



Challenging Orientalist Cultural Narratives of Arab Women: an analysis of a short film

Lily Gerloff-Blood

Bachelor International Studies

Abstract: In her short film *Shedding Skin*, Yumna Al-Arashi confronts Orientalist Western constructions of Arab women's identities, by creating her own depiction. She displays scenes of nude Arab women in a hammam, accompanied by a self-narrated voice-over, addressing various aspects of identity and culture. This article explores how Al-Arashi's film challenges dominant Western cultural narratives that perpetuate essentialised and exoticized constructions of Arab women. Through the portrayal of nude Arab women in the safe space of a hammam, Al-Arashi counters the notion of the 'sexual object,' by placing them in a closed space exempt from social expectations. Meanwhile, she deconstructs the notion of Arab women being oppressed by their culture, instead showing the West as oppressive for its hegemonic cultural narratives. I argue that Al-Arashi offers a construction that counters Orientalist representations of Arab women, and by challenging these, she is reclaiming agency not only for herself but also for the wider female Arab population within the tradition of Said's theory of Orientalism.

Keywords: Orientalism, Arab Women, Agency, Identity, Short Film, Space, The New Scholar

Copyright: This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. This allows for unrestricted use, as long as the author(s) and source are credited.

Introduction

In its most basic definition, personal identity is constructed by an individual's self-perception. However, this perception is also heavily influenced by the view others hold of them.¹ Within the theory of Orientalism, coined originally by Edward Said, the construction by others can be so strong, it invalidates and overpowers one's self-perception to such a degree that a whole separate identity is created.² From this phenomenon, two prominent cultural narratives surrounding the Arab woman have emerged in the West, one sexualising and objectifying her, and the other presenting her as an oppressed victim of her culture and religion.³

Yumna Al-Arashi's short film titled "Shedding Skin" opens space for a new narrative. It was created in reaction to Orientalist constructions, and to President Donald Trump's openly Islamophobic rhetoric, such as the Muslim ban, in 2016.⁴ As shown in **Figure 1**, Al-Arashi

¹Wendt, "The State and the Problem of Corporate Agency," 224.

² Burney, *Pedagogy of the Other*, 23–39.

³Simons, "Representation of Muslim Women as 'Sexual Objects,'" 27; Zine, "Muslim Women and the Politics of Representation," 2.

⁴ "Index."

constructs her own depiction of an Arab woman's identity, displaying scenes of nude Arab women in a hammam, accompanied by a voice-over, written and read by Al-Arashi, addressing various aspects of identity and culture.⁵ Through an analysis of this film, this essay explores the question: how does Al-Arashi's film challenge dominant Western cultural narratives that perpetuate essentialised and exoticized constructions of Arab women's identity?

I argue that Al-Arashi's film offers a construction that counters Orientalist representations of Arab women, which have continued to marginalise them, and is a move towards reclaiming their agency within identity construction and western discourse. Thus, the aim of this essay is to gain a deeper understanding of Arab women's complex identities, which is relevant to further dismantle Orientalist constructions. I wish to emphasise that it is Al-Arashi who made clear that her film is critical of the West,⁶ a perspective that has greatly informed my interpretation.

Orientalism in Theory and the Western Perspective of Arab Women

Orientalism is a theory originally established by Edward Said in his book, *Orientalism*,⁷ which describes the process through which Western colonial powers constituted the East, as the 'Other', in contrast to the West. It pursued to establish that for everything the West was, the East was not. For example, the 'Other' was presented as irrational and backwards, therefore the West was rational and modern. Western scholars, artists, and travellers did this through extensive documentation of the region, including travel articles, novels, and paintings.⁸ By perpetuating their own views onto the Orient through hegemonic cultural narratives, the West "robbed it (the Orient) of its true identity, voice, and indigenous culture."⁹ Said argued that the intention of such narratives was, and continues, to justify Western colonial intervention in the region, while simultaneously building a system through which the West could continuously control and manipulate the East for their personal gain.¹⁰ The way in which elements of the Middle East are presented in Western discourse repeatedly reflect the political and ideological aims of the West.¹¹

Within these hegemonic narratives, there are two regarding Arab or Muslim women. One of these narratives presents the Arab woman as an overtly sexual and exotic being. Her only purpose is to please the man and fulfil his fantasies which also leads to him claiming possession over her. She has no identity except for what is defined by "what she has between her legs."¹² This process of objectification signifies removing a women's identity and replacing it with a purely sexual purpose. It intends to further entrench the East's position as an object of infatuation. Examples of this representation are particularly prevalent in 19th century British and French Orientalist novels and paintings, such as writings by Gustave Flaubert and the paintings of William Holman Hunt.¹³

The other hegemonic narrative is the Arab women as a victim of oppression, both at the hands of her culture, Islam, and by the men in the region. This hegemonic notion of presenting women as in need of saving serves the purpose of strengthening the existing conception that labels the Middle East and Islam as backward, uncivilised, and barbaric. It vindicates the

⁵ "Shedding Skin."

⁶ "Index."

⁷ Said, *Orientalism*.

⁸ Burney, *Pedagogy of the Other*, 23–39; Simons, "Representation of Muslim Women as 'Sexual Objects,'" 24.

⁹ Said, *Orientalism*, 5.

¹⁰ Burney, *Pedagogy of the Other*, 23.

¹¹ Zine, "Muslim Women and the Politics of Representation," 4.

¹² Simons, "Representation of Muslim Women as 'Sexual Objects,'" 27.

¹³ Tayyen, "Muslim Women through Evolving Lens," 103.

Western invasion of the region.¹⁴ Abu-Lughod also expands on this in her work, arguing that especially since the events of September 11, 2001, these representations became even more connected to the aim of having to save Arab women from their culture.¹⁵ In contemporary media this representation remains very prevalent, such as can be seen with one Canadian medical journal describing the hijab as an “instrument of oppression” and the Fox News headline “Muslim Women in U.S. Struggle to Balance Western Freedoms and Islamic Culture.”¹⁶ In each of these imposed depictions, the Arab woman loses all agency as an independent actor and exists purely to be used as a political tool for the West to gain leverage over the East.¹⁷

Shedding Skin

With her short film *Shedding Skin*,¹⁸ released in 2017, first generation immigrant Yemeni-American artist, Yumna Al-Arashi, makes a move towards reclaiming her power as an Arab woman. Al-Arashi explained the spur for film was former U.S. president Donald Trump’s election in 2016 and his consequent implementation of the ‘Muslim ban’ in January 2017.¹⁹ The ‘Muslim ban’ was an executive order prohibiting immigrants from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen from entering the United States, including refugees.²⁰

What Al-Arashi points out in the voice-over of the film, is that the West with its hegemonic perceptions is as complicit in the oppression of Arab women, as it likes to claim about her culture and religion. This is in line with Abu-Lughod’s appeal that we must abandon the idea that Arab women need ‘rescuing’ from their culture.²¹ The West’s prescribed notions of freedom, while simultaneously downgrading Arab history, culture, and development, disregard Arab women’s own voice to speak out, thus denying their agency.²² As Abu-Lughod argues, to deconstruct these notions, one must hold the West accountable for its actions, and highlight the power dynamics involved in constructions of Arab women.²³

¹⁴ Zine, “Muslim Women and the Politics of Representation,” 2.

¹⁵ Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*, 6.

¹⁶ Bond, “Doctor Calls Hijab ‘Instrument of Oppression’ in Medical Journal Article;” Ravve, “Muslim Women in U.S. Struggle to Balance Western Freedoms and Islamic Culture.”

¹⁷ Zine, “Muslim Women and the Politics of Representation,” 2.

¹⁸ “SHEDDING SKIN — Yumna al-Arashi.”

¹⁹ “Index.”

²⁰ Amnesty International UK, “A Licence to Discriminate: Trump's Muslim & Refugee Ban.”

²¹ Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*, 6.

²² Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*, 9, 46–47.

²³ Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*.



Figure 1. Yumna Al-Arashi, *Shedding Skin*, 2017, photograph. Public domain: <https://yumnaaaa.com/SHEDDING-SKIN>

The 8-minute film takes place in a hammam in Lebanon. As illustrated in **Figure 1**, it portrays very intimate scenes of a group of Arab women, of different ages and appearances, shown nude or semi-nude, performing various acts of self-care and cleansing rituals on themselves and others. A hammam is a segregated public bathhouse common in the Muslim world. It is an enclosed space that is safe for women. It is a place of purification and cleansing in many Middle Eastern and North African cultures, as it is not only about the act of physically cleaning yourself, but spiritually as well. Culturally, the hammam is also viewed as a sanctuary for women, to escape the prying eyes and pressures of society, due its secluded nature.²⁴ It is important to note that this is not the first insight into a hammam. Visually, the film in some ways recreates those early Orientalist paintings which depict imaginary scenes of nude women in hammams, for example *The Large Pool of Bursa* by the 19th century French artist Jean Leon Gerome, as shown in **Figure 2**.²⁵ This was a deliberate choice by Al-Arashi to draw in Western viewers.²⁶

²⁴ Staats, "Social Meanings in the Traditional Women's Baths."

²⁵ Nishizawa, "History Of Segregation In Women's Baths."

²⁶ "Index."



Figure 2. Jean-Léon Gérôme, *The Large Pool of Bursa*, 1885, genre oil painting. Public domain: <https://www.wikiart.org/en/jean-leon-gerome/the-large-pool-of-bursa>

Another distinctive element in the film is the lack of any distinct time- or storyline. One cannot tell how much time is passing, nor are there any clues as to what period the scenes take place in. This gives a sense of timelessness, which reflects the position that the hammam holds in Arab culture, existing as a safe space for women over hundreds of years. Adding to this effect is the voice-over, written and narrated by Al-Arashi herself. Since the viewer hears no intelligible speech from the women portrayed, our attention is directed solely at the narration. It explores a range of themes, such as identity, cultural displacement and erasure, colonisation, and the struggle for self-expression. It also touches on subjects of womanhood, gender roles, and beauty ideals. By employing direct pronouns of “you” and “me,” Al-Arashi deliberately emphasises the cultural and societal barriers between the Western viewer (you) and Arab women (me). Thus, Al-Arashi presents herself as a speaker for the experiences of Arab women.

Challenging Orientalist Constructions of Arab Women

Al-Arashi’s depiction of nude Arab women in a hammam counters that of the ‘sexual object’ so common in Orientalist and Western culture described above. She captures the women in their most uncovered state, framing them in the safety of the hammam, where they are shielded from the male gaze. The inherent safety of the space enables the women to be seen beyond their appearance, by giving them a realm where they are free to choose how to express their sexuality.

This is also underlined by the voice-over, in which Al-Arashi states “I too, use my body to express myself” and “I too, am every kind of sexual.”²⁷

When referring to space we can distinguish between private, public, and semi-public, each containing a different set of conventions on how to act. Jana Nakhal argues that space becomes ‘gendered’ because of inherent ‘social norms’ reflected in it. Gender of space is entrenched in both its architectural composition, which is often a standardised built for the man, and in the segmentation and connotations associated with certain spaces, designating some as private space as feminine and public space as male.²⁸ The hammam constitutes a private space, open only for women and, as described previously, shielded away from prying eyes. However, it is a space which overcomes the social norms inhabited by every other, thus challenging gendered spatiality. At the same time, both the film and the hammam are contributing to the gendering of space, by again segregating ‘female private space’ and ‘male public space.’²⁹ Is it really so that only by removing herself from the general public space and male gaze that a woman can let go and be free of societal perceptions and judgements?

In contrast to the 19th century Orientalist paintings, female nudity in this film is not provocative and lustful, but a tool that frees the woman from material concepts of beauty. Abu-Lughod asks if “dress can symbolise any freedom or constraint?”³⁰ Societal pressures to cover or uncover, to conform to certain trends, will always influence and constrain choice in what to wear. This is reflected by the voice-over line: “In this space your currency of clothing and beauty is not accepted. It’s useless here, and I feel free. My womanhood is all I have left. Here, I am away.”³¹ Al-Arashi actively removes herself and the other women to a space away from both the male and Western gaze, where there are no longer restrictions of societal norms on her construction of identity. Only with nudity in the safe space of the hammam can liberty be somewhat achieved.

In the voice-over Al-Arashi’s challenges the Western representation of the Arab woman as oppressed. At the beginning she states “I’ve tried in every way to conform and bide myself to please you” illustrating how she feels boxed in by Western hegemonic cultural expectations.³² There are limits on cultural expression, as stressed by “your restrictions on my soul know no end - but still I bend - because I cannot be broken”.³³ It is said that to be a part of the discourse in the United States where Al-Arashi lives, one must stick to these prescribed notions especially in the public domain.

Al-Arashi goes on say “You have taken everything from me. My home. My traditions. My secrets. You have destroyed my ancestors. You have disgraced them. You have stolen my history and disregarded it as barbaric.”³⁴ This can refer to prominent meddling of the West in the Middle East. The damage done is undeniable, from the US/UK invasion of Iraq in 2003 under ‘democratic justifications’ to US involvement in the Israel-Palestine conflict. Thus, she identifies the problems and damage of colonialist attitudes and Orientalism as defined by Edward Said.

²⁷ See Appendix 1.

²⁸ Nakhal, “Women as Space/Women in Space,” 16, 17, 20.

²⁹ Nakhal, “Women as Space/Women in Space,” 20.

³⁰ Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*, 18.

³¹ See Appendix 1.

³² See Appendix 1.

³³ See Appendix 1.

³⁴ See Appendix 1.

Reclaiming Agency

Al-Arashi's film is also an act of reclaiming the agency previously denied to her and Arab women. Agency is defined as the "capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create."³⁵ She is taking the initiative to express her experience in a stand against Western hegemony. Her title "Shedding Skin" reinforces this by symbolising that in the hammam, she can 'shed' all cultural and societal expectations to find a sense of freedom and authenticity. Moreover, in the closing words of the voice-over she not only states that "We are shedding you off of us" but also asks "Can you see clearer now?"³⁶ That this is only possible in the safe space of the hammam again highlights that it is not her Arab culture that is oppressive, but Western influences. It has labelled Arab women as oppressed by their religion, the Islam, by their 'backwards' culture, and by what they wear. Only in the act of cleansing, can she liberate herself from these orientalist constraints and reveal her true self.

Conclusion

Through the theory of Orientalism, the West has constructed two identities for the Arab woman, one as an overly sexualised and objectified object, and other as a victim of oppression at the hands of her culture. Both depictions were and are used as tools by the Western powers to achieve political goals. In *Shedding Skin*, Al-Arashi confronts these representations. She portrays nude Arab women in the safe space of a hammam counter the notion of the 'sexual object'. In this environment, the power to desexualise them exists through the concept of a closed space, exempt from social expectations. Meanwhile in the voice-over, she deconstructs the notion of the Arab woman being oppressed at the hand of their culture, by showing the West as oppressive for its hegemonic cultural narratives. By challenging essentialised Western representations of Arab women and highlighting the power dynamics at play, Al-Arashi is reclaiming agency not only for herself but also for the wider female Arab population within the tradition of Said's theory of Orientalism.

Acknowledgements: I want to thank my parents, friends, and tutors for all their help and support.

Images

Figure 1. Yumna Al-Arashi, *Shedding Skin* 2017, photograph, Source:

<https://yumnaaa.com/SHEDDING-SKIN>

Figure 2. Jean-Leon Gerome, *The Large Pool of Bursa*, 1885, genre oil painting, Source:

<https://www.wikiart.org/en/jean-leon-gerome/the-large-pool-of-bursa>

³⁵ Mahmood, "Feminist Theory, Agency, and the Liberatory Subject," 33–34.

³⁶ See Appendix 1.

References

- Abu-Lughod, Lila. *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* Harvard University Press, 2013. <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674726338>.
- Amnesty International UK. “A Licence to Discriminate: Trump's Muslim & Refugee Ban.” *Amnesty International UK*, August 21, 2017. Accessed April 26, 2023. <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/licence-discriminate-trumps-muslim-refugee-ban>.
- Bond, Meredith. “Doctor Calls Hijab ‘Instrument of Oppression’ in Medical Journal Article.” *CityNews Toronto*, December 23, 2021. <https://toronto.citynews.ca/2021/12/22/medical-journal-camj-hijab-oppression/>.
- Burney, Shehla. “Orientalism: The Making of the Other.” In *Pedagogy of the Other: Edward Said, Postcolonial Theory, and Strategies for Critique*, 23–39. Peter Lang, 2012. “Index,” n.d. <https://www.theindex.la/stories/yumna-al-arashi-shedding-skin>.
- Mahmood, Saba. “Feminist Theory, Agency, and the Liberatory Subject: Some Reflections on the Islamic Revival in Egypt.” *Temenos-Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion* 42, no. 1 (2006). <https://doi.org/10.33356/temenos.4633>.
- Nakhal, Jana. “Women as Space/Women in Space: Relocating Our Bodies and Rewriting Gender in Space.” *Kohl: A Journal for Body and Gender Research* 1, no. 1 (2015): 15–22. <https://doi.org/10.36583/1-1-3>.
- Nishizawa, Lyon. “Staying Clean: A History Of Segregation In Women’s Baths During The Ottoman Empire.” *Jetset Times*, January 9, 2022. <https://jetsettimes.com/countries/morocco/marrakech/marrakech-traveler/hammams-a-history-of-segregation-in-womens-baths-during-the-ottoman-empire/>.
- Ravve, Ruth. “Muslim Women in U.S. Struggle to Balance Western Freedoms and Islamic Culture.” *Fox News*, May 16, 2015. <https://www.foxnews.com/story/muslim-women-in-u-s-struggle-to-balance-western-freedoms-and-islamic-culture>.
- Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. Vintage, 2014.
- “Shedding Skin,” n.d. <https://www.maff.tv/watch/shedding-skin>.
- “SHEDDING SKIN — Yumna al-Arashi,” n.d. <https://yumnaaa.com/SHEDDING-SKIN>.
- Simons, Hazel. “Orientalism and Representation of Muslim Women as ‘Sexual Objects.’” *Al-Raida Journal*, 2002, 23–32. <https://doi.org/10.32380/alrj.v0i0.457>.
- Staats, Valerie. “Ritual, Strategy, or Convention: Social Meanings in the Traditional Women’s Baths in Morocco.” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 14, no. 3 (1994): 1–18.

Tayyen, Sana. "From Orientalist Sexual Object to Burkini Terrorist Threat: Muslim Women through Evolving Lens." *Islamophobia Studies Journal* 4, no. 1 (2017). <https://doi.org/10.13169/islastudj.4.1.0101>.

Wendt, Alexander. "The State and the Problem of Corporate Agency." In *Social Theory of International Politics*, 193–245, 1999.

Zine, Jasmin. "Muslim Women and the Politics of Representation." *American Journal of Islam and Society* 19, no. 4 (2002): 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.35632/ajis.v19i4.1913>.

Appendix 1: *Shedding Skin* by Yumna Al-Arashi³⁷

I've come here time and time again.
 My body is a heavy one as I enter.
 I've tried in every way to conform and bide myself to please you.
 Your restrictions on my soul know no end - but still I bend - because I cannot be broken.

Your world drags me.
 Sometimes I rebel. Other times I'm quiet.
 I'm not entirely sure why either feels right.
 You have perfectly orchestrated my feelings. To pitifully grant me some dignity. An illusion that I may have ownership of them. I know I do not.

I too, use my body to express myself.
 I too, seek bits of joy in solace.
 I too, am every kind of sexual.
 I too, search for a love that can heal all pain and leave me a little less alone.

I am only human, but you still see me a world away.
 You created a fracture. It's a void filled with nothing.
 Is this the gap that is so ornamentally displayed when you wage your wars against my people?
 The one you parade when you build your walls?

You have taken everything from me. My home. My traditions. My secrets.
 You have destroyed my ancestors. You have disgraced them.
 You have stolen my history and disregarded it as barbaric.
 And after all of this, you have promised to save me from these horrors. To give me home.
 I've grown here only to see this home come as a deal. A deal to turn my eye away from the tragedy and become one of you.
 I have carried the weight of home from the past as a distant memory.
 I am coming to the surface from an amnesia that has drawn so much of me.

For now, this place is my home.
 I simply hang my clothes and make my way in.
 In this space your currency of clothing and beauty is not accepted.
 It's useless here, and I feel free.
 My womanhood is all I have left.
 Here, I am away. Here, I am not alone.

I watch this layer of darkness glide off my skin, and I wonder. Do you really see such a difference between you and me?
 We are shedding you off of us.
 We are looking for our skin, so rich underneath, all of which you have lazily plastered on.
 Can you see clearer now?

³⁷ Yumna, "Shedding Skin," August 4, 2017, accessed April 26, 2023, <https://vimeo.com/228396380>.