasolini's style has worked to stereotype the culture and civilization of the East.

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