

## Myths of the Veiled Kingdom: Representation and Counter-Representation of the Middle East in Selected Contemporary Bestsellers

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### Abstract

The present research stems from an interest in contemporary Western cultural stereotypes of the Middle East and the counter-discourse, which seeks to dismantle such images. One can argue that a monolithic approach to the East still exists, which is based on an opinionated mythic discourse. In his *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes notes that, in such a discourse, myth “distorts”. It is “an inflexion” (1972, 129).

Many bestsellers, which depict images of the Middle East, cater to a long-borne stereotype of a secluded “veiled” realm that conjures up sketches from *The Arabian Nights*. For example, in her bestselling book, *Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women* (1995), Geraldine Brooks delineates her experience of travelling in several Islamic countries and her perspective of what she depicts as an exotic world, very much alien to Western culture, yet satisfying Western curiosity.

The paper, thus, raises the question of whether, at the turn of the twenty-first century, bestsellers from the Western world still represent and interpellate the Middle East by means of a mythic discourse, or, whether they have shifted to a more impartial vantage point. Rajaa Alsanea’s *Girls of Riyadh* (2007), among others, is an example of a bestseller from this pivotal region of the world, proposing a counter-discourse as it attempts to dismantle the myth and tell a different story. The paper will shed light on selected bestsellers from the Middle East, which interpolate cultural misrepresentation.

**Keywords:** Bestsellers; cultural myths; hegemonic discourse; Islam; Middle East; Orientalism; Post-colonialism; representation of women; stereotype; veil.

أساطير العوالم الخفية: تصوير الشرق الأوسط و التصوير المضاد في أعمال مختارة و معاصرة من الكتب الأكثر مبيعا

### المستخلص

يعتمد هذا البحث على الإهتمام بقولبة الثقافة الغربية للشرق الأوسط و الخطاب المضاد الذي يسعى إلى خلخلة تلك الصور المقولبة. فبالرغم من حصول بلدان الشرق الأوسط على إستقلالها في حوالى ستينيات القرن العشرين من الإستعمار الغربي المهيمن، إلا أن الأساطير و القوالب التي ترتبط بالشرق لا زالت قائمة. فمثلا لا زالت العديد من الكتب الأكثر مبيعا في السوق الغربية، خاصة في الولايات المتحدة و بريطانيا، تستحضر الحياة في الشرق الأوسط على أنها مستمدة من حكايات ألف ليلة و ليلة. فعلى سبيل المثال لا الحصر، في كتابها *تسعة مناطق للرغبة: العالم الخفى للمرأة المسلمة* (1995) تسافر

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جيرالدين بروكس الصحفية الأسترالية إلى عدة بلدان إسلامية و تنقل تجربة سفرها من وجهة نظر تعيد قوالب تلك البلدان و تصويرها في عالم يتسم بالغرابية و يصور المرأة على أنها مجرد جسد يجب إخفاءه.

و بناءً عليه يطرح البحث سؤالاً عما إذا كان لا يزال هناك أعمال غربية كثيرة تصور الشرق الأوسط في إطار مقولب في القرن الواحد والعشرين أم قد حدث تغيير واضح نحو تصوير تلك المنطقة من العالم بشكل أكثر موضوعية. و من ناحية أخرى فهناك عدد كبير من الأعمال و هي من الكتب الأكثر مبيعا في العالم العربي و صدرت عن دور نشر عربية تقدم صورة للشرق الأوسط تدحض بها القالب الذي ينتجه الأدب الغربي. و من تلك الأعمال رواية *بنات الرياض* (2005) لرجاء الصانع و التي تقدم صورة بديلة عن الحياة الاجتماعية في المملكة العربية السعودية تتميز فيه المرأة بالتمكين. و هكذا يقدم البحث دراسة مقارنة عن صورة الشرق الأوسط في الكتب الأكثر مبيعا من الشرق و الغرب.

In his *Mythologies* (1972), Roland Barthes postulates that a myth is based on various “modes of ... representation[s]” (110). In other words, it is not just a “written discourse,” but also involves the media, “photography, cinema, reporting, (...), shows, publicity” (110). In the context of an Orientalist discourse, Edward Said describes myth as a “structure of thought,” “with its codes, (...), and tropes” (*Orientalism* 89). In this respect, the principal notion of the Middle East that dominated the Western colonial worldview was particularly based on a myth, an image of an “Islamic Orient,” which was “perceived as exotic and mysterious” (Lockman 45). Such a prevalent symbolic notion was mythical in the sense that it did not necessarily reflect any specific reality but addressed a fixed and fabricated vision of the colonized cultural other. This opinionated perspective was also coupled with a condemnation of what were considered cultural malpractices that did not conform to the Western cultural norm (Lockman 70). Such malpractices were deemed “barbaric”, a worldview of the Orient justifying the “civilizing mission” of Western imperialism (Lockman 70).

In the light of the mythical notion of the Islamic Orient, the aim of the paper is to investigate representations of the Middle East in selected bestsellers and works of popular fiction. It will, therefore, track the veil motif as an embodiment of Muslim culture so as to trace the compromising discourse adopted by Geraldine Brooks’s *Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women* (1995). On the other hand, it will equally examine the counter-representation of the myth, as it is illustrated by Middle Eastern bestsellers and works of popular fiction, particularly Rajaa Alsanea’s *Daughters of Riyadh* (2005) and Hend Al

Qassemi's *The Black Book of Arabia* (2015). Relying on the claim of the stereotyped representation of the Middle East, the paper proposes to explore the driving force of the contention between East and West, as it is manifested in bestsellers, both fiction and non-fiction. The research stems from a concern with a dominant pattern of material produced about the Middle East, focusing on the Muslim woman, and available for the lay reader. It does not claim to offer and cover an exhaustive list of bestsellers, but only a selection of such literature to illustrate the present argument.

During the peak of the colonialist era in the nineteenth-century (Young 2), the Middle East particularly lured the curiosity of European thinkers, writers and artists, who did not necessarily wish to acquire knowledge about a new and different Eastern culture (Lockman 70). Instead, they hoped to confirm their own fantasized vision of a mystifying harem-like existence, the dominant narrative of which asserts that "the Muslim woman is being victimized" (Kahf 1). Against such an ideological backdrop, "Arab women's images were first filtered through Orientalist lenses – mysterious, alluring, secluded" (Cooke 126-7), images which then, further developed in the twentieth-century: "As American contacts with the Arab world grew, the half-naked odalisque was replaced by the completely covered chattel who represented the oppressiveness of Arab patriarchy" (Cooke 126-7).

One of the classical motifs, which illustrates the European exploration of the non-European world, is that of the voyage (Said, "Resistance" 96), during which a traveler sets off on a journey, and is possibly privileged with a glimpse of such a magical, yet mysterious, world. In fact, travel writing in the nineteenth-century, during the apogee of the colonialist project, paved the way, substantiated and justified the colonization of the "other". In short, it justified the *mission civilisatrice*:

travel books, ..., gave European reading publics a sense of ownership, entitlement and familiarity with respect to the distant parts of the world that were being explored, invaded, invested in, and colonized. ... They created a sense of curiosity, excitement, and

adventure, and even moral fervor about European expansionism (Pratt, *Imperial Eyes* 3).

Given that the Middle East is currently a major focus in global politics, there is, perhaps, better awareness of its culture and is, hence, apprehended from a more impartial perspective. However, despite this fact, Western popular fiction, and bestsellers for that matter, still manifest fossilized images and preconceived ideas of this part of the world. Surprisingly, the stereotyped images continue to manifest themselves in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as “the mainstream media persists in utilizing images of veiled women to illustrate and symbolize the presumed alterity of Muslims, continuing historical Orientalist stereotypes within contemporary debates” (Lewis 2-3).

In the face of such a hegemonic discourse, and with reference to Bill Ashcroft, et al.’s renowned book *The Empire Writes Back*, Edward Said notes that one way of resisting a compromising discourse of the Orient is by “writing back to the metropolitan cultures, disrupting the European narratives of the Orient and Africa, replacing them with either a more playful or a more powerful new narrative style” (“Resistance” 97). The process of “writing back” is not necessarily addressed to one particular work, “but to the whole of the discursive field within which such a text operated and continues to operate in post-colonial worlds” (Tiffin 101). The disruptive discourse attempts to demystify the dominant discourse, “to counter its effects by transforming” it (Ashcroft, *Post-Colonial Transformation* 14).

The dialectic between East and West manifests itself in, what Mary Louise Pratt calls, the “contact zones”, by which she means “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination – ... as they are lived out across the globe today” (*Imperial Eyes* 7). Such a cultural dialectic unfolds by means of “transculturation”, which is “a phenomenon of the contact zone,” (Pratt, “Arts of the Contact Zone” 36), that is, “processes whereby members of subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted by a dominant or metropolitan culture” (Pratt, “Arts of the Contact Zone” 36), “what they

absorb into their own, how they use it, and what they make it mean” (Pratt, *Imperial Eyes* 7).

The contact zone is the space of negotiation, where culturally different people are involved in contention (Pratt, *Imperial Eyes* 8). Pratt calls the hegemonic discourse involved in this contention an ethnographic text. She notes: “ethnographic texts are those in which European metropolitan subjects represent to themselves their others (...)” (“Arts of the Contact Zone” 35). In turn, it is defied by a counter-discourse, what Pratt calls, an autoethnographic text: “autoethnographic texts are representations that the so-defined others construct in response to or in dialogue with those texts” (“Arts of the Contact Zone” 35). In other words, an autoethnographic text is “a text in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them”(“Arts of the Contact Zone” 35).

Thus, in the process of the research, it was interesting to find a whole range of material, which, at one and the same time, exoticizes the Middle East, as well as depicts it as barbaric. For instance, Jean P. Sasson, is a New York Times bestselling author, whose non-fictional work mainly revolves around women in the Middle East, particularly in the Arabian Peninsula. Among her most famous publications are: *Princess* (1996), which, alternatively, has the more luring title of *Princess: A True Story of Life behind the Veil in Saudi Arabia* (1992); *Princess Sultana’s Daughters* (1994), *Princess Sultana’s Circle* (1999), as well as *Daughters of Arabia* (2004), among other titles. In 1994, *The Complete Princess Trilogy* was published, and, in 2012, appeared the *Princess Trilogy Study Guide* by John Gregson Crawford, which is even recommended on the list of *Goodreads*. Many of these books are available as audio books, audio CDs and in kindle editions, which is also very indicative of the demand for such material.

Sasson’s *Princess*, for example, recounts the experience of a royal Saudi princess, who suffers gender discrimination at the hands of her next of kin. In an effort to convey her perspective of a miserable life experience, Sasson gives her a voice, beginning the introductory chapter in the following manner: “In a land where kings still rule, I am a princess.

You must know me only as Sultana,” (15) “The history of our women is buried behind the black veil of secrecy” (22). The prevalent tone is reminiscent of an imprisoned princess, an emblem of a damsel in distress, who weaves the tale of an exotic, imaginary fairy-tale land of “once upon a time,” in which the incarcerated princess endures a distressing ordeal, and hopes for salvation.

Other such works include Carmen Bin Laden’s *The Veiled Kingdom* (2004), the cover of which promises to grant the reader “a unique insight into Saudi society and the Bin Laden family” (Amazon). The book’s author, born in Switzerland to a Swiss father and an Iranian mother, was married to, and later divorced from, a Bin Laden family member. She had lived in Saudi Arabia, and, spurred by the horror of 9/11, found it necessary and urgent to abandon her discretion and disclose her own version of one of the world’s major source of terrorism. To tempt the readers to buy the book, Amazon fervently advertises the published product, which preserves the paradigm of the Western traveler, who sets on a voyage to the Orient to subject such an unusual and strange world to his/her own gaze. As it is the case in previous precepts, there is an attraction towards an alleged inaccessible world, which the outsider is privileged to reach:

Carmen’s story **takes us inside** one of the most powerful, **secretive and repressive kingdoms** in the world and the Bin Laden family’s role within it, and she is one of the few women to have acquired, through her husband, **intimate knowledge of the inner workings of this society** (Amazon) (*my emphasis*).

Qanta Ahmed offers another interesting work entitled *In the Land of Invisible Women: A Female Doctor’s Journey in the Saudi Kingdom* (2008). To advertise the book, Amazon states on its website that “In this stunningly written book, a **Western trained** Muslim doctor brings alive **what it means for a woman to live in the Saudi Kingdom**” (*my emphasis*). The author is a Muslim medical doctor, who is endowed with a Western mindset, and is given the opportunity to travel to Saudi Arabia, from which she communicates to the reader the inside story of a hitherto concealed world and her experience of it. Her profession allows her to

unravel the rigid life endured by the women incarcerated in the inner sanctum of a contemporary “harem”. Arabia is, once again, fantasized.

In addition, one can particularly notice the book covers of many of these paperbacks, which calls for shedding light on the function of these books’ paratextual elements. Initially introduced by Gérard Genette, the paratext is concerned with elements that are found in the book itself, such as the book cover, pictures, a preface, footnotes, titles of chapters (the epitext), or posters, films and interviews that shed light on the text (the peritext) (5). The paratext’s function is “to capture readers and influence the work’s reception” (Watts 2). It is “the way in which publishers appeal to stereotypes of foreign cultures (...)” (Batchelor 38).

In the present context, the book covers promise to gratify the curiosity of Western readers by granting them a precious glimpse of this sanctified place. One can presume that the reader is lured by the repetitive phrase, which initially establishes an analogy between the veiled woman and the veiled kingdom. One can read the following clichés on the book covers of such bestsellers: “life behind the veil,” “a “veiled kingdom,” “the hidden world” and “invisible women”. It is further corroborated by a fixed stereotyped image of a woman wearing the *hijab*, or even, the *niqab*, whose face is totally covered, except for her eyes, and who becomes an embodiment of an unrelenting discourse. Accordingly, such bestsellers promise to delight the palate of the curious reader as they advertise a dominant pattern, a visually stereotyped image of veiled hidden women peeping out of an inner sanctum, which is principally transposed on the covers of these paperbacks. The pictures connote a recurrent image of closed domains, totally concealed from the rest of the world, while hosting a rigid and oppressive network of family relationships, particularly detrimental to women. Whoever is able to have access to such a world is deemed privileged. One can deduce that through the various representations of the Middle East in such bestsellers, there is an underlying discourse, which still maintains the myth of a stereotyped Middle East, what Annique Heijmans calls, in her study, a “veil fetish” (7), that is, the mystifying effect of the concept of the veil, which allows

publishing houses to sell such books about Islam and the Middle East (Nomani, “Veiled Babes”).

The veiled woman embodies the exotic “invisible”/hidden kingdom, which is, a mere fossilized notion of the Muslim Arab world. What is worthy of note is the fact that the concept of the harem with its attributes of exoticism, secrecy and mystery are transposed on the woman’s body. In turn, the Muslim woman is presented on the covers of bestsellers as a metonym of the harem and whose veil acquires a magic-like characteristic, which makes of it a fetish, as well as serves to contribute to the mysterious attribute associated with both the woman’s body hidden underneath it and the world it embodies.

On the other hand, in the process of the present research, it was also interesting to find that there is a large number of bestsellers published in the Middle East, responding to, as well as implicating and disrupting the Western hegemonic narrative. For instance, Ehab Mo’awwad’s *al-rejāl min bulāq wal-nissā’ min awwel feiṣal (Men are from Bulaq and Women are from Feissal)* (2012), re-envisioning John Gray’s *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus* (1992). The American bestseller explores and accounts for the differences between men and women and hence, the challenges confronting married couples in the American culture, and the Western culture, in general. Mo’awwad’s book, on the other hand, a bestseller which was published twenty years later and reprinted over seventeen times, rejects and mocks John Gray’s work. He argues that Gray neither addresses nor, for that matter, accounts for marital relationships in al-`ashwā’iyyāt (the Egyptian slum community). Conversely, Mo’awwad, whose book stems from and reflects upon the slum environment, is able to move conjugality to a more local and hence, relevant context. Particularly tinted with a sense of humor, it is a celebration of marital relationships in Egyptian popular culture, illustrating an obvious counter-discourse, whereby the author repudiates the Western bestseller and offers material which brings to bear upon his own home culture.



In another example, Omar Taher's *Raṣf maṣr* (2010) draws on the title and is a reminder of *Waṣf miṣr* (the *Description de l'Égypte* (1809-1828)), the massive material, which is the epitome of the colonialist project, and which Edward Said describes as "that great collective appropriation of one country by another" (*Orientalism* 84). The twenty-three volume project concretizes the subjection of the Egyptian colonized to the gaze of the French colonizer, who studied and interpreted the country from his own perspective. In contrast, while Taher's book title conjures up the great French institutionalized endeavor, closely associated with the French Expedition to Egypt, his book is concerned with the manners, customs and mentality of the modern Egyptian middle-class. He draws on popular culture as he sarcastically and humorously self-criticizes the Egyptian society, while depicting the monolithic challenges, which the Egyptian citizens daily confront and with which they attempt to cope. In such instances, the mainstream hegemonic ethnographic discourse is counterbalanced by a marginalized subaltern autoethnographic counter-discourse.

Thus, a totally different tone is adopted in bestsellers written from a Middle Eastern perspective. They either depict quasi-dystopian worlds, such as the Egyptian Alaa El Aswany's *The Yacoubian Building*, lamenting the decadence of a bygone prosperous age, while highlighting political and social corruption, or sarcastically address the social mores of everyday life, which is illustrated by Mo'awwad and Taher. The fixed approach of a neo-colonialist lens, which insists on subjecting the Eastern culture to the Western gaze so as to degrade it, is contested by works of Arab popular culture, as it will be elucidated below.

Geraldine Brooks's *Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women* (1995) manifests a hegemonic discourse, while a counter-discourse or autoethnographic text is illustrated by such works as Rajaa Alसानea's *Banāt al-riyyaḍ* (*Girls of Riyadh*) and Hend Al Qassemi's *The Black Book of Arabia*. Brooks promises to decipher "an understanding of the women behind the veils," whereby the "journey to Arabia" (Ahmed 11) is translated into an account analogous to what Pratt calls an ethnographic text. On the other hand, the counter-discourse is addressed

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towards the whole “discursive field” (Tiffin 101) rather than targeting any specific work.

Brooks relates her travelling experience to several Middle Eastern capital cities as a foreign correspondent, where there is an enactment of the mythical voyage to the East. She highlights women’s ordeal, their participation in the society and their struggle to grope with a socio-cultural environment which compromises their status. Despite the fact that she claims that she seeks to convey a more objective vision of Islam, and a more uncompromising portrayal of women’s plight, she fails to avoid the various and common pitfalls of the “us” and “them” discourse, in which she adopts a condescending rhetoric. Her project still retains the underlying tone of the dialectic relationship between a “civilized” and superior Western world addressing a backward inferior Middle East, in which women’s private lives can only be discreetly deciphered by the feat of a Western savant.

In her prologue, Brooks initially records the challenging and privileged access to the Middle East. Although she admits that she had a preconceived idea, (“I had imagined the Middle East differently. White-robed emirs. Almond-eyed Persians. Camels marking the horizon like squiggles of Arabic calligraphy” (6)), she is disillusioned (“it was hard to find the Middle East I’d imagined” (6)). However, as a Western journalist and news correspondent, she still maintains and focuses on “the women behind the veil”. She notes: “For almost a year I fretted and kicked at the Middle East’s closed doors. Then, (...), I looked up and noticed the window that was open only to me” (7). She underlines and is mystified with the restricted and self-contained attribute associated with the East. Furthermore, her sense of being privileged with access to such a realm, one that she finds apart from the rest of the world, still underscores the mentality of the Western traveler hoping to find the mystifying exoticism of a bygone colonialist age. The closed hidden world is the “contact zone,” which witnesses the East-West encounter, the space of which inspires an ethnographic account from the point of view of a Western traveler, who seeks to endorse the preconceived idea of the Muslim woman’s victimization, backwardness, oppression and passivity. In their account,

the writers of these bestsellers emphasize the privilege of being granted a glimpse of the “harem”, and focus on women’s status within the confines of a quasi-cloistered social existence.

In Brooks’s text, the language is tainted by a subjective perspective that is unable to depict the Middle Eastern culture as merely different. During her visit to Jordan, for example, she cannot help but perceive this alien culture as a series of scenes or images from *The Arabian Nights*, which, in the Western collective consciousness, is the epitome of lust, libertinage, excess and an imaginary realm: “That whole long, scorching day passed in a blur of tableaux from *The Arabian Nights*” (124). In short, the comparison with the famous literary work helps “to consolidate pre-existing prejudices and to strengthen stereotypes” with reference to the Orient (Sabouri and Karimzadeh 127).

During a visit to Iran, Brooks’s inflected perspective is embodied in a sarcastic tone, which is prevalent over the whole text, as, in several instances, she pokes fun at Muslim socio-cultural values. For example, in her depiction of women wearing the chador, she subjects them to her own demeaning gaze, as, on several occasions, she mocks their appearance. She remarks: “With chadors pulled tight around their squatting figures, they looked like a trio of ninepins waiting for a bowling ball” (14). In Saudi Arabia, she notes: “Saudi women trod carefully behind their husbands, peering from behind gauzy face veils and 360-degree black cloaks that made them look, as Guy de Maupassant once wrote, “like death out for a walk”” (21). The similes that Brooks uses to depict the veiling women compares them to incongruous and anachronistic objects, which carry a mocking disrespectful tone.

On several occasions in her book, and, in her engagement with the Middle-Eastern culture, while allegedly claiming her objectivity about her portrayal of this part of the world, Brooks conjures up major colonialist figures, such as Winston Churchill and T. E. Lawrence (a. k. a. Lawrence of Arabia). The latter was a prominent figure in the Orientalist project, and described by Said as an “imperial agent[s]” (*Orientalism* 240). Brooks notes in her chapter about her Jordanian visit: “Winston Churchill used **to boast** that he’d **created** Jordan on a Sunday afternoon **with the stroke of**

a **pen**. At a meeting in Cairo in 1921, Churchill and T. E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia) **doodled the amoeba-shaped state** of Transjordan onto the map of the Arabian Peninsula to provide a throne for their ally, ..." (122) (my emphasis). The condescending language is prevalent in the passage, emphasizing the hegemonic discourse. In another instance, and on a visit to Saudi Arabia, she creates an analogy, and a very striking one for that matter, between Lawrence and herself:

When I opened the door of the air-conditioned jeep, a blast of hot air hit me like a gust from a crematorium. My eyeballs felt desiccated, like dried peas. T. E. Lawrence described the heat of these Arabian sands: "The sun came up like a drawn sword and struck us speechless." (144).

Typical of a Western ethnographic text, Brooks's account of the Middle East illustrates many examples of systematic comparison of East and West, to the advantage of the latter. It is possible to read, in one of the chapters recounting her visit to Iran, the following remark: "Leila had grown up in Iran **but** vacationed every other summer with her grandparents in Missouri. In Kansas City she enjoyed the **freewheeling** games of her **American** pals. But **back home the walls of the courtyard closed in on her**" (101) (my emphasis). The use of the coordinating conjunction "but" compares and contrasts life in Iran and in Missouri, respectively. The contrast between the two types of life is further developed in the following sentence, where the unconventional and rebellious games, which Leila is given the chance to temporarily enjoy, are at odds with the home context, where she has to endure the confines of her domestic environment. Brooks celebrates the American type of life, which is corroborated by the use of such words as "enjoy" and "freewheeling", as opposed to the constricting type of life, which Leila has to endure in the Muslim context, where her movement is limited by "the walls of the courtyard" that "closed in on her".

At various instances in her travelogue, Brooks further juxtaposes the Western and Eastern contexts. During her visit to Saudi Arabia, she is alarmed at the fact that while, in America of the 1960s, the National Guard was summoned to maintain "racial desegregation in schools", in

Saudi Arabia, the role of the National Guard was to secure and preserve the opening of an all girls' school (147). Brooks concludes that "Like most Westerners, I always imagined the future as an inevitably **brighter place**, (...). But in Gaza and Saudi Arabia, what I saw gave me a different view. From there, the future is a **place that looks darker** every day" (166). Thus, according to Brooks, the West is the benchmark against which the standard of life, in general, is to be measured. Once again, the juxtaposition of East and West yields a stark contrast, exposing, what the author sees as the Arab society's oppressive values, which are detrimental to women. By means of such comparisons, Brooks maintains, to her own advantage, a structure of binary opposites, one that favors the Western context to its Eastern counterpart.

The predominant motif and the most mystifying and ambivalent element in the whole of Brooks's book is the veil. The Western gaze associates the concealment of the body with conservative patriarchal values that are restrictive to women. Brooks sheds light on the meaning of the veil in different Arab and Muslim countries. During a visit to the Gaza Strip, she recounts her experience, during which she meets with female students at the university and notes: "Driving from the huge military roadblock that divides the Gaza Strip from Israel, I hadn't seen a single unveiled woman" (155). During her visit to Iran, for instance, she notes that women's wearing of the chador is a political act to defy the American-backed *Shah*. Brooks confesses that some women, such as Sahar from Egypt, willingly put on the veil, out of their own free will. In other instances, where Brooks's gaze is equally underscored, there is an urge to see what is concealed under the chador. About one of the Iranian women, she deduces that "In the end, under all the concealing devices – the chador, jalabiya or abaya, the magneh, roosarie or shayla – was the body" (32).

On the other hand, on several occasions, Brooks, avails herself of a chador, in order to keep a low profile and move around Iran unnoticed: "What was I to say? That the chador was great camouflage for getting into places I wasn't supposed to go?" (17). The chador acquires different significance. Her rejection of the veiling garment defeats her, as she

benefits from it for her own disguise. Hence, the function and significance of the veil becomes ambivalent. In this respect, towards the end of the text, Brooks appears to illustrate the idea of the “veil fetish”, as she personifies her chador, the key by means of which she is given access to the “veiled” world, and which proves to have an ambiguous function:

“Limp on a hanger is the chador itself, the big black square of silk and synthetic that I used to despise. But that well-worn black rag stained on the hem and torn on the shoulder, has become an old friend. Like a 1980s dress-for-success suit, it has been the camouflage that helped me do my job in a world where I wasn’t quite welcome” (234).

The “veiled kingdom”, the equivalent of the harem-like existence, proves to be an antiquated paradigm. It is the “contact zone” within the framework of which the cultural contention takes place, and which is counteracted by its antidote, namely social media and popular fiction, as it is further explored below.

The two main Arab texts, which I would like to closely examine, offer an autoethnographic counter-discourse, which dismantles the outdated paradigm of the “veiled world”. Saudi writer Rajaa Alsanea originally published her debut novel, *Girls of Riyadh*, in Arabic in 2005. Despite the fact that it was banned in Saudi Arabia and published in Beirut, the novel immediately proved to be a success, which accounts for its translation, two years later, into many languages, including English in 2007. The novel depicts four young women in their twenties as they grapple with Saudi culture and traditions, illustrating prospective love and marital relationships. Hend Al Qassemi’s *The Black Book of Arabia* (2015), is a collection of short stories, originally written in English. Al Qassemi is an Emirati businesswoman, who depicts the ordinary lives of women from different Arab countries, while adopting a humorous and sarcastic tone. The stories disclose gossip that takes place in several inner Arab social circles, particularly revolving around women’s conjugal life. Both writers zoom in on the personal lives of ordinary people from the Arabian Gulf, which counter-acts Brooks’s stereotyped depiction of the Muslim society.

Alsanea's book cover is basically sketched in a cartoon-like style, with *The Arabian Nights* paraphernalia of a grand palace, a palm tree and an overpowering crescent. Unlike the Western bestsellers' stark pictures of women behind the veil on their front covers, Alsanea's book discreetly indicates that the novel is concerned with women's stories, by exhibiting, as a caricature, a pair of high-heeled shoes and a mobile with a heart on its screen. Furthermore, in the title, the word "Riyadh" is typed in capital letters so as to emphasize a depiction of the seat of conservatism from a different perspective. In addition, in the light of Pratt's notion of transculturation, the back cover advertises the book by referring to American popular culture, as it states: "Imagine Sex and the City, if the city in question were Riyadh". As such, the concept of the hidden realm is totally subverted as material from American popular culture is transposed onto the city, known for being the epitome of rigid patriarchy.

In addition, the back cover takes the book to a different level, as the English translation specifically addresses the Western reader. It states: "Now in English, Rajaa Alsanea's bold ... novel **exposes** the hidden lives of young upper-class women and their personal conflicts with cultural tradition and **offers Westerners an unprecedented glimpse into a society often veiled from view**" (my emphasis). The translated version specifically addresses and offers a fresh look at the "veiled world", an inside story, as it were, the introduction of which heavily relies on parody. In this example, there is a conscious and deliberate process of exposing the young women's "hidden lives", which defeats Brooks's insistence that she is privileged with access to and is being clandestinely infiltrated into this conservative part of the world. In Alsanea's example, access to Saudi society is granted by a member from within this same society, this time, totally exposing it to the world.

The "Author's Note" of the translated edition also addresses the Western reader and initiates a process of *writing back* to the mythical discourse. Interestingly, the translated version is transformed into an account that hopes to defy the stereotyped representation of Saudi society. Alsanea sarcastically states:

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It seemed to me, and to many other Saudis, that the Western world still perceives us either romantically, as the land of the Arabian Nights and the land where bearded sheikhs sit in their tents surrounded by their beautiful harem women, or politically, as the land that gave birth to Bin Laden and other terrorists, the land where women are dressed in black from head to toe and where every house has its own oil well in the backyard! ..., I felt it is my duty to reveal another side of Saudi life to the Western world” (Alsanea, “Author’s Note,” *Girls of Riyadh*).

Thus, the prefatory note initially harks back to and parodies “the representation of gender in the paratext” (Watts 9) of Western bestsellers. The translated text becomes a different text in its own right, which addresses a different set of readers, and hence, adopts a counter-discourse. In response to Brooks’s ethnographic work, Alsanea offers an autoethnographic version, whereby there is a process of transculturation. The Saudi writer borrows stereotyped images, which are usually used to condemn the East, and mocks them. She, for instance, refers to *The Arabian Nights*, which is a well-known symbol of the romantic exotic image attributed to the East, to negate the western discourse. In addition, Alsanea exaggerates the image, whereby she introduces an anomaly by placing the oil well in each and everyone’s backyard. Therefore, in the face of the imposed Western image, Alsanea promises her novel “to reveal another side” of the story. East and West negotiate the myth of the veiled world, which is the “contact zone” of contention, as proposed by Pratt.

Al Qassemi claims that her stories are true accounts of various marital examples from countries of the Arabian Gulf. The paratextual elements of the book evidently formulate an ambivalent message as the author juggles with cultural markers. The “**black**” book promises to disclose the actual and inner dynamics of the Arab society. The use of a totally black color as a background for the cover suggests social and personal scandals, but also evokes Brooks’s reference to and study of “the hidden world” embodied by the veiled or totally covered woman in a black cloak. Significantly, Al Qassemi uses the generic and titular term “Arabia” to identify the content of her book, which is reminiscent of *The*



*Arabian Nights* and its symbolic significance of a romantic and remote mystifying East. At the bottom of the book's front cover, one can read the following rhetorical question: "Who said Arab women are weak?" a statement which harks back to the subjugating discourse, which constantly imposes a stereotypical image, and so, conversely, this collection of tales promises "to tell a different story".

In addition, the back cover presents an informative note, which extends and confirms the message of the front cover. It, once again, evokes the fantastic tales of *The Thousand and One Nights*, as it introduces the author as "a modern day Scheherazade" (*The Black Book of Arabia* – back cover), who "spins fantastic tales of love," and "look[s] into the personal lives of a whole range of men and women – everyone from princesses to paupers and from sultans to sorcerers" (back cover). In a jesting and ironic tone, the book seems to promise the reader tales of an exotic remote land, which in fact, is a collection of stories reflecting real life and modern day "Arabia". The flippant sarcastic tone is further corroborated by a discreet phrase at the top of the back cover, which reads as "#ArabSecrets," ("hashtag Arab Secrets") implicating the veiled realm, that constantly summons an overused image of enclosed premises shutting out the external world altogether.

Al Qassemi's book confirms the process of transculturation, as, this time, she draws on western classical fairy tales, as well as Anglo-American popular culture for the choice of titles of her stories, such as "The Princess and the Pauper", "From Riches to Rags", and "Sleeping with the Nanny", which resists the claim of exoticism, attributed to this part of the world. In fact, Al Qassemi "writes back" to Brooks as she displaces the so-called hidden world to the Western world. Two of her stories of Arab households are set in London and New York, respectively, which subverts and totally obliterates the myth of the veiled kingdom.

In response to the envisioned veiled exotic Middle East, Alsanea hopes to unravel the details of four Saudi women's lives, in their prime of life, who do not live in closed quarters, and who experience various adventures and mishaps with young men. Her novel follows in the footsteps of a Lebanese talk show called *seera wenfata7et* سيرة وانفتحت

("A Story Disclosed"), the title of which the author slightly modifies to suit her narrative project as *seereh wenfadha7et* *سيرة وانفضحت* ("A Story Unmasked"). Each chapter is initiated by an entry in the form of an email addressed to a yahoo group, called "seerehwenfadha7et@yahoogroups.com," (1) which illustrates a process of unveiling as opposed to the Western imagined illusion of a veiled world, posing a challenge to unravel. Alsanea, thus, addresses the challenging customs and traditions of the Saudi society by means of openly parodying the conservative socio-cultural practices in Riyadh, the Saudi capital. But, unlike the victimized women usually depicted by Western representations, and which Sasson, Brooks and Ahmed, for instance, highlight in their narratives, Alsanea captures more empowered women, who express their discontent at their oppression. Although they live in a rigidly patriarchal environment, they are not depicted as mere pawns trapped in the hands of their male counterparts.

Alsanea offers a version of Saudi life which becomes open and subject to minute scrutiny and sharp criticism as the seriousness and sanctity of the mythically imagined world is turned upside down to be the topic of an informal chat over the internet, a mere interaction in cyberspace. In this context, cyberspace is explored as offering potential "liberatory prospects" (Cooke 119). In other words, by making use of a yahoo group, she is able "to intervene more readily in the dominant discourse," (Ashcroft, *The Key Concepts* 20) so as "to interpolate" her "own cultural realities" and "use that dominant language to describe those realities to a wide audience of readers" (*The Key Concepts* 20). Interestingly, Alsanea's novel was initially meant to readers of her own social context ("Author's Note"). Yet, in its English version, it consciously addresses the Western reader and deliberately forms a counter-discourse which contends with the myths of such a discourse.

The opening lines of the novel depict the elusive narrator as the four girls' mouthpiece ("I am writing to give a voice to those girls" (204)), as well as a clownish figure, as it were, who will defy the concept of "the world hidden behind the veil." She transforms the seriousness of the sanctified secret world into a mere spectacle:

Ladies and Gentlemen: You are invited to join me in one of the most explosive scandals and noisiest, wildest all-night parties around. Your personal tour guide – and that's *moi* – will reveal to you a new world, a world closer to you than you might imagine ...

Who has got enough inner courage to read the naked truth laid out on the World Wide Web (...)

Tonight's the night. The heroes of my story are people among you, from you and within you, for from the desert we all come and to the desert we shall all return (1).

The narrator is loud and makes of her immediate social context a spectacle, in which she mocks her society: "Readers: prepare yourselves. I'm ready to disclose the first scandal!" (4). The act of "disclosing" is a process of unveiling, which subverts Brooks's account and claim of clandestinely being privileged with a glimpse of such a conservative world, starkly at odds with Western culture. Instead of being perceived within the confines of enclosed and cloistered premises, the female narrator claims her entitled public space on cyberspace, which guarantees total disclosure and unveiling. In one of her collective email entries, Alsanea's anonymous narrator observes: "I only ask for a small space on the World Wide Web to tell my stories through" (93).

Alsanea depicts the stories of four young women, who are friends, and whose lives are entangled with each other. The writer's anonymous narrator recounts their joy, sadness and predicaments in a tightly conservative patriarchal society. In one of the stories, the young women decide to attend their friend's bachelorette party in disguise. The adopted attire is, thus, described:

But these *abayas* weren't the loose teepees that you see women wearing on the street. These were fitted at the waist and hips and they were very attractive! With the *abayas*, the girls wore silk *lithaams* that covered everything from the bridge of their noses to the bottom of their throats, which of course only emphasized the beauty of their kohl-lined eyes, their tinted contact lenses and their outlandish eye-glasses all the more (17).

Unlike Brooks's demeaning reference to the veil, a symbol of backwardness, subordination, passivity and helplessness here, it is depicted as a disguise which highlights the four women's beauty. The disguise, which Brooks assumes with her chador, is for the purpose of stealthily and discreetly entering into a world, in which she is perhaps unwelcome. Instead, in the passage above, wearing the *abaya* is for the purpose of highlighting the women's beauty. Therefore, in this context, the veil highlights the woman's body and does not conceal her. In this context, the function of the veiling garment dismantles the conventional image of the veil as depicted by Brooks.

Al Qassemi's collection of short stories illustrates and portrays the details of marital lives in different Arab social contexts. She, thus, **unveils** the inner workings of Arab marital households in different countries from the Arabian Gulf, while totally deconstructing and disposing of the secrecy, mystery and sanctity of Arabia. Similar to Alsanea, her collection carries a sarcastic tone, which dismantles the imposed western stereotypical image. Alternately, the stories are told by an anonymous narrator who assumes the role of omniscience, giving voice as well as empowering her female protagonists. The female characters are endowed with agency, as they take their lives into their own hands, and attempt to struggle with their conjugal predicaments.

The various marital cases take the form of anecdotes, in which the female storyteller conveys her plan to protect her marital household, while occasionally enduring bewilderment at her husband's strange and awkward conduct. In fact, the stories revolve around the tricks and wiles of the female protagonist/narrator to solve her marital problems. The female protagonist is at the center of the plot, unveiling her own life-story. In addition, the women are portrayed "unveiled", in the sense that there is no mention of this cultural marker. For instance, in a story entitled "Voodoo in New York", one of the female characters is depicted in the following manner:

A petite bronze but a stone overweight, Maha was attractive for her age, with a pretty face and round features; tiny, fat hands with long, painted nails with crystals glued onto them; and thick, dark

hair. She was very energetic and just a few years older than Maryam (150).

In this story, a Kuwaiti couple live in New York City, where the husband is working on his PhD in architecture. Initially, the young wife felt a sense of alienation and loneliness. One day, as she goes out shopping, she felt that “New York was not Arabia, where shops and bazaars were open from morning till late night” (150). In this instance, Maryam subjects the western world to her own gaze, as she establishes a comparison of East and West, to the advantage of the former. The comparison, therefore, allows Al Qassemi to turn the tables on Brooks.

In the face of Brooks’s “veil fetish”, Rajaa Alsanea openly and easily discloses the minute complexities of her social environment over the internet. She depicts four young women, who “literally and figuratively shed traditional garb as they negotiate” the various aspects of their lives, whether love, career or, even, rebellion (*Girls of Riyadh*, back cover). As such, bestsellers depicting the Middle East are engaged in a veil-unveil dialectic, as they make visible what is invisible and reveal, rather than conceal their world. This reflects the dialogism of preserving versus subverting the myth of the veiled kingdom.

By subverting the myth, the counter-discourse becomes empowering. The Arab female narrator speaks from the very heart of the Arab society, of which she is an active and assertive member. She is, once again, a descendant of the prototypical storyteller, Scheherazade, whose voice becomes heard through her stories. She does not need the mediation of a Western agent, who, in fact, silences her and imposes on her the voice of hegemony, subordination and oppression. Instead, in the face of the victimized woman depicted in the Western bestsellers, the narrator of these stories is intelligent, wise, resourceful and empowered.

The “harem-like” existence, which the western traveler seeks and is keen on clandestinely having access to is eliminated in the Arab bestsellers. The notion of the harem is, in fact, displaced as it no longer represents the destination of a western traveler who is keen on probing the secrecy and curiosity of an exotic land. Instead, Alsanea and

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Al Qassemi blur the boundaries between East and West, while the new Arabia which they depict is based on an intercultural exchange, where the two seemingly dichotomous worlds are transposed on each other.

To draw on Pratt's notion of an ethnographic text, Brooks's book is more of a judgment or condemnation of a seemingly alien culture, which she fails to tolerate and accept. Furthermore, her perspective of the veil is ambivalent. It is a constant source to condemn the backwardness of the Muslim world, by means of consolidating and pinpointing the patriarchal oppression and objectification of women, who are principally identified by their body. Instead, both Alsanea and Al Qassemi turn the tables on patriarchy as they speak for themselves, as well as give vent to their joy and woes.

The veil is also Brooks's means of disguise to stealthily penetrate the inner sanctum of the conservative East, in which case it becomes a mere tool for a masquerade. Brooks maintains the motif of the veil and the transposition of the conservative hidden world on the Muslim woman's body. She offers a compromising perspective of Eastern values, traditions and beliefs. Her book depicts the veil as a constant paradigm in which the Muslim woman appears to be imprisoned.

Conversely, while the veil in Brooks's ethnography is a steady means of maintaining a hegemonic discourse, Alsanea and Al Qassemi's bestsellers subvert the significance of the veil, which takes on a different dimension. It becomes a mere abstract concept, as they unveil a social context that is void of exoticism. Both writers are keen on pinpointing the pitfalls of the Arab society, while drawing attention to and mocking the Western monolithic views of an allegedly remote and alien East. They transform the "contact zone" into social space for mere gossip, as the autoethnographic text closely examines and discloses the driving force of the Arab society's sociological concerns. What these bestsellers from the Middle East propose is that theirs is an ordinary type of life, where the women are not mere objectified pawns in the hands of a ruthless oppressive society. Instead, the bestsellers depict empowered women, whose agency is highlighted, as they displace and altogether subvert the myth and mere fantasy of an imagined Arabia.

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