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Female Persian Scholars' Resistance to "The Orientalist Construction of Persia" a Critique of James Morier's *the Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan*

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Abstract

The Western fascination with Persia, intensified though it was by the nineteenth century obsession with Indo-European languages, extends back into the classical origins of European culture. As Edward Said notes, Aeschylus' *The Persians* demonstrates how deeply embedded in the European mind is the belief in Persia's quintessential status as an Oriental society. For many Orientalists Persia demonstrated, perhaps more than any other Eastern country, the exotic otherness and romantic fantasy of Oriental culture. Said finds that Aeschylus "*represents Asia, makes her speak in the person of the aged Persian queen, Xerxes' mother. It is Europe that articulates the Orient*" (1978-57). However, while *The Persians* demonstrates how deeply embedded is Europe's power to *create* the Orient through the representation of Persia, it is perhaps James Justinian Morier's *The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan* (1824) which best demonstrates the operations of Orientalist assumptions within literary discourse. It is also *Hajji Baba* rather than *The Persians* (despite the latter's higher literary merit) which has served most powerfully to perpetuate Orientalist

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assumptions about the superiority, corruption and deceitfulness of the Persians.

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In Morier's picaresque novel, the Persians are culturally, religiously and racially constructed as rogues in comic medium of picaresque. Picaresque is seen to be a key strategy in the genraic construction of Persia because the essentially comic mode balances the critique of Oriental disorder, roguery and untrustworthiness in a medium which tempers the element of debasement prevalent in the novel. *Hajji Baba* was regarded as a guide book for the scholar and the layman supplanting the picture of the Persians, presented in works such as Thomas Mores' *Lalla Rookh* and *The Arabian Nights Entertainment*. It became extremely popular in Britain and Europe and comprehensively demonstrates the subtlety of Orientalist discourse in engaging the paradox of an Aryan Oriental country.

Immensely popular in its time, *Hajji Baba* became remarkably influential in shaping European perceptions of Persia itself. Among the fictional works in English which represent the cultural orientations and psychological disposition of the Persians, few appear to have received as much enthusiastic reception as *Hajji Baba* in the West. From the year 1824 when *Hajji Baba* was first published, there has been a great demand for new editions in succeeding generations. The amount of written materials in books, journals and introductions to the English editions of this work (1876, 1884, 1886, 1894, 1895, 1914, 1922, 1923, 1937, 1948, 1949, 1954, and 1986) is a testimony to its popularity and power. Indeed, few Orientalist works on Persia appear to have done as much to encourage Orietalists to perpetrate myths and stereotypical assumptions about this country.

Hajji Baba has highlighted aspects of cultural difference between the West and the Orient in areas of religion, government, law, traditions and customs. Viewed from this perspective, the enthusiastic reception of this text by Orietalists is indicative of the political significance of this text for the British imperialism. The position of *Hajji Baba* in Persian culture is more complex than it is in the West. While it has been enthusiastically received, it has also

been vehemently challenged, and the function of the translated version in Persia needs a more detailed examination.

Of the criticisms of Morier's writing, his comedy, his knowledge of Persia and his insight into several aspects of Persian culture, none appear to be as analytical and systematic as studies undertaken by female writers such as Homa Nategh and Marzieh Gail. Significantly, while appreciating the comedy of *Hajji Baba*, they have brought the most vigorous indictment against Morier's representation of the Persians in their criticism. It is significant that in the Arab World, too, the most authentic critical evaluation of *Hajji Baba* is undertaken by the female scholar Fatima Moussa Mahmoud. As with Nategh and Gail, Moussa Mahmoud admires Morier's entertaining book, yet sharply criticizes the political, anthropological and ethnographic interpretations of it by colonial writers such as George Nathaniel Curzon and Arthur Gobineau. The position of Morier in *Hajji Baba*, the place of his text in colonialism, the several types of his authority, and his mask as translator are among issues discussed by these writers. Nategh speaks effectively and meaningfully in the voice of her own experience, but Gail and Moussa Mahmoud "translate" their experience into "English" or the discourse of the dominant.

As a Marxist historian, Nategh demonstrates her materialist conception of history in a reading of *Hajji Baba* (1975) in which her critique of Persian society during the Kajar period appears to be her main concern. She focuses on the unequal distribution of resources, the human potential stunted by the division of labor and the control of the forces of production by the Kajars. Nategh argues that the Kajars used their economic power and brutal force to exploit the people by appropriating the economic surplus for their own benefit, a situation which gave rise to class struggle. It is significant that her reading of Orientalists such as Fraser and Morier has shaped the conceptual framework of her analysis of the infrastructure of Persian society and the economic relations between the ruling class and the subordinate majority of the population. They also appear to have given her insight into factors accounting for social change and development, and relation of production in shaping the political and cultural arrangement. Morier's text has especially inspired her to examine how the impoverishment of peasants and tribes drove them to revolt in several forms such as escape and migration.

In her analysis of the dictatorship in Persia's feudal society, Nategh approves of Morier's treatment of the Kajar's bureaucratic system. She remarks: "Morier's ideas can be justified because the relationship between the rulers and the mass of the population was based on levies and taxes forcefully taken by magistrates and executioners" (1975: 118). She investigates the strategies taken by the ruling class in shaping the political institutions and cultural beliefs, and strives to find out how the ideological elements of imperialism influenced the economic and political organization of Persian society and functioned as a barrier of Persia's progress and development.

Nategh is also concerned with the significant position of Morier's text in colonial literature. "*Hajji Baba* is not the first novel about the Orient and Orientals., however, it is celebrated more than other texts because, to some extent, *colonial literature begins with this novel*" [My emphasis] (108). Emphasizing the function of the socio-political and cultural milieu in shaping Morier, she finds him instrumental in the imperial system and brings and indictment against him:

As a nut and bolt installed in the imperial machinery, Morier takes advantage of suitable occasions for legitimizing Western rule and domination and affirming the corruption of the Orient. To safeguard his own [imperial] interests, Morier negates not only the rightful claims but also the existence of others. In taking the jump, he sometimes appears to be identical in his views and behavior with his protagonist. Transformation of the oppressed into the oppressor and the oppressor into the oppressed is repeated once again in Morier's case. Indeed, points of similarities between the writer and his hero become so manifest that even some of his countrymen- who are often more biased than Morier in their views towards the Orient- openly declare that Morier and Hajji Baba shared many points of similarity. He [Morier] was fond of adventure and his life was given up to pleasure and drinking. Of this affable and good-humored individual it was often remarked that only when he was traveling round the world he could feel at home. (106-107).

Nategh expresses doubts about the authenticity, value and the "truthfulness" of his text. Aesthetic distance in her interpolation emerges in the form of an accusation of plagiarism against the writer. Nategh rightly claims that Morier has incorporated several stories of *The Book of One Thousand and One Nights* to his text without acknowledging the source. This leads her to reiterate her view that Hajji Baba the rogue, and Morier the plagiarist are one and the same person (113). She also associates Morier's plagiarism with a tradition in European literature for writers such as Gobineau, Lafontaine, Montesquieu, and Balzac of whom she remarks that they either adopted or plagiarized from this Oriental text.

Nategh attacks male critics such as Minovi and Jamalzadeh for their uncritical evaluation of Morier's book as a "true" picture of themselves and repeatedly reminds them that the position of the writer in the text and the purpose of the book should be taken into consideration. Nategh argues that all Morier's attempts were directed towards legitimizing the dominance and control of his government over Persia. She shows a certain consciousness of colonial masks by significantly suggesting that the Persians can and should challenge imperial history:

Today we have evidence which may help us in solving the problematic of *Hajji Baba* in order to clarify Morier's aims in writing this novel. Is *Hajji Baba* "a picture of all classes of the people during the reign of Fath Ali Shah," as Mojtaba Minovi puts it, or the story of the wretched and the oppressed or the rulers and oppressors? Is it the story of Hajji Baba a man from Ispahan or James Morier a man from England? Is it a story of the ignorance, exhaustion and helplessness of the Orient or the dominance and colonization of the West? (95-96).

Nategh's attack against Morier appears to demonstrate that her aim is to assert her cultural and national identity and erase the imperial history. The period during which her critique of Morier was produced should also be taken into consideration. Nategh wrote her criticism when waves of indignation were directed by the people against the dictatorship of Shah Mohammad Reza and American imperialism. Her argument implicitly suggests a political theory and

rules according to which a social order may be established so that one could take advantage of others.

On the other hand, Marzieh Gail, residing in London, does not seem to show any interest in contemporary social problems of her country. Her article on Morier, "What For You Write *Hajji Baba*" comprising the fourth chapter of her *Persia and The Victorians* (1951), was written during the turbulent years when Persia was struggling against the British for the nationalization of its oil resources. However, it does not seem to bear any trace of the social and political problems of the period. In her discourse, imperialism is treated as a subject related only to the past.

In her reading of *Hajji Baba*, Gail is concerned with the way *Hajji Baba* has had a direct influence upon everyday reality both in England and Persia. Beginning her analysis of Morier's work with his "straight reporting style" in *Hajji Baba of Ispahan* and his two travel books, she concludes by saying that they are "harmless enough" in comparison to *Hajji Baba*. Her objection is directed towards *Hajji Baba* because it "has always stirred up trouble" (74). Admiring Morier's expertise and technique in his humorous depiction of the Persians, Gail is simultaneously concerned with the way he has vigorously stigmatized them as "liars" and "cowards":

The Persians say that if a man throws a few drops of water at you, it does not matter. If he throws a little mud at you, it is of no moment. If he throws a straw at you it is nothing. But if he takes the water, the mud and the straw and combines them into a brick, and then throws them at you... The trouble was, Morier had combined them, and his aim was too good (83).

In relation to Morier's durable representation of the Persians and its perpetuation of stereotypes, Gail also remarks:

We have often asked ourselves what Persia's place in the modern world would have been like if *Hajji Baba* had never occurred; if Morier, perverse, poltergeistical genius, had only been as formal and unexciting a writer as his fellow-diplomats, or indeed had continued to write as properly as he did in his own first travel book. To this day, the West cannot approach Persia except under the influence of an Ispahan barber, who emerged into words more than

a hundred years ago and refuses to disappear. His presence invests the soberest diplomatic parleys with a kind of craziness; hysteria is always too close, in the Western mind, as the Persian exhibits one or another of the Hajji's well known traits. This hardly seems fair (63).

Even a cursory glance at Morier's depiction of the Persians demonstrates his ethnocentric and ideological biases. The personality traits, attitudes and values that he finds to be more or less unique to Persians obviously have striking resemblances to the characteristics that several other Orientalists have purported to be more or less unique to other countries of the Orient. These similarities suggest that Morier's conception of the Persians, like that of his colleagues, derives from a general model of the Oriental. Gail appears to have been particularly conscious of this point when she attempts to find out why *Hajji Baba* is a matter of great interest both to the English readers and the Persians: "Certainly, if the qualities described by Morier were to be found only in Persia, they would not have aroused such global interest" (83).

Why have female rather than male scholars shown more interest in contesting and changing Morier's discourse? Can we infer from Nategh's, Gail's and Mahmoud's sensitiveness to the depiction of Persian culture that Oriental man is more contaminated by the world view of Orientalism and its ideological systems of power and knowledge? Is Oriental woman more capable of freeing herself from the old ideological straitjacket of this discipline? Considering the wretched condition of the women in different societies, and the prevalence of a patriarchal system in Persia, can their interpolation in this discourse be viewed as a mark of their ambivalence, Marginality and suffering within their own culture? In other words, is not their response to Morier only a stratagem and camouflage by means of which they have 'written back' to internal power?

Orientalism can be viewed as a manifestation of the global interactions between feminism and myth-making and the patriarchal tools that keep women oppressed. Mary Elmann's influential book *Thinking About Women* discusses various "feminine stereotypes" (1979: 55-147) such as formlessness, passivity, instability, confinement, piety, materiality, spirituality, irrationality,

compliance together with incorrigible figures like the shrew and the witch. Obviously, such a list, with some slight variations, is applicable to several societies and cultures, especially those in which women live under wretched conditions.

The theme of violent seizure and possession charged with sexual imagery is a dominant theme in Orientalism. The link between voyeurism, knowledge and mastery in colonial representation of women also finds one of its supreme manifestations in Morier's *Hajji Baba*. The Orientalist's idealization of the east is revealed in Morier's outburst:

Persia that imaginary seat of Oriental splendor! That land of poets and roses! That cradle of mankind! *That uncontaminated source of Eastern manners lay Before me*" [My emphasis] (P.5).

Morier's "penetration" of a "virgin" country, the uncontaminated source of Eastern manners" should obviously be viewed in terms of male *gaze*. Simon Ryan in "Voyeurs in Space: The Gendered Scopic Regime of Exploration" points out that Western discourses have a history of construction the subject of scientific investigation as female" (1994: 36). In Morier's discourse his dominant, masculine and colonial tone not only constructs Persia as feminine but also brutally reduces it to an object of fun and ridicule.

A distinguishing feature of Morier's discourse is his masterful depiction of life in the harem. Morier informs us of the light and chatty scandals concerning the affairs of the harem through the narrative of a Kurdish slave girl who belongs to king's physician. In the following passage, Morier describes the visit of the king of Persia to his physician's harem. Behind the funny and stupid remarks of the king, spoken for the purpose of possessing this girl, Morier provides us with an illustrative example of the commodification and dehumanization of women:

"What sort of a thing is this? She is no indifferent commodity. By the king's Jika [dress] the animal is fine! Doctor, Mashallah, you have a good taste he moon-face the stag-eye, cypress waist, everything is here" (160)

Viewed from this perspective, it can be argued that Morier is perpetuating between sex and the Orient: a link which as Said has demonstrated in his work (1978: 188-90), is among its distinguishing features. However, this passage is an illustrative example of the patriarchal system, of male dominance and of the subjugation of women in Persia. As such, we should not denigrate Morier's insight into the wretched condition of women. Regrettably, in his paradoxically sharp criticism of Morier, the male Persian scholar, G.A. Tavassoli justifies the harem by this simplistic comment: "Harems were necessary because men were jealous and did not want their wives to have sexual relationship with other men (Tavassoli 1966: 73).

Briefly stated, Nategh and Gail responses are multifaceted, and their resistance appears to have been directed not only towards the patriarchal system of their own culture but also the sexist views promulgated in Orientalist discourse, as well as other discourses in which the function of women in the paradigm of power and knowledge is reduced on several moral, cultural and biological levels.

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