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Interrogating Richard Burton's *Arabian Nights*: Harem Literature and the Question of Representational Authenticity

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Abstract

The concept of ‘authenticity’ informs the main argument of this paper that interrogates the very 'authenticity' of Richard Burton's Orientalist representation of Oriental women by tracing signs of Orientalist intertextuality and 'authorial subjectivity' in his erotic translation of the Arabian Nights. The idea of the Orient constructed through Burton's Orientalist imaginary rendering of the Nights marks a new emerging anti-realism in the nineteenth-century Orientalism, a response to the demand of readership for exoticism. My argument pertains to this phenomenon of the imaginary or fetish rendering of the Nights by Burton, which vividly exhibits a lack of authenticity, a crisis that appeared due to Burton’s

affiliation with the Orientalist main authorities on the Orient and his personal and ideological inclinations. It is clearly problematic to think of Burton's erotic and imaginary rendering of the Nights as authentic and accurate, while he conflates between ethnographic reality and fantasy. In this paper, the examination of key passages from Burton's translation of the Nights makes it clear that he was not really true to his claims of validity for his translation, as he relied on delirious Orientalist imagination, inclined towards his ideological position and personal interests to claim authenticity for his translation.

Keywords

Orientalism, representation, harem, Arabian Nights, travel writing

1. Introduction

In the history of the European interaction with the Middle East, the nineteenth century was the longest and most critical period in which Europe’s interest was pronounced massively in the boom of Orientalist travel narratives, anthropological descriptions, imaginative literature, art and many forms of popular culture. In the context of this increasing interest in the Middle East, pornographic or erotic literature flourished in a significant way through Orientalist travel narratives of the harem and harem literature (Oriental tales and translations), a very popular industry in the Victorian society in which eroticism or sexuality was governed by taboos and moral objections.

According to Edward Said, sexual imagery associated with the harem and propagated by Orientalism via travel accounts and harem literature has fed the Europeans' desire for information on modes of Orient daily life and secret pleasures of exotic Orientals. So the Oriental harem was the quest of many European writers and travelers to the Orient that was represented as a foreign setting and "a place where one could look for sexual experience unobtainable in Europe" (190).

The persistent legacy of Orientalist travel narratives of the harem and harem literature can be tracked down to the development of the main models of travel writing to Arabia especially in the nineteenth century. Billie Melman refers to two dominant models of travel writing in the context of the Middle East: "the pilgrimage and the domestic ethnography focused on Muslim everyday life" ("The Middle East/Arabia: 'the cradle of Islam'" 107). The shift of focus from the religious to the more secular and modernized mode of travel writing towards the nineteenth century, Behdad says, “reinforced Orientalism as the official discourse invested with the power of representing Europe’s Other” (38). The writers' Orientalist desire for the Orient in relation to the colonial circumstances of the nineteenth century was a reconfiguration of an Orientalist desire, a new interest in Muslim society, which indicates a discursive repetition of Orientalist representations within a continuing Orientalist legacy. By the nineteenth century, a large number of Orientalist travel accounts and imaginative literary works

and translations were devoted to these Oriental social customs such as polygamy, concubinage, and seclusion of harem. The immediate outcome of such narratives was a kind of expanding corpus of Orientalist texts that romanticized the Muslim people, and reinforced the mystique of the Orient, the exotic harem and the sensual East.

Recent academic interest in harem literature revolves around issues of cultural encounters and representation. In such framework of comparative cultural studies, the nature and form of harem literature can be determined by investigating the political, economic, and cultural factors related to the motives of harem literature. Many cultural critics, like Edward Said, Billie Melman and Reina Lewis, have emphasized that the cultural function of nineteenth-century harem literature was the search for a new eroticized other, which reveals its complicity in promoting European racial and colonial ideologies. The interrogation of harem literature in the context of European colonialism and its racial ideologies is, thus, an important contribution of the postcolonial discourses of comparative cultural studies, where scholars seek to examine the ideological implications of harem representations and their authorial consequences. Within this framework of comparative cultural studies, Said's critique of the Orientalist writings connects Orientalist representations to empire in a way that shows Orientalist harem literature as a discourse of power that lacks authenticity and serves to legitimate colonial expansion. The significance of these cultural

critical formulations, especially Said's critique of Orientalist harem literature, rests not only in recognizing the connections between these writings and empire but, most importantly, in highlighting the different personal and ideological strategies employed by the writers to seek authenticity. Thereafter, the question of 'authenticity' of harem literature takes a central stage in cultural scholarship with a growing acceptance that claims to truth are not always trustworthy.

Critics have paid a special attention to the assumed authenticity of many nineteenth-century translations of Oriental texts for understanding their harem representations and their motives. Obscene translations of Oriental texts were, in fact, mass-market commodity, as they were destined to satisfy the suppressed Victorian eagerness for exoticism at the cost of literary fidelity. While translation is supposed to create a 'common understanding' between cultures by retaining linguistic and cultural features of the original in the translation process, nonlinguistic elements- ideological and personal involvement- still predominate in the process of translation (Snell-Hornby; Bassnett and Lefevere; Bassnett, *Translation Studies*). In this way, translators enjoyed some liberty not only in rendering the text but also in adding supplementary materials such as preface and footnotes, which bear strong imprint of the translator's ideological interests and personality, as seen in the case of Burton's *Nights*. The final outcome of such appropriation and personal reworking of the original text

is a publication that highlights a deeply subjective and ideological inquiry at the cost of literary fidelity.

The obscene translations of Oriental texts were popularized by Burton's translation of *Arabian Nights*, which sparked the first public literary debate about pornography, discussions about homosexuality and cultural representation (Colligan 34). Burton's version of the *Nights* is a personal reworking of the original stories designed to consolidate the Orientalist image of sensualist 'exoticized' East, and used also to "reveal not the East but a personal East" (Sironval 240). His Orientalist fetishisation of the *Nights*, which sought to satisfy the public eagerness for exoticism, had been the outcome of the new spirit of harem travel writing and harem literature that focused more on personal preconceived ideas of travel writers, translators and editors about the Orient than about the reality of their subjects. The idea of the Orient constructed through Burton's Orientalist imaginary rendering of the *Nights* marks a new emerging anti-realism in the nineteenth-century Orientalism, a response to the demand of readership for exoticism, which bears an inclination towards his ideological position and personal interests.

It is clearly problematic to think of Burton's erotic and imaginary rendering of the *Nights*, which sought authenticity through Orientalist intertextual references and personal preferences, as authentic and accurate representation of Oriental women, while he conflates

between ethnographic reality and fantasy. My argument pertains to this phenomenon of the imaginary or fetish rendering of the *Nights* by Burton, which vividly exhibits lack of authenticity, a crisis that appeared due to the Burton's affiliation with the Orientalist main authorities on the Orient and his personal inclinations. The concept of 'authenticity', thus, informs the main argument of this paper that interrogates the very 'authenticity' of Richard Burton's Orientalist representation of Oriental women by tracing signs of Orientalist intertextuality and 'authorial subjectivity' in his erotic translation of the *Arabian Nights*. Within this context of Orientalist continuing and inescapable intertextuality and 'authorial subjectivity', this paper addresses these different personal and ideological strategies employed by Burton to seek authenticity, which reveals a huge gap between literary fidelity and fantasy in the process of translation. In this paper, the examination of key passages from Burton's *Arabian Nights* makes it clear that he was not really true to his claims of validity for his translation, as he relied on delirious Orientalist imagination, inclined towards his ideological position and personal interests, to claim authenticity for his translation at the cost of literary fidelity. This paper traces the way Orientalist intertextual and subjective inclinations affect the way Burton translates The *Arabian Nights* accurately and represents Arabia and Arabian women fairly.

2. The Historical Context of Harem Reality

In her book *Harem: The World behind the Veil*, Alev Lytle Croutier explains the meaning of the word "harem":

> *The word harem, derived from the Arabic haram, means 'unlawful', 'protected' or 'forbidden.' It is a term that implies respect for religious purity. The sacred area around Mecca and Medina is haram, closed to all but the Faithful. In its secular use, harem refers to the separate, protected part of a household where women, children, widowed relatives, and female servants lived in seclusion and privacy ...; in a noble or wealthy house, the harem would be guarded by eunuch slaves. The term may also be applied to the women themselves. In the West, harem implies a "house of joy", a less-than-religious acknowledgement of the master's exclusive rights of sexual foraging. (17)*

This harem system "is the combination of the seclusion of females with polygamy and concubinage" (Melman, *Women's Orients* 60). Thus, the harem came to be conceived by Europeans not only as a psychosexual symbol, but a metaphor for injustice and women suppressed by their tyrannical husbands and society. According to Laurel Ma, "defining the harem is problematic because it is more reflective of European's sexual fantasies of "Oriental" women than of domestic realities of the regions it supposedly depicted" (15).

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the topos of the harem became an obsession and a fantasy created by Orientalist male travelers and writers, who expressed a

desire to penetrate the private and closed spaces of the Oriental harem, through a diverse body of literature depicting a lascivious and alluring harem. The harem fantasy soon led to a prolific production of harem literature (Oriental tales and translations) visual art and Orientalist travel narratives, which imagined and framed Oriental women through European male projections and Orientalist fantasies of the harem. As one of the defining aspect of European interaction with the Middle East, the sexual and harem figure of Oriental woman played a central role in Orientalist narratives. Said suggests that the Oriental woman- "vessel of the Orient"- was central to the Orientalists' "dream-quest" of the Orient (184). Drawing out their fantasies, travelers, writers and artists cultivated an image of the harem as sexual, submissive and debauched eager vixens. In the context of nineteenth-century Orientalist travelers and novelist, Said refers to the sexual figure imagined for oriental women, who are represented as “creatures of a male power fantasy", endowed with "unlimited sexuality" (207). They are also seen as manipulative and power-hungry women who are residing an exclusively female space forbidden to men.

It is argued that the myth of harem, associated with the male Orientalist voyeuristic gaze, was based on men's writing that "did not draw on an observable reality ... and relied on texts- literary text, polemical literature, travellers' accounts" (Melman, Women's Orients 62). Cultural critics such as Rana Kabbani, Billie Melman and Susan Bassnett (*Comparative Literature*) emphasized that the idea of penetrating the private world of harem life by male Western travelers, like Burton, is not believeble, as they had no access to the closed harem rooms or Seraglio. This myth of the harem, associated with the male

Orientalist voyeuristic gaze, was challenged by the publication of European women travelogues in the late eighteenth century and nineteenth century, which, despite their appropriation of aspects of male fantasy of the harem, provided an insider and an eyewitness description of the harem (Melman, *Women's Orients* 62). According to Melman, "the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw the rise and evolution of two distinctly female artifacts which I call 'harem literature' and the feminine 'travelogue proper'" (16). She assigns the role of this genre as "concerned, mainly or wholly, with the material conditions of life and everyday domestic experience of Muslim women" (16).

3. Exoticism and Eroticism: Sexual Politics of Harem Literature

It has been noted that the topos of the harem continued to haunt the Western mind in a persistent way as an essential part of the Orientalist fantasy of the nineteenth century. This is not without reasons since the harem topos has occupied a special place in the sexual politics of travelers, ethnographers and writers. The erotic publications of harem literature were a very popular industry in Victorian society, which was governed by taboos and moral objections. That is why Victorians turned to eroticized images of harem life, slave-girls, and luxurious palaces in the context of Eastern foreign lands such as Arabia. Mary Ann Stevens argues that:

> *One of the preoccupations which profoundly affected the Western understanding of the Near East was the belief that this region could satisfy the West's urge for exotic experience. Exoticism meant the artistic exploration of territories and ages in which the free flights of the imagination were*

> *possible because they lay outside the restrictive operation of classical rules. (17)*

In the context of Victorian repressed erotic fantasies, this association between images of Oriental sensuality and imaginary exoticism dominating the nineteenth-century harem literature is clearly illustrated by Kabbani who points out that "the Orient of the western imagination provided respite from Victorian sexual repressiveness … used to express for the age the erotic longings that would have otherwise remained suppressed" (36). A typical example of this Victorian attitude is Richard Burton who viewed the Orient as "chiefly an illicit space and its women convenient chattels who offered sexual gratification denied in the Victorian home for its unseemliness" (7).

4. Representation of Harem: Affiliation with the Orientalist Authority

In the context of a continuing Orientalist legacy, the nineteenth-century Orientalist desire for the Orient was a reconfiguration of an Orientalist desire, developed into a new interest in aspects of the social life of Oriental women, such as polygamy, concubinage, and seclusion of harem. Considering the persistent legacy of Orientalist hegemonic tropes of Oriental women, Billie Melman notes that despite the shift from the medieval pilgrimage travel writing to a more modernized form of ethnographic travel writing in the eighteenth and nineteenth-century British Arabian travel writing, "here too some features of older [Orientalist] forms and strategies of representation have

persisted" ("The Middle East/Arabia: 'the cradle of Islam'" 108). This shift, Behdad says, “reinforced Orientalism as the official discourse invested with the power of representing Europe’s Other” (38).

The representation of Oriental harem as luscious under despotic suppression does not function only as a mass-market commodity to satisfy the West's erotic longings, but serves as a colonial gaze that expresses a desire to penetrate and control the Orient, the Other. In a large number of nineteenth-century translations and Oriental tales of harem literature, the representation of the harem relies much on the discourse of Orientalism, particularly the Orientalist dichotomy between East and West, Other and Self, indicating a relationship between imperial politics and sexual politics. According to Sara Mills, Orientalist travelers and writers of harem literature rely on a normative Western gender experience of home as a universal standard to represent harem women as inferior "Other" (48). Kabbani illustrates the way the representation of naked harem was constructed in Orientalist texts in opposition with the depiction of the well-covered Victorian British middle-class women. She also refers to Richard Burton's attitudes towards Eastern women as an example of a master-slave relationship, which explains how "fascination with the *Arabian Nights* was greatly enhanced by the fact that they upheld his own views on women, race and class" (48). In texts such as Byron’s *The Giaour*, the Oriental harem were represented as colonial other, repressed by their masters and then

liberated by a European male (Leask 25-33). Another text such as *The Lustful Turk* contains shocking description of the sexual scenes and erotic fantasies which are modeled on popular Orientalist stereotypes of the harem (Marcus 195-207).

However, the most influential of Orientalist texts responsible for the creation of the myth of harem and sensual East is the *Thousand and One Nights*, a collection of Arabic tales, which was introduced to Europe first in the 18th Century through Antoine Galland's translation, *Mille et Une Nuits* 1704–17, and then through different versions of the *Arabian Nights Entertainments* by nineteenth-century English Orientalists. In the process of transmission and translation from Oriental to Western versions, the collection of tales often underwent radical alterations and modifications to become a hybrid commodity for its western readers, and thus emphasize Orientalist paradigms of sensual East and its harem women. Such Western versions of the *Arabian Nights* remained the source and paradigm from which the descriptions of harems became focused on. Among all translators, Burton is unique in his obsession with the seeming sexualities of Oriental women. In fact, Burton loved to expand on sexual details and exaggerate too much in associating these sexual traits to Oriental women, which confirms the obscene and the eroticizing nature of his translation and sets his translation apart from other translations.

5. Harem Literature and the Question of Authenticity

It has been argued by many scholars that the myth of harem, associated with the male Orientalist voyeuristic gaze, rests upon the writer's assumed authenticity, fabricated through different personal and cultural strategies (Bassnett, *Comparative Literature*; Melman; Helmers and Mazzeo; Phillips; Saunders). The examination of the different personal and ideological strategies employed by harem writers and translators to seek authenticity reveals a huge gap between reality of the subject or literary fidelity and fantasy. This interrogation of the 'authenticity' of harem literature makes it hard to take for granted any claims to truth and objectivity by harem writers and translators. In the context of nineteenth-century harem literature, the quest for 'authenticity' was an obsession underlying many harem tales and translations. In many cases, 'authenticity' may be forged as writers and translators, tempted by psychological, aesthetic and material demands, resorted to different personal, cultural and ideological strategies to attain or claim 'authenticity'. 'Intertextuality' and the highly 'authorial subjectivity' are the main strategies for forging 'authenticity', which also contribute to the lack of objectivity and violation of literary fidelity in harem writings and translations.

Intertextuality is a striking feature especially in the nineteenth-century harem literature, as writers claim

'authenticity' through their affiliation with earlier Orientalist texts by getting inspiration from these intertextual references as sources of information and recycling their records and impressions. The close intertextual relation reveals how harem literature represents Oriental places and cultures through an Orientalist conceptual framework constituted by previous Orientalist texts, which further distances the writer and the actual subject from the reproduced texts. The gap between the actual subject and the created subject of representation indicates how the writer's perception of place is mediated not only by social and cultural ways of seeing but also by personal and ideological motives that further contribute to the lack of objectivity in harem literature.

In this way, most of the nineteenth-century harem writers and translators used the main elements of the Orientalist authority on the Orient found in earlier Orientalist texts as a reference and a source of ethnographic authority. The most influential of such Orientalist texts is the *Thousand and One Nights*, first transcribed by Antoine Galland as *Mille et Une Nuits* between 1704–17. Melman notes that in *Turkish Embassy Letters* Lady Mary Wortley Montagu used Galland's exotic harem version of the *Nights* as "a reference text, a source of ethnographic data to be cited as authority, a repository of ready anecdotes, types, and plots" (*Women's Orients* 64). Ali Behead admits that “there is no ‘outside’ to the discourse of Orientalism: to write about the Orient inevitably involves an intertextual

relation in which the new text necessarily depends for its representational economy on an earlier text." (23). When depending heavily on Orientalist intertextual references, these European writers reveal more about their preconceived ideas of the Orient than about the reality of their subjects. Said affirms this point when he says that "the Orient is less a place than a topos, a set of references, a congeries of characteristics, that seems to have its origin in a quotation, or a fragment of a text, or a citation from someone's work on the Orient, or some bit of previous imagining, or an amalgam of all these" (177). In effect, this practice puts at risk the very integrity and authenticity of harem writing and translations.

In conjunction with Orientalist intertexuality, writers and translators resort to 'authorial subjectivity'- personal impressions and interests- to contribute something new and claim authenticity for their texts. The highly 'authorial subjectivity' is a striking feature especially in the obscene translations of Oriental texts, in which the gap between the original text and its reproduction into a text makes it easy to invent stories and to add irrelevant personal descriptions and commentaries. In effect, this personal reworking of the original text jeopardizes the literary fidelity and authenticity of such translations, as in the case of Burton's *Nights*.

It is clearly problematic to think of such translations, which sought authenticity through Orientalist intertextual references and ideological and personal preferences, as

authentic and accurate representation of Oriental women. It becomes evident that the ethical problem of representing Oriental places and cultures fairly is a prime concern in comparative cultural studies. The concept of 'authenticity' informs the main argument of this paper that interrogates the very 'authenticity' of Richard Burton's Orientalist representation of harem in his erotic translation of the *Arabian Nights*.

6. Richard Burton's *Arabian Nights*: imaginative sexual geography and the Crisis of Representational Authenticity

The idea of the Orient constructed through Burton's Orientalist imaginary rendering of the *Nights* marks a new emerging anti-realism in the nineteenth-century Orientalism, which rests upon delirious imagination found in fiction rather than on the scholarly knowledge of the Orient. As Margaret Sironval notes, "the realism which satisfied the scholars did not, however, prove sufficient to quench the thirst of a general readership eager for exoticism" (239). Burton's Orientalist fetishisation of the *Nights* relies more on his subjective desires and preconceived ideas about the Orient than about the reality of his subjects. This new trend in the nineteenth-century Orientalism, as a response to the demand of readership for exoticism, was connected in an important way to the change in the spirit of travel writing and harem literature, which bears an inclination towards the author's ideological position and personal interests. In his

translation of the *Arabian Nights*, Burton enjoyed some liberty not only in rendering the text but also in adding irrelevant supplementary materials such as preface and footnotes, which reveal strong imprint of his ideological and personal interests. Burton's personal reworking of the original text reveals a deeply subjective and ideological inquiry at the cost of literary fidelity. When examining the phenomenon of the imaginary and fetish rendering of the *Arabian Nights* by nineteenth-century translators and their affiliation to the continuing legacy of Orientalist authority, Sir Richard Burton, a prominent travel writer and translator, appears as a leading figure in this regard. Illustrations from Burton's erotic rendering of the *Arabian Nights* make it clear that he was not really true to his claims of validity for his translation, as he relied on delirious Orientalist imagination and 'authorial subjectivity' to claim authenticity for his translation at the cost of literary fidelity.

When compared with other prominent translators, who ventured into the world of *Alf Layla WaLayla*- such as William Lane and Antoine Galland, Burton is unique in his obsession with the seeming sexualities of Oriental women, revealed not only in the tales but also in his added pornographic material in the supplementary materials and footnotes.. Burton was a daring traveler and translator to venture into matters of sexuality of the East. Legitimization for this was given that the East was a far away fantasy land created by Europe. Rana Kabbani states that “Burton had broken the Victorian taboo of masking

sexuality. Yet he managed to do so only by speaking of sexuality in a removed setting- the East" (53). Burton's sexual discourse appears clearly in the tales, footnotes and preface of his *A Plain and Literal Translation of the Arabian Nights' Entertainments or The Book of a Thousand Nights and a Night* (1885–8). His *Arabian Nights* abounds with stereotypical images of "the adulterous wife, the negligent mother, the perverse lesbian, the gossip, the indolent sensualist, the narcissistic prostitute, the jealous rival, the extravagant consumer, and the sexually precocious child" (DelPlato 162).

Burton's *Arabian Nights* is a typical example of erotic literature with a libertine atmosphere, in which the element of eroticism was made essential for the interpretation of the narrative. Many tales contain explicit or implicit references to acts of sexuality, in which illicit relationship or adultery constitutes one of the favorite themes in the *Arabian Nights.* The motif of adultery or unfaithfulness, associated with women, was significant in the construction of Burton's sexual discourse of the *Nights* (Marzolph, Leeuwen and Wassouf). In fact, the frame story of "King Shahryar and His Brother", dominated by the adultery motif, presents the sexuality, associated with women characters, as a source of enjoyment and lasciviousness, which functions to expose women as lewd, promiscuous and liable to playful lust or to deceit. The story recounts how the two kings, Shahryar and his younger brother Shah Zaman, were made cuckolds when their wives committed the hideous act of adultery in secret

relationships with black slaves. Consider the following passage, which recounts King Shah Zaman's discovery of his wife's infidelity:

> *But when the night was half spent he bethought him that he had forgotten in his palace, somewhat he should have bought with him, so that he returned privily, and entered his apartments, where he found the Queen, his wife, asleep on his own carpet-bed, embracing with both arms, a black cook, with loathsome aspect and foul with kitchen grease and grime. When he saw this, the world waxed black before his sight, and he said "If such case happen while yet I am yet within sight of the city, what will be the doings of this damned whore during my long absence at my brother's court?" So he drew his scymitar and, cutting the two in four pieces with a single. (R. F. Burton, A Plain and Literal Translation I: 4)*

In this raunchy passage, we can see the fear and contempt for women. Burton here reinforces the stereotype of dishonest Eastern woman, whose sexual promiscuity can not be prevented or cured.

The frame story, "King Shahryar and His Brother", lays down the tone for the rest of the stories in the *Nights*. In fact, many stories repeatedly bring up the motif of Oriental women's faithlessness or adultery, which reinforce and justify Shahryar's decision to have revenge against all women, executing every women he sleeps with. The "Tale of the Ensorcelled Prince", part of Shahrazad's second main tale, "The Fisherman and the Jinni", is also about an adulterous wife. In this "Tale of the Ensorcelled

Prince", the character of the adulterous wife is disgusting. She is a royal wife whose sexual appetites can't be satisfied by the prince. Instead she leaves her husband 's bed every night in order to go and lie with a black slave who keeps abusing her:

> *Thou liest, damn thee! Now I swear an oath by the valor and honor of blackamoor men (and deem not our manliness to be the poor manliness of white men), from today forth if thou stay away till this hour, I will not keep company with thee nor will I glue my body with thy body. Dost play fast and loose with us, thou cracked pot, that we may satisfy thy dirty lusts, O vilest of the vile whites? (I: 72)*

Here, the prince's wife is represented as lecherous Oriental woman who cares nothing about humiliating herself in order to achieve her sexual desire in the most merciless and shameless manner.

Another example of lecherous Oriental women, who defile their marriage bed in illicit relationships, is presented in a number of tales under the title "The Craft and Malice of Women", which illustrate Burton’s misogynic fascination with Oriental women's illicit sexual practices. Adultery is the major theme of "The Craft and Malice of Women" tales, such as "The Lady and Her Five Suitors", "The Lady and Her Two Lovers", or "The Vizier’s Son and the Hammâm-keeper’s Wife". The tale of "The Lady and Her Five Suitors" provides a good example of Burton’s misogynic representation of Oriental women, justified by Oriental women’s supposed innate wantonness. The

woman in this story is presented as a beautiful and malicious adulterer, who betrays her husband with a handsome lover. When her lover is imprisoned, she uses her malicious intelligence to save him for the sake of fulfilling her sexual desires. Burton's *Nights* is marked by an added pornographic material, which functions to stress on Oriental women's malicious sexual attributes. Infidelity is a running theme throughout the *Nights*, in many tales such as "Tale of the Trader the Jinni", "The Story of the Third Shaykh" and "The Tale of Kamar al-Zaman". Elements of explicit sexuality, as part of the translator's imaginative pornographic varnish, play a prominent role in tales such as "The Porter and the Three Ladies of Baghdad", "The Woman Who Had a Boy and the Other Who Had a Man to Lover", and "Mus'ab ibn al-Zubayr and Ayishah bint Talha".

The already explained sexual passages and stories from Burton's *Nights* confirm the obscene and the eroticizing translation of Burton, who, unlike other translators of the *Nights*, loved to expand on sexual details and exaggerate too much in associating these sexual traits to Oriental women. Burton justifies the erotic nature of his translation by arguing for the advantages and instructional aims of his translation, which afford him "a long-sought opportunity of noticing practices and customs which interest all mankind" (*A Plain and Literal Translation* I: xviii). However, Burton's obsession with Oriental sexual customs and his exaggerated erotic descriptions are also documented in the additional information in the footnotes

and the lengthy "Terminal Essay". He took pride in providing his translation with these supplementary scholarly information and explanations of the sexual customs of Eastern peoples, defending such added sexual content on the grounds of anthropological educational value for English gain. He boasts that his explanatory notes "will form a repertory of Eastern knowledge in its esoteric phase" for any student, who then "will know as much of the Moslem East and more than many Europeans who have spent half their lives in Orient lands" (*A Plain and Literal Translation* I: xix). He highlights the importance of his explanatory notes over that of the text itself when he says that he "can hardly imagine The *Nights* being read to any profit by men of the West without commentary" (I: xviii). However, such lengthy supplementary materials are provided by Burton to impress his readers of the uniqueness of his Night and to claim authenticity for his translation. In fact, these footnotes along with the supplementary scholarly materials set Burton's translation apart from other translations because it "incorporated strange anthropological observations on Arab sexual practices such as bestiality, sodomy, eunuchism, clitoridectomy, and miscegenation (Colligan 32).

An infamous example of the commentary Burton appended to the text is the first notable footnote of the *Nights* on the frame story of “King Shahryar and His Brother”, in which he explains the illicit relationship of King Shahryar's wife with Saeed, the blackmoor. To

provide anthropological detail about the reasons why "debauched women" prefer "negroes", Burton notes:

> *Debauched women prefer negroes on account of the size of their parts. I measured one man in Somali-land who, when quiescent, numbered nearly six inches. This is characteristic of the negro race and of African animals; e.g. the horse; whereas the pure Arab, man and beast, is below the average of Europe; one of the best proofs by the by, that the Egyptian is not an Asiatic, but a negro partially white-washed. Moreover, these imposing parts do not increase proportionally during erection; consequently, the "deed of the kind" takes a much longer time and adds greatly to the woman's enjoyment. In my time no honest Hindi Moslem would take his women-folk to Zanzibar on account of the huge attractions and enormous temptations there and thereby offered to them. (A Plain and Literal Translation I: 6)*

Here, Burton seems to window-dress his personal, often unscientific, opinions as facts in his notes. His sexual fantasies about Oriental women are also extended to the sexual capacity, size, and appetite of Oriental Blacks, supplemented in the notes:

> *A peculiarity highly prized by Egyptians; the use of the constrictor vagina muscles, the sphincter for which abyssinian women are famous. The 'Kabbazah' (holder), as she called, can sit astraddle upon a man and can provoke the venereal orgasm, not by wriggling and moving but by tightening and loosing the male member with the muscles of her privities, milking it as it were. (IV: 227)*

As a vehicle for exercising his sexual fantasies, Burton's notes even evoke the Oriental harem as an eroticized space, associating them with Sapphism and Tribadism (forms of lesbianism). In one footnote, Burton considered "the Moslem Harem a great school for this 'Lesbian (which I call Aossan) love"; and he even described the Oriental "tribades", female homosexuals, with great fascination: "These tribades are mostly known by peculiarities of form and features, hairy cheeks and upper lips, gruff voices, hircine odour and the large projecting clitoris with erectile powers" (*A Plain and Literal Translation* II: 234). In the same note, Burton not only described eroticism of Moslem harems but also provided graphic details of alleged perversions, deviations and excesses, which reinforced European notions of traditional seraglio of lascivious harem:

> *Onanism is fatally prevalent: in many Harems and girls' schools tallow candles and similar succedanea are vainly forbidden and bananas when detected are cut into four so as to be useless; of late years, however, China has sent some marvellous artificial phalli of stuffed bladder, horn and even caoutchouc, the latter material of course borrowed from Europe. (II: 234)*

Burton’s discussion of lesbianism/homosexuality of Moslem harems is also evident in his commentary on the harems of Syria:

> *Wealthy harems, I have said, are hot-beds of Sapphism and Tribadism. Every woman past her*

> *first youth has a girl whom she calls her "Myrtle" (in Damascus). (IV: 234)*

It is evident that Burton's comments in these notes are overtly and provocatively sexual. As Kabbani points out, "Burton's footnotes to the *Arabian Nights* were often irrelevant to the text they were annotating, mere additions for the purposes of entertainment, erotic highlights of a sort" (60).

The sexual nature of Burton's translation and the erotic highlights of his irrelevant notes are further evidenced by the nonsensical exploration of sexual perversions of his "Terminal Essay", which extends and emphasizes the erotic component in his translation and enhances the sensual atmosphere. The "Terminal Essay" is devoted to the discussion of issues of sexology with chapters on Oriental women and Pornography; and the largest section of it is an extensive treatise on "Pederasty" or in Burton's own term "Sotadic Zone". Upon this emphasis and erudition of the detailed notes and "Terminal Essay", one might think of them as more discussions of sexual practice than about Arabian culture.

Considering the above key passages from Burton's translation of the *Arabian Nights* along with samples of his notes and comments, a question may be asked: to what extent his translation is precise and authentic in rendering Oriental women as faithless and lascivious? These illustrations testify to Burton's eroticizing rendering of *The Arabian Nights*, which make it clear that he relied on

delirious Orientalist imagination, inclined towards his ideological position and personal interests, to claim authenticity for his translation at the cost of literary fidelity. It is noticed that Burton associates imaginary exoticism with eroticism, in which the erotic is legitimized as a taste for the exotic. When the metaphorical content of Burton's translation of the *Nights* overcomes the material, it becomes evident that his translation is a vehicle for his sexual imagination.

As already explained in the theorization of the concept of 'authenticity' in nineteenth-century harem literature, Orientalist intertextuality and subjective imagination affect the way these works of fiction and translations represent Arabia fairly. The individual imagination was always a vehicle to satisfy the author's erotic desires. The metaphorical or imaginative mapping of the so called "Sotadic Zone", an area in the eastern Mediterranean, "with the coast-regions of Africa from Marocco to Egypt", apparent in the footnotes and "Terminal Essay" of the Night, is the main distancing device of Burton's imaginative geography between Occident and Orient (R. F. Burton, *A Plain and Literal Translation* X: 206).

Through self-effacing distance and assuming the disguise of different characters of the *Nights*- a doctor and a professional geographer, Burton affects the role of a passive translator and scholar who is licensed to talk about sexuality of the East and elaborate more on his sexual discourse in the geographical and anthropological

footnotes and essays he attached to the *Nights*. As Richard Phillips points out

> *with self-effacing distance and scholarly licence, Burton charts a region that seems to have little to do with him, a region that is, nevertheless, a reflection of his colonial desires. In other words, he makes a typical colonial map. His role, as translator and scholar, is less passive than it appears. He selects stories, seeks out information and then decides how to retell and report, translate and annotate. And, despite his stated intention of restoring the Nights to their original form, Burton proceeds to censor them. (76)*

This strategy of distanced imaginative geography of "Sotadic Zone" is what makes Burton's essay and notes appear authoritative and realistic. It is through this kind of imagination that Burton used to connect between foreign lands and seeming unusual sexualities. Kabbani states that in Burton's notes, "What the narrator felt himself unable to say about European Woman, he could unabashedly say about Eastern ones. They were there for his articulation of sex" (59). Therefore, Burton's claim of the existence of a 'Sotadic Zone' is a mere vehicle for his sexual imagination and a reflection of his colonial desires.

In conjunction with this revelation of the imaginative geography of Burton's *Nights*, another important question might be asked: how closely did Burton adhere to the form and content of the original text? Burton claimed that he adhered to the original text and "carefully sought out the English equivalent of every Arabic word, however low

it may be or " shocking " to ears polite" (*A Plain and Literal Translation* I: xvi). He was quoted claiming, "I regret more than I can say the coarseness of the Arabic, but I consider it not less my duty to translate it word for word" (I. Burton 290). Burton would even claim that his translation of the *Nights* along with the added sexual manuals are intended for enhancing scientific pursuit and challenging the English "profound ignorance of sexual and intersexual relations" caused by the "rigid repression" of Victorian pedantic morality rather than for erotic entertainment (*Supplemental Nights to The Book* VII: 437, 465).

The following examination of some key passages from Burton's translation of the *Arabian Nights* exposes a lack of authenticity and reveals that Burton was not really true to his claims of validity for his translation. First, Burton took liberty in rendering the original text. In many parts, he amended the text through omissions and additions or inappropriate paraphrasing. A quick comparison of several English translations including Burton's and the Arabic text indicates that Burton distorted the form and therefore the content of the original. There are many instances that show Burton's inaccurate rendering of the original. For example, the following passage from the frame story of "King Shahryar and his Brother" was translated by Burton:

> *But when the night was half spent he bethought him that he had forgotten in his palace somewhat which he should have brought with him, so he returned privily and entered his apartments, where he found*

> *the Queen, his wife, asleep on his own carpet-bed embracing with both arms a black cook of loathsome aspect and foul with kitchen grease and grime. When he saw this, the world waxed black before his sight and he said, "If such case happen while I am yet within sight of the city what will be the doings of this damned whore during my long absence at my brother's court?" So he drew his scymitar and, cutting the two in four pieces with a single blow, left them on the carpet and returned presently to his camp without letting anyone know of what had happened. (A Plain and Literal Translation I: 4)*

The above passage shows some textual additions not manifested in the original. Although it never appears in the original Arabic or in other English or French translations, Burton shamelessly adds in the phrase "of loathsome aspect and foul with kitchen grease and grime' to his translation of 'black slave".

While Lane's, Haddawy's and Shiyab's translations somehow preserve the image in the Arabic original, Burton's translation distorts the original by invoking Orientalist preconceived ideas of Oriental barbarianism and deviant sexuality. In another excerpt from the frame story, Burton's distorting additions appear clearly when compared with other translations along the original text. Haddawy's translation reads, "a black slave jumped from the tree to the ground, rushed to her, and, raising her legs, went between her thighs and made love to her. Mas'ud topped the lady…" (7). While Haddawy's translation is close to the original, Burton's is shocking

and it goes, “the hideous blackamoor dropped from the tree straightaway; and, rushing into her arms without stay or delay, cried out, "I am Sa'ad al–Din Saood!" The lady laughed heartily, and all fell to *satisfying their lusts* and remained so occupied for a couple of hours… and the blackamoor *dismounted from the Queen’s bosom*” (*A Plain and Literal Translation* I: 9). Burton's added phrases “satisfying their lusts” and “dismounting from the Queen’s bosom” invoke graphic images and indicate his predisposed portrayal of the Orient's vulgar sexuality. The above excerpts show the difference, not just in text, but also in the context Burton's translation gives. These differences are significant enough to mark Burton's clear departure from the original text, revealing that he was not really true to his claims of validity for his translation.

7. Conclusion

In fact, if we praise Burton’s effectiveness in representing the foreign East, and the manner in which he brought the subject matter of the East to the understanding of Europeans, we will fail to situate him in terms of his Orientalist ideology. Regarding authenticity, it seems that Burton’s notorious representation of the harem follows a standard pattern of the Orientalist travel discourse of the harem. Applying Said’s critique of Orientalism and his notion of the ‘strategic location’ of ‘the author’s position’ into investigating Burton’s authority in the commodification of Eastern harem will yield fruitful insights of dynamics of the nineteenth-century Orientalist

travel discourse of the harem (Said 20). The geography of Burton's *Nights* is shaped by his travels and nineteenth-century travel imagination, which is identified by him "as a classic of English adventure literature" (Phillips 80). Richard Phillips points out that "Burton establishes his credentials as a *bona fide* Orientalist and translator, backs up some of his specific claims and explains away his interest in pederasty". He adds, "he also puts his travels, and himself as a traveller, into the *Nights,* and therefore links the geography of the *Nights* to the geography of his travels" (79).

Undoubtedly, this shows that he depends for his general information on external travel Orientalist authorities rather than on participant observation. Mellie Melman states that:

> *even the great Burton is less confident when he writes on women. Despite his mastery of oriental languages and dialects, despite his familiarity with Arabs, Indian and Ottoman sources, despite the fact that he traveled through Egypt and the Hijaz disguised as a Muslim physician (which made contact with local women relatively easy), Burton could not penetrate the private world of Middle Eastern Women. And his writings on harems manifest exactly the same flaws as those of the lesser authors. Burton does not inform us even about the unsecluded and independent Bedouin women. He admits, albeit reluctantly, that in his capacity as a physician he 'heard much but saw little' of harems. And he infers from medieval or pre-Islamic sources to the contemporary Hijaz, or Egypt;*

> *and by doing so de-historicises the harem. (Women's Orients 74)*

As emphasized by Rana Kabbani, Melman and Susan Bassnett, Burton's claimed true account of the harem in the *Arabian Nights* is not a firsthand experience of the harem but a mere sexual fantasy of his own, derived from imagined impressions of harem life provided by earlier Orientalist women travelers and writers such as Lady Mary Montagu. This study takes this provocative stance that the reality of the harem's lives can not be fully grasped through the harem representations by travelers and translators. On this, Burton's authenticity, then, is a matter of fabrication. It is really problematic to think of Burton's erotic and imaginary rendering of the *Nights*, which sought authenticity through Orientalist intertextual references and personal preferences, as authentic and accurate representation of Oriental women, while he conflates between ethnographic reality and fantasy. This paper has, thus, demonstrated how Orientalist intertextuality and subjective inclinations affect the way Burton translates The *Arabian Nights* accurately and represents Arabia and Arabian women fairly.

Now, If we ask ourselves, why Burton turned to the Orientalist authority of imaginative sexual geography to affect authenticity and represent the harem as an epitome of a wicked sensualist Orient? Burton's representation of Oriental harem as voluptuous under despotic suppression serves a variety of social and political agendas; it does not function only, as a mass-market commodity, to satisfy the

West's erotic longings (including gratification of Burton's personal desires) but also serves as a "colonialist gaze" that expresses the desire to penetrate and control the Orient, the Other. Despite claiming to provide authentic information about the Oriental life, Burton's translation along the footnotes and annotation does reveal a wicked sensualist Orient, augmented by women's supposed innate licentiousness, an image that implies colonial power relations and reinforces the traditional Orientalist paradigm of a sensual and threatening Orient.

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