

A Reading of the ‘Insignificant Other’ in the Oriental Texts of the Romantics

Supriya Mandloi

Department of English
The Bhopal School of Social Sciences, Bhopal
supriyabmandloi@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Romantic Age in history is noted for its path-breaking developments and radical theories. The most prominent among them has been the imperial conquest of the East and its further representation as the “Other” in well-known works such as those of Byron, Beckford, Dacre, and other writers. In the projection of the ‘insignificant other’, the already pre-existing ‘insignificant other’ of the so-called civilized society i.e. women have been further projected as weak, dependent, slave-like, and merely as objects of passion and desire. The derogatory depiction of women has either been as objects of desire as in the case of the Arab woman or as docile and pious as the Indian woman existing merely to meet the demands of the ‘significant other’. The present paper is an attempt to explore some prominent oriental narratives as canvasses of the bleak, dark, and lonely world of the female -insignificant other and as subtle connotations of colonial patriarchal voices.

KEYWORDS

Oriental; Insignificant Other; Eastern women; Patriarchal Voices; Colonial.

Edward W. Said, in his ground breaking book, *Orientalism*, defined it as the acceptance in the West of “the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, ‘mind,’ destiny and so on”(Said, 1978). Much before Edward Said’s radical voice on the ‘colonial representation of the East from the lenses of a white man’ was published, the western world had rejected altogether the existence of any other civilized world other than that of the whites. The East was simply a land of snake charmers, fantasy lands with uncultured barbarians; where there was no development, no progress, or in simple words a totally non-existent world. The idea was that this world came into existence only when the West started discovering it through settlements and colonization. The colonial discourse was an extended way of furthering the power dynamics over the ‘Other’ by representing them as strange ‘odd man-outs’.

Edward Said’s discussion of Orientalism, in which he points out that this discourse, this way of knowing the ‘Orient, is a way of maintaining power over itlays more stress on the importance of writing and literary texts in the process of constructing representations of the

other. (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin 77)

Based on Edward Said’s concept of Orientalism the new interpretation of this other half of the world was that it was a world with its patterns of subjugation and authoritarian set-ups, especially for fair sex. In the process of spreading their cultural and imperial roots in the colonies, the colonizer’s mapping of the mind of the natives led them to understand the already existing patriarchal customs of treating the native women who were subsequently represented as the ‘insignificant other’ in the Oriental Discourses – as objects and slaves rather than as human beings. As the ‘Insignificant Other’ of the ‘Other’. Although women for centuries were denied equal rights compared to their male counterparts, in the Romantic Oriental texts the status of the Eastern woman is presented as far more miserable and lowly compared to her western counterparts.

While in their country, women have been suppressed for centuries, being denied the right to education, vote, and above all the right over their own bodies, colonization further humiliated them by their offensive representation in the oriental narratives. Needless to say, the female domination and control by native patriarchy are synonymous with a similar role of colonial rulers over the colonies.

Ever since the beginning of human existence, the patriarchal order has had a great impact on almost everything in the world. Patriarchy is also a part of colonization. Colonization is itself a masculine phenomenon in which the male colonizers victimize native women. The construction of native women in terms of recognizable roles, images, models, and labels occurs in Oriental discourse. The terms of such construction are to be sought in the dominant modes of ideology (patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism). What is required here is an alertness to the political process by which such representation becomes naturalized. (Shabanirad and Marandi 24)

Shabanirad and Marandi's remark bring home the idea that the colonies had naturalized and traditionalized patriarchal roles and Oriental discourses assign roles, labels, and models thus contributing their share as colonial patriarchy. As Young (2001) rightly remarked that women had to fight the double colonization of patriarchal domination in its local as well as its imperial forms. The misery of the women in colonies was heightened by being victimized by their native and colonial masters as objects that only of desire as seen in the Romantic Oriental Narratives, especially in the works of Byron and Beckford.

Byron in his popular work "The Giaour" narrates the oriental tale of a female slave, Leilaa member of her master Hassan's harem, who loves a Giaour and as a result is killed by her master by being drowned in the sea. Such kind of representation of the Orient culture with the so-called wife or woman (her status is not clear) being referred to as a member of her master's

Harem grossly derogates the native woman. Next, she is represented as a life that has no right to 'live'. Either she is to endure subjugation and a slave-like existence or else quit the world. Further, the very world of which she is a part has no mention of either a family or a society rather it's a *harem* which served to safeguard her chastity and protect her from the *evil* eyes of the world or to rightly put, deny her free air and any other male contact. Such kind of portrayal presents the women of the East as vulnerable, meek, and entirely 'insignificant'. All rights reserved with their male counterparts. Such kind of portrayals fed the colonial needs of the Empire and was immensely popular back home. However, they have strongly derogated the native women and culture in the eyes of the world which only added to their already distressing existence.

Macfie reveals how an Orientalist representation of the West and the "Other" carries an East-West divide in an

essentializing and homogenizing move.

Europe (the West, the "self") is [...] essentially rational, developed, humane, superior, authentic, active, creative, and masculine, while the Orient (the East, the "other") (a sort of surrogate, underground version of the West or the "self") is [...] irrational, aberrant, backward, crude, despotic, inferior, inauthentic, passive, feminine, and sexually corrupt. That orientals, unlike occidentals, are by nature mysterious, menacing, irrational, demonic, and sexually corrupt (as cited in Hasan 2012).

Dehumanized representation of women of the east further catapulted the west's superior notion of its assumed greatness and as an emancipator of mankind and womankind too. It is ironic to note how the projection of the women of the Arab and the Eastern world as no less than slaves exposes the way the West itself treats the alleged uncivilized and uneducated blacks in America and other parts of the world. Most of these text project how eastern women for their male counterparts are merely objects of desire and the role of a woman in a household is simply that of a provider - a service provider serving the house; a provider in terms of providing her body to her man-her owner- '*owner of the insignificant other*'.

Most of the Orientalist writings have elaborately explored femininity, concerning Indian and Arabic women. They are represented along with Other objects as vulnerable, inferior, and as commodities who are denied any claims to identity by their male counterparts. While the Arabic woman is presented as over-sexed, fertile, and passionate, her Indian counterpart is submissive, obedient, and devotional. In the first case, she is a provider and in the second case, she is a server. But while in the first case the emphasis is not on providing any monetary benefits to the family rather it is to provide physical satisfaction to her male counterpart who in actuality is considered to be the real provider for the family needs, in the second case she is presented as docile, meek and a server almost like a slave. In both the cases, the function of the woman is to serve and satisfy the man who is the 'significant other'.

Western writers are responsible for the stereotyped images of the nativewoman that has remained current ever since as being truly representative of the whole species (Shabanirad and Marandi 32). It has been a never-ending saga for the women in both the Arab World and the Indian subcontinent to shed these stereotypes which tend to eclipse their existence, caging them in identities and roles which have ironically

won name and fame for the Oriental writers.

It is also interesting to observe how these roles are defined strictly in the Arab and the Indian scenario. While in the Indian scenario the projection of the women does not focus on her as an object of desire as the Indian social and religious setups cannot visualize women as objects of desire within the family. They are assigned roles where they are devotional and submissive since in Hindu religion a woman is akin to Goddess and therefore projecting them as objects of desire within the household seemed to contradict the Indian mindset. On the contrary, the depiction of Eastern women has been less as devotional and submissive and more as objects of passion and desire. These dual shades of representing the 'eastern insignificant other' put these women in modes of accepting, adapting, and tolerating rather than commanding, demanding, or controlling. In the romantic oriental narratives, the Arab women become a provider and the Indian women become a server. Both these roles of the insignificant others have canvassed not only the western perception of the east but also evidenced the layers of mindsets operating within social and familial set-ups. We strongly notice colonial pride and superiority surfacing in these works where they can be rescued only by white males. Even their husbands are shown as tyrants who have held them as captives. One example can be seen in Byron's *Don Juan* (Canto V) where the description of the Arab woman goes as,

Large dark-eye showed deep Passion's
force,
Though sleeping like a lion near a source

These lines represent the vulnerable woman in Arabia and India who are always unsafe and need to be rescued. The rescuer will be the superior 'White'. So as Gayatri Spivak says, 'the white man who is saving the brown woman from the brown man' (Spivak 1988). Byron's "The Giaour" also paints the master of the harem as a tyrant who ends up killing Leila the member of his harem for loving the Giaour. So, the offensive picture presented is not only of the 'insignificant other' but also of the 'significant other' when contrasted with the 'significant' only savior white male. Though the native woman is majorly involved in household chores and is quite dutiful, yet the focus is more on objectifying her rather than presenting her as an individual with an identity.

Further, these texts represent the East as seductive where western masculinity and femininity are at risk from the Arab/ Moor/ Indian. An example from *Dacre's Zofloya*:

"Never till this moment, had she been

so near the prison of the Moor-had such powerful fascination dwelt around him, that she felt incapable of withdrawing from his arms..... Did she behold that beautiful and majestic visage...? All thought of his inferiority vanished." (Dacre 234)

Though we notice that the white woman is ashamed of her sexual desires but at the same time she is mesmerized by the sensuality of the Moor. Most of these Oriental Discourses speak about the woman, their over-sexed brown masters, or the social order that is responsible for subduing them. Belittling the social order and religion of the native Arab and Indian woman automatically catapults the English religion and social order which claims to have emancipated its woman.

The eastern woman is not presented as educated, progressive, or social. Mostly she is presented as having an isolated existence within the four walls of her prison-like house with a tyrant like a husband and therefore often involved in the pursuit of the dark, mysterious, or the sensuous. William Beckford's *Gothic Tale*, *Vathek* (1786) represents Carathis, *Vathek's* mother who is given to mysterious powers, dark art, and satanic magic is worth noting.

By secret stairs known only to herself and her son, she first repaired to the mysterious recesses in which were deposited mummies. under the guard of fifty female negroes mute and blind of the right eye were preserved the oil of the most venomous serpents, rhinoceros horns, and woods... a presentiment that she might someday enjoy some intercourse with the infernal powers. (Beckford 1786)

These traits in the eastern made them more tempting to the western male as that element of something dark, seductive, and mysterious was till now unknown to the white and bright western world....de Beauvoir maintained that "otherness is a fundamental category of human thought" (Beauvoir 1989).

The term insignificant other is also loaded with subtle connotations. 'Insignificant' implying no significance in terms of existence, contribution, and identity. The term 'other' again reveals the hierarchy of secondary and primary. Women of the East are not represented as standing or existing next to their male counterparts and or contributing equally to the family and society. Romantic narratives represent them existing in isolated, lonely often dark spaces especially in the case of the Arab world where they become controllers and not controlled. In one such narrative the woman

of the house practices black magic, frequently retired into dark dungeons, working on strange spells, and performing ominous practices which reveals interesting pattern about their behavior. Involvement in such kind of practices where they become the controlling authority and got desired results at the snap of a finger proves how this isolated, secluded world of theirs give them an escape and a strange kind of relief from their so-called real world, where they are objects and commodities to be controlled. In the case of Indian women seeking comfort through religion and prayer acts as a soothing balm to ease the harshness of the real world.

Romantic Oriental narratives' one-sided biased representation of the eastern women as grossly subordinate to their male counterparts can therefore be read as attempts to paint a picture of an East that can never develop

unless 'white' liberates them since practices of subjugation and slavery can never emancipate a society. Such representations ended up giving an edge to the western social fabric at the cost of the eastern social setups. The 'dark' and 'mysterious recesses', the barbarous life of the native women has echoes of ignorance, savagery, a certain kind of philistinism further justifying and adding to the white man's supremacy. And who would be better suited to paint this picture than the women who are already voiceless and vulnerable? The overall picture that shaped up was somewhat like a this-voiceless female at the mercy of a merciless male. This completed the colonial task of putting down the curtains on the rich and developed legacy of the Orient and its woman, shrouding their real identities for years to come. West thus elevated itself at the cost of the East without putting in much effort.

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Dr. Supriya Mandloi works as Assistant Professor with the Department of English, BSSS College Bhopal. Her teaching career spans over a period of twenty-four years. Her areas of research include language through literature, the increasing impact of technology in ELT classrooms, devising strategies for reaching out English to the grass root levels and Literary centric-curriculum and its role in language building in EFL countries.