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THE INCOHERENCE OF ORIENTALISTS



SARA Z. ALAFIFI

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I have always been interested in Orientalism and my curiosity has been fueled by observing its contemporary patterns in the Arab and Muslim world, where it has become ingrained within our cultural fabric, often unnoticed. I was fortunate to meet Dr. Wael Hallaq in person during one of his talks titled “What is Post-Orientalism?” I recall posing the question of how I, as a female Arab Muslim, could navigate and transcend Orientalist narratives, particularly in my work and design rooted in Western ideas—a consequence of studying at a Western design school. Dr. Hallaq advised me to delve into the writings and historical works of pre-colonial Muslim historians and scholars. Not to romanticize the past, but to understand the unique modes of thought they possessed. He emphasized that by studying this intellectual heritage, I could grasp how the paradigm serving the modern state project eroded and supplanted this rich tradition of thinking. To Dr. Wael Hallaq, I extend my deepest gratitude.

I am deeply grateful to Basma Hamdy, Giovanni Innella, and Levi Hammett for their invaluable contributions to this project. Their support, guidance, and encouragement were instrumental in its completion. To Basma Hamdy, I extend my sincere thanks. Your wisdom and insights have illuminated my path and inspired me to navigate the complexities of Orientalism with courage and integrity. Levi, I am thankful for our profound discussions and the enjoyment of sharing totally different opinions on the subject matter with an open mind and heart. Giovanni, your unwavering attention to every academic interview I shared, coupled with the insightful discussions that followed, alongside your profound passion for history, deeply resonated with me and inspired me to delve even further into my research.

Last but certainly not least, I extend my heartfelt thanks to my family members. My brother, Hamad, deserves special recognition for his significant support through out my journey as a designer. I also want to express my gratitude to my cousin, Beshaiyer Al-Kendi, whose influence introduced me to Edward Said and Orientalism. Without her, this path of discovery would have been vastly different.

ABSTRACT

Orientalism, the Western practice of fetishizing cultures, extends beyond mere misrepresentation of the “other;” it epitomizes the underlying structures of colonialism and imperialism, infiltrating everyday life and eroding the moral fabric of Islamic society.

This thesis analyzes colonial control through the exercise of political power and the production of knowledge, investigating key events related to Napoleon’s Egyptian campaign and the narratives of resistance that emerged in opposition to it.

Through the lens of this 18th-century expedition, the study examines how Western knowledge systematically contributed to the dismantling of Islamic systems of knowledge. Select phrases from Colonial-era printed proclamations are extracted and embroidered into a two-part series of symbolic *Sitarahs*—textiles ritually placed at the door of the Kaaba.

The resulting *Sitarahs* expose the stages of Orientalist discourse, its symbols, and its language, echoing the oppressor’s voice. A visual, critical response to Orientalism, the work engenders an Arabic intellectual culture that prioritizes intrinsic Arab Islamic values, fostering a post-Orientalist society.

INTRODUCTION:

One can define Orientalism as the intellectual movement of Western scholars studying Eastern cultures, commonly referred to as “the East.” While often considered a historical practice, it remains a subject of ongoing debate among Arab scholars who have long recognized its relevance to current issues facing the region. This discourse with Orientalist narratives took on a heightened significance following the “Al-Aqsa flood” on 7 October 2023 and the subsequent war, thrusting Arabs and Muslims into the center of new Orientalist debates.¹ The legacy of Orientalism – as a discourse, an ideology, and a political project – is encountered almost every day by Arab and the Muslim world.² Moroccan writer and political anthropologist Dr. Mohamad Al Mazouz, in an arabic language interview stated that the medieval theories that fueled European hostility towards Arabs and Muslims, as well as the narratives of the 19th century, persist in modern Orientalist discourse.³

Orientalism emerged from Europe’s profound interest in overseas territories. Scholars trace this Western fascination

with the East as far back as the 16th century AD, marked by the first translation of the Qur’ān into Latin, if not earlier⁴. Maxime Rodinson pinpointed the birth of Orientalism in the West to 1779, the year when the term first appeared in England.⁵ However, Orientalism, as a fully-fledged movement, began with Napoleon’s campaign of Egypt (1798-1801), a period marked by a substantial influx of Egyptian goods into France.⁶ Orientalism encompasses various dimensions, including intellectual pursuits of knowledge, albeit with the knowledge gained often serving colonial interests. George Saliba, an American historian and Professor of Arabic and Islamic Science, contends that classical Orientalism was not driven by a genuine pursuit of understanding other nations but rather by a desire to control them.⁷ This approach, he argues, served to support and justify colonial expansion. For instance, French orientalists framed their period of colonization as the “mission civilisatrice” or the French civilizing mission.⁸ This terminology conveyed the idea that their aim was not merely colonization but

rather reform and civilization. However, in practice this perspective devalues native cultures and their knowledge, by implying that indigenous cultures are uncivilized and irrelevant. The French believed it necessary to impose their superior Western ideology and intellectual history to “enlighten” these native populations.⁹

From this historical backdrop, this thesis delves into the impact that classical Orientalism had on the current landscape of Arab society, culture, and politics. It investigates how colonial power and knowledge production sought to dismantle the foundation of Islamic society. From this legacy, there is a need to develop an awareness of Orientalism to encourage an Arabic intellectual culture that actively resists Orientalism and its modern counterparts. The primary aim of this study is to foster narratives that empower Muslims to construct their own history and liberate themselves from intellectual colonization.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

According to Edward Said's definition, Orientalism consists of a Western intellectual movement through which European scholars studied and understood the people of the 'East,' particularly Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa. Said characterizes Orientalism by a set of interconnected practices, including research, literature, art, and media representations, which aim to observe the East. This lens, originating from a Western standpoint has perpetuated stereotypes, simplifications, and a sense of Western superiority, portraying the East as irrational and inferior. One of Said's main arguments is that Orientalism functions as a tool for power, allowing the West to exercise control over the East and justifying Western colonialism, imperialism, and hegemony by presenting the East as in need of Western intervention.¹⁰ He was the first to present Orientalism as part of a discursive system of "power-knowledge," a term Said borrowed from Foucault.¹¹

Although Said's book was very controversial and opened doors for critiques of how Western intellectuals depicted the East,

Wael B. Hallaq, a scholar specializing in Islamic law *Sharia* and legal philosophy, notes that Said's understanding of Orientalism needed further expansion.¹² In an interview, Hallaq discussed Edward Said's portrayal of Orientalism as a complicit academic field in Western academia that "happened to conspire with empire and colonialism, becoming a participant in the disparaging, racist, and discriminatory attitudes of Europeans toward their colonies."¹³ Hallaq noted that Said's depiction of Orientalism aligns with a long-standing understanding that conquerors often regarded conquered populations as inferior. However, Hallaq emphasized that Orientalism reflects a deeper-seated epistemology prevalent throughout western academia. According to Hallaq, Orientalism is not limited to a specific field but is rather a product of Western modernity, encompassing the study of 'the other' from a European perspective. Therefore, Hallaq suggests that abuse, discrimination, and systematic devaluation exist within various post-Enlightenment academic disciplines, mirroring the issues

inherent in Orientalism.¹⁴

Hallaq's argument focuses on the contrast between the Western experience after the Enlightenment and premodern Islam. Ethical values were the central domain in all aspects of life in premodern Islam. These ethics were implemented within the legal framework of the *Sharia*. They were upheld by a community of Muslim scholars, preventing any single entity, whether a ruler or merchant group, from monopolizing or evading the moral responsibility. This Islamic paradigm that centers on ethics sharply contrasts with the Western development of the joint-stock corporation, which exonerates individuals from moral responsibility through legal entities. In modern Western politics, models like Carl Schmitt's concept of total politics granted sovereignty the power to suspend the law in times of emergency, allowing for actions like genocidal violence. Hallaq argues that these two morally neutral Western entities—the joint-stock corporation and the Schmittian state—facilitated global colonialism, to clear the path for capitalistic exploitation through

genocide. This perspective also explains how the West colonized the Muslim world by attempting to dismantle a legal system that protected ethics, exposing them to corrosive economic and political rationalities.¹⁵

According to the historical reference mentioned in *Restating Orientalism*, the French Orientalist scholars provide a prime example of dismantling the Islamic legal systems. During the French colonization of Algeria, and the subsequent military intervention, there was a desire to dismantle the system of Waqf.¹⁶ Waqf refers to the practice of endowment, where Muslim individuals or institutions dedicate property, assets, or valuable resources for charitable purposes that are socially beneficial.¹⁷ The French, instead, planned to use the land for grape cultivation to produce wine. To achieve this, they aimed to release the land from the Waqf by ignoring the existing Islamic legal system, and ultimately turning Algeria into a capitalist entity.

As a propaganda strategy, they dispatched an army of French Orientalists who argued that Waqf is an invented term and not part

of Islamic Sharia.¹⁸ In his book *Restating Orientalism*, Hallaq stated that “France’s heavyweight Orientalists not only helped in matters pertaining to legislation but also effectively ‘campaign[ed],’ to ‘discredit the institution of Waqf among the Algerians themselves.’”¹⁹ This discourse then extended to British Orientalists and some German Orientalists, leading to the development of a whole Orientalist academic field that produced knowledge about the problematics of Islamic law regarding the Waqf. It’s worth noting that their attempt to remove the Waqf failed, but a few hundred years later, the professors who propounded this doctrine in French scholarship became the main mentors of Muslim students from Lebanon, Syria, and Egypt, hence continuing the legacy of Western Orientalism, and disseminating those theories directly to the Arab context.²⁰ From this it becomes clear that the impact of Orientalism is more profound than might be realized; it is not only a Western practice and colonial tool but has significantly undermined Muslims’ faith in the fundamental values of Islamic

society and culture.²¹

The practice of Orientalism was used as a propaganda tool to justify imperial expansion for civilization purposes, evident in Napoleon’s conquest of Egypt. The real reason behind this invasion is believed to be the global capitalist rivalry between the British and the French. France’s main goal was to attack England. However, they could not achieve this due to England’s naval superiority. Instead of a direct attack, they preferred an expedition to Egypt as one of the trading routes leading to the British Indian colonies.²² During the French Campaign against Egypt in 1798, Napoleon dispatched two to three hundred orientalists to study various aspects of Egypt. The French recognized that there was much to learn about Egypt and Islam, and Napoleon’s invasion provided an opportunity to do so. The establishment of the so-called ‘Institution of Egypt,’ which still exists today, dates back to that period and was a colonial project. Its purpose was to understand how to control and govern the population.²³ In an attempt to connect with

the local population to promote their ideas, the institute promoted written and spoken Arabic by establishing a printing press. Napoleon's propaganda pamphlet is one of the first items printed in the press. It was composed in Arabic by the orientalist who accompanied the campaign and was printed for distribution to the people of Egypt. This pamphlet, written in the language of the locals, explained the campaign's objectives and Napoleon's goals for the Egyptians. However, the text contained numerous linguistic and grammatical mistakes and was mocked by Egyptian intellectuals.²⁴ Moreover, it strategically orientalized the invasion, portraying Napoleon as a figure who worshiped Allah, respected the Prophet, and was a friend of Muslims, intending to attract the sympathy of the locals and ease his plans of conquest. making it harder for Muslims to revolt against the invasion.²⁵ It is evident that Orientalism and Colonialism, not only worked hand in hand, but were "two wheels spinning for the same machine."²⁶

Western Orientalist scholars recognized the Arabic language's influence on intellectual

development, due to its connection to linguistic sciences, arts, and its relationship with the Qur'an, Arabic identity, and heritage.²⁷ As a result, the focus of these scholars on the study of the Arabic language—the language of the Islamic religion—was aimed at controlling the Islamic state and shaping it according to their desires. They declared their attack on the Arabic language by fabricating suspicions about its authenticity in ancient history. All these efforts were essentially made to disconnect Arabs from their script — and thus their ties to Islam.²⁸ There is a famous saying by Frantz Fanon: "Colonization doesn't always succeed because the colonized might resist it, but it succeeds when the colonized absorbs the colonizer's morality and attitude."²⁹ Examining the history of colonialism reveals that when language becomes the vessel of identity, it becomes the center of resistance.³⁰ George Saliba contends that Colonization is not a splinter one can simply remove to heal the wound. It produces a moral weight that requires generations to overcome and construct an independent mindset free from

its effects.³¹ In *Restating Orientalism*, Hallaq suggests presenting an authentic narrative about Islam that empowers Muslims to articulate their own history independently. Essentially, Hallaq argues that the structure of language reflects thought and thus it should reflect our underlying beliefs and assumptions. When words are carefully chosen and questions are reframed within a particular perspective, the process of decolonization can be initiated.

In essence, Hallaq's approach is about challenging the deep-seated biases and assumptions that Orientalism has perpetuated and reshaping the way knowledge about Islam is constructed.³²

This thesis explores Orientalism, particularly its role in supporting the hegemonic agendas of powerful Western empires to control and subjugate the Arab Muslim world. It aims to confront the repercussions and legacy of classic Orientalism, its infiltration of every aspect of daily life, and its ongoing erosion of the moral fabric of Islamic society. The literature review examines how classical Orientalism served as a tool for colonialism, extending beyond mere misrepresentation to epitomize the structures of colonialism and imperialism inherent in Western modernity. It highlights the cultural and political hegemony imposed upon the Arab and Muslim world, leading to the dismantling of indigenous systems under the guise of progress. In response, this thesis endeavors to foster an authentic intellectual culture built from the foundation of Arabic language and Islamic values, aiming to construct a post-Orientalist society.

The following chapter will explore a series of regional design precedent studies, delving into diverse facets including the exploration of historical narratives and the adoption of methodologies influenced by Eastern regions. These studies offer valuable insights into the development of the framework I have created for my thesis.

PRECEDENT STUDIES:

“OPERATION SUNKEN SEA” by Hiba Amin, is a multimedia art project that explores the destructive nature of colonialism in the modern age. This project is based on an actual colonial proposal that surfaced in the 1920s by the German architect Herman Sörgel that aimed to drain the Mediterranean Sea. Sörgel’s goal was to connect Europe and Africa into one large continent to ease the process of exploiting natural resources in Africa.

In this project Heba Amin re-appropriates this entitlement in a series of mixed media works that take a critical look at Sörgel colonialist attitudes towards his so-called Atlantropa proposal.³³ The artist portrays herself as an authoritative ruler of a fictional nation mimicking the speeches and the language of male authoritarian figures. Amin’s work is inspired by the language and the ideas of past authoritarian governments to suggest a new vision for Africa and the Middle East. The project examines a historical event that reflects controversial Western ideas about these regions and portrays how colonial powers would do



Figure 1

what it takes to reshape and change the entire world for its capitalist needs. What is particularly compelling is its unique focus on delving into one story and constructing an entire framework around it. This includes a combination of mixed media such as maps, flags, objects, and performance art, all dedicated to narrating a specific historical incident. Simultaneously, it manages to shed light on multifaceted concepts such as geopolitical issues, totalitarian regimes, and the influence of globalization.

PRECEDENT STUDIES:

Slavs and Tatars is a collective group of researchers and artists that focuses on the region between the Great Wall of China and the former Berlin Wall. Their practice bridges design and research, inviting people to explore the depth of their work through a warm and abundant sense of humor.

Love Letters work by Slavs and Tatars investigates linguistic transformation: ten equally sized tufted carpets explore language as a vehicle for political and metaphysical liberation. Inspired by the cultural production of carpets in Turkey, these carpets use caricatures that show the challenges of adapting an imposed foreign alphabet on one's native language. The carpets narrate the story of how the Turkic-speaking communities in the Russian Empire transitioned from writing in Arabic script to Latin and later Cyrillic because of the Bolshevik's imposition to further distance Turkic communities from their Arabic and Islamic heritage. The artwork emphasizes the unpredicted mistakes of these linguistic shifts, such as the loss of vowels, letters, and mistranslations, as symbols of the trauma



caused by modernization.

This project represents an interesting precedent for my research because it shows how language can become a tool for imperialism to control and reshape communities by altering their identities.

Figure 2

PRECEDENT STUDIES:

The art installation titled **Dream Travelled** by Sultan Bin Fahad reinterprets folk stories and historical narratives through the use of material cultures. Sultan Bin Fahad transforms these narratives into contemporary contexts, providing a reassessment and offering a personal perspective on Islamic Art.

The inspiration behind this work comes from a Hajj certificate issued in 1940, given to pilgrims visiting the three holy mosques in Islam: Masjid al-Haram, Al Masjid an Nabawi and Al-Aqsa Mosque. The certificate incorporates illustrations of these holy masjids and is characterized by vibrant colors and rich graphics, a practice that no longer exists in the Islamic world. Over time, these certificates were standardized, resulting in a simpler design.

The installation transforms those bidimensional certificates into a room adorned with Hajj murals and images from the Holy Quran, and it is crafted using thousands of colored beads. This creation entirely made by embroidery serves as a tribute and remembrance to the pilgrims



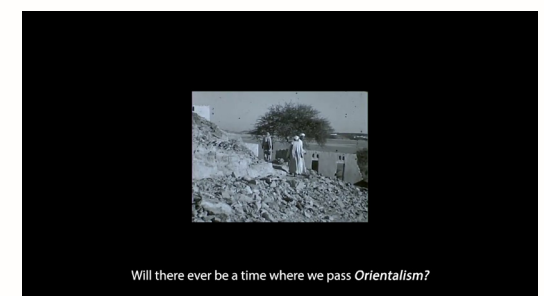
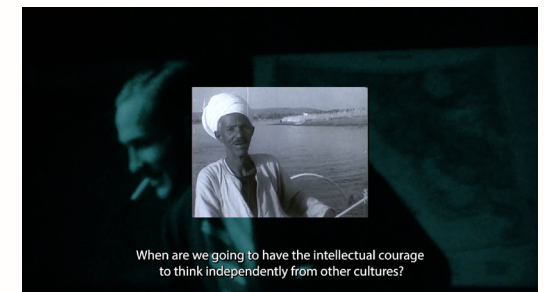
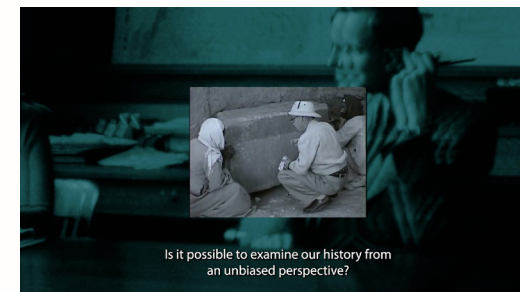
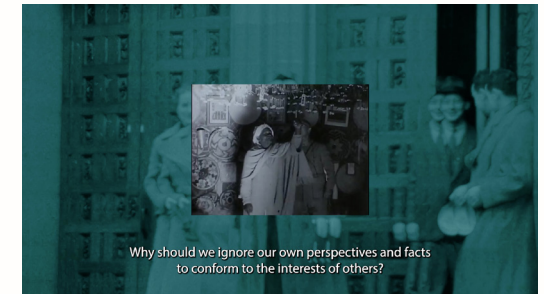
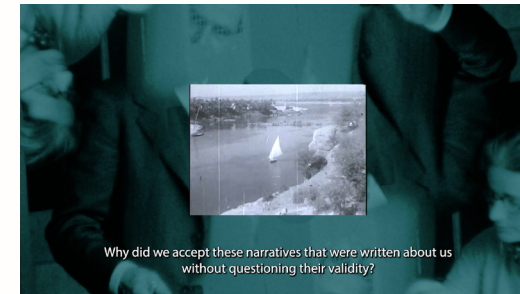
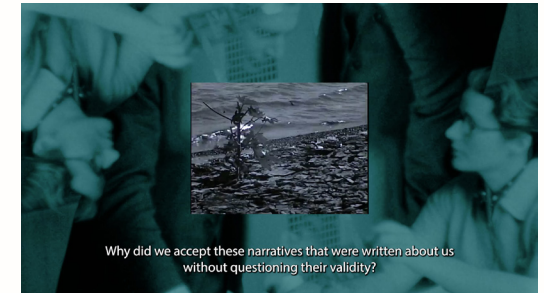
Figure 3

who embarked on the Hajj pilgrimage journey in earlier times when travel was very challenging to achieve.

At the core of Bin Fahad's artistic practice is the use of vernacular symbols drawn from Islam. The authenticity of this work is inspiring. It sheds light on a no longer celebrated practice and recreates symbols known to the Middle East region, establishing a deep connection to cultural and religious roots.

QUESTIONS OF BEGINNINGS:

Being inspired by the works of Wael Hallaq and George Saliba, I found myself on a path filled with questions I needed to address in order to shape my thesis. My focus leaned heavily towards the historical aspects of Orientalism. As it became evident to me, if history does not include our voices and is not written by us, then the core of the issue lies therein. In my exploratory works, I emphasized the importance of every nation having the right to independently record its history, drawing from its unique perspectives, affiliations, beliefs, originality, and subjectivity, grounded in thoughtful sources. The goal should always be to achieve objectivity in interpreting history, even if it means conflicting with dominant historical narratives.



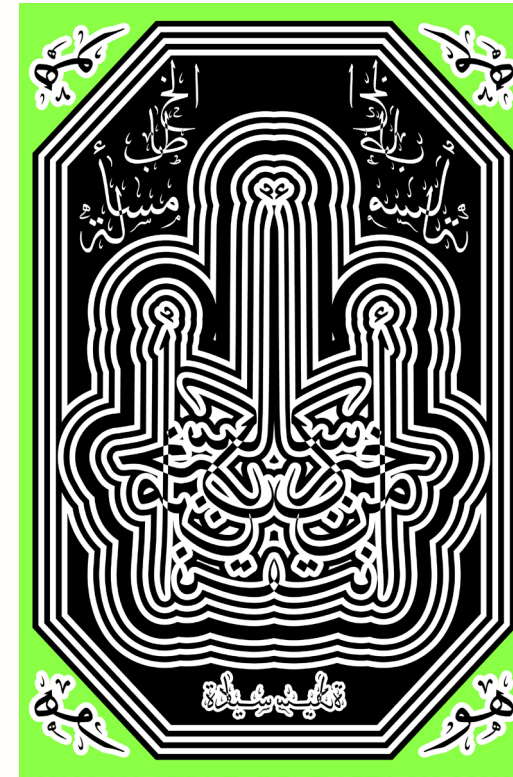
Within this context, I explored two distinct directions: **Direction 1: (Exploring Contemporary Orientalist Statements through Altered Carpets)** This direction focused on crafting poetic commentary statements that satirizes and humorously engages with Orientalist perspectives, while integrating materials that contribute to a singular concept.

I've collected statements from interviews with thinkers like Wael Hallaq, editing them to fit my vision. These statements have been seamlessly integrated into a series of carpets, ideally serving as Trojan horses able to bring the conversation about Orientalism right in the contexts where it is most needed – the homes and collections of Orientalists. The choice of carpets, fetishized objects in the West and frequently depicted in Orientalist art, is deliberate. They carry layers of political significance and are often embellished with calligraphy. By utilizing carpets as a medium, my intention is to subtly convey these messages while also redirecting inquiries back to Western audiences, captivating them with the "Oriental" design.



QUESTIONS OF BEGINNINGS:

The design of these exploratory works was influenced by the visual language of Iranian posters, infused with the 'Muthanna' Mirror Writing style from Islamic Calligraphy. Departing from the typical carpet appearance, I aimed for a more contemporary feel of a traditional carpet. However, upon receiving the carpet produced in Isfahan, the carpet looked very flat and modern because I designed it with 4000 pixels, when usually typical carpets look more pixelated. Also the overall seemed somewhat plain, lacking the intricate decoration usually associated with carpets, which I believe would have added much more value to its design, and strengthened the reference to the traditional carpets of the region. The statements I gathered were somewhat interesting, yet I realized that the work needed to be more grounded and less confusing. Viewers were uncertain about the intended audience and if the carpets were addressing Arabs, imperialists, or adopting a fictional or an actual voice. Furthermore it was unclear if I was assuming the role of Napoleon, dictating directives, or portraying the perspective of



a confused Arab who is internalizing an Orientalist mentality. Navigating typography and language requires utmost precision and a single word out of place can disrupt the entire message. While I appreciate the potential for messages to be interpreted in various ways, I also recognized that adopting an ambiguous and, at times, cryptic language could diminish the clarity of my message.. As a result I chose a more direct approach to clarify my thesis's objectives enabling an audience who may be less familiar with Orientalism to grasp the main message.

Direction 2: The second direction I considered involved extracting precise sentences from the works of Orientalists and conducting historical research to illustrate the profound impact of Orientalist narratives on the pre-colonized nations of the Middle East. This approach aimed to equate Orientalism with colonialism, highlighting the depth of its influence. By scrutinizing the exact words of Orientalists and delving into historical materials, I sought to reveal the extent to which Orientalist discourse shaped perceptions and policies, ultimately reinforcing colonial dominance. I initially planned to collect three different stories from various accounts of colonization in North Africa and the Middle East. However, I ultimately chose to center my focus on Napoleon's conquest of Egypt (1798-1801). This decision was influenced by its remarkable significance, being perceived by many historians as the pioneering colonial conquest notable for introducing Enlightenment ideas to the Orient as well as the moment where the production of oriental literature began. **Figure 4**



NAPOLEON CONQUEST OF EGPYT:

In Gustave Bourgin's painting, a portrayal unfolds of the moment Napoleon enters Cairo. In this imaginary scene, Egyptians are depicted kneeling and prostrating in a display of respect and appreciation for the occupying leader. However, this depiction stands in stark contrast to historical reality, as Napoleon's entry into the city was marked by violence and resistance. Despite this, many French paintings of the campaign persist in depicting such scenes, reinforcing a narrative propagated by French historians and subsequently echoed by generations of European historians.³⁴

The story of the young leader Napoleon Bonaparte, who reached the pinnacle of his military success, begins with his preparations for a new journey to the East at the heart of the Islamic lands. In the spring of 1798, Napoleon began planning to establish a colony in Egypt that lasted for three years starting on July 1, 1798, and concluding on September 2, 1801. Like any occupier, Napoleon initiated the campaign to serve his own and his country's interests, primarily aimed at damaging Britain's colonial process



Figure 5

by controlling the routes to the British colonies in India. However, as the French troops advanced in the Egyptian territories, they presented themselves as agents seeking to 'civilize' Egypt and bring it towards modernity. This strategy explains why the campaign adopted a crucial technology as its weapon: the printing press. As a modern communication technique, the printing press served as a strategic medium for propaganda throughout the campaign, until its very last day. Napoleon's keen interest in printing led him to insist that a printing press be relocated to Egypt, where he supervised the printing of the first proclamation distributed among the Egyptian population.³⁵

The Orientalization of the Occupation

During this occupation period, Muslims had various reactions to the occupying forces, influenced by their beliefs. One of the main principles that French orientalist learned is that Islam teaches that Muslims should not live under non-Muslim rulers and should move to places where Muslim laws are followed. So, the French designed their propaganda to present themselves as Muslims aiming to be accepted and tolerated. During the French occupation, *Azhar ulama* (scholars), *shaykhs*, and other Egyptian Muslims reacted in different ways. Some left Cairo, some joined the French administration, and others stayed in the country, but avoided the invaders. Overall, the French rule was tacitly accepted.³⁶

Aljabatri, The voice of the oppressed

Abd al-Rahman al-Jabarti, a religious scholar and historian, resided in Cairo during the Napoleonic campaign. He chronicled the events of this occupation, compiling them into the book "Arabic Aja'ib al-athar fi al-tarajim wal-akhbar", also known in English simply as "Al-Jabarti's History

of Egypt." Al-Jabarti's work is significant for this thesis project as he represents the voice of the oppressed, countering the narrative often shaped by victors in history. His documentation plays a crucial role in shedding light on the realities of colonization. Additionally, his proficiency and eloquence in Arabic highlighted French propaganda's weaknesses. He scrutinized the proclamations, exposing spelling errors and revealing contradictions in the French claims regarding their belief in and respect for Islam.³⁷ According to Aljabatri, the French violently suppressed the rebellion during the Cairo uprising in October 1798. He described how they rode on horseback, wearing boots, and proceeded to desecrate the mosque. They tore apart books and the Quran, throwing them onto the ground. Al-Jabarti also mentioned that they defiled the mosque by relieving themselves on its premises. Anyone found inside the mosque, whether sheikhs or students, was forcibly stripped of their clothing and expelled from Al-Azhar. This starkly contrasts with the slogans of respect

for Islam and Muslim sanctities that the printing press had previously promoted.³⁸ Further examination of history reveals that the French, deep down, mocked the claims they made to the Egyptians. For instance, in a letter from General Duput to one of his friends, he admitted, "We're tricking Egyptians by feigning interest in their religion, which neither we nor Bonaparte believe in."³⁹ which proves to us that the French had accommodated Islam to gain the trust and loyalty of the locals to achieve their end goal of entrenching colonial rule. The French Campaign can be characterized by three distinct periods: the Napoleonic period(1798-1799), the Kléber period (1799-1800), and the Menou period (1800-1801). Islamic propaganda during the Napoleonic period of the invasion was more intense than the other two periods.

The Napoleonic period

Napoleon's proclamations often cited Quran and used its style, Napoleon also was interested in religious manifestations. He attended religious ceremonies, let the singers walk in his procession, and praised the prophet. After his initial proclamation (see page reference), Napoleon escalated his propaganda efforts to extreme levels, transitioning from a facade of respect for Islam to claims of conversion and even owning some supernatural powers. He asserted, "I am able to expose what is in the hearts of each of you, for I know at sight the moods of man and what he conceals, even if I say nothing openly. The time and the day will come when it will be evident to you that all my acts and rulings were by an irrevocable divine decree." Furthermore, Napoleon presented his actions as direct manifestations from God, attributing divine powers to himself. However, he crossed sensitive boundaries in his religious propaganda. As accurately depicted by al-Jabarti, he claimed Mahdihood and Prophethood, by saying: "The Creator, who is Praised and Exalted,

commanded me to be compassionate and merciful with His servants. I have acted in accordance with His command and have become merciful and compassionate towards you [Egyptians]."⁴⁰

Afterwards, he openly declared, "I am a monotheistic Muslim, I glorify the Prophet Muhammad, and I love Muslims." However, contradictory statements surfaced even in this claim. Aljabatri noted, If he truly had converted to Islam, he would have said "our prophet" instead of "the prophet." Moreover, the passage becomes even more complicated and contradictory: "I love the Prophet Muhammad because he is a hero like me. His emergence resembles mine. I am even higher than him because I fought harder than he did." No true muslim would dare to claim prophecy and mahdihood or superiority over the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).⁴¹ In later parts of the text, Napoleon threatened the members of the *diwan* – the central finance department in Islamic societies – with his conversion to Christianity again. All these comparisons and efforts to equate Napoleon with the prophet of Islam easily justify al-

Jabarti's reactions to disbelief in the French claims of Islam as it invalidated the religious propaganda that the French had been trying hard to build with great effort.⁴²

Kléber's period

During Kleber's period, no religious propaganda was made compared to the intense propaganda activities of Bonaparte. However, this period was characterized by extreme violence. The French army General Jean-Baptiste Kléber besieged Cairo during the second rebellion, forbidding its residents from access to food and water, and ordering the French cannons to bombard the city day and night. The French army executed the most horrific revenge on Cairo's civilians until Kléber announced orders in April of the year 1800 to cease the killing and abuse against the people of Cairo. Nonetheless, it was too late to redeem his image. Kléber was fatally stabbed with a dagger four times by one of the Al-Azhar young students, Suleiman Al-Halabi.⁴³

Menou's period:

After Kléber's death, Jacques Menou's period began, during which he pretended to embrace Islam and continued to engage in Islamic propaganda, similar to what Napoleon did. However, unlike Napoleon's era, the announcements and correspondence during Menou's period were primarily directed towards the members of the *diwan*, rather than the Egyptian society at large. Neither the Kléber nor Menou period can be equated with Napoleon's in terms of mass propaganda. Although Menou claimed to be a practicing Muslim, his dialogues on Islam were incoherent and paradoxical. When faced with moral dilemmas, he would ask the sheikhs, "Is this permissible in your faith?" in an attempt to portray himself as acting by Islamic principles. However, unintentionally, he posed the question from the perspective of an outsider, a non-Muslim.⁴⁴

SEARCHING FOR THE RAY OF LIGHT

French historian Alain Decaux famously stated that “The passing of Napoleon through Egypt was the first ray of light to shine in the darkness of barbarism,”⁴⁵ But upon examining what this ray of light truly changed in Egypt, it becomes difficult to find clear answers, leaving us to question the validity of this assertion. The French occupation has been subject to extreme interpretations. Some historians conveniently claim that the invasion brought revolutionary ideas to Egypt, citing examples such as the establishment of the Institut d’Égypte and the *Diwan*. However, in reality, the Institut was a scientific center with its own agenda, publishing studies in French for a French audience and isolating these studies from the Egyptian people. Essentially, it functioned as an orientalist institute founded to study Egypt.⁴⁶

Furthermore, the claim that the French colonizers were propelling Egypt into modernity and a period marked by progress ignores the imperialism inherent within the definition of progress and modernity according to European standards. Therefore,

asserting that the occupation brought revolutionary ideas to Muslim society seems implausible, as the people at the time did not speak the language of the occupier. On the other hand, the *diwan* as an administrative unit with a similar purpose had existed during the Mamluk period, and the Ottomans maintained it. All the French primarily accomplished was the discovery of the Rosetta Stone and the authoring of “Description de l’Égypte,”⁴⁷ written in French, a language inaccessible to most Egyptians, 28 years after the end of the occupation. No genuine reform was found during the French occupation, as they used Egypt as a laboratory of discovery for their own benefit rather than for the Egyptian people. Genuine reform and progress only came after the French retreated, during the reign of Muhammad ‘Ali Pasha (1805-1849), Egypt witnessed remarkable advancements in its economic and socio-political landscape.⁴⁸

During the investigation phase, I uncovered how orientalists used their knowledge of Islamic society in Egypt to support

colonizers in asserting political dominance and disrupting the societal structure. Their aim to establish good relations with the Egyptian people was at the center of the French occupation policy. The French authorities exploited their understanding of Islam and Islamic culture as a means to control and colonize Egypt. In this process, language emerged as a critical instrument for manipulating the local population. This led me to focus my thesis on unveiling the propaganda-driven language that was employed to oppress the colonized people. Further exploration of this topic will be explored in the upcoming chapter.

PROJECT OUTCOMES

Introduction to *The Sitarahs*

Through my research, I encountered an intriguing textile known as the *Sitarah*, which serves as the curtain for the door of the Ka'bah – the stone building at the center of Islam's most important mosque, the Masjid al-Haram in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. It constitutes the most elaborate segment of the Kiswah – the cloth that covers the Ka'bah – and is replaced annually. Since Mamluk times and continuing until the mid-20th century, *sitarahs* were crafted in Egypt and journeyed from Cairo alongside the kiswah to Mecca. Despite evolving designs over the centuries, Qur'anic verses consistently featured prominently in its adornment. These verses are intricately arranged in panels, friezes, and cartouches, predominantly in the elegant Thuluth cursive script that was developed by the Ottoman Empire. The *Sitarah* is a religious symbol created by those responsible for the most sacred place in Islam, the Kaaba.⁴⁹ It served as a representation of their wealth and power, as well as their humility and devotion in the face of Allah. The symbolic,



Figure 6

communicative and expressive nature of the traditional *Sitarah* allows for multiple messages of faith, wealth and politics through a linguistic embroidered tapestry. I chose to create subversive replicas to express the multilayered colonial narratives inspired by the proclamations. Furthermore, like the proclamations, the *Sitarah* follows the Quranic stylistic system. Beginning with Bismillah and continuing with Quranic verses, it serves as a powerful medium to convey the distortion of Islam for colonial purposes. There were three stages in the colonization process of Egypt during the Napoleonic campaign. However, two of these stages were heavily reliant on propaganda and language manipulation. My focus lies in exposing the language that abuses this power. Consequently, I have designed two *Sitarah* projects: one symbolizing the beginning of colonization and, the other, its culmination.

On choice of **languages:**

The *Sitarahs* I created feature two languages: French and Arabic. Initially, I had chosen to create them in English and Arabic, the two most commonly used languages in Doha,

Qatar. However, upon further consideration, I chose to swap the English for French. First, I wanted to use the French text in its original form to confirm historical references and ensure accuracy and authenticity. Second, I was intrigued by excluding English as a means of excluding the majority of audience members, as French speakers in Qatar are infrequent. This method of exclusion echoes the alienation of Egyptian people from political decision-making processes and the manipulative strategies of French Orientalists to abuse the Arabic language and Islamic religion for political gain. The interpretation of the *Sitarah* by different viewers offers a unique perspective on their own histories and their connection to the legacies of colonization.

PROJECT OUTCOMES NAPOLEON'S PROCLAMATION SITARAH:

Below is the text I selected for my first Sitarah, written in Arabic and French:

1/ *In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. There is no God but God. He had no son and no companion in his sovereignty.*

2/ *On behalf of France, which was built on the foundations of freedom and equality- the commander in chief of the French armies, Bonaparte.*

3/ *The Lord of this world and the hereafter, the Almighty, has already decreed the end of their rule.*

4/ *Egyptians! They may tell you I came here solely to abolish your religion, but this is a patent lie: do not believe it.*

5/ *I am more a servant of God – may He be praised and exulted – than the mamluks, that I venerate His Prophet and the great Koran.*

6/ *The Lord of this world and the hereafter,*

*the Almighty, has already decreed the end of their rule.*⁵⁰

The extracted text from the proclamations shed light on the strategy adopted by Napoleon. He aimed to win the hearts and minds of the Egyptian people by portraying himself as the savior of Egypt, the protector of Islam, the ally of the Ottomans, and the adversary of the Mamluks, who held power in Egypt at the time. Napoleon attempted to present his forces not as colonizers, but as liberators.

Aljabatri account:

Upon reading Al-Jabarti's book, he documents Napoleon's proclamation and begins deconstructing it. I extracted this sentence that he wrote at the end of his investigation regarding Napoleon's first proclamation:

*"There is no doubt that this is a madness in the mind. And exaggeration in ignorance, That is, worship, in addition to its abundance, with disbelief that covered his heart and prevented him from reaching the path of his guidance, and in speech there is precedence and delay, and an independent lie."*⁵¹

"لا شك أن هذا خيلاً في العقل، وغلو في الجهل، أي عبادة فضلاً عن كثرتها مع كفر غطي على، فؤاده، وحجبه عن الوصول إلى طريق رشاده، وفي الكلام تقديم وتأخير، وكذبة مستقلة."

In summary, this sentence encapsulates Al-Jabarti's interpretation of the proclamation. Al-Jabarti suggests that the wording of Napoleon's proclamation implies alignment with the three sects (Judaism, Christianity, Islam), rather than solely with Islam. By mentioning the name of God and denying offspring and partners, while omitting Islamic testimonies ("There is no god but God" and 'Muhammad is the Messenger of God'), the proclamation denies Islamic principles and rejects essential Islamic beliefs and practices.

Al-Jabarti then critiques Napoleon's justifications for occupying Egypt: 'I only came to you in order to protect your rights from the hands of the oppressors.' Al-Jabarti dismisses this as the first lie concocted by Napoleon. He further rebukes Napoleon's claim of worshiping God more than the Mamluks, deeming it as absurd and ignorant. Al-Jabarti also questions

Napoleon's claim of respecting the Prophet, labeling it as a blatant lie. He argues that true respect for the Prophet entails belief in him and acceptance of Islam as doctrine. Similarly, Al-Jabarti refutes Napoleon's claim of respecting the Qur'an, asserting that genuine respect involves honoring its contents and acknowledging the Prophet as the seal of the prophets and the conveyer of the finest messages, which the French reject. Additionally, I included the name AlMahdi and equated it with Napoleon, referencing later proclamations where Napoleon claimed prophethood and Mahdihood. Through this comparison, I attempt at joining Al-Jabarti in exposing further inconsistencies and manipulations in Napoleon's rhetoric. *(Refer back to page 30 The Napoleonic period)*

PROJECT OUTCOMES MENUO (ABDALLAH) PROCLAMATION SITARAH:

The text I selected from Menuo's proclamation:

1/ *In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful, there is no god but God, Muhammad is the Messenger of God*

2/ *From Abdullah Jacques Menou, general in chief of the French armies.*

3/ *I told you that I only punish evil people who disobey God and His Messenger*

4/ *I told you that I would take revenge on murderers and thieves*

5/ *Bonaparte has ordered me to rule this kingdom with justice, fairness, and chivalry*

6/ *Poor to his Lord, Abdullah Jacques Minno.*⁵²

The selected excerpts exhibit strong religious terminology. Menuo identifies himself as a Muslim by reciting the two testimonies, contrary to Napoleon's proclamation, and also changes his name to Abdallah. The threatening messages

mimic the Quranic style of writing when read in Arabic. In this later period, French authorities constantly attempted to draw analogies with Islamic elements to justify and strengthen their own claims. However, in doing so, they ended up falsifying their own assertions. It's important to note that the Dagger and the Palm Tree symbolize the assassination of General Kléber. This event marked a turning point for Menuo, prompting him to escalate the propaganda efforts out of fear for his own safety. I extracted this satirical sentence from Al-Jabarti's book, symbolizing the conclusion of the French occupation and their futile efforts to persuade the Egyptian people, which ultimately boomeranged on them: "The Francis lost their money in Egypt between a donkey and wine. And soon For them in the Levant is a destruction in which their lives and goals will be wasted."⁵³

It also alludes to Napoleon's campaign in Syria, which ended in failure and the evacuation of the French army from Egypt.

"إن الفرنسيين قد ضاعت دراهمهم في مصر
ما بين حمار وخمار وعن قريب لهم في الشام
مهلكة يضيع فيها لهم أجال أعمار"

PROJECT OUTCOMES THE SITARAHS:

Choice of Colors

Taking inspiration from the original Sitarahs, the design is embroidered on a black piece of fabric, mimicking the actual colors of the Sitarah. Gold and silver threads are typically found in the Sitarah. I adopted gold to represent the voice of the French in Arabic, while silver represents the French script. Red thread symbolizes texts containing menaces and violent messages, while green represents the voice of Aljabtri, the author who documented this oppression.

Scripts and Fonts

For the proclamation typed in French, I chose the Johnson font to mimic the early printing press font used in the 1800s. Capitalizing the Latin text was intended to evoke the grandeur of Roman carved inscriptions on walls, reflecting Napoleon's conquests that ultimately elevated him to the status of emperor.

For the proclamations written in Arabic, I collaborated with an Egyptian calligrapher named Hamed, who replicated the style of the Thuluth script—the same script used in the Sitarahs and the cover of the

Kaaba. The Thuluth script, developed by the Ottomans, with its vertical extended letters like marching soldiers, carries a long-standing authoritarian aesthetic, as it was the official text used for religious inscriptions, princely titles, and epigraphs. Kufi Quranic script was chosen to represent the voice of Al-Jabarti, perceived as the voice of truth.

Symbols

The Bee symbolizes immortality and resurrection was chosen to link the new dynasty that Napoleon started to the very origins of France. The hand of justice, the oak leaf, the bow, laurel wreath, these emblems symbolize Napoleon's military prowess, leadership, and imperial aspirations. They were prominently displayed on flags, uniforms, and other insignia of the French Empire during his reign, serving as a potent symbol of French power and dominance. The sword represents the Mamluk sword that Napoleon carried during the campaign to mimic the appearance of generals of the East. The Napoleon Rifle symbolizes the technological advantage the French possessed for the invasion, highlighting the

pivotal role of weapons firepower in the success of their colonization efforts.

On the production of the Sitarahs

The typical size of the Sitarah is 505 x 275 cm. However, in my design, the scale is 90 by 165, maintaining proportions similar to the original size but significantly smaller. Each Sitarah required one million stitches to create. The work embroidered using computer machine embroidery, employing Satin stitch type to mimic the handmade way of stitching and to give it an authentic premodern look to the final designs. The two Sitarahs are made and produced in Qatar.





IL N'Y A POINT D'AUTRE DIEU +

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ مُحَمَّدٌ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ
مَا تَدْرِكُهُ الْبَصَرُ وَلَا يَخْفَى عَلَى الْعِلْمِ وَسِعَتْ كُرْسِيُّهُ السَّمَاوَاتُ وَالْأَرْضُ وَلَا يَئُودُهُ حِفْظُهُمَا وَهُوَ الْعَلِيُّ الْعَظِيمُ

قُلْ مَا أَسْأَلُكُمْ عَلَيْهِ مِنْ مَالٍ وَلَا مِيرَاثٍ وَلَا مِنْ حِسَابٍ
وَأَنْتُمْ تَعْلَمُونَ

+ QUE DIEU ET IL N'Y A RIEN NI +



← ASSOCIÉ DANS →



← SON EMPIRE →



JE SUIS VENU VERS VOUS UNIQUEMENT
POUR RESTAURER VOS DROITS DE LA
MAIN DES OPPRESSEURS, ET QUE JE
SUIS PLUS UN SERVITEUR DE DIEU -
QU'IL SOIT LOUÉ ET EXULTÉ - QUE LES
MAMELOUKS, ET QUE JE VÈNÈRE SON
PROPHÈTE ET LE GRAND CORAN.



أَنْتُمْ كُنْتُمْ تَعْلَمُونَ



* MAIS DIEU MAÎTRE DE L'UNIVERS ET *

وَاللَّهُ يَكْتُبُ مَا يُشَاءُ وَاللَّهُ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ

* TOUT-PUISSANT, A ORDONNÉ QUE *



LEUR EMPIRE FINIT.



فَوَاعِدَهُمْ وَعَاجِلَهُمْ
وَأَنْتُمْ تَعْلَمُونَ



فَوَاعِدَهُمْ وَعَاجِلَهُمْ
وَأَنْتُمْ تَعْلَمُونَ



IL N'Y A DE DIEU QUE DIEU,
ET MAHOMET EST SON PROPHÈTE.

قُلْ مَا أَسْأَلُكُمْ عَلَيْهِ مِنْ مَالٍ وَلَا مِيرَاثٍ وَلَا مِنْ حِسَابٍ
وَأَنْتُمْ تَعْلَمُونَ



أَنْتُمْ كُنْتُمْ تَعْلَمُونَ

VOUS AI DÉJÀ DIT USIEURS FOIS QUE
JE NE P ONISAIS QUE LES MÉCHANS ET
LES HOMMES QU NE CRAIGNAIENT
PAS DION ET SON PROPHÈTE,
JE VOUS AI DIT QUE JE PUNISSAIS DE
MORT LES ASSASSINS ET LES VOLEURS,
LA RÉPUBLIQUE FRANÇAISE
ET LE PREMIER CONSUL, LE CÉLÈBRE
GUERRIER BONAPARTE M'ONT
ORDONNÉ DE VOUS GOUVERNER AVEC
DOUCEUR, JUSTICE ET HU- MANTÉ.



فَوَاعِدَهُمْ وَعَاجِلَهُمْ
وَأَنْتُمْ تَعْلَمُونَ



فَوَاعِدَهُمْ وَعَاجِلَهُمْ
وَأَنْتُمْ تَعْلَمُونَ



فَوَاعِدَهُمْ وَعَاجِلَهُمْ
وَأَنْتُمْ تَعْلَمُونَ



CONCLUSION

This thesis explores a specific aspect of Orientalism, particularly the strand that endorsed colonial imperial expansion. As a consequence, the literature stemming from this perspective perpetuated a distorted and dishonest image of Islam, the repercussions of which we continue to endure today.

The work I produced consists of two Sitarahs that expose the stages of Orientalist discourse during the Napoleon occupation, including its symbols and propaganda-driven language, echoing the voice of the oppressor. It examines Orientalism role in undermining the foundations of Islamic society. It advocates for heightened awareness of Orientalism to cultivate an Arabic intellectual culture that actively opposes its modern manifestations. Ultimately, the aim is to empower Muslims to reclaim their history and break free from intellectual colonization.

It's important to note that this thesis, for its limited nature in terms of time and resources, only scratches the surface of the vast topic of Orientalism. There are a multitude of layers to unravel, and my objective is to establish a framework that serves as a foundational step in my practice. This framework will be rooted in creating more related work that both deconstructs and studies Orientalism.

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