

Sexually ‘Lecherous’ Muslims and Sexualized Women in Sherry Jones’ *The Jewel of Medina*

Brahim EL Fida

Ph. D, Professeur vacataire at the Polydisciplinary Faculty of Nador
Nador, Morocco
elfidabra@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examines the feminist Orientalist conceptions and images of the contemporary American journalist and author Sherry Jones in her first historical novel, *The Jewel of Medina* (2008). The text provides a context to unravel age-old Orientalist images and conceptions on Islam and Muslims. The article focuses on the literary tropes of the ‘harem’, belly-dancing and dancing to show how the text is influenced by earlier Orientalist texts, perceptions and conceptions. Orientalism as a resilient and porous discourse is still alive and influential in the American novels that appeared after the events of September 11, 2001. These images and conceptions are reproduced and disseminated once again to stress the sensuality, backwardness and the oppressive nature of Islamic Oriental culture and society. The reproduction of such disparaging images and depictions, the study concludes, hinder any serious attempt at culturally understanding Islamic history and culture.

Keywords: Sherry Jones, feminist Orientalism, harem, belly-dancing, orientalist, oppressed Muslim women

Introduction

In the aftermath of 9/11, 2001 events, a skyrocketing interest has been noted concerning the conditions of Muslim ‘Oriental’ women in the ‘East’ in general, with a special focus on the images of the veiled and the sequestered women of Afghanistan. Orientalist feminists speak loudly during this development stressing the need for a campaign to set free and rescue these oppressed and silenced women. Contemporary American Post-September 11th events’ novels still employ Orientalist sexualised images and perceptions to depict Islam and Muslims. Hence, it is essential to uncover the sexual dimension deployed in one of these narratives. The article unravels how Sherry Jones’s novel *The Jewel of Medina* (2008) depicts the deemed ‘lewd’ character of early Muslim people. Sexual scenes also inculcate Orientalist conceptions and animalistic imagery. The latter aspects leave a derogatory tone on the people presented. Jones also adds sexual scenes and episodes which reflect her pervert imagination. The tropes and settings of the harem, the public ‘baths’ (or *hammams*) and the mosque are used to reflect these themes. The role of the Prophet as model and perfect man or of a ‘teacher’ is hardly mentioned. The article includes two sections: section one examines how Muslims are depicted

as ‘lecherous’ while the second uncovers how Muslim women are represented as sexualised and oppressed.

1. Sexually ‘Lecherous’/ ‘Lewd’ Muslims

There are still important contemporary studies on the impact of imperialist, racist and Orientalist conceptions and myths on the ‘Oriental’ women as sensual, lecherous and exploited creatures (WU Yongzhen’s A Study of Sexuality and Gender in *M. Butterfly* Under the Context of Post-Colonial Feminism. *Cross-Cultural Communication* 2023; Geoffrey P. Nash’s edited book *Orientalism and Literature* 2019). It is now well-known that Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978) states that “contemporary Orientalist attitudes flood the press and the popular mind” and adds that Arabs “are thought of as camel-riding, terroristic, hook-nosed, venal lechers whose undeserved wealth is an affront to real civilization.”¹ However, at other times and through the pens and paintings of different authors and artists, the Arab/Muslim Bedouin was depicted as a courageous knight, a just ruler and admired sultan; and women are put as desired Queens or princesses. One of the weaknesses in Said’s work is the limitation or absence of female European writers and travelers who depicted and visited the ‘forbidden’ and the ‘enclosed’ corners of the Orient exemplified in the harems. At least, as Said puts it, though ironically, “there are good Arabs... and bad Arabs.”² 9/11 events have ignited interests in these issues and have informed many discussions and publications.

To provide an illustration of the obsession of these Arab and Muslim men with sex, we read the following presentation by Aisha of the leader of the ‘hypocrites’ Ibn Ubayy:

Desperate to discredit Muhammad, Ibn Ubayy began to insult Sawdah and Fatima in public. Whenever they went to market, Ibn Ubayy or his grunting friends would snuffle up and try to touch them. *How much for an hour in bed, habibati? I’d pay in gold for a feel of those glorious breasts.* Listening to these tales, I shuddered. How much to let a man sweat and grunt all over me like that? There weren’t enough *dinars* in all of Hijaz.³

These men are presented as sexually avaricious whose daily lives are littered with lewd jokes. This shows no respect for Muhammad’s legacy whose family members are targeted and harassed from both the author and Ibn Ubayy in this case. The ‘Orient’ has always been depicted as the cradle of sensuality, *avaricious* and *predatory* men and legendary wealth. From Aisha’s

¹ Edward W. Said (1995). *Orientalism*. London: Penguin, 108.

² *Ibid.*, 306.

³ Sherry Jones, *The Jewel of Medina* (New York: Random House, 2008), 48.
<https://ijase.org>

prism, these men are disgusting ‘unbelievers,’ lecherous and sexually obsessed; they are simultaneously rich and threatening. Moreover, Aisha the ‘protagonist’ and narrator in the novel still suggests how:

The image of us in bed together [Aisha and Muhammad] flashed like a bolt of lightning through my mind...I do n’t remember whether my mother kissed me good-bye or cried a tear; I don’t know what my father murmured as he pressed into my hand a leather pouch containing five silver *dirhams*. All I could think about was that old, hairy-bottomed Hamal astride his small young wife. Fazia-turned-Jamila had been only a year or two older that day than I was now.⁴ (54).

Aisha is traumatized by the conception of having an old man as husband; the image of the old Hamal, as a cruel man, making love to his *child-bride* Fazia makes her shiver at the thought. It looks as if he were punishing her (or even killing her). Asma, who is older than her sister Aisha and married to Abdullah, tells Aisha what ‘normally’ happens in bed after wedding ceremonies. Asma’s speech is punctuated by sexual vocabulary. She states this: “I recalled the whisperings of Asma [saying] *Hands like scorpions scuttling across your skin*, she’d breathed in my ear last night as she brushed my hair. *And then—the sting of his tail between your legs!*⁵.

The sexual images alluded to by the use of the telling terms *scorpion*, the *scuttling hands* and the *stinging tail* will be repeated and inculcated in Aisha’s memory. Animalistic imagery goes hand in hand with sexual episodes. Although the narrator postpones Aisha’s consummation up until the age of fourteen, Muhammad at other times is depicted as *seduced* by other beautiful new wives in his ‘harem.’ At first, Aisha feels deranged about her relationship to him but then she seems to be in dire need of conceiving a child who could liberate her and establish her as queen in the household depicted as ‘harem.’ She says:

‘I held my breath as he reached his fingers toward me. I watched his eyes change, as if catching flame, and I waited for the *scuttling hands*, the *stinging tail*. This was the beginning of something new, something terrible. Soon I would be lying on my bed beneath him, squashed like a *scarab beetle*, flailing and sobbing while he *slammed* himself against me. He would not want to hurt me, but how could he help it? *It’s always painful the first time. Just close your eyes and pray he will finish soon...* ‘Wait,’...My voice shook. I grabbed my doll, Layla, and thrust her in front of me. My hands trembled, making my doll quiver, also (59, first emphasis added).⁶

Going to bed with a child-bride still clinging to her toys is thus constructed. She is ‘immature’ and fearful to make it. Animal imagery is always present when comparing people and things and also when making love. This at times proves derogatory. From *scorpions* to *beetle* the connection goes on to include other animalistic images as in the following exchange between

⁴ Ibid., 54.

⁵ Ibid., 55.

⁶ Ibid., 59.

Aisha and Safwan:

He waved the fan over my head and face as if he were my servant—but no servant would have moved so close to me, or caressed me with his eyes as the palm fronds tickled my nose and cheeks. My pulse raced like that *galloping horse* I'd dreamt so often of riding on with him... 'By al-Lah, that smile is worth the pain in my toes!.. I wish for a *camel* to trod on my feet next...I might have a thousand of your smiles to console me" he murmured. I couldn't help laughing, he was so audacious, but when I glanced up at him the expression on his face told me clearly that he was not joking. And I wondered: Was this the danger I'd sensed when I'd approached the market? 'Yaa A'isha...I miss our times together [he said].'⁷

Scorpions, beetles, rams as well as *camels* are invited to establish sexual episodes and sexual imagery. She is sexually at ease with Safwan while not with Muhammad. Animal imagery is also employed when talking, referring to or describing sexuality and sexual relations. After few days of Hafsa's arrival to Muhammad's 'harem,' Sawdah takes Aisha's face in her hands and peered down at her saying this: By al-Lah, what is wrong with you? "You look like you want to cry. You remember those first nights [with Muhammad]. Like a pair of *rutting goats*, eh?...But it does not last" (emphasis added).⁸ In response, Aisha tries to deny the fact, but her words later betray her; she says in an indirect speech: "Sawdah's grin was lusty."⁹ Perhaps one should remember Iago's words to Brabantio to persuade him to take action against Othello in the famous play bearing his name. Iago tells him: "*You'll have your daughter/Covered with a Barbary horse*" (I, i, 110-12).¹⁰ Of course, Iago's aim is to depict Othello as devilish and animalistic trying to stop him from taking Desdemona. Yet, Shakespeare's play is an artistic piece of work although it also uses this animalistic imagery. In the novel too, this imagery is used but to depict these people's cruelty, but at times it is used for no artistic goal. There are sixty words referring to animals. In Shakespeare's work, it has a dramatic effect since it shows how Iago develops 'evil' plans to harm Othello who turns also to use such images for the sake of showing how he was tricked to believe the rumors about Desdemona which by the end bring tragedy. Moreover, between Aisha and the legendary Hind, Abu Sufyan's wife, one comes across the following 'dialogue':

'You prevented kept [sic] our men from quenching their thirsts at Badr, but now we are in control,' she said with a cackle. Her narrow face and *cunning* eyes reminded me of a *jackal's*. I wished for my sword, I would have loved to cut off her hands.. 'Hand me that bucket,' I snarled, 'or I'll take it from you' ...Her laugh was like a shriek, high-pitched and harsh. 'You are Muhammad's little whore, are you not?...I

⁷ Ibid., 68.

⁸ Ibid., pp 77-78.

⁹ Ibid., 78.

¹⁰ William Shakespeare. *Othello*, the Annotated Shakespeare, with an Introduction, by Burton Raffel with an essay by Harold Bloom (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005) I, i, 110-12.

don't know why you are in a hurry. Your husband is dead [says Hind]' (emphasis added).¹¹

'Adulteress,' 'fahisha,' and then 'whore' are some of the unexpected labels addressed to Aisha in this narrative. Aisha is also described as 'whore' by Raihana which is so distorting.¹² Subsequently, how can one believe Jones's claims that she honors Muslim women/men by inventing lewd accusations and inserting insulting designations? And how can one believe her 'big lie' that she has 'respect' for Islam and its Prophet? Aisha is called as such at least three times in the narrative. Aisha wants to achieve or go beyond the legendary courageous "Umm Umara's place someday,"¹³ but she never reaches that goal.

With each new sister-wife (or a concubine) in Muhammad's household, Aisha is given the opportunity to extrapolate on Muhammad's sexuality and his desires for his 'new wives.' She feels *depressed* and *punished* with each newcomer; she puts it as follows:

I was still haunted by the desire in Muhammad's eyes as he'd gazed at the Mother of the Poor...Even with her so-so looks and lack of style, could Umm al-Masakin steal Muhammad's love from me?...Yet what was I willing to do to keep Muhammad's favor? [she is] a widow. The marriage bed would be familiar to her, while the very thought of the scorpion's tail still made me tremble. Hafsa reassured me when I told her about my fears—after she'd gotten over her shock at learning that our marriage wasn't consummated.¹⁴ (96).

This time Aisha is jealous of Zainab bint Khuzaimah (known as Umm al-Masakin). She is concerned and tries, like what happens with Hafsa, to win Muhammad's heart and overcome this new rival. Using the euphemisms of the scorpion's tail and 'consummation,' Aisha has been fuming since Hafsa's unexpected arrival. She is overwhelmed by these ideas of 'seducing' Muhammad. She posits thus:

Pain or not, I determined to do whatever was necessary to turn his attentions back to me. When his ardor for Hafsa had faded...Now was the best time for me to win Muhammad's heart again...tonight was the time to shrug off my fears and become a real wife to him...I'd begun seeing affection in Muhammad's eyes I hoped to light

¹¹ Jones, *The Jewel*, 90.

¹² *Ibid.*, 224-25.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 96.

the fire of love in his heart ...I bathed myself thoroughly and rubbed my skin with gypsum on my face, and I lined my eyelids with collyrium, using a lavender stem to spread the dark paste...I lit candles and incense to give my room a soft, romantic atmosphere. Then I picked up my tambourine and practiced the dance my sister had taught me. *It's a dance to make a man wild*, she'd said with a sly smile.¹⁵

The tale of sexualized, Orientalised Muslim women perhaps needs no further elucidation. Aisha is developed as seeking to consummate, to *seduce* the Prophet. The sensuality of the 'Orient,' 'Oriental' women and its people is well executed in this passage as well as in countless others. Hence, this does not only uncover how Islam and Muslims are presented but also how their characters are developed. This is why Said's significant statement is still valid that the 'Orient' is a sort of *stage* upon which other fantasies and images are made for and by the 'West'; this time by a female author and feminist for the expectations of some readers. Rarely does there exist any lengthy *tale* on the 'Oriental' (or Muslim) women without inserting this motif of sex/sexualized, willing women. The *tambourine* and the (belly) *dancing* add to set up that Orientalist stage of 'Oriental' sensuality. *Ars erotica* seems to be an 'eastern' practice.

Pursuant to this passage, Aisha continues describing the *romantic* atmosphere and 'show' she is exhibiting as follows:

The jingle of the tambourine bells must have prevented my hearing his knock. I spun across the floor, my hands clapping the instrument high over my head and sliding my bare feet across the hard-packed earth, when I glimpsed him standing in the room, *smiling*. I rattled my tambourine and tossed my hair. I teased him with my eyes, the way I'd seen Hafsa do. I *danced* up to him and whisked his turban from his head. As I whirled it to the windowsill, I recited verses from a *love poem* (emphasis added).¹⁶

The tambourine, the dance, the perfumes of lavender and lotion, the bare feet, the smiling and the shaking all play their part in inculcating this seducing aspect of the Orient and its women. This motif is further enhanced by the presence of very crucial cultural signifiers of dress like *turban*. Aisha, therefore, is made to resemble a 'Turkish harem girl,' performing in a fantasy tale on Turkish sex-mad Sultan. Dancing and clapping the tambourine are used to portray erotic Muslims (male and female) and the sensual East. The harem and dancing (or belly-dancing) are famous Orientalist tropes. In this passage, many connotations are condensed. As Alev Croutier posits it, "odalisques with extra extraordinary beauty and talent were trained to become

¹⁵ Ibid., 97.

¹⁶ Ibid., 97.

concubines, learning to dance, recite poetry, play musical instruments, and master the erotic arts.”¹⁷ Aisha fits exactly within this Orientalist paradigm. Slave girls in these accounts presented in Croutier’s book are rendered *objects* bought, sold, and given as *gifts* to pashas and other men/women in high ranks to serve them as they please. These tropes and motifs then relate not only to Oriental make-up and dressing, but also to sexual imagery. Still, in the exchange between Aisha and Umm Al-Masakin and one friend of Ibn Ubayy runs as follows:

‘*Marhaba, habibati,*’ the short man with big ears said. ‘Remember me? You’re a tiny thing, but you’ve filled out nicely. Are you still the Prophet’s toy, or are you looking for a real man?’... ‘Do you still sleep alone, or have you found a dog to meet your needs?’ I retorted, but Umm al-Masakin’s voice cut in as sharp as a whetted blade... ‘Step aside,’ she said in a stern tone. The men nudged each other and grinned... ‘I’ll take her,’ Ibn Ubayy said. ‘I prefer grown women to redheaded brats’ (109-10).¹⁸

Sexual imagery once more goes hand in hand with animalistic vocabulary and meals. These ‘hypocrites’ seem to disturb Arab/Muslim women on a daily basis. Lewd jokes and harassment speak volumes as far as these people’s characters and features are concerned. In contrast to Faiza’s situation (her young female friend married to an older, cruel man), Aisha is determined to fight back and speak for herself when mistreated by her ‘future husband.’ Sensuality and sexuality are brought once again when depicting the relationship between Hamal and his young wife Fazia (child-bride). They are described as the ‘new bridegroom.’ Describing a sexual scene when Aisha, Safwan and their friend Nadida were still young spying on Hamal, one reads this:

‘They’re in there now...You should see her. She’s the same age as me, and married to that old goat;’ Nadida said. Safwan placed a finger to his lips listening. A sharp, keening cry, like the wails of Medina’s mourning women, made me shiver. Then we heard a man’s growl and his laugh as rough as scraped skin...‘By al-Lah, is he killing her?’ [asks Aisha]. Safwan and Nadida snickered. ‘She probably wishes she were dead,’ Nadida said... a loud groan from inside shook me to my senses: That Hamal was a giant. If he caught us peeking in his window, he could crush us both with one hand.¹⁹

Hamal is a giant man, a ‘monster’ according to this portrayal. Roaring like a beast, he seems to

¹⁷ Alev Lytle Croutier. *Harem: The World Behind the Veil* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1989), 32.

¹⁸ Jones, *The Jewel*, 109-110.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

have sexual potency. He is punishing or killing his young, weakling wife. Once again, sexuality and bestiality are connected together to picture this unequal relationship. Women suffer on the streets and in beds as well. Still within this context, Aisha states what follows:

I scampered to the top of that rock like a lizard, ignoring my pounding heart, which I was certain Hamal would hear. As my eyes adjusted to the shadowy light inside, I could see only scattered clothing at first, strewn across the floor, then trays of half-eaten food and dirty dishes and a water-pipe tipped over on its side. The odors of barley and decaying meat and rotting apple mingled with the damp smell of sweat.²⁰

This again reminds one of Shakespeare's Othello. With Hamal as a giant and unnatural man with a messy 'house,' these stinking meat and fruits portray him as a beast. He is fabricated as a monster. Sexuality and bestiality with Hamal's scene are significant as far as the biblical and Orientalist images of the sexual potency and cruelty of the Muslims/Arabs are concerned. It becomes crystal clear in this episode. He is named Hamal ibn Affan in the narrative. Aisha also adds the following description of the scene:

A low, steady grunting pulled my gaze to the bed. A trickle of sweat crawled down Hamal's broad, naked back as he lifted his body off the bed then slammed it down again and again. I stared at his behind, as big as my *goat's-bladder ball* and covered with hair, as it clenched and relaxed with each thrust. Beneath him, skinny arms and legs stuck out like the limbs of a *scarab beetle* under a sandal, flailing and clutching at him. A girl's voice seemed to sob, and her heels pounded against his hips. I gasped and grabbed Safwan's arm: He *was killing her!*... Hamal's voice grew louder and his body-slams faster ... Hamal shout, "Hi! Hi! Hi!" like a *hyena*. I covered my mouth with my hand [pretending] to laugh, also, not wanting him to see my horror, while the image of the girl's squashed body under that *hairy beast* replayed itself in my mind (emphasis added).²¹

Sexuality and bestiality go hand in hand in this regard. Muslims/Arabs are developed as sexually avaricious and predatory. This betrays the author's claim that the narrative does not contain any sexual scenes. These episodes might come as shocking and offensive to Muslim and non-Muslim readers with the slightest knowledge of Islamic history and ethics. A 'goat-like' man, 'giant,' 'beast' and then 'hyena' perpetuates centuries-old conceptions on the deviant, monster-like 'Saracens' peopling *Eastern lands*. Besides, this impacts Aisha's young

²⁰ Ibid., 14-15.

²¹ Ibid., 15.

psyche and weak body as it is put by her closing words. This also plays a greater role in the narrative since it comes after that story of the ‘slander’ against Aisha and Muhammad’s *apparent* love for her. Aisha also adds this in the ensuing paragraph after Hamal’s scene.

Someday I’d marry [Muhammad] and we would do *that*? His smile was fierce; his eyes seemed to mock me as if he were having the same thoughts, unlike me, he seemed to relish the idea ...he would be the one who crushed, while I’d be the poor girl underneath, sobbing and flailing my arms and legs. ‘That’s marriage, Aisha,’ he whispered, making me want to run away.²²

Aisha, Safwan and Nadida can then be said to be little ‘mischiefs’ that have to participate in a scene of voyeurism. Aisha as a young woman is tormented by these episodes of Hamal and her sister’s tales of the scorpion’s sting. Again, remembering that scene of Hamal, Aisha contemplates how she would be *tormented* in the same way as Fazia-turned-Jamila was. She narrates how “like the slap of the fat Hamal against his frail young wife. In one week, I would lie under Muhammad while he pinned me down with his body, imprisoning me, hurting me. Would he hear my cries of pain? Or would he only pound into me harder and faster, as Hamal had done to Fazia-turned-Jamila?”²³ Muhammad then is portrayed as marrying a young *child-bride*; contemporary western audiences would see him as ‘pedophile.’ Aisha has a very modest marriage ceremony that does not match her reputation. She is portrayed deeply refusing Muhammad; she then plans to escape with Safwan.

During the preparation for the wedding before Aisha could accompany Muhammad, she has these ideas and emotions to convey. “Once again, I nearly burst into tears at the sight of it. But then I reminded myself to pretend I was happy. That way, everyone would be caught off guard when I and Safwan ran away.”²⁴ Aisha feels depressed and traumatised by this news; she points how she feels as follows:

Another devil-wind began deep in my stomach, then whirled wider and higher until I thought it would consume me completely. By al-Lah, it was already beginning! The marriage hadn’t even happened yet, and already Muhammad ...was determining how I should dress ...I saw my dreams of freedom fade like the light from my grandmother’s eyes as she’d lain on her deathbed. Dizziness staggered me. This was not my life! I, A’isha, was supposed to wield a sword and race camels in the desert. Instead I was about to march under my *ummi*’s glaring eye to a life of servitude with a *shaykh*—an old man—and the toothless, grinning Sawdah as my

²² Ibid., 15.

²³ Ibid., 36-37.

²⁴ Ibid., 40.

only companions.²⁵

Then Aisha says “ululations filled the room like the warbles of a thousand and one birds”²⁶ leaving no mystery that these events, characters and scenes are not far from the famed *Arabian Nights*. Aisha remembers her close male friend, the boy she was supposed to marry, Safwan. The latter is more present than the Prophet, which creates tension in the narrative and also establishes how miserable is Aisha for being *forced* to marry an ‘old sheikh!’ This scene exhibits her wish to flee, to run away to be free in her choice with Safwan rather than be presented to Muhammad. To provide a telling passage in which feminist Orientalism speaks volumes as far as the fate of Aisha as an oppressed young woman is concerned, she is portrayed as chattel whose destiny is decided by others; she has no right to choose freely whom to marry or whom to refuse. This is reflected in the pursuant passage: “‘Go, A’isha!’ My mother’s voice jolted me. I told my right foot to step forward. Nothing happened. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. My future awaited on the other side—a fate chosen by others, as though I were a sheep or a goat fatted for this day. I began to tremble like the branch of a tree.”²⁷ This manifest feminist Orientalism of the twenty-first century, therefore, distorts earlier Islamic history.

Animalistic imagery is once again used to stress how inferior and abused a young woman can be in such a repressive culture. To provide another scene involving ‘soft sex,’ which the narrative is pregnant with, one reads when Safwan and Aisha meet after the victorious battle against al-Mustaliq the following passage:

His lips were so sweet and his breath so warm. I let my eyes flutter shut again as I returned his kiss, as chaste as a *child’s*. I felt a stirring under my skin, and I raised my tongue to touch his. With our bodies we brushed each other lightly—my breasts to his chest, his thigh to my most intimate place, my toes to his shins. An aroma like musk rose from his body. My moan of pleasure surprised me, luxuriant as the *purr of a cat* stretching in the sunlight (emphasis added).²⁸

This is neither the first kiss nor is it the last with Safwan. Animal imagery is rampant everywhere one turns; one finds it when describing sexual scenes, when Aisha portrays some cruel, intruding men, or when depicting her *rivals* (Zaynab, Hafsa, Ali, Umar and Ibn Ubayy), be they sister-wives or her ‘enemies’ from Quraysh or other tribes of Arabia. They are, moreover, portrayed as jackals, dogs and serpents. The sentence of returning his kiss puts both Aisha and Jones as ‘liars.’ It puts Aisha as a liar since she hides the truth from her *interlocutors* and those who take charge of *investigating* her tale (Ali and Umar); it also considers her so

²⁵ Ibid., 41.

²⁶ Ibid., 41.

²⁷ Ibid., 42.

²⁸ Ibid., 178.

since she later claims she remains truthful to Muhammad. It puts Jones as a liar since she claims that the book contains no such (sexual or obscene) scenes. Attributing the sexual potency to ‘Orientals’ has often been deployed by some Christians, Europeans and Americans for centuries to discredit the fallen nature of these wicked deeds. Now they are employed to depict them as inscribing ‘scientific truth’ about these people by a feminist, secularist female white American author. On their way home to the mosque, Muhammad and Aisha meet Ibn Ubayy’s friends called ‘hypocrites’ in the novel who start the ensuing passage referring to their harassment and ‘sex talk.’ It runs as Aisha recounts:

“*Yaa Muhammad, is your young bride ripe at last?... I hope you will not scream loudly tonight, little girl. It would be cruel to torment those of us who sleep alone*” the shorter man said with a dirty grin... My face filled with heat. Behind me, Muhammad’s body stiffened... ‘Do you sleep by yourself? You poor, lonely man... by al-Lah, from the smell of you I can guess why’ [Aisha says wrinkling her nose]. The man’s face reddened as the people—including his tall friend—filled the street with laughter.²⁹

This takes place when Muhammad and Aisha are having a ride to go back to her apartment. These men are introduced as the hypocrites of the city. Allegedly accusing him of marrying a ‘child-bride’ the man also alludes to the sexual connotations contained in his speech. Yet, Aisha is equipped with wit and a sharp tongue to silence the man, referring to his stinking smell. Lewd jokes and sexual talk seem to be their daily business. In the following section, the article turns to discuss the essential issue of how Muslim/Arab women are depicted and sexualised.

2. Sexualised Muslim Women

These Arab/Muslim women’s beauty, bodies, shapes and curves are highlighted many times in the narrative especially of young girls and women who are married to older men. Older men are aged like these women’s fathers. Aisha reports what Sawdah tells her:

‘Tut, what a tiny thing!...I had better get busy cooking. You need some padding on those *hips!*.. A man needs something to hold on to, as you will find out soon enough.’ A telltale heat crept up my neck to my cheeks. By al- Lah, was *the bedroom* all anyone could think about today? (emphasis added, 57).

²⁹ Ibid., 54-55.

Hafsa is also *orientalised* to reveal her youth, beauty and glamour. She is depicted splendidly dressed and developed with costly jewels and dresses of the Exotic, mythic and rich ‘Orient.’ In a nutshell, this unfolds to note Muhammad’s sensuality and love of young women. The passage is littered with euphemisms denoting sexual desires and lasciviousness. Aisha says this when she serves Muhammad and his new wife, Hafsa:

The pair settled themselves on a single cushion, so close she might as well have been sitting in his lap. And such an appetite Muhammad displayed! He and the ravenous Hafsa devoured a pile of dates ...She was resplendent. Her thick hair spilled like a river of ink over her shoulders. Her blue silk trousers embroidered with yellow birds narrowed at her waist, then billowed over her hips, accentuating their fullness. Already she had lined her eyes thickly with *kohl*, which dramatized their erotic dance. Her gazes at Muhammad invited, then rebuffed, then teased, then laughed... she wore a necklace of lapis lazuli flecked with golden glints like stars on a slender bronze rope.³⁰

These sexualised Muslim women are there to stress the sensuality of Muhammad and the luxurious East full of ‘ripe’ girls and ‘child-brides’ ready to get plucked. Body parts, lavish clothes embellished with Persian colours and shapes, perfumes and jewelry are employed to stage this sexualized Orient. Then *kohl* as a well-known literary trope and an iconic cultural motif leaves no doubt that the setting and the characters are ‘Oriental’ or else ‘Orientalised’ through a huge library of available, textuality, vocabulary and imagery. Then, Aisha also adds how they “cooed and preened like two nightingales in a nest. I thought of the night they had just spent, her body under Muhammad’s, and my stomach churned. The tip of her breast brushed his arm as she leaned across him for another piece of fruit.”³¹ Aisha regrets that Muhammad forgets her for now under the power of the seduction of Hafsa. This also happens with each new wife.

The public baths or *hammams* (used to portray Turkish characters and naked women bathing in an act of voyeurism) are also employed to reveal such aspects of the Oriental women’s hidden and forbidden parts, secrets, desires and shapes. Aisha notes what follows:

The baths were not crowded; only a few women soaked in the large rectangular pools lined with stone, which were filled from a nearby spring using copper pipes. Others reclined on stone slabs beside the waters and towel-dried their skin, or sat upright, clothed and scented, while their daughters braided their hair. *Musk* and *sandalwood*, *lavender* and *rose* tinged the moist air, overpowering the burnt smell

³⁰ Ibid., 76-77.

³¹ Ibid., 77.

of oil from the lamps on the stone walls (emphasis added).³²

From bedrooms to public baths, *hammams*, and ‘harems’ the women are there to stage the sensuality Of the Muslim ‘Orient’ and the power of spices and herbs to seduce the viewers and lovers. Hafsa is not the only young woman rendered an object of desire in the text. Zaynab and Umm Salama are depicted so as well. Zaynab is portrayed as glamorous and beautiful despite her claimed hot rivalry with Aisha. The latter narrates:

I looked up to see Zaynab bint Jahsh standing in the entryway. I tried not to stare at her, but my gaze kept returning like a *bee* to a succulent flower. She was every bit as beautiful as Umm Salama, but in a different way. Umm Salama was a *gazelle*, elegant and understated...Her eyes shone a startling gold, like ripe dates fresh from the tree, and her loose, dark hair curled wildly about her face, vining around her green silk wrapper (emphasis added).³³

Again, the animalistic vocabulary and the luxurious and exotic Oriental topos are brought over and over to give a picture of and compare these women in their beauty and bodily features. It makes no difference if these women occupy the public baths, the harem or the mosque itself. It is implied that their presence is seducing and threatening for men. Muhammad, according to some guests present during Zaynab’s ceremony, is seduced by the latter and is ‘lusty’ as well. Aisha states this:

Such was the mood in al-Lah’s holy mosque that evening: lewd and leering, filled with bawdy jokes and winking speculations. *See how the Prophet lusts for his bride? It is a wonder he was able to wait four months to marry her...* men and women alike nudged one another, baring teeth and wagging tongues. *Of course he waited. He had to be certain that she did not carry his son’s child, did he not?...*The insinuations made me yearn to attack some of them.³⁴

On the seduction of Muhammad, some of these attending men under the cloak of some Orientalists accuse the Prophet of being seduced by Zaynab. In their view, he commits the sin of ‘incest’ because of his marriage to his adopted son’s ex-wife (Zayd divorced her before marrying Muhammad). The latter accusation is a well-known Orientalist misconception of the

³² Ibid., 127.

³³ Ibid., 146.

³⁴ Ibid., 153.

Prophet Muhammad. Even Aisha accuses him of using the Qur'an to legitimise this marriage which is an old established Orientalist misperception reappearing after about one thousand years (Norman Daniel's *Islam and the West* 1960). The power of these women to seduce even the Prophet and pious males is telling. "They must think I'm dangerous" as Geraldine Brooks suggests when trying to book a room in a hotel in Saudi Arabia, with the hotel male receptionist retorting firmly, "they think all women are dangerous."³⁵ This explains why women should be 'covered,' veiled and sequestered. Still, sexually driven talks and daily lewd jokes seem to be the everyday gossip of these people.

In her quest to *seduce* the Prophet and consummate her marriage for the sake of establishing herself queen and leader of his 'harem,' Aisha performs an 'Oriental' dance. "It is very nice," Muhammad says adding that he did not recognise she was "a dancer."³⁶ Simultaneously, he is described as wearing a white turban as if he were a 'Turkish Sultan' enjoying the dancing of his 'child-bride' Aisha. This very portrait sums up centuries of fantasies, Orientalist paintings and fictitious Orientalist narratives. She also adds later how she slips her own *red* gown, behind the screen, under which she wears "a dancer's costume" Asma gave her "to inflame his passions." Therefore, Aisha is depicted as a young maiden moving from 'entertaining' the Prophet and providing pleasure to leading his 'harem' and exercising power. She appears in "a frenzied display of music and dance, shaking [her] body like a flower."³⁷ Hence, Aisha stands for the Oriental/ Orientalised woman as portrayed in Orientalist paintings and narratives for centuries in luxurious palaces to entertain and please bored and anxious sultans and pashas. Still, she remains his young, 'child-bride.'³⁸

Moreover, with the arrival of Alia, the young beauty sent as a gift from the king of Yemen to the Prophet, Aisha recounts how her sister-wives in the household react to Alia's presence:

We watched her in silence at first, as though listening to a poem that told of high cheeks like figs, of eyelashes as long as a lover's kiss, lips as full and dark as forbidden wine, skin like coffee, and a bosom like the twin hills of Mecca... 'Say good-bye to your husband, sister-wives,' Raihana [says]. 'This new toy won't lose its appeal anytime soon.' ... 'She is an exotic flower drawing every eye,' Saffiya complained... 'By al-Lah, another foreigner to make us all seem common,' Hafsa said. 'Raihana speaks the truth. We'll never see Muhammad again' ...Her smile

³⁵ Gerladine Brooks's book, *Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women* (1994), 2. It is one of the feminist Orientalist books that S. Jones consulted before writign her book. Brooks worked as a journalist, corespondent in the 'Middle East' for years (in Saudi Arabia, Iran and palestine).

³⁶ Jones, *The Jewel*, 97.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 100.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 102.

outdazzled the jewels dripping from her throat, ears, arms, and ankles.’³⁹

The euphemisms the passage is pregnant with speak volumes as far as the feminist, Orientalist repertoire, images and conceptions are concerned. Feminist orientalism, as defined by Joyce Zonana (1993), “is a rhetorical strategy (and a form of thought) by which a speaker or writer neutralizes the threat inherent in feminist demands and makes them palatable to an audience that wishes to affirm its occidental superiority.”⁴⁰ Thus, the Muslim Orient is portrayed as backward, oppressive and patriarchal, a space where Muslim women and girls have few rights. Hence, the Oriental women of Arabia are Orientalised, sexualized and romanticized; these portrayals are repeated each time Muhammad brings a *new wife* or is offered a new beauty. Moreover, the *ummah* then Medina are depicted as a place where rumors, murmurs and gossip spread like fire. Muhammad, furthermore, is illustrated as a ‘seduced’ and ‘fascinated’ Prophet. Crucially, these images and conceptions are engraved Orientalist and Christian polemical designations to portray Muhammad and his ‘unfair’ religion. Also among the misconceptions are the twin concepts of marriage and divorce. For a man to marry it suffices that he says, ‘yes’ I take this woman; if he wants to divorce her, it would suffice to say the three words or repudiations; and that is all over as if they were ‘chattel.’ Since the Medieval Ages, as noted by the distinguished scholar Norman Daniel, the Prophet Muhammad’s life (or what Muslims call *sirah*) has been used and misused for different purposes among which the distortion of his legacy; this is what Daniel calls ‘polemic biography’ that was used to distort his legacy and prove his ‘false’ religion.⁴¹

Conclusion

Sherry Jones as a feminist Orientalist and author appropriates and propagates the old-new enduring misconceptions and images of Islam and Muslims that originated earlier European and American texts and contexts. The images of the lustful and lewd Muslim men and the sexualised, Orientalised, oppressed Muslim women are reproduced and disseminated once more in the post-9/11 America. While the writer claims that she ‘respects’ and understands Islam and its Prophet, her text is crammed with feminist Orientalist disparaging conceptions that hinder any true attempts to understand and respect other cultures and societies. After this exposition, it is important to unravel the feminist Orientalist (mis)conceptions of the

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 261-262.

⁴⁰ Joyce Zonana, “The Sultan and the Slave: Feminist Orientalism and the Structure of ‘Jane Eyre.’” *Signs*, The University of Chicago Press, Vol. 18, no. 3, Spring 1993, 594.

⁴¹ Norman Daniel, (first edition 1960) *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image* (Edinburgh University Press, 1993), 100.



Companions Ali and Umar and how they are (mis)presented in the narratives of this era.

Bibliography

Brooks, Geraldine. *Nine Parts of Desire : The Hidden World of Islamic Women*. New York: Anchor Books, 1995.

Daniel, Norman. *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image*. Oxford : Edinburgh University Press, 1993.

Jones, Sherry. *The Jewel of Medina*. Random House, 2008.

Zonana, Joyce. "The Sultan and the Slave: Feminist Orientalism and the Structure of 'Jane Eyre.'" *Signs*, The University of Chicago Press, Vol. 18, no. 3, Spring 1993, pp. 592-617.