

Gender as a 'Discursive Practice' in Romance Discourse

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Abstract

This paper calls into question the cultural discourse behind writing and reading popular romances in the Western sphere. Within the framework of orientalist discourse, this paper examines the trope of gender construction in Rebecca Stratton's *The Silken Cage*. It unveils Western female writers' complicity, Stratton as a prototype, in the perpetuation of orientalist discourse through gendering the oriental 'Other'. Stratton's romance is worthy of scrutiny by virtue of displaying how gender colours the hegemonic discourse of representation. This paper is indebted to postcolonial theory. After the analysis of the chosen account, it was inferred that Rebecca Stratton partakes in the replication of the orientalist ideas and images that have been already propagated by 'white' male writers about the gendered Moroccan 'Other'. 'Harem' is presented in *The Silken Cage* as an arena where these gender misrepresentations about Morocco, as a subject and a culture, are articulated. Notably, Stratton's mode of representation is marked by 'ambivalence'; given its racist discourse, the novel sways between relegating and praising the 'Other'. Stratton's romance as a manifestation of a cultural potentiality deserves to be examined due to its location within the framework of distinctiveness between the 'Self' and the 'Other'.

1. INTRODUCTION

At large, the study of Orientalist romance has gained considerable ground in the Western academy thanks to its cultural potential. This potentiality is more crucial when it comes to the study of contact zones among different societies, which are distinct on the base of their cultural specificities and historical uniqueness. Given the fact that every society has got to be portrayed in terms of its distinctive traits, orientalist romance is to be regarded within these specificities as a cultural process of gathering different peoples. Thus, this paper aims to disclose why popular romances about the Orient, Morocco and other places in the Maghreb in particular, have been widely written and read in the Western sphere. It demonstrates how British orientalist romance has been always intent on drawing a specific image of the Moroccan 'Other' and their cultural practices.

There has been recently a big deal of interest in the politics of cultural representations of Morocco in terms of gender in memoirs (e.g., Lamghari, 2024), sex work and migration (e.g., Phipps, 2023 & 2022), orientalist travel literature (e.g., Aammari, 2023; El Aidi, 2021; Simour, 2020; Bouamri, 2020; Bouamer, 2019; Wade-Lang, 2019; Khouf & Tamourtbir, 2018;

and Agliz, 2016), and colonial cinema (e.g., El Bouayadi, 2022; Benhima & Khatib, 2019; Oudadene, 2017; and Oudadene, 2014). In the meantime, there has been no scholarly interest in gendered constructions of the Moroccan ‘Other’ in imperial romance. This paper comes thusly as an endeavour to fill this research gap. It sets out to examine Rebecca Stratton’s romance *The Silken Cage* in terms of its cultural potentialities and historical representation of Morocco. The rationale behind analyzing this non-canonical yet popular romance is to uncover how the indigenous people, Moroccan men and women, could be commodified in the literary product form. This paper assumes that even though popular romance has been canonized and is considered to be an aspect of ‘low-brow’ art, it is imbued with gender stereotypes about the oriental ‘Other’. Gender stereotyping in this type of imperial writing is a strategic technique adopted by romance writers to basically sustain cultural differences between the ‘Western’ woman and the oriental one. This paper, in this sense, can be described as a ‘literature of resistance’ where the hegemonic discourse of British orientalist romance is called into question. Significantly, this paper will not limit its scope of investigation to the borders of understanding the cultural discourse of romance within the Manichean machines or the binary division between the ‘West’ and the ‘East’, but rather it will decipher the underlying significance of its ostensibly thematic approaches to gender and similar related issues.

The reading of Stratton’s *The Silken Cage* is immensely indebted to a postcolonial approach. The significance of this approach lies in the fact that it is interested in challenging the thematic issues of representation, gendered identities, and differences concerning colonialism, which is the core issue of this paper. Also, postcolonial criticism is strongly believed to be a space where the subaltern female subjects are given a voice. So, Western hegemony against the ‘woman of colour’ will be analyzed and problematized in the suggested corpus through the use of some postcolonial critics (such as Reina Lewis, Billie Melman, and Sara Mills...) as relevant guides. This paper is divided into two major parts. The first part offers a theoretical background about the topic under discussion; it aims to help the reader understand the field of cultural and gender studies as well as the development of the notion of culture industry (i.e., the commodification of culture). The second part dwells on gender and the stereotyping of women in Stratton’s imperial romance *The Silken Cage*. The focus will be on the ‘harem’ as a form of women’s enslavement. This notion of the harem has always been correlated in the selected novel with ‘displacement’ and the experience of ‘captivity’.

2. On Criticism of Gender Construction in Imperialist Discourse

It seems clear that the currently vigorous academic interest in the ‘popular’ is the outcome of a large process in which popular cultural technologies, genres, and works are increasingly

Gender as a 'Discursive Practice' in Romance Discourse

moving and interacting across national and cultural borders. The integration of feminism into cultural studies in the mid-1970s was not “a matter of smooth collaboration.” (Gray, 1997, p.87) It is a struggle and a contestation in which feminists have insisted on, among other things, extending the understanding of the political, and bringing the concept of power home and into the intimate relationships of the so-called private and domestic spheres. They brought up the importance of representation and consumption in understanding cultural processes, the need to conceptualize pleasure and desire, and, crucially, the centrality of gender/sexuality to questions of power, subjectivity and identity. (Blunt & Rose, 1994, p.6) Cultural studies’ efforts to address these matters also compelled scholars to rethink the relationship between society and the psyche and to confront the question of how cultural studies could best appropriate the insights of psychoanalysis. Feminism has widened the scope of cultural studies by offering a feminist understanding of culture and generating a space where masculinist perspectives on the landscape (be it physical, cultural, or historical) are contested. (Rosaldo & Lamphere, 1974) To illustrate, the notion of subjectivity in feminist research raises critical questions about the basic assumptions of how knowledge and power influence the research process. Feminist intrusion within cultural studies has stressed the need to break down terms such as difference, patriarchy, resistance, and space by exploring how power and knowledge are (re)produced through these concepts of spaces which are occupied by women, and viewing space as “central both to masculinist power and to feminist resistance.” (Blunt & Rose, 1994, p.5) In “Introduction: Women’s Colonial and Postcolonial Geographies,” Blunt and Rose (1994) argue that the ‘social map’ of patriarchy created ‘ground rules’ for the behaviour of men and women, and that “the gender roles and relations of patriarchy constructed some spaces as ‘feminine’ and others as ‘masculine’ and thus allocated certain kinds of gendered activities to certain gendered places.” (p.25) This reorientation introduces the crucial question of the prioritization of gender within the feminist frame of analysis. Another key issue that has surfaced along with the growing array of theoretical perspectives in feminist cultural studies has been the challenge of providing a “common ground” or nodal points from which constructive dialogue among feminist theorists can continue.

Bearing in mind its systematic relation to difference, the concept of ‘gender’ has generated many disturbing inquiries, the aim of which is to challenge, mainly, the colonial manipulation of the term, which stresses the superiority of the European ‘Self’ over the inferiority of the Eastern ‘Other’. The concept of gender is typically a matter of culture and an important feature of most societies which differentiates people’s experiences in everyday life. It is also interesting to note that the concept of gender does not only refer to women, but it refers to both men and women whose social roles and responsibilities within a particular

community vary according to the cultural specificities of this same community. One can argue that the qualities that are stereotypically attributed to women and men in contemporary Western culture are indicative of the power that the perception of gender can accrue to the understanding of human differences. Gender has been foregrounded in the colonial discourse to lay bare the disparities between the rationalized West, which gives more respect to the noninterventionist social bonds grouping both men and women and the freedom-restricting East, which is in turn taken as a society that tends to separate between the two sexes, favouring males over females and holding the woman body as a site of mere sexual excitement and recreation. In other words, the purpose of affirming a sex/gender distinction is to argue that the actual physical or mental effects of biological difference have been accentuated to maintain a patriarchal system of power and to create a consciousness among women that are naturally better suited to 'domestic' roles.

More importantly, the conception of gender in colonial discourse has been relegated to a point wherein the justification of social stratifications and stereotyping of (Eastern) women constitute a rewarding enterprise for the imperial expansions overseas, not to mention its viability in offering entertaining stories to be told to men and women of Europe about the denigration of the Eastern thought regarding the female sex. In short, women are either absent or misrepresented in terms of the stereotypes based on sexual attractiveness and the performance of domestic labour. Actually, the Western popular imagination has striven to provide a site of entertainment to its audience from the stories circulating about the gender roles and relations of patriarchy in the East to help Western readers escape their monotonous lives. The stratification of gender roles in the Eastern patriarchal societies has prompted questions on the nature of the people who would negate the presence of their 'harems' and further stretch male roles and, thus, dominance, which might seem truthful and particular to some areas other than others. The question of gender roles under the ascendancy of patriarchy has contributed to the spread of stereotypical assumptions in the colonial discourse about the East in general and Eastern women in particular.

As a matter of fact, the Arab world has constituted plain ground for Western representations. Arabs were imbued with dreamlike images; the very symbols that represent the culture are seen as threats. Native cultures, on the other hand, continue to display themselves according to images drawn through the eyes of others, with references that rely heavily on nineteenth-century legacies and that broadcast simultaneously old and new value systems. These legacies and value systems, which were reinforced by Western writers, have been nurturing their stereotypes about people of the East and helped fictionalize their history. These value systems are what Western popular imaginations or popular romances employ in

Gender as a 'Discursive Practice' in Romance Discourse

many different ways to implement their stereotypical discourse about the natives. This utilization is worthy of elucidation in terms of the preconceived images of other cultures and peoples. Western popular imaginations both reveal and reproduce the emotional and political disenfranchisement of women through the manipulative strategies of capital and the oppressive representations of dominated women. Following this argument, the manipulative use of the female body as a commodity for profitable enterprises and the oppressive representation of dominated women may cause a psychological rift in the repressed woman as a result of her loss of a sense of being and belonging to a warm and protective place. The circulation of such images about the Eastern woman in the Western popular imagination contributes, consciously or unconsciously, to encircling the world of women, thereby rendering it a confinement that has no purpose other than demonizing the female presence and denying her any importance of sexual pleasure and recreation. From such a perspective, gender appears “only as a metaphor for the negative characterization of the Orientalized Other as feminine.” (Lewis, 1996)

In questioning simple oppositions between ‘black’ and ‘white’, ‘man’ and ‘woman’, feminist writers challenged binary constructions and insisted that it was illegitimate to deploy general constructs such as ‘black women’ in ways which stereotyped and negated their importance. Feminist theory, in this account, has argued that masculinity and femininity are constructed by social and environmental factors rather than being innate or essential characteristics that accompany biological makeup. The distinction between sex and gender is central to a critique that sees women’s subordination as a consequence of social structure and cultural conditioning. This was not the first time that such distinctions had been made; they were very much the stuff of anthropology, psychoanalysis and feminism. In this respect, Simone de Beauvoir has explored this distinction in her book, *The Second Sex*, by arguing that “One is not born one, but rather becomes a woman.” (de Beauvoir, 1974, p.295) de Beauvoir’s discussion makes clear how gender differences are set in hierarchical oppositions, where the masculine principle is always the favoured norm and the feminine one becomes positioned as other. Femininity, for her, can only be defined as deficient; it is a deformed creature that is somewhere “between male and eunuch”, and that civilisation is masculine to its very depths, and women are the continual outsiders.

To conclude, it is very crucial to emphasise that the subject (the ‘Self’) and the object (the ‘Other’) in the colonial context were no longer the same, and the cultural characteristics, among which gender constitutes a milestone, of the represented cultures were highly determined by the colonizing culture, the outcome of which was the empowering of the latter. Nevertheless, in the wider world there remain constant shifts between conceptualisations of human beings as

controlled by either predominantly social or biological forces. This is most marked by a return to the age wherein science is the first to be consulted and the last of which is to be taken for granted. Therefore, the return of science tracts, using a quasi-Darwinian logic, powerfully suggests that our biology is once again our destiny. Having discussed the topic of gender at length, the subsequent section will take up the analysis of gender stereotypes in Rebecca Stratton's *The Silken Cage* from a postcolonial perspective.

3. Gender Stereotyping in Rebecca Stratton's *The Silken Cage* (1981)

It was not until the rise of feminist theory in the 1960s that gender studies were allotted a big deal of interest. With the advent of this theory, women's role in social and political life was called into question; it tried to deconstruct the patriarchal restrictions that had marginalized women in different spheres for a long time. The reconsideration of women's literary works was one of the main concerns of this theory. This part is consequently destined to explore Western female writers' complicity or participation in the construction and perpetuation of imperialist discourse. It aims to highlight how gender, as an order of discourse, colours the mode of representation of the oriental 'Other'. The ultimate goal of this analytical part is to draw the reader's attention to the fact that 'white' women writers have replicated the hegemonic discourse that has been enacted by 'white' male writers. *The Silken Cage* by the British romance writer, Rebecca Stratton, will be taken as a case study. Much stress will be put on the subject matter of the discourse of femininity in connection with 'harem', 'patriarchy', and 'displacement'.

There is no doubt that 'harem' is the locus of exotic and abnormal sexuality that fascinated Westerners. It comes to be regarded as a "microcosmic Middle East, apotheosizing the two characteristics perceived as essentially oriental: sensuality and violence." (Melman, 1992, p.62) Stratton's *The Silken Cage* is no exception when it comes to the stereotyping of the different 'Other'. Throughout this romance, we learn about the Arab mode of living and the positioning of women in this society where they are considered as subordinate and inferior to their male counterparts. This subordination is a manifestation of women's mistreatment by men. Interestingly, we can claim that *The Silken Cage*, unlike many other popular romances, has provided a vivid image of 'harem' and how women used to be treated. We are being exposed to an image of a harem from within. This image raises two main important issues: women's captivity/enslavement in the harem, and the question of power. All these issues are to be understood as cultural potentialities to grasp the positioning of women and how they are being underestimated in the East. They are considered nothing but subjects to be sold and used for pleasure. As stated by Stratton (1981):

Gender as a 'Discursive Practice' in Romance Discourse

“The effusive blonde at Paris airport had undoubtedly been kissed with the same practiced fervor as she had been last night, and for much the same reason. She happened to be there and Kadir was a man with a passionate appetite for women. It was disturbing to realize how much she hated admitting it, but it was a fact, and she was a fool to care so much.” (p.155)

This passage reinforces the Western idea that women in the East are suffering under the yoke of enslavement and patriarchy. Such patriarchy is an essential trigger that pushes women to establish their own feminism thereby advocating their rights and their equality to males. They are denied the right even to participate in the activities of their everyday lives. Women have only one purpose to accomplish: to pleasure men. This dramatic situation of the oriental woman is clearly outlined by Mills (1991) when she writes: “Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of ‘third-world woman’ caught between tradition and modernization.” (p.58) This double victimization of women is quite clear in Stratton’s romance when Troy Darrel has been caught in the harem and experiences imprisonment:

“‘But I’d have you faithful to me,’ she told him in a voice that was husky with the desire only he could arouse in her. ‘Always, my love!’ ‘And, Kadir, I couldn’t live in a cage ___’ ‘I will never cage you, my own love, you shall be with me always, wherever I got!’ He took possession of her mouth again and kissed her until she felt she would never breath again except by way of that hard exciting mouth.” (Stratton, 1981, p.191)

Considering the above quote, Darrell reveals that women in the East are to be confined behind bars or imprisoned within the walls of the specific quarters of the harem, but to give them freedom means, above all, to ruin or twist one’s life. Women are seen as the source of evil and destruction. Women’s enslavement is highly reinforced in *The Silken Cage* to the extent that the East is conceptualized as a place where every role of Western civilization is to be reversed and contested. The enslavement of female subjects is to be understood through different stages and various displacements. Darrel was not only displaced physically but above all spiritually and culturally, as Stratton (1981) demonstrates in the following excerpt:

“You brought me here for some ransom of your own, shut me up in the women’s quarters and presumably expected me to be content to stay there, and now you’re trying to make me a prisoner! Well, let me tell you something, I refuse to stay cooped up in your wretched harem, and I demand to be allowed out into the village! If you

don't order your—watchdog to get out of my way I shall scream loud enough to be heard in Meduhma.” (pp.58-59)

It is through following these displacements that it is possible to decipher the real image of women in the East and the Western stereotypes about them. The oriental women are described as mere objects to be sold. They should be used as any other goods or commodities. This commercialization of women is the reason why the East is infamous for women's deprivation of their values as human beings in Western literature. It is also the justification of Western stereotypes about the Arab people and their relationship with women. Women are still to be viewed as complementary to the personality of men. They are subordinate to their counterparts. This passivity of women also shows the fact that women themselves have contributed to their enslavement by accepting to be held in an inferior state. This passivity, in the context of *The Silken Cage*, could be seen in Darrel's ignorance of the rules prevailing within such societies:

“Taking the direct way, Troy did not ask if Mr. Peter Darrell had stayed at the hotel, but stated definitely that he had and asked if the clerk remembered him. Heavy-lidded eyes regarded her cautiously, as if the very fact of her being there alone was cause for suspicion, and it brought home to her that that factor alone could well be a stumbling block to all her enquiries in this male-dominated country.” (Stratton, 1981, p.15)

In the aforementioned extract, we notice how the Western subjects (Troy Darell) are implicitly idealized at the expense of demeaning the natives (Moroccan women). Stratton's intent to shed light on the situation of the Moroccan woman in “a male-dominated country” is not probably to challenge patriarchy and the Moroccan law, but rather to make it an essential attribute of the oriental inferiority. In this sense, it can be argued that the knowledge that most romance writers have about the Arab world is heavily loaded with ideological agendas that Said (1978) pointed out in his influential book *Orientalism*. While the Western discourse of representation tends to denounce the Arab culture and its people, it glosses over the fakeness of emblems of ‘democracy’ and ‘enlightenment’. Interestingly, the inferiority of the Moroccan ‘Other’ can be testified by the writer's extensive exploitation of the technique of repetition. The repetition of the theme of patriarchy in *The Silken Cage* is symbolic; it gives credibility to the writer's mode of representation. It emphasizes the fact that Stratton is haunted by visualizing the backwardness of the Orient. Cultural hybridity has been also seen as a way of asserting the cultural supremacy of the West over the East; this supremacy is vividly clear in the intrusion of Western values within the Arab world in an attempt to make people aware of their backwardness. This Western supremacy is one of the major literary conventions of

Gender as a 'Discursive Practice' in Romance Discourse

popular romances. Stratton's *The Silken Cage* is not out of the rule. It equally manifests itself in the process of reducing the complex relationship between men and women into a form of entertaining romance.

In interracial and intercultural popular romances, captivity and displacement have been considered as defining narrative features. (Barlow & Krentz, 1992, p.17) Such narrative strategies reflect the physical acts of displacement and replacement as a well-established tradition of literary captivity narratives. Popular romances, as captivity narratives, feature a story of contact between natives and Westerners, and the significance of this experience to the 'white': individually, as an initiation into the vagueness of desert; socially, in terms of the survival of white culture; and historically, raising the question of whether violence was inevitable in dealing with the land and its inhabitants. In *The Silken Cage*, Stratton (1981) cites:

“For the moment she did not even realize that Meduhma had been left behind and that they were surrounded on all sides by the searing hostility of the desert; as isolated as two people could be. She watching Kadir's face, fascinated as always by the dark and harshly handsome profile that could arouse such unfamiliar emotions in her, and she dared not even contemplate that he *minged* if Adrian was her lover.” (p.172)

It needs to be pointed out that captivities in popular romances are centered on women who are being displaced and exposed to native inhabitants. Therefore, Stratton's female protagonist, Troy Darrel, could be seen as a prototype of this displacement and experience of captivity. It is through Troy that the writer delineates contrasting responses to these perils:

“Don't weep too much for me, love,' he advised her with a faintly rueful smile.' 'You know me, I 've had a broken heart before.' 'But you loved Ayesha.' He pulled a face. 'Still do,' he confessed, 'but I 'll probably grow out of it. I'm not so sure about you, though; you're really head over heels for that bold, bad kidnapper of yours, aren't you? 'I __ I don't __ I mean __' Tears flooded her eyes and she turned her face to face to the comfort of his shoulder again. 'I love, Peter, and I know it's hopeless and __and idiotic. Kadir is too used to having women fall over themselves to fall in love with him” (Stratton, 1981, p.185)

In certain captivity narratives, women function to represent the white lady in the wilderness and how she will be able to survive in that world only after it has been made safe for refined civilization. What has to be overcome to assure her survival, in fact, is not only danger to her physical safety but also the threat of her being given over to the inherent brutality of the untamed land, that would come in later Westerns. Stratton's *The Silken Cage* exploits the possibility offered by the captivity narrative to help reshape the viewpoint of the white

majority on the Arab culture when she transports her characters into the heart of the plain desert. This transportation or rather transplantation led to the imposition of a dilemma between wish-fulfillment and the question of power. This duality is quite important in terms of understanding the extent to which popular romances adopt some baseless arguments about other cultures to construct a stereotypical point of view about the indigenous.

Generally speaking, one can conclude that Stratton's *The Silken Cage* reproduces the same orientalist assumptions in its representation of the discourse of femininity. It is fraught with a number of stereotypical ideas and images about the oriental 'Other' (men and women). These gender misrepresentations are extremely manifested in the way Morocco, as a subject and a culture, is constructed throughout the account question. Significantly, Stratton's mode of representation is marked by a kind of ambivalence in the sense that she customarily sways between relegating and praising the 'Other'. It should be finally stressed that gender differences between Western and oriental women are dictated by the racist discourse.

4. CONCLUSION

It is through taking the path of discourse analysis that this paper has tried to examine how the Moroccan 'Other' is culturally constructed in Rebecca Stratton's *The Silken Cage* at the gender level. It has come to speak against the stereotypical images of Moroccan men and women. After the analysis of the proposed novel, it has been found that like other writers of imperial works, Stratton's imperial romance helps in the cultural misrepresentation of the Moroccan 'Other'. 'Harem' is seen in the novel as an arena where the discourse of femininity is constructed. While Moroccan women are constructed as 'captives', sexual 'objects', and 'victims' of a male-dominated society, Moroccan men are portrayed as 'despotic', 'primitive', and 'oppressive'. It is due to imperial romance that the circulation of orientalist images about Moroccan men and women has played out. Stratton has been extensively influenced by the previous imperial writings, like *Arabian Nights*, which exoticize non-Western peoples. Stated differently, writers of imperialist accounts influence one another and build upon one another, and their texts are further linked by the history of relations between the East and the West. In addition, Stratton's imperial romance *The Silken Cage* has come not to deconstruct the imperialist thoughts of the 18th and 19th centuries, but to perpetuate them and maintain power relations between the East and the West through gendering the 'Other'.

Popular culture, as a new option of literature, has been reconsidered concerning intercultural postcolonial studies. This reconsideration aims, in the first place, to question the so-called 'literary canon', by inviting into the academic scene what has been referred to in cultural studies as "low-brow" or cheap literature, including popular romance. The commercialization of culture is succinctly obvious in the arena of popular romance. Romance

Gender as a 'Discursive Practice' in Romance Discourse

writers have been accustomed to travelling or reading about other cultures in order to exoticize themselves first, and then to entertain their Western readership. However, the exoticization of the 'colonial' space has unfortunately led to the construction of non-Western cultures as backward/uncivilized, and nothing more than to entertain. It is crystal clear that the focus of this paper has been on the politics of 'gender' in romance discourse, but other areas such as 'race' and 'space' have been left unexamined. Equally, imperial romances can be studied comparatively with other popular texts such as travel, detective, and captivity literary works. What is more, there are many romance narratives that are adapted to screen, and their literary examination might be shifted to audiovisual. Religious issues, class, and representation of the 'body' are among other areas that still need examination. It is to be hoped, then, that this paper has managed to shed light on the importance of investigating imperial popular romance as far as its colonial, orientalist, and cultural discourses are concerned. It is also hoped that this paper has succeeded in displaying how orientalist discourse knows no limits or barriers, but goes across time and space, across 'high culture' and 'popular culture'.

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