

An Orientalist Reading of John Denham's *The Sophy*

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Abstract

This article attempts the application of Edward Said's views in Orientalism (2003) to John Denham's The Sophy. The researchers have applied only the relevant and some of the key assumptions of Said to this play. Our main contention is that Denham has misrepresented the Oriental characters like the Persians and Turks in the play as the majority of the characters have been portrayed as cultural stereotypes. The playwright has misrepresented the Oriental characters under the influence of the dominant ideology of the early modern period which was to demonize the cultural others. The research findings confirm the contention that misrepresentation of the Oriental characters in the play reflects Denham's Eurocentric perspectives which is Said's main stance in his work Orientalism.

Key-words: Orientalism, Ideology, Misrepresentation, Eurocentric Perspectives, Early Modern Period.

Introduction

The term Orientalism had positive and apolitical meanings in traditional sense. It was, however, Edward Said (1978) who adapted this term in his revolutionary work *Orientalism* to critique the Western European constructs about the people of the Orient and their culture. The researchers have applied Edward Said's views to Denham's *The Sophy* for the descriptive textual analysis of the play. Said's focal point that the Western writers have misrepresented the Orient and Oriental people due to their Eurocentric perspectives has been examined in detail in the play.

Research Questions

- a) In what way(s) does Denham (mis)represent the Oriental characters in his play *The Sophy*?

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- b) To what extent do the representations of the Oriental characters in *The Sophy* reflect Denham's Eurocentric perspectives?
- c) What sort of effects does Denham want to achieve through the representation of the Oriental characters as cultural stereotypes?

Denham's Eurocentric Perspectives

The *Sophy* implicitly as well as explicitly reflects Denham's Eurocentric perspectives in case of the Ottoman Turks and the Islamic Persian characters. The literary discourse employed in the play is in line with other Western discourses which reflect the Eurocentric perspectives and, thus, registers continuity in this tradition. This play has Islamic setting which has been introduced through the choice of names of famous Muslim figures and by their oaths of 'by our holy Prophet, by Mahomet' and by 'Mortys Ally'. For instance, Abbas' Islamic identity has been established by his oaths of 'by Mahomet' which he repeatedly utters in the play. Moreover, he thinks that his throne is also being protected by the Prophet Mahomet. However, the available traditional criticism does not elaborate this point in Denham's *The Sophy*. Majority of the critics including Theodore Banks (1928), Samuel Chew (1937), J. M. Wallace (1974), Anat Feinberg (1980) Linda McJanet (1999), Mathew Birchwood (2007), Javad Ghatta (2009), Chloe Houston (2014), and Sheiba Kia Kaufman (2016) argue that the play has close relevance to the topical and political affairs of 17th century England. According to these critics, the play is a sort of critique, a warning or a lesson to the English rulers of the period. So, it is didactic in nature. Though the points of the worthy critics have great validity yet the play has deeper ideological implications beyond the didactic element and the political relevance to the period. The playwright has represented Islamic Persians as cultural others and the play is rife with the negative images and stereotypical representations of Islamic characters. Hence, the representations of Oriental characters in the play are not, in the words of Edward Said, (2003) true to the "natural depictions of the Orient" (p. 21).

Amin Momeni (2016) observes that "Denham's dramatic representation of the Turks in this tragedy conforms to the persistently negative contemporary British and European perceptions of the Ottomans" (p. 77). Shah Abbas (1588-1629) because of his services to Persia is known as 'the Great'. But most of the English writers have portrayed him negatively and as a cultural stereotype. For instance, Edmund Spenser in *The Faerie Queen* (1590-6) and Thomas Haywood in *The Four Prentices of London* (1594) have represented Shah Abbas as the bitter enemy of the Christian world (Farahmandfar, 2016, p. 142).

Denham has also followed his predecessors and portrayed Shah Abbas as a cultural stereotype in his play.

The Western writers have created the negative and stereotypical images of the Oriental characters due to the phenomenon which Emile Bartels (1993) calls the “emergence of imperialist ideologies and propaganda” or “the ideological backing” (pp. Xiii-Xiv). Similarly, the historians have also misrepresented Shah Abbas as a cultural stereotype. Among them, the most prominent is Sir Thomas Herbert who is the main source of Denham’s *The Sophy* and Baron’s *Mirza*. Herbert in *A Relation of Some Years Travaille* (1634) has represented Abbas as a bloody tyrant rather than a famous king which reflects his biased attitude. It is because of Herbert’s biased attitudes, ParvinLoloi (2012) calls him “a relatively unsophisticated and badly informed traveler” whose work is full of “some historical inaccuracies” and under whose eyes “the historical Abbas has been turned into the most enduring stereotype of medieval and Renaissance thought- the cruel Oriental tyrant” (pp. 349-350). If Thomas Herbert, who has been used as authority and main source, is biased in his attitude towards Shah Abbas, it is natural and logical that Denham will also be biased in his representation of Abbas due to his heavy reliance on Herbert. He produced what he received and what he received was “Pre-judgement [which] produced judgement” (Matar, 2009, p. 223). Thus, all these texts form an intersexuality and have been created “under the pressure of conventions, predecessors, and rhetorical styles” (Said, 2003, p.13) that limit creativity.

Representation of Shah Abbas

“In other words, representations have purposes, they are effective much of the time, they accomplish one or many tasks. Representations are formations or... deformations” (Said, 2003, p. 273). Said’s stance is valid in case of the representations of Shah Abbas in most of the Western works, especially in the literary and historical works of early modern period. *The Sophy* and *Mirza*, like *The Travailes of The Three English Brothers* (1607) also revolve round the story of Safavid king Shah Abbas and his family. *The Travailes of The Three English Brothers* apparently portrays Shah Abbas as a noble and hospitable king but ironically as it has been pointed out in the preceding discussion Abbas is depicted as an emotional, irrational and illogical person contrasted to the Sherleys. These two plays also represent Shah Abbas as a cultural stereotype and further accentuate the emotional and irrational aspect of Shah Abbas. Here, Shah Abbas is depicted as a superstitious, suspicious, cruel, lethargic and lusty Muslim monarch who always

remains indulged in physical pleasures and to gain crown and prolong the period of his kingship, he commits heinous crimes such as parricide, fratricide and filicide.

His representation as an Oriental barbarian and despot follows the typical formula which the English playwrights have used in representation of other Oriental despots like Cambyses, Sultan Soliman, Sultan Murad, and Sultan Selimus. This has been the strategy of the colonial discourse which is homogenizing and based on generalization. Louis Wann (1915) aptly notes that the Persians, Tartars, Arabs, and Egyptians “might have been cast in the same mold. Their morals are loose, and their monarchs are apt to be tyrannical” (p. 441). Through this homogenizing discourse, the West has tried to gain authority over the East. As Emile Bartels (1992) argues that despite the political aspects and didactic nature of the plays related to the Orient, “the demonization of the Oriental rulers provided a highly charged impetus for England’s own attempts to dominate the East” (p. 5).

Representation of Haly and Caliph

Denham’s Eurocentric perspectives may also be noticed in case of the Ottoman Turks and other Islamic Persian characters that have been represented as the hostile others. These Eurocentric perspectives find their full expression in the Islamic Persian characters particularly in case of Haly and Caliph who have been portrayed as the true villains in the play. To Momeni (2016), the name Haly “has religious connotations” (p. 78) since it is “the distortion of Ali, the fourth Muslim caliph who ruled after the death of Muhammad” (ibid, p. 81). Thus, Haly has been modeled on that Ali to whom Dante in his *Divine Comedy* shows along with Mohammad in the eighth circle of Hell (Said, 2003, pp. 68-69). Like his leader and Prophet Mohammad, Ali has all those sins which Dante has described in Mohammad. In the light of this analogy, Haly is represented as a perfect devil. The close examination of his character in the play bears out this fact. The dialogues spoken by him bring out different negative aspects of his personality.

Like Haly’s name, the name of Caliph has also religious connotations. In Islam, Caliph is a religious leader, a holy figure, “an imam who issues a fatwa, a holy order” (Momeni, 2016, p. 81). All Muslims venerate and follow him and his words. Therefore, by using the generic holy name Caliph for a character and his words as divine authority for Mirza’s imprisonment and blindness, Denham has demonized all the Muslim priests.

Conclusion

The Orientalist reading of the play reveals confirms the researchers' contention that the play reflects Denham's Eurocentric perspectives. These perspectives enabled the West to define itself as rational and logical in relation to the Orient as emotional and irrational and assert its cultural hegemony. Finally, such perspectives facilitated the West to pave the way for emergence of the British Empire and the phenomenon of colonialism in the future.

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