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## **Paradigm Shift in Oriental Stereotype of Muslim Woman: American Orientalism, *Black Sunday* and Beyond**

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**Abstract:** Muslim woman as an Orient has gone through a drastic change from its beginning to the present for Western scholarship. The Oriental woman was initially perceived and conceived, and portrayed in literature as highly sexualized seductive woman, enchantress, sorceress etc. But over the time stereotypes transformed from highly romanticized to exaggeratedly realistic, but the essence of this representation remained unchanged, the Orientalist. This paper aims at tracing phenomenon of transformation of Oriental representation of Muslim woman in Thomas Harris's novel *Black Sunday* published in 1975. The novel portrayed a Muslim woman for the first time as a violent terrorist. Whereas the predominant image of Oriental Muslim woman up to this particular moment was exotic. The novel changed the course of stereotyping the Muslim woman; she no longer remained a sexual object. Therefore, this paper will analyze the type of image that existed there before the *Black Sunday* and what type of change it brought in stereotype of Muslim woman.

**Key words:** Muslim women, Orient, sorceress, transformation, stereotype.

### **Introduction**

*Women are found in a multitude of different circumstances and their identities tempered by religious beliefs, class backgrounds, the social context in which they find themselves and personal experiences...identities do not have a fixed essence but are rather always made and remade power relations are an important part of identities... (Tina Sherwell 59-60, qtd in Moore 1).*



When one goes through the representation of Muslim women in the literature one finds a huge arsenal of images flicking under the arena of Orientalism. The representation of Muslim woman ranges from the harem girl in the eighteenth century travelogues and French paintings to the dreaded terrorist in Thomas Harris's novel *Black Sunday* (1975) in the twentieth century. Oriental women in general and Muslim women in particular were indentified with all that is unknown, mysterious, exotic, luring and sensational; the intrinsic element of the Oriental women from European point of view. The representation of Muslim woman has gone through a drastic change from the colonial period to the post World War II. The dominant image of Muslim woman during the colonial era was sexual and most of the literature represents her as a harem girl; both the images are highly sexual meant for male appeal. With the end of the colonialism many things either ended or transformed and it too effected the representation of the Muslim woman. This paper aims at investigating how the image of Muslim woman changed from a belly dancer and harem girl to a deadly terrorist.

The stereotype of the deadly terrorist Muslim woman emerged in America both in the novels and Hollywood. So the representation of the Muslims woman initiated, romanticized, propagated by the Europeans was handed over to Americans. In his book, *American Orientalism* (2008), Douglas Little has concentrated on the Orientalist stereotypes of Arab and Muslim, both men and women, in American popular culture. Chicago World Fair (1892) was the first instances when Muslim women were introduced in American culture through the character of a belly dancer. Organizers of the fair brought belly dancers from the Middle East and they performed before the American audience, and American womanhood was defined against the sexual symbols of belly dancer. Little takes hints from that very beginning and analyzes the imaging of Muslims in America post World War II. He concentrates on the connection between the stereotypes and natural resources available in Middle East and the American dependency on them. Little has also evaluated the increasing need of America of the petroleum that also determines the clash between the two vastly different cultures. In *American Orientalism*, from Little's point of view oil resources are a major factor behind American understanding of Islamic culture.



Movies have presented very sensational picture of the Muslim woman both in the veil and outside veil. The interesting thing to notice whether the veil is on or off the Otherness of Muslim women is stagnant. *Reel Bad Arabs* (2001), Prof. Jack Shaheen has analyzed Hollywood movies; he has laboriously watched as many as 1200 movies to write this book. The portrayals of Muslim men and women, the author says that he was stunned to discover that the image from 1890 to 1990 remain unchanged, or got worse. The author has painstakingly analyzed the roles, dialogues and the paraphernalia that has been assigned to these seemingly Muslim men, women and Arab people. Shaheen himself remarked on his investigation that ‘there seems to be a Saddam Hussain/Osama bin Ladin industry in Hollywood, the U. S. military and the news media.’

A huge body of scholarship is dominated by a “subtle and persistent Eurocentric prejudice against Arabo-Islamic peoples and their culture” argues Edward Said (18). He also explains that a long tradition of romanticized images of Asia and the Middle East in Western culture had served as an implicit justification for European and the American colonial and imperial ambitions. The cultural the dressing of the Eastern women was not seen as an independent culture by colonizer but a sign of primitiveness. To investigate the American understanding of Muslim culture in general and Muslim woman in particular colonizer’s understanding of Muslim woman is foundation.

### **Representation of Muslim Women**

The colonial fascination with the Muslim women was either a veiled one or a semi-naked belly dancer, she was never a normal woman. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, veil functioned as a fascination for the European travelers to Middle East, instead of the fact that there were many orders of nuns who veiled. The veiled woman was painted as lifting the veil and showing her nude body. Conversely, colonial education claimed to liberate women, as a result Muslim women caught between the two cries of the East and the West, the former claims to protect her and the later claims to liberate her. But Muslim woman was never allowed to speak out for themselves. They literally explain the condition and confusion that Muslim women felt throughout the history of representation and image making. The conspicuous cultural gap, the considerable social nexus, the ill economic condition, the over burden of family and so on were indisputably a disadvantage for Muslim woman. But the stereotype she was fitted in farther marginalized her.



Rachel Bailey Jones argues that “by positioning the representation of women in other cultures within academic discourse, the Orientalist scholars created myths and stereotypes of these women that has been accepted as true and are very difficult to deconstruct” (29). These mythical stereotypes of Oriental woman suited the tradition of Othering, marginalization and created Occidental woman as distinct and superior. The Western womanhood has only been defined in comparison with Oriental woman. The image that the Oriental woman had gained through a long colonial discourse got established in intellectual circles remain a solid one. The submissive and subordinate role endowed to woman in general but Muslim woman was considered most suppressed and exploited. “The representation of Muslim women as backward, victimized, silenced and eventually invisible...undergirds the construction of other identity” (Sarkar 24).

“The media makes clear that the representation and image of Muslim women remain present and function as potent signifiers of discourse about Islam’s place in the Modern world” (Jardim xvi). The harem girl or the belly dancer image was not an isolated one but the two were studied in relation to a religion that advocates barbarism and primitiveness from the Western point of view. Americans too nurtured the same opinion that Islam sanctions the condition woman are kept in the Muslim societies rather than a strong patriarchal setup, “fascination with the tales of the *Arabian Nights* did much to disseminate these views amongst the European” (Bullock and Jafri 39). East-West relations have long been framed by constructions of Oriental despotism, encapsulated by the ‘maltreatment’ of women and Americans also believe that Muslims have problematic attitudes to women. But still Muslim woman has been largely vilified in America.

Timothy Marr’s *The Cultural Roots of American Islamicism* (2006) provides with great insights into the roots of the representations of and attitudes toward Islam and Muslims. This text extends and deepens knowledge on various topics—American Orientalism, early American history, and Islam in America. Students of American history automatically think of western European influences on the social and political structures of early America, but Marr invites us to revisit early America and explore another significant influence on those structures—cultural imaginings of Islam and Muslim cultures. These imaginings were used along with others in oppositional ways in early nation building.



### ***Black Sunday and Beyond***

The novel *Black Sunday* by Thomas Harris was published in 1975 and for the first time a Muslim woman was portrayed as a dreaded terrorist who is motivated to kill as many Americans as possible. The novel demonstrates a new image of Oriental woman who has shunned the veil and subordination, and has become an utmost manipulator and killer. Dahlia Ilyad, a Palestinian Muslim woman “her appearance had changed during her year in United States” (2), has planned to blow up the stadium during the Super Bowl in New Orleans and kill as many as eighty thousand Americans along with their President. When the novel opens we find her busy in discussing the terrorist plot with her comrades, she talks about the technical difficulties in killing eighty thousand audiences at once. Harris has portrayed her as a ruthless terrorist, barbaric and murderous who is full of hatred for Americans. The motivation of Ilyad, Harris says, is the atrocities that Israel has committed on Palestinians, and Ilyad considers Americans directly responsible for it.

She is aggressively eager to kill Americans and uses any tactic to achieve her goal. She enlists the help of Michael Lander, an American who has fought in Vietnam War, to carry out terrorist attack on stadium. The basic Orientalist traits of violent nature have been obvious in Ilyad but she is exotic too. Michael Lander has been controlled through sexual attraction. Michael after spending many years in jail remained impotent until he met Dahlia. And Dahlia says: “He says he was impotent from the time of his release in the North Vietnam until two months ago.” But from two months he is no more impotent, gained sexual potency just by meeting Dahlia such is the sexual attraction of the Orient woman. Another thing that is to be noticed that Michael was suffering from trauma before he met Dahlia and she calms his agitated mind, pacifies his need and lets him gain the confidence.

Simpson says that from “Orientalist perspective, if we examine all the Arab characters in *Black Sunday*, we find a rogue’s gallery of villains, each one representing a particular facet of the American fear of the Arab other” (Simpson 81). *Black Sunday* portrayed a deadly woman, the difference now between the Near East and say Americans, is not cultural one but the fear creates the Other now. Dahlia is a fearful terrorist who is motivated for an evil endeavour of killing American innocents. “Killing the 80,000 people in the Super Bowl in the one move, with plastic explosives



and steel riffle darts, that is good approach to an approximation of a real disaster,” Roemer McPhee argues and goes on to add that “the thriller *Black Sunday* was far ahead of its time.” The Arab in the novel has been made utmost evil, killing people in most cruel way is their only intention and they invest all their abilities in planning it and executing their plan.

Dahlia and Najeer in the novel have been described as vengeful persons probably worst than the Nazis themselves. It was far before the 9/11 that Arabs were shown as blowing planes out of the sky, holding innocent for ransom and want the destruction of America. Overall, a close probing analysis of America’s Orientalist fears exposes how the “evil” Arab of American popular fiction and film is actually an illusion that reveals more about American’s Orientalism. Prof Sut Jhally explains that “at the heart of how this new American Orientalism operates is a threatening and demonized figure of Islamic terrorist that is emphasized by journalists and Hollywood” (7). The analysis of the novels, films and news articles in post-9/11 America about the Muslims with the aim of examining how Muslims are stereotyped and depicted to the whole world public after 9/11, results in the surprising revelation that Muslims have been evil doers for Americans much before the terrorist attacks.

“Striking where it hurts Americans most” is the intention of Dahlia, she want to strike in such a way that Americans should be most hurt and their ego broken. Dahlia has been portrayed as a woman of violence. Her plans are to kill thousands of Americans along with their president. She does not care about anything but she wants to execute her plane in a successful way. The Arab characters in the novel are hardly humans and Dahlia is a devil woman. She has been deprived of any womanly quality. She is shown really to be two things; a strong headed terrorist and a sexual symbol. Harris has most degraded the Arab characters and Muslim woman mostly. Dahlia, Harris makes her to choose a soft target, tries to kill people who are there in most emotional way watching the football match. Harris is trying to make concept of terrorism a full circle by making them kill ordinary people in their most undefensive state.

Said demonstrates in *Covering Islam* (1996) how a centuries-old, academically produced image of the Islamic world has operated to foster Western colonialism. And he further shows how such negative imagery, repeated in media news, drama, and advertising, operates to justify U.S.



hegemonic claims on Arab lands. Timothy Marr asserts that “the powerful historical templates that preceded and prefigured the mass immigration of Muslims still shape in some ways the contours of how Islam is perceived and received within the United States” (Marr 7). The perception of Islam influences the representation of Islam and this scenario was further complicated by the 9/11 terrorist attacks which shocked the whole world. The stereotypes about the Muslims prevent world community from thinking that Muslims were equally saddened and shocked by these attacks.

### Conclusion

Oriental women in general have been represented as an Other but Muslim woman as an Orient was embedded in more sticking image of sexuality, exoticism, violence and barbarism. Colonial stereotype of Muslim woman was either a veiled one or a semi-naked belly dancer or a full naked harem woman. Thomas Harris’s *Black Sunday* transformed this sexual stereotype of Muslims woman and converted her into a violent and barbaric terrorist. But the essence of the representation remained unchanged that is Orientalist and Othering. Harris opened up the way for a new stereotype which then gained currency in fiction as well as Hollywood and their followed a huge number of novels and films which depicted Muslim woman as terrorist whose sole motivation is to kill innocent people. This representation of Muslim woman has largely remained unquestioned by large number of audience. Eventually this stereotype seems almost natural representation of Muslim woman.

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