

Masked Orientalism Exhibited in Local Movies: An Orientalist Reading of *Livre de la Loi*

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Abstract—The current paper seeks traces of indigenous Orientalism in the territory of cinema. Orientalism which down the history lane and also during the recent years has overwhelmed the world of literature, nowadays is popping up in the sphere of the seventh art. The power discourse has also nurtured certain native informers to corroborate the presuppositions of Orientalism and through them changes a local cinema to an Orientalist agent. The paper at hand is in quest of unveiling the masked Orientalism in an Iranian local movie *Livre de la Loi* and through examples demonstrates how the movie takes it on itself to verify the power and Orientalist discourse. The paper finally offers approaches and strategies to deal with the issue. Paper finally offers approaches and strategies to deal with the issue.

Index Terms—Indigenous orientalism, stereotype, manichean heresy, erotic orientals.

I. INTRODUCTION

Livre de la Loi (2006), directed by Maziyar Miri, renders Iran utterly as a dark realm full of sound and fury in which unearthing a genial being comes arduous. Such a movie is chiefly regarded as a veracious account of the living condition of Iranians in the Western media and among many western intellectuals and their westernized advocates since it is produced by an indigenous cast; and consequently, is a good commodity for the consumption of the Westerners who hanker after the veiled face of real Iran and all the injustices (!) practiced there. Nowadays we are spotting indigenous Orientalists stepping into the sphere of Cinema. They make heaven and earth to depict and stereotype the Orientals the way Orientalists desire for. *Livre de la Loi* is a domestic Iranian movie which follows a direct line of Orientalist discourse that corroborates certain traits to be specifically of Orientals (here particularly Muslim Iranians). Before anything else, hence, it comes crucial to take a trip down the library lane to spot some of the certain features which the Orientalist and power discourse have chiseled on the forehead of Orientals, and then see if they are applicable to the content of the movie or not, i.e., if such features are attributed to Iranians in the movie or not?

Though resting somewhere far from the madding crowd, the Orient is a territory full of sound and fury. It is “the location of the Garden of Eden”¹ and offers “exotic, sinful, sexual delights all wrapped in an ancient, mystical and mysterious tradition.”² It is the land of fabulous fictions and is associated with ‘the escapism of sexual fantasy’. To see more to it, one should remember that an Oriental is “a passive,

childlike entity that can be loved and abused, shaped and contained, managed and consumed.”³ Those human beings roaming the Earth to the east of the west are ‘inevitable liars’, ‘lethargic and suspicious’ and “in everything oppose the clarity, directness and nobility of the Anglo-Saxon race.”⁴ The Oriental “generally acts, speaks and thinks in a manner exactly opposite to the European.”⁵ To know more of their identity, a Westerner should bear in mind that “accuracy is abhorrent to the Oriental mind”⁶ and that their brainpowers, like their “picturesque streets” are “eminently wanting in symmetry.”⁷ They are ‘gullible’, ‘devoid of energy’ and “irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, different.”⁸ The Orientals are “half devil half child”⁹ and whence absolutely untrustworthy; they are “customary, passive, non-participating, endowed with a ‘historical’ subjectivity, above all, non-active, non-autonomous, non-sovereign with regard to itself.”¹⁰ Their societies are ‘despotic by nature’¹¹ and lack of legal institutions is quite conspicuous there. There is no real science and scientist on this part of the globe. The Orient is realized through “its eccentricity, its backwardness, its silent indifference, its feminine penetrability, its supine malleability.”¹² The Orient of Orientalists is never without ‘its sensuality, its tendency to despotism, its aberrant mentality, its habits of inaccuracy, its backwardness’.¹³

To Orientalists, time, unfortunately, did not convey a sense of alteration and hence it became attainable for them to stereotype the Orientals. Friedrich Nietzsche in his *Human, All Too Human* argues that the ‘world of appearance’, quite apart from the ‘thing-in-itself’, emanates from the fecund imagination of human beings. He censures philosophers for their tendency to “confront life and experience (what they call the world of experience) as they would a painting that has been revealed once and for all, depicting with unchanging constancy the same event.”¹⁴ How is it within the realms of possibility for Orientalists to generalize on the Orient, an entity which embraces a massive domain brimful of individuals from divergent social circumstances, heritages, and milieus? In compliance with what Nietzsche contends, the arduous endeavor of the Orientalists to portray a vast entity as a fixed quantity cries out for a Homeric laugh. Orientalism is actually the genesis of superannuated process of converting Easterners into creatures devoid of human traits drowned in a vast sea of deep-rooted idiosyncrasies. Consequently, the stereotyped Oriental can never measure up to an Occidental, and is regarded inferior to him. One becomes, in Hegel’s terminology, ‘master’ and the other ‘slave’; one the Self and the other Other.

In the course of the past few years, the phenomenon of ‘indigenous Orientalism’ has surfaced as one of the pillars of Orientalism. Indigenous Orientalists are the ones who

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identify themselves with the world of the West, and do their best to cast aspersions on their native country and countrymen. It is the Orientalist discourse which in order to shake off the myth of authenticity parent some 'captive minds', 'brown sahibs', or 'native informers', in Hamid Dabashi's terminology, so as to draw a curtain of accuracy over their fallaciousness. In terms of local movies, the native informer is already at hand. An indigenous scenario writer, consciously or unconsciously, advertently or not, ratifies the Orientalist discourse to issue enough materials for the Western and Westernized minds to maneuver over. Next part, scrutinizes the movie to root out the portrayal of the features Orientalism has essentialized for the Easterners to see how the latent Orientalism is trying to blight the face of Iranians.

II. LIVRE DE LA LOI AND DOMESTIC ORIENTALISM

Before getting directly on *Livre de la Loi*¹⁵, it's of assistance to flip a few pages of *Not without My Daughter* written by Betty Mahmoody. This book chronicles Mahmoody's account of her being ensnared in a culture unsympathetic to Americans, a family antagonistic to her, and an abusive husband. The depicted sketch of Iranians is utterly evil and immoral, and the way they treat Betty grieves the readers. She is finally triumphant in fleeing from Iran through the borders of Turkey. Now, let's put it into consideration that the diabolic territory of Iran portrayed in *Not without My Daughter* dates back to the 1980s, and the movie focused on here belongs to 2006. Hence, it would be utterly captivating to see if Iran of many years after Mahmoody's plight has changed for better or not? *Livre de la Loi* records the journey of Juliet (later on Amene) from Lebanon to Iran. Amene has studied in France and might also be a Sayyid Ahmad Khan- and Mirza Ghulam Ahmad-like figure so as to fulfill Pax Britannica. She is a symbol of the West since she has studied there and has oriented herself to that culture. So down the tunnels of the binary oppositions of Orientalist discourse, Juliet would unquestionably top all of other Eastern beings. In Postcolonial sphere, it reminds one of 'Manichean Heresy', a concept which flourished in the third century AD and postulated a 'dualistic theology'. This doctrine maintains that Satan is co-eternal with God and that the two provinces of matter and spirit are like poles of a magnet. When we enter into the borders of postcolonial world, Manicheanism indicates the binary structure of imperial discourse. This term was popularized by Abdul JanMohammad. Accordingly, Juliet becomes a symbol of whatever pureness and the other Oriental creatures, darkness. We will get back to Juliet a little bit later on.

One of the other chief characters of the movie is the religious scapegoat of it, Haj Agha Harasi-Nejad. It is too crude to watch Iranian religious men as moron, cruel and oppressive. The movie makes heaven and earth to portray Haj Agha as the one who pays meticulous attention to the commands and orders of Islam while has got a hidden id that when unleashed can be detrimental and brutal downright. Once, we discern him who has taken a ewer (*aftabe*) with him from Iran to Lebanon in case the Lebanese toilets are not supplied with water. Moreover, at the restaurant of the hotel,

Harasi-Nejad is alerted about the non-Halal foods which are forbidden in Islam. Into the bargain, he also bars Juliet to sing a song since singing in public is forbidden for women. However, even in practicing the minute orders of Islam, he seems to play a little bit sanctimonious, a halo of hypocrisy glows around his face while talking to others. Be that as it may and let's consider him as a real religious emblem, the movie, on top of that, unveils Haj Agha's other face. At first, the movie strives to impart that Iranian people deny the company of their religious men as we see Rahman taken aback when he finds out that he shall stay with Haj Agha in a room, and also the moment other friends come to know that Haj Agha has gone to the bathroom, they leave the place towards the nights of Beirut. Haj Agha, like other countrymen who are doomed to be labeled irrational in an unfair dominant discourse, is also illustrated as an absurd and illogical being when he commences on articulating about the existence of Jinn embedded in the meat of pig. In the middle of the movie, the location alters into an office. There we encounter Haj Agha Harasi-nejad scheming for his demonical plan so as to corroborate Iran as an oppressive society for women, just as the one which entrapped Mahmoody many years before that. He unveils the identity of a district in Tehran called Salim-abad. He says that the Salim of Salim-abad is Rahman's (Amene's husband's) grand grandfather. He continues that Salim had one wife and 30 or 40 concubines. This would certainly remind everybody of lustful Iranians and the supposed Oriental harem, or Azadeh Moaveni's claim that "everyone was addicted to talking about sex"¹⁶ in Iran or her *Sex in the Time of Mullahs* in which she tries to sketch a 'secret prostitution' flowing in the artery of Iranian society. Harasi-nejad goes on to assert that Rahman's wife has got a book in her hand and is destroying his life, forgetting the fact that the supposed book just teaches the orders and laws of Islam, the religion which Haj Agha claims to be practicing meticulously. Haj Agha tells Rahman that his wife has gone wild and he needs to tame her so as to be able to 'saddle' her. This would be hell to women and specifically feminists to see an evil man considering ladies as animals which need to be saddled! Consequently, in order to saddle Amene, they gain on the historical struggle of the bride and mother-in-law which alters into a perfect Crusade, and as Rahman narrates, Haj Agha himself takes the responsibility of the crisis management of the war. Here, Haj Agha who is the representative of a male religious Iranian is depicted as the one who conspires to ruin the life of others. For the first attack, Rahman clicks on the way his wife pronounces some words in Arabic and judges that all of her prayers said up to the moment have been wrong. The present company at the scene also confirms Rahman. After each emotional and spiritual strike at Amene, the location changes to Harasi-nejad's office to see him laughing at the miseries of the lady. Next blow is struck when Rahman notices Amene slicing garlic. Quite humiliating, he tells her that the Prophet did not like garlic. Succeeding blow comes when they censure her strongly for crossing the threshold of the toilet with his right foot first. Just after it, we see Harasi-nejad who enquires some information from Rahman about Amene. However, Rahman replies that Amene is perfect and follows all the orders of the religion precisely. In the third blow, they

want to send dust into her throat by dusting a rug in order to invalidate her fasting. Next emotional blow to Amene comes when they grow on her for being left-handed. Such scenes corroborate the Orientalist discourse when claims that Oriental societies are 'despotic by nature'. Ultimately, we see Rahman in Haj Agha's office who states that Amene is so downhearted, and expresses that she was alone previously, but more alone right now. It is here that Haj Agha insults Rahman with addressing him with some animal names. It suggests that Religious figures are even badly mannered. It is quite weird from them to call people names so candidly and so rudely. While Rahman's eyes are glowing with tears, Haj Agha is laughing quite satanically at the miseries of Amene. This Haj Agha is enough to ruin all the warm-heartedness of Iranians, on top of that religious figures. Amene herself narrates that she was alone among a people who were famous for tender-heartedness. Iran of today is rendered just a little better than Iran of about twenty five years ago in the views of Betty Mahmoody. Amene is just like Betty entrapped in a cruel society who aims at torturing her for no rational reason. Such portrayals might be poked fun at in a domestic ring; nonetheless, is accepted in other places since dominant discourse corroborates such sketches. Anyhow, if such people are the real Iranians, the editorial cartoon printed in the 4 September 2007 issue of the *Columbus Post-Dispatch* is accurate in rendering Iran as a sewer and Iranians as cockroaches! Portraying such things would justify an attack from the Imperialist world to eradicate the cockroaches which are ruinous to the society.¹⁷ Such things can work as pretexts that led America to assail countries like Afghanistan and Iraq. Iran would be next down the list in this case.

The movie also zooms in on the horrible condition of women and erotic Oriental also in some other parts of the movie. Once, we discern Meimenat coming up with a Persian proverb. The proverb connotes that first Amene should complete the first stage to move on to the next. The Persian proverb in order to put this forth asserts that one first needs to prove his/her brotherhood. Forgetting that it is a proverb, Amene says that here, in Iran, it is 'brotherhood' which calls the shot and is highly momentous and even sisters, first need to prove their brotherhood. The moment one hears this from Amene, s/he can have the scenario writer of the movie in mind who had definitely toiled and troubled so as to find this proverb to show the backdrop of Iranian mind and society full of prejudices against women. The scenario writer seemingly lacks knowledge enough to know that such things do not count in a proverb which tries to impart a fact in a concise way and that they are existent in every living language. Let's consider English language for a couple of moments. What is meant by a 'prehistoric man', for example, in this language? *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* defines 'man' as 'people as a group'; and as a result, both parties of men and women are being categorized under this one word 'man' which supposes just the male party. Why shall we say 'men' and have 'women' also in mind? Does it suppose that even 'women' in order to be counted as people shall be called 'men'? This was one of the most foolish claims made by the scenario writer. We can also pose another question connoting why we can't apply the word 'woman' and then mean both parties? Seemingly 'men' call the shots even in English countries too. For a character like

Amene who has studied languages and knows at least four languages, such a claim comes quite bizarre.

Previously we mentioned Salim who had a Harem at house which recollected one of the chief Orientalist features to the backdrop of the mind. Now in another case, let's consider Rahman himself. Once, just the morning after the wedding ceremony, Amene tries to awaken Rahman for Morning Prayer. Nonetheless, she encounters an indignant response from the one who has idolized her three hours ago. It reminds one of the lustful Orientals introduced by Orientalists who just seek their sexual gratification, and when fulfilled, they forget everything. Sometimes, one might cast doubt about the idea of 'love' among Iranians while watching such movies. On the other hand, Amene, who is pure in every possible arena, portrays a utopian European culture embedded in her. Her love is a pure one which cannot be juxtaposed with that of Rahman's. She is a newly-converted-to-Islam woman, but teaches age-old Muslims about Islam. In another case, once we encounter the family members around a dinner table. Amene is the cook and has provided them with numerous dishes. But they do not accept to eat from those things and leave for the kitchen. Amene is quite worried and anxious for them. She takes her book and goes down. When Amene gets there, they are wolfing down the lunch leftover. Amene tells them that she is not upset for the way they are treating her; however, she is depressed for them whom if don't come back in speaking terms with her in three minutes will not be Muslims any longer. They get vexed beyond repair. Rahman's mother roars at her with her last power which harbingers her blind prejudices. Then, she recites them a *hadith* from the Prophet of mercy which connotes if three Muslims are not in speaking terms for three days, they are no longer Muslims. It is interesting that Rahman's aunt claims that she knew the Arabic origin of the *hadith*, but she didn't practice it. Then they temporarily make peace with Amene. It shows that the surrounding world of Amene is full of empty and sanctimonious Orientals who just claim to practice the religion pedantically.

Once, when in market, Amene sees all of the Iranian men there as Rahman which testifies her decent love for him. She is a western symbol which is superior in every case; she is educated, cultured and conscious. Let's consider her at the market to see how Iranian people and society are portrayed and how she is illustrated as superior, over the see-saw of binary opposition. Her account here suggests Iranian abnormality in their daily life. The first shopping center she visits is a grocery from which she wants to buy some oranges. However, rather than three kilos of oranges, the salesperson gives her three kilos minus one hundred and fifty grams which she denies. It reminds us of the Orientalist feature set by power discourse which maintains that "accuracy is abhorrent to the Oriental mind."¹⁸ After that she sets foot in a supermarket so as to purchase some cans of yogurt. When Amene notices that all the cans of yogurt are expired, she throws them in the trash can. The shopkeeper loses his temper and in order to verify that a product which has passed its expiration date just for two days does not harm anyone, eats the yogurt. Then, we see an ambulance getting to the supermarket in order to take the shopkeeper to the hospital. It jogs the same old irrational Iranian to the mind. Then she visits a butchery in which the owner does not respect the bills and rumples them. She leaves the place and gets back to home empty-handed. It is thoroughly eccentric that she does

not meet even one good Iranian shopkeeper! One may remind the title of one of the chapters of Moaveni's *Lipstick Jihad: "My Country is Sick"*.¹⁹ Orientalist and Imperialist discourse are actually striving to fabricate a dominant ideology through which they can hold sway over the East, and particularly Iran. Such portrayals of Iranians are big lies which are consumed better by a hungry community of readers who are eating their heart out for knowing real Iran. The Orientalist discourse does its utmost to come up like Janus who is endowed with two faces: one face is always heavenly and pleasant; the other brings the Hades and underworld to light. In reality, one is lightness and the other darkness. West tops the ladder and East stays at the bottom.

One of the main features of Orientalist narrative is to stereotype the East and Easterners. The movie represents ladies in different sessions all doing the same thing. Ladies who seem to be all religious at the outset of movie gossip, which is utterly forbidden in Islam, about the young girls of the neighborhood such as Mojgan, Akhtar, Pante'a, Esmat and others. In another case, we find ourselves in the midst of *roze* (a speech session on the sorrows and afflictions of the saints), and there we hear some ladies who are mourning in the backdrop and a woman who is reciting some verses of Quran. When the session is ended, again they commence on backbiting others, mostly in an ill-mannered way. The adjacency of these two which are poles apart is too awful. For the moment, let's consider the sessions Rahman and the company attended in Lebanon. Such session are held three times within the temporal boundaries of the movie. In all of the three sessions, just exactly some sentences are repeated without a word of difference and no result is received. Even in these meetings, Easterners seemingly require some mighty agents to handle their assemblies and round them off! It reminds one of Pax Britannica and its purpose to educate Easterners who are not themselves able to learn.

III. CONCLUSION

Livre de la Loi does not depict anything of value in the 'repressive' (!) sphere of an Islamic Iran. It takes each and every aspect of indigenous Iranian culture to be 'backward', qualified for being unloaded onto the trash of history. Seemingly a *collective amnesia* and a *selective memory* have pooled resources in the process of writing the scenario. *Livre de la Loi* avails itself of such a collective amnesia and strives to brush off the precious values and cultural products of an Islamic country from the face of history. The movies greedy longing for assimilating into Western culture spells out a defaming and vilifying attitude towards local Iranian history and culture. However, one shall not forget that such movies just present subjective discursive mappings of the world. Peter Novick, considering such a discourse, asserts that: "public discourse doesn't just shape private discourse, it is its catalyst; it sends out the message 'This is something you should be talking about'."²⁰ Imperialism acts out as a 'catalyst'. It simply presents the scenario writers with a message, a quite dictatorial one: you must articulate what 'we' crave for. So as to accomplish this, the collective amnesia and selective memory join forces to let them submit to the passions of imperialism. An orderly deprivation of a collective memory paves the way for *Livre de la Loi* to paint a vast nation as a dark world whose account was passed above.

It strikes us as if, in Francis Fukuyama's terms, we are hitting 'the end of history'. It seems as if no one has ever recorded the heroism and warm-heartedness of Iranians manifested in different zones. We are not attempting to represent Iran as a utopia, what we want is to omit the prejudices against Iran. Anyhow such movies are being produced day after day. What should we do in order to fight the influence of such movies off in the West? Of necessity, the moment anti-Iranian movies are produced, Imperialist bells start tolling, and they commence on making a sword out of it to disparage Iran. Since the power of Western media is so formidable, we should counter them with dominant media; but, since the Western agents possess the most paramount media, we should gradually introduce the real Iranians to the world and stop stereotyping. We can spot both virtuous and malicious people in Iran as in the West. So why shall we stereotype the East?

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