

(Un)reading Orientalism in Sherry Jones' *The Jewel of Medina*

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ABSTRACT

Oriental representations of Muslims are often manifested in a society's media, literature, theatre and other creative means of expression. However, these representations, which are often historically and conceptually one-sided, have adverse repercussions for Muslims today, potentially leading to Islamophobia. Orientalism of Muslims in Western writings and discourses have been much discussed, debated and disproved, yet some works of literature continue to disseminate many of the earlier Oriental assertions about Islam/Muslims: that of being terrorists, misogynists, barbaric or uncivilized compared to the civilized West. Sherry Jones' *The Jewel of Medina* (2008) chronicles the history of Islam from the time of the Prophet of Islam, Muhammad, through the voice of his youngest wife Aisha. This paper argues that there is more to the image of the Muslim than what is portrayed by Western writers. Through an "(un)reading" of Sherry Jones' text, this paper unravels the misconceptions regarding early and forced marriage with a view to address the ways in which these misconceptions could lead to Islamophobia. Using Edward Said's theory of Contrapuntal reading, which urges the colonized to unread Western canonical texts to unearth the submerged details, this paper identifies and puts to question non-conforming depictions of Muslims in Sherry Jones' *The Jewel of Medina* (2008) – while placing the text in its historical space – in an effort to mitigate the growing stereotyping of Muslims and to address misconceptions with regard to Islamic history.

Keywords: Orientalism; Childbride; Islamophobia; The Jewel of Medina; Contrapuntal reading

INTRODUCTION

Misrepresentations of Islam and Muslims in Western discourses have a long history. For centuries, the perception of the Muslim world by the Western Europeans has primarily been an Orientalist one. In early modern British writings, Muslims are consistently portrayed negatively as mystic, violent, barbaric, misogynist, and sexually licentious. Norman Daniel in his book *Islam and the West* (2000), in what he calls "the polemic biographies of Muhammad", asserts that the English writings in the medieval age represented the prophet of Islam as a deceptive

(false prophet), violent, and lustful figure. His history and character are opinionatedly rewritten to satiate the orientalist attitude of the Western world (Daniel, 2000, p. 100). It is to this point that Edward Said explicates his argument of Orientalism; the patterns through which the Europeans represent the non-Western world (Said, 2003, 3).

Said argues that, “the false image which is generated from preconceived archetypes rather than reality and fact, was dominantly manufactured by the Western writers, poets, imperial administrators, travelers, researchers etc. This image accounts of the East, as the uncivilized and exotic ‘other,’” in distinction to the enlightened and rational West which projects the East as a marginalized ‘other’ (Abubakar, 2018, p. 107). Said’s subject of enquiry is mostly the Arabs whose major religion is Islam. Their religious and cultural practices have maximally been Orientalized especially after the unfortunate event of 9/11 (Alosman, Raihanah, & Hashim, 2018). With regards to this, Gray and Finley-Hervey opined that, “Western images of Islamic culture and Muslim women are largely informed by an “orientalist” perspective” (Said 1994; Said 2003 in Gray & Finley-Hervey, 2005, p. 205).

According to Ain Jenkins (2007), “Muhammad, within early modern writings on the Islamic world, remained an essential component in the refutation of the beliefs of Muslims and the depiction of the behaviors of Muslims through the representation of Muhammad as the root of their many perceived vices” (13). It is to this extent that, modern and post-modern literary writers have continued to write canonically to portray Muhammad and Islam negatively. Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* remains a benchmark in this regard, followed by V.S. Naipaul's travel writings and the many popular English writings that followed suit. Sherry Jones' book is one of the most recent fiction to have provoked Muslim sentiments (Waseem, 2009; Chandran & Vengadasamy, 2018; Abubakar & Muhammad, 2019).

Sherry Jones' first book *The Jewel of Medina* (2008) sparked a lot of controversies as its story is based on the history of Prophet Muhammad. The novel is a historical fiction about the life of the last Prophet of Islam, Muhammad, seen through the eyes of his youngest wife Aisha, starting from her engagement to him at the age of six, to their marriage at the age of nine. She is portrayed to be a typical child-bride, and the Prophet, a lusty fellow with a great love for leadership. The plot illustrates Aisha's story, while it captures her life within and outside the household of Muhammad. It also illustrates the people around her as well as the lifestyle of the sixth century Arabs at large. During the lifetime of Aisha, some mysterious events occurred which are central to this discussion. Aisha at the age of fourteen deliberately missed her caravan in order to meet her young lover Safwan, which sparked controversy among the Arabs as Aisha is conceived to have committed adultery. This is considered a taboo for a married woman in Arabia until ten verses of the Quran were revealed to clarify and exonerate her from the allegation. Aisha grew up to become a jealous wife as she finds herself amid other wives of the Prophet. The novel further laments the struggles of young Aisha from childhood to maturity until the death of Muhammad.

The controversies surrounding the publication of this book garnered it readership and made it an international bestseller. Random House publishers terminated their contract with Jones when their British publisher was attacked, and Denise Spellberg (a Professor of Islamic history at the University of Texas) warned of the repercussions of publishing such a work which according to her, will hurt the Muslims’ sentiments as it is insulting to their religion and history (Nomani, 2008). Beaufort Books publishers in response to such accusation accepted the work and got it published in the US and the novel was subsequently published in sixteen other

countries. Muslims in the UK and US demonstrated their dissatisfaction with the storyline, while many liberals criticized the publication withdrawal as a threat to freedom of speech. These differing positions fueled the controversy surrounding the book's publication. Anshuman Mondal (2014) sees this controversy as:

A controversy conducted almost entirely amongst those left-liberals and liberal-conservatives who constitute the social commentariat in the US and the United Kingdom, and the debate focused on the issue of self-censorship and the putative fear of 'offending' that liberals now assume to be the dominant feature of 'politically correct' multiculturalist liberal-democracies. (p. 179)

The novel is however, grouped with other Islamophobic works that have misrepresented Islam or affronted its sacredness such as Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*, the film *Fitna* by the Dutch filmmaker Geert Wilders, Danish cartoon of Prophet Muhammad and *Submission*, the short movie about Islam by Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Theo Van Goh (Waseem, 2009).

Although, Sherry Jones wrote this novel with the sole aim of combating the stereotyping and fear of Muslims in the Western world, she unavoidably fell victim to the same issue she had hoped to address. A fear created by repeated discourse of demonizing the Muslims after the unfortunate event of September 11, 2001. In different interviews, she maintains that she intends to bring a different narrative of Muslims (through her work) by delving into the origins of Islam – which she did quite substantially. When asked of what she feels about the controversy that surrounded her book, she answered:

I think fear got the best of the decision-makers there, and that they over-reacted. But I understand why they did so. Our entire culture in the U.S. has been permeated by fear and loathing of Islam since the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. It began with the televised images of people leaping from burning buildings, and was perpetuated by President Bush's rhetoric calling countries in the Middle East an "Axis of Evil." Obviously, I refused to succumb to this fear-mongering, or I wouldn't have written, or published, the book.

(Nimet Seker, 2009 para. 6)

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sherry Jones' novel has been applauded for aesthetic qualities and richness in presenting socio-cultural Arabian practices (Nomani, 2008)¹ and at the same time fervently criticized for her simplistic portrayal of an otherwise horrible Islamic history. For Robert Spencer, Jones has over-sympathized with Muhammad for carving his character as exceedingly gentle and kind (Spencer, 2009). On one hand the novel has been examined for its inaccurate portrayal of pre-Islamic Arab culture on the basis that it is built on Orientalist assumptions of the Muslim world (Elnaggar, 2008; Brooks, 2008; El-Katatney, 2008). Furthermore, the studies of M I H Pirzada (2008) Fahd Mohammed Taleb Saeed Al-Olaqi (2010) and Mubarak Abdullah Altwaiji (2013) have discussed the oriental stance of Sherry Jones' novel. They emphasized that she has used her Western feminist imaginations in building her plot which ends up "assassinating" the historical facts (Al-Olaqi, 2010, p. 93). Similarly, Mondal (2014) equates her portrayal of Aisha with "Teo's description of the 'new heroine' of the orientalist historical romance" who finds freedom in outdoor sports and is reluctant towards marriage and succumbing to traditions (p. 176). As a

¹ Asra Q. Nomani is a writer and former editor of Wall Street Journal. As a Muslim, she condemns the reactions and controversies surrounding Jones novel as unnecessary.

non-Muslim Western writer, her masterpiece is seen by scholars as quite deficient of the real struggles of Muslim women (Brooks, 2008; Elnaggar, 2008; Haylamaz 2013). Despite her near-accuracy in artistically projecting sixth-century Arabia, her narrative is accused of having been overflowed with modern feminist ideas which do not fit the sixth-century Muslim world (El-Katatney, 2008; Mondal, 2014). For Mondal, “Aisha is far removed from her in time and space, differentiated by ethnicity, race and religion; she is an Other woman.” (p. 169).

Previous literatures have investigated the stereotypical portrayal of Islamic figures, the religion and its treatment of women. Nevertheless, little effort has been taken to address the Oriental polemics by drawing upon factual historical occurrences to write back. Third-world critics have long criticized this form of representation along with postcolonial feminist critics and even Muslim feminists. In recent times, it is mostly critiqued under the framework of oriental feminism or feminist orientalism which operates in the guise of universal womanhood (Mohanty, 1988; Mondal, 2014; Bahramitash, 2005). This study will examine Jones’ novel within the context of its setting.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

CONTRAPUNTAL READING AS A METHOD OF (UN)READING ORIENTALISM

Contrapuntality as a concept was first used by Said in the essay ‘Reflections on Exile’ and then more comprehensively developed in his book *Culture and Imperialism* (1994). His argument on contrapuntal reading was essentially his response to critics of Orientalism who felt that he seemed to have exclusively focused on European culture and (mis)representation while he ignored the resistance and agency of the colonized (Chowdhry, 2007). This book marks Said’s focal point of resistance of representation in Postcolonial theory, thus, it serves as a continuation of his book *Orientalism* originally published in 1978. It proposes solutions to the identified problems in Orientalism. Since Orientalism observes that the East (or other colonized) is represented stereotypically by the West, Said’s contrapuntal reading urges the colonized to unread the misrepresentations and write back to correct the distortions made. Similarly, Said’s *Orientalism* (2003) asserts that the European misrepresentation of the East is assertively constructed, in that, it transforms from artistic representations (fantasies) to “actual administrative manifestations” (p. 78) which the natives are forced to believe of themselves. Here, a contrapuntal reading suggests that the native should read the imperial (now canonical) novels to bring to light what is silenced or deliberately ignored about the native, to refute the one-sided story always brought to the mainstream. Said writes:

We must, therefore, read the great canonical texts with an effort to draw out, extend, give emphasis and voice to what is silent or marginally present or ideologically represented in such works. The contrapuntal reading must take account of both processes – that of imperialism and that of resistance to it, which can be done by extending our reading of the texts to include what was once forcibly excluded. (pp. 78-79)

Contrapuntal reading of a text is, therefore, a counter-narrative which infiltrates underneath the surface of a text to elaborate the existence of Orientalist attitudes of the author in canonical literature to disclose the political worldliness of the text (Ashcroft, Tiffin & Griffiths, 2007). In this approach, the critic offers the affiliations of the text, its origin in cultural and social reality instead of the usual mere canonical criteria in the literary text. That enables the critic to

uncover or find-out the political or cultural implications that are not explicitly addressed in the text (p. 56). Since contrapuntal reading looks at both the perspectives of imperialism and that of resistance to it, this approach of study would be used to unveil the submerged details about Muslims, to address the misrepresentations and to provide historical instances of what has been silenced and marginally present in similar English history. Said states that:

A contrapuntal perspective [is] able to think through and interpret together discrepant experiences, each with its particular agenda and place of development, its own internal formations, its internal coherence and system of external relationship, all of them coexisting and interacting with others.
(1994, p. 32)

Said's approach to contrapuntal reading offers critics of Orientalism (and its resistance) a method of studying misrepresentation by focusing on “connectedness” and intertwined experiences, past and present (Bilgin, 2016). He also offers an ethos for approaching Oriental misrepresentation in canonical texts by raising our “contrapuntal awareness” of multiple ways of thinking through a problem and translating the findings in different perspectives. There is already a wealth of research in Orientalism that focuses on misrepresentation of Islam or Muslims in English writings. This study attempts to hermeneutically read Sherry Jones’ novel within its historical context as Said advocates for a new historical consciousness from the reader, which can imply the text's connectedness to imperialism. Thus, through drawing upon “contrapuntal readings”, the “overlapping and intertwined histories” of what is popularly referred to as “Western” or “non-Western” ideas are highlighted. Hence, this method of reading considers not just what the text includes, but also, what has been excluded from it by going beyond the constraints of narration within the terrain of imperialism (pp. 66-67).

Considering one of the critically significant aspects of the contrapuntal reading – “not only the construction of the colonial situation as envisaged by the writers but the resistance to it as well.” (Said, 1994, p. 79) – In exploring Jones’ narrative, Said's notion of “contrapuntal awareness” as a deconstructive mode of resisting oriental representation is used to examine the stereotypes of Islam facilitating early and/or forced marriage and its oppression of women as well as the distortion of Islamic historical facts, while placing Sherry Jones’ *The Jewel of Medina* (2008) in the context of its setting. In highlighting the oriental portrayal of Islam and Muslims in the novel, the paper will contextually scrutinize the motivation behind the identified oriental depictions as a counter-narrative resistance to Orientalism. “Adopting contrapuntal reading as a method, submitted Said, is one way in which “intertwined and overlapping histories” of the colonizer and the colonized could be grasped” (Bilgin, 2016, p. 7)

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The discussion focuses on how Orientalism of Muslims in Jones’ novel is refuted based on Edward Said’s theory of Contrapuntal reading. Starting with the subject of child-marriage in Islam, the discussion delves into English history to bring-to-light occurrences of the same practice in the context of their settings. The discussion proceeds to analyze some distorted Islamic historical facts which also corresponds with some occurrences in English history. These distorted facts are further clarified with reference to Quranic sources.

THE QUESTION OF CHILD-MARRIAGE

Sherry Jones reiteration of the phrase ‘Muhammad's child-bride’ (when referring to Aisha) correlates with Bhabha’s basic idea of a stereotype. That, stereotype constructs a group (or individuals) as “the other” venerated as significantly different from the Western tradition. For Bhabha, this construction, however, ascertains the “other” to be identifiable by always repeating the stereotype (Bhabha, 1990, p 18). Although, Jones unlike Rushdie, did not acquiesce to so much of blasphemy in her work, she has said that she has written the book with a good intention which is, to bring Muslim historical figures to limelight especially to those in the West and to show “that Islam, is at its source, an egalitarian religion” (Jones, 2008, p. 356).

While Safwan, Aisha's fictional young lover blames her for not waiting till their maturity to get married, she retorted, “I was not allowed to make that choice, was I” (155) which insinuates that Aisha was forced into marrying Muhammad. To further portray how much of a child Aisha was at her time of marriage, Jones depicts her fragility, innocence and immaturity in the childish response she gave to Muhammad in his first sexual advances to her:

He moved his hands to my waist, and then slowly up my ribcage, toward my breast. I twisted my doll frantically, willing my hand not to push him away. Then I heard a ripping sound that made me gasp. I looked down at my hands. Poor Layla lay limp ... "Oh, no!" I cried. "I have killed her."
(p. 60)

"Do you think I do not love you?" I said. "I know you do, habibati. However, it is not the same love that I have for you. Yours is a young girl's love, not a woman's." He sighed. "It is the risk I accepted when I married a child-bride."
(p. 61)

More scenes that insinuate child-bride in the novel run through pages 90, 102, 110, and 335. In modern times, such marriage has been debated severely pointing towards the pedophile indictment of Muhammad. Given that it is still practiced in some Muslim-majority countries till date, it is criticized and justified as a Prophetic teaching. Sherry Jones on one hand shows the mercy and kindness of the character of Muhammad by allowing him to considerably consummate his marriage with Aisha only when she turns fourteen years and on the other hand she gets lashed (by Western readers) for sugar-coating pedophilia.

In furtherance of this debate, Professor of history Margaret Wade Labarge observes that: “It needs to be remembered that many Medieval widows were not old, important heiresses were often married between the ages of 5 and 10 and might find themselves widowed while still in their teens.” (Labarge, 1997, p. 52). Similarly, according to a professor of Sociology, a man as old as 50 being intimate with a girl under ten years was legal under the United States law until the mid-1960s. “In fact, until the mid-1960s, the legal age of consent in Delaware was 7, so a 50-year-old man could legally have sexual intercourse with a 7-year-old boy or girl.” (Cortese, 2006, p. 85). This implies that child-marriage was not restrictedly practiced in the Arabian peninsula.

Like Aisha's much-criticized age of marriage is Mary’s, the mother of Jesus, who was according to the Bible betrothed to Joseph the Carpenter at the age of twelve while he was above eighty-ninety. Christian historians and early church Fathers believed and proved this claim. (Discover The Truth, 2013). The consummation of this marriage remains controversial among the Christians. However, Joseph named him Jesus – (Matthew 1:25, The New King James Version). This suggests that after the birth of Jesus, while Mary was thirteen – fourteen years, the normal sexual life of a married couple transpired between them. Although many Christians believed the marriage was forever unconsummated. This provides an example of ancient Jewish marriage, the normalcy of it is seen in the lack of its criticism from Jesus, his disciples, the

Jewish community or subsequent saints, except for keeping the information in the apocryphal². Thus, this part of history is largely ignored; it is hardly ever used to justify child-marriage by Christians going on today in some parts of the world. There is no doubt that child-marriage is not just well practiced in most Islamic countries until today, but rather than seen as a deeply rooted cultural practice, it is perceived as a religiously motivated practice.

Sherry Jones' painstaking narration of Islamic history in relation to the issue of child-bride is hereby problematized. Even the fictional sixth century Arabs and other wives of the prophet refer to Aisha as Muhammad's child-bride; a perception which fits better to 21st-century understanding.

The history of English civilization is arguably the most widely read, but most details of its similarity with the East are not a conventional discourse. This brings us to 1396, when Isabella of Valois was married to King Richard II at the age of 7 – or 9 according to other sources (Bloks, 2015). Similarly, in 385, Augustine ended his relationship with his lover to prepare himself to marry a ten-year-old heiress (Brown, 2000, p. 63). These instances show that: “Throughout history till the 20th century, child-marriages were the norm in most parts of the world” (Sen, 2017, para. 2), but Jones illustrates the same event in a 21st-century understanding. Till today, the issue of child-marriage has not been completely eradicated from all cultures, not excluding the developed countries. The plight of child-brides is reported to be at rife in China today; it has been in the mainstream media for quite some time (Gadkar-wilcox et al. 2014). In America, independent charity and human right organizations have fought and are still fighting for the amendment of girls’ minimum marriageable age law. “Though some boys do marry, the vast majority of marrying minors are girls. This has been the pattern throughout U.S. history” (Syrett, 2017, para. 4). Revolt, and active opposition to child-marriage in America only started in the 19th century by women rights advocates. The issue of child-marriage is usually seen as a phenomenon peculiar to the Muslim Arabs and others in developing countries like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh or most African countries (for its continuous occurrence in these regions). Meanwhile child-marriage is as ancient as every culture; it existed even in recent centuries in Europe and other parts of the world before its legal ban or amendment in some cases. Whereas, the persistence of child-marriage in India becomes implicitly discussed, the pedigrees all connect back to medieval ages; when child-marriage was not abominable. Aparna Marion in response to this, writes:

Though age at which the girl was to be married differed and it was rare for girls younger than 12 to be married in antiquity. Nevertheless, girl brides became younger towards the Medieval period, and it became increasingly common for girls as young as six or eight to be married in Indian society.

(Marion, 2010, para. 1)

Sherry Jones, on the other hand, reiterates the inappropriateness of Aisha's marriage to the Prophet by continually reminding the readers that Aisha is a “child-bride”, with connotations that insinuate Aisha to be everything else but an adult bride. When the news of her marriage reached her sister Asma, she asked, “Why marry her to him now, when she is so young?” (p. 40) Asma's expression signifies that this is an uncommon practice in that period. Such marriages are likely unchallenged or criticized because it is culturally normal, not just in the Arabian Peninsula but among cultures transcending almost all parts of the world. The marriage of Richard II of England to young Isabel of France - who was just seven years old when they were betrothed in

² "Apocrypha is a plural word (singular: apocryphal) that originally denoted hidden or secret writings, to be read only by initiates into a given Christian group" (VanderKam and Flint, 2005).

1396 Paris – is of crucial importance to this argument. Not only was there no uproar; but also, there was substantial happiness expressed over the assumption that the marriage would hopefully end the 100 years of war between the two kingdoms. Therefore, peace was ensured by arranging the marriage between this man and the little girl. This was a politically contracted marriage in the UK and France. King Richard II is not censured of pedophilia today which proves Said's point that the disposition of the Orientalist is always biased when it comes to matters of the Orient.

In the above context, the issue of time and space becomes very crucial to this discussion. To shed more light on this argument, the significance of Kecia Ali's³ book will be highlighted for her insightful comparison of different biographies of Muhammad written in different time periods. She argues that the emphasis of these biographies reflects the primary concerns of the age in which they were written⁴. She further proves her point that Aisha's age of marriage was never a trouble to those who earlier wrote critically about Muhammad. Ancient critics have condemned him for lust for power and prophetic falsity, but it was only recently that modern-day writers were troubled by his age of marriage to Aisha which is seen as pedophilia or, perhaps that his example encourages it (or child-marriage) in the Muslim world today. This concept never occurred to earlier biographers. (Ali, 2016)

In modern times, studies show that child-brides are victims (or potential victims) of psychological trauma, domestic violence or depression⁵, due to physical, psychological or sexual abuse they are exposed to. (Ahmed, Khan, Alia & Noushad, 2013; Le Strat, Dubertret, & Le Foll, 2011; Pearson, 2011) Aisha's mental health is yet to be scholars subject of enquiry, but rather, she has been venerated for the most significant roles she played in the development of Islam. Aisha is considered by scholars as a precursor and leader among Islamic scholars in terms of preserving and transmitting the hadith⁶ of the Prophet. Her youthful marriage to Muhammad is (agreed by most Muslims) as something ordained by God to possibly be a source of knowledge to the Muslims (Haylamaz, 2013). Due to her young age during the time of their marriage, she had the wit to recall so many significant events and rulings given by the Prophet as to which she is the first narrator of thousands of hadiths which the Muslims live by today. Aisha's role as a source of hadiths earned her the epithet "mother of the believers", Muhammad's affection for her earned her the epithet "the beloved of the beloved of God". Urwa is reported to have testified: "I did not see a greater scholar than Aisha in the learning of the Qur'an, obligatory duties, lawful and unlawful matters, poetry and literature, Arab history and genealogy", and to have remarked that Aisha could cite poetic verses for every occasion. She is said to have related 2,210 hadiths in total (Walker and Sells, 1999, p. 58). Sherry Jones remarkably pictures Aisha's wisdom, enthusiasm and braveness in her character development but missed out on her scholarship.

DISTORTION OF HISTORICAL FACT

A notable example on distortion of Islamic historical fact is Safwan and Aisha's relationship. That, they both were still in love despite her marriage to Muhammad and were lovers since childhood reveals greater aspects of Sherry Jones' creativity. In several occasions, Aisha is found missing Safwan and having sexually ignited wishes for him.

³ Kecia is an Associate Professor of Religion at Boston University.

⁴ Where seventeenth-century non-Muslim writers denounce him as a false prophet, 20th-21st century writers focus more on his violence and intolerance and in the contemporary world of entrepreneurship, he is hailed as an ideal entrepreneur.

⁵ Other mental health problems include anxiety and bipolar disorders which are likely to put them into alcoholism or drug abuse.

⁶ Hadith is the Arabic word for the collection of the sayings and actions of the Prophet which is now used by Muslims as a source of jurisprudence.

Hadn't I vowed to forget about Safwan and focus on my marriage? Yet whenever I saw him, my intentions scattered like clouds blown by the hot winds of desire. My heart fluttered as I remember his proposal to ride through the desert with our bodies pressed together on a single horse.

(Jones, 2008, p. 141)

Although, Sherry Jones reserves the right to her artistic creation, her illustrations of the affair between Safwan and Aisha tend to be contrary to Islamic norms and values. Safwan embracing Aisha in a battlefield (p. 86), expressing his desire for her in a marketplace (pp. 67-8), or the nearly consummated romance episode (pp. 178-80) appear to be a comfortable mixture of Western romantic visions with Islamic historical facts.

In Norman Daniel's chapter on "Muhammad's polemic biography", he emphasized that most of the documented biographies of Muhammad in English illustrate falseness of his Prophethood through invented stories. After accusing the prophet to have invented revelations that suite him best, the verses that were revealed to exonerate Aisha of the adultery charges were falsified and doubted by many Western writers. It is to this extent that some hagiographers stick to the idea that she has something to do with Safwan right from childhood. Norman Daniel remarkably traced this historical invention to its origin. In his words: "The credit for this absurd, nasty and gratuitous invention (the final point in which will make nonsense of the entire story) must go to Peter of Toledo, in whose translation alone it occurs." (Daniel, 2000, p. 123). The final point which Daniel refers to is Peter of Toledo's Latin translation of Risalah (Arabic text) in which he narrates Ali's argument at the time of the scandal, that, Aisha was described as beloved by Safwan.

The plot of Sherry Jones' novel has much in common with the above mentioned invention. Although, largely fictionalized, Safwan and Aisha's affair tends to stimulate the curiosity of the reader - that Aisha had been involved with Safwan long before her betrothal to Muhammad, that she still sees him and has feelings for him after her marriage, and that the incident occurred as planned, to slip away from the caravan and be alone with Safwan. These insinuations provoke doubts about Aisha's vindication by Allah. Either that Muhammad invented the verses to save Aisha for his fondness to her, or that Allah is biased or unaware of the truth if he could reveal such verses to Muhammad despite what really happened. Norman Daniels perceives this sort of innovations – that proves Muhammad's deceitfulness⁷ – as a commonplace in the tradition of Muhammad's polemic biography. However, Sherry Jones takes the liberty of literary license in the Question and Answer part of her book where she acknowledged that "A'isha was not engaged to Safwan at birth, but to the son of one of her father's friends" (p. 357).

Meanwhile, the Islamic stance on this matter differs extensively. In the book of circumstances of revelation, Bukhari's⁸ authentic hadiths give the commentary on the revelation of those ten verses that exonerate Aisha from the accusation. He says: when the news of the rumor reached the prophet, he addressed the people saying:

"To proceed: O people Give me your opinion regarding those people who made a forged story against my wife. By Allah, I do not know anything bad about her. By Allah, they accused her of being with a man about whom I have never known anything bad, and he never entered my house unless I was present there, and whenever I went on a journey, he went with me."

(Al-Bukhari 6.60.281)

⁷ Further described as 'Tales of Muhammad's falseness, lechery, violence & sordid lineage' by Jonathan Burton (Jenkins 2007).

⁸ "Imam Mohammed Al-Bukhari is considered as one of the most distinguished scholars of Hadith in Islamic history. His book Sahih al-Bukhari, in which the Prophet's words, actions, or habits were collected, is one of the greatest sources of the prophetic influence in history" (Blake, 2017).

The excerpt is the testimony about Aisha and Safwan by the prophet, with regards to her good moral conduct as well as Safwan's. When the news reached Safwan, the accused, he said, "Subhan Allah!"⁹ By Allah, I have never uncovered the private parts of any woman". When the Prophet made the announcement earlier in the mosque, a companion from the Aus tribe¹⁰ requests the permission from the prophet to act against the people spreading such rumors. But another companion from the Khazraj tribe¹¹ disputed such request, and thus it erupted into a tribal/clannish clash. Due to the prolonged rumors and controversy of the matter at stake, the Prophet asked Aisha to clarify herself for or against the rumor "Now then O 'Aisha! If you have committed a bad deed or you have wronged (yourself), then repent to Allah as Allah accepts the repentance from his slaves." (Bukhari 6.60.281) But Aisha rather felt offended by this, for putting her worth and chastity to question. Thereafter, she requested her father and mother to respond to the prophet, but they failed her, not knowing what to say. Hence, she praised and glorified Allah as He deserves and further said:

"Now then, by Allah, if I were to tell you that I have not done (this evil action) and Allah is a witness that I am telling the truth, that would not be of any use to me on your part because you (people) have spoken about it and your hearts have absorbed it; and if I were to tell you that I have done this sin and Allah knows that I have not done it, then you will say, 'She has confessed herself guilty.' By Allah, I do not see a suitable example for me and you but the example of (I tried to remember Jacob's name but could not) Joseph's father when he said; so (for me) "Patience is most fitting against that which you assert. It is Allah (alone) whose help can be sought."

(Bukhari 6.60.281)

It is at this moment that she decides to be patient and wait for Allah's revelation to Muhammad. He then received a divine inspiration that clarifies Aisha of the accusation. (Quran 24:11-20)

Indeed, those who came with falsehood are a group among you. Do not think it bad for you; rather it is good for you. For every person among them is what [punishment] he has earned from the sin, and he who took upon himself the greater portion thereof - for him is a great punishment.

(Quran 24:11) and the remaining nine verses.

In the event of the uprising slander against Aisha, her servant, Barira, was interrogated to testify for her character. Barira stated that Aisha's only fault was that she tended to leave "the dough of her family out for the goats." (Bukhari 6.60.281) Thus, it becomes quite difficult for some readers to combine these Islamically ingrained facts with Jones' imaginative creations.

All those romantic scenes between Aisha and Safwan seem implausible to fit to the sixth-century Arabian culture. Eloping with Safwan despite being married could be seen as oriental feminist liberation mechanisms, (Bahramitash, 2005) that is inharmoniously marred with a prophetic Islamic history. But since contrapuntal reading gives us the ability to look beyond the text; to draw upon contextual references in other to give meanings to utterances or events in the text, this paper will resist this distorted fact ascribed to Islam by looking into the Orientalist's history in like terms.

A similar event in English history is King Henry's marriage to his fifth wife, Catherine Howard; after the doomed German marriage. (Weir, 2001). When they married, Catherine was

⁹ An Islamic exclamation.

¹⁰ A minority tribe from the outskirts of Medina

¹¹ Another tribe from the populace of Medina

only seventeen years old and has been repeatedly molested by her music teacher, Henry Manno who was then aged 36 while she was 13 –because of Catherine's vulnerability of being an orphan. Catherine reigned in the King's heart and the royal court until the exposure of her love affair with Thomas Culpeper brought her tragic and shameful death. Both were beheaded after pleading guilty in 1541. This storyline might be the inspiration behind Jones' plot development wherein, she simulated it in the character of Aisha to have had an illicit relationship with Safwan.

Another historical fact distorted by Jones is her depiction of Aisha's reaction to the Quranic revelation that decrees the Prophet's wives to cover their faces. Aisha finds the hijab unfair and domineering, she revolts against the commandment to the extent of exemplifying what it would look like to the prophet, even to the extent of talking back at him. For Marwa Elnaggar, this very instance is Orientally manifested. "For any Western woman writing in a post-feminist 21st century, the only possible reaction of a woman who is supposed to be described as a brave heroine with a fiery spirit to this commandment is obviously to see it as "oppressive". To suggest otherwise, it seems, would mean being disloyal to Western culture and ideals." (Elnaggar, 2008, para. 22) After the revelation of the hijab verse, Jones' Aisha retorted:

Have you ever tried to move about with only one eye exposed?" I pulled my wrapper over my face and began to walk. A few steps later, I misjudged the location of the date-palm tree and kicked it with my bare foot. I released my wrapper to grab my throbbing toe, as my sister-wives watched in grim silence. "Yaa Prophet of God, see what a time I'm having," I said with a wry grin. "Three steps, and I've already broken your rule." Muhammad frowned. "This difficulty is not my intention," he said. "I will think more about this new requirement." (Jones, 2008, p. 163)

Aisha's brave objection to the divine ordinance maximizes Sherry Jones' subscription to Oriental discourse – that hijab is oppressive and Muslim women need to get rid of it to be liberated. This paper argues that through the representation of Muhammad, Aisha and other significant Islamic historical figures, Sherry Jones' readers would have an idea of who Muhammad was and what Islam is. Thus, amid her brilliant creativity is a flawed representation of Muhammad and Islam which has tendencies to give a wrong image; of the prophet being a pedophile since he fits into the modern definition of one, of the hijab being an oppression to Muslim women and of Muhammad developing verses to protect against the adultery accusation. Hypothetically, her historical fiction contributes to the growing Islamophobia, which is fueled by repetitive stereotypes of Muslims. Taj Hashmi opines: "Sherry Jones's controversial novel, *The Jewel of Medina*, is an ahistorical depiction of Ayesha, Prophet Muhammad's wife, which is extremely offensive to Muslims is yet another addition to the Islamophobic literature." (Hashmi, 2014, p. 170)

CONCLUSION

Said's theory of contrapuntal reading is an essential concept of understanding the variety of readings possible for a canonical text. One of the implications of this conclusion is the rejection of the actuality of a one-dimensional worldview of early and forced marriage orientally ascribed and limited to Islam. Highlighting similar occurrences in the English history within medieval time underscores "contrapuntal awareness" and the lack of an absolute interpretation, a type of reading that has been neglected by mainstream scholarship. Even though Jones maintains on different occasions to have written the novel with good intentions, there still are inevitable oriental insinuations that get Muslim readers feeling once again Orientalized. Her attempt to

debunk the misperceptions of Islam as a misogynist religion adversely drags her into the footstep of the Western Orientalists. Despite Sherry Jones' claims of perceiving Islam as an egalitarian religion, this reading finds the difficulty in striking a balance between the post 9/11 Western feminist perception of Islam/Muslims and the fictional depiction of an egalitarian Islam. Thus, her subscription to Orientalism becomes definite. The portrayal of Early and Forced Marriage (EFM) has very much been criticized within the framework of postcolonialism, gender studies, psychological or sociological theories.

A re-assessment of this practice through a “counter-narrative” approach cultivates an appreciation of transnational cultural practices within the milieu of their space and time, respectively. The production of a counter-narrative drawing from the English historical facts accentuates Muslim women's ability to resist Oriental stereotypes ‘being subordinate to men Islamically’, as this analysis provides valuable insight into similar occurrences in English history. Edward Said has always urged the colonized, the Orientalized and the marginalized to write back, for Said, “the role of a creative critic is to ‘speak truth to power’ through undertaking a ‘contrapuntal reading’ of the writings of the Empire” (Said, 2001, 78). Hence, this paper as a write-back, proceeds to examine the motivations behind Jones' emphasis on Aisha's age of marriage to the prophet by drawing upon historical facts with similar occurrences. The study establishes the findings that Early and Forced Marriage (EFM) might look awkward and illogical in modern times, but back then in the medieval period, it was considered normal and stretched across most cultures around the world. Therefore, historical fictions like this one should be interpreted within the setting of its original occurrence. This paper is limited to misrepresentation of Islamic history related to Aisha, the beloved and youngest wife of the Prophet. Future research in this stream ought to dispell other misrepresentations like; the Prophet's polygamous marriage, ascribing idolatry to Islam, and the extreme disparity between Ali and Aisha in Sherry Jones' *The Jewel of Medina* or other novels purporting Orientalism of Islam.

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