

## **Contemporary criticism on the representation of female travellers of the Ottoman harem in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: A review**

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**Abstract:** A common problem that needs addressing in the study of narratives concerning the Orient and the Ottoman harem in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, through an emphasis on gender, is the popular belief amongst certain groups in post-colonial and feminist scholarships that writings by women on these subjects are the alternative to hegemonic imperial discourse. Post-colonial and feminist critics whose research deals with women travel writers to the Middle East and North Africa—Sara Mills, Reina Lewis, Billie Melman, Susan Meyer and Shirley Foster—have all argued that since women were not directly involved in the imperial project, their writings on the Orient and the Ottoman harem should be considered as articulating alternative views in colonial narratives. One of the aims of this paper is to present evidence that suggests that narratives by women, as well as those by men, did not necessarily bear a counter-hegemonic imprint. It argues that in most cases, they display, through the attention to gender and race in relation to the Orient and the Ottoman harem, ambivalences that neither completely support nor subvert the imperialist subject.

**Keywords:** Feminist Orientalism, travel writing, harem, gendered

**Abstrak:** Satu masalah biasa yang perlu diteliti dalam kajian penulisan berkenaan dengan ‘Orient’ dan ‘harem Uthmaniyaah’ pada abad ke 19, melalui penekanan kepada jantina, adalah kepercayaan popular dalam kalangan sesetengah kumpulan ilmuwan pasca-kolonial dan feminis bahawa penulisan wanita dalam isu-isu ini hanyalah alternatif kepada wacana imperialis

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hegemoni. Pasca-kolonial dan pengkritik feminis yang mengkaji tentang penulis pengembara wanita ke Timur Tengah dan Afrika Utara—Sara Mills, Reina Lewis, Billie Melman, Susan Meyer dan Shirley Foster—telah mempertikaikan bahawa memandangkan wanita tidak terlibat secara langsung dalam projek imperial, penulisan mereka tentang Orient dan harem Uthmaniyyah harus diambil kira sebagai memberi penjelasan pandangan alternatif dalam penulisan kolonial. Salah satu tujuan makalah ini adalah untuk membentangkan bukti yang menyarankan bahawa penulisan wanita, serta lelaki, tidak semestinya mengandungi cetakan hegemoni yang bertentangan. Ia mempertikaikan bahawa dalam kebanyakan kes, ia memaparkan, melalui penelitian kepada jantina dan ras yang berhubung kait dengan Orient dan harem Uthmaniyyah, pandangan berbelah bagi yang tidak menyokong atau menyangkal sepenuhnya isu imperialis.

**Kata kunci:** feminis, Orientalisme, penulisan pengembaraan, harem, peranan genus

As interdisciplinary interest in studies on gender, women, travel writing and imperialism increases, post-colonial and feminist critics on Orientalist writings and art—Sara Mills, Reina Lewis, Billie Melman and Susan Meyer—have all accused Edward Said of neglecting to mention women’s writing within his study on Orientalist discourse; he is alleged to have paid attention only to a male conception of the world. They suggest that Said’s *Orientalism* is only concerned with articulating men’s singular experience of the Orient and contains sexist undertones (Mills, 1991, pp. 57-58). In *Discourses of Difference* (1991), Mills argues:

It is incongruous that someone who seems to be claiming universality for Orientalism (in so far as it appears to be impossible to write about the Orient without using Orientalist discourse) should equate that universality with maleness, and that he should write an account which is so sensitive to issues of race representation and yet should not have considered the implications of gender (Mills, p. 58).

As Mills has made clear in this passage, an insight into gender issues is absent from Said’s work. While he recognizes that Western travellers and writers writing on the Orient often differentiated the ‘cultured’ race from other races by using normatively loaded words like ‘manly’ and ‘effeminate,’ Said fails to criticize the highly masculinized nature of

Orientalist writings. When he says that women are highly sexualized in Orientalist narratives—“Women are usually the creature of a male power-fantasy. They express unlimited sexuality, they are more or less stupid, and above all they are willing” (Said, 1978, p. 207)—Said does not offer to challenge these essentialized representations by highlighting, for example, texts by Orientalist women who ‘write back’ at these stereotypes.

There have been, however, some attempts at rectifying this lack of perspective on gender in Said’s seminal work. One of the most notable focuses of recent studies on gender and imperialism has been on the representations of the colonized women in the Muslim institutions of the Ottoman harem, a spatial site within a traditional Middle Eastern and North African family institution, because any studies on the harem have to take into account that a significant part of its construction is determined by the notion of separate spheres; women and men being differentiated along the lines of the private, as opposed to public, spheres.

### **The harem**

The term ‘harem’ originates from the Arabic word *ḥarām*, meaning ‘forbidden place; sacrosanct, sanctum’ and *ḥarām*, meaning ‘sacred.’ Although the institution of the harem was practised by various Oriental communities and nations, for example, medieval China, it is generally associated with the practices and cultures of the Muslim people who had lived in places under the protectorate powers of the Ottoman Empire, such as the Middle East and North Africa. In these regions and to these peoples, the word ‘harem’ means a private quarter within a house in which its inhabitants are guaranteed privacy that should be honoured and respected by everyone, visitors and family members, alike. European popular culture today, however, frequently constructs it as a site of sexual license, a forbidden territory, a segregated space barred to men and charged with erotic significance, since it is a place where a number of women are thought to serve the desires of a single and promiscuous dominant male. The prevalence and popularity of this perspective of the harem is largely owing to a general tendency in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe to emphasize the enslavement, especially in the sexual sense, of women within Middle Eastern and North African societies. From fictional writings to fictional works, mostly by male

travellers and authors, there exists in traditional European constructions of the Islamic Orient the idea that Muslims generally mistreat their women, objectifying them as sex slaves.

A major and influential work of the imaginative construction of the harem within a largely male, 18<sup>th</sup> century Orientalist tradition of writing on the subject, Montesquieu's novel, *Persian Letters* (1721) relates the various correspondences between two fictional characters who are 'masters' of their harems in Persia, Usbek and Rica, as they travel across Europe, and the concubines 'encaged' within their harems. These correspondences, however, end abruptly when the harem women, led by Roxanne, or 'Roxana,' as she is known in the English translation of the work, the most beloved of one of the traveller's wives, stage a rebellion that ends with the total annihilation of his harem and her eventual suicide. Roxanne's rebellion is an event that would later be often repeated by feminist writers, such as Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797), to support the idea that women's suppression by men would result in pernicious consequences.

This emphasis on the imprisonment of women in fictional works is also present in travel accounts on the harems of the Middle East and North Africa. While many of the earliest accounts of this institution refer only very briefly to it, concentrating instead on descriptions of Ottoman manners and customs, religion and government, and citing the difficulty in gaining access to the private apartments, there were a few exceptions to the general rule. From these writings, travel accounts by Flachet (1740-55) stand out for their detailed description of the harem. Having managed to gain the trust of his friend, the Kislär Agha, Flachet made plans and sketches of his friend's house when he visited him there, mentioning in these accounts, the 'caged' and secluded existence of the inhabitants of the harem (Flachat, 1766, p. 64). The most influential work conveying the image of Oriental women as enslaved, however, came much later. Lane's widely-popular travel writing about Egypt, *An account of the manners and customs of the modern Egyptians* (1836), emphasized that not only were women deprived of liberty, they also had a libidinous nature due to the climate, the "want of proper instruction" and their husbands endorsing licentiousness in their wives (p. 305). As Lane says in his writing, "The women are permitted to listen, screened behind the windows of wooden latticed

work, to immoral songs and tales sung or related in the streets by men whom they pay for this entertainment, and to view the voluptuous dancers of the *ghawazee*, and of the effeminate *khawals*” (Lane, 1908, p. 305). Lane also assures his readers that “the intrigues of the women in the *Tales of a thousand and one nights* present faithful pictures of occurrences not infrequent in the modern metropolis of Egypt” (Lane, 1908, p. 308).

The image of the Oriental women’s unnatural and animal-like sexuality and enslavement in the Ottoman harems was so firmly embedded in European perception of the East that the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) notes that as early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Italian word ‘seraglio,’ meaning ‘a place of confinement’ and ‘the family unit of various animals’ was used to misleadingly render the Turkish word *serai* meaning ‘lodging’ and ‘palace.’ At around the same time, one could also find the Italian term ‘seraglio’ being used interchangeably with the word ‘harem.’ This greatly explains why, in this early period in the history of Western representation of Islamic societies, ‘harem’ not only denotes ‘the private apartments of women’ but also ‘a prison or soulless women.’ As most works reviewed in this paper would suggest, the harem remains the most important spatial site and boundary conceptualized through understanding of gender in the study of Orientalist writing and criticism.

### **Oriental women and writing back**

Following Said’s *Orientalism*, an early and notable example of critical writings on representations of the harem and its female inhabitants as being subject to slavery in European travel accounts of the Orient is Rana Kabbani’s *Europe’s myths of Orient: Devise and rule* (1986). In it, she argues that images of Eastern women in harems are not only biased and negative but have also been central to the West’s construction of the Orient. Unfortunately, her work risks essentializing European writers’ perception of the East as a site of abominable acts of slavery and promiscuity because it concentrates solely on establishing this hypothesis. At the end of her work, Kabbani argues that “it is unfortunate that the bulk of European travel narratives about the East was so strongly coloured by bias and supposition. The narrative did, no doubt, lead to an

expansion in knowledge of the world, but it was a tainted knowledge that served a colonial vision” (Kabbani, 1986, p. 139). She concludes her argument by urging others to be more open-minded with their views and writings about the Other. Kabbani 1986 (p. 139) says:

It is mandatory that we ultimately arrive at a less prejudiced sort of narrative in our description of other peoples, other races, other religions. And one of the ways to do this is to continually question the testimony we have inherited...In questioning those notions that are supposed to prove how different we are as peoples, perhaps we may, with sympathy and effort, arrive at an understanding on how similar we are as humans in an increasingly complicated world.

Though she ends her paragraph with what may be termed as a call for more understanding between peoples who were previously colonized and those who had colonized them, she avoids addressing the issue of subjectivity inherent in any narratives. She suggests, rather too naively, that future discourse on the subject should and could ‘write-out’ the hegemony of imperial narratives that had brought it about in the first place, simply passing over issues of ambiguities and anxieties as part and parcel of these narratives. Kabbani’s work, however, merits mention in any text that deals with Orientalism and gender. This is because, by virtue of being one of those few Oriental women who write about what they perceive to be the degraded way Oriental women have been portrayed in European texts, she grants agency to this frequently marginalized group by suggesting that they can resist being objectified by resorting to a variety of subtle ways, such as writing.

The focus on colonized women representing themselves and negotiating their place within Western discourse on the Oriental institution of the harem leads us to Reina Lewis’s work, *Rethinking Orientalism: Women, travel and the Ottoman harem* (2004). Unlike many writings by Orientalists that analyze only Western women travellers’ discourse on the harem, it also studies writings on the harem by the Oriental women who had occupied them. However, it does not suggest that the latter represented themselves as overtly passive or determinedly resistant in the way they have been represented by Westerners. Instead, her work focuses on the more credible project of showcasing Ottoman writers who were actively

engaged with both the Western perception of Oriental cultural codes and Western Feminist movements. As Lewis argues in her text:

Their travel accounts, memoirs and fictions reveal a gendered counter-discourse that challenges Occidental stereotypes. As well as engaging directly with Western orientalist discourse, they also intervene in Ottoman debates about female and male emancipation...For me, in trying to rethink Orientalism, their voices and those of Western women, with whom they were in dialogue illustrate how the West was never the sole arbiter and owner of the meanings about the Orient...Orientalism was a discourse framed by responses, adaptations and contestations of those whom it constructed as its objects...Orientalist knowledges were challenged at their very 'historical moment of inception,' not just from a postcolonial perspective (Lewis, 2004, pp. 1-2).

These subjects are shown, in her work, to actively manipulate, sometimes reinforcing, and at other times, challenging Western perceptions of Oriental institutions, such as the harem, polygamy and the stereotypical figure of the Oriental woman, transforming them into both contested and contesting sites of resistance.

Lewis' project, nonetheless, is not without its problems. This is because her subjects cannot be considered 'conventional' Oriental women of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As Lewis (2004) herself says, "The group of women writers that form my study travelled Turkey, Britain, the United States of America and the rest of Europe, as well as within the Ottoman Empire. Their writings are connected to each other by personal contact and by ideological debate" (p. 1). Her Oriental subjects clearly had recourse to Western discourses on the Orient, being frequent travellers to the West. They were even consciously engaged in the Western feminist project of worldwide emancipation of women, which in their case means 'ultimate' liberation from the confines of the 'harem' family structure. She acknowledges, following Spivak, that those Oriental women who have agency, though racialized, can never assume the part of the subaltern—the proto-class groups whose subjugation prevents them from representing themselves (Lewis, 2004, p. 6).

Nonetheless, as pointed out earlier, this paper is not so much concerned with how colonized women and the harem were

represented in Orientalist discourse as with how European travel writers represented North Africa, its women and institutions, from a gendered perspective. While the main arguments of some critics have tended to either suggest that women writers presented an alternative discourse to colonial narratives or support the notion that they could be included in the imperialist framework, this paper argues that there is no necessary determining imprint in European women's writings on the Orient; heterogeneity and anxiety, related to a gendered and colonial position, are present in the Orientalist narratives of both men and women.

### **Heterogeneity and ambivalences in gendered Orientalist narratives**

Lisa Lowe's *Critical terrains: French and British Orientalisms* (1991) is one of the earliest works to acknowledge the fact that gendered narratives are, in fact, heterogeneous and ambivalent. While orientalism, according to her, is heterogeneous and contradictory since it seeks to stabilize domination, in actual fact it allows for the possibility of allegories of counter-hegemonies and resistances to the dominant discourse. What Lowe rightfully conjectures is that there are no clear-cut counter-hegemonic writings but multiple numbers of constructed allegories that do not essentialize a certain site as resisting domination. Lowe concludes, and I agree with her, that effective contestation of colonial domination could still take place while taking into account "a critical acknowledgement of non-correspondence, incommensurability and multiplicity" (1991, p. 5) of the narratives themselves. Having probed into a number of discursive productions, such as those connected to gender, race and class, which could offer new sites of resistance in literary texts, I find her analysis of Mary Wortley Montagu's *Turkish embassy letters* (1717-18) as "paradoxical and multivalent" enlightening because it exposes Montagu's narrative as ambivalent rather than simply examining differences or similarities between herself and her Oriental female subjects. Not only does she manage to point out Montagu's contextual awareness, such as her consciousness of class, gender and race difference, Lowe also demonstrates that these aspects of Montagu's discourse on the harem and the Oriental Other are heterogeneous because they oscillate between herself and her subjects. As Lowe (1991, p. 45) comments:



The use of the rhetoric of difference places Montagu's texts in relation to a discourse of Orientalism, whereas the rhetoric of identification expresses the critical distance of the text from Orientalism, marking it as heterogenous, divergent and dissenting.

While Lowe adopts a middle ground in her emphasis on the anxieties and ambivalences of Oriental narratives by women, other post-colonial and feminist critics, including Melman, Lewis, Meyer, Ferguson, Foster, and Yeğenoğlu, have chosen to position themselves on two extreme sides of this debate concerning whether or not women are enunciators of an alternative discourse. Coming from one extreme end of the spectrum are critics like Melman and Lewis, who focus exclusively on gendered writings on the harem by European women as the single most important alternative discourse to the dominant imperial texts. Although they generally accept that women's writings do not appear to have the potential to become counter-hegemonic because the authors were not directly opposing colonialism and racism, they argue that since these writers were also never included in a large corpus of male writers who constructed colonial discourse, their writings merit at least an assessment for any resistance to the dominant discourse. As Lewis says in her seminal text on representations of the Orient by Western women, *Gendering Orientalism* (1996):

Women's gender specific representations do not have counter-hegemonic potential because they were all automatically anti-racists opposed to colonialism. Rather, it is the very contradictions thrown up by the assumption (then and now) that women made no contribution to, or had no active role in, imperial expansion that allowed women the positionality from which a counter-hegemonic discourse could be enunciated (1996, p. 20).

Although it would not be possible to find women writers who consciously articulate counter-hegemonic narrative, the line of arguments Lewis adopts here essentializes women's discourse. It ignores the multiplicities and ambiguities inherent in any narrative, building on the mistaken assumption that women writers' attitudes towards imperialism must differ markedly from those of their male counterparts.

Lewis' position has, nonetheless, undergone some revision in her latest work *Rethinking Orientalism*. As she herself points out in this later work, many women writers, both her Ottoman subjects and Westerners, including herself, do not seek to escape the dominant discourse completely, preferring, instead, to rely on traditional stereotypes of the harem in order to make their works more marketable. For example, the word 'harem,' Lewis argues, needs to appear in the title of her book "to pique the reader's interest even as I struggle from the start to control the particular fecundity of its associations" (Lewis, 2004, p. 12). Like her, Lewis adds, her Ottoman female subjects also made use of some of the stereotypical images associated with the harem. While they strive to challenge some of the existing stereotypes frequently attached to Ottoman women, Lewis says, they also "had recourse to these stereotypes to sell their books and were at times personally attached to them because the positive elements of stereotypical imagery (such as the renowned charity of the Ottoman women) were important to their self-image" (Lewis, 2004, p. 7).

Besides illustrating the ways in which Oriental women were both consciously aware of the negative stereotypes frequently attached to them by Westerners, but also the negotiating of rules of discourse opened to them via their Western education and travels, Lewis' inclusion of the British author Grace Ellison shows how European women travel writers could have a dialectic relationship with her Oriental women subjects. Moreover, she also writes of Ellison as someone who "trod a delicate line between offering the expected pleasures of a recognisable Orient and challenging Orientalist stereotypes, wanting to show that Ottoman homes were not as Europe imagined but were in fact contemporary, respectable domiciles full of European furniture" (Lewis, 2004, p. 207). By highlighting European women writers, like Ellison, who negotiated popular images of the harem with the desire to put to question some of the conventional ideas associated with the institution, Lewis' groundbreaking work is an admirable project that not only exposes imperial narratives by women as heterogeneous but also bridges the gap that has for so long characterized the troubled relationship between post-colonial women writers and Western feminists and their movements. Unfortunately, works that propose similar ideas as those in *Rethinking Orientalism* are rare and difficult to encounter.

### Women's narrative as counter-hegemonic

Billie Melman's *Women's Orients: English women and the Middle East, 1718-1918* (1992) is representative of writings that support the notion that European women's narratives must be counter-hegemonic to the European imperialist accounts. Examining a list of European women who wrote travel accounts of their journeys to the Middle East, Melman argues that they contest Said's views on the homogeneity and stability of Orientalist narratives. She endeavours to show that the English women's representation of the Orient are less denigrating than those by their male counterparts because they emphasized a presentable and domesticated harem, as opposed to loading it with sexual innuendoes. Melman, however, risks limiting the subject of these writings to that of the harem and also marginalizing the huge number of women writers, like Florence Nightingale, in *Letters from Egypt* (1854), who did touch on the issue of polygamy in their accounts of the harems that they had visited.

A later work, Susan Meyer's *Imperialism at home: Race and Victorian women's fiction* (1996) extends Melman's argument further by implying that Western travellers actually empathized with their Oriental subjects. She says that although many Western women were empowered by their racial identity as colonizers, they identified closely with the colonized subjects, as both had experienced oppression under the British rule. Although Meyer did not write on European women's travel accounts of the Orient, her argument that Western women novelists identify and empathized with their Oriental fictional subjects strongly corresponds with the notion of women's narratives as counter-hegemonic. In her study of three women fiction writers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Charlotte Brontë, Emily Brontë and George Elliot, she argues that her subjects,

...use race metaphorically in their fiction as they explore the issues of gender. These writers were necessarily situated differently from their male contemporaries in relation to the idea that white women are like people of other races, and indeed this idea undergoes a transmutation as it appears in their fiction. What links the two terms of the metaphor, in the fiction of Charlotte Brontë, Emily Brontë, and George Elliot,

comes to be not shared inferiority but shared experience of frustration, limitation and subordination (Meyer, 1995, p.7).

This argument—that European women believed that they shared similar experiences with the Other—completely overlooks the issue that these women were also implicated within the imperialist project, and that while their writings are not overtly supportive of a predominantly male imperialist project, neither are they completely against it. While feelings of “frustration, limitation and subordination” were shaped, this does not mean that these feelings were experienced to the same degree or even in the same way by the European women and the Other.

Yet, it is a line of argument that manages to prevail in studies published only a few years ago, such as Shirley Foster’s essay *Colonialism and Gender in the East: Representations of the Harem in the writings of women travellers* (2004). Working largely within the context of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century European women, she argues that they,

...were generally recipients of, rather than active participants in, colonialist projects and their accompanying ideologies. Moreover while female travellers, as much as their male counterparts, may already have ‘received’ the East as a region of exoticism and promiscuous sexuality...it was not available to them as a site of heterosexual desire. At the same time, their gendered sense of selfhood, conditioned by factors such as the position of Western women within marriage and the nature of European domestic life, impacted upon their responses to the foreign Other (Foster, 2004, pp. 6-7).

However, Foster, like some critics before her, does not offer convincing evidence to back up her claim. When Foster suggests she has found something relatively new to support her hypothesis, the general portrayal of women travellers in the East in her essay reinforces the assumption that these women were simply recounting a gendered experience that was less resistant to colonialist attitudes than she presupposes. While Foster argues that heterosexual desire is not present in the women travellers’ writings on the harem and their inhabitants, this does not necessarily imply that homosocial and same-sex desires and tendencies are completely absolved of the hegemonic power-relation that has characterized the relationship

between the European and the racialized Other. Montagu's and Duff Gordon's warm and admiring responses to the naked women in the Turkish baths they visited, for example, were simply dismissed as sincere and innocent reactions. The counter-hegemonic label that Foster attaches to these writings is, nonetheless, undermined by evidence that she offers to support her argument. Duff Gordon, for example, wrote to a man, her husband, about her intention to photograph a young "negro girl" in Luxor "to show you in Europe what a woman's breast can be..." (1983, p. 103). Such a narrative, in my opinion, is reminiscent of colonialist tropes in which Oriental women are to be penetrated by the masculine West, not to mention Duff Gordon's voyeuristic attachment to the breasts. At the end of her article, Foster, however, appears to retract some of her earlier arguments. In her concluding paragraph, she seems to acknowledge the deep-seated ambiguities and mixed-reactions that European women experience in their encounters with women of other races. Foster mentions that while these women's responses "are never wholly free of colonialist attitudes, their engagement with difference that was both alien and a skewed image of their own society's cultural patterns reveals itself in empathy and receptivity as well as criticism" (Foster, 2004, pp. 16-17). Here, it can be said that Foster is acknowledging a dialectic relationship between the European and the racial other that exposes the instability of 'counter-hegemonic' labels frequently attached to women's writing in the East.

Further evidence that women writers do not necessarily write out counter-hegemonic narratives can be discerned from works by critics like Lewis who, in the afterword of her book *Gendering Orientalism*, has to admit that the vast myriad of women artists do not, as a rule, conform to a specific pattern of viewing the Orient: "The research on which this book is based was sparked off by a hunch that if I could find proof of women's involvement in Orientalist culture, I would be able to challenge masculine assumptions about women and imperialism...At the very moment that I proved my hypothesis of women's involvement in visual Orientalism, the stability of its constituent categories began to crumble" (Lewis, 1996, p. 236). What emerges from the women's works, Lewis concedes, is in many cases a fluidity of representation, demonstrating its perpetually contested and shifting meanings which, at times, appear to subvert the dominant discourse but, at others, support the

hegemonic programme. Yet, she explains away these ambivalences by arguing that they resulted from women who wanted to create spaces for their gendered writings through containing, appropriating and minimizing what might be perceived as a threat to the dominating discourse (Lewis, 1996, p. 237). What Lewis, in this earlier work, has failed to realize from these writings is that they can be a part of the discourse they were thought to oppose, and that like any other discourse, they are unstable, characterized by ambivalences and anxieties concerning the imperial project.

### **Escaping gendered discourse**

Taking on an opposing view on the matter, Meyda Yeğenoğlu's *Colonial fantasies: Towards a feminist reading of Orientalism* (1998), argues that English women writers can never be enunciators of an alternative discourse. Yeğenoğlu's analysis of Montagu's account of the harem experience locates Western women's representations of the Orient as playing a supplemental role to the dominant discourse, existing basically to fulfil a gap in male writings about the Orient (Yeğenoğlu, 1998, p. 78). Her rhetoric, Yeğenoğlu suggests, only serves to create a subordinate space for Montagu herself (because she is female) in a world of a largely male, Orientalist scholarship. To attempt to present Montagu's writing as containing any 'positive' depictions of the Orient and Oriental women, she argues, is to subject to a Western moral criterion that deserves to be examined because it is subjective and relative to those of other cultures. Even Montagu's opinions on veiling, Yeğenoğlu argues, are not an indication of an exclusively 'positive' standpoint of women's writing since male writers, such as Gerard de Nerval, have recorded opinions of a similar nature (1998, p. 89). When Yeğenoğlu denigrates Montagu's account on the basis of her gender, and the limitations it supposedly sets upon her writing, it becomes difficult to accept that any written work by a woman could ever possibly break away from a monolithic and stable, gendered model of discourse. On the contrary, Yeğenoğlu herself seems to suggest this very possibility since she argues that a male writer's discourse on veiling, in particular, those by Gerard de Nerval, is similar to those by a woman, such as Montagu, as mentioned earlier. What is implicitly clear from Yeğenoğlu's arguments is that there is no determining imprint of gender in Orientalist discourse.

## Conclusion

Both extremes in this argument regarding whether or not women could become possible enunciators of an alternative discourse have largely proven insufficient to account for the heterogeneity or fluidity within women's writing on the Orient. To focus on gender specificities in women's writing does not immediately mean that there is a necessary determining imprint of gender in Orientalist narrative since this would reduce its inherent complexities. In fact, both Yeđenođlu and Lowe give a few examples of male writers of Orientalist narratives, such as Baron de Montesquieu and Gerard de Nerval, whose writings display the ambivalence which, at certain times, subverts but, at other times, supports the imperial project. Following Phillipa Levine, I argue that the practice of invoking gender as a significant historical consideration should never accept that all women or all men share similar experiences of colonial practice (Levine, 2004, p. 2). Gender, instead, signifies "the multiple and contradictory meanings attached to sexual difference" and shows how these multiplicities played an important role in shaping and influencing the way people lived their lives and how they thought about the world around them (Scott, 1988, p. 25).

The main problem with the study of Orientalist narratives with regard to gender, I argue, is the unequal and imbalanced attention paid to a gendered heterogeneous construction of the Orient. When men's Orientalist writing is addressed, little or no attention is paid to women's writers and vice versa. While this paper purports to show that women and men writers have different interests and concerns, it argues that heterogeneity and anxieties of imperialist discourse characterized the Orientalist narratives of both men and women. Yet, because of these contradictions and partly-explored issues, the colonial discourse in the text exposes the anxiety and ambivalence of Orientalist narratives which, in turn become sites of resistance against colonialism's hegemony.

Apart from the issue of the heterogeneity of gender perspectives, most studies on the 19<sup>th</sup> century Orientalist narratives also structure a dichotomous relationship between Europeans and the racialized Other. As a result, there is comparatively little research on the impact that Orientalist narratives had on British society, and, even less, on

the societies of those who become subjects of these inquiries. Nonetheless, we cannot dismiss the huge influence in shaping representations and stereotypes that regions such as North Africa and Middle East have had on former colonial powers like Britain, and how they continue to impact British conceptions of otherness and difference. What this paper has shown is that narratives, not only in post-colonial studies but in any other studies, do not and should not be treated dichotomously. Instead, they should be looked at as examples of dialectic discourse negotiating actively within the rules of discourse, establishing, for studies like those in post-colonialism, the heterogeneity and ambivalences in any representations.

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### Notes

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