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**Reading the Arab in American Literature**

One of the beauties of American storytelling is its fearlessness. American authors have used their stories to take snapshots of culture, and often times, use their stories to see how people are valued and represented in the world. These stories offer perspectives in how others have formed their identities throughout history. A challenge occurs in concern with Arab identities, where American imagination has often assumed the Arab usable archetypes. Locating the Arab in the American canon calls for a deconstruction and critical analysis of these assumed imaginations. Literature shows that the Arab are present in the cultural fabric, but are nonetheless sidelined and subjugated into objective roles in order to progress a story. This subjugation can change the opinion and understanding of the culture, but it can be argued, though, that these images and ideas are a direct result of incorrect information, which only results in the “easy” use of the Arab as an object. Disingenuous imaginations of Arabs and Muslims can be compared to the treatment of other minority groups in America – Latino, Asian, and African Americans – but where other minority groups have found success in developing their identity and place in America, the Arab American image has primarily gone unchallenged within academia, culture, and leadership. What the future calls for is the actual engagement of the Arab identity within American humanities, examining how their image is used in literature and culture, while challenging the idea about Arabs studies in America in order to further humanize society.

This essay will use a literary lens in order to analyze and theorize a possible approach in examining the images of Arabs and Muslims in American literature and visual media. The target will be the “imagined” and “assumed” archetypes, allegories, and metaphors that have followed Arab and Muslim Americans into the contemporary era. The two primary literary sources that will be examined are Mark Twain’s *The Innocents Abroad* and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, while conversation will coincide with the 1921 film *The Sheik*. All these sources will be critically analyzed with the assistance of Edward Said’s Orientalism, Amaney Jamal and Nadine Naber’s editing of *Race and Arab Americans Before and After 9/11: From Invisible Citizens to Visible Subjects* with specific focus on essays by Louise Cainkar, Michelle Hartman, and Evelyn Alsultany. These critical analyses will assist in providing historical and critical theories which can articulate the treatment Arabs in America, providing some proof that there has been a lack of pedagogical engagement in concern with the society as a whole.

**Mark Twain’s *The Innocents Abroad* and Edward Said’s *Orientalism***

In literature, imageries can be delivered to the reader through the technical use of a narrator’s perceptions and how they imagine – or reimagine – their own views of the world. How the narrator tells their story to the reader depends on what the narrator actually knows – the audience can only see the world from the narrator’s point of view. In concern with American narrators, their imagination is influenced by the knowledge they have consumed. In other words, what the narrator *knows* and *assumes* is what the reader will have to consume.

Mark Twain’s *The Innocents Abroad* tells the story of a set of American travelers who leave the country with dreams and expectations of the things they might see in foreign lands, but my the end of the book, their imaginations are disillusioned due to the pragmatics of the world. Published in 1869, *The Innocents Abroad* was Twain’s bestselling novel during his lifetime and was immensely popular for its use of satire, humor, and its message of disenchantment. From a theoretical lens, the travelers’ “enchantment” was created by the grand dreams of art and literature, the possibilities deriving from well-travelers and scholars in academia. It was “…to be a picnic on a gigantic scale” (Twain, 17), an adventure where they would see “…the customs and costumes of twenty curious peoples – the great cities of half a world – they were to hob-nob with nobility and hold friendly converse with kings and princes, Grand Moguls, and the anointed lords of mighty empires!” (Twain, 17). If it’s one thing Mark Twain wants to make clear about his Narrator and his friends, it is that they were naïve and ignorant about the pragmatics of foreign land. The only thing which they truly knew about the other countries, in other words, were from the stories of “professionals”.

Indeed, it is in Turkey where the Narrator begins to realize that his exposure to Oriental stories and his education on the Middle East has been, for the most part, wrong. The Narrator realizes that his own assumptions about the culture and his expectations of the society was, in his words, a lie: “When I think how I have been swindled by books of Oriental travel, I want a tourist for breakfast” (Twain 297). A close reading of the American’s adventure into the Middle East shows them second guessing their assumptions while scrutinizing the institutions of the region. The Turkish meals are not what he imagined to be, the narghili he smokes is no different than the tobacco he smokes in America, and when he sees the newspaper being sold for double the price, the Turkish excuse is that the “…paper has been suppressed!” (Twain, 296). Twain’s Narrator, in this single instance, realizes that all of the Oriental stories he’s consumed have tricked him. He begins ridiculing all the exotic and fictional artifacts of the Middle East, specifically the lands where Arabs and Muslims dominate, and he sees that those lands have only been misinterpreted from their actual realities which alters the imaginations which one assumes of the land.

The information that “swindled” Twain’s narrator failed to provide the “truth” - it fictionalized the people. Controlled variations of knowledge are technical, and is used by academics, artists, and others who want to show “the other” based on their own fantastical imagination. Edward Said investigates and examines these changes in his book *Orientalism*, which describes the overall epistemological process and methodology in which someone looks to describe the “Orient” – that is, countries from North Africa to South Asia. Said argues that Orientalists are searching for ways to portray the people within these areas in a negative light, something which he defines as “…the Orientalist vision, a vision by no means confined to the professional scholar, but rather the common possession of all who have thought about the Orient in the West” (Said, 69). These visions, according to Said, can be “taught”, and they have used multiple methods of knowledge-based dissemination – “…societies, periodicals, traditions, vocabulary, rhetoric…” (Said, 67) – which, without proper pedagogical challenges, will re-imagine what people may think and understand of those specific area and its peoples. In relation to Mark Twain, Said is arguing what his narrator quickly realized: That all academic journals, studies, and imageries he’s consumed about the “Orient” have been fabricated and fraudulent in comparison to its realities. Essentially, he tried to “fill in the gaps” of how he imagined Arabs to be like overseas. That is, he created his own assumptions about how people behave and act based on the faulty information which he was supplied.

Twain’s Narrator in *The Innocents Abroad* begins to challenge his own “imagination” and realizes the systematic tyranny of the land due to the harsh realities of the Ottoman Empire over Arab countries such as Syria and beyond. It is within these specific passages where the imaginations of the travelers begin to become disillusioned. What was expected to be found from false advertisements and Orientalist academia only proved the overwhelming presence of poverty and tyranny. As the Narrator’s assumptions are disproven, he finds that the reality of the land and its people are suffering. “When you ride through of these villages,” Twain writes, “you first meet a melancholy dog … a young boy without any clothes on … A Syrian village is the sorriest sight in the world” (Twain, 371). Comparing a “young boy without any clothes on” with that of a “dog” can equivocally dehumanize that boy’s representation of a Syrian, that his only worth is being decrepit and homeless. Furthermore, the Narrator locates this scene directly next to the holy sight of Nimrod, writing that “I would not have gone into this dissertation upon Syrian villages but for the fact that Nimrod … I wished the public to know about how he is located” (Twain, 371). To the Narrator, it is the unfortunate circumstance that a holy site such as Nimrod’s grave is located in the vicinity of this Syrian village, where people are broke, homeless, and suffering under oppression. Where he expected Nimrod to be beautiful, it turns out only to be the opposite.

Though it could be read that Twain is describing Arabs in a negative light, it is necessary to understand that he is doing so only under the broken “Orientalist vision” which Said was describing about above. Twain, or Twain’s Narrator, realizes that their perspectives of the world has been heavily impacted and transformed by the false Orientalist information. Indeed, Twain has a heart for the Arabs, as the narration shows that his dislike towards Arabs and Turks is something that was learned based on the incorrect and controlled knowledge from the various products of Orientalist knowledge. He writes that

“If ever an oppressed race existed, it is this one we see fettered around us under the inhuman tyranny of the Ottoman Empire … These people are naturally good-hearted and intelligent and with education and liberty, would be a happy and contented race … The Sultan has been lavishing money like water in England and Paris, but his subjects are suffering for it now” (Twain, 350-351).

The Narrator’s previous statement about a Syrian village being the “sorriest sight in the world” isn’t necessarily a critique on the Arab people, but rather a critique of the Ottoman Empire and its tyranny over the land. That Arab boy with no clothes on being dehumanized to the point where he is compared to being a dog is result of tyranny, the sad realities which Twain’s narrator finds unfortunate. Though Twain dehumanizes the young Arab boy, it was done through examination of tyranny. The “Orientalist vision” he held before is completely not true – in fact, he realizes that it was a fabricated lie meant to hide the realities of what is really going on in the land. The sad irony is that Nimrod and the other holy sites of Jerusalem are surrounded by this tyranny, and what Twain truly realizes is that the knowledge he thought he knew about the area, was in fact, not the correct knowledge he had the whole time.

The reality of the matter rising from Mark Twain’s *The Innocents Abroad* is that the characters wish they “knew better” than the assumptions and expectations made deriving from their Orientalist sources. Even in contemporary times, what can be observed from the revelation is that there has been a lack of pedagogical and academic engagement within the subject matter in order to “correct” these opinions. Louise Cainkar’s essay *Thinking Outside the Box* focuses on the numerous challenges towards Arab Americans. One statement she points out is that “…the most noted features of Arab exclusion in the United States are tactical … This exclusion also has been evident in political mobilization and in multicultural pedagogy … In pedagogy, Arabs have been excluded from race and ethnic studies, and when mentioned, often treated differently than other groups” (Cainkar, 49). When compared to *The Innocents Abroad,* these allegories and imageries deriving from Mark Twain reflects these sentiments in that they suddenly realize that their previous education has been entirely fraudulent. Furthermore, the problem in allowing the images to go unchallenged means that they will remain in a constant, stagnated within the face of popular opinion and conceptual treatment. Edward Said writes that without any challenge, then “The Arab is a sign for dumbness combined with hopeless over-articulateness, poverty combined with excess. That such a result can be attained by philological means testifies to the sad end of a formerly complex philological tradition…” (Said, 320). Within literature, arts, and sciences, there has been an almost “easy” and “natural” reason to use the Arab image doing the same thing with the same results. Twain’s Narrator only assumed that people were living the life he saw in literature, art, and academics. “Arabs’”, Said continues, “are presented in the imagery of static, almost ideal types, and neither as creatures with a potential in the process of being realized…” (Said, 321). This reoccurring “static imagery” requires the Arab or Muslim image to be in a narration involving “lowness”.

**F. Scott Fitzgerald and the Static Imagery**

Mark Twain had to travel across the Atlantic and explore an entire region during the 1860’s in order to reimagine the Middle East and to realize that an entire region of the world do not reflect Oriental imaginations. His learned imagination of Arabs and Muslims has been based on Orientalist traditions (the paintings of nude children parading around rich old men, concubines and their birds, and the list can go on) and he realized that these negative stereotypes result in dissatisfactory images of foreign societies, the “dirty” Arab image being a direct result of Ottoman tyranny. The challenges highlighted by Edward Said, however, points out that even if writers like Twain are able to articulate that these images have been false, that does little to change the constant imagery which follows the Arabs well into the 1900’s. Indeed, these images have remained a constant inside the American cultural and literary scene well after the times of Twain’s *The Innocents Abroad*, and more specifically, can be located in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby.*

Narrative perception is key when conducting a reading of the Arab in F. Scott Fitzgerald. *The Great Gatsby* has been historically touted as the American novel of extravagance - how the desire for money and love coincides with attainment of the American Dream. Similar to Twain’s Narrator in *The Innocents Abroad*, F. Scott Fitzgerald uses Nick Carraway to tell the story about Jay Gatsby and his longing for Daisy Buchanan, who is Carraway’s cousin. In order to do so, Gatsby believes he must “make up” for his historic lack of wealth by throwing extravagant mansion parties and keeping connections with powerful men. Nick Carraway, who is used to living around the wealthy, catches onto Gatsby’s façade and questions his legitimacy, wondering how a poor man truly got to where he is. Carraway’s questioning and reflexive observations opens room for a new reading of *The Great Gatsby*, and that because of Carraway’s observations of “poorer” societies, Carraway’s narration, in a sense, is not so much about extravagance in America, but a sudden “rise” in minority societies.

If *The Great Gatsby* is deconstructed, then a reading that “rise of minorities” can be visualized from Fitzgerald’s writing. Nick Carraway provides numerous situations where he realizes that an entire social class of Americans are actually living, side by side, by the wealthy. His observations in the “rise” of a minority society is highlighted as jazz music becomes the tool for happiness, Jews are getting white people rich, and the poor is seen mourning over their dead loved ones. Indeed, F. Scott Fitzgerald has written a highly “American Dream” story at the surface, but has layered it with cultural changes that instead shows an ever changing America. Take, for example, the scene when Jordan Baker convinces Nick Carraway to lend his home to Gatsby so that he can swoon Daisy Buchanan. Baker spends the moment talking about his past and how his one goal has always been to attain Daisy once again, and in the background of high towers and “celebrity homes”, these song lyrics comes into view:

“I’m the Sheik of Araby,

Your love belongs to me.

At night when you’re asleep,

Into your tent I’ll creep –“(Fitzgerald, 83).

These brief song lyrics is a direct reference to the famous 1921 song titled “The Sheik of Araby”, written by Harry B. Smith and Francis Wheeler in response to the equally famous film, “The Sheik”, starring Rudolph Valentino and Agnes Ayres. It is important to note that Fitzgerald published *The Great Gatsby* in 1925, but the actual story itself was set during the summer of 1922, one year after the film and song came into popularity. The movie caused an immense cultural response during the 1920’s, as Rudolph Valentino’s portrayal of an Arab man became a hit sensation. He would flare his eyes, flex his nostrils, and sexually overwhelm Agnes Ayres as she attempts to break social boundaries. This is precisely the “static imagery” which Said discusses, and precisely the pedagogical exemption which Cainkar takes to note. Men of the 1920’s desired to adopt the similar attitudes and characters of Valentino’s sheik in order to be much like Valentino’s sheik.

Nick Carraway, in The Great Gatsby, is actively observing this cultural movement from The Sheik and relaying this archetype to reflect Jay Gatsby’s own personal agenda. Indeed, in order to find some success in his life, Jay Gatsby the conman must wear multiple different “masks” that hide his true intentions, which is solely his desire to attain Daisy. By adopting the archetype of Valentino’s Arab – the archetype of a violent and sexually dominant Arab man – then he can possibly find his most success in his quest for love. Ultimately, Jay Gatsby is killed by a poor man, the one thing he has been trying to get away from. This imagery of Valentino’s Sheik only makes the Arab man into an allegorical representation for violence, docility, and an inability to mix within America, and ultimately, doomed to failure with the implication that this type of behavior leads to an eventual death of a man.

F. Scott Fitzgerald was completely aware of the cultural environment of America during the 1920’s, and *The Great Gatsby* offers a unique historical perspective on how gender, race, and class was represented during the time. Nick Carraway, through his passive narration, offers the perspective to the reader that an entire new society has been making their voices heard in America. His view of the Atlantic Ocean, how he sees “…the boats against the current…”, can perhaps be a view that all of America has arrived into the land, that we’ve all came, in one form or another, on a boat from another culture.

**Conclusion**

In the 1830’s, an African Muslim slave named Omar ibn Said wrote the first all-Arab slave narrative on American soil. Said was exotified and misunderstood, such as wrongly identified in 1927 as “Moreau the Arabian Prince” by Greensbro Daily News contributor, Louis T. Moore. Given Rudolph Valentino’s 1921 portrayal of an Arab sheikh, there is enormous room to see that the Arab has been historically misunderstood and misrepresented in America. Without significant opposition and proper re-imagination in academia, this pedagogical mishap has affected Arab Americans into this day. War and politics have only caused the Arab to become a source of mistrust, as *being* an Arab in America means one must either stand *with* America and its values, or *against* it. The fact of the matter is that Arab Americans have significantly contributed and participated in America, but their contributions are in danger of remaining under the static noise of wrongful American imagination. Given the current contemporary climate, the time is more opportune than ever to give the Arab American a “second chance”.

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