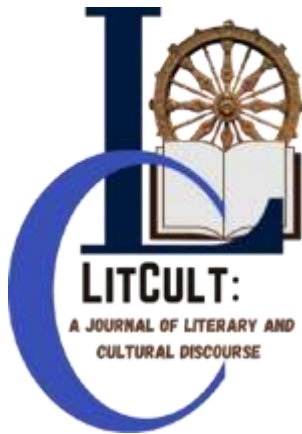




Framing the Orient

Photography, Orientalism, and Construction of the 'East'

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Abstract

The concept of the “Orient” refers primarily to the Middle East and other parts of the so-called “Eastern region,” defined historically through hierarchical and dismissive Western discourses. This paper examines the intersections of photography and Orientalism, drawing on Edward Said’s foundational arguments in his seminal work *Orientalism*. Photography, as both a visual archive and a colonial technology, played a pivotal role in producing and circulating images of the Orient that denied its political and cultural legitimacy while simultaneously exoticising its people and spaces. Such visual representations reinforced the binary between “East” and “West,” attaching derision and contempt to the Orient and naturalising its subservience. Photography thus became an instrument of Orientalist knowledge-production, constructing, homogenising, and ruling the Orient within frameworks of power. These dynamics shaped how the nineteenth century envisioned the “East” and continue to influence postcolonial theory today, illustrating how visual images and written texts collaborate to reinforce power and domination.

Keywords: Orientalism, Photography, Representation, Postcolonial Theory

Introduction

Edward Said believes that Orientalist opinions were shaped through the acculturation of people through art, photography, literature, and the social sciences. Among these, photography stands out as a significant medium. The beginnings of photography go back to the early nineteenth century, with the development of the daguerreotype by Louis Daguerre in 1839. This early photographic process could capture images with outstanding life-like detail, something that

painting or drawing could not attain with the same immediacy. Due to this ability to capture reality with such precision, photography quickly gained popularity and spread widely. At a time when the camera itself was a new invention, the power of a visual image had an intense impact on how people saw and comprehended the world. In this way, photography became a crucial tool for circulating and reinforcing Orientalist ideas.

After its invention in 1839, photography quickly became closely associated with the Middle East. It was adopted as an important tool by Egyptologists and Orientalists, who used it to document cityscapes, ancient monuments, and people, classified into ethnic or occupational “types.” The dazzling Middle Eastern light made it easier and faster to produce photographs, thereby turning the region into one of the earliest centres for photographic practice. Images of rural landscapes, local dress, and daily life were circulated to fit Western expectations of the “exotic East.” In doing so, these photographs reduced complex societies to exotic scenes, while ignoring the political, cultural, and economic realities that moulded them.

As Edward Said has argued, such representations were never neutral; they strengthened Orientalism by producing a visual discourse that justified Western domination and denied authenticity to the lived realities of these countries. John Tagg, in *The Burden of Representation*, similarly opines that photographs should not be seen as visible reflections of reality but as an apparatus of power, produced within specific institutional and ideological contexts. Seen together, Said and Tagg show how nineteenth-century photographs of the Middle East did not merely “record” but actively constructed the Orient as exotic, timeless, and inferior; an image that served the political interests of the Empire.

Thus, Orientalism was useful for photographers from both regions, as it gave the East a set of conventions by which to frame its culture for Western audiences. Ali Behdad shows how Middle Eastern audiences adopted photography as a way to foreground status and patriarchal values while also exoticizing other social classes. Further, Michelle Woodward points out that photography was also used as propaganda by Sultans, who would deliberately commission albums depicting the rapidly modernising regimes to create new perceptions of the ‘East’.

It is imperative to understand the presence of Orientalist bias. Within the expanding colonial context, relations between the ‘East’ and the ‘West’ were shaped by Orientalist assumptions about culture and political organisation. Photography, in this framework, functioned as a tool

that buttressed these preconceived ideas and helped shape the political dynamics between the two regions.

Literature Review

Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) laid the foundation for understanding how the "Orient" was produced as Europe's cultural and political opposite. Said argues that representations of the East through scholarship, literature, and art constructed a knowledge system that naturalised Western superiority. Later scholarship (Mitchell and Macfie 2000) extended Said's critique, showing how Orientalism shaped not only academic disciplines but also cultural perceptions and political practices. These frameworks remain essential for examining how visual media such as photography functioned as a technology of Orientalist knowledge production.

Photography's invention in 1839 quickly coincided with imperial expansion, enabling European powers to create visual documentation of colonies and their people. John Tagg's *The Burden of Representation* (1988) highlights that photographs are not neutral records of reality but embedded within institutional frameworks of power. They serve as instruments of surveillance, classification, and control. Similarly, Allan Sekula (1986) emphasizes the documentary function of photography as tied to systems of authority. When applied to Middle Eastern contexts, these critiques reveal how photography translated Orientalist assumptions into seemingly objective evidence of the "exotic" and "timeless" East.

Scholarship on nineteenth-century Middle Eastern photography shows how photographers like Félix Bonfils framed the region through Orientalist conventions. Gavin Carney (1982) demonstrates that Bonfils' images constructed the Orient as scenic, static and untouched by modernity, thereby aligning with European notions of cultural superiority. Behdad and Gartlan further argue that such photography was both representational and performative—it did not merely depict the East but actively produced a lens through which the West could view the East.

Scope of Study

Orientalist depictions are most evident during the broad period of the 1800s that saw the emergence of photography as a new form of technology. It affected the minds of the people, more because of the subtle simplicity of its capacity to influence. Further, according to Ali Behdad, "Photography was the key to the evolution and maintenance of Europe's distinctively

Orientalist vision of the Middle East for European audiences." (Behdad & Gartlan 45). This period therefore, proves to be a suitable period as far as the scope of study is concerned.

The research narrows down to two countries as case studies to study these perceptions, namely: Turkey and Egypt. Bazaars, buildings, cultural practices, harems, etc., are all depicted in highly romanticised forms. The scope of this research is based on exploring Orientalist tendencies within photographs based on the above themes. Through the course of this research, we attempt to understand how photography serves as a collaborator to the creation of Orientalist conceptions. In doing so, we shall begin by understanding the overarching nature of these conceptions, evaluate their impact on Egypt and Turkey, and analyse the usage of state propaganda as a response to them.

The limitations of this study include the following aspects: Though Turkey and Egypt are not geographically part of the Middle East, they fall within the same area of study as far as the geopolitics of the period is concerned. There is also an acute lack of photographic data regarding the daily lives of the people in these areas, and thus, one can only speculate, given the overarching political context.

Method of Study

The research was completed using secondary web and literary sources, including collections of photographs that could be used to carry out a qualitative analysis in order to answer the research questions put forward in the above sections. The works of scholars like Michelle Woodward, Ali Behdad, Nissan Perez are the focus of the research, among others. In addition, photographs of Felix Bonfils, Pascal Sebah, Francis Frith, and Abdullah Brothers have been used for the analysis as mentioned above.

Analysis

The principal characteristic of Orientalism is a "subtle and persistent Eurocentric prejudice against Arab-Islamic peoples and their culture." This prejudice derives from Western images of what is Oriental (cultural representations) that reduce the Orient to the fictional essences of "Oriental peoples" and "the places of the Orient." Such cultural representations dominate the discourse of Western peoples with non-Western peoples. (Bullock & Trombley 56)

Representations of the "East," and particularly the "Middle East," demonstrate the Foucauldian idea that *knowledge is power*. Western constructions of the Orient became the dominant discourse, shaping how the East was understood in ways that were deeply Eurocentric and

problematic. In this sense, Orientalism shows how Europe's efforts to "know" the colonised world were inseparable from its strategies of control and domination.

Photography, as mentioned previously, has been a major accomplice to constructing the East in a certain way that catered to the notions of the West. The impact of the same has been felt all over the Middle East, including the countries chosen for the research.

Impact on Egypt:

The early 1800s saw the emergence of Muhammad Ali as a prominent ruler of Egypt under the nominal control of the Ottoman Empire. He initiated a series of military, economic, and administrative reforms to build Egypt into a modern state, free from Ottoman control. These reforms were followed by legal and educational transformations under Ismail Pasha. Educational missions were sent to Europe to learn Western art, and Western architects were employed to construct buildings in Cairo in the European style. With the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, exposure to Western culture increased even more. (*Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*) Nineteenth-century Egypt can thus be viewed as undergoing a Western reconstruction of sorts. However, the photographs of this time show an image far from this:



(Figure1: Ploughman with a team of oxen, with the pyramid of Khufu at Giza in the background. Photographer: Bonfils, F. Date: c.1880) Source:

<http://www.griffith.ox.ac.uk/perl/gi-em-makedeta.pl?&sid=1475928120-1.39.40.85&1=x&2=x&3=Bonfils,+F.&4=1880&5=x&6=x&en=gi04104>

This image by Felix Bonfils exemplifies the point. Much of Bonfils' photography can be read as Orientalist in its attempt to portray the East as static and unchanging, poised on the edge of disruption by Western modernity (Gavin 112).

By deliberately selecting only specific elements from the environment to include in the photograph such as rural landscapes, traditional dress, and props that imply pre-modern occupations, he aimed to meet his own and other Europeans' expectations and interests. Bonfils was not interested in depicting current realities but preferred to recreate for the camera what they perceived as the region's "pristine character and special cachet." This is illustrated further through the work of Gabriel Lekegian below:



(Figure 2: A palanquin carried by camels. Photographer: Lekegian, G. Date: c.1890) Source: <http://www.griffith.ox.ac.uk/perl/gi-em-makedeta.pl?&sid=1475928120-1.39.40.85&1=x&2=x&3=Lekegian,+G.&4=1890&5=x&6=x&en=c111-193>

Given the extensive 'modernising' reconstruction of Egypt occurring in the 1800s, it is highly unlikely that a palanquin would be used as a means of transport too often. Adding to that is the not-so-subtle background of the mosque, reinforcing notions of the 'other' through cultural means. Lekegian ignores how Cairo was, in fact getting more and more 'European' due to Muhammad Ali's modernising project, and focuses solely on extreme exoticisms that would 'sell'. We thus see these photographs acting as proof of a society that existed only in the minds of the Orientalists.

In the early nineteenth century, several such photos were taken in Turkey as well. This attitude and aesthetic were a result of the accumulation of certain historical events in Turkey itself. The dominant nature of the Ottoman Empire was on the decline with Turkey losing many of the territories it had under its control, including Egypt and other parts of North Africa, and the creation of Bulgaria, Romania during the period of the 1800s. This period showed such a decline of the empire and its economy that the empire was called the 'Sick Man of Europe'. This served as a prerequisite for the West to have an Orientalist perception of Turkey. Moreover, the weakening power of the Ottoman Empire paved the way for it to be viewed as a place full of exotic culture, thereby satisfying the curiosity of the people in the West. This is reflected in the Orientalist nature of the photos of Turkey:



(Figure 1) Street Cafe in Istanbul. Late 19th century- Early 20th century. Photographer: Unknown . Source: <http://www.shutterstock.com/pic-159560405/stock-photo-istanbul-turkey-circa-s-old-photo-street-cafe-in-istanbul.html>

The above picture is a vivid depiction of a street cafe in Istanbul. The photograph fits well into the Orientalist notion that was created by the West. The sense of these men in the typical Turkish manner is seen to be inferior to the Western form of dressing as this is something that is 'traditional' and is not the same as the 'modern' style of dressing as seen in Europe. Further, the men in this street cafe are seen to be consuming 'hookah', which is also associated with

'traditional' culture. However, the consumption of hookah is not only an integral part of the Turkish culture, serving as a basis for the process of socialisation, but is also considered elite, unlike its frivolous depiction in photos that are Orientalist in nature. In addition, J. Nash states, "The care taken in the manufacture of the Narguilles or hookahs, beautifully ornamented with silver, shows how indispensable an article of luxury the pipe is to the Turk." (Nash 42) The depiction of such scenes in photos shows the Eastern life in a manner that is more exotic, frivolous and something that is not legitimate social culture.

The bazaars of the so-called East were similarly subjected to Orientalist bias, frequently represented through the trope of exoticism. Western observers, rather than engaging with these markets as central economic sites, fetishised their artefacts as "antiques," thereby detaching them from their role within local systems of production and exchange. In this process of reinterpretation, the bazaars were emptied of their economic vitality and reoriented with the homogenising stereotype of the "Islamic bazaar," reducing them to cultural spectacle rather than recognising them as dynamic nodes of commerce. The following photo highlights the same argument:



(Figure 2) The Grand Bazaar of Istanbul, 19th century. Photo: Unknown.
Source: www.alamy.com

Just as photographic representations by figures such as Bonfils reinforced an image of the Orient as timeless and static, depictions of marketplaces similarly constructed the East as chaotic and disorganized. The photograph of the Istanbul bazaar, for instance, disturbs these

Orientalist tropes by revealing a more complicated reality. While Western discourse often contrasted Eastern markets with the “organized” commercial spaces of Europe, Mohammed Gharipour notes that the apparent “chaos” of the bazaar was supported by Islamic traditions of spatial and social order at both micro- and macro-levels (Gharipour 125). Within the Ottoman context, bazaars were not marginal or traditionalist remnants but were entrenched in the very landscape of the city, functioning as vital hubs of economic and civic life, thereby challenging Orientalist readings of them as backward or torpid. (Gharipour 138)

When viewed alongside the historical context of Turkey, the photos reveal how Orientalist notions were enlarged in the West during the nineteenth century. In reality, however, this period marked the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the gradual loss of its territories. How, then, was the empire’s magnificence projected to Western audiences? One strategy was Sultan Abdul Hamid II’s deliberate use of photography as a tool of propaganda, framing the Ottoman state as a "modernising empire" in direct response to prevailing Orientalist stereotypes. The following section explores how photography functioned as propaganda in the Ottoman Empire and the broader implications of this practice.

Photography as State Propaganda:

The reign of Sultan Abdul Hamid II in 1876 was characterised by the use of photography not only for bureaucratic documentation but also for state propaganda to record visuals regarding the nature of his empire. In the context of an already declining Ottoman Empire, this form of propaganda was needed by the Sultan to depict an empire that was 'modern' as per the standards of the Western notion of modernity and lifestyle while also showing the Ottoman Empire as one that depicts grandeur. The above statement is supported by Trish Greene:

The Western European powers, Britain and France foremost among them—were making territorial, military, and technological gains that the Ottoman Empire knew it must keep up with and adopt lest its long history end with colonization. With this in mind, the Ottoman government of the late nineteenth century made a calculated effort to present itself in a progressive light to the rest of the world. (Greene, 1)

Many scholars claim that the Sultan in this context recognised the increasing importance of visuals as a mode to impact the minds of the people. Further, the initial rise of photography saw photographers from Western Europe and native photographers to click pictures in the region of the Middle East for the exotic connotation that was attached with the former thereby catering to a 'market' in the West.

The Sultan in this manner wanted to use photography to depict the above notions. This was done by the use of bureaucracy that used technology like photography for documentation and with the help of photographers like Pascal Sebah, Febus Enfendi, the Abdullah Freres etc. Most of the sceneries that were depicted included the schools, bazaars, harems, buildings, bazaars, etc which are collected in albums called *Yildiz Palace Albums*

The photographs as commissioned by the Sultan had a twofold cultural implication. On one hand, the photography had modern elements and on the other hand, many of the photos taken, ended up reinforcing the orientalist conceptions as held in the West regarding the Middle East. Michelle Woodward states that a range of perspectives can be seen in these photos including the 'fictional orientalist clichés' to 'modernising images'. This, in turn depicted the varying nature of the photos taken as part of propaganda.

Therefore, a comparison can be made between the photos that depict modernizing elements and the exotic elements based upon which the East was constructed thereby indicating the coexistence of both in these pictures. Further, a certain level of orientalist understanding was reinforced with these photos to serve the European market. The following photos would explain the coexistence of both elements in the Hamid collection of photographs:



(Figure 3) Turkish School Girls. 1890s. Phot: Abdullah Freres (L) (Figure 4) Students, Asiret School. 1880-1893. Photographer: Abdullah Freres (R) Source: <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3b27691/?co=ahii> (L) <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3b28350/?co=ahii> (R)

The above photo (L) depicts three Turkish school girls who are dressed in a Western European fashion thereby showing the modernization feat undertaken by Turkey. Unlike, the typical 'exotic' Orient, these photos have elements of 'order' (Woodward, 363-368) as discussed by Michelle Woodward, wherein the models are posing at the photograph and there is no chaos or disorganization in the photography. Further, the orient which is associated with 'bustling streets' is countered in this photograph. Woodward also claims that such pictures depicting 'order' were clicked by Pascal Sebah thereby depicting an absence of backwardness and decay in the empire' (Woodward 363-368)

The second photograph (R) shows school boys who are dressed in a more traditional form of dressing than the other. Though representing the cultural tradition of Turkey, such images are perceived as Orientalist in the West thereby reinforcing the former notion. Further, Tish Greene claims that the gifting of such albums had 'little effect' on the perception of the US or Great Britain due to lack of documentation and the putting of these photos into the Department of Orientalia shows the same. (Greene, 1-33)

Further, under this undertaking, there are photographs that highlight the two extremes of modernity and tradition in terms of buildings as well. This will be highlighted through the following photographs:



(Figure 5) Tomb of Sultan Selim II. 1880-93. Phot: Abdullah Freres. (L) (Figure 6) 19th century Istanbul. Photographer: Abdullah Freres.

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3b28685/?co=ahii> (L)

[http://www.photorientalist.org/about/orientalist-photography/\(R\)](http://www.photorientalist.org/about/orientalist-photography/(R))

The existence of traditional and modern architecture is shown in the above two photos. While one (L) which is the tomb of Sultan Selim II, depicts the intricate Islamic architecture, the other represents a modern European city (R), which can easily be mistaken for a West European city like Lisbon etc.

The existence of traditional and modern architecture is shown in the above two photos. While one (L) which is the tomb of Sultan Selim II, depicts the intricate Islamic architecture, the other represents a modern European city (R), which can easily be mistaken for a West European city like Lisbon etc.

The above photos highlight how photography has been used as propaganda to suggest to the West, an image of grandeur for the Ottoman Empire, to counter the orientalist perceptions of the former, the nature of which is twofold as mentioned above. Therefore, it can be said that the method of propaganda photography, aimed to counter Western perceptions of political alliances but also to change the cultural biases that the West had of the East.

Conclusion

It is pertinent to understand that photography was a major accomplice to the formation of orientalist conceptions across the 'West'. It even reached out to those who were not literate in forming the aforementioned perceptions. One must take into account the plethora of agency that the photographer has in this process. S/he can choose to click a certain image depicting exactly what s/he wants it to say. The frame acts as a blinker, allowing the viewer to see only that which has been captured, while completely ignoring the rest with great ease. In light of this, the analysis of what these photos depict becomes imperative.

Through research, one finds that photography had, in fact acted as a double agent of sorts. It was used not only to create orientalist perceptions, but also to counter them in the form of propaganda by the Sultans. Therefore, the question that arises is- can these two extremes be reconciled or did they develop independently of each other?

Though, it is difficult to claim the exact nature of the reality of the so-called Orient; it is possible to counter certain exaggerated elements that constitute the basis for Orientalist perceptions of the East. It is possible that the Sultans, through their propaganda, not only tried to counter orientalism by adopting the path of modernization, but also show their own traditions in a positive light. As quoted in Michelle Woodward's works, Sultan Hamid claims, "Most of the

photographs taken [by European photographers] for sale in Europe vilify and mock Our Well-Protected Domains. It is imperative that the photographs to be taken in this instance do not insult Islamic peoples by showing them in a vulgar and demeaning light.” (Woodward, 363-368)

The cultural realities of these countries can also be understood through Homi K. Bhabha’s notion of *hybridity*, which challenges the binary opposition of tradition and modernity. Instead of viewing the Ottoman Empire as caught between “Orientalist” exoticism and Western reform, Bhabha’s framework demonstrates how both elements coexisted and intermingled. Photographs of the period reflect this hybrid identity, revealing an empire negotiating between ingrained traditions and the increasing influence of Western modernity. These photographs, therefore, did not merely reproduce Orientalist stereotypes or record modernisation efforts but illustrated the emergence of a hybrid modernity where political authority and cultural selfhood were reinforced through selective engagement with both tradition and modernity. In this sense, the Ottoman Empire’s visual culture becomes a striking example of hybridity as theorized by Bhabha, articulating a complex identity rather than a simple cultural opposition (Bhabha 37).

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