

Unveiling American (Mis)Conceptions in (Neo-)Orientalist Post 9/11 Fiction: Sherry Jones's *The Jewel of Medina* as a Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Orientalism and its legacies still exercise tremendous influence on how Arabs/Muslims, previously called 'Saracens,' are perceived and represented in different Christian European, then American narratives and contexts. The Prophet Muhammad was targeted to discredit him as 'false' Prophet and 'ambitious' leader. The Images of sexual potency and debauchery was first addressed to Muhammad, and then transferred to 'Turks', Arabs and 'Moors'. The continuity of the very images hinder any sincere attempts at mutual understanding. These conceptions are reiterated and reproduced in political discourses and campaigns. They have a negative influence how Islam and Muslims are conceived and treated. *The Jewel of Medina* was published in 2008 as a feminist Orientalist attempt to represent and reinterpret early Islamic society and history. The article primarily exposes resilient contemporary misconceptions, images and (mis)representations of Muhammad and Muslims as sexually pervert, cruel, despotic and oppressive. Accordingly, the 'Orient' has been widely construed as a luxurious space full of excess. Through reviewing and reconsidering the images and conceptions that were disseminated in European literatures and narratives on Islam and the 'Orient' for centuries, the article shows how these very images and depictions are reiterated time and again and consolidated in the Post-September 11th American context and writings.

Keywords- Orientalism, distorted images, Islam, Muhammad, Muslims, American fiction, Sherry Jones..

I. INTRODUCTION

This article explores images and conceptions of Islam and Muslims as they are reflected in the first novel of the American feminist and journalist Sherry Jones. *The Jewel of Medina* was published in 2008 as a feminist Orientalist attempt to reread and reinterpret early Islamic history and development of Islam and Muslims. The article primarily discusses resilient images and (mis)representations of Muhammad and Muslims as sexually pervert, cruel, despotic and oppressive. The 'Orient' is constructed as a luxurious space full of excess. While these images and conceptions are widespread in European literature and narratives on Islam and the 'Orient' for centuries, they are now reiterated in the American context and writings. The essay also critiques some of the feminist Orientalist sources Jones consulted (Alev Croutier's *Harem: The World Behind the Veil* and Nabia Abbott's *Aisha: The Beloved of Mohammed*) before

composing her feminist Orientalist novel *par excellence*. Umar is also represented as a cruel and misogynist.

The Americans have *inherited* the enmity and conflict with the Muslim world from the Europeans. They have taken over that enmity and history since the sixteenth century during the wars and conflicts with the Ottomans in Eastern Europe (Vienna and the battle of Lepanto) and later in 'Barbary wars' in North Africa. They have equally *inherited* conceptions, scholarship, vocabulary and images of the Muslim Orient where 'tyrant,' 'cruel,' 'menacing' and 'sexually pervert' people thrive and where powerless women suffer. These images and conceptions were deployed earlier in English, French and other European discourses and literatures on Islam and Muslims (fiction and non-fiction) as explored by prominent scholars. That deeply rooted sense of threat of the Muslims likewise was passed on. Americans following this logic have surpassed Europeans and aim to found a totally different nation from *those* of Europe; they

wanted to be strong, different from both Europeans and ‘Others.’ Americans were described, moreover, as amassing more power and were free and courageous enough to humble the cruel ‘Orientals.’ The West (America included) then is connected with liberty, power, human progress and true religion while ‘Others’ lack and envy the absence of these very features and ideals. These ‘Others’ are conceived as ‘savages,’ ‘impoverished,’ ‘slaves’ to their desires and tyrannies. Although “the West’s understanding of Islam in the twenty-first century represents” a certain change, “there is continuity as well, in that the persistence of long-standing prejudices remain about Islamic societies, their beliefs, and practices” (Quinn 164). This change is the result of growing exchange and contact with the Muslim world and Muslims worldwide that are not located only in the Middle East but exist predominantly in diverse countries of North Africa and (Southeast) Asia and even in the West, a generally overlooked facet in Said’s *Orientalism*. Therefore, “the sheer growth of Islamic numbers—over a billion Muslims by 2005, only about 18 percent of them living in the Arab world, requires a new perspective in the West. Islam has become a major force in Asia from Pakistan to the Philippines” (Quinn 164). The latter facts invite and challenge scholars, sociologists and anthropologists to discuss Asian Islam, ‘non-Arab Islam’ or even ‘European Islam.’

However, American interests in the Muslim World by large can be summarized in three aspects and concerns: the Holy land, ‘Barbary Pirates’ and oil (and other energy resources). Famous American missionaries (Cotton Mather, Bayard Taylor, Henry Jessup) and American writers (Mark Twain and Washington Irving) participated in forming the first impressions and conceptions concerning Islam and Muslims. Muslims are dehumanized and conceived as monsters. They are also described as cruel, violent, and lustful. Their women are viewed as docile, sexualized and oppressed. In the American literature on the Muslim world that appeared by the end of the 18th century, Robert Allison points out, Americans saw what could happen to people who made the wrong choices. Muhammad had offered people a chance to change, and change they did, adopting a new religion, building new states and empires, reorganizing family life. But each change had been a tragic mistake. The once prosperous people of Egypt, Turkey, Mauritania, and Syria were impoverished by bad governments, and their fertile lands turned to deserts (xvii).

Robert Allison would have been more convincing and consistent if he had also noted how Native Americans had to be exterminated and how the wealth of nations had to be *stolen* and *confiscated* and equally how ‘brown’ or ‘negro’ women had to be raped and abducted. This would have been, however, more contradictory to this triumphalist narrative. Besides the very argument that Americans thought themselves to be different from their ‘weak’ European counterparts is a basic idea in American

Orientalist discourse. American Orientalism is no exception in expressing concerns over issues of liberty, human progress and civilization. It is important to explore here the early American interests, formed conceptions and images on Islam and Muslims. Emphasis will be on how earlier missionary and literary writings on Muslims of the East (‘Turks’ or ‘Ottomans’ and ‘Barbary Pirates’) have shaped the conceptions and attitudes of the rising and nascent America and Americans toward the populations of the East in general and Muslim Arabs in particular.

II. PRESENTING THEORETICAL AND HISTORICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Postcolonial literary theorists and critics, and also historians, sociologists and critical journalists among others have reconsidered the history of Islam and Muslims and their (mis)conceptions in the ‘New World.’ They argue that Islam and Muslims were also present in American context and cultural productions for countless decades. However, three contexts or aspects of an *earlier* encounter can be explored. These three themes and contexts include the deployment of missionaries to the Middle East to preach the ‘true message of God’ and to convert not only Muslims but also Eastern Christians who have gone astray from the right path (McCarthy’s *The Turk in America*). The second is the American struggle/war against piracy activity (deemed ‘maritime jihad’ for some) undertaken mainly by ‘Barbary Pirates’ in North Africa. The third aspect is the interest in oil and other (energy) resources (Douglas Little’s *American Orientalism* 2008).

For instance, the sociologist of religion Jose Casanova in *Gendering Religion and Politics* argues that the present-day worldwide “discourse on Islam as a fundamentalist, antimodern, undemocratic, and sexist religion shows striking similarities with the old discourse on Catholicism that predominated in Anglo-Protestant societies,” principally in America from the 1850s to the 1950s (21). Both discourses accordingly are formed upon “four similar premises” (21). As a matter of fact, Muslims, Jews and Catholics suffered in that nascent context and rising nation of America. Evidently, Native Americans underwent a decimating experience in *their* own lands. Catholics and Jews and Muslims included suffered from the politics of nativism partly because of the belief of most Protestant Americans that the former were ‘different,’ threatening to the American republic and did not follow ‘true religion.’ It was also believed that Islam was hindering science and modernity because of some deemed intrinsic aspects in the faith that impeded innovation and democracy. The same aspects are believed to be responsible for the oppression of women in Islam. The hatreds and conflicts between these various religious denominations played a significant role in the process of the secularization of the public sphere in America. Casanova, in the same chapter, criticizes those who are ignorant of the wide variety and complexity of Islamic

societies and cultures in the East and elsewhere in the world. As for those four premises upon which that anti-Islam discourse was established, J. Casanova puts them thus:

(a) a theologico-political distinction between “civilized” and “barbaric” religions...between religions compatible with Enlightenment principles and liberal democratic politics...and [those] religions grounded in traditions that resisted the progressive claims of the Enlightenment philosophy of history, liberalism, and secularism; (b) a nativist anti-immigrant posture that postulated the unassimilability of foreign immigrants due to their uncivilized social customs and habits; (c) transnational attachments and loyalties...that appeared incompatible with republican citizen principles and the exclusive claims of the modern nation-state; and (d) a set of moral claims about the denigration of women under religious patriarchies in contrast to their elevation by Protestantism (21).

These four premises, unfortunately, are still influential in the American context, on cultural productions and this can be supported when studying presidential and political discourses and statements by the ex-presidents of the U.S., namely Donald Trump and many in his administration and beyond. These premises or principles, argues Casanova, “may have been more or less salient at any particular time and place,” but “it is their superimposition, however, that has given the anti-Catholic and anti-Muslim discourses their compelling effect” (21). It will be clear that these claims and the theologico-political distinction between ‘civilized’ and ‘barbaric,’ ‘free’ and ‘authoritarian’ frameworks are met repeatedly in many of the works and the statements that follow.

On his part, American professor of history Robert Allison, bewildered by the events in America caused by the ‘enigmatic’ Iranian revolution which so few Americans understood, he went back to study the “more explicable Revolution” and the early national period of American history. He states this:

But even here, the specter of the Iranian revolution against progress and liberty would not go away. Like some *Arabian Nights* genie changing the familiar into the strange, images of the Muslim world appeared everywhere I turned in the early history of the American republic. Virtually every American knows that the United States fought a war with the ‘Barbary pirates’ in the early 1800s, a war memorialized in the Marine Corps hymn. That had been the extent of my own knowledge of this American encounter with the Muslim world (xiv).

It is therefore crucial how the powerful national narrative of progress and liberty deprives many from understanding and tolerating other histories, experiences and cultures. Progress and liberty are measured through the lenses of Post-Enlightenment philosophy and thinking. Societies that *lack* certain requirements and ideals remain underrated, uncivilised and backward. Iran,

for instance, before the revolution, was closer to the U.S. administration because of their ally, the former regime of the Pahlavi. Still, two seminal phrases in the passage (*Arabian Nights* and images of the Muslim world genie) speak volumes as far as the widespread influence of the *Arabian Nights* and the concomitant abundant images of the Muslim world in America are concerned. It is therefore worth uncovering those very images and history. However, the issue has other deep structures and histories which will be uncovered in what follows. The main source of the first *encounters* with the Orient and Islam is not only that of fighting piracy in the Atlantic or the Mediterranean. The writings and reports of earlier American missionaries sent to the Middle East and the influential work of Mark Twain are also vital in shaping American conceptions of the faith and the region by large. Frederick Quinn notes that in America.

Muslims were presented as scheming heathen, not unlike American Indians. Mark Twain elaborated on this theme, as did other writers, who to the list of suspect persons added the Barbary pirates, who represented a real threat to the young American republic. This helped create an “us” against “them” mentality on the part of Americans, God’s elect, regarding foreigners—civilized, peaceful Christians against the uncivilized, warlike heathen foreigners. This theme, borrowed in part from the European past, was carried unhesitatingly into America’s global future (163).

Twain had also been ‘generous’ in his ‘Orientalist’ portrayals of Moroccans—Arabs and Berbers—when visiting Tangier; he was looking for the exotic and the strange that he *found* walking there. If he had not found that, he would have created it, imagined it to be there. Because of his internal image of Islam and Muslims inhabiting an exotic East, Twain wrote that “there are stalwart Bedouins... and stately Moors... and swarthy Riffians...and original, genuine Negroes as black as Moses; and howling dervishes and a hundred breeds of Arabs—all sorts and descriptions of people that are foreign and curious to look upon” (Obeidat 196). It is not surprising to find him and others after him deploying such imagery. Even the Sultan of Ottoman Turkey, Abdul Aziz, did not fare well. The sultan is presented as “the representative of a people, by nature and training, filthy, brutish, ignorant, unprogressive, superstitious” (qtd. in Obeidat 196). Filthy, monstrous savages and other derogatory register and words are available to fill the pages of narratives composed on the Moors, Arabs and Turks, Berbers and the like.

As for that war alluded to in these last paragraphs, Allison notes that it was not “an isolated phenomenon, not a chance encounter. The American encounter with the Muslim world actually began before there was a United States and almost before Europeans became aware that America existed” (xiv). Therefore, that encounter happened before America was discovered and grew. Like earlier Christian images on Islam and Muslims which were there before the emergence of Islam by the

seventh century, American images and conceptions of Islam and Muslims had already been established by the European encounter and experience. Following the line of the argument, it started in the late 15th century by Christian Europeans while “the Christian kingdoms of Castille and Aragon conquered the Muslim kingdom of Granada in 1492, their most Christian majesties Isabella and Ferdinand had extra capital to pay for Columbus’s voyage to the Orient” (xiv). Allison also adds that Ferdinand and Isabella had the hope that by “securing a new route to the Indies, they would find a new source of revenue to pay for their continuing holy war against the Muslims they had driven into Morocco and Algiers” (xiv). Hence, from Muslim Spain (Al-Andalus) to the context of the New World of America, the image of the Muslim as a threat and danger to Christians to be fought in a launched holy war travelled from the Old Continent to the new World and American perception. Piracy and the establishment of the growing American nation were among the main concerns for the founding fathers of America. The Ottoman Turks were also a nuisance for both Europeans and the emerging American nation. Europeans during the 16th century were very concerned.

Accounts of piracy and captivity were common at that era. They not only reflect the current struggles, political upheavals and military campaigns taking place then between ‘East’ and ‘West,’ but also function as a site where stories are told and disseminated about the threatening ‘enemy.’ In some of those accounts, Turks or Moors were depicted as barbarian and cruel, while others were human and helpful. “These episodes are important and must be considered as part of a larger struggle that did not end when the Ottoman Turks were driven from the gates of Vienna or their navy beaten at Lepanto” (Allison xv), argues Allison. These episodes, accounts, and stories are paramount in shaping the first conceptions and reaction of the Americans. American audiences, like their European predecessors, are fascinated as well by stories of the harem, sexual pervers and the mysterious ‘Orient’ of the *One Thousand and One Nights*. Hence, those very struggles and conflicts were deemed crucial since there were “more than a struggle for trade routes or territory. Americans at the time saw these episodes as part of the contest between Christians and Muslims, between Europeans and Turks or Moors, and ultimately, between what came to be called civilization and what the newly civilized world would define as barbarism,” says R. Allison (xv). The Americans became heirs to this conception of the Muslim world and chased this *rival* more uncompromisingly than the Europeans had done before. Americans were enchanted in doing so.

This antagonism and conflict with the kingdoms/states of North Africa was interpreted and consolidated as a struggle between ‘civilized’ nations of Europe and its offspring and ‘barbaric’ eastern pirates and despots. This theological-political premise, as stated above, played a great role in what can be initially called ‘international relations’ between emergent, ‘civilizing’

America and ‘barbaric’ peoples in the East. However, the mythology of the ‘savage Others’ is not only connected to the ‘barbaric’ Turks or ‘Moors’ endangering safe routes and trade in the Mediterranean; it was evidently also disseminated against the native Americans. The history of ‘barbaric Others’ is bloody and horrible as far as the American experience is concerned. Many millions of Native Americans were exterminated in the name of bringing religion and prosperity to the *promised land*. In her *Europe’s Myths of Orient*, Rana Kabbani suggests that “the encountered natives had somehow to be converted, controlled. The Calibans of the New World, they were tolerable only when subdued. In order to justify such servitude forced upon a people, this kind of narrative stressed the conspicuous cruelty, the lechery, or the perversity of the natives” (4). Kabbani’s allusion to Shakespeare’s Caliban is no surprise in this vein. Caliban’s island and territory had to be conquered and owned and narratives had to be composed and disseminated. In colonial America, for example, “the forging of racial stereotypes and the confirmation of the notions of savagery were vital to the colonialist world view,” argues Kabbani (4). The claimed savagery of ‘barbaric’ and ‘savage’ others was partially used to subdue the resistant peoples and cultures. In colonial America, as an illustration, “there was a systematic attempt to portray the Indian as an abductor of women, a killer of children, and a collector of scalps, as an apology for white brutality against him.” Therefore, the struggle against despotic and cruel Others, be they Native Americans or Turks or Moors, was vital in forming an ideological stance which proved essential in forging American national identity and interests. Many Americans thought their nation to be different from any precedent nation or empire while its very deeds are no new phenomena. It was believed that Americans were heirs to a weak Europe and were more successful in bringing ‘civilization’ and battling savage nations. It is no surprise that it is actually deployed to bring *freedom and democracy* to Iraq and Afghanistan.

Once more, Allison recounts that “the war with Tripoli carried great ideological importance for the Americans, who imagined themselves doing what the nations of Europe had been unable or unwilling to do: beating the forces of Islamic despotism and piracy” (xvi).

Therefore, it was thought as mission to be followed by Americans. Every growing empire argues that it is different from all that went before; that it is more humane, civilizing and enlightening and a need for humanity. These wars, argues Allison, showed Americans that Their real status as a nation and affirmed that theirs was to be a different kind of nation—different both from the nations of Europe, which were content to pay tribute to the Barbary states, and from the Muslim states, *ravaged* by their rulers and torn apart by their *impoverished and savage people*. For the Americans, the war had a significance far beyond military objectives. Pope Pius VII said the Americans had done more in a few years than the

rest of Christendom had done in centuries: They had humbled the Muslim states of North Africa... The Americans had proved that they would behave better than the Europeans, that they would not stoop to the demands of Tripoli or use the Barbary states to drive their own competitors from the sea. The war inspired the American people with a renewed sense of their mission and destiny (Allison xvi, emphasis added).

Orientalism speaks loudly as this passage attests. Americans thus think they are a different nation not only from a lagging behind Europe which in their views was declining and weakening but also and mainly different from the 'insolvent,' 'savage' and 'backward' Muslim world. The cornerstones of Orientalism, needless to reiterate, are these very oppositions and highlighted differences between these two worlds. This binary thinking and dichotomy attributes negative aspects to non-European and then non-American societies, peoples and cultures. This bellicose and triumphant narrative is further blessed through the mention and speech of Pope Pius VII who had been in dispute with Napoleon in Europe. Still, these two axes of growing power and destined progress would manifest themselves once and again as far as American discourses and conceptions of the Orient in general are concerned (Arjana 2015; Jarmakani; Lyons 2012). Lastly, this very narrative would only lead to a glorious and *civilizing* mission and a *distinct* destination which still appears in the interests and interventions in the Middle East.

Leila Ahmed, to her bewilderment when on a university panel, discussing American relations with the Middle East, was surprised how that debate was reduced to the concern of "how the United States should deploy its military forces to protect 'its' oil in the area—as if the area were culturally blank and populated by an irrelevant people" (521). These immaterial people are reduced to easily managed players. This reminds one of Edward Said's idea of Middle Eastern states and peoples as if they were peanuts. It is rather widespread "to hear high officials in Washington and elsewhere speak of changing the map of the Middle East, as if ancient societies and myriad peoples can be shaken up like so many peanuts in a jar" (Said 2003). This is *common wisdom* because the "Orient," that semi-mythical construct which since Napoleon's invasion ...has been made and re-made countless times by power acting through an expedient form of knowledge to assert that this is the Orient's nature, and we must deal with it accordingly" (2003). This constructed knowledge impacts conceptions of Middle Eastern societies and peoples. This disputed *knowledge* and the two axes of power and progress are better illustrated through the conception of the Oriental/Muslim woman which manifests below.

As with numerous stereotypes of cultural and ethnic others, Amira Jarmakani points out, the chief images of Arab women in American popular culture "lie at two opposite poles" (Jarmakani 4). Arab women, on the one hand, are either conceived as "erotic, exotic,

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 the harem slave" (Jarmakani 4). Muslim women (or Oriental women in general) are thus presented as ethnically different and exotic. She also argues that the idea that these prevalent images and stereotypes "are historically accurate and authentic representations of Arab womanhood is the lie that makes their fabrication possible," and this is why perhaps, although many attempts to correct such misperceptions were undertaken, they still keep "cultural authority" in America "as compelling descriptions of Arab and Muslim women's realities" (4). Basing her argument upon Roland Barthes's formulation in his "Myth Today," Jarmakani employs the term "cultural mythology" to mean how the "mythologies of veils, harems, and belly dancers" function as "second order sign systems which have been unmoored from the particular conditions in which they might traditionally be embedded and retooled as signifiers of dominant ideologies" in the American cultural milieu in which they are formed' (4-5). When applying this theory, the concepts of the harem, the veil and belly dancers are therefore reworked and used as "a mythology insofar as it is dislodged from historically and culturally grounded meanings of the harem as the women's section of a middle- or upper-class household and appropriated as a metaphor for absolute male power and sexual fantasy" (5). This also applies to the conceptions of the veils and belly-dancers.

Consequently, these cultural mythologies operate "as emptied forms" that are owned and "refilled with the dominant ideologies of the culture in which they are created" (5). Hence, they "lose their contingency in any particular cultural or historical setting and they are represented as innocent and natural forms" (5). Still, although they may be used as emptied forms or signs in the American cultural mythology and context, "the anatomy of mythology is such that the historical meaning of each of these concepts is never completely obliterated" (5). Drawing from Roland Barthes, Jarmakani suggests that the historical meaning of these categories stay as an "instantaneous reserve of history," so these forms will incessantly manage "to draw upon for sustenance" (5). Put otherwise, the connotations of these three cultural categories of harems, veils and belly-dancers as entrenched in specific histories present an affluence that "cultural mythologies can access, and draw upon, despite the fact that these meanings lose their contingencies and are emptied into forms in the instant that mythology reaches, and then transforms, them" (5). In the novel under study, the veil, the belly-dancer and the harem help in contextualizing politically and historically the growing Muslim community (or nascent state) providing thus "gendered insights about power dynamics therein" (6). Therefore, at times these categories are transformed into both symbols of male power and female oppression.

Then, these cultural mythologies comprise complicated and multifaceted association to the specific dynamics of the American cultural context in which they are entrenched (6-7). Jarmakani also notes that portrayals of Arab womanhood in American popular culture “are quite varied, complex, and even contradictory” and currently, for instance, “images of exoticized and hypercommodified belly dancers coexist with representations of the veil as a cloak of submission and oppression” (7). This suggests that conceptions and representations of Islam and Muslims, women here, are not decided by that grand, totalizing narrative and that they are not monolithic and unique. These images on Arab/Muslim women, therefore, do not stay fixed overtime as might be argued by some when discussing Western representations of Muslim women. Nevertheless, these representations preserve some structural parallels as cultural mythologies.

Jarmakani provides two examples to stress this feature. First by the late nineteenth century, for example, “imaginative projections of the Holy Land determined much orientalist imagery in the United States; gendered orientalist imagery included landscape paintings of feminized land” (7). Then, by the twentieth century, ‘the figure of the belly dancer’ stood famously for the portrayal of the Arab world (7). The structural affinity between these images and representations appears in the manner in which both operate “as visual vocabulary for structures of feeling” ingrained in the “notions of power and progress” (7). The continuity of these images can rather be attributed to related roles “as nostalgic foils for U.S. progress and as imaginative figures through which to grapple with shifting power relations” between America and the Middle East in this case. In this way, images of Arab/Muslim women are intertwined and involved in the notions of progress and power between the two worlds. Jarmakani discusses these images in the light of three meaningful social processes and events: the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair during the time of expansionism and industrialization, the early 20th century advertising during the era of mass consumerism and proto-imperialism, and contemporary ads and images at the time of imperialism and multinational capitalism. Existing images of veiled women show them as subjugated “metaphorically implying the brutal patriarchal system under which they supposedly live” (8). These representations and conceptualizations of the veil, the harem and the belly dancer operate as “constitutive others to the progress narrative, both as representations of backward, primitive others, and as emblems of a timeless and/or traditional past” (8). While cultural mythologies function as form instead of meaning, Jarmakani argues that they “play a rather pernicious role in shaping popular perceptions about the conglomeration of cultures, ethnicities, and religions they supposedly represent” (9). Since these cultural mythologies provide congealed and stagnant images to portray other unmonolithic cultures and peoples they carry on the perception that “Arabs and

Muslims...are one monolithic mass” (9-10). This evidently echoes Said’s main argument in *Orientalism* which states that there are unsophisticated categories through knowledge production about the Orient and Orientals. Although the exact origins of Orientalism, and the anachronistic claim about power relations between the ‘West’ and the ‘East,’ where the latter has always been dominated by the former, are Said’s Trojan horse, his theory and analysis of Orientalism as discourse (producing certain knowledge) is still valid and insightful.

Current portrayals of the veil and veiled women in American popular culture have been used to underline the refined superiority of U.S. culture in contrast to allegedly barbaric practices of female oppression (Jarmakani 15). This in conclusion explains why veiled women are represented as such; it is because of shifting power relations in favour of the West epitomized by the U.S. and because they remind these audiences of the great march and progress of their civilization. It can be added that these representations and images perpetuate existing prevalent stereotypes and sing the same song with the political and ideological elites and serve foreign policy. This also establishes the ‘West’ as the ‘centre,’ the most advanced, free ‘civilisation’ from which to look back at certain backward, primitive ‘Others’ thereby giving more credibility to the glorified narrative of western modernity. Thus, at least two tropes can be decoded here: a) power to recount an earlier Islamic history; b) these notions of backward peoples consolidate the account of progress while ‘Others’ are congealed in history. Laura Bush, as the ‘First American Lady,’ expresses her concern over the bad situation of women under the Taliban. However, her speech as the ‘civilising mission’ to save women there makes the division and opposition of backward/progressed and barbarism/civilisation clearer. Consequently, these narratives in the post-9/11 era are catching readership. Building on what these feminist scholars and critics suggest on these issues, it is argued here that the two narratives are feminist Orientalist *par excellence*. Moreover, on his part, Henry Harris Jessup, an American missionary Presbyterian, notes that women in the Orient were “slanderous, capricious, never trained to control their tempers. The rod, the scourge is the only instrument of discipline. Women are treated like animals, and behave like animals” (quoted in Quinn 119). It is no surprise that these very images are still thriving in literary narratives of the twenty-first century.

III. UNCOVERING THE ‘ORIENTAL’ OPPRESSORS AND OPPRESSED OF THE FEMINIST ORIENTALIST PRISM

In her first novel *The Jewel of Medina* (2008), Sherry Jones focuses her attention on the ‘protagonist’ Aisha bint Abi Bakr and how she is strictly confined. This represents the wails and ailments of all the women in the

Arabian context. This also emphasizes the social/cultural practice of 'purdah' and the veil or curtain as a means of controlling and restricting women's movement and threatening sexuality. The women are presented as powerful in seducing *pious* people. Besides, Umar and Ali at times are portrayed as oppressors and first Muslim misogynists.

1. Oppressive Muslim/Arab Men

The progress (or 'life') of Aisha can be divided into three phases throughout the narrative. These stages include the following: a) Aisha as a 'revolutionary,' 'mischievous' young and 'boyish' child-bride; b) Aisha as a jealous, rival, and feminist 'Turkish Sultana' (or 'hatun') struggling to be the 'great lady' and 'first woman' of Muhammad's 'harem,' and lastly c) Aisha as a grown-woman seeking to consummate her marriage and conceive a child to be master of the 'harem,' to help the Prophet and to sustain the *ummah*. Her role as preacher and/or teacher, however, has been relegated and silenced. Her relation to Ali seems to be at daggers drawn from the very start. Many times in the novel, one gets the conception of Aisha as an *androgynous* little girl who wants to live in the desert among the 'free' and 'dangerous' Bedouins of the Hijaz. In the opening paragraph of the novel, one reads a passage speaking volumes as far as her character and surrounding culture and atmosphere are concerned:

It was my last day of freedom. Yet it began like one thousand and one days before it: the wink of the sun and my cry of alarm, *late again...*the windowless rooms of my father's house, my wooden play-sword in my hand... *I'm late I'm late I'm late...* Oil lamps flickered dimly against the walls, their feeble light a poor substitute for the sun I loved... *Faster, faster.* The Prophet would be here soon. If he saw me, he would want to play, and I would miss Safwan (12; first emphasis added).

It is her *last day of freedom* since she will be sequestered to her parents' house for years to come, not allowed to see other males except for her relatives. Hence, narration is meant to *free* her from these shackles. This opening scene is important; it is so since it presents the main characters as well as the place/setting in the narrative: Aisha is restricted in her father's house where, significantly, there is no bright sun to enjoy and no fresh air to breathe, no Muhammad and no Safwan. The latter is almost always present in the first two thirds of the novel. He is more present than Abu Bakr and almost as present as Muhammad. Contrary to historical records, companion Safwan is promised here as a future husband to Aisha and this creates tension in the text. Besides, the allusion to the *One Thousand and One Nights* in the phrase 'one thousand and one days' is not innocent and strange in this context. It is so in two directions as far as its reception is concerned. First, the reader gets the impression that he/she is going to read another story (or stories) like what happened in *The Nights*. Secondly, Aisha's days in *imprisonment* are countless and distressing. Both readings, however, revolve around

Orientalist, feminist politics and imaginary. The narrative is told from the first-person narration of Aisha and from her point of view. Freedom is thus restricted and postponed; this gives a sign of what the narrative is about. No sun and no windows, only walls and barriers add insults to injury as far as Aisha's person is concerned; she is described as secluded and isolated in her tomb-like room. Even home is portrayed to mean a *tomb* which means that she feels as if she were already dead and buried alive. This passage also establishes the main themes and tensions: As a young and ambitious girl, she is tied more to Safwan her close friend and close in *age* than to her potential husband, *older* than a *father*. What is also noticeable is her consciousness that it is *too late* for her to get up and go out to play, run away with young friends before the arrival of Muhammad; his arrival then means she will stay forcefully at home. This comparison makes her as a *child-bride* and Muhammad as a 'pedophile' both of which are running conceptions of Muhammad and Muslims.

Aisha is portrayed suffering from the age of six, during her confinement (or 'purdah') at her parents' home; then, she suffers in Muhammad's household. She is confined and restricted, not allowed to play and intermingle with boys the same as her age because of the deemed and accused culture of the time as it is believed, presented and interpreted by the author. She is not allowed to see other, *strange*, older men because of the strict education she is subject to and because of the belief that males may hurt her, cause her harm and spoil her reputation. As she puts it, she experiences the following:

The pounding of my heart... sent me running to [my mother], dizzy with the need to stop this imprisonment before it started. In *purdah* I wouldn't be allowed to step outside my parents' house until my wedding day. I'd be stuck in this cold, *dreary tomb* until the day my blood flow started, six years away or maybe even longer, with no Safwan to play with, no boys at all, just the silly girls who came with their mothers to visit (18-19, emphasis added).

Again, Aisha portrays her situation as trapped in *detention*; therefore, this captivity narrative is crucial since it represents her dilemma within a suffocating culture, believed to be cruel and misogynist. Reminders that keep recurring in this novel are imprisonment, animals, and Safwan. 'Purdah' here is a non-Arabic term; actually, it is culturally inconvenient to name or conceive an Islamic and Arab practice. Harems, Alev Croutier states, "existed throughout history in different parts of the Asian world, known by different names, such as *purdah* ('curtain') in India." Purdah also means segregation of women; it is considered, with the beating of women and girls, polygamy and genital mutilation, a violation of human (women's) rights. Commenting on the work of Fran Hosken, the female American feminist and writer, who perceives purdah as a violation of human and women's rights, Chandra Mohanty states that "by equating purdah with rape, domestic violence, and forced

prostitution, Hosken asserts its ‘sexual control’ function as the primary explanation for *pardah*, whatever the context.” It is also mostly used with the same connotation of sexual control (or a walled, caged harem) in the novel; it is used as a practice to strict women’s movement and contacts with *strange* men since women, following this logic, are viewed by this ‘patriarchal’ system and culture strong at seducing and tempting *pious* men. Women then are viewed as a ‘*fitna*’ (*femme fatale*) in the sense that (even devout) men might succumb easily to their looks, shapes and bodies. (This is well manifested when Muhammad is depicted as *seduced* by the loosely veiled Zaynab in the narrative). Therefore, her parents’ home and her room are portrayed as a cold *grave*, meaning total powerlessness and confinement. In the same line of thought, Croutier also claims that Islam “imposed segregation and the veil upon women, claiming they could not be trusted and had to be kept away from” other relatives “whom they could not help but seduce. The need for special, secluded dwelling places for women became imperative—not to protect their bodies and honor, but to preserve the morals of men.” Thus, it is protecting men from the seducing women that is implied in this context. Croutier’s and Jones’s conceptions therefore are not dissimilar in this regard. Aisha in consequence is strictly *confined* not only to protect her from *strangers*, but also to control her *threatening* sexuality. Still, she is presented as a resistant young woman; indeed, she is introduced as a conscious feminist embattling these suffocating practices. It is no wonder then that Aisha although so young is challenging and defiant to these *silly practices* and *silly girls*. Later, she describes their passiveness and lack of resistance as well.

In a telling passage in the novel, Aisha states this: “I’d known it would happen someday, but not when I was six. Only a very few girls were engaged at birth, as I had been, but they were never confined until they began their monthly bleeding. To begin *pardah* at my age was unheard of” (20). Then, she expresses her rage and bewilderment towards this *confining practice*. In an important speech addressed to Aisha, her mother (Umm Rumman) states this unexpected, unwanted ‘breaking news’ for her:

‘You are to remain indoors, A’isha. It is forbidden for boys or men to see you unless they are relatives... You won’t be going to the market anymore, or going anywhere else without me or your father...Starting today, you are in *pardah*. Until your husband says otherwise...Safwan has nothing to do with this (18, emphasis added except for *pardah*).

It is not hard to note the highly targeted terms by feminists, namely phrases for prohibition, restriction and confinement of oppressed Oriental/Muslim women in need of rescue. Then, the feminist agenda with which these introductory passages are loaded is not hard to discern. Highlighted words are crucial since they describe the vocabulary and mindset of this culture and context. Still, one of the violations of (Islamic) historical records

is that Safwan is a *promised husband* while in the Islamic traditions it was Jubair. Nabia Abbott puts it clearly otherwise at the beginning of her book. One reads that Aisha was “promised to a young relative named Jubair” whose “mother objected to the previous arrangement between them on the grounds that she feared the marriage would lead to her son’s conversion to Islam. Muṭ’am seconded his wife’s objection, and “thus did Allah release Abu Bakr from his promise” (Abbott 3-4). This is one of the distortions the novel is replete with. Jones puts Aisha in love with Safwan against both historical records and her own consulted sources; she will later put her on the brinks of *adultery* with Safwan in *The Jewel of Medina* and with Talha in her second novel *The Sword of Medina* (2009). Moreover, in a telling exchange and response cited at length, Aisha frowning and almost yelling puts it with a tightened grip on her mother:

‘Stay inside? ... But I and Safwan are going to the market to see the caravan from Abyssinia... *Purdah?* I felt all my senses sharpen... I gaped at her like a fish pulled from the water, trying to breathe. ‘For how long?... My husband?’...I raised my voice to my mother. I knew she’d beat me for my shrill, whining tone...I knew I had to convince her to change her mind ...before she pressed her lips together and refused to speak—a sign that her mind was set and that no argument would change it... ‘Safwan wouldn’t want you to hide me away.. go ask him, *ummi*...It’s not fair to lock me up! You’re punishing me...I want to go outside. I don’t want to stay inside! I’ll die in this stuffy old cave...when I marry Safwan, we’re going to run away to the desert... you’ll never see me again. You’ll be sorry then’ (18-19).

Aisha consequently recounts when her mother tells her to stay, from now on, *indoors*, locked up; she is restricted to stay at home confined, not allowed to see other men. This challenging response puts her as a defiant, feminist voice threatening and warning her mother. It is significant that she endeavors to change her mother’s *mind*. But this is not just ‘a cruel joke’ the reader is told (20). Noteworthy terms are deployed in her speech with telling background: *not fair*, *punishing*, *outside/inside*, *old cave*, marrying Safwan and *running* to the desert. One may also note the implied notions of the public and private spheres highly celebrated in liberal and secularist circles. As Wendy Brown puts it in *Politics of Religious Freedom* (2015), “for liberals, liberty requires both having the capacities for self-governance and being unhindered by other people, the state, or other sources of dicta. Liberty is centered in the individual moral autonomy theorized by Immanuel Kant but also requires leashing or limiting all other sovereign powers to secure a dominion for individual autonomy” (324). Aisha is an outspoken, young, conscious feminist undoing social injustice who seeks to make her choices in marrying her young ‘beloved’ Safwan and living *freely* in the desert. The desert here represents a place of freedom where no orders, borders or hierarchies are ruling. It can also be

argued that it is 'genderless.' In response, her mother replies with the following *orders* that Aisha reports:

'You will do as I say, unless you want to be whipped... This confinement is not a punishment... Al-Lah has blessed this family today...But a girl's honor can easily be stolen. If you lose it, you might as well be dead' ...She stopped and turned to give me a long, last look... 'Do not think you know what al- Lah has planned for you, A'isha' (19).

Aisha is therefore asked to abide by these rules, to stay home, closed indoors as if she were dead in a cold cave or tomb. Such repression and castigation felt by a little girl aged six (or nine) is quite strange; it is also symbolic and representative of the sufferings of other little girls/women since concentration is focused on Aisha. Moreover, Aisha expresses her feelings in a telling speech with her mother: "sprawled at her feet," she realises she is not going to "change her mind. I felt as though hands were closing around my throat, squeezing tears from my eyes, making me gasp for breath...*Buried alive in this house for the rest of my days*" (19-20). Criticism of this suffocating context and milieu is significant as far as her life and fate are concerned. She also expresses her awareness of being under oppression although so young; this gives meaning to the manipulation of her character when she is between six and nine. Even her mother cannot help her get out of this dilemma since it is a *male domain* already 'decided on' by Abu Bakr. This also puts her in a weak position. Her mother is reduced too. To strengthen this focus on confinement and oppression of Arab/Muslim women in general, the author chooses to expand this in many passages and contexts. For instance, in the subsequent passage, Aisha (against history and its records) likes to choose Safwan, to *marry* him and live *freely* among Bedouins in the desert; it reads as follows:

Someday, I and Safwan would ride far away from Mecca and all its *foolish traditions*. We had already *taken the blood-oath*, had pricked our fingers and smeared them together and sworn to leave the city, once we were married, and become Bedouins in the wild. Nothing could break that vow. If they tried to lock me away forever, I would escape. With the Bedouins, I'd be free to live my *life the way I wanted*, to run and yell and fight in battles and make my own choices... in the desert, it didn't matter whether you were a woman or a man... there were no walls. *Control your destiny, or it will control you* (20; 3 first italics added).

Consequently, Aisha as a mature Western feminist seeking an adventurous life to live freely and wisely in contrast to her heritage and context is revealing. Again, this act of *taking blood-oath* is a pre-Islamic practice strange to these Companions, especially to Aisha, daughter to Abu Bakr and 'future' wife of Muhammad. The desert represents more freedom where there are no walls. Therefore, she is portrayed as a conscious feminist seeking to control her destiny (as expressed by Geraldine Brooks in the first chapters of her *Nine Parts of Desire*:

The Hidden World of Islamic Women (1995)). Important value judgments such as *foolish traditions* and feminist politics such as the phrase *make my own choices* put Aisha as a conscious liberal feminist of the twenty-first century rather than a pious and scholar of early Islam. Furthermore, one reads about Aisha's dilemma and incarceration. She, as the unreliable narrator, says about 'her' Safwan and her own potential life unrestrained:

I watched him scamper, strong and free... chasing his friends with stick-sword brandishing, curdling wild Bedouin yells in his exuberant throat. I peeked through the cloth like a shy moon veiled by clouds, longing to be seen yet fearing it. My parents had drummed the dangers into my bones until I dreaded the gaze of any man not in my family. *One illicit glance... could pierce the veil of my virginity*. So I watched life outside... as though I had died, *shrouded by my curtain*. Restless, I learned every stone in the floor, every crack in every wall of our Meccan home... in *pardah* (21; emphasis added).

Confinement refers simultaneously to two aspects; for one, it stands for a type of (Islamic) dress or curtain so women are veiled and covered. The second refers to a 'moral' aspect imposing heavily on her mind and psyche. Thus, although she is still young (child-bride), she is aware of the restricting measures imposed on her. Indolence, boredom and being docile are also long-established categories and themes in Orientalist paintings and writings on the Muslim 'Orient'. Safwan is pictured as a young man who disappears as swiftly as a 'djinni.' Denied the right to choose, Aisha is portrayed as *obliged* to marry Muhammad who is presented as a father than a husband. She expresses her opinion concerning this confining practice hindering women in the 'Hijaz':

In [my mother's] world, women weren't supposed to fight, only to submit. They weren't supposed to plan, but to let others plan for them. They weren't supposed to live, only to serve... I pulled myself up to my windowsill and peered into the stars, imagining they were the one thousand and one eyes of al-Lah. When He looked at me, what did He see? Inferiority, a shrunken soul, a light that shone more feebly than that of a man? (29).

Hence, Aisha seems to be developing a different view from the start. She develops a different perspective from her mother and, by implication, from all other women in Arabia. She is not only challenging this patriarchal authority, but also questioning God's view of women. Islam, for Alev Croutier, "holds women in particularly low esteem, considering them intellectually dull, spiritually vapid, valuable only to satisfy the passions of their masters and provide them male heirs. Woman is a field, a sort of property that a husband may use or abuse as he sees fit," says the Quran, permitting "four *kadins* (wives), if a man is able to keep them all in the same style and...equal amounts of affection." Women are 'chattel' to men/males according to this logic. Jones uses Croutier's very words (hatun, *pardah* and satisfying desires) that were and are encountered and disseminated via Orientalist novels and writings. Therefore, Muslims

are accused of developing a derogatory and misogynist view of women whatever their status, era and age. More stress is given to the difference in ages between Aisha (six, then nine) who is 'forced' and Muhammad (in his late fifties). The passage told by Aisha reads:

I slumped onto my bed, feeling as though stones filled my body. Married to Muhammad! It couldn't be. *He was older than my father*, much older than Hamal in comparison to Fazia-turned-Jamila... why was he allowed to visit me during my *purdah*, when all other men were forbidden? Suspicion was a heavy hand squeezing my chest, stealing my breath. 'Safwan... Come and rescue me. Hurry, before it's too late' (26; emphasis added).

Hamal is another *older* Muslim man who is also married to a younger girl (Fazia) the age of Aisha's, which signals that these people prefer child-brides. Aisha at first was not aware that she is betrothed to Muhammad; only later that she is told so and grows enough to know by herself. This development puts her as a *traumatized* little girl in both senses; she is disturbed and this is reflected in her body as it tightens and tenses up, and in her character when she feels helpless and depressed. The theme of rescuing the oppressed Muslim woman (Aisha) is rendered through Safwan. Whether one likes it or not, Muhammad and her parents are then put as the causes of her misery. However, Muhammad is rarely presented as an indulgent man. Besides, although she is young, she seems conscious and tends to refuse and mock her relation to him; she is very critical of these practices. N. Abbott once again does not indicate this; neither does she confirm that there are traditions speaking about this incident. She suggests that Aisha understood that a marriage was arranged but did not identify to whom and "would not ask; she waited instead on her mother to tell her. There is no record of the child's reaction to the realization that she was to be the wife of the middle-aged prophet of Allah. For a while at least her main concern was the business of childhood play." Therefore, when the sources are silent concerning Aisha's reaction(s) to her potential marriage to Muhammad, Jones interferes to enhance her addition and (mis)interpretation; this (mis)interpretation revolves around the fact that Aisha, though so young, is defiant, seems to refuse and does not submit easily to her parents' decisions. Moreover, this promotes the idea of 'romance' with Safwan required of historical romances, of which *The Jewel* allegedly is. On this matter, Aisha has this to say: "I never wondered why he was allowed to do so when no other man was permitted even to look at me. Muhammad had been part of my life since I'd been born, and it seemed natural to clash toy horses with his...but in my ninth year, a series of events changed the way I viewed Muhammad" (24). Therefore, the relationship to Muhammad is represented to be more a relation between father and daughter than a potential husband to his future wife.

The modern readers may wonder or get surprised of this rapport if they have no glimpse of Islam and Islamic history. Aisha will also state that she gets to know

Muhammad since she was given birth. Before finally submitting to Abu Bakr's decision, she has always dreamt of running away from *home* with Safwan and plotted to. On this idea she states that "yes, Safwan and I had plotted to run away and join the Bedouins, but that was different: We'd be moving for adventure, not out of shame. We could always return" (24). She dreams of breaking this institution of seclusion because of that sense of boredom and because significantly she has a perspective at odds with her surrounding environment which she considers 'silly' and 'foolish.'

Safwan, not the Prophet, is almost present on each page in the first half of the novel. This makes his 'relationship' to Aisha look so deep and established. In fact, it is one of the main climaxes in the text. It creates tension and marks the plot. The frequency and presence of Safwan is aimed to create the conception that they are young and suitable to each other. It also stresses the situation of Aisha as a 'child-bride.' This regularity and repetition meet the requirements of a 'romance' in the deserts of Arabia. This theme is an established imagery in Romance texts set in the Deserts of the imagined Orient. It is here that the influence of that cultural imaginary plays its role in perpetuating images and Orientalist conceptions and fantasies about 'sheikhs' leading an adventurous life in the hot sands and on the back of horses and camels.

From the beginning, Aisha describes her traumatic situation. It is so confining and suffocating for women in her age and situation. In her description of the harem, she alludes to its confining nature. It is noted that Abu Bakr has many wives as well. She is trapped as a *caged* bird. Again, within the harem and her father's house, she is restricted and locked indoors. This happens when she is still at her parents' home in Mecca. Furthermore, she recounts how her days pass:

Days in *purdah* stretched and thinned, past into present into future, like a slow-moving caravan... During the day I listlessly kneaded bread dough, spun wool, and wove cloth, dreaming of the time I would be free, unbridled by *purdah* or my neighbors' tongues. I loathed the women's chores, dull and repetitive, and lived for the evenings I would spend with my *abi* (23).

The male Orientalist conception of eastern women doing nothing or doing monotonous and boring household work is so engrained. Therefore, the strategy is to put her outdoors to lead an *adventurous* experience. The description of Aisha as a child-bride is repeated many times which invokes Orientalist and anti-Islam polemics concerning marrying child-brides and even 'pedophilia.' The only solace is evening nights with her father to breathe fresh air. Still, Aisha narrates how she cherishes some nights with the mare given to her by her father:

Noting the pallor in my skin, he chose a horse from his stable for me...and took me riding in the desert on cool evenings. These were the nights I cherished in my parents' home: the quickening of my pulse as we galloped over the soft red earth; the ripple of the horse's flank

under my hand...in my ninth year a series of events changed the way I viewed Muhammad (24).

This takes place before the Prophet decides to leave Mecca, the *Hijra* (the Flight) to Medina. Then Muhammad is understood by Aisha as a different, caring man. He “patted my cheek in farewell. ‘After today, A’isha, you will not need to worry about being treated harshly again... That much, at least, I can do for you now,’” Muhammad says with a strange, poor description on the part of the author that “his golden eyes softened, like honey in the sun” (25). Later in her room, she contemplates Muhammad’s words saying this: “How audacious of him to tell my father how to discipline me, as if I belonged to him!...*Maybe I do...* might I be engaged to Muhammad instead of Safwan? My *purdah* would make sense then (25). Only then does she start to fathom the change in her parents’ behavior towards her as well as the attitudes of others. Torture, punishment, and assassination are inflicted on those who choose to embrace Islam (26). Aisha is outraged when at home during a night while Abu Sufyan and his companions are “slapping and punching” Raha, Aisha’s close female friend (26). Aisha “grabbed a knife” and opened the door to face them while she is nine years old, the reader is told. How a nine-year-old girl would face aged men at night while they are punishing men and women who embrace Islam shows how the idea of liberating and empowering Aisha alludes to one of the failures of the novel. She is intended to be an empowered young woman at all costs. This trait, however, goes far when presenting her as a little warrior either with a knife in this case or a sword later.

Aisha, determined to help and rescue her friend, is reported to *shriek* saying: “Raha!.. Let her go, you Qurayshi dogs! Abu Sufyan is beating her up... I wanted to rescue Raha.. *Yaa ummi*, I can fight. Safwan taught me how. See... Let me go to her *ummi* they’ll kill her if we don’t save her” (26-27). Still, cruelty and ferocity likening men to dogs and bloody *savages* in many cases is not hard to discern. In response to this ‘immature’ conduct and ‘misbehavior,’ Aisha’s mother, Umm Rumman, responds telling her:

‘Sword-fighting in the streets? Do not be ridiculous. You are a girl, not a boy. You cannot save anyone. That is the task of men...your father would lose his life before he would accept your help’...Her eyes were fierce, like a wild animal’s. ‘You know what those men would do to you. Then your family would be disgraced. Is that what you want? Abu Sufyan is the reason you are in *purdah* now!’ Her face turned as red as if she were strangling. ‘He was bragging to everyone in Mecca that he was going to deflower you. He said you had teased him with your red hair’ (27).

One would, no doubt, wonder why only names of *animals* and *beasts* are used to describe these people, scenes and events. While Abu Sufyan and his men are pictured as *dogs* and *predators* and Umm Rumman’s fierce eyes likening her to a ‘wild animal,’ so the implied meanings and images of torturing, abusing, raping and

invading *oppressed* Muslim (Oriental) women is obvious. One should remember that old persistent claim depicting Muhammad as he *wanted* to ‘rape Mary’! Arjana points out how:

The mythology that Prophet Muhammad was a pervert, expressed in the claims that he planned to rape the Virgin Mary in heaven and had unending supplies of semen, is an important part of the story of Muslim monsters... these fantasies were eventually attached to all Muslim men and they stuck. Today, Muslim men are often depicted as rapists and pedophiles, characterizations rooted in the Middle Ages (2015, 33).

These conceptions are there to stay whether they are applied to Muhammad or other Arabs/ Muslims and followers; they do not seem to disappear. They are persistent and keep recurring thoroughly. In this post-9/11 atmosphere, it is no surprise that they are activated to meet the expectations of the implied large audience. Muslim ‘monsters’ are revived in this era. What would the reader expect after reading these scenes and *atrocities*? In the ensuing paragraph, the reader gets Aisha’s feelings and words as follows:

The thought of that greasy-bearded *goat* [Abu Sufyan] touching me made me feel as if *rats* were scuttling all over my skin. I ran to my bedroom window to urge my father on in his fight for Raha, hoping to see him knock Abu Sufyan...What I found made me scream: my father on his back and Abu Sufyan standing over him, pressing the point of his sword into my father’s cheek. Blood oozed around the blade...I saw Umar tying a gag across Raha’s mouth and shoving her into a wagon... Abu Sufyan looked up and saw me in my window, shrieking and jumping...He leered and licked his thick lips. ‘*Yaa* Abu Bakr, your lovely little fire-haired daughter has come to say good-bye’ (27).

Thus, in addition to *dogs*, *wild animals*, and *sheep* addressed to Muslim/Arab men and women, one also reads how others are described as *goats* and *ferocious* as *wild beasts* and Abu Sufyan as *monster*. This presents how these early Arabs are cruel and *savage* creatures. In the midst of this scene, Aisha (about ten years) narrates that she offers to help her father fighting his attackers saying: “*Yaa abi*, let me come out!” she cries glaring at Abu Sufyan. “I’ll save you and Raha”... “Yes, let her come out...I will warm myself in those flames of hers, and your life will be spared” Abu Sufyan says, baring his teeth (27-28). It is not clear who this Umar with Abu Sufyan is; but arguably and controversially he is Umar ibn al-Khattab before embracing Islam (26-28). He is deployed to distort his legacy and image. Sometimes Aisha is rendered *courageous* but at the same time *ridiculous*. For how would a girl of nine years old go for a sword fight challenging old men like Abu Sufyan and Umar described as brutal and threatening? This gives a glimpse of how the idea of empowering the young Aisha can turn against itself. Abu Bakr is about to be killed by Abu Sufyan while the *child* Aisha is presented as wanting to chase and fight these wild men to rescue both her father and Raha.

‘Raha...I could have saved you, I know I could. Oh, Raha, I’m so sorry’... I could have stopped those men if my mother hadn’t interfered. Fighting with a real blade couldn’t be much different from fighting with a wooden sword, as I’d done so many times with Safwan. I would have sent that dung-breathed Abu Sufyan’s head rolling in the dirt, and the mean-faced Umar would have run whimpering home like a whipped dog (27-28).

Again, while Raha the young girl is described as “so jolly and as gentle as a lamb” Abu Sufyan and his companion Umar are introduced as whipped dogs. These descriptions are influenced by literature and media discourses when depicting young girls and women as beautiful and in need of rescue from some implied savages and fundamentalists or even ‘terrorists;’ they are also informed by old-established images and conceptions about the ‘Orient’ (Moctar EL-Shinqiti 2013). These animalistic vocabulary items are repeated *ad nauseam* in the narrative; these men are despised and distorted *creatures*, not only visually but also olfactorily as Abu Sufyan is described as having a gut-wrenching smell. Still, they are also deployed to portray powerless women and powerful men. Aisha at times seems to be questioning Allah’s will and power for the sake of saving these powerless and hapless young girls; the following passage exhibits this:

Why, al-Lah? Why would He let this happen to Raha, who loved Him so much? Wasn’t He supposed to protect us? Maybe He was so busy, he hadn’t noticed Raha’s cries... My arms and legs still hummed with the longing to run to Raha and free her. That energy was God’s; I felt it in the blood that sang through my veins. He had heard Raha’s cries, and He’d called me to fight for her. But I couldn’t... You cannot save anyone. That is the task of men...In my mother’s world, being female meant being helpless. Powerless (28-29).

Muslim women then suffer psychologically and bodily on the streets of Medina and in beds, too. Being persecuted by the merciless Qurayshi men under Abu Sufyan, the growing community of believers is given permission (by Allah to his Messenger) to move to Medina. However, this proves a tiring and perilous journey. Aisha reflects on this matter saying: “Would Safwan’s family join us, or would they remain in Mecca and marry him to someone else? I looked back at the city as we rode away, yearning for a glimpse of my friends, but it was late and the houses of Mecca slept as if assassins had never roamed her streets” (33). Therefore, besides being *stinking, cruel, and threatening* these people are portrayed as assassins and scheming.

Again, Aisha is portrayed as a young warrior training to fight potential Arabian *murderers*. She is presented as such for the sake of transcending her gender roles. This feminist and Orientalist belief that Arab/Muslim women are oppressed and secluded plays its part in this picture building. She has never been asked for her opinion or about her dreams, the reader is told many times. She also states that she gets out of the courtyard in

Medina “to play for the first time in years with the children filling the courtyard... lots of children! My body felt as light as air as I bounded out to join them” (38). Moreover, this is why she puts it in this way:

My father invited me..for a cup of galangal water and a “talk”...My parents had never made this kind of invitation before. I could easily imagine what they wanted to discuss...*Please, al-Lah, oh please let them say my husband will be Safwan. Don’t let them marry me to Muhammad. I know he’s Your Messenger, but he’s an old man—and I want to ride free with the Bedouins... But al-Lah didn’t hear my prayer...their words clashed with my desires.. Muhammad, they said, was to be my husband. It had all been arranged on the day I began my purdah. I set down my drink so violently it sloshed over the lip of the bowl. ‘But what about Safwan?’ (35).*

Aisha is of the sort of feminist thinking women of the twenty-first century who should be asked her opinion before taking any decisions or arrangements. Jones, hence, establishes Aisha as such since she knows that Aisha was promised to Muhammad after the cancellation of the arrangement with Jubair’s parents. Consequently, putting her in such a mould goes hand in hand with secularist and feminist politics and agenda set from the beginning. This, however, renders not only her parents, but also Allah as ‘patriarchal’ as well since He does not interfere in deciding otherwise. This secularist and feminist perspective contradicts the nature of Islamic history and theology. Against her will and freedom to choose Aisha says:

‘Yaa A’isha!’ My mother’s shout startled me... Was she my mother, with a woman’s heart and a woman’s knowledge of the marriage bed? ‘What is wrong with you? ... Those do not look like tears of happiness.’ ‘I...’ I hesitated, fearing her tongue as sharp as any sword. But then I thought again of marrying Muhammad and sharing his bed, and my mother’s fury seemed less forbidding. ‘I want to marry Safwan,’ I said in a tiny voice... ‘Did you think your father invited you out here to ask what you want?.. You foolish girl. When are you ever going to learn?’ (36).

After the revelation is received by Muhammad during the wedding ceremony to Zaynab, the reader is told how his present wives interpreted those very revelations. What is striking in this context is the intended absence of Sawdah, the elder wife. She is absented from the scene because she is considered an old, uncaring woman who has nothing to complain about.

Safwan is the only one to whom Aisha recounts her suffering in the text. She tells him about the day she moves into her new apartment, about how her ‘girlish’ fear has put out Muhammad’s fire. She does not tell him about the times she tried to “seduce Muhammad” while he patted her head calling her “Little Red” and she does not tell him about holding “back (her) tears in recent nights as he’d slept with his back” to her believing that she is “still a child” (180). To this point in the narrative, Aisha has not yet consummated her marriage; she is still

considered a 'child-bride.' Thus, Safwan is thought of as a *rescuer* to save her from the enslaving *cage* of the harem. Therefore, the author succumbs as well to the temptations of this marketable and controversial genre of novel. Accordingly, the reader is told in a clumsy plot that does neither respect readers, nor does it respect the historical records. An oppressed and 'sinful' child is the image that is reinforced once and again in the novel. It is so since Aisha has fallen, in the novel as well as in some readers' eyes, to Safwan's desires and kisses. She is no more 'sincere.' After the 'affair of the slander' takes place, Aisha returns to Medina ashamed. Rumors have spread and grown threatening the community. Aisha states that "given the rumors already flying through the *umma*, I couldn't be sure I'd escape that terrible death. But at least I would die knowing I'd been true to Muhammad. When he joined me in Paradise he would know the truth also" (184). This is, however, a technical and narrative truth to vindicate Aisha after those controversial scenes with Safwan. Besides, there is this ridiculous idea of easy access to Paradise which becomes ridiculous and silly. It is reiterated and employed as if to claim that more sexual freedom in this earth would also pave the way for sensual pleasures in the next life. This idea is also present and discussed in *The Sword*. After the affair, Aisha is portrayed as banished and sequestered again in her parents' home. "It's no wonder I spent most of my time in the bedroom... my parents kept a dark house, one that banished the sun's heat by blocking its light, creating an atmosphere as uplifting as a tomb," says Aisha (184).

Jealousy and competition for being the 'first lady' in Muhammad's household drive Aisha crazy. While in her parents' home after she has been sent there by Muhammad to reduce the growing tension in the *ummah* over her 'innocence' with Safwan, she contemplates her fate and conceives her surrounding and social culture. One reads this:

Or was he finding comfort in Zaynab's arms? Jealousy stung me, but I shrugged it off. Self-pity had caused me nothing but trouble. It was time to face the facts: Men would be telling me what to do for as long as I lived. I might not like their rules, but I couldn't escape them. Safwan couldn't rescue me from servitude... The Prophet of God himself couldn't loosen this yoke, not without losing the support of men like Umar, who clung to the old ways (188).

This passage is important for the following reasons. It imposes all men as powerful and in command of their destinies as well as of their women. Neither the Prophet nor Safwan could free her from her mental and psychic *servitude*. This puts Aisha as an alien woman to this culture and space. Umar then stands for the ossified 'fundamentalist' who influences the Prophet's decisions. He sticks to his old-fashioned styles. This renders Muhammad as a weak man who follows Umar's directions and suggestions. Aisha finally surrenders to

Allah by falling to her knees and praying for hours, "begging His forgiveness for my impulsive act, asking Him to show me the way to win my husband's trust again." Then, she sleeps and "God sent His answer to me in the form of a vivid dream" (189). Aisha then surrenders to God and her fate. She puts it: "'It's in Your hands, al-Lah. I trust You to help me...I turned to face them all'. 'I have said what I have to say, *abi*. The matter is in al-Lah's hands now.' I looked at Muhammad. 'When He has vindicated me, I will happily return to the *harim*—as your true wife'" (193). Still, one can ask the question: how can Allah forgive a 'liar,' a 'sinner,' and an 'adulteress' who fluctuates between positions and attitudes? What is also reflected in the passage is how honour can destroy a nation, an empire, even the fate of a Prophet. Moreover, in a crucial passage that speaks volumes as far as the Orientalist concern over the position of both male and female characters/people in Muslim society are concerned, one reads:

Power was what drove them all, including Muhammad. In truth, it was what I desired, also: the power to live freely, to fight for my *umma*, to control my destiny. Being a woman meant I couldn't seize this power by force, and I certainly wouldn't gain it by running away. Muhammad married every one of his wives...for political gains. My best chance for empowerment...was to become politically useful to him. If I could earn his respect and trust, I could become his advisor. I might also be able to help the *umma*, fulfilling my promise to al-Lah with my intelligence instead of my sword (197).

This passage speaks volumes so far as women's entrapment in Arabia is concerned. Power is a big concern for everyone. Power is the driving force that motivates these people; this will be clearer and scrutinized and foregrounded in the second novel, *The Sword*. This best captures and designates these people as power-hungry men and women. Furthermore, she is put in contradictory situations. On one hand, she is presented as an eager young woman who wants to be a courageous warrior and then she is developed wanting to use her wit and political intelligence. This again betrays the feminist politics and agenda enhancing such depictions.

However, at times this plot of empowering Aisha turns ridiculous and futile so far as the whole fabric and structure of the novel is concerned. She by the final analysis never participates in any battle, never achieves the legendary place of Umm Umara. Sometimes, these women are presented as hapless "waiting, helpless, for slaughter" (210). While at other times she seems courageous, wanting to participate in battles she is never given an opportunity; she does not want to surrender to passivity and idleness. On this matter, she suggests that "not for me the task of sitting passively and wringing my hands in worry. Al-Lah had chosen me to fight, not to cower like a girl. And, after the debacle with Safwan, I needed to prove myself to the *umma*" (211). However, on

the next page, she deplors her dilemma and confinement since she is condemned “to sit at home and wring [her] hands while a battle raged outside our walls” (212). Repetition of both *confinement* and *helplessness* and phrases (wringing hands) marks the unfolding of the narrative. The same poor qualities and repetition of phrases and confining conditions punctuate the story; it renders it hard and tasteless to follow. A few passages afterwards, the reader again stumbles on equal formulations. “I couldn’t flee from my fate; nor did I want to. But I could act bravely, wielding my sword, fighting to the end...I’d fight like no woman those soft-bellied merchants had ever seen” (216). These unending, boring and recurring phrases and situations exhibit the impoverished qualities of the author’s plot and style.

IV. CONCLUSION

Sherry Jones consolidates the earlier European feminist Orientalist perceptions of the Muslim ‘Orient’ and its men and women in her post-September 11 narrative. Muslim women are depicted as oppressed soft creatures by an oppressive growing elite in the early nascent Islamic society. Muhammad is portrayed as a lover of ‘child-brides’ while his Companions are represented as cruel, savage and misogynist men. The Muslim Orient is still depicted as an exotic, erotic, backward space where women have few rights. Instead of reducing anxiety and working for bridging the gap between societies and civilisations and better understanding of other cultures, Jones expands the widespread misconceptions rampant in media coverage that have thrived since the Post-September 11, 2001. Discourses on the oppressiveness of the Muslim Orient and the struggle for basic human rights have skyrocketed since then; they have been employed by politicians and decision-makers to launch their agendas and interventions in the Muslim lands.

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