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The Self in the Other's Gaze: Neo-Orientalism in Hamza Koudri's *Sand Roses* (2023)

Le soi dans le regard de l'autre : le néo-orientalisme dans le roman *Sand Roses* (2023) de Hamza Koudri

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Abstract

In the context of the Occident versus the Orient, the notions of self and other are fraught with reactions of rejection or endorsement, even of petrified identity. The Western gaze has always been haunted by the Orient, this close and intimate stranger. A further concept introduced by Ali Behdad in this field is Neo-Orientalism which is a form of Orientalism performed by Orientals themselves. The present article explores the Neo-orientalist discourse vented in Hamza Koudri's novel *Sand Roses*, a perception ranging from the erotic and savage, to the exotic and mysterious, and construed as rather nefarious collaborations with Western agendas than genuine rendering of life in Bousaada in the 1930's under French colonisation. Koudri's novel can therefore be considered as an instance of rampant Neo-Orientalism whose self-proclaimed authenticity sanctions and authorizes disparaging visions of the self as if seen through the gaze of the Western other.

Keywords: Other's gaze, Neo-Orientalism, Hamza Koudri, *Sand Roses*, historical novel

Résumé :

Dans le contexte de l'Occident versus l'Orient, les notions de soi et d'altérité sont chargées de réactions de rejet ou d'approbation, voire d'identité figée. Le regard occidental a toujours été hanté par l'Orient, cet étranger proche et intime. Ali Behdad a introduit un autre concept dans ce domaine, celui de néo-orientalisme, qui est une forme d'orientalisme pratiquée par les Orientaux eux-mêmes. Le présent article explore le discours néo-orientaliste exprimé dans le roman *Sand Roses* de Hamza Koudri, une perception allant de l'érotique et sauvage à l'exotique et mystérieux, et interprétée comme une collaboration plutôt néfaste avec les agendas occidentaux plutôt que comme une représentation authentique de la vie à Bousaada dans les années 1930 sous la colonisation française. Le roman de Koudri peut donc être considéré comme un exemple flagrant de néo-orientalisme dont l'authenticité autoproclamée sanctionne et autorise des visions dépréciatives de soi, comme si elles étaient vues à travers le regard de l'autre occidental.

Mots clés : regard de l'autre, Néo-orientalisme, Hamza Koudri, *Sand Roses*, roman historique.

As subsumed by Alex Mucchielli (2013), identity is the result of social contact and its construct is inseparable from the notion of otherness. It evolves through interactions with others as posited by George H. Mead as early as 1934 in *Mind, Self and Society* when he stated that the self "arises in the process of social experience and activity, that is, develops in the given individual as a result of his relations to that process as a whole and to other individuals within that process" (p. 135). Hence the ambiguity of the notion of otherness and difference; for otherness may occur in reciprocity, exchange and mutual respect as it can take place in struggle, conflict and violence.

The notions of self and other, in the context of the Occident versus the Orient, are fraught with reactions that range between rejection and endorsement, albeit of petrified identity. The Western gaze has always been haunted by the Orient, this close and intimate other. It has never ceased to amplify its perception with negative representations in the form of such labels as fanatic, barbarous, fundamentalist and terrorist; thus precluding any sort of dialogue. This attitude is best explained by Edward W. Said in his seminal work *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (1978) where he demonstrates how the West has shaped the image of the Orient as inferior and dominated while the Occident "gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self" (p.3).

The process of othering occurs in parallel with orientalizing, the Other being more a creation to separate between the coloniser (the Western Self) and the colonised (the Oriental Other). In the words of Ashcroft et al, "in order to maintain authority over the Other in a colonial situation, imperial discourse strives to delineate the Other as radically different from the self, yet at the same time it must maintain sufficient identity with the Other to valorize control over it" (Ashcroft et al, 2004, p.102); this is done through a process in which imperial discourse constructs its others in order to confirm its own reality.

Edward Said has significantly contributed to expose the negative image created by the Occident about the Orient as he claimed that "the Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences" (p.1). It was conveyed by Orientalist discourse as dark, mysterious, savage, exotic, erotic, and indulging in sensuality; all such preconceived ideas that have adversely contributed to shape the Oriental identity.

In addition to his seminal work *Orientalism*, Edward Said effectively addresses the (mis)representations of Muslims through Western lens in *Covering Islam* (1981) where he attempts at deconstructing Western visions of the Islamic world by adding political perspectives

to his critique. *Covering Islam* focuses on the historical perspective of the relation between the Western world and Orient and its development, increasingly portrayed in hostile and antagonistic terms in the Western gaze which demonizes the Islamic world as fearful and violent, thus shaping a distorted image of the Orient (Said, 1981, p. 13). In his other works such as *The Question of Palestine* (1992), *Blaming the Victims* (Said and Hitchens, 2001) and *The Politics of Dispossession* (1994), Said examines the prevalence of "the rhetoric of terrorism in western societies and blames their media for pigeonholing the Muslim into terrorists and thus widening the divide between the two sides" (Kennedy, 2000, p. 56-7).

The evolution of Orientalism has gained momentum in the twenty-first century, especially after 9/11 events as it started to appear in various guises in response to changing time and context. Indeed, several scholars have sought to elaborate a new form of Orientalism, labelling it Neo-Orientalism.

In an attempt to elucidate a newer version of Orientalism, Tessa Bartholomeusz uses the term neo-Orientalism to make a distinction between the old and the new. Tracing the era of post-World War II, she maintains that the emergence of neo-Orientalism signals the shift of the attention "from national to personal concerns" (Bartholomeusz, 1998, p. 9). Viewing it as a continuation of Orientalism, she further argues that neo-Orientalism "testifies to the internalization of Orientalism in neocolonial world" (Bartholomeusz, 1998, p. 20).

In the line of Said's framework, Dag Tuastad's (2003) article "Neo-Orientalism and the New Barbarism Thesis" adds that the combined labeling of "terrorism" and "Arab mind backwardness" ascribed to the Oriental Other invariably links "violence" with "a backward culture" and these "powerful inventions" not only "legitimize" but also consolidate "colonial economic or political projects" (Tuastad, 2003, p. 592). This negative Western view that violence is ingrained in tribalism or "local culture" is named by Tuastad as "the new barbarism thesis," with its reinforcement of the idea that without the "support" of "political authority," nation-states in the Third World will become "unstable" and will not grow into "true civil societ[ies]." This new barbarism thesis, as Tuastad continues to illustrate, shares "the tenets" of neo-Orientalism (p. 595).

In a similar vein, Fatemeh Keshavarz perceives the consolidation of a monolithic representation of the Islamic world in the present day as New Orientalism. She accuses the New Orientalist literature as manifested in "the memoirs, travel accounts, novels, and journalistic writings" of creating "Muslim ghosts" in large quantity in order to arouse fear and justify "the use of force" in the Middle East (Keshavarz, 2007, pp. 6-7).

Another new facet of Orientalism is explored by Yilin Yu (2010) in "Reframing Asian Muslim Women in the Name of Honor: Neo-Orientalism and Gender Politics in Mukhtar Mai's Constructed Narratives" where she investigates the ways in which the manifestation of neo-Orientalism is conducted by reproducing Orientalist rhetoric and practices. She examines in her critical reading of neo-Orientalism and gender politics, the development of Orientalism as an influential cultural discourse and practice and its transition to neo-Orientalism in association with gender issues in the Muslim world.

However, Edward Said's foundational critique of Orientalism as extended by scholars who identify neo-Orientalism as a new iteration that caters to 21st-century strategic and political interests has evolved even further. Neo-Orientalism, as a recent turn in East-West perception which describes contemporary incarnations of Orientalist thinking, is not limited to Westerners as was the case for Orientalism but also non-Westerners, in this case, Orientals. Quoting Avadhesh Kumar Singh, Shanta Nair-Venugopal (2012) defines neo-Orientalism as a novel avatar of Orientalism:

> Neo-Orientalism stands for the "discourse about (sic) Orient by the people of the Orient located in the West, or shuttling between the two" ... or the "discursive practices about the Orient by the people from the Orient ... located in the non-Orient for the people of the non-Orient" (p. 13) ... it is a "discourse about the Orient, constructed by the Occident (West = America) and Orient in collaboration." (p. 236)

Unlike Orientalism which was mainly the work of Western authors, neo-Orientalism is created by Orientals who continue the same negative discourse of Westerners about themselves, perceiving themselves through the gaze of the West.

In "Neo-Orientalism Today" Ali Behdad and Juliet Williams define it as "a mode of representation which, while indebted to classical Orientalism, engenders new tropes of othering" (p.284). They contend that "neo-Orientalism is neither limited to these [Western] regions, nor is it merely produced by Western subjects. On the contrary, not only do Middle Eastern writers, scholars, and so-called experts participate in its production, but they actually play an active and significant role in propagating it" (Behdad and Williams, 2010, p. 284).

Like its classical counterpart, neo-Orientalism is monolithic, totalizing, reliant on a binary logic, and based on an assumption of Western moral and cultural superiority over the Oriental other. Whereas classical Orientalists were commonly male European savants, philologists, established writers and artists, neo-Orientalists tend to be North African or Middle Eastern authors whose self-proclaimed authenticity sanctions and authorizes their discourses. Contemporary neo-Orientalists are not, however, merely "native informants" or "comprador intellectuals" as Hamid Dabashi (2006) and others have suggested (p.1), but rather Oriental

authors who use their native subjectivity and new-found agency in the West to render otherwise biased accounts of the Eastern region seemingly more authoritative and objective. It is this latter meaning of Neo-Orientalism that I am employing in this article, the orientalism of Orientals turned Orientalists who indulge in the same unfavourable clichés of Westerners for self-representation.

One such Neo-Orientalist, as I contend, is Algerian novelist Hamza Koudri, especially in his 2023 novel *Sand Roses*. Set in Bousaada in the 1930's, the historical novel tells the story of two twin sisters, Salima and Fahima, pretending to be one woman, Ammariya. They are Nailiya dancers in colonial-Algeria cafés and play the Geisha for French officers following an immutable ritual of serving tea first to their customers before accommodating their desires in their own *haouch* (in Arabic in the text).

In a "Historical Note: The Quest for a Fading memory" as an appendix provided at the end of the novel, Koudri admits that his source was a French historian who likened Ouled Nail customs to those of Japanese Geishas and that his further research for writing *Sand Roses* were for the most part Western, with only one Algerian historian and anthropologist, Barkahoum Ferhati, who avows "defying all taboos around prostitution" (p. 323). Instead of relying on authoritative historical sources from the Algerian region where the novel takes place, Koudri prefers Western Orientalist source materials "albeit with the occasional supremacist side comment" (p. 326). His awareness of the inevitable superior and belittling bias of his European references on his subject matter does not deter him from blindly echoing their colonial discourse in the novel. Though the story follows the twin Algerian women and is largely told from their perspective, the overall impression evokes a colonial novel like Albert Camus' *The Stranger* where French officials profit from their imperialist advantages to abuse the natives.

A sand rose is a typical symbol of the desert where it is formed, especially the Algerian Sahara, usually coveted by tourists as souvenirs; and in the novel, the two sisters are presented with a desert rose as a gift by their lovers, Mourad for Salima and the French medical officer René for Fahima. The sand roses therefore represent the Nailiya dancers, beautiful but hard and resilient, living in a hostile environment.

The novel opens with an explicit rape scene which ends by Fahima killing the French soldier who was violating her twin Salima and both throwing him in the well to hide their crime. The narrative is fragmented, blending perspectives from the colonial characters to the Ouled Nail women who have come to Bousaada; "Her dream had been to become a successful Nailiya dancer… the ultimate goal was to collect a dowry before going back home to get married and

start a family. Her mother had done that, and so did every Nailiya dancer" (p.23); dancing and prostitution being rendered as a tradition in the region.

Whether intentionally or not, Koudri's novel heavily reverberates Paul Bowles's orientalist novel *The Sheltering Sky* (1949) which presents the same typical images of the erotic East and where the Oriental desert is portrayed as a place for indulgence and unbridled sexuality. Bowles's novel begins with Moresby's visit to Marnia, a prostitute who wants him to know the story of Outka, Mimouna, and Aicha, three dancers who left their home in the mountain because they wanted to have tea in the Sahara. "The girls dance in the cafes of Ghardaia" to earn enough money and end up dead in the sand dunes, pursuing their dream of the Targui who had made love to them. American Paul Bowles indulges in all the Orientalist stereotypes about the oriental woman and uses the trope of the desert to embody the mysterious world of the inferior other.

Were it not for the name Hamza Koudri as the author, *Sand Roses* would be thought as just such another Orientalist work, but being composed by an Oriental, it can therefore fall into the category of Neo-Orientalism for it seizes every opportunity to abet by Western distortion of Oriental identity while feigning authority, authenticity and native knowledge of life in the Algerian desert.

The biased stereotypical representations of Algerians expected in Orientalist writing are all found in this neo-Orientalist novel, including references to violence against each other and foreigners, reminiscent of Thomas Shaw's travel book on *Travels or Observations in Barbary and the Levant* in the 18th century where he writes in the PREFACE;

> must be what the Europeans call wild Arabs; for there is no such name peculiar to any one particular clan or body of them, they being all the same, with the like inclinations (whenever a proper opportunity or temptation offers itself) of robbing, stripping, and murdering, not strangers only, but also one another (Shaw, 1738, p. xviii).

A similar description is given by Koudri in his novel; "The Ouled Brahims had now settled out in the desert where they continued to terrorise the French and natives. They attacked travellers and stole everything they could get their hands on" (p.37).

The contrast between the Western self and the Algerian other so abides by Orientalist principles as to question the identity of the novel's author, when he ascribes superiority to the Europeans and presents Arabs as dirty, uncivilized and violent. "Most French families lived in similar gated houses, safe from the litter and noise of Arabs. Arabs lived in the old part of town in ancient and dirty mud houses and stiflingly narrow labyrinths they called streets" (p.38). The coloniser's perception of the inferiority of the Algerian other is conveyed in italics as in: "A

group of children ran past him [Colonel Dupont], shouting excitedly on their way to school. *These natives will never be civilised*, Joseph thought, *no matter how much education you give them*." (p.40). Yet, the whole narrative offers a biased, negative vision of Algerians, and therefore of the self by Koudri as it were, but seen through the orientalizing gaze of the Western other, not only represented by the European characters of the novel but evidently exuding from the narrative discourse of the whole novel.

Koudri imaginatively draws from the famous nineteenth-century Orientalist novel *Aicha the Mauresque: An Algerian Fantasy* by D. A. Knights where a French colonel named Rene de Mare turns "Muslim" and indulges in sexual orgies with Moorish women as Algerians were called at the time. In *Sand Roses*, the French army doctor, similarly named René, falls in love with the twin Fahima and helps her family by delivering her sister's baby and hiding with them in the well to survive the soldiers' attacks and blasting of their house after they refuse to surrender. Orientalist clichés such as scalding tea drinks as a prelude to exotic lovemaking and Oriental dancing in cabarets which have become key images of the Oriental other for Westerners are employed for self-representation by Neo-Orientalist authors in search of international recognition and literary notoriety.

Set against the backdrop of French settler colonization of Algeria, *Sand Roses* as historical fiction is expected to present the perspective of formerly colonized countries writing back against empires in a Postcolonial tradition. Instead, it embraces the colonial Orientalist perception and presents the fight of the Algerian characters against the French officers as a quest for revenge for the killing of their children rather than a fight for independence. The novel ends with Saadia, the twins' mother, pursuing Colonel Joseph to Algiers years later and poisoning his tea during the celebrations of the allies' victory in World War II in order to kill him and commit suicide after making herself known to him; " You don't remember me? I remember you,' she said calmly. 'You took my virginity years ago.' (p. 322) … 'You killed my baby girl Farida,' the woman said, then she made to give Joseph another stab saying, 'And only son, Amar'." (p. 323).

Hamza Koudri's incentive for writing the story of "Nailiya dancers", or rather prostitutes or comfort women of sorts for French officials, is both historical and cultural as he claims:

> The lack of documentation around the Ouled Nail culture made me realise the importance of a project like this to preserve unique immaterial heritage from little-known corners of the world. It also gave me the chance to do what writers like to do best: invent. (p. 327)

Yet, the perspective he adopts in portraying the Algerian characters of the novel not only "invents" details and events but does so following the new Orientalist attitude by Orientals themselves who assume the prejudiced, negative perception of the Easterner with all its othering stereotypes though issuing from the self. Being Algerian himself, and presenting his national identity and cultural heritage in his novel, endow his narrative with authenticity and legitimacy and fix it as depiction of the self, elevating a marginal and shameful practice imposed by colonial conditions to a traditional way of life pretendingly characteristic of the Sahara, in parallel to the notoriety of the stereotypical belly-dancing in Egypt as an Oriental custom invariably sought by Western travellers to the Orient.

To conclude, the neo-Orientalist discourse vented in Koudri's *Sand Roses* ranges from the erotic and savage, to the exotic and mysterious and may be construed as rather nefarious collaborations with Western Orientalist agendas than genuine rendering of life in Bousaada in the 1930's under French colonisation. Koudri's novel therefore is an instance of the contemporary evolution of neo-Orientalism whose self-proclaimed authenticity sanctions and authorizes disparaging visions of the self as if seen through the gaze of the Western other.

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