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“Practices, Interpretations and Representations”

By Christina E. Civantos

Orientalist discourses – essentialist representations of Arab and Muslim cultures – frequently display a fascination with the sexuality, gender roles, and women of Muslim cultures. In Argentina, not only Orientalist writings, but also texts that attempt to problematize them, participate in this fixation on sexuality and gender. The power dynamics of the representation of the feminine, feminized, and/or sexualized Orient arises within Argentine works that describe either a far-away Orient or the Arab immigrants present in Argentina. The range of representations can be understood according to three historical markers: the Rosas dictatorship of 1835–52; the massive influx of immigrants, among them Arabs, in the late 1800s to early 1900s; and the Menem presidency of 1989–99.

In the mid-1800s, writers used images of the Arab and Muslim world in their nation-building process and in particular to criticize the dictatorship of Juan Manuel de Rosas. Their works portray Arabs as savages, or more specifically, depict those whom they consider to be uncivilized savages – Rosas and his supporters – as Arabs. All of these works either use Arab characters, depicted as barbarians, to symbolize Rosas and his followers or describe Rosas as Arab-like, and most use the figure of a Muslim woman or conceptions of Muslim sexuality to express their condemnation of the Rosas regime. José Mármol, famous for his Romantic anti-Rosas writings, wrote a verse play that takes place in the twelfth-century Near East and centers on the violent passion of Celina, a Muslim woman who kills her Crusader lover when he forsakes her. Mármol uses an alluring yet dangerously passionate Muslim woman, and the desert that is the source of her uncontrollable passion, as the vehicle for criticizing the Rosas dictatorship. Another anti-Rosas text portrays a contemporary historical event – the execution of Camila O’Gorman by the Rosas regime – through stereotypical images of the harem and Arabo-Muslim sexuality. The Franco-Argentine Felisberto Pélissot wrote a novel about O’Gorman that portrays Rosas in the garb and lifestyle of the Arab of Orientalist imagination. Pélissot, by describing Rosas as a sultan with a harem, who wears slippers, moves coquettishly, and gazes into a mirror, criticizes the authoritarian leader as a vain, effeminate, yet lascivious Arab. These writers adapt European Orientalist archetypes of uncontrollable Arabo-Muslim sexuality in order to criticize Rosas. They were, however, the last Argentines to use such imagery in commenting upon any Argentine leader of European descent. What changed over the following years was the demographic make-up of Argentina.

In the 1860s, Arab immigrants began to arrive in Argentina. Primarily from present-day Syria and Lebanon, the majority of them were Christians, but all of them, in the eyes of Euro-Argentines, were associated with Islam. Once Arabs were physically present in Argentina, and thus were raising questions about the definition of national identity, Argentines no longer used the figure of the Arab to represent Euro-Argentine politicians. Instead, the Orientalist imaginary was employed in the definition of a new, post-immigrant wave national identity, one marked by cultural nationalism, Hispanism, and anti-immigrant sentiment. In the early 1900s, precisely in this period in which immigration policies, the judicial system, and public sentiment were rejecting immigrants, especially Semitic ones (both Jews and Arabs), writers began to employ with particular intensity the literary topos of the Orient, both as a far away place offering enticing difference and as an immigrant group of troubling dissimilarity. In these texts the authors attempt to control the Other and construct the self through their representational strategies.

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Twentieth-century Argentine literary Orientalism includes several literary genres and ranges in style from realism to modernismo (akin to French Parnassian and symbolist writing) to the avant-garde. The modernista and avant-garde works often represent the Muslim world as the site of erotic freedom and excess, through figures ranging from seductive women to sexually aberrant men. One prominent example within modernismo is Enrique Larreta's *La gloria de don Ramiro*. This novel, which attained international popularity and canonical status, takes place in post-Reconquest Spain and mocks the Spanish desire for a Christian, European identity as reflected in the concept of *pureza de sangre* (pure bloodlines, that is with no Muslim or Jewish traces). However, the novel accomplishes this critique through traditional stereotypes of Muslim sexuality: repeated references to Muslim sensuality and seduction and the main female character, Aixa, a Muslim woman of captivating beauty and lustful ways.

Arab Argentine writings from the early twentieth century reveal an awareness of these Euro-Argentine discourses and attempt to counter them by writing works that present Arabo-Muslim history and culture to a Spanish-speaking audience. During the first half of the twentieth century most Spanish-language Arab Argentine publications were histories of the Arab world or essays defending the Arab immigrants in Argentina. Not coincidentally, many of these efforts focused on women's issues. Emin Arslan, the most prominent and prolific of these writers, historicized the customs surrounding marriage in Muslim societies, the harem, and the veil; however, he also fed the reader's desire for lurid Eastern tales. Thus, his response reinforced images of a voluptuous and sensual East.

The iconoclastic, yet now canonical, vanguardista writer Roberto Arlt treated the supposed hypersexuality (eroticism or “deviance”) of the East in his Morocco-inspired writings. While traveling as a newspaper correspondent in Morocco in the 1930s, Arlt wrote essays in which he objectifies Muslim women and sneers at homosexual Moroccan men; in contrast, in his collection of Morocco-inspired short stories, Arlt often presents essentializing discourses about an exotic Other with self-conscious irony. Nonetheless, this irony sometimes coexists with a reinscription of fixed conceptions about the Orient, including its excessive sexuality. For instance, in “*Los bandidos de Uad-Djuari*” (The bandits of Uad-Djuari), a humorous critique of tourism and cultural authenticity is limited by the figure of a feminized Muslim boy: described like a coquettish schoolgirl, this duplicitous boy embodies the stereotype of the Arab male who displays feminine guile.

In the literature depicting Syro-Lebanese immigrants in Argentina, while some works (such as the popular theater pieces of the *sainete*) do not associate the struggling immigrant merchant with any sumptuous sensuality and only maintain the stereotype of the submissive Eastern woman, others present different versions of Muslim hypersexuality. From the 1970s on, the well-known Arab Argentine novelist, Jorge Asís, published a series of novels that portray Syro-Lebanese immigrants and their descendants in Buenos Aires. Asís's novels present, albeit with a picaresque tone, female Syro-Lebanese characters who are passive in the face of patriarchal power, or even actively supportive of it, and male Syro-Lebanese characters who boast exceptional sex drives and powers of seduction.

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Euro-Argentines have taken up Orientalist imagery as they react to the political career of Carlos Menem, the son of Syrian Muslim immigrants (he converted to Catholicism) who became president of Argentina. Anti-Arab bigotry resurfaced once Menem won the presidential nomination in 1988. Since then, the press, the populace, and popular culture (from Vegas-style revues to humor magazines) have often linked Menem's shortcomings as president to his ethnic origins. One strand within this phenomenon, seen in the popular non-fiction works of Morandini and Walger, employs the Western image of the harem to criticize Menem and associated Muslim Argentines.

Argentine writers, of both Arab and European descent, have attempted to critique and unravel essentialist representations of Muslim women, but these problematic representations continue.

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