

**References of Sexuality in Relation to the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) in 17th-19th Century
Selected French and English Orientalist Travelogues****Ummi Nadhirah Binti Mohammad Rosli**Department of English Literature
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This article examines references of sexuality in relation to Prophet Muhammad's (peace be upon him)ⁱ within selected French and English 17-19th century Orientalist travelogues. It uses Edward Said's theory of Orientalism to demonstrate how 'sexuality' as an attributed Western discourse about the Prophet (pbuh) developed into exotic ideas embodied in the image of the Arabs and Turks. The analysis explores three main leitmotifs that help shape the idea of the 'Prophet's sexuality', namely the harem, slavery and the notion of the 'Mohammaden Paradise', all of which have implicit or direct referencing to the Prophet (pbuh). This article attempts to show how Orientalist travelogues in particular, have contributed to a very negative conception of Muhammad (pbuh) and his marital life—an image that unfortunately persists until today. The discourse carries with it a familiar yet dangerous binary attitude that continuously positions the West and Muslims antithetically. And in the centre of this narrative, the Prophet's image gets convoluted by the predominance of the Western Orientalist discourse.

Keywords: Exotic, Orientalism, Orientalist travelogues, sexuality, Prophet Muhammad (pbuh)

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Introduction

The question concerning Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) marital life has long been a controversy in the Western discourse on Islam. The Prophet's multiple marriages and more recently, his marriage with young Ayeshaⁱⁱ have led to public accusations that the Prophet (pbuh) was a pervertⁱⁱⁱ and a paedophile^{iv}. These accusations, however, are not new. As this article shows, similar ideas appeared in the works of Western Orientalists but unlike the medieval scriptures, the Prophet's image in the Orientalist discourse took on a more sensual and exotic form.

Based on the works the authors collected, the first public criticisms against the Prophet's marital life can be traced back to medieval Christian polemics. Images from this time frame need to be examined for I argue that there is a connection between the medieval ideas of sexuality in Islam and how they continue to shape the representations of the Prophet (pbuh) in the Orientalist framework.

To start, one must consider the religious climate that had influenced the sexual allegations against Muhammad (pbuh). Works by Southern (1962) and Buaben (1996) offer clear accounts of the religious tension between the Christians and Muslims during the medieval era. The Church, being aware of Islam's different stand on sexual morality especially in the practice of polygamy, constructed an opposing image of Islam as "indulgent, lax, sensual, extrovert, and worldly" compared to the West as "celibate, ascetic, reflective, heroic, sacerdotal, and hierarchical" (Southern, p.5). For example, the polemical life of the Messenger (pbuh) as scripted in the brief biography of Guibert of Nogent's *Gesta* (1107) presents a distasteful conception of "the law of Muhammad", a more lustful and carnivalist form of faith in juxtaposition with Christianity. To Guibert, the law of Muhammad allows "libidinous sexual relations not only with numerous wives and consorts but also with beasts" (Tolan, 2002, p.146). Exaggerated claims of permissive sexual relationships with multiple wives and animals, like the one by Guibert, were in fact part of the normative culture in medieval time. Daniel (1975) claims that these hostile ideas about Muhammad (pbuh) were deliberate (p.235). The Christians targeted Islam not because they despised the Prophet's character but because the "Christian would not accept that the Quran was truly revealed" (p.231). Based on Daniel's argument, the theological conflict between Muslims and Christians was fundamental to the spread of unfavourable ideas about the Prophet (pbuh). Medieval writers made the subject of sexuality a particular concern and as a result, the polemic inveighed on the merits of the Prophet (pbuh) as a moral figure.

What then started as a theological issue exacerbated to territorial wars between the East and West over the years. The Prophet (pbuh) not only became a sexual and violent leader as painted by the West, but Muslims in general and the Arabs and Turks in particular were identified by similar labels. The implicit fear and loathing of the Muslims that led to the construction of the sexualised image in the first place can be attributed to the fall of the Byzantine Empire in 1453, when Roman Christendom fell, and Islam rose to prominence.

The victory of the Ottomans over the Roman Christians provoked familiar prejudices against the Muslims that had been harboured since the medieval era. Given the unfortunate conqueror-conquered relationship, the process of othering took place. Hopwood (1999) explains that the West brought to the fore the issue of sexuality in the Middle East (more commonly

known before as the region of the Near Orient), and through particular interest in polygamy and later the harem, sexuality became the “metaphor for geographical and cultural diversity” (p.16). In other words, sexuality became a discourse that was able to satiate the curiosity of outsiders; but this discourse also gave rise to negative associations, which then propagated and escalated into accounts of violent sexual rhetoric. As I will discuss in further detail below, the semantic integration between the Near Orient, the Turks and the Arabs can be compounded into one significant category—i.e., Islam. It then followed that the people of all the above three regions were connected under one predecessor, namely the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). This article attempts to investigate how such images of the Arabs and Turks became emblematic to the notion of the Prophet (pbuh) as sexual and vice versa. I examine these images through the Orientalist discourse of sexuality within selected Orientalist travelogues.

Western travelogues that were published during the European colonisation of the Ottoman lands serve as critical literary texts to further explore the Western depiction of sexuality in relation to the Prophet (pbuh). As Chard argues, travelogues have a unique advantage over other literature since it is able to cross symbolic and geographical boundaries (p.11). The narrativising of experiences in foreign lands and the encounter with different people invite the unknown and unfamiliar in new conceptual spaces. Similarly, the act of ‘crossing’ both physically and literarily can evoke destabilization of the writing, and at times, in negative ways (p.11). It is for this reason Chard considers travelogues a form of transgression.

Taking Chard’s views of defamiliarisation and transgressiveness of travel literature to the context of this article, I argue that her views are central to understanding the conceptualisation of sexuality in Orientalist travelogues written about the Prophet (pbuh) and Muslims in the Near Orient. The travellers’ descriptions of the social attitude and practices of sexuality are clad in medieval rhetoric about Muhammad (pbuh), which are often hyperbolised. In several instances, implicit referencing to the idea of the ‘sexual Prophet’ are inferred through the portraits of the Arabs and Turks revelling in sexual vices. Though these images are questionable, the writings have to a certain degree projected contradictory ideas about the Messenger (pbuh) in the Western discourse. This research expounds on the problematic of this imagery and explores the extent in which the notion of sexuality in regard to the Prophet (pbuh) has shifted in the Orientalist framework.

The analysis will examine selected French and English Orientalist travel literature written during 17th to 19th century. Britain and France were greatly involved in the colonisation of the Ottoman territories and were therefore best acquainted with the people of the Near Orient. By using Edward Said’s theory of Orientalism, the analysis will examine the shift in the Orientalist sexual discourse from explicit criticisms of the Prophet (pbuh) and his sexual life to more exotic interpretations of sexuality in Islam through the sexual and violent figures of the Arabs and Turks. The next section offers a cursory review of Orientalism as main theoretical framework for this present study.

Orientalism

Several critical ideas in Said’s theory of Orientalism are relevant to studying the Western discourse of sexuality in Islam. Said examined how discourses developed about the Near Orient.

He built on Orientalism to understand how ideas were dominated and restructured by Western corporate institutions that led to the general misrepresentations of the Arab's civilisation (Said, 1978, p.3). In the context of European colonisation, the Orient was often portrayed in contrast to the West as the uncivilised, barbaric and immoral 'other'. Said argues that the West was able to project these negative imageries through two key assets: power and knowledge. These not only helped the West to accumulate power but to produce power as well.

Said (1978) constructed his theory largely based on Michel Foucault's concept of discourse. Foucault studied the constitution of knowledge and how certain knowledge is framed. He claimed that knowledge is interminably linked to power, and with power, the authorities are capable to represent some kind of knowledge as truth. Foucault argued on the lines of power relations, social practices, institutional and ideological power in using knowledge to subjugate the individual agency. Said's Orientalism modelled from Foucault's framework but Said shifted the focus towards Western colonisation and institutional strategies in the West that controlled the worldviews of the Orient.

Through Orientalism, Said (1978) demonstrated how the West relied on intellectual power to further advance the colonial project. Accredited works such as Comte de Volney's *Voyage en Égypte en Syrie* (1787) and Gerard de Nerval's *Journey to the Orient* (1851) provided more systematic accounts of the Orient but they were mostly written in negative light. Notwithstanding, these works were used as justifications for colonising people who the West thought of as less ethical and intellectual. By referring to scholars and academic works, the Europeans generated a discourse that convinced them of having a "positional superiority" over the Orient (Said, 1978, p.7). The discourse not only exaggerated the West and East bipolarity, but this article brings to the fore one of the common imagery developed by the Western Orientalist discourse, that is, the image of the Near Orient and their sexuality.

From Sexuality to the Exotic

The word 'sexuality' has been defined through various historical and theoretical lenses. With this said, any attempts to define 'sexuality' must be established through the specific framework it is being assessed in. This article examines 'sexuality' based on how Orientalists have spread ideas concerning the Prophet (pbuh) and sexual patterns in Islam. I explore selected Orientalist travelogues with the aim to investigate the question of the predominance of discourse that has complicated the narrative of the Prophet (pbuh) by the West.

By extend of this argument, the word 'sexuality' is not recognised in the linguistic and historical frameworks of Islam. Muslim scholars who have studied the life of the Prophet (pbuh) use this term to deliberate on jurisprudence matters such as the legal terms of marriages or issues of individual cleanliness. Akande (2015) offers a clear explanation of how Muslims apply this term. He states that "sexuality, like all aspects of human life, is a religious matter that is regulated by the Sacred Law (Shari'a)...the sacred law is a legal and ethical framework governing creed, behaviour and etiquette" (p.4). In the context of the Prophet's marriage, issues of *haram* (forbidden) and *halal* (permissible) as well as *mandub* (recommended) and *makruh* (reprehensible) are brought to light (Akande, 2015, p.4). Even non-Muslim scholars like Esposito (2002) and Armstrong (2007) have rejected that Muhammad (pbuh) was driven by desires in his

polygamous relationship and his marriage with Ayesha. They have argued instead from the tangent of culture and ethics^v. What is critical here is that ‘sexuality’, first and foremost, represents a Western constructed terminology born from the Western historical context. As such, the term as it is used throughout this article will reflect this populist approach, and does by no means advocate the notion that the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) is sexual.

Thus the main focus is how the medieval concept of ‘sexuality’ of Muhammad (pbuh) continued or evolved in the Orientalist framework. To investigate this subject matter requires a contextualisation of the history and the political climate, which to an extent, have patterned the views of Islam in Orientalist writings.

Over the centuries, as the English and the French empires flourished, and frequent cross-cultural contact was established with the Ottomans, Orientalist scholars began to pay more attention to the issue of the Arabs and their sexuality. From the perspective of Orientalism, the West felt threatened by the growing number of Arabs and their strong family units led chiefly by the male figures. Orientalist believed that this was a key factor in the establishment of a solid social structure (Said, 1978, p.311). Orientalist scholars also understood that in the context of war, the quantitative size of the military is critical for power acquisition and as they observed, the Oriental people had plenty. In order to stabilize the Western power, Orientalists began to claim that the developments in the Arab lands had little to do with their intellect, but the Arabs were prospering only because of biological and sexual reasons. Hence, the Arabs and their sexuality “must never be taken seriously” (Said, 1978, p.311). Despite the incongruity of such claims, the debate managed to reinforce several important ideas that cater to the evolvment of exotic images of the Near Orient. Firstly, the debate signalled a shift in Orientalist revisions away from Muhammad (pbuh) as sexualised artefact onto Arabs, and later as I will discuss, onto Muslims as a whole to maintain power and territorial control of the Near Orient. Based on the Orientalist works collected in this research, the notion of sexuality of the Other became exoticised—it came to acquire sensual, erotic and at times violent tropes that became more associated with Arabs and Turks.

But what did the West see that was ‘exotic’ about the Near Orient? Daniel (1966) defines the exotic as something “unfamiliar” (p.48) whereas Stevens (1984) in discussing Western Orientalist art and paintings of Islam describes the exotic as “the artistic exploration of territories and ages in which the free flight of the imagination were possible because they lay outside the restrictive operation of classical rules” (p.17). Here, the anticipation of escaping and imagining about taboos are correlated with the exotic. According to Foucault (1978), the attitude towards sexuality in the social context of Victorian bourgeoisie was partly responsible for creating these urges. The Victorian era implemented strict moral codes that involved a silencing to the dialogue of sex. Sexual practices were restricted to the privacy of the house; it “had no right to exist and would be made to disappear upon its least manifestation” (p.4). From this view, it is of no surprise then that the West looked at the East to escape and seek for more freedom to the idea and practice of sexuality.

In the context of the Near Orient, the exotic displayed two prominent ideas about the people and their culture: sexuality and violence. This research argues that the sexual and barbaric

depictions mostly represented the Arabs and Turks. Exotic tropes of sensual Arab women and violent Arab men in Orientalist art and literature were plenty. Delacroix's *The Death of Sardanapalus* (1844) portrays an Arab on a large divan watching in comfort while his many concubines are raped and murdered. Jean-Léon Gérôme *Moorish Bath* (1820) illustrates a naked pale skinned woman along with a naked Algerian woman as how the artist envisioned them in the Harem Bath within the Oriental setting (Stevens, 1984, p.21).

There is another more crucial idea embedded in the term 'exotic' that is less acknowledged, but which this article argues is critical to the Western Orientalist discourse of sexuality and exoticism. Scholars identify a link between the images of the sexual Arab and Turk and the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). In the *Histoire generale du serrail* (1626), M. Baudier offers a portrait of three images of the Turkish Sultan. "There is a portrait illustrating a sultan military entourage, a sensual dance performed for the sultan by six women, and a bathing session in a Turkish bath with his nude concubines" (qtd. in Al-Tae 20). The images of the Turkish Sultan indulging in a sexual menagerie, Al-Tae observes, "were also ascribed to the character of Muhammad" (20). The fanaticism of the 'sensual' Turk, the pictures of the harems and the exotic concubines warrant an irresistible association to "Muhammad's idea of an earthly paradise" (Reeves 216). In this example, Muhammad (pbuh) became the 'transfer point' for exotic sexuality. Hopwood (1999) argues clearly on the implicit connection between exoticism and the Prophet (pbuh). He explains:

While medieval commentators were keen to impugn Muhammad through these and numerous other accusations on doctrinal, legal and theological grounds, it was, perhaps unsurprisingly, the notion of Islamic misdemeanours which took hold of the popular imagination. It was believed that all the Prophet's followers (as they were termed) adhered to his licentious example. The way to carnal lusts, then it was inevitable that Islam be a religion of sexual licence and that all Arabs (or Muslims) be prey to the same lusts. (10)

According to Hopwood, it was because Muhammad was seen as sexual that the Turk became sexualised. Both Muhammad (pbuh) and the Turk became conjunctives to each other, which was manifested, consciously or not, in Orientalist texts. This association of sexuality and licentiousness then became synonymous with lust and cruelty, which then evolved into the precept of the hypersexual Arab and Turkish man who was in full possession of his women's sexuality, as the French traveller Thévenot (1665) notes, "[t]hey take their women simply for their service as they would a horse and often abandon them for new wives (qtd. in Hopwood 150). Reeves (2003) argues that when violent images of the Turks and Arabs surfaced, they were immediately attributed to a presumed "wickedness of Muhammad" (113).

Against the backdrop of the exotic, a connotation of male domination and sexual subordination is implied especially among Ottoman male elites and their violent treatments towards their women. Exotic leitmotifs were part and parcel of Orientalist literature; in it lies a world of unveiled promiscuity, daring sexual licensing, and unrepressed pleasure, all entitled to the submission of the lustful Muslim Turk and Arab. But behind these exotic impulses lay a very dangerous association with the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), one that reaches back to medieval

polemics of Islam. To medieval Christians, Muhammad's morality as a religious leader was already in question; when images of highly sexualised Muslims began appearing in Orientalist texts, these images were related back to Muhammad's (pbuh) status as a moral figure. The Prophet's image has long been challenged within the predominance of the Western discourse of sexuality and exoticism.

This article argues that sexuality or the exotic ideas about the Near Orient is commonly displayed in the leitmotifs of the harem, slavery and the notion of the 'Mohammaden Paradise'. The next few sections explore direct sexual references made against the Prophet (pbuh) and more indirect criticisms through the exotic images of the Arabs and Turks in the above tropes within selected Orientalist travelogues.

Polygamy and the Harem

Discussions about the harem would be incomplete without addressing the fundamental issue that gave rise to its popularity- polygamy. Montesquieu (1721) describes the harem as an act of despotism built upon polygamy (Konrad, 2011, p.28) whereas feminist critic Reina Lewis (1996) explains that polygamy assumes male ownership, lust and the control of women, which gave the West every reason to revile Islam and regard Muslims as infidels and backwards (p.155). It was only in later Orientalist works when polygamy matured into the exotic depictions of sensual women and the male figure in the *harem*. Even the term *harem* had to an extent been eroticised. The word *harem* in Arabic translates as 'forbidden', but the term became conflated with the Italian *seraglio*. Hopwood (1999) notes that in the *Rogers Thesaurus* of 1852, *seraglio* was synonymous with 'brothel' and 'impurity' (p.135). The harem thus became a site for sexual desire, accompanied as it was by "luxury", "lusty beauties" and "soft eroticism" (Cavaliero, 2010, p.32).

Travelogues that emerged in the early 17th century are usually replete with criticisms targeting the Prophet's marital relationships. The travel literature selected below demonstrates the evolving depiction from polygamy to the harem within the bigger Western discourse of sexuality in regard to the Prophet (pbuh). The analysis begins with the work of William Biddulph (1609/1999).

Biddulph was a Protestant clergyman from England who travelled from Aleppo to Palestine in the early 17th century and recorded his experiences in *The Travels of Certain Englishmen. The writer spends a portion of his work criticizing the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). To Biddulph, Muhammad (pbuh) was a despot and an imposter responsible for deviating the Turks. He claims that the "wickedness and tyranny of the Turks" are a result of the "impiety and tyranny" of the Prophet (pbuh) (p.91). The writer then directs his attention to the Mohammaden law of polygamy.*

Biddulph claims that the permissibility of polygamy originates from the Ten Commandments of Muhammad, which are the same laws governing the Turks (p.94). The seventh commandment states that marriage is only for procreation so that Muhammad's sect can multiply (p.95). The men can simply purchase their wives from her parents or the parents can force their daughters into marriage (p.95). The wives have only one privilege, which is a trip to

the *bannio* or known as the hot bath, but this is very seldom. He claims that if the man is discontent with his women, they are allowed to sell their wives to the market or offer them to other men as slaves. If the wife is accused of adultery or of being a whore, the husband can chain her and throw her into the river with a stone tied to her neck till she drowns (p.95). From Biddulph's perspective, Muhammad's law on sexuality is a vicious cycle of sex and violence. The writer portrays a sadistic image of the Messenger (pbuh) as well as those who follow him.

Cartwright (1611/1999) was another English traveller who ventured through Persia, Syria, Iraq, Chad and Arabia. Based on the writer's account, the Persians were by far the most sensual and erotic in nature. Cartwright states that the Persians "are much inclined to sensuality, having three sorts of women [...] honest woman, half honest woman, and courtesans" (p.115). Adultery and incest are very common, sometimes between the father and his children or among the children themselves (p.115). Cartwright calls such acts a "monstrous impiety" (p.115) that belong to the tradition of Muhammad (pbuh). Below is Cartwright's description of the Prophet (pbuh). He writes:

His precepts are indulgent to perjury, giving leave to have as many wives as a man will, to couple themselves not only with one of the same sex, but with brute beasts also; to spoil one another's goods, and none to be accused under four witnesses. (p.124)

Cartwright accuses the Prophet (pbuh) of promoting bestiality, homosexuality, heterosexuality, polygamy and greed. Therefore Muhammad (pbuh) is "a sinner, an idolater, an adulterer, and inclined to women" (p.124) and the rest of Persia trails in his "darkness" (p.124). Both Cartwright's and Biddulph's works exhibit a level of exoticism. Sexuality becomes a defining characteristic of the Near Orient as well as a homogenising factor that inevitably ties to the tradition of the Prophet (pbuh).

In the eighteenth and nineteenth century, more British and French travellers journeyed in the Ottoman territories. They were more intrigued by the exotic elements of the Islamic Orient. Their travels tell of naked women, the male master in the harem and all of its sexual temptations.

French traveller Jean Chardin (1673/1927) wrote a ten-volume book entitled *The Travels of Sir John Chardin*. These became one of the most referred to Orientalist travelogues with a particular interest in the Persian customs. Scholars like Rousseau and Montesquieu have referenced his works, but Hopwood (1999) cautions that some of Chardin's ideas invite negative ideas about the Near Orient, which were overlooked (p.15).

In *Voyages de monsieur le chevalier Chardin en Perse*, Chardin narrates about his travels to Persia where he visits one of the kings. The writer does not name the king, but it is clear that the king possesses untold riches. He is also a drunkard and a despot. The king is invited to a grand event and Chardin accompanies him.

During the feast, the host shows the king to the garden and he offers the king a choice. He can either see the horses or visit the Women's apartments. Without hesitation, the king chooses

the harem. The Master of the House is thrilled, in fact he is honoured to have the noblest and most sacred of men in the presence of his women.

When the King arrives, the women in the harem were ready to welcome him. The writer offers more detail of the scene. Chardin describes:

... yet are they of Opinion, that no greater Honour can ever happen to them, nor any higher piece of good Fortune, than when the King enters into that Place: The Reason they give for it, is, that the Persons of their Kings are Sacred and Sanctified, in a peculiar Manner above the rest of Mankind [...] that when the King goes into those Places, any Obscenity is committed there; they assure on the contrary, that there never was on Example of this kind; but yet, sometimes the King taking a Fancy to the Beauty of Wit of some young Woman he sees there, desires her of the Master of the House; they are far from refusing him, for they look upon it to be a great Stroke of Fortune, to have a young Creature in the King's seraglio, by whom they may back their Interest, and promote themselves. (p.11)

The description is laced with enticing imageries of “young women” who “promote themselves”, who have “the Beauty of Wit” and who are “far from refusing” the king's orders. The male gaze, the submissive women and men's sexual urges are pictured in the harem. Both the “Obscenity” and desires serve as transgressive thoughts but they build a yearning escapade to the more liberal and sexual Near Orient.

Chardin's, Cartwright's and Biddulph's writings share similar perspectives of eroticism and violence in their descriptions of the harem or sexuality in general. There is a hidden connection between Muslims and the harem. The harem in particular recalls the permissibility of marrying and keeping of multiple women in the tradition of Islam, thus the final image that is silently seeded and sowed is that of the Prophet (pbuh) and his practice of polygamy.

Slavery

Perhaps more controversial to the West than the concept of the harem is slavery in Islam. There is something about possessing slave women that add to the mix of fear and fascination. Colligan (2006) argues that slavery titillated the sexual fantasies of Western audiences (p.97). In 19th century Britain's print culture, slavery was thought of as the “new erotics of cruelty” (p.97). The picture of the whip and the nude slave women as drawn by Britain's underground print communities became a source of fetishism (p.96).

The images of slaved women imprisoned under the male order are especially powerful in the depictions of slavery. To an extent, these ideas mirror the nature of polygamy that has been sensationalised through the harem. In fact, many illustrations of concubines in the harem have been attributed to the slave culture of the Orient, and essentially, the discourse of sexuality in light of the Prophet's (pbuh) multiple marriages and presumed slave keeping. The selected travelogues below imply the hidden ideas of sexuality in the travellers' encounter with the slave culture of the Near Orient.

William Lithgow in *Rare Adventures and Paineiful Peregrinations* (1632/1999) recounts his experiences in the slave market during his three months journey in the Middle East. His

account reads like a fiction where the protagonist—Lithgow himself—rescues a white Christian slave from her master, the Frenchman. The travel begins with Lithgow and the Frenchman embarking on a trip to Constantinople towards the slave market.

To Lithgow, the market is every bit revelatory. He repeats the number five hundred, that is, five hundred males and five hundred female slaves queuing and waiting for their turn to be inspected. For interested buyers, the inspector strips the slave to the last bone. Virgin and prettier slaves are sold very high, such as the Christian slave bought by the Frenchman and whom Lithgow rescues in the end.

The Turks are also attracted to the white slaves. Lithgow recalls his meeting with the concubines in Constantinople. He was informed that The Great Turk who mostly constituted of elites keep eight hundred concubines in one of the compartments inside the harem. The eunuchs and the officers treat them rather well. Every morning, they assemble in the hall waiting for their master. When he arrives, he takes out his rod and examines them one by one. The fairest of the woman gets chosen and she follows him “into his cabin of lechery” (p.157). If the master is pleased with her, she receives praises and gets a possible dowry for marriage, alongside honour and name (p.157).

In one of the nights, the Armenian prince offers Lithgow the women slaves of his harem but Lithgow instantly refuses. He could not, however, escape an invitation to the Prince’s ball. Lithgow describes it as a night of dancing and feasting where women all with wicked customs, “whores” exhuming such “sensuality” (p.166) entertained for the Turks who took pleasure in them. The prince’s concubines had no worth for they were merely there for sexual services.

Lithgow also takes notice of the male slaves. The males are treated much worst. If they are not part of the harem, they work for the Turks under harsh conditions. Lithgow tells:

It is common thing wit them to kill their servants for a very small offence; and when they have done, throw them, like dogs in a ditch. And oftentimes (if not so) will lay them down on their backs, hoisting up their heels, bind their feet together, and fasten them to a post, and with a cudgel give them three or four hundred blows on the soles of their feet. Whereupon, peradventure, some ever go lame after. (p.155)

Lithgow’s description of the slave trade in Constantinople treats the female and male slaves in equally inhumane ways. The writer cautions that the Turks are “extremely inclined to all sorts of lascivious luxury ... besides all their sensual and incestuous lusts, unto sodomy, which they account as a dainty to digest [with] all their other libidinous pleasures” (as cited in Burton, p.105). Lithgow’s image of slavery under the Turkish rule is one of transgression, hedonism and cruelty.

Contrary to Lithgow’s negative views of slavery, Gerard de Nerval’s *Journey to the Orient* (1851/1972) pictures a more uplifting and rather humorous experience in the slave trade of Egypt. He describes the event below:

The merchants were ready to have them strip; they poked open their mouths so that I could examine their teeth; they made them walk up and down and pointed out, above all, the elasticity of their breasts. These poor girls responded in the most carefree manner, and the scene was hardly a painful one, for most of them burst into uncontrollable laughter. I realized, moreover, that they would prefer any circumstances to a long sojourn in the bazaar and, perhaps, to the existence which they had previously led in their own country. (p.34)

The locals seem indifferent to the practice of slavery and even the slave women enjoy the attention. Nerval was surprised and was later inclined to purchase a slave himself. He tells the dragoman of his secret attraction to the pretty slave in charge of cooking, but the dragoman says that the merchant intends to buy her and have a child from her. If he sells the slave, she will be overpriced (p.34).

Lastly, I examine Lady Mary Montagu's letter which she wrote during her stay in Constantinople. Lady Montagu's *Turkish Embassy Letter* (1763/1965) is a collection of letters read as a memoir of her experience in Turkey from 1716-18. She was from the elite, the wife of the British ambassador. Her many invitations to the local banquets and feasts divulges of her meetings with the concubines.

In a letter to Lady Mar, Lady Montagu compares the slaves in the market to the slaves of the King. The slaves in the market are much less valuable. They are frequently involved in crimes and more ready to provide service to men. The slaves under the King are more privileged. They are reared from young to dance, sing and sew. If the master is tired of them, they either offer them their freedom or hand them to their friends. Because most of these slaves are Circassians, they are much rare and higher in value. Notwithstanding their statures as respected ladies of the seraglio, their primary duty is to serve the "Pleasures of the great Men" (p.368).

The travelogues above present different reactions to and narrations of slavery, yet sexuality remains the foregrounding idea in regards to the buying and the keeping of female and male slaves. The comments made by *The Edinburgh Review*, an intellectual and cultural magazine published in 19th century Great Britain, best captures the premise of slavery in Orientalist writings. As the magazine states, slavery is a "strang[e] anomaly in Mahometan morals" (as cited in Daniel, 1966, p.43).

Mohammaden Paradise

The previous tropes of sexuality—the harem and slavery—build up to the Orientalist imagery of the Mohammaden Paradise. The idea of a paradise full of luxuries and sexual indulgence is believed in the Western discourse to have originated from Muhammad (pbuh), and later used as symbolism for the concept of the Prophet's sexuality. The Orientalist claimed that paradise was used as a motive to engage in war among the Arabs and Turks.

Sir Henry Blount's *A Voyage into the Levant* (1636/1999) contains clichés images of the Mohammaden Paradise. Blount was a traveller, an author as well as a political and military figure. On one of his commission, he travelled to the Levant for fifty two days and spent five

days in Constantinople before leaving for Egypt. Despite his respect for the Turk's military discipline, Blount's resented the Turks for invading the Levant. He claims that that the Turk's invasion was a success because they had "a meere devotion to gaine Paradise by dying for the Mahometan cause" (p.121).

Blount accuses Muhammad (pbuh) of creating lies about paradise so he could pander to his followers' desires. According to Blount, Muhammad (pbuh) knew that his followers were "rude, and sensual" (p.121). In order to win their favour, he promised a paradise for those who die for the Mahometan faith. Blount states:

Mahomet [...] made not his Paradise to conflict in Visions, and Hallelujahs; but in delicious fare, pleasant Gardens, and Wenches with great eyes [...] he promises that their Souls shall suddenly have given them young lufty bodies, and set in Paradise, eternally to enjoy those pleasures [...]. (p.122)

Blount calls paradise a set of "superstitions" (p.123) and criticises the Prophet (pbuh) for spreading false beliefs. Blount's ideas of sexuality in the Mohammedan paradise is looked at with disgust and made to juxtapose with Christian morality.

Lithgow (1632/1999) provides his own visions of the Mohammedan paradise. He claims that the people of the Orient believe that Muhammad (pbuh), Moses and Jesus will be leaders who lead their followers on the Day of Judgement. Muhammad will represent the Arabs, Turks and Muslims, Moses will lead the Children of Israel and Jesus will lead the Christians. However, only Muhammad's (pbuh) followers will be granted paradise. Men in paradise are thirty years of age while the virgins are fifteen years, and they will live forever. There will be gardens and buildings made of pearl, gold and silver with lustrous chambers while rivers of wine, honey and milk will flow underneath (p.158). The image of young virgins, riches, fresh fruits and water are associated with the Mohammedan Paradise. To Lithgow, the indulgences in paradise are estranged and exotic.

Lady Mary Montagu (1763/1965) could not even rid herself of these imageries. In a letter to Anne Thistlethwayte, she describes her experience during the Turkish banquet as akin to the feeling of being in the Muslim paradise. She informs that after the dance ceremony, four slaves entered the room and sprayed perfumes. They knelt before her and served her coffee in the most excellent china and silverwares. Upon leaving, two maids carried with them gifts in the finest silver baskets and they gave her the most charming embroidered handkerchief. Lady Montagu, in continuous awe confesses that "[she] could not help fancying [she] had been some time in Mahomet's Paradise, so much [she] was charm'd with what [she] had seen" (p.352). The vision of beautiful girls dancing and serving their masters while surrounded by abundant riches is some of the more familiar tropes of the Mohammedan Paradise. As one of the most referred to Orientalist works, Lady Montagu's letters help accentuate the Orientalist discourse of sexuality.

Conclusion

The point of discussing sexuality in inconspicuous or indiscreet references to the Prophet (pbuh) is to demonstrate that the discourse is shelled within its own polemic; sexuality attributed to the

Prophet (pbuh) has been foreshadowed and foretold, embedded within its own criticism and made collective to the public. It might even be that texts alone are not the sole cause for a certain perceptions to be dependent on. They may mirror, highlight, exaggerate and propagate, but the seeds have already been sewn. What has happened throughout the discussion of sexuality and Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) is that one part of the Prophet's marital life was hyperbolized and was translated to be sexually immoral. The Prophet (pbuh) became the embodiment of the sensual Arab and Turk and is portrayed in different acts of sexual pervasiveness. The force of the discourse pulls the Prophet's image into the space of sexuality and in the form of the Muslim character. In this regard, the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) remains the central model in reference to the Western discourse of sexuality.

In contemporary times, not much of the narrative about the Prophet's sexuality has changed. Cartoons and caricatures published by recent media such as the Danish newspaper *Jylland-Posten* and the French magazine *Charlie Hebdo* have alluded to the Orientalist notions of the concubinage in the harem and the Mohammaden Paradise. More so than anything, these images demonstrate that the Orientalist discourse on Islam still remains dominant. Though Orientalist travelogues in particular have offered immense insights to the West and East relationship, but their oversimplified and at times, exaggerated accounts of Muslims and the Prophet (pbuh) have created more division between East and West. The Western constructed idea of the 'sexual Prophet' as observed in the selected travelogues not only added to the skewed image of the Messenger (pbuh), but now, Islam and Muslims have become the subject of inquiry in which their beliefs and identity are continuously challenged by the predominance of the Western discourse.

Notes

¹ This is form of salutation or an invocation of God's blessings and peace upon the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). It has been abbreviated in English as 'pbuh' for the expression 'peace be upon him'. The invocation is repeated among Muslims when the Prophet's name is mentioned in both print and speech as a form of respect. This article uses the full salutation on the first mention of the Prophet and the abbreviation 'pbuh' thereafter.

¹ Professor Kecia Ali in *The Lives of Muhammad* (2014) informs that it was not until the mid-twentieth century that the Prophet's marriage with young Ayesha started to receive criticisms from the West (p.133).

¹ Dutch politician Ayaan Hirsi Ali made this claim in an interview with Gerald Traufetter for Spiegel Online. See <http://www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/spiegel-interview-with-ayaan-hirsi-ali-everyone-is-afraid-to-criticize-islam-a-399263.html>

¹ The leader of the Dutch Party for Freedom Geert Wilders describes the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) as an "insane, paedophile, rapist murder". England's *The Telegraph* newspaper published an article on this claim. See

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/netherlands/8419643/Geert-Wilders-steps-up-anti-Islam-rhetoric.html>

¹Further discussions can be read in Esposito's *What Everyone Needs to Know About Islam* (p. 14) and Armstrong's *Muhammad- Prophet for our Time* (p.105)

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