Minority Concerns: Female Scholars at the Cultural Intersection

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I still remember my surprise when many years ago I heard women being referred to as a minority. Obviously, it was the statistics that made me wonder: how could half the population in any given country, and sometimes even more than half, be considered a minority, or a marginal group, as they were also sometimes called? I was in the US when I heard on the news that they were talking about minorities “such as blacks and women.” Blacks, OK, given their number, but women? Later on, I understood how misleading and idiotically empty of significance statistics can be, but at the time, I was busy pondering what it meant to be part of what is known as the Third World. Larger in statistics, the Third World was, and continues to be, smaller in power and effectiveness. It came out clearly as a “third world.”

In the US, where I spent a number of years studying in the late 1970s and early 1980s, I found myself surrounded by my “third world minority” status while gradually discovering the cultural and academic importance of another minority: women. As a student of the formation of Orientalist thinking in Western literary discourse, I had a great deal of help from female scholars who, to my surprise, had done a lot to alleviate my “thirdworldliness” by exposing the Western indebtedness to the Orient, that ancient part of what is now known as the third world. What was it that motivated a scholar such as Dorothee Metlitzki in the mid-twentieth century to study Arabic and produce a magisterial study of what she termed “the matter of Araby in Medieval England”? Why, before that, was she drawn to analyzing the interest of an American writer such as Herman Melville in the Orient in her book Melville’s Orienda?1

Along with Metlitzki, I came to know the work of another scholar, also female, who wrote another impressive study of the Arabic Role in Medieval History.2 That book, beside others published by the same author, drove the

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point home: here were two fine scholars sharing a similar motive to highlight the Arabo-Islamic role in the formation of Western civilization. What appeared particularly impressive, and heartening to me, was the manifest sympathy characterizing the work of both scholars, a sympathy not always shared in Western studies of Islam which is largely dominated by male scholars.³

It was certainly that sympathy with or admiration for Arabo-Islamic culture that caught my attention in an Orientalist context that, according to Edward Said, was either characterized by bias or marked by politics and colonialist objectives. It was no wonder then that it was female scholars who would immediately question Said’s argument. Menocal was among a number of Western Arabists and Islamists who were unhappy with what they considered Said’s generalized and sometimes unfair contentions.⁴ When I came to discover more names and works moving along similar lines as those followed by Metlitzki and Menocal, and when the names of the Germans Sigrid Hunke, Katharina Mommsen, Annmarie Schimmel, and the Americans Barbara Harlow, Barbara Parmenter, Karen Riley, among others, started filling my increasingly impressed book reviews, questions and gasps of wonder were the natural responses. They were the same questions over and over, the same as those raised upon encountering Metlitzki and Menocal.

We all know that the number of female scholars, not only in the field I am referring to but in most fields of research, is still far from equaling those of males. My encounter with the female scholars specializing in Arab or Islamic culture, however, showed that in no way could the male scholars match the female scholars in sympathy and fairness. What lies behind such a remarkable phenomenon is what this paper will try to address. But before addressing that question I should add another and no less significant side to the issue. The phenomenon I am referring to is not limited to Western female scholars; it also applies to the other side as well, that is, to female scholars from Arab and Muslim countries. Those scholars, on the other side of the coin, looked not at themselves and their own culture, but at the West from an angle reminiscent of the one adopted in the West vis-à-vis the East. By looking at those two sides of the coin a more provocative picture is likely to emerge. Naturally, that picture is too large for the limited space I have here,

³ I met Professor Menocal in 1979, as far as I recall, at the MLA convention in New York. I was a student then working towards my doctorate and developing an interest in Orientalism. Prof. Menocal told me how she felt about Said’s study which was, she said, quite unjust in its assessment as it ignored the great Orientalism of Spain and Germany. She articulates the same views in some of her publications.

⁴ See the article by John Irwin in the British magazine Prospect (February, 2006) where he argues that Said’s book had an adverse effect on the growth of Orientalist studies in the UK.

so my only option is to draw the map and hope that a larger exploration of this hitherto little studied territory will follow.

The group of Western female scholars mentioned so far can be divided into two groups. The first includes pioneers such as Metlitzki, Hunke, Schimmel, and Mommsen whose focus is on Oriental contributions to Western civilization. Besides age and generation, there are several other reasons for putting these scholars in one group. They were all Orientalists in the traditional sense, moving along the old highway of research where values such as objectivity and erudition predominate. The many centuries of German, Russian and English education in their backgrounds had established such criteria and values that paved the way for monumental scholarly achievements. Besides, the subject of their interest is the ancient East, old Arabia, Persia, the Indian sub-continent, and the Levant. Their interest in cultures so remote included a strong emotional attachment, culminating in some cases in personal sagas of fascination and love.

The second group includes a younger generation of scholars who come from diverse Western backgrounds. Though still attached to the East (which transforms in this case into a Third World) with bonds of sympathy and admiration, this group differs in two respects: the main concern of this generation is the contemporary world of power struggle, domination and resistance, as all that reflects on culture in general and on literature in particular; second, the majority of these scholars are deeply involved in the theoretical issues dominating contemporary studies, particularly those related to post-coloniality and gender studies. Indeed the two generations testify to the passage from Orientalism to Postcoloniality and other adjacent fields.

Yet it is the circumstances and the reasons behind this rush Eastward of women scholars that lends such an aura of intrigue to this area of research. Neither Orientalist nor Postcolonial approaches can explain the personal touch and the depth of involvement. Although such a personal touch is not always articulated in a direct manner, it is difficult to make sense of the degree of involvement visible in all those cases without assuming an extraordinary motivation. Annemarie Schimmel, for instance, who at her death in 2003 had written more than a hundred books in studies related to the Orient, was highly articulate when it came to the reasons behind her intellectual and physical journey Eastward. In her autobiography she wrote that her involvement began when at the early age of seven she read a statement by Prophet Muhammad to the effect that people are asleep, but when they die they wake up. “At that moment, I knew where my road began: the East became the goal, the East, where mysterious wisdom resides.” 5 Schimmel was to follow a path that the great hero of her life, Goethe, had already struck.

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5 Qtd. by Stefan Weidner, “A New View of Orientalism: Annmarie Schimmel and Cultural Interrelations between Germany and the Islamic World,” in Art and Thought No. 78 (2003),
Understandably, the impact of Goethe was enormous not only on the lives and careers of scholars such as Schimmel, Hunke, and Mommsen, but on German Orientalism as a whole, which was one of the most brilliant, creative and prodigious of all Western forms of interest in the East. The German writer was, as Mommsen points out in her *Goethe and the Arab World*, a great force behind the establishment of Arabic studies in the West, as he was in drawing the attention of Western nations to the importance of Arabian civilization. That civilization is what someone like Hunke took upon herself to unfold in front of a forgetful West in a book such as *Allah sonne über dem abendland. Unser arabisches Erbe* (1960). It is also, but in a larger context, what Schimmel wanted to uncover. Schimmel’s case, however, reminds us that works of scholarship can sometimes be as much driven by personal vision as works of art. According to Stefan Weidner, the Orient Schimmel fell in love with was an Orient that no longer existed, an imagined Orient, one of mystics, spiritual poetry and monumental achievements in various fields. It was also a land that allowed her to sail away from a Germany beset by Nazism and socio-economic difficulties.

Comparable although not identical difficulties seem to have motivated the Russian/Jewish Metlitzki who, like Schimmel and Mommsen, later went to the United States. Born in 1914 in what was then East Prussia, Metlitzki had to roam Europe with her family for some time in flight first from Stalinist then Nazi persecution before settling in London and studying Arabic. In 1948 she migrated to Israel where she worked as a Zionist activist taking part in laying the foundations of Israel. What motivated her in the seventies to research and publish her exceptional *Matter of Araby in Medieval England* (1977) may not relate directly to any specific circumstance in this background. An exceptionally reticent person regarding her personal life and the author of only two books, she may have found in an East remote both in time and space a refuge from a meaningless or painfully meaningful present. Like Clarel, the character in Melville’s long poem with the same name discussed in her book on the American writer’s relation to the East, she may have sought a spiritual home in an Orient removed in time and space.


7 This book exists both in Arabic as well as French translations. In English it reads: “Allah’s Sun Shines on the West: Our Arabic Heritage.”

8 See footnote no. 5.

9 It is certainly unusual, to say the least, that a Zionist Jew would be so much drawn to study the contribution of the Arabs, those whom she had to fight and drive away in order to establish Israel.
Metlitzki’s reticence with regard to her motives does not, however, hide the fact that she belonged to a minority both as a Jew and as a woman. The former identity singled her out for a kind of persecution unknown to the other female Orientalists. But it is her other minority affiliation that may offer a possible explanation for the unusual sympathy behind her impressive endeavors. The sense that Oriental cultures were not accorded their due respect or viewed as great contributions to the human heritage, the figuration of such cultures as misunderstood, embattled and at best alien, is likely to invoke sympathy in the hearts of individuals who see themselves in a position not so different. The matter of Araby, writes Metlitzki, is viewed in the West as “an extraordinary phenomenon because extraneous to the tradition of Medieval Europe.”

This is the case when it comes to the Arabic background to Medieval romance literatures in Europe as Rosa Menocal, a scholar of Cuban origin, discusses it. The offhand dismissal by Romance philologists of the possibility that Troubadour poetry had Arabic origins (as the Arabic word “tarab” or “singing” suggests) was, she tells us, the immediate reason for her writing *The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History* (xii).

It would of course be difficult to find in the work of these scholars any direct or professed links between their Orientalist projects and any efforts on behalf of feminism or women’s rights. The clearest link that I found was in two articles by Mommsen on Goethe’s views of the emancipation of women. Mommsen’s interest in what she called “the Scheherazade attribute” in Goethe’s narratives provides another clue to her devotion to the patriarch of German Orientalism. As for Schimmel, there is the fact that just like Goethe who identified with the Muslim East, she also emphasized her own closeness to Muslim women.

A feminist perspective is more noticeable in the work of the other group of scholars, the younger American Arabists. Barbara Harlow, who wrote a pioneering study of “resistance literature” (1987) and who authored and co-authored a number of books on Arabic literature, also wrote a book on “women writing and political detention” (1992). Harlow’s areas of interest, as stated on her page on the State University of New York web site, include ethnic, third world literature, women, and gender. Obviously, these areas not only coexist comfortably but crisscross and appear to be interchangeable.

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Harlow’s perhaps best known book, *Resistance Literature*, sheds a great deal of light on the plight of women within the various struggle movements in Third World countries. The book considers these issues in the context of theoretical, but highly pertinent issues affecting the literatures of the non-Western world. On the one hand, Harlow deplores the absence up until the 1980s at least of Third World literatures from the curricula of French and English departments in Western universities. On the other hand, she raises, with manifest concern, questions related to the independence of non-Western literatures and whether they can be studied with the critical tools developed in the West. “Can [such theories],” she wonders, “be deployed in analyzing the literary output of geopolitical areas which stand in opposition to the very social and political organizations within which the theories are located and to which they respond?”\(^\text{13}\)

Harlow’s argument and general critique falls within the well known parameters of postcolonial studies that have reached a high level of complexity in the work of numerous theoreticians among whom women, particularly those with third world backgrounds, constitute an imposing presence. The connection between gender and postcoloniality is the subject of numerous studies by critics such as Spivak, Mohanty, and Suleri.\(^\text{14}\) That the marginality and minority status of women played a part in shaping the postcolonial critiques of such scholars is therefore too obvious to require restating or examining here. What I propose to look at, instead, is the opposite situation of non-Western female scholars, who are located outside the West and who in the last two decades or so have initiated their own critiques of Western colonial discourses and postcolonial, Western as well as non-Western literatures. The work of Arab and Muslim women acquires an added significance in this context as a result of the contemporary cultural clash and the unfortunate misunderstanding resulting from various sources of tension. It is these in particular that I would like to pay attention to in the remaining part of this discussion.

These scholars may not be as numerous as their counterparts in the West, nor is their work on the same level of density as that of the Western scholars. They are Occidentalists in so far as Occidentalism means specializing in Western cultures, that is as a counterpart of Orientalism, since most of them specialize in European, particularly Anglo-American literature. Their affiliation, however, to postcolonial theory shifts the theoretical groundwork of their interests away from the kind of views and attitudes one is likely to associate with “Occidentalism” as it stands in a binary opposition to Orientalism. Furthermore, the feminine, and not necessarily feminist, element in the

\(^{13}\) *Resistance Literature* (New York: Methuen, 1987), xvi.

works I am referring to, provide further links between them, on the one hand, and postcolonial theory as well as gender studies, on the other.

Among such scholars we encounter the Egyptian Hoda El-Sadda, a professor of English literature at Cairo University. The author of several studies that touch on East-West relations in the context of translation studies, postcolonial theory, and gender issues, El-Sadda proceeds from an awareness that Western Orientalist discourse intersects with the issues raised by gender studies at the point where the language used in portraying, analyzing or judging the dominated peoples of the East is similar to that used when women are discussed or referred to. She points out in an interview that it was in Said’s *Orientalism*, that she discovered the link between women on the one hand and overpowered nations, on the other. That similarity, she says, continued to “haunt me as a persistent feeling.”15 Like other female scholars, El-Sadda says, she also became aware of the fact that Said’s study sidesteps the plight of Oriental women in his critique of Orientalism.

Along similar, though not identical, lines comes the work of another female scholar. It is that of Rana Kabbani, a Syrian who was born to a Muslim family in Damascus in 1958, and who specialized in English literature at Cambridge. Kabbani is perhaps best known for her book *Europe’s Myths of Orient* (1986). It is a study of Western travel literature reflecting on the deeply embedded prejudices and misrepresentations of the Orient as Other and as a colonial subject. It is a work that stands as a counterpart to Harlow’s *Resistance Literature* as it maps out “domination literature” in a manner informed by studies such as Said’s. Like *Orientalism*, and for that matter like a great deal of postcolonial critiques of colonial discourse, Kabbani’s book is a kind of “resistance scholarship” in an empire-strikes-back mode stating that “in order to arrive at a West-East discourse liberated from the obstinacy of the colonial legacy, a serious effort has to be made to review and reject a great many inherited representations” (13).16 The language of domination that Kabbani examines is most apparent in the way Oriental women are represented by various travelers. Oriental erotica played a prominent role as it attracted Western travelers, translators, and readers alike: “Europe was charmed by an Orient that shimmered with possibilities, that promised a sexual space, a voyage away from the self” (67).

Kabbani’s other work bespeaks an abiding interest in exposing the intersection of Orientalism and female representation. She edited the diary of the French traveler Isabelle Eberhardt (1877-1904) in 1987, and published a study of “travel, gender and the politics of postcolonial representation” (1995). Yet she is more forthright on a personal level in a little book she wrote in the aftermath of re-awakened hostilities between Muslims and Westerners. In *Letter to Christendom* (1989), Kabbani explores her own

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15 *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* No. 19 (1999), 211. (This interview is in Arabic).
embattled allegiances as a Muslim woman living in the West and having to defend herself on various fronts. Her feelings for non-Western women are, however, especially keen despite the fact that her life has been so privileged in comparison with most of those women: “Yet I believe that what I have in common with less fortunate women from, say, Morocco or Pakistan or Bradford transcends class difference and is greater than what separates us.”

To a great extent, Kabbani’s sympathies emanate from such minority concerns, something that brings her closer not just to less fortunate non-Western women but to all of those with whom she shares a range of intellectual concerns. Those intellectuals include young female scholars from the Arab World who started their academic careers with theses that highlight Western Oriental themes or the postcolonial work of figures who are part Western, part third world. One such scholar is the Saudi Hessa Al-Ghadeer who wrote a master’s thesis on the Afro-American poet Gwendolyn Brooks focusing on “the impact of urban experience on black females.” The study is concerned with women not only on the level of writers, but also on the level of characters in the work of those writers; it highlights the plight of female characters in the work of a female writer who is known to have projected much of her personal suffering on those characters. That Brooks is black and female must have been a major reason behind Al-Ghadeer’s choice. For female characters abound in the works of male writers as well, and male writers from similar backgrounds do get Al-Ghadeer’s attention later on. In her doctoral thesis, she tackled the more difficult case of Derek Walcott. Although her focus is on the two themes of identity and exile, prominent themes in postcolonial literature, the Saudi scholar is also concerned about the way Walcott along with a number of other English-speaking, non-Western writers are viewed by Western critics. Such critics, she says, “identify [these writers] as isolated national off-shoots of English literature.” One task of her study, therefore, “is to correct the false prejudiced attitude by emphasizing the points of originality in the poetry of Derek Walcott” (7).

The scholars discussed in this paper all evince a sense of solidarity that can only come out of personal compassion on personal and cultural levels, a sense one finds in Schimmel, Menocal, and Kabbani, scholars who are not strangers to the predicament of Oriental or a third-world writers, or to the unfair treatment of whole cultures. It is thanks to such passionate and compassionate scholarship that bridges of mutual understanding, respect, and sympathy can be built across cultural and religious chasms.

19 “A Portrait of an Island: Post-Colonial Identity and Exile in the Poetry of Derek Walcott,” A doctoral dissertation submitted to the faculty of Girls’ College of Education, Department of English Language and Literature (2004). This thesis was done under my supervision, but it was the student’s own interest that ultimately drove the research in the path it took.
Works Cited


