

Black and White Memories: Re-inscription of Visual Orientalism in *Embroideries*

ESMAEIL ZEINY JELODAR
National University of Malaysia (UKM)
ezeiny@ukm.edu.my

NORAINI MD YUSOF
School of Language Studies and Linguistics, FSSK
National University of Malaysia (UKM)

ABSTRACT

*In the aftermath of the tragedies of 9/11, the West began to represent the East in a darker way. The western mass media, and the art and literary markets are riddled with visual discourses that consolidate the stereotypical representation of the Orient. One of these visual discourses which strengthen the stereotypes is the portrayals of Eastern women. Almost without exception, the whole mass media use images of eastern veiled women either as victim or lecherous to bolster its East/West demarcation. These sorts of images can be found in some contemporary Muslim women's works as well. By examining the history of visual orientalism and by studying Marjane Satrapi's *Embroideries* (2005), we argue that discourses such as Satrapi's re-inscribe the visual Orientalism by representing the cliché and stereotypical images of women.*

Keywords: visual orientalism; stereotypes; Muslim women; East; West

INTRODUCTION

Representing the Orient has always been an obsession for the West. This representation began with Western travellers who journeyed to the Orient in search of exotica and excitement. These travellers' accounts encouraged many Western artists to travel there. They were mesmerised by the Eastern culture, artefacts, and above all the women. These Eastern women were veiled and were not allowed to reveal their body and face before a male stranger. This led to the male Westerners being curious to uncover what lay beneath their veils. These women were depicted either as victims or as seductive and licentious. It is argued that these paintings are the result of fantasy and reality that were expressed and willed to take credit as pure fact. This "combined layering and effect of the multitude of Western representation of Islam, [Muslim women,] and the East produces a discourse that can be called Visual Orientalism" (Bailey Jones 2007, p. 107). These portrayals and travel accounts created an Orient as a source that provides the West the deepest and most recurring images of the Other. Therefore, it defines the West in terms of contrasts and differences; "one culture is what the other is not" (Mortimer 2005, p. 296). These differences are celebrated by the Westerners as they are shown as colonial/imperial dominance and the East is shown as the land of submission and slavery. In representing the Orient, the West created the concept of 'imaginative geography,' a term that they use to express the dichotomy of 'our land' and 'their land.'

The depiction of the East as barbaric and a land of submission continue to date. The representation of the Orient became darker, particularly after the 9/11 tragedy. The events of 9/11, following President Bush's series of speeches, and their coverage by the mass media created xenophobia amongst Westerners. To justify his speech for launching his' war on terror' project, President Bush resorted to the issue of women's right in the Islamic countries. The media became loaded with images of veiled Muslim women and stories of their

victimhood in an Islamic society (Zeiny Jelodar, Noraini Md. Yusof & Ruzy Suliza Hashim 2014). Soon a great number of visual discourses about Muslim women emerged and flooded the art and literary markets. Most of these books are produced by Muslim women in the hope of unravelling the lives of Muslim women in an Islamic society but in fact some of these discourses helped the empire to continue its hegemony. The authors of these visual discourses follow the stereotypical representation of Orientalists artists. One of these visual discourses is Marjane Satrapi's graphic memoir, *Embroideries* (2005). It is argued that her book is produced to erase the Orientalists' stereotypes but it is, indeed, a re-inscription of visual Orientalism.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF VISUAL ORIENTALISM

For centuries people in the West have always been interested in learning the culture and people's way of life in the colonised East. The West began to take interest in the East during the Roman Empire and it reached its peak in the nineteenth century after the European colonization. The East had been "since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, [and] remarkable experiences" (Said 1978, p. 1). Westerners travelled to the East in search of exotica, excitement, adventure and inspiration. To Westerners, the East was a place of pleasure and dream as it was characterised by the *Arabian Nights*. According to Sha'ban (1991, p. 179), the *Arabian Nights* and identical literature "preconditioned the American traveller even before journeying the Orient and definitely shaped his attitude to things Oriental." Having travelled to the East, the travel writer, Sara Haight confessed that she "scarcely could believe it to be reality" and she asserts "I could only think of scenes of the Arabian Nights, or fancy myself dreaming over a page of Hajji Baba" (Sha'ban 1991, p. 180). Napoleon Bonaparte, also, searched the East for glory; and found his utopia and liberty in the East. On one occasion, he summoned his wife and tells her about his love of the East:

In Egypt, I found myself freed from the wearisome restraints of civilization. I dreamed all sorts of things, and I saw how all that I dreamed might be realized. I created a religion; I pictured myself on the road to Asia, mounted on an elephant, with a turban on my head, and in my hand a new Koran, which I should compose according to my own ideas. I would have combined the experience of the two worlds with which to set about my enterprise; I was to have ransacked, for my own advantage, the whole domain of history; I was to have attacked the English power in India, and renewed my relations with old Europe by my conquest. The time I passed in Egypt was the most delightful part of my life, for it was the most ideal (Sha'ban, 1991, pp. 149-50).

Such travel tales encouraged and inspired many artists to journey eastward. Many of these artists were white males. During the colonization era, the East became "a major preoccupation of nineteenth-century painting, an East which was, in turn, 'Imagined, Experienced, [and] Remembered'" (MacKenzie 1995, p. 44). What were of particular interest to most of these artists were Eastern women. Westerners were fascinated with the lives of these women as their lives were shrouded in mystery due to the historical gender dichotomy in the East. There are annals that prove that westerners have been fascinated with the exoticism of the inaccessible Eastern women that traces back to the images made in colonial era. These images were usually images of harem girls which were portrayed seductively to titillate the West. Harlow (1986, p. xv) is of the idea that "[t]he popular image of slave girls, harems, and concubines nonetheless continued to horrify and titillate Western critics of the Muslim world through the colonial period." These male artists generated a "sexualised [and] fetishised form of looking that seeks to make available the women pictured as objects of desire" (Bailey Jones 2007, p. 109).

The slave and harem tropes provided the means for Westerners to construct their political and psychosexual images of the Eastern women. They concocted an exoticised and eroticised Orient in their images to tantalise Western audiences with lust and adventure. To fabricate this exoticised and eroticised Orient, the male artist had the power to represent women in a style and dress of his own choice. These women were veiled and were not allowed to appear unveiled to men outside the family; this means that the male artists had the “power to reveal the coverings and reveal what lies beneath” (Bailey Jones 2007, p. 110). Thus, the portrayals are a result of “fantastic imagination, monetary compensation, or negotiations with male relatives of the woman” (Bailey Jones 2007, p. 110). These portrayals carry an air of coercion, dream and submission within themselves. If these images are not a work of imagination, then these women were forced to pose in a way to show their longing for Westerners. This sort of representation of eastern women has occupied a magnificent place in the imagination and the work of a great number of Western artists. Their representations of Eastern women have been contaminated with a biased and colonialist perspective.

This male monopoly of visual representation of women conceived an inferior and a slave in the colonial era. The created colonial knowledge about the Orient leaned on an amalgamation of “real observation, imagined inferiority, and artistic fantasy” (Bailey Jones 2007, p. 113). According to Said (1978, p. 36), the created knowledge of the Orient is “what makes their management easy and profitable; knowledge gives power, more power requires more knowledge, and so on in an increasingly profitable dialectic of information and control.” This was a combination of reality, faith and bigotry that were expressed and willed to take credit as pure fact. This “combined layering and effect of the multitude of Western representation of Islam, [Muslim women] and the East produces a discourse that can be called Visual Orientalism” (Bailey Jones 2007, p. 107). Thus, it is, the romanticisation of the Other as primitive, inferior, debaucher, exotic and barbaric to provide justification for the Western desires to expand colonial rules and be dominant. The created knowledge indicated that the colonial power had a superior culture and visually they were clean and scientific; the native cultures, instead, were visually shown as savage, dirty, bloodthirsty and in search of sex.

In *Visual Regimes of Colonialism*, Terry Smith (1998) argues that calibration, obliteration, and aestheticisation were the three parts of visualisation that the colonial rulers utilised to maintain their control in their colonies. The first step, calibration, is “the mapping of oceans and landmasses, measurement of distances and of governmental and property boundaries [and] surveillances of peoples” (Smith 1998, p. 483). Changing names of roads and towns to colonial names was essential for the ruling power to keep their hegemony. The second stage of colonial visualisation is obliteration which involves demolition of the natives. It, in fact, contains “practices range from actual, brutal murder to an equally potent imaginary Othering” (Smith 1998, p. 484). Aestheticisation, as the last stage, “spun charming appearances as garlands over the instrumental actualities of establishing colonies in foreign climates, of creating systems of control, of building ordered socialities” (Smith 1998, p. 484). This last stage was recruited to create a “beautiful and exotic façade that covers the actual brutality of maintaining colonial power” (Bailey Jones 2007, p. 113). All the three stages worked well together to normalise and preserve the colonial control of the natives. Bailey Jones (2007) opines that the paintings and photographs of Muslim veiled women who seductively returned the gaze of male artists or the picture of a bare-breasted woman fall into the third category of visualisation, the aesthetic façade. This third stage of visualisation was utilised to unveil the veiled women for the gaze of Westerners to reveal what lies beneath. The masculine monopoly on women representation created fantasised Oriental lecherous women.

One of these male artists who focused on women as his subject matter was the French Orientalist painter, Jean-Leon Gerome (1824-1904). Gerome was the “darling of the Orientalist movement and the lion of artistic circles” (Thornton 1983, p. 172). One of his most famous paintings is *Dance of the Almeh* (1863) (Figure 1). It portrays a voluptuous young woman dancing in a coffee shop to the sound of violin, drum and flute of local musicians. Her head is directed towards the audience and she is dancing with her belly, naval, breasts and arms showing. She wears pink trousers, a striped yellow belt around her hips and a yellow vest; she is also wearing a white veil on her head. She is adorned with earrings, bracelets and golden coins on her forehead. The audiences are all men. Two groups of men wear different attires. The group on the left is attired in colourful clothes which look vibrant and this combination of colour intensifies their look. On the right hand, the musicians represent the natives as they are attired in the native garbs. The colourful attired people are the guests who are located near the carved door that opens to the city of Cairo; this can be the sign of an exit from the enclosed café. The natives are placed to the inner part of the building. The woman is placed at the centre of the two groups and her pathway to the back and front is blocked which implies that the woman is encircled and cannot escape. The woman’s face is indicative of the fact that she is entrapped and not happy with her surroundings (Bagnole 2005). Her gloomy face might have been affected by the guns that hang on the wall which can be suggestive of coercion. The fact that she is engulfed by men shows women’s victimhood.



FIGURE 1: Jean-Leon Gerome, *Dance of the Almeh* (1863).

Gerome’s *Arab Girl with a Waterpipe* (1873) (Figure 2) depicts a woman on a bench in a shaded area and a lighted background. The background shows two women and two men; a woman is sitting on the floor resting her chin on her arm while listening to the front standing man and the window woman’s conversation. There is also a man behind the background woman. The woman in the front, who is placed near the hookah, wears pink puffy pantaloons, a yellow vest and she is adorned with a few bracelets. Her front knee is held up by her clasped hands while the other leg stayed down with pointed toes. Her eyes are depicted as if they are returning someone’s gaze. The same woman in the picture is used for Gerome’s *Woman of Cairo* (1882) (Figure 3) but in a different pose. The woman is posed sideways before an entranceway and her head is turned back to see the onlooker. Her breast is showing and she rests one of her arms on her right hip. She holds a cigarette in her left arm.

In the background, two women and a man are depicted talking. In the far distance under the archway, a man and his camel are going to the direction of the front woman.



FIGURE 2. Jean-Leon Gerome, *Arab Girl with a Waterpipe* (1873)



FIGURE 3. Jean-Leon Gerome, *Woman of Cairo* (1882)

Another equally famous painting of Gerome is *Arab Girl in a Doorway* (1873) (Figure 4). This painting depicts two women; the woman in the foreground is depicted at an entrance identical to that of *Woman of Cairo* (1882), posing seductively with her arm cushioning her head. She carries a hookah and wears a bracelet. There is a jug of water and a piece of fabric on the bench next to the door. The other woman who is portrayed obscurely is walking down the dark entry. The woman in the front, who is posing seductively in revealing clothing, is staring at the viewer seductively and coyly. The viewer is assumed to be a Western male and the woman in the painting is portrayed with a conspicuous sense of exotic fascination and desire. All these paintings represent women in revealing attire and seductive poses. The women in these paintings usually have adorable appearances and enchanting gazes. The women's erotic pose and seductive gaze assert their sexuality. Bailey Jones (2007) believes that since many Eastern women were unavailable to the colonialist and Orientalist sexual gaze, the placing of unveiled women in a doorway suggested an invitation for the spectator of the peace to enter into their private sanctuary. These Orientalist paintings reinforced the stereotyped image of Muslim women as silent, submissive and lecherous. The colonial obsession of unveiling veiled Muslim women is the motive behind visual discourse of western representation which is still at work, but this time for imperialism. The events of 9/11 sparked the imperialism to continue its stereotyped visual representation of the Orient.



FIGURE 4. Jean-Leon Gerome, *Arab Girl in a Doorway* (1873)

9/11 AND THE CONTINUANCE OF VISUAL ORIENTALISM

Before the tragic events of 9/11, the media representation of Muslims was biased and one-sided. According to Akram (2002), the Western media has a long involvement in demonisation of Muslim; it started long before the September 11 bombings. This can be traced back to the media and film stereotyping of Muslims as a “part of conscious strategy of ‘experts’ and polemicist on the Middle East” (Akram 2002, p. 61). Western media carries the same and common trope in representing a Muslim man; he is “robed and turbaned, sinister and dangerous, engaged mainly in hijacking airplanes and blowing up public buildings” (Akram 2002, p. 65). Another scholar, Jack Shaheen (2001) argues that Muslims, in Western movies, are barely depicted as ordinary people with families, relatives, friends, and social interactions. He further argues that this stereotyping of Muslims has been so successful that critics and commentators do not pay any attention to it. In representing Muslim women, Shaheen (2001) is of the idea that the media depicts Muslim women as voiceless, weak, black-covered creatures or half-naked belly dancers. In reviewing 900 Hollywood movies, he asserts that only five percent of the 900 movies he has studied portrayed Muslims positively. Representing Muslims as “inferior, threatening, immoral and dehistoricised” has been a common strategy for media to misrepresent this group (Ali Muscati 2002, p. 131).

The events of 9/11 have caused a dramatic shift in the West/East relationship. All of a sudden many Westerners, who used to feel sure about their safety, invulnerability and supremacy, lost their sense of certitude. Bailey Jones (2007, p. 9) argues that this “loss of confidence brought about an ugly wave of xenophobia, a crisis of identity that led to a sealing off from everything perceived as different and foreign.” Since then, the Western fear-mongering media has posed a fear of anything Muslim in grass roots’ opinion. The Western fear of Muslim terrorism has augmented antagonism towards anything Muslim. Thoughts such as ‘Muslims are all terrorists and they are going to terrorise our society’ became prevalent in the west. The media gave all Muslims a bad name to the extent that the presence of a veiled woman could be associated with bombs and extremism. En route to visit her sister, Bailey Jones (2007, p. 2) asserts:

When the bus reaches its next stop a woman in full burqa, covered from head to toe with a fabric mesh panel covering her eyes, gets on the bus and stands near me. Before I have time to reason with myself, a sickly feeling of fear comes up in my stomach. The fear is irrational; it causes thoughts of bombs, fanaticism, and Islamist extremism to fly through my body. My heart beats faster as my arms and legs prepare for flight, or impact or something.

She, later, admits that fear was an irrational one and was caused by the media. However, that is the common sentiment of many Westerners. President Bush's speech *Axis of Evil* following 9/11, which was addressed to Iran, North Korea and Iraq, was an obvious demarcation of West/East. It created a noticeable increase in violence and abhorrence towards Muslims in the west. His "you're either with us or against us" separated the world in clear sides. He has campaigned frequently to rescue the 'civilised' world from 'evil' to justify his 'war on terror' project. In conducting a textual analysis of President Bush's series of speeches after 9/11, Debra Merskin (2004) opines that President Bush used a chain of Orientalist stereotypical words and images that have been used to describe Muslims for more than two decades. According to McAlister (2005), the events of 9/11, the following President Bush's series of speeches, and the consequent traumatising in America created a national amnesia and a new account of the essentially good nature of the State's imperial power. This is manifested in the dubious phrase of 'why do they hate us?' which, indeed, obliterates the long western involvement in the Middle East. The mass media of the time followed the same path; they represented Islam and Muslim women negatively and in need of Western liberation.

In his study of visual representation of Muslim women in U.S newspapers after the events of 9/11, Ghazi-Walid Falah (2005) argues that images of Muslim women in newspapers were hardly related to the subject matter of the story; this is suggestive of the fact that the images were used to serve another purpose. He is of the idea that these "images are insinuated into the text, where they serve to project cultural judgments about Islam and Muslim societies and to convey the political viewpoints of the editors" (Falah 2005, p. 305). These images are usually portrayed with two different themes: a passive woman as a victim and an active woman as a political agent. He, further, continues that these images are accompanied by some captions that do not encourage the audience sympathy but rather they allude to feelings of "self-righteousness and/or moral revulsion" (305). The images and the captions that fall under the first theme are employed to stress that women's oppression is being mitigated by the Western emancipation. The portrayals that fall under the second category is somehow "jarring" and defy the stereotyped image of victim women; "[y]et the subtexts of these images project meanings that reinforce rather than challenge such stereotypes" (306). These images are images of strong women who are involved in political activities which frustrate the stereotype of victimisation but somehow their portrayals reinforce the Orientalist stereotypes.

The Western media has been obsessed with reports on Muslim women. They deal with reports and stories as why women are veiled and what a veil looks like. The emergence of American nationalism after 9/11 caused the media to act in a patriotic way as well. They bolstered the stereotyped binary of 'us' and 'them' which was constructed upon unequal power legacy of colonialism. The media became the government's mouthpiece and created a surge of sentiment supporting the government policies. On the role of media in post 9/11 era, Waisbord (2002, p. 201) asserts:

Comforting and warning became two of journalism's most obvious functions during the crisis triggered by terrorist strikes in New York and Washington. To provide comfort to a grieving, shocked country and alert it to possible future attacks, the media relied on a well-known nationalistic trope: a shared, national culture provides solace and unity to a community that has suffered foreign incursion. Risk was framed from this perspective. Any threat existed as a potential danger to "the nation."

Heritage of nationalism and imperialism have made uneven power relationships in representing the self/other. Bailey Jones (2007, p. 7) argues that those who have power in the world "represent the rest of the world in the form of their choosing." The Western colonial dominance and exploitation has created the Other very artistically. The biased media revived

the stereotype of the Orient and Muslim women in post 9/11 era. This reservoir of negative depictions of Muslims women is so packed that it cannot be reversed easily. The state accounts and mainstream media, in fact, hammered the grass roots with arguments that the ‘war on terror’ project should be launched; hence, people became curious to know about the Middle East. Soon, there was a resurgence of visual Orientalist discourses in the Western art and literary market. What is interesting to note is that these visual discourses are mostly produced by the diasporic Middle Easterners, especially women. Since then, the art and literary market has been loaded with this genre and continues to accommodate them in bookstores in the West. Issues of Islam and women are the two focal points of these discourses. The diasporic visual discourses fall into the two categories of Falah’s (2005) two themes. Most of them fall under the first theme: representing women as victims of a patriarchal society. Some of them are produced in the hope of dispelling the stereotypes but they are, in fact, reinforcing them such as Marjane Satrapi’s graphic memoir, *Embroideries* (2005). The question to be raised here is ‘wouldn’t it be better to put an end to animosity and develop some images of East/West friendship instead of representing the West/ East dichotomy?’ It is high time that images like ‘East and West Kiss’ (Figure 5) should be produced, encouraged and distributed in the West.



FIGURE 5: East and West Kiss, *Dani*, 4 January 1999, Cover.

Embroideries (2005)

Currently residing in France, Marjane Satrapi, an Iranian born woman, is an illustrator, graphic novelist, and animated film director. She comes from a well-to-do and a ‘highly intellectual and politically conscious’ family and was schooled in Europe from the age of 14. Even in Iran, during her teen years, she attended the French school, the Lycee Française as she was from a privileged family. Her *Embroideries* (2005), a black-and-white woodcut-illustration memoir, is deeply centred on women, sex and relationships. Satrapi tells the story of her female family members with “unrivalled candor” (Darznik 2007, p. 142). Darznik (2007) argues that the reticence of Iranian women writers about their sexual life has created more curiosity amongst Westerners. That is why upon its publication, *Embroideries* (2005) captured the attention of many Western readers. To write about Iranian female sexuality in a memoir means a bold break from Iranian literary tradition where women were not allowed to

write their life stories let alone writing about their sexuality. Reviewers of *Embroideries* have spoken of it as a “secret history” of Iranian women’s sex lives (Darznik 2007, p. 143).

The seemingly simple black and white illustration is started from the cover of the book. The cream cover depicts an ornate gilt frame containing a woman’s portrait with the title ‘embroideries.’ The woman is posed sideways looking at the audiences with her squinting eyes as if inviting them to her sanctuary. The word ‘embroideries’ stimulates an idealised femininity which is Satrapi’s first captivating disguise. Examining the cover of the graphic memoir, Darznik (2007, p. 145) argues that the cover makes for a “canny disguise for a book laced with cultural and political improprieties” (Figure 6). The setting is the lunch party at Satrapi’s grandmother’s place in Tehran. Satrapi’s graphic memoir accommodates three generations of women: her grandmother and some of her friends; her mother, aunt, and some of their friends; and Marjane herself with a young neighbour; these women are the prude, the liberated vamp, the witless young bride and the long-suffering wife. The timing of the story is presumably sometime in the nineties. The men go to take siesta after lunch and Marjane is told to bring everyone tea. Satrapi uses witty portrayals to represent female domesticity and servility. First she uses images of a row of women taking dishes to the kitchen to wash (Figure 7). Then, she uses the image of a big Samovar next to Marjane who is preparing the tea which suggests that it is the work of women to tend the Samovar at home; Marjane says: “the Samovar was my responsibility. I took care of it morning, noon and night” (Figure 8).

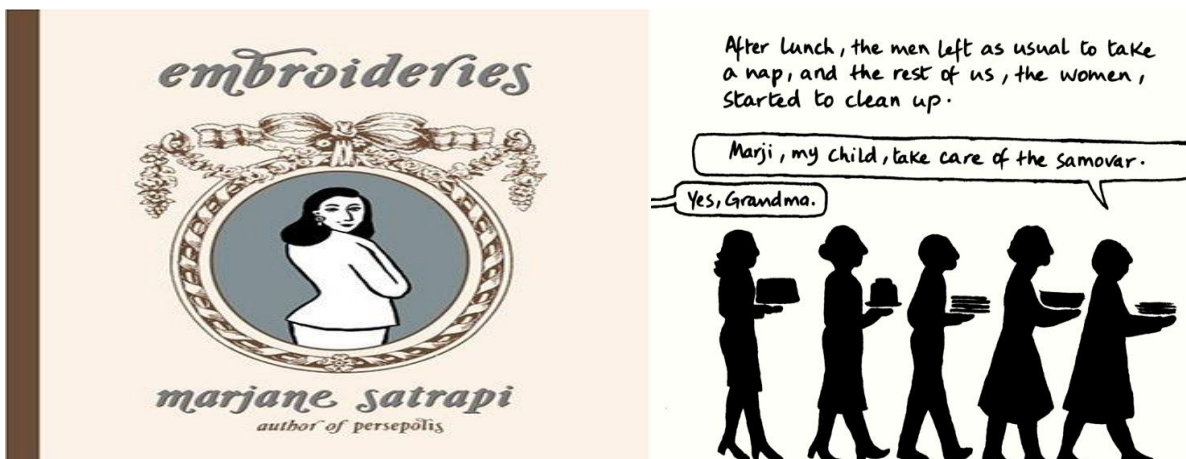


FIGURE 6. The Cover of *Embroideries* (2005), Marjane Satrapi FIGURE 7. *Embroideries* (2005), Marjane Satrapi



FIGURE 8. *Embroideries* (2005), Marjane Satrapi

The audience learns in the third page of the story that Marjane's grandmother is addicted to opium. Satrapi explains that she uses a little amount of it every day to "regain her sense of humour and her natural kindness." One day after taking opium, her grandmother tells her about the virtue of opium; she says: "it's not just good for reducing pain." She tells Marjane that when she was younger she used to take "a little taste" before going to parties as it gave her eyes "a languorous look." Her grandmother continues, "You should learn to close your eyes a little...[Y]ou'll find lovers more easily;" the image shows her grandmother encouraging Marjane to narrow her eyes to look sexy and Marjane tries that (Figure 9).



FIGURE 9: *Embroideries* (2005), Marjane Satrapi

An Iranian grandmother that advises her granddaughter how to find lovers easier does not match any pre-existing ideas about Iranian grandmothers. Later audience learns that her grandmother has married three husbands. This image tallies perfectly with the Orientalist stereotype of Muslim women as lecherous and in search of lovers. When Marjane brings the tea, it is the time for the women of the memoir to begin to chat and tell their titillating stories. The story commences with Marjane's grandmother's assertion: "To speak behind others' back is the ventilator of the heart." Right from the opening pages, Iranian women are portrayed as exotic being who enjoy talking behind each other's back (Figure 10). The image depicts the women listening cautiously to the first storyteller, Marjane's grandmother, who sits at the centre.



FIGURE 10: *Embroideries* (2005), Marjane Satrapi

The first story teller is Marjane's grandmother. She tells the story of a friend's botched attempt to pretend on her wedding night that she was still a virgin. Before telling the story, she explains that her friend, Nahid "died after years and years of incontinence". She explains how she was approached by Nahid the day that she revealed she had lost her virginity to her lover and now she wanted to marry another man as it was an arranged marriage. She was afraid that her father might find out and kill her. Marjane's grandmother came up with a brilliant plan for her friend: during the intercourse, Nahid is to cut herself with a razor and the drops of blood will "keep her honour intact." However, she got the timing wrong and mutilates her husband's testicles. This story creates a burst of laughter but one can argue that it is portrayed to show the differences between an Eastern and a Western man; it reveals that how virginity is important for Eastern men. It is highlighted in grandmother's assertion of "Of course, you know, my child, men's pride is situated in their scrotums." Upon hearing the story, a woman in their gathering admits that she has never seen a male organ' though she had four kids. She explains how her husband comes 'into the bedroom' and turns off the light and then "Bam! Bam! Bam! "(Figure 11). This image reinforces the stereotype of Muslim women as victim, submissive and an object of satisfaction.



FIGURE 11. *Embroideries* (2005), Marjane Satrapi

Another woman, Parvin tells the story of her marriage. She is thirteen when her mother tells her that some certain army General, 56 years her senior, has asked for her hand. Although she does not want to marry the old guy, her mother insists and she cannot resist. She escapes to her aunt when she is alone with her husband in the chamber on the wedding night. Arranged marriages and proof of chastity are not very common in Iran today but 'virginity' is a significant issue to many families in Iran (Darznik 2007); in order to "satisfy traditional expectation, some women who have engaged in premarital sex now choose to undergo surgeries before their weddings" (Darznik 2007, p. 150). The title of the graphic memoir, *Embroideries*, indeed, refers to a surgical procedure that restores virginity. Marjane's grandmother suggests that 'embroidery' is a right arsenal for women in a culture that places huge importance on women's chastity. She says "to think that if this poor Nahid had been born in this epoch, she would have been able to have herself embroidered instead of cutting her poor husband."

In another image, one woman talks of her first love marriage. She loves a guy who is a communist and who wants to leave the country not to get imprisoned; the man asks the girl's father for his daughter's hand and her father accept it right away as the family would "regain its lost honor." The man leaves for Germany and his wife joins him after a year. She tells how she later got to know that her husband had affair with other women. She asks about his work and he replies he is tied up in political activities. However, she understands that his chief occupation is "the diplomatic relations between his testicles and women's breasts." Finally she tells how she met another man, Herbert, in a dance studio and developed sexual affairs with him. She says "Herbert was so charming. No one had ever satisfied me like him" (Figure 12). Herbert was married and she was with him for six months and then returned to Iran. Somehow the women in the party unanimously agree that Western men know how to satisfy their women. Parvin is surprised at her return and scolds her for returning. She says being a mistress of a man is a great joy as she has experienced it in France with a Minister. The mixed images of Eastern licentious and victimised women are conspicuous here.

I sensed that he wanted to seduce me, but I was a married woman, so I couldn't give in to him. The more I saw Herbert, the less I could stand my life with Houshang! I finally let myself go. Herbert was so charming. No one had ever satisfied me like him. Just one kiss and I was already in seventh heaven...



FIGURE 12. *Embroideries* (2005), Marjane Satrapi

Marjane, as another storyteller of the party, is forced to recount the story of Shideh, her friend, whose misfortunes have led her to seek help from a magician woman. 'Black magic' is of great popularity amongst Iranian women. Marjane explains when Shideh divorces her first husband she falls in love with a man whose mother strongly disagrees with their marriage as she is a divorcee. The women who are depicted listening to the story with great enjoyment ask if the husband is handsome or if he is good in bed (Figure 13). Again, they are shown as in search of sex and lovers which conjures up the image of Orientalist paintings: lecherous women. Shideh asks Marjane to go with her to a witch who would help her to secure the devotion of her lover but the plan fails.



FIGURE 13. *Embroideries* (2005), Marjane Satrapi

After Marjane is done with her story, another woman complains of her husband's cheating. She says her husband is cheating and she thinks she has to do something to bring him back to herself. At this, another woman in the party suggests a plastic surgery. She says she had her buttocks' fat injected into her breasts; that is why her husband loves her more (Figure 14). Parvin, retorts and demands "[a]nd why is it the women who have to be virgins? ... Why don't we behave as Westerners do? For them, since the problem of sex is solved, they can move on to other things! This is the reason they progress!" This portrayal suggests the

stereotypical binary of Westerners as more sophisticated and civilised than the Easterners and it is also suggestive of the fact that women are victims in the society as their husband cheats with another woman.



FIGURE 14. *Embroideries* (2005), Marjane Satrapi

Satrapi's graphic memoir is said to dispel the stereotypes about Muslim women but it bolsters the Orientalist stereotypes. Women are shown either as licentious or victims of their men. The images re-inscribe the visual Orientalism. However, there are some commendable parts in Satrapi's graphic memoir. She parodies the Iranian women's involvement in ancient and nefarious 'black magic'; her contempt for the irrational bigotry against divorced women as 'free targets' and willing target for men is justified; she scolds parents marrying off their daughters to strange Iranian men residing in the West in the hope of a better and wealthy life. Marjane's mother tells the story of her cousin's daughter, Bahar, who is engaged to be married. Her cousin gushes "the gentleman who is going to marry her is a MULTIMILLIONAIR!" Marjane's mother explains how on her wedding day, the bride sits next to a picture of the groom (Figure 15). This image is indicative of the fact that Iranians are obsessed with sending their kids to the west. Once in Europe, the girl learns that her husband is gay so she returns to Iran two months later.



FIGURE 15. *Embroideries* (2005), Marjane Satrapi

CONCLUSION

Visual Orientalisation of Muslim women has been a core interest to many Western artists. They have always wanted to unveil Muslim women and reveal what lies beneath the veil. The Eastern women were portrayed either as victims or as lecherous creatures. They were posed seductively for the Western male gaze. They were represented as lustful and wanting to have affairs with the Western men. This clichéd visual representation continues after the events of 9/11. The Western mass media represents women as voiceless, weak and in need of Western man to save her. 9/11 and President Bush's speech have provided an opportunity for some artists to bolster the West/East dichotomy by portraying Muslim women stereotypically. One of these artists is Marjane Satrapi whose *Embroideries* (2005) are an erotic history of the exotic Muslim female. She has unveiled her family female members and offers the West what they are looking for: what lies beneath the veil. Women are depicted either as victims of their men or as seductive beings in search of lovers and this reinforces the visual Orientalism. The repercussions of 9/11 and the resurgence of visual Orientalist discourses such as *Embroideries* (2005) provide imperialism a chance to continue its hegemony.

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