

THE REPRESENTATION OF ARAB MASCULINITY IN THE FICTION OF THE ARAB-AMERICAN CONTEMPORARY NOVELIST SOHIER KHASHGGI

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Abstract

Contemporary Arab-American women's fiction is preoccupied with the Arab male's image. Analyzing Sohier Khashoggi's novels, this paper examines Arab masculinity from the point of view of an Arab-American female writer. It explores her portrayal from a feminist, religious, traditional, and social perspective. Using these paradigms to understand her way of representation, this paper illustrates how this Arab-American novelist introduces specific key themes concerning the relationship between husband and wife, father and daughter, brother and sister such as individuality, marriage, marital rape, violence, and honor. A key feature of Khashoggi's texts is the manner in which her fiction highlights the negative representation of the Arab male.

Furthermore, this paper draws attention to how the author's fiction, following the stereotypical mainstream, demonstrates the Arab male's supremacy and wickedness by frequently referring to negative traditional practices which Khashoggi introduces as authentic religious laws. It therefore, aims to show how as an Arab-American female writer, who is of a hybrid identity, and whose ideology was passed on either by personal experience or by historical, literary, political, cultural, and mass media discourses, has boldly highlighted in her writings the patriarchal mode of the Arab male by questioning religious and traditional concepts of masculinity.

Hence, this paper evaluates Khashoggi's fiction by shedding light on the way the novelist reshapes the reader's mind through depicting the fierceness and viciousness of the Arab male living in a world governed by patriarchal precepts.

Keywords: Arab-American fiction, Arab male, Patriarchal Power, Religion, Tradition

MAIN TEXT

In Western art, there exists numerous critical literature on the demeaning representation of Arab subjects. One of those subjects is the image of the Arab male. It is significant to note that the word Arab was defined in the 1960s and the 70s in *Roget Thesaurus* as the "roughneck, cad, clumsy, deceitful, naïve". These connotations were changed only after lots of efforts and pressures by Arab organizations in America (cited in Aleedan and Aldahsh, 2005). However, the negative representations of the Arab still exist and they are still under assault in the new millennium. But one would ask why are Arab subjects continuing to be represented

through such perspectives? Are these representations deceiving and inaccurate images? And why do writers persist in writing in such manner? Some critics, such as Jack Shaheen in *Media Coverage of the Middle East* declare that such images are a result of the mass media, being one of the greatest influences on public perceptions. Its stereotypical images of the Arab significantly impact on how the public perceives and behaves towards them (162). Other critics, for example Edward Said in his book entitled *Orientalism*, proclaim that the reason behind such negative representations goes back to the Orientalists' effective writing, which portrayed Arab subjects in a way different from their reality (273). Many Arab critics as indicated in an article in *Saheefat Alrakoba* (Alrakuba Newspaper) agree with Said's perspective. However, they assert that the works of Arab writers living in the West who endeavored fame, personal benefits and prosperity also assisted in the continuation of such misrepresentations. This is very obvious in the literature of some Arab-Americans living in the USA, such as the contemporary novelist Sohier Khashoggi.

Originally a Middle-Easterner, Khashoggi is one of those Arab-American writers who persist in criticizing the Arab world in an exaggerated manner by introducing specific key themes that are concerned with the relationship between husband and wife, father and daughter, and brother and sister. These key themes include individuality, marriage, marital rape, violence, and honor. A key feature of Khashoggi's texts is the manner in which her fiction highlights the negative representation of the Arab male. Hence, this paper introduces the extent of distortion inflicted on the Arab male as represented in Khashoggi's fiction. In particular, it focuses on the misrepresentation of Arab masculinity in her three novels: *Mirage* (1996), *Nadia's Song* (1999), and *Mosaic* (2003). The paper sheds light on Khashoggi's representation of the Arab male in three major dominant stereotypical images: the fanatic extremist who uses alleged Islamic or traditional laws as weapons to oppress and despise the female; the licentious polygamist who drives behind him a queue of women, whether wives or odalisque; and finally the vulgar uncivilized wealthy Arab, who squanders his tremendous money on gambling and drinking.

The first major dominant stereotypical image, the fanatic extremist who uses distorted Islamic or traditional laws as weapons to oppress women, is evident in the characters of Ali (the heroine's husband) and Leila's brother in *Mirage*, Omar (the heroine's brother) in *Nadia's Song*, and Samir (the heroine's brother-in-law) in *Mosaic*. They are depicted as illogical contemptuous despisers of the other gender. For example, in *Mirage*, Amira's husband, Ali reinforces his masculinity through a limited understanding of his Islamic rights by hanging a translated distorted verse from the Quran that states "*If you fear that they (your wives) will reject you, admonish them and remove them to another bed; firmly beat them. If they obey you, then worry no more. God is high and great*" (180). Thus, misusing Quranic verses to his advantage, Ali is portrayed as a latent brutal creature hidden behind the walls of the bedroom.

This hegemonic image of Arab masculinity that misuses Islamic conceptions is also reinforced in the character of Laila's brother in *Mirage*. Khashoggi depicts the brutality of the male sibling by creating a horrific stoning image of a young girl called Laila, who was forced into marriage with an old man and who is then prosecuted for adultery. Khashoggi writes:

"Laila ... was led out and tied to the stake. Scarcely a dozen yards away, Laila's family were lined up, as stiff and rigid as statues. By law they were compelled to be here, the men to share Laila's shame and dishonor, the women to witness what could easily happen to them if they strayed from the rightful path ... Laila's eldest brother stepped forward, a fist-sized stone in his hand. Only a few feet from his sister, he suddenly hurled the rock with all his might straight at her forehead." (*Mirage* 51)

Introducing this image of a brother who steps forward before anyone to stone his blindfolded sister stirs the readers' sensations and hatred against the Arab male. Unfortunately, the male sibling is introduced as a brutal prosecutor doing his job, despite the fact that such punishments are for both sexes and are very rare in Islam. Further, they are only decided under severe regulations, which most of the time are impossible to be met. Another example is in *Nadia's Song* where again the Arab male sibling tyrannizes his sister for dishonoring the family. Emphasizing his masculinity also, Omar beats and drags his sister Nadia "along the street as if she were a reluctant dog" for committing the unforgivable crime of adultery which as the narrator emphasizes always ended in its adulteress's "death and disgrace" (114-118). What is significant in Khashoggi's novels is the idea that torment and Islamic sentences are only related to the female, never to the male. This not only reinforces the absence of justice in Islamic laws as alleged, but also foregrounds the presence of the unjust patriarchal traditional society which celebrates the viciousness of male dominance. This is evident in Khashoggi's third novel *Mosaic* where the novelist writes "honor killings ... were perpetrated by fathers, husbands and brothers against women who supposedly had brought dishonor to a family, either by sexual misconduct or by the appearance of it" (48). Samir, Dina's brother in law, declares that such laws are vital and indispensable. He asserts "if honor killings were not allowed, or at least

sanctioned, ... morals at home would become as loose as they were in America" (49).through highlighting these scenes of female victimization and male brutality, Khashoggi alleges that males are excluded from the penalty of honor killings, a doctrine that is not true.

The second dominant stereotypical image is the licentious polygamist, who drives behind him a queue of women whether wives or odalisques. This image is evident in *Mirage* in the characters of Omar (Amira's father), who is depicted as a traitor betraying his thirty years old wife with a younger woman, and King Farouk, who is not only unable to know how many concubines he has but also "liked to watch very young women, as many as a dozen at a time, swim naked among the lilies" (151). Zainab the king's daughter declares that when her father "loses his temper with no provocation at all ... it means it's a sign that he requires a new woman ... someone young and pretty and virginal" (172). King Farouk is also represented in *Nadia's Song* again as the sex maniac. Khashoggi introduces him as a man who "sampled all known love potions and aphrodisiacs" (40). Consequently, the Arab husband, in Khashoggi's novels is represented as a sexual athirst, who has excessive sexual appetite and lacks control of his beastly desires. Such images reinforce those depicted in *One Thousand and One Nights* or *The Arabian Nights* which has had a deep influence in one way or another on cultures and writers around the world since it was translated in the 18th century.

The Third and final dominant stereotypical image is the vulgar, uncivilized wealthy Arab, who squanders his tremendous money on gambling and drinking. It is evident in the characters of Ali in *Mirage* and King Farouk in *Nadia's Song*. In spite of the fact that it is against Ali's and King Farouk's Islamic laws, Ali the prince and Farouk the king are both depicted as vulgar rich men who drink "too much" and waste their money in partying and women. Neglecting their religion, family, and responsibilities, they are portrayed as unstable, careless, and worthless beings. On the contrary of this dominant ugly image of the Arab male, it is significant to note that the Western one, whether father, brother or husband, is introduced in a very respected manner. He is represented as a gentleman who is embodied with stable masculine features and who is endowed with an accurate, logical, and considerable mind.

Accordingly, one can declare that whether in *Mirage*, *Nadia's Song*, or in *Mosaic*, the Arab male character is represented as a type not as an individual. He is the minor flat character who is introduced as a scum and rabble. That is to say that Khashoggi does not bother herself to draw the complete features of the Arab male character but rather confines herself by introducing only a part of it, most likely the negative ones. Hence, in all three novels Khashoggi evidently following the stereotypical mainstream, demonstrates the Arab man's supremacy and wickedness by frequently referring to negative traditional and what is believed to be authentic religious laws. Being an Arab-American female writer, who is of a hybrid identity, and whose ideology is passed on either by personal experience or by historical, literary, political, cultural, and mass media discourses, Khashoggi boldly highlights in her writings the patriarchal mode of the Arab male by emphasizing religious and traditional concepts of masculinity.

Five possible reasons can be stated for such negative perspectives. First, it might be out of personal experience, due to the novelist's meticulous details. Second, it might be due to the effectiveness of propaganda and media. Third, it might be only for financial reasons in which the novelist tries marketing her work in the Western marketplace by raising topics that preoccupy the Western interest. Fourth, it can be due to the sensitive political attitudes between the West and the Arab world and the Arab-American feeling of insecurity being a part of both worlds. Finally, it can be a bit of each, if you will. Whatever the reason is, Arab-American novelists such as Khashoggi cannot be totally blamed for such representations. Living in a chaotic political world that has so much emphasis on "I" and the "Other" and living under the influence of marginalization as well as working hard to emerge into the American society, Khashoggi weaves herself to adjust in the American arena. Consequently, she turns to topics and themes that attract the Western consumer, which mostly introduce the defects of the Arab world. Unfortunately, such representations form specific images in the minds of the readers which unconsciously affect their views towards the "Other" (Arab). There has been a significant amount of research which proves that there is "pragmatic and empirical evidence that substantiates the fact that any mental stimuli that enters the human subconscious via sight or hearing has the capacity to impact the perceptual mechanism of the human psyche, subsequently condition or brainwashing the thought process..." (Wallace, 2015). Therefore, one can say that reading novels can be considered as one way of mental stimuli that is used as a mechanism of control by many writers.

Hence, this paper comes to the conclusion that Khashoggi as a contemporary Arab-American female writer has helped in the continuation of the stereotypical images that has reshaped the reader's mind through depicting the fierceness and viciousness of the Arab male living in a world governed by patriarchal precepts. In fact, it not only proves that Khashoggi's fiction is influential in distorting the image of the Arabs, but it also

proves that the stereotypical distorted image of the Arab male still exists to this day and by writers of Arab decent. In other words, it reinforces that the prevalent stereotypical image of the Arab which has been infixed in the Western mind for centuries still exists in Khashoggi's novels. Ultimately, this paper claims that it is time to stand up and engage readers with positive images of the Arab world in general and the Arab male in particular and to infuse an awareness that most minds, whether Western or Eastern, still have a problem in perceiving the image of the Arab.

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