

Meyda Yegenoglu *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, 182 pp., paper, £13.95

The veiling of Islamic women and the figure of veiled woman are metaphors for Western articulations of Islam on the one hand, and on the other, an illustration of Western (feminist) ethnocentrism, according to Third World feminist scholars such as Chandra Mohanty and Leila Ahmed. Muslim feminist writer Lama Abu Odeh posits the veil both as an oppressive tool of Islamic patriarchy and a liberating strategy enabling Muslim women to avail of education and paid employment without being harassed. However, reading the veil has other angles. In a feminist critique of Edward Said's influential *Orientalism*, Turkish sociologist Meyda Yegenoglu examines the veil as a site of fantasy and of nationalist ideologies and discourses of gender identity.

According to Yegenoglu, the figure of 'veiled Oriental woman' has a particular place in Western texts about the Orient, not only as signifying Oriental women as mysterious and exotic, but also as signifying the Orient itself as feminine, always veiled, seductive and dangerous. In the Orientalist context, the veil is multilayered signifier which refers at once to an attire which covers a Muslim woman's face and to that which hides and conceals the Orient and Oriental woman from view. It hides the 'real' Orient and keeps its truth from Western knowledge. At the same time it is a metaphor serving as a screen around which Western fantasies of penetration revolve.

This idea of a Western desire to penetrate the Orient is central to Yegenoglu's reading of veiling as the missing (gendered) element in Said's *Orientalism* (1978). To say that Said's analysis is gender-blind is to state the obvious: Said himself admitted in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) that studies about the Middle East have been dominated by masculism and acknowledged the importance of feminist works in undermining this hegemony. However, only recently have feminists begun engaging with the missing link between Orientalism and Western women's discourse.

Yegenoglu points out that although Said refuses to acknowledge the notion of a 'real' Orient as preceding its discursive representation, in differentiating between manifest and latent Orientalism, he also occludes the sexual difference involved in Orientalist discourses. Utilising Homi Bhabha's notion of the ambivalence of colonial discourse, Yegenoglu argues that latent Orientalism is precisely the site where unconscious desires and fantasies of the 'other' are linked to sexual difference. She examines the place the figure of 'veiled Oriental woman' has in 18th and 19th century European travel texts. Furthermore, by drawing comparisons between representations of Orient, veil and feminine, she suggests that Orientalism is

mapped onto the language of phallocentrism and she thus links representations of cultural and sexual difference.

Yegenoglu suggests that the Western subject, including the Western feminist subject, occupies not only a colonial but also a masculine subject position, a suggestion not taken too kindly by US feminists. The ways in which the Orient is represented in writings by Western women travellers, such as Lady Mary Montagu, demonstrates that Western women also occupy a masculinist position in relation to Oriental women. Moreover, Montague, despite feminist identification between Turkish and British women (along lines of class and gender), acts as agent for Western men who wish to penetrate the Oriental harem: the desire to see and penetrate the veil (and the Orient) is masculine in nature.

Critics of Western feminism as ethnocentric focus on the Western feminist desire to lift the veil of the Oriental woman in the name of 'liberating' her. Yegenoglu goes much further than Mohanty or Ahmed in criticising Western feminism's ethnocentrism by arguing that the colonial feminist discourse to unveil Muslim women in the name of liberation is linked not only to discourses of Enlightenment but also to the desire to master, control, and reshape the body of the subjects by making them visible. Since the veil prevents the colonial gaze from reaching such a visibility and hence mastery, unveiling becomes essential. Yet, Yegenoglu argues, there is nothing 'natural' about unveiling. Not-to-veil is as inscriptive as to veil. However, because unveiled bodies are seen (by Western Feminists) as 'natural' and 'true', colonial feminists feel justified in intervening against the veiling of Muslim women. This is despite the view that veiling is not less barbaric than control of bodies through bras, stiletto heels, cosmetics etc.

Since a Muslim woman's body is not inside the veil, but of it, the veil is fundamental to a Muslim woman's subjectivity, according to Yegenoglu, who concludes her book with a rewarding critical discussion of Third World as a Western/Orientalist construct. She cites Fanon's description of Algerian women re-veiling themselves in the struggle for independence (so as to carry bombs under their clothes), yet her main thrust in linking nationalism and Western hegemony is discursive rather than materialist, which for me is the main weakness of this otherwise fascinating analysis.

According to Said, the Orient was 'orientalized' in the process of modernisation by nationalist elites who aim to 'civilise' the native populations. According to this logic, nationalists at once accept and refute the dominance of the West. Yegenoglu follows Said in viewing nationalism as reproduced by Orientalist discourses and by an imperialist divide between Western and native. According to Partha Chatterjee, woman is the ground upon which nationalism constructs national identity; she must be controlled

(via her dress, the food she makes, her education, her family role, etc.) and defined as distinct from Western women. Her sexuality must be erased so that she can be mother (and motherland).

Chatterjee's argument, that the effacement of sexual difference is crucial in the discursive battle between imperialism and nationalism, is applied by Yegenoglu to Turkish and Algerian nationalism as examples of the ways in which both women and the veil occupy a particular place in the anti-colonial struggle. Despite her centrality to nationalist articulations of independence and modernisation, woman herself tends to disappear by being transformed into a battleground in the struggle between nationalism and imperialism (Algeria) and between Islamism and secular/Western nationalism (Turkey). In both cases the veil is seen as the medium through which male nationalists articulate their desires and fears and assert national differences (although I must confess a problem with equating Turkey, former empire and current oppressor of Kurds and occupier of Armenia and Cyprus with the colonised).

While unveiling symbolised progress in the Turkish transition from empire to republic, in Algeria re-veiling was a response to the French desire to unveil Algerian women and thereby control Algerian culture and society. Though Yegenoglu says little about the Islamisation of contemporary Algerian society, she argues that the nationalist, but Islamic FLN wished to protect Algerian women from the French desire to unveil women's body as a way of penetrating the colony. Re-veiling, according to this reading, is not simply a return to tradition, but a new dress, a Western product. But in the process of liberation, women themselves were effaced, their own liberation deferred until independence was won. The question of sexual difference was erased in favour of the national struggle, an omission often cited by Palestinian feminists, adamant that they do not wish to replicate Algerian women's experience of being returned to the kitchen after taking part in liberating their colonised country.

Does nationalism differ from Orientalism? According to Yegenoglu, the difference is in the position of the native: while in colonial discourse the native is passive, in national discourse the native is autonomous. Both constructions, however, maintain the distinctions between East and West, hence nationalism must be read as 'reverse Orientalism' and both veiling and unveiling as products of Orientalist hegemony.

While I found the book provoking (and intend including it in reading lists on women and Islam), I take issue with Yegenoglu's refusal to engage critically with Islamic male elites re-veiling women as an anti-democratic strategy (as argued forcibly by the Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi in a materialist, rather than discursive feminist reading of veiling and Islam). Yegenoglu would have answered my criticism as she responds to US

feminist critics who urge her to deliver 'the truth' about women in Muslim societies, by saying that the liberal desire to turn her into a 'native informant' is but another imperial gesture whereby the sovereign Western subject constructs herself as considerate and benevolent. However, if as she argues, veiling, like unveiling, is an Orientalist gesture, it is also a patriarchal one, one end of a scale, the other end of which is the abuse of women's bodies in our capitalist societies. Ethnocentrism cannot be mitigated by a cultural relativism which says 'this is their culture' to harmful practices such as female genital mutilation or murder for family honour practised in Muslim societies from Palestine to Pakistan.

Another criticism is Yegenoglu's language, which I found denser than Bhabha's (which is saying a lot). Opting for a discursive rather than a materialist analysis is a fair choice, but I cannot avoid thinking that just as she accuses nationalist elites of making women themselves disappear in their appropriation of their bodies as the contested territories of the nation, Yegenoglu too occludes women's real lives in her use of women, and their veils, as no more than discourses.

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Ziauddin Sardar, *Postmodernism and the Other: The New Imperialism of Western Culture*, London: Pluto Press, 1998, 346 pp., paper £14.99

For those of us used to treating postmodernism in contradistinction to modernism (a contradistinction that its very name implies), Sardar's approach to his subject matter is a novel one. Rather than seeing postmodernism either positively as the overthrow of tyrannical meta-narratives, or negatively as the relativistic betrayal of the promise of progress, Sardar regards it as just more of the same. Despite all its claims to entail a revolutionary departure from the past, he argues that postmodernism is simply a continuation and further expansion of the dynamic of western culture, a culture whose imperative is the subjugation, both material and ideological, of the non-western 'Other' (to use the appellation applied by Sardar to those who lie outside the pale of the west).

Sardar's portrayal of the historical trajectory of the global influence of western culture is roughly as thus. Using military power and Christian ideology, colonialism sought to civilise those it represented as the savage or barbarian Other (to use Adam Ferguson's categories). Post-colonial modernism provided a secular version of this representation, placing all cultures in a universal history, within which the teleology of progress dictated that all should strive to go the way of the west. Postmodernism

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