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Through a colonial lens: photography, orientalism, and the middle east

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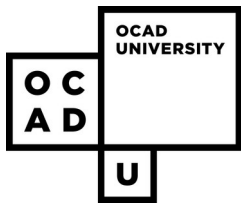I am an undergraduate student at OCAD University, and my sponsor for my research paper is Professor Andrew Gayed

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What comes to mind when you hear "Middle East"? War? Conflict? Poverty? These automatic, stereotypical images often come from historical, cultural, and media narratives that have shaped perceptions of the region, particularly in Western societies. Since the invention of the daguerreotype in 1839, many European photographers travelled to the Middle East, contributing to the rise of Orientalism. In the book *Photography's Orientalism: New Essays on Colonial Representation* by Ali Behdad and Luke Gartlan, Orientalism is described as "a Western tradition and style of thought, imagery, and language used to represent the Middle East for a European audience." In this essay, I will explore these "thoughts" and "imageries" constructed by Orientalists and the European audience, examining how they have shaped perceptions of the Middle East today, and compare the photographs taken by Orientalist photographers with local Middle Eastern photographs.

What is Orientalism and how did it start? In the book *Orientalism* by Edward Said, he simply describes Orientalism as how the West represents and views the East, especially in cultural, political, and academic contexts. He argues that this perspective is not neutral but tied to the power dynamics of imperialism, shaping how Western societies see Eastern cultures and people. Orientalism began in the late 18th century, alongside European colonial expansion, and portrays the East as exotic, backward, and different from the rational, superior West. This way of thinking helped justify colonial control and domination. In my perspective Orientalism played a crucial role in Eurocentrism, by showcasing the East as an undeveloped, exotic and outdated

region, the West can simply keep its role and power as "the best" or " the most developed", and also keep its role as the colonial.

In the book *Photography's Orientalism : New Essays on Colonial Representation,* Ali Behdad argues that Orientalist photographs are not objective representations but are shaped by historical and aesthetic influences[1]. Although these photographs may appear fragmented or inconsistent, they follow a visual system that reinforces a specific way of portraying the region. This approach, which Behdad calls "denotative exoticism," unifies different images of the Middle East and North Africa under a shared ideology. This system turns the region into a collection of exotic symbols or "signifiers," creating a stereotyped but cohesive vision that aligns with Western perspectives. By using props, backdrops, models, and staging, Western photographers could make orientalist photographs to align with Western stereotypes and expectations. In the article *The Ideal Other: Photography and Colonialism in the Middle* East the writers suggest that "Men were commonly portrayed as threatening, dishonest, and distrustful, women as seductive and a source of weakness, and children as uneducated, unhealthy, and unhappy vast generalizations, of course, which some Westerners used to defend the argument that it was their moral responsibility to bring light, literally and figuratively, to "primitive" or "backward" peoples."

One notable Orientalist photographer according to Bibliothèque Nationale de France was Felix Bonfils, one of Pioneers of Photographers in the Middle East. Félix Adrien Bonfils (1831–1885) was a French photographer known for his documentation of the Middle East. After participating in a French military expedition to Lebanon in 1860, he moved to Beirut in 1867 with his family and established the Maison Bonfils studio. Bonfils became one of the first

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[1] Behdad and Gartlan, *Photography's Orientalism*.

commercial photographers to capture Middle Eastern landscapes, monuments, and genre scenes on a large scale. His work, often targeted at artists, archaeologists, and tourists, combined documentary value with aesthetic composition, although the quality varied due to high demand and production volume. Maison Bonfils produced numerous photographs and albums, including *Souvenirs d'Orient*, which were showcased at the 1878 Paris World Fair. After Bonfils' death, his family continued the business until 1918.

Bonfils played a crucial role in orientalism. His images often showcased ancient ruins, empty desert landscapes, and traditional scenes that portrayed the Middle East as a region untouched by modernity. These visuals aligned with the orientalist trope of the East as a timeless, unchanging place, contrasting with the West's self-perception as progressive and modern. By using props, backdrops, and staging, he captured this image in a way the West wanted to see it [2].

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[2] "Félix Bonfils | Photographer | All About Photo."

Félix Bonfils Bedouin violin players, c. 1880

Félix Bonfils Guardian of the Tomb and his family, c.1880

Félix Bonfils Woman from Nablus, between 1867 and 1885

Félix Bonfils Women of Siloé, Palestine, c. 1880

Women and orientalism

How were women represented in Orientalism?

In *The Orientalization of Gender*, Mahmudul Hasan discusses how both Orientalist and Western feminist perspectives oversimplify and stereotype non-Western women. These discourses often depict Eastern women as passive, oppressed, and submissive, contrasting them with the image of free, educated Western women. This creates a harmful divide that reinforces the idea of Western superiority. Hasan argues that such portrayals ignore the rich cultural and historical realities of Eastern societies and their women, similar to the colonial suppression of indigenous cultures and knowledge.

As Said argues, various movements, including feminism, human rights advocacy, environmentalism, and animal rights, became entangled in the colonial project of "civilizing" and "othering" non-Western societies. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said highlights how Eurocentrism influenced movements like the workers' movement, the women's movement, and avant-garde art. Feminist Eurocentrism is particularly relevant, as Western feminism itself played a role in demonizing Eastern societies and Indigenous women, contributing to the broader civilizational "othering" process.

Throughout history and continuing to the present, women, both Western and non-Western, have been oppressed by men in many ways. According to Mahmudul Hasan, the involvement of feminists with Orientalists in portraying Eastern societies and indigenous women reinforces colonialism, challenging the idea that men are always the colonizers and women the colonized. Laura E. Donaldson notes that analyzing women's historical colonial experiences

complicates the man=colonizer, woman=colonized metaphor. Eastern women face both external and internal colonization, while Western women experience only internal subjugation. Before colonialism, Eastern women were already oppressed by patriarchy, but colonialism added another layer of oppression, affecting both men and women in similar ways. While Western women were already struggling with issues of rights, freedom, and gender roles internally, Eastern women faced the same challenges but with even greater intensity and on a global scale. [3]

Women of Algiers, circle of Charles Marville, 1858. Albumen print. The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (2008.R.3).

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[3] Zaidan, "Art Blog."

Rudolph Carl Huber was an American photographer, known for his contributions to early 20th-century portraiture and photography that often depicted themes of exoticism and sensuality, characteristic of Orientalist imagery. His works frequently featured women in poses that reinforced the stereotypical portrayal of Eastern women as submissive and mysterious. This representation was part of the broader trend of using the female form to evoke the "exotic" nature of the East during that period, furthering colonial narratives. Huber never took images to exoticize Western women, why is that you think? During his time, there was a widespread belief in the "exotic" and "mysterious" nature of the East. This view was used to reinforce colonial ideas, and Eastern women were depicted as passive and sensual to fit these stereotypes. Western women, in contrast, were usually depicted in more empowered or modern roles, reflecting different cultural expectations and the idea that the West was superior to the East.[4]

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[4] Zaidan.

Carl Rudolf Huber (attributed),

Gruppenakt to 1875/76,

Photo Institute Bonartes

Rudolph Carl Huber (circle of)

Nude woman sitting on carpet with her back against a wall, Cairo, Egypt, 1875-1876

Ken & Jenny Jacobson Orientalist Photography Collection

Western photographers vs local Middle Eastern photographers

I want to analyze how local Middle Eastern photographers captured images of their hometowns and regions, comparing the Western photographers that captured the regions in a Western view and narrative. Local photographers however captured images of the regions as it was. One notable example is Aqa Reza Akasbashi, Iran's first professional photographer, who had an important role in early photography and its connection to Orientalism. Working for Naser al-Din Shah Qajar, he managed Iran's first photography studio in Golestan Palace and captured significant subjects, including rare photos of religious sites like Mashhad and Karbala. These works documented Iran's culture and landmarks, offering a perspective that sometimes challenged Western Orientalist views.

Trained by French photographer Francis Carlhian, Agha Reza combined European techniques with his realist style. He moved beyond traditional portraiture to document Iranian society more authentically. His photographs of cultural and religious sites provided a unique Iranian perspective during a time when Western Orientalist depictions often dominated the narrative.

Agha Reza's work shows how photography in the Qajar era was both a tool for documenting Iran's identity and a way to engage with and respond to Orientalist portrayals of the region.[5]

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[5] "زندگینامه آقا رضا عکاس باشی".

Aqa Reza Akasbashi

Persia (Iran), c. 1870-1880.

Nasserddine Shah during a hunt. The shah looking through a telescope.

Aqa Reza Akasbashi Iran, c. 1880.

Aqa Reza Akasbashi Iran, c. 1880s.

Ashraf Os-Saltaneh was one of the first Iranian women photographers, active during the Qajar era. As a member of the royal family, she gained access to photography through her connection to Naser al-Din Shah. She is known for being among the pioneering female photographers in Iran and for her contribution to documenting court life and portraits during a time when photography was a male-dominated field. Her work reflects the evolving role of women in the arts and the introduction of modern technology in Qajar Iran. unlike the Western photographers who portrayed Eastern women as seductive, passive, and exotic. Ashraf Os-Saltaneh did quite the opposite when it came to photographing women. Through her images, you can see she portrays women as modern, clean, up-to-date, and fashionable, challenging the orientalist stereotypes.[6]

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[6] Norouzi, "پایگاه خبری عکاسان جوان - ‘اولین بانوی عکاسِ ایران’ اشرف السلطنه".

Ashraf os-Saltaneh, c. 1860s-1900s

Ashraf os-Saltaneh, c. 1860s-1900s

Ashraf os-Saltaneh, c. 1860s-1900s

Photography has played a significant role in shaping narratives about people, places, and regions. I am interested in comparing the perspectives of Western Orientalist photographers and local photographers, particularly those working in the same periods. How do their photographs differ in their portrayal of regions, and which approach offers a more authentic and valid representation? Does the local photographer, who is from and has lived in the region, offer a more accurate portrayal of life there, or do the foreign photographers, often commissioned by colonial powers, present a more Eurocentric, controlled perspective?

In conclusion, comparing Western Orientalist photographers and local Middle Eastern photographers highlights key differences in how the region was portrayed. Western

photographers, such as Félix Bonfils and Rudolph Carl Huber, often depicted the Middle East as exotic, backward, and in need of Western control, reinforcing colonial power dynamics. Their photographs, with the use of props, backdrops, and staging, portrayed a stereotyped, romanticized view of the region. On the other hand, local photographers like Agha Reza Akasbashi and Ashraf Os-Saltaneh provided more authentic representations of the region. They captured their surroundings with respect, showing the culture and people in a modern and dignified light. Their work challenges the stereotypes created by Western photographers and offers a more accurate and meaningful portrayal of the Middle East, reflecting the true experiences of those who lived there. Understanding these differences is crucial when studying history, as it helps us avoid falling into the trap of false representations and stereotypes that have been perpetuated for centuries, ensuring a more accurate and respectful understanding of the past.

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