ENCOUNTERING THE ORIENT/ISLAM: RE-READING CYBER-NARRATIVAL HETERONORMATIVITY

by

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This paper examines how heteronormativity operates as a mechanism of representation in cyber-narratives.[1] I insinuate that post-structural analyses should be further appropriated in understanding cyberspace as a realm of power/discipline. Cyber-narratives on the "Muslim woman" for example are complex processes of disciplining into being "mute as ever" (Spivak 1988: 294). This paper ultimately re-reads cyberspace as a heteronormative realm imbricating "sexuality" and "race" (as technologies), and regularly representing the normal/abnormal, white/brown, man/woman as unproblematic, fixed categories (Butler 1990). Paraphrasing critiques of visual filmic narratives, the subsequent sections unravel how cyberspace creates unproblematic gendered and racialized "naked [read objective] bodies" of brown/white/men/women (Jameson 1990: 1). Michel Foucault (1978) and Judith Butler (1990, 1993), in their genealogies of sexuality, have examined how visual objectivity of the body itself are processes of control/discipline. This paper is an endeavour towards adapting such genealogies to cyberspace.

This paper departs from scholarship since William Gibson's (1984) terming of cyberspace that presupposes being "on-line" as a transcendental experience from the body.[2] Re-reading cyber-narratives is a method locating cyberspace as always imbricating processes like colonialism, Orientalism, racism and sexism. For example, this paper pursues Edward Said's concerns about proliferating information in "Orientalism Now" (1978) to explore how

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[1] I am grateful to Falak Sufi for literally co-writing this paper.
[2] http://www.library.wisc.edu/libraries/WomensStudies/fc/fcsaco.htm.

cyber-narratives re-present Occidental encounters with the Orient/Islam. Subsequently, this paper unpacks the World Wide Web's role in creating "sexed bodies" (Butler 1990). Here, I draw upon scholarship that has been aware of how realities such as the September 11 event and post-event War/Liberation/Freedom have been hegemonically created by cyber-textual strategies (Der Derian 2004; Puar and Rai 2002; Derrida 2001; Baudrillard 2003). Unlike critiques of a repressive order of "Western" hegemonic cyber-narratives, I am concerned here with how Orientalists and the West to whiteness itself have produced through cyberspace (Rai 2004: 4). The conclusion will highlight this paper's scepticism about cyberspace and suggest engaging alternative narratives to problematize cyberspatial reification of heteronormartivity. This does not aim at detaching the represented "Muslim woman" from the real subject for example (Alloula 2000), but is a mere attempt to facilitate further genealogies.

More recently, postcolonial critiques have furthered Said's (1981) concerns about Orientalism's mass reproduction and/or translation in the 'new media' (Puar and Rai 2002). Sufi (2006) for example examines how a colonial obsession with the eroticism of the "Muslim woman" (Sen 2001: 9) has been regularly reproduced in cyber-narratives. Cyberspace has facilitated *encounters* with the erotic Orient in its *pardanashin* (veiled woman) within harems and *hammam* (Oriental female public bath) for example, re-producing Orientalist voyeurs emancipating (or clicking) the secluded "Muslim woman" through *showing* and *seeing* her further. Orientalist travelogues (complemented by contemporary voyeurism)[3] and Victorian art (on the mute, submissive, sexy Oriental woman)[4] to French pornographic colonial postcards (produced from 1900-1930 in Algeria of *unveiled* women)[5] have been made accessible to web-surfers today, beyond the prior select colonial audiences. Furthermore, proliferated visual representation and the notion of being "on-line" as a transcendental experience has simultaneously detached audiences from political contexts and meanings to situate these "originally" print narratives within.

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[3]   http://www.cloudsmagazine.com/12/Stefan_Borbely_Lady_Montagu.htm; http://www.gonomad.com/womens/0009/hammam.html.

[4]   Even Orientalist museums have gone "on-line". See www.fineartmuseum.net/ New_AG/Matisse.htm for example.

[5]   See www.postcardman.net for example.

Butler's (1990) concerns about feminist attempts at liberation as active processes of creating the "sexed body" is evident in how cyber-feminists' *crusades* against the "veil" for example have re-presented *encounters* with the Oriental female body. Assia Djebar[6], the Sisters in Islam[7] to cyber-feminist blog-posts (Sufi 2006: 15) have respectively criticized the male controlling of the sexual Muslim woman's *zina* (gaze), lamented the limited transnationalism of Kemalist aversion to the *parda* and celebrated Turk/Afghan female "liberties to expose". Interestingly, the aforementioned cyber-feminist narratives are not stereotypical, Western images of Muslim "sexed [female] bodies" oppressed by Islam but rather cyber-narratives by the now fancy-term "native feminists" (Chow 1996). Indeed, this paper furthers these critiques of such feminists into the very practice of *representation* in cyberspace as a process of creating the Oriental, sexed body. Paraphrasing Frederic Jameson, the *visual* is blinding. This is perhaps best evident in how even cyber-narratival attempts to unsettle Orientalist representations like Shirin Neshat's have unintentionally *re-presented* the "sexed body" and added to the proliferation of pornographic cyber-narratives.[8]

One area this paper is attempting to re-read is the post-911 cyber-narratives on heterosexual heroes, homosexual/hypersexual Islamists, sexual *jihads*, sexually-repressed Muslim women have re-presented *encounters* with the Orient/Islam (Rai 2004; Lorber 2002; Rai and Puar 2002). Interestingly, diverse post-911 cyber-narratives from terrorism analyses[9] to Hindu Rightist[10] propaganda have re-presented the harem as an ever-virile production line for Islamists. The author in an interview with a supposed terrorism expert was disturbed by how the latter's views on *jihad* were directly informed by a cyber-notion that *mujahideen* are driven by heavenly rewards of unregulated sex with sixty-two/seventy/seventy-two *huri*s (black-eyed virgins).[11] Indeed, such "scholarship" simultaneously informed me about cyber-narratives on Palestinian female suicide bombers being driven by

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[6] http://www.assiadjebar.net/.

[7] http://www.sistersinislam.org.my/.

[8] http://www.artnet.com/artist/12480/shirin-neshat.html.

[9] I have had the unfortunate tasks in my research capacities of reading through some of the cyber-narratives of Southeast Asian "terrorism experts".

[10] See http://www.vhp.org/ for example.

[11] See http://www.jihadwatch.org for example for its array on articles on this motivation for *jihad*.

"single-hood", the lack of a sex, desperation, and the loss of male (even in-cestuous) relatives.[12] Such cyber-narratives "make" audiences *encounter* Ori-ental females craving for heavenly unlimited towel boys, electrolysis and nicer breasts,[13] and *voyeur* (like Hala Jaber) at women handling and/or strap-ping-on weapons.[14]

While influenced by counter-hegemonic cyber-narratives such as Ar-undhati Roy's webpages[15] to MP3 audios[16] critiquing the American construc-tion of victimized *burqa*-clad Afghan/Iraqi women to liberate, the author re-mains sensitive to how "911" and "post-911" American *masculinity* itself has been simultaneously created in cyberspace. This paper is concerned with how cyber-narratival heteronormativity operates through re-presenting an *encounter* with an Orient/Islam that creates the very entity of the "West", "Occident" or "white man". Cyber-narratives on the victimized "Muslim woman" and *kohl*(eye-shadow)-wearing, hand-holding homosexual "brown men" (like the *Taliban*)[17] have simultaneously created the heroic *masculinity* of "911" fire-fighters, post-911 military-men (read feminist *crusaders*) and even normal family men (as opposed to sexual/violent Oriental harems and Islamist oppression of their women) (Lorber 2002; Puar and Rai 2002; Sufi 2006: 17). Unlike web-columns that have celebrated the valorization of work-ing-class *masculinity*, this paper calls for further sensitivity to, in Foucault's words the *disciplining* of "docile [male] bodies".[18]

This paper dares criticism in suggesting that there exists a complex inter-textuality between cyber-narratives and *real* practice. For example, more re-cent critiques have highlighted how the American regime's refusal of *nego-tiation* (derided as *feminine*) as an option[19] has been inter-textual with prolif-

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[12] http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2004/12/1213_041213_tv_suicide_bombers.html; www.feminista.com/archives/v5n1/dworkin.html.

[13] http://www.bobfromaccounting.com/4_08_02/suicidegirls1.html.

[14] http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,22989-1698047,00.html.

[15] http://www.outlookindia.com/author.asp?name=Arundhati+Roy.

[16] http://mysite.verizon.net/res7dhyg/arundhati_roy.html.

[17] www.sodomylaws.org/world/afghanistan/afnews009.htm; www.easterwood.org/hmmn/?feed=rss2&p=38; http://gayandright.blogspot.com/; http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2006/09/20060911-3.html.

[18] www.springerlink.com/index/GT830T4M7762211T.pdf; http://chronicle.com/free/v48/i09/09b01801.htm.

[19] http://www.thegreenpapers.com/PCom/?20051009-0.

erating cyber-images of Ground Zero as marked by heroic *masculinity*[20] (Lorber 2002; Sufi 2006: 19). The author is more concerned however with how cyber-feminists such as the United States-based "The Feminist Major-ity" operate in cyber-complicity with *real* American displays of *masculinity* such as the war in Afghanistan.[21] These cyber-feminist narratives re-present the Orient/Islam as a regime suppressing the "sexed bodies" of *brown* sisters awaiting *white* sisterly emancipation (this interestingly has even appropri-ated "American peace keeping" in Afghanistan).[22] Similarly, cyber-feminist narratives have conveniently cohabitated with Israeli attempts to prevent Palestinian suicide bombings for example through bringing the *brown wo-man* out of the *bomber* (created by outfits such as the *Al-Qaeda,* Islamic *Jihad* and *Al-Aqsa* Brigade).[23] As noted in a recent critique of post-911 narratives, Miss America blogs re-present *encounters* with an Orient/Islam of brown women *blowing* (themselves up) instead of liberated, white woman *show-ing*.[24] The scepticism the author displays of cyberspace is not an attempt to be-level insightful cyber-narratives that have unpacked the "violence" of lifting the *veil* for liberalism's "equal opportunities", and been attentive to cyber-feminism's essentialism of "sexed bodies".[25]

In conclusion, this paper highlights its scepticism about cyberspace, and suggests engaging alternative narratives to unsettle the reification of hetero-normartivity in cyberspace. This is not an implication of a "reality" and/or "body" being beyond and/or prior to cyber-discursive constitution. On the contrary, this is a humble attempt to further Foucault's genealogies i.e. ad-opting multiple narratives to *problematize*. These narratives, some of which I have been *informed* by in my discussions and interviews[26], unsettle the very cyber-narratives (and intertextual *real* practices) that set out to "emancipate" them. Discussions with and hearings of multiple narratives

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[20] http://explorer.altopix.com/media/8v2sk8/1/424/Ground_Zero_9/11.htm.

[21] For further explication, see http://www.feminist.org/.

[22] http://www.feminist.org/afghan/.

[23] http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2005/06/26/wmid26.xml;
http://www.slate.com/?id=2063954;
http://www.feminista.com/archives/v5n1/dworkin.html;
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Female_suicide_bomber;
http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4436368.stm.

[24] http://blog.missamerica.org/?feed=rss2.

[25] http://71.18.187.11/radicalweb/radicalconsultation/rankin/ar6.html.

[26] My research and interviews encompassed largely anthropological studies of "local", "Islamic", "privatized" and "feminine" practices/narratives of "women" in north Pakistan.

that I have been exposed to reveal a consciousness among these seemingly "repressed Muslim women" of their *bodies* being sites of gendered/ racialized power relations, and an aversion to being re-presented as sexual *encounters* with the Orient/Islam.

While certain critiques have been attentive to how cyberspace has been "racialized" in its dominant confinement to a developed, "white", Western context,[27] this paper has been concerned with the re-presented *encounters* with the Orient/Islam that create these very identities. However, such scholarship does help further genealogies of cyber-narratives as being detached in their very language and/or content from the "entities" they speak for. The author sceptically dismisses even websites and blogposts claiming to re-present the "Muslim woman" as a 'speaking subject' – in re-naming cyberspace as "cyber-*hijab* (veil)"[28] for example – as re-presenting *encounters* with the secluded (anti-interaction/emancipation) *zenana* (harem).[29] This is not an attempt to belittle the "postmodernism" of cyber-bodies such as the *Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan* (RAWA)[30] and the on-line journal *Zanan*[31] who seem aware of aforementioned discursive constitutions, and endeavour to 'subvert' dominant cyber-discourses and *real* politics. The author's critique encompasses a discomfort at cyberspace being a hegemonic form of knowledge, and at how a neoliberal, late-modern capitalist cyberspatial ethic *silences* individual (read *private* and/or *feminine*) practices/narratives that are devalued in its language. This study is merely one engagement of cyber-narratives; hopefully a realization of the *politics* of being "on-line" will spur further genealogies of the seemingly all-pervasive rubric of cyberspace.

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[27] http://www.humanities.uci.edu/mposter/syllabi/readings/nakamura.html.

[28] http://www.islamicvoice.com/2001-05/women.htm.

[29] See for example: www.livinghalal.com/hijaab.html; www.geocities.com/hijab hypocrisy/; www.studentofknowledge.com/question.htm; www.muhajabah.com/hjbscared.htm#decide; www.shira.net/faces.htm.

[30] http://www.rawa.org/.

[31] http://www.zanan.co.ir/.

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[3] Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, NY: Routledge.

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[32] The cyber-narratives have been referenced throughout the paper.