

Orientalism in Children’s Literature: Representations of Egyptian and Jordanian Families in Elsa Marston’s Stories

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Abstract

Children’s literature plays a significant role in people’s lives. For children and young adults, a story is a discursive space where they find answers, solutions, and ideas. Contrastingly, to adult writers, it is a space dedicated to promoting ideological beliefs and values to young readers. Thus, this study attempts to investigate the problematic representation of Arab city and village families found in two children stories written by American author Elsa Marston (1933-2017). She classifies families into two opposing extremes; the civilized city families and the poor, conservative village families. Using Edward Said’s Orientalist discourse analysis, alongside David Spurr’s rhetorical trope of Classification, the researcher explores how and why Jordanian and Egyptian families are classified with disregard to cultural differences. The analysis reveals that Arab families, both Jordanian and Egyptian, are equally classified based on education, social class, and culture. City families are viewed as developed due to their interaction with the west, whereas village families are portrayed as ignorant and uncivilized for their lack of communication with the west. The analysis also detects the author’s negative attitude towards village families.

Keywords: children’s literature, colonial enterprise, Egyptian families, Elsa Marston, Jordanian families, orientalism, representation

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Introduction

The existence of children's literature can be traced back to the beginning of time. However, it was generally neglected by scholars who believed it to be unworthy of investigation (Nodelman, 2008, p. 139). It was only during the late twentieth century that critics recognized the ideas implemented within children's books of the nineteenth century, which extended the ideology of colonialism and the British Empire. Rose, (1992) argues that children's literature is not about "what the child wants, but of what the adult desires - desires in the very act of construing the child as the object of its speech. Children's fiction draws in the child, it secures, places and frames the child" (p.2). To adult writers, children's literature is a discursive space dedicated to promoting ideological beliefs and values to young readers. Such stories must be investigated for their ambiguous content. Accordingly, the aim of this paper is to analyze two stories written by American author Elsa Marston, (2008) who attempted to teach American readers about the Arab world (p. xi). Her main objective was to show young western readers that Arabs are not different as it is portrayed in social media. However, her representation of Arab families throughout her book is problematic. She describes Arab families in a negative manner that is strikingly similar to colonial literature written about the East by Western writers. Thus, this paper's main objective is to look beyond the text by uncovering the stereotypical misconceptions about the Arab world employed by the author. This would help in providing a better understanding of the Arab world, in addition to highlighting the ideologies which lie within children's books. As for the theoretical framework, Edward Said's Orientalist discourse analysis will be used to investigate the texts, alongside David Spurr's rhetorical trope of Classification. Spurr's theory will be used to understand why Marston classifies Arab families negatively in both stories.

Review of Literature

Children's literature as a generic term has been the subject of controversial discussion among critics. The term is believed to be impossible due to the genre's diversity; ranging from stories for early childhood to young adulthood. Rose, (1992) explains that "the very ambiguity of the term 'children's fiction' - fiction the child produces or fiction given to the child? - is striking for the way in which it leaves the adult completely out of the picture" (p. 12). Even though adults write the stories belonging to that genre, Rose claims that the term itself excludes the very presence of adults. She persistently argues that "children's fiction is impossible, not in the sense that it cannot be written...but in that it hangs on an impossibility, one which it rarely ventures to speak. This is the impossible relation between adult and child" (p. 1). This existing gap between adult writer and young reader makes it extremely difficult to have a fixed definition, or a set of characteristics, for this diverse genre. Critic Jones, (2006) agrees with Rose on the impossibility of the term, concluding that "the possibilities of children's literature are irrevocably undermined by the confusion created by the term" (p. 15).

Contrastingly, Perry Nodelman, a well-known critic in Children's Literature, argues against the notion that Children's Literature is impossible to define. Nodelman, (2008) criticizes scholars, including Rose and Jones, who refuse to "question the existence of children's literature as a genre with definable characteristics" (p. 139). He, therefore, proposes a set of various qualities which he believes to be present in any text written by adults for children. Such characteristics include simple

writing style, special attention to action, realistic tone, children as protagonists or childlike animals or adults among many other things (pp. 76-77). He is one of the first critics to outline fixed qualities found in children's literature regardless of its diverse nature. His work could be used as a framework to investigate any text written by adults to the younger audience.

Apart from the controversy the term evokes, children's literature is found to be problematic due to its gap between adult and child. Rose, (1992) believes that children's fiction constructs a world "in which the adult comes first (author, maker, giver) and the child comes after (reader, product, receiver), but where neither of them enter the space in between" (pp. 1-2). She asserts that children's books are never about children, but it is mainly about the adult who attempts to control the child outside the book; "If children's fiction builds an image of the child inside the book, it does so in order to secure the child who is outside the book, the one who does not come so easily within its grasp" (p. 2). Nodelman, (1992) is similarly alarmed by this serious gap between adult and child, insisting that children are colonized by adults. He argues that the attitudes of adults who write about children are similar to Orientals as described by Edward Said. Children's literature is adult-centered, he says, in the sense that it silences the child and regards him as the Other. Children are made inferior by writers who believe that they have the right to speak on behalf of youngsters (pp. 29-30). His interesting discussion on the parallels between Said's Orientalism and the representations of childhood highlights the importance of investigating children's literature and the ideologies found therein.

Consequently, Critic Hourihan, (1997) argues that children's stories should not be disregarded, on the contrary, they must be analyzed as any other work of literature. She determinedly calls for analyzing hero stories in particular as they reflect Western ideologies about the white man's superiority (p. 1). She further explains

We can begin to unpack the ideology of hero stories by examining the binary oppositions which are central to them. The qualities ascribed to the hero and his opponents reveal much about what has been valued and what has been regarded as inferior or evil in Western culture. A consideration of what is foregrounded, what is backgrounded and what is simply omitted from these stories throws further light on the hierarchy of values which they construct. (p. 4)

Hourihan believes that all stories are ideological, thus they must be treated accordingly. One must examine different aspects of these stories to uncover its hidden content.

Many researchers responded to the problematics of children's literature as addressed by the previously mentioned critics. They conducted studies on different Western works of literature which were written for youngsters. Their findings are shockingly alarming, as they conclude that all these stories reflect colonial ideologies. Wallace, (2002) believes that children's books written during the "Golden Age" of children's literature, i.e. the nineteenth century, are in actuality colonial discourses. She further explains that "it is no accident that the 'golden age' of English children's literature peaked...during the high noon and faded with the dusk of Empire" (p. 176), asserting that children were needed to serve the ideology of colonialism. This justifies why the age

of imperial expansion marked the same era in which children's literature flourished. She argues that

an idea of 'the child' is a necessary precondition of imperialism—that is, that the West had to invent for itself 'the child' before it could think a specifically colonialist imperialism—and, further, that while this ideological complex is overtly coded in such children's books of the period as the boys' adventure novel, it also underlies the more critically respected fantasy literature of the mid- to late-nineteenth century. (p. 176)

As denoted from the lines above, children's literature of the Golden Age featured the adventures of "the child" character to reflect the colonial expansion and the discovery of the unknown.

Brittany Griffin has explored another brilliant interrelation of children's literature and the imperial enterprise. She argues, (2012) that children's literature in the nineteenth century reflected the evolving attitude of England and the British Empire towards its Eastern colonies. Using Said's Orientalist discourse analysis, she explores three literary works, Christina Rossetti's poem "The Goblin Market" (1859), Lewis Carroll's stories on Alice in Wonderland and Frances Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (1911), each belonging to a different period in the nineteenth century. She explains how each of these works reflects the shift in the British Empire's attitudes toward its colonies, which were triggered by historical events including the Indian uprising and the fall of the Empire (p. 59).

Unsurprisingly, the ideologies of colonialism are reflected in postcolonial children's literature written by Western writers about the Arab world, among which is Elsa Marston. Researcher Masud, (2016) argues that Western writers of children's literature, including Marston, deploy stereotypical settings which extend the image of the East as exotic and dangerous (p. 601). He explains that

Persistent engagement with war and violence is one of the most common ways in which the region is imagined in children's and YA literature about the Arab world written by non-Arab writers... The construction of the Arab world as imagined by a multitude of other books relies on generalizations about its physical and cultural environment. (p. 613)

This body of literature relies heavily on stereotypical images and misrepresentations about the East, which contribute to promoting distinction between East and West. The East is therefore rendered inferior to the West. Such ideology is passed down to the younger audience through these stories.

The efforts made by the scholars discussed above highlight the dynamics of Children's Literature and the fatality of its hidden content. Whether these stories are intended for adults or children, their ideologies must be analyzed and exposed. Shohat, (1995) an academic in cultural studies, asserts that

Each filmic or academic utterance must be analyzed not only in terms of who represents but also in terms of who is being represented for what purpose, at which historical moment, for which location, using which strategies, and in what tone of address. (p. 173)

With that being considered, this paper extends existing argument on the interrelation of children's literature and the colonial enterprise by exploring the representation of the Arab city and village families in Elsa Marston's *Honor: A Story from Jordan* (2008) and *In Line: A Story from Egypt* (2005). The existing research regarding children's literature focuses on the problematics of the genre in addition to the ideologies extended by the authors. I intend to focus on the ways a Western writer represents Arab families.

Methodology

This cultural study is influenced by theories in postcolonial studies. Since the selected stories feature representations of the East by a Western writer, Edward Said's Orientalist discourse analysis will be used as the main theoretical framework. Said, (2007) defines Orientalism as "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between the 'Orient' and the 'Occident'" (p. 2). He argues against Western discourse written about the East as it forms an imaginary distinction between the Orient and the Occident. Found in these discourses are negative portrayals and false representations about the "exotic" East. He asserts

In any instance of at least written language, there is no such thing as a delivered presence, but a re-presence, or a representation. The value, efficacy, strength, apparent veracity of a written statement about the orient therefore relies very little, and cannot instrumentally depend, on the Orient as such. On the contrary, the written statement is a presence to the reader by virtue of its having excluded, displaced, made supererogatory any such real thing as "the Orient". (p. 21)

The East is made inferior by the West through negative representations which reduced the East to a place of romance, exotic creatures and savagry, as opposed to the West; which is considered a place of civilization and rationality. Said's theory is essential in understanding why the East is portrayed as such in the selected texts.

Consequently, since Arab families are classified in Elsa Marston's stories, Spurr's rhetorical trope of Classification will be used to analyze the texts. Spurr, (1993) identifies the basic rhetorical features of Western discourse, believing that they served the process of colonization (p. 1). He explains that one of the rhetorical types used in colonial discourse about the Orient is classification. Classifying the natives based on their level of advancement and civility helped the colonizers maintain hegemony over the colonized natives. He elaborates:

This system of classification is indispensable to the ideology of colonialization as well as the actual practice of colonial rule. On the level of ideology, it serves to demonstrate the fundamental justice of the colonial enterprise by ranking native peoples according to their relative degree of technical and political sophistication as seen from the European point of

view. On a practical level, these distinctions are made in order to show that each category of native requires its own administrative tactic. (p. 69)

This method of Classification is still found in western texts about the East. It is thus essential to understand how and why Marston classified Arab families as such.

Analysis

The act of speaking on behalf of a group from which the speaker does not belong has always been problematic. When a group is represented by an external observer, misrepresentation becomes evident. As a result, false images are constructed and maintained throughout history. Said, (2007) argues that "In any instance of at least written language, there is no such thing as a delivered presence, but a *re-presence*, or a *representation*" (p. 21). Thus, no representation is ever authentic and altered versions of the truth are produced. This act of representation posits the observer as superior and renders the represented inferior. In Elsa Marston's stories; *In Line: A Story from Egypt* (2005) and *Honor: A Story from Jordan* (2008), the representation of city and village people is problematic due to the false images it employs. She presents village and city families as opposing extremes and classifies them based on education, social class, and culture. The analysis presented in this section is devoted to discussing how and why Arab families are portrayed as such.

The first thing noticed in the representation of city families is their level of education as opposed to the village families. The mothers, particularly, are depicted as educated and progressive. Yasmine's mother in *Honor* is "a hard-hitting investigative journalist, and she saw opportunities for social change and noble struggle in practically everything She was so good at her job... that she'd won a special fellowship to study in London" (p. 131). Rania's mother in *In-Line* has an "honors degree in English literature" (p. 98) and studied in American schools most of her life (p. 103). The mothers' education and open-mindedness are attributed to the West, as they both have been westernized. It is also implied that Yasmine's father is unconventional due to his work nature. Yasmine explains "both of my parents were very democratic. Mum just loved getting lathered up about social causes, and Baba's import-export business gave him a more or less worldly view of things. Justice, Freedom, Democracy! Equal rights for everybody!" (p. 132). Having an import-export business allows the father to interact with foreign cultures, and the mother's activism showcases her individuality from the society to which she belongs. Their progressive mentality, in contrast to the community depicted in the story, is attributed to cross-cultural interaction; specifically Western cultures. Presenting the city families as such highlights the author's attitude towards the Orient, implying that these families are only progressive due to the West. Marston highlights the West's superiority in education and progressiveness over the East. She thus extends the stereotypical image about the Orient as being, in Said's words, "not quite ignorant, not quite informed" (p. 65).

As for the village families, Marston presents a sharp contrast in their education, occupations, and open-mindedness. Wafa's mother in *Honor* is restricted to the domestic realm as she does not "do much except stay home, cook and watch Egyptian films on television" (p. 134). Her narrow-

mindfulness is evident in the way she reacts to subjects concerning science and religion. She doubts that her daughter's friend Yasmine is not a good Muslim due to her experience in London and fears her influence on Wafa (p. 133). She thus restricts Wafa from talking to Yasmine too much, warning her that her father is not paying "for [her] to socialize" (p. 133). Even though Wafa's family moved to the city two years ago, they are reluctant to change out of the notion that "people don't drop their ways just because they move to the city" (p. 145). Rejecting development highlights the village family's backwardness in contrast to the city family. Similarly, the Egyptian village family presented in *In-Line* is portrayed as uneducated and undeveloped. Rania explains that "Fayza's father is a farmer, Mummy, like most everybody else. He has chickens and a donkey and a cow. He raises cotton. That's what people do around here, you know" (p. 97). These lines also generalize specific characteristics to the village society, which lead to implicitly negating individual differences. It is also implied that village people, in contrast to city people, have no future in spite of their potential. Rania's mother tells her that "the future of a girl like Fayza—even though she might be very smart—is so limited. But you can prepare for anything you want, be a doctor or architect or university professor, anything" (p. 105). This negative notion renders village people inferior as they are incapable of moving forward.

Marston further contrasts city and village families based on their social class. She not only juxtaposes them accordingly but makes it clear that neither are meant to cross the class border. In *Honor*, it is stated that Wafa's family, as members of a particular tribe, do not belong in the city "A girl from Beit es-Souf in the glittering capital of the Royal Kingdom of Jordan! I don't wonder she's awed" (p. 132). It is further noted that Wafa does not belong in "a progressive place like the Ayesha Modern School for Girls" (p. 132). When asked about Wafa's home address, Yasmine answers, "I told you what part of Amman, Mama," I said. "It's not where most of the girls at school live. The school bus really has to go out of its way" (p. 152). These words "part of Amman" not only indicate Wafa's social class but also highlight her family's detachment and separateness from the rest of the city society. This reflects the imaginary borders which Marston draws between city and village families presented in the story. As for *In-Line*, the issue of social class becomes more evident in the way Rania's mother views village people. She does not wish for her daughter to be associated with Fayza's family; "what would people think about the daughter of the senior social services officer, a government official from Cairo, being entertained in a peasant home? Really, was this friendship something to be encouraged?" (p. 98). She furthermore questions Fayza's family's "cleanliness" and associates the village with dangerous diseases (p. 104). Moreover, Marston's description of city and village clothes is consistently emphasized to highlight the difference in class. Fayza's clothes are described as "faded and a little outgrown" (p. 99), whereas Rania's clothes are described as "nice" and clean (p. 100). Rania's mother's head covering is furthermore described as "a fancy headcovering [sic] of white fabric with fringe, which covered all her hair—the Islamic thing, not like the little scarves that the village women wore" (p. 99). Whereas Fayza's mother's appearance is described as "a wrinkled little black kerchief over her hair and a loose, faded flowered dress down to her ankles, like most of the village women" (p. 100). This constant contrast of physical appearance between city and village people highlights Marston's negative attitude towards the latter, as she associates the villagers with filthiness and diseases. This sharp distinction of social class is problematic as it betrays the author's limited

knowledge of the Orient. The ending of both stories emphasizes her views as village and city people are forever separated.

The Arab families presented in both stories are furthermore classified according to their cultures. Since the city families are westernized, Marston showcases the superiority of the Occident's cultures in contrast to the Orient's. Both Egyptian and Jordanian city families are portrayed as civilized as opposed to the village families. Wafa describes her uncle when he gets angry as irrational; "but Uncle Nabeel. . . he jokes a lot, but he does like to have his way. If something displeases him, he lets you know it! He'll be roaring with laughter one minute, and roaring with something else the next" (pp. 138-139). Yasmine, in return, explains "I couldn't imagine my father ever roaring. He and Mum always tried to debate in a civilized, rational way, no matter how much anger there might be underneath" (p. 139). Yasmine's family's civility is attributed to their interaction with the West. The village people's irrationality is furthermore highlighted when Wafa's family decides to kill their daughter for talking to a man. This irrational behavior is contrasted with the Western people's attitude towards couples;

the young couples in London, holding hands or with their arms around each other as they walked down the street, and sometimes even kissing right out in public, with lots of hugging and grabbing and messing up each other's hair. And nobody told them not to, nobody hardly even looked at them. (p. 143)

The Occident's culture is thus perceived as rational and civilized, in contrast to the Orient's culture, which is portrayed as irrational and uncivilized. This is also evident in the way Marston's describes the eating customs of Egyptian city and village families in *In-Line*. Fayza explains

We each had a plate, and in the middle of the circle sat a large pot of stewed chicken with lots of onions and garlic, and a heaping platter of stuffed cabbage leaves. Everyone dug in and ate without ceremony. I couldn't help thinking how different it all was from home, where my mother set the table with style and care, made sure everything was clean, and kept reminding Ameen and me of our manners. (p. 102)

This sharp distinction between city and village families reflected in both texts not only highlights the author's negative attitude towards Arab village people, but also reflect the superiority of the Occident's culture. Egyptian and Jordanian villagers are given similar stereotypical characteristics in spite of their geographical and cultural difference. This negative image of the Arab has always been present in Western texts, as Said explains, "the Arab is always shown in large numbers. No individuality, no personal characteristics or experiences" (p. 262).

The author's language in describing village people further emphasize her negative attitude towards Arab villagers. In *Honor*, Wafa is continuously described as being "so conservative", "boring", "so covered up by her hijab", a "tortoise" tucked into herself, in addition to the family, which is described as "notorious", "super-religious" with "idiotic mentality", and one of the wealthy villagers is described as "tribal bigwig". Their village is described as a "benighted place

out in the desert" (p. 151). Similarly, in *In-Line*, all the Egyptian village natives are described as "peasants" and their land is described as "flat", "nothing-happening", "dusty", and "muddy". Marston not only extends stereotypical images about the Orient but also negates the Oriental landscapes and presents them as empty. She observes these landscapes from the standpoint of a foreigner, which David Spurr calls "the foreign eye" (p. 14). He explains that "this visual survey carries with it an assessment of aesthetic and economic value...the city itself is ambitious but empty and incomplete, marked by gaps, vacancy, absence" (p. 19). Marston's representation of the Orient, or any representation for that matter, thus falls into the problematic issue of misrepresentation.

Conclusion

The analysis of both stories confirms that Arab and city families are classified based on culture, social class, and education. The city families are represented as civilized, rational, and developed. Their advancement is attributed to their interaction with the western society, which reflects the West's superiority over the East. In contrast, the village families who remain loyal to their native culture and lack connection to the West, are represented as uncivilized, irrational, and undeveloped. Giving such extreme oppositions indicate that the Orient has no middle grounds. The analysis further engages the author's use of language, which implies a negative attitude towards Jordanian and Egyptian villagers.

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