

## **Biblical Proximity and Women: The Image of Arabs in Victorian Works of Religious Nature**

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### **Abstract**

The pro-suffrage campaign to elevate the Oriental female did not give emphasis to Arab women; however, they were vividly presented in religious literature and romances of a religious nature. The inferior position and the victimisation of Arab women, attributed to Islam, delivered a political and a religious message that helped steer the Victorian reader's opinion towards a desired effect. The paper will focus on the image of the Arab woman in some of these publications to highlight that the use of the biblical element of the Middle East was employed to reinforce Christianity and combat Ottomans. The image of the victimised Arab woman also prepared the public for a future military involvement in the Middle East. The paper suggests that the Victorian depiction of the Arab female may well be the precursor of present-day use of Islam-phobic slogans that trigger sorrow easily transformed into anger at the men, culture and the religion that victimise women.

**Keywords:** Arabs in British Nineteenth Century periodicals, Arab proximity to Bible, Arab Women, Revival of mediaeval polemic, Victorian perception of Arabs

## Introduction

To regard Arabs with wonder has long been the proper function of all European writers, and for some thousands of years yet the untameable rover of the desert will in all probability be an interminable source of astonishment. (Stigand, 1872, p. 39)

William Stigand's remarks published in *Belgravia* in July 1872 capture the curiosity which characterised Victorian interest in Arab ways and practices. Articles, from as early as the late eighteenth century, and throughout the nineteenth century, focused on Arab life, customs, proximity of their life style to stories in the Bible, and the treatment and position of their women. Those early accounts, whether fiction or impressions, regardless of their reliability, have largely contributed to stereotyping Arabs in general and Arab women in particular: as Michael Wolff rightly notes, "An attitude, an opinion, an idea did not exist until it had registered itself in the press" (Codell, 2010, p. 17).

The idea for this paper began with my surprise at the large number of Victorian works on Arabs returned from the British Periodicals Online's search engine for the keywords "Arab" and "Arab women". I found them hugely varied and spread over a long period of time. I was intrigued by works that highlighted the biblical element of the Arab region and Arab proximity to Scripture. My major concern here is to investigate the presentation of Arab life and Arab women in Victorian literature of religious context to assess their possible impact on the reading public. Through the textual analysis of two English romances and two articles that focus on the biblical element of the Middle East, the impact of Islam on culture and on Arab women, I argue that common themes suggest the existence of a common factor or factors; thus works of this nature contributed to delivering a religious or a political message or both. Religiously, they reinforced belief in the authenticity of the Bible and evoked Christian prejudice to liberate the Holy Land and defend the Cross (Warburton, 1845, p. 242) from the "Paynim" hand of "Mohammedans" This religious-political goal gradually generated anger against the Turks and sanctioned the later invasion of the Arab region.

To further clarify my argument, I have also chosen a book by Reverend H. H. Jessup, *The Women of the Arabs*, 1874, and a review of the same book to highlight not only the observations but also the recommendations to handle the issue of Arab women. The presentation of Arab women, of other religions, suffering under Muslim rule, further consolidated the negative image of Arabs and evoked sorrow for Muslim and non-Muslim females in Arab countries. This in turn convinced the Victorian reader of the need to shoulder the burden of rescuing the helpless women by dispatching civilising missions and sanctioning future military intervention in the region.

Checking the dates of many articles showed that the main output of religious literature highlighting Arabs were published from the 1830s to the 1870s, which also coincides with rising religious doubt evoked by the works of eminent philosophers, like Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830-33), David Friedrich Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu für das deutsche Volk bearbeitet* (*The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*),<sup>1</sup> long before Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859). These books challenged the credibility of the biblical stories on the basis of the time-scale of creation given in Genesis (Jay, 1986), creating strong controversy over the credibility of the Bible among the intellectual classes and threatened reaching those of the slightly lower social level. Records show that by 1849 religious books and sermons formed a third of Macmillan's list

(in Scott, 1973, pp. 213-223) of publications and continued to rise. Similarly, 213 out of 516 magazines were estimated to have been of a religious nature (Scott, 1973) and had become increasingly available to a larger readership with the reduction of stamp duty and the successive repeals of advertisement duty.

The period also coincides with several Ottoman massacres against Christians in Syria, Lebanon and Crete, and the Russian–Turkish war in 1877, all of which were covered by the European press. Western misconceptions over the treatment of women under Islam were emphasised and later echoed during the British occupation of Arab countries, and horror stories about Muslim misogyny were reiterated by Western patriarchs to justify imperialism, excuse sex discrimination against British women and oppose the rising calls for their enfranchisement. Lord Cromer, British colonial administrator in Egypt 1883-1907 and ardent anti-suffrage figure, believed the veil demonstrated Egyptians’ moral and cultural inferiority in the treatment of women and demanded they be “persuaded or forced” to become “civilised” by disposing of the women’s veil. In 1924, Gertrude Bell, British Oriental Secretary in Iraq, described her work with women as British efforts for the “advancing of Moslem women” (Bell, 1924). This paper proposes that the presumed plight of the Arab Muslim woman continues to be an “effectual” argument for sanctioning military intervention.

### **The British View of Arabs**

The first cultural and political contact between the British and the Arabs took place when the Arabs were under Ottoman occupation (Nasir, 1979, p. 18). Apart from official envoys and ambassadors’ reports on the region, trade companies using the Middle East route for their trade in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries also allowed communication with Arabs (Al-Rawi, 2008), but the expansion of the Ottoman Empire influenced the prevalence of the negative image of Arabs as they were seen as identical with the Turks (Hollenbach, 1972). This is largely due to their participation in the Ottoman wars and in several massacres against Christians. The power of the Turks over Christians generated hostility which sought to revive and consolidate Christian mediaeval theory accusing Mohammad of engineering a religion, theft from Christianity and Judaism and supported by false revelations, designed to meet his various political needs and personal desires. The survival of this ideology is clearly illustrated in Thomas Carlyle’s description of Islam as “bastard Christianity” (1840).

Very little was added to the theoretic polemic before the nineteenth century (Al-Rawi, 2008, p. 6) and the most noticeable change then was the replacement of mediaeval polemic by exotic entertainment (Al-Rawi, 2008, p. 9). The Gothic revival and Romantic Nationalism, manifested in the national feelings of primacy and superiority participated in reviving considerable European and British interest in the Middle Ages (Chapman, 1986). Religion was estheticized and writers felt free to draw on Biblical themes with freedom and with very little reverence. Religion, a dominant factor in England, along with the development of values and moralities, criticised the corruption of the mediaeval Church thus generating nostalgia for the conventional Christianity of the East. The second contact with Arabs came through fiction about the “inscrutable Orient,” the mysterious “phoenix of Arabia,” “stories of assassins” and “evil spirits of the desert” (Nasir, 1979, p. 18). Open British political interest in what is now known as the Arab Middle East was not clearly defined until the purchase of almost half the shares of the

Suez Canal in 1875, followed by Britain's competition with France and the dual control over Egypt in November 1879 (Cleveland, 1986, p. 92).

The increasing number of travellers in the Middle East generated wider interest in Arab literature. Edward William Lane's translation of the *Arabian Nights*, published in monthly parts in the years 1838 to 1840 became an immediate success amongst the British. The fact that the *Nights* offered "very little of the sectarian peculiarities of religion" ("Popularity of the Arabian Nights," 1834, p. 264) explains its renown. *The Nights* "uniformly acknowledge" the "care of beneficent Providence," ("Popularity of the Arabian Nights," 1834, p. 264) but do not give emphasis to Islam. Intense popularity led to its being published in three volumes in 1840 and a revised edition in 1859. According to Nasir, *The Arabian Nights* changed "the English attitude towards Arabs and the region in general" (Nasir, 1979, p. 39) yet the term "Arab" evidently remained the synonym of a scoundrel in the titles of several serialised works about thieves and rogues from the 1850s and well into the 1890s.<sup>2</sup>

The British perception of Arabs was shaped by intellectuals and theologians over a number of centuries. As the cradle of all the monotheistic religions, the Arab lands became an arena for religious clashes over sacred history, prophets and divine revelations. The sensitivity between Christianity and Islam and the efforts to prove the authenticity of Scripture and falsehood of the rival religion go as far back as the twelfth century when an oriental polemic was developed depicting the Saracens as evil (Nasir, 1979, p. 20). Lacking first-hand experience, most Western mediaeval understanding was influenced by perceptions of Christians under Muslim rule that "saw the conquest of Islam as a punishment from God" (Blanks, 2007, p. 142). Polemists targeted the Christian audience; their polemic horrified those at a distance from Muslims and fortified those close to Muslims against it (Norman, 1993, p. 295). The image of Arabs generally depended on the genre of the periodical; the Bedouin romance "Antar" was, for example, published, serialised and discussed in a number of British periodicals such as *The Literary Gazette*, *The New Monthly Magazine*, *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* and others between 1819 and 1825, but the major concern here is to highlight the image of Arabs depicted in literature of religious context to highlight their relevance to the above-mentioned points.

### **The Biblical Element of the Middle East**

In both "Antar" and "The Arabs and the East," Arabs are highlighted in relation to Scripture and to Christianity. They are depicted as unchanging like the geography of their region since biblical times. In an article on the historical Arabic "Bedouin" romance "Antar," Arabs' "peculiar destiny" as "Ishmaelite," unlike other nations, was to live in "a fixed condition of existence" and continue to hold on to the same "habits, tastes, customs and manner of [their] remotest ancestors" ("Antar," 1850, p. 1). The author states that he aims "generally to point out Scripture parallels sufficiently exact, and often more strikingly analogous" ("Antar," 1850, p. 12). Although he acknowledges that there may be "no direct analogy to any circumstance or usage mentioned in Scripture," he confirms that the ideas and the elevated language of the poem are "entirely in the style of the Bible" and nothing like the *Arabian Nights*.

From marriage to sharing the spoils and revenge, the writer toils to demonstrate exactness despite the outright differences; war in the romance is described as greatly analogous to Scripture usage despite the absence of horses in the biblical stories ("Antar," 1850, p. 12). Despite the great differences between the two, the writer claims that Antar reminds of David. The analogy is

quite strained as the two essentially differ in characteristics and temperament; The writer merely contradicts himself when he writes that unlike David, Antar is ugly, of base origin and has a “tyrannous temper” (“Antar,” 1850, p. 21). The analogy is thus made on the less significant parallels of their professions and esteem; both Antar and David tend their fathers’ flocks and are admired warriors. Similarly, the comparison between David’s conflict with the lion and the bear and Antar’s adventure with the wolf show them to have nothing in common apart from the slaying of animals that attack their flocks. The effort the writer makes is further demonstrated when he describes it as having “remarkable” similarity although David’s story is “better and more beautifully told” (“Antar,” 1850, p. 21). The practice of revenge in warfare is said to be exact as in Scriptural instances of this practice shown “in the case of David and Goliath,” (“Antar,” 1850, p. 13) and the duration of the wedding feast in the romance is compared with the wedding feasts of Jacob and Samson. Quotation from Genesis is intended to approximate the discontent felt by the bride, Tamadhur, for marrying without a dowry, with Laban’s daughters even if the example is unsuccessfully applied. It is clear that Tamadhur’s father had no knowledge of king Zohair’s scheme to pass himself as a hero by organising an attack on Zohair’s tribe and thus Tamadhur’s dowry was thought to have been received in the form of Zohair’s great service (“Antar,” 1850, p. 17). Laban on the other hand had confiscated his daughters’ dowries: “He hath sold us, and also quite devoured our money” (“Antar,” 1850, p. 19).

However, in “The Arabs and the East” the tone becomes more convincing as the reader is advised to acquire “an accurate knowledge of the mode of life, the style of phraseology, and the mould of thought, of the Ishmaelites, the Israelites and other eastern races to read “Scripture aright” (“The Arabs and the East,” 1861, p. 497). The comparisons are more vivid and Abraham is only a “little different from the Bedouin sheikh of the present” and lives in a very similar tent (“The Arabs and the East,” 1861, p. 498). In food and drink, the Arab “obeys as strictly and unanswerably the injunctions of his creed as did Jonadab the son of Rechab”.<sup>3</sup> The comparison with the Bible continues to include wells, women, hospitality and revenge and the reader is assured that everything in the land “in which the patriarchs sojourned” reminds “of some passage of Scripture story” (“The Arabs and the East,” 1861, p. 499).

The works, published at a time of rising religious scepticism, clearly demonstrate they were written for a purpose; the generalisation that Arabs do not progress because they are destined to live like their forefathers serves to prove to readers that the biblical stories are authentic as if it is ordained, by God, for the inhabitants in the land of Abraham to continue to live in the same manner. However ancient pre-Islam women were highlighted as leaders and ferocious fighters like queen Rohab who killed the King of the Abs and Adnan tribes (“Antar,” 1850, pp. 13-14). The images of pre-Islam Arabs in “Antar” reflect preconceptions of Arab exoticism, similarity to Western traditions of chivalry, and the elevated position of Arab women. Analyses of pre-Islam social customs and conduct highlighted similarities with Western ideals; Antar’s gallantry was described as bearing “a more striking resemblance to the custom of [Western] chivalry” than Arabs in Islam (Stigand, 1872, p. 39). Pagan days were “the golden age of the Arabians” (“Antar,” 1850, pp. 4-5).

### **The Position of Women: Oppressive Image of Islam**

The articles above depict women in relation to Scripture; women were highlighted as wearing nose rings in the same fashion “with which the servant of Abraham adorned Rebecca’s face when he chose her as the bride of his master’s son” (“The Arabs and the East,” 1861, p. 498)

Apart from the biblical comparisons, two interesting images of women emerge; the image of queen Rohab and the image of the slave, Zebeeba, Antar's "negro" mother, whereas scant notice is paid to the object of Antar's love, Abla or Ibla, whose face "was lovely as the full moon, and perfectly beautiful and elegant" ("Antar, An Arabian Romance," 1837, pp. 55-56) Rohab's image received more attention and was the topic of several articles throughout the century which painted her as the victorious queen who drove a "spear through [the king's] chest" (Reynolds, 1853, p. 360). However, as a slave, Zebeeba's position remained inferior despite the little privileges she was awarded on Antar's birth.

The spread of Islam or "Mohammedanism" is clearly held responsible for the inferior position of women and the pro-women legislations of Islam were dismissed as oppressive and "more fitted for one sex than for the other" ("ART. V.," 1834, p. 113). Islam is described as appealing "to the pride and sensuality of the Arabians" ("ART. V.," 1834, p. 115) whereas pagan days were "the golden age of the Arabians" ("Antar," pp. 4-5). However religion becomes a decisive factor in determining the position of Arab women in the Victorian romances. In Aubrey De Vere's romance "Antar and Zara" (1877) or "The Only True Lovers, an Eastern Romance," the Arab woman is Christian and thus less oppressed and more gentle than the Muslim woman presented by the anonymous poet of "The Arab Maiden" (1851).

The revival of the mediaeval treatment and understanding of Islam found expression in romances highlighting the virtuous Christian East suffering under the Ottoman Muslims and in the recreation of the Crusade scenes that reminded readers of a holy land awaiting salvation. De Vere's romance attacks both the Muslim Turk and the Christian "Frank" and expresses high regard for the land of the "ancient Race." The romance, written in 1855 but not completed until 1877, attacks Islam and the Muslim Prophet. The fact that it took twenty-two years to finalise and publish suggests an accumulated resentment to what was magnified and circulated to the public as Ottoman atrocities against Christians, such as the massacres in Aleppo 1850, Nablus 1856, Damascus 1860, the Druze-Maronite massacre in Lebanon 1858-1860, the revolt in Crete 1869, the massacres of 1876 in Batak and the Russian-Turkish war 1877, all of which received considerable attention in the European press (Gaunt & Beğ-Şawoçe, 2006, p. 32).

De Vere, who had converted to Catholicism in 1851 (Lennon, 2004, p. 163), highlights the 1877 massacre by lamenting the West's neglect of Middle Eastern Christians (De Vere, 1877, Introduction). He briefs the reader on the history of Arab Christians forced out of the Euphrates and Mesopotamia when the sword of the 'False Prophet' invaded their regions (De Vere, 1877, Introduction). The reference to the persecution of Christians in Lebanon and the massacres against Christians in Turkey suggest that the reason behind his attack was his great sympathy for Christians under Ottoman rule rather than his being influenced by the Irish Famine (Lennon, 2004, p. 163).

The direct criticism of the "imposter prophet" and the "trenchant Moslem sword," the "suffering of the Native Land" and the "martyr-crown" (De Vere, 1877, III), all emphasise Arab-Muslim aggressions and direct the reader's attention to the "hundreds of years" of "unequal strife" with bearers of "the crescent flags of Saladin". The "dusty track" of pilgrims reminds the reader of Muslim control of Jerusalem. Zara or Za[h]ra, the name given to the Christian maiden, carries the positive Arabic meaning of flower which reflects chastity and coyness; she draws her veil tighter when embarrassed or afraid of a stranger. When separated from Antar, Zara laments

her resistance to her beloved's approaches for the fears "to seem too quickly won" (De Vere, 1877, II, p. vii). This is further clarified by Antar's ecstasy at the fall of Zara's "rosy girdle" which for him holds "the earth, the sun, the stars ... and the sea" (De Vere I, p. i). Although De Vere's image of the "fawn with trailing cord" highlights Zara's destiny, like most Arab women, regardless of their religion, is in the hands of others. Although the trailing cord permits movement in the forest, the reins may be pulled at any time. However no reference is made to its being an oppressive measure or a sign of inferiority. It is also worth noting that Zara's veil and long dress are highlighted as signs of chastity and modesty.

Similarly, all the other characteristics, depicted as exclusive to Christian Arabs, are more or less typical of the region, such as the importance of women's chastity, adherences to patriarchal traditions, gallantry and generosity. Although critics do not see this particular work to be as successful as his other works, De Vere's conversion to Catholicism, and his dislike for both the Eastern and the Western dominations, revived the glorification and elevation of ancient Christianity. His hostile introduction and his animosity to Islam throughout the poem reflect his abhorrence of Ottomans which is quite symptomatic of the period.

Similarly, "The Arab Maiden" conveys parallel messages; while the work secures no tribute is paid to Islam, it criticises the mediaeval Church and stresses the Evangelical assertion "Believe and thou shalt be saved." Although critical of religious authority, the work emphasises that God, not Man, will take vengeance, punish or reward. The "flower of English Chivalry", Sir Raymond of Altondale, had killed his English wife and is thus punished. His punishment, at the hands of an Arab Muslim female, highlights two points; the existence of a Creator who punishes wrongdoers and the sinful Muslim who defies God by taking vengeance into her own hands. The reader is constantly reminded of the Crusades while the unyielding and vengeful image of the Arab protagonist is being constructed. Although the mediaeval Church is accused of sending "blood-seeking gentry," with no mental skills to fight for the "Land of Romance," the moral, the imagery and the reference to Peter the Hermit,<sup>4</sup> not only convince the reader of the authenticity of Scripture but evoke and revive the desire to "win Christ's tomb from paynim hands".

It is not clear if the poet had intentionally named her Zillah, which conveys the negative Arabic equivalent of "flaw," but the reader is tipped from the beginning that this "pretty" dove-like creature "was scarcely mild" and thus prone to flaws. Like Rohab, Zillah has a "strong dash of spirit-a something fiere." She is "bird in a cage" with "fierce dark passion" and a mixture of the oriental tigress and dove and must thus be dreaded and feared more than "Ten thousand battle-fields" ("The Arab Maiden," 1851, p. 292). Once out of the cage, Zillah is capable of killing not once but twice. The reader's unfamiliarity with Arab customs makes it almost impossible to comprehend that Arab maidens are, under no circumstances, prepared to compromise their honour. Thus the cultural gap is utilised to create a brutal image of an action highly revered by Zillah's culture.

Zillah, a victim of patriarchal customs, is held captive by the invading Frank. On both occasions she is victim of the "wicked men," but the difference for Zillah is vast; the customs are her people's way of life and demonstrate protection rather than oppression, but to be taken among the spoils by an invader is a different story; the Oriental "tigress" quickly replaces the dove when she stabs him the first time to put an end to his advances. With honour safe, the dove takes over again and she nurses the wounded knight to full recovery. Although she falls in love

with him, she remains conservative in her attitude and continues to wear her hijab, but takes off the burqa which is not a requirement for Muslim women. The fatal incident, however, takes place in England when Zillah follows the knight all the way home. Although Altondale denied taking a wife, it was rumoured that he had abandoned a Muslim wife back in Arabia. Upon marrying him, Zillah would have become an outcast and would not have dared return to her people as she would face a death punishment.

Though her revenge is culturally justified, the work gives no explanation and the Victorian reader is left abhorred with the Arabs' thirst for revenge. Zillah, disguised as a minstrel, sings her story before stabbing Altondale in the heart. In both incidents, Zillah is provoked into committing crime. Her suicide is another failing as the poet concludes that she is cursed with the crime of Cain by taking the matter of terminating lives, a matter only for God to decide, into her hands. Had Arabs' veneration of women's honour been clarified, their restrictive attitude towards women may then be understood as over-protection.

Arabic literature, especially poetry, from pre-Islamic times to this very day, reflects the high esteem and the central position of women in Arab societies. Several pre-Islam and Islamic poems translated by British men of letters in the nineteenth century praise women: "Behind us come our lovely, our charming damsels, whom we guard so vigilantly that they cannot be made captive, or even treated with disrespect" (Clouston, 1881, p. 67).

This particular verse not only shows the high regard for women but also explains why Zillah called upon her folk to "mourn" and "weep." Zara's reserve and Antar's contentment that she will be watched while he goes to battle the "upstart" Muslim demonstrates that the position of Arab women is governed by culture not Islam. In both romances the Christian and Muslim maidens as reluctant to let passion overrule in compliance with the conventions of society. Although the Christian maiden is named a flower while the Muslim is called a flaw, both Zara and Zillah are coy and reserved but not out of their own free will and are restricted in their movement; Zara's trailing cord allows some freedom of movement but Zilla is caged and thus a fiercer more oppressive image is created. The recreation of images of the Crusades and the Muslim violations against Christians in Lebanon would have undoubtedly evoked rage and the urge to defend the Cross (Warburton, 1845, p. 242) while filling the reader with sorrow for the female victims.

The plight of women in Arab countries is better clarified in Jessup's *The Women of the Arabs*. The book itself is remarkably similar to the above mentioned works in its presentation of pre-Islam women as dignified and capable of exercising their rights (Jessup, 1873, p. 4), attributing the degradation of women and the beating of wives to Islam. He declares that violence will be practiced "as long as Islamism as a system and a faith prevails in the world" (Jessup, 1873, p. 9). Although Jessup acknowledges that 'Moslem girls, thanks to missionary efforts, have been taught to read and write and sew' in American, British and Prussian schools, he says a long time is required before the 'debased minds of Arab Mohammedans' comprehend women's right to dignity (Jessup, 1873, Chapter 2). Jessup restricts wife-beating to the British lower order, seen as inferior as natives and in need of elevation (Cannadine, 2002, p. 5), but generalises that 'scourging and beating of wives' is a 'features of Moslem domestic life' (Jessup, 1873, Chapter 2)

Jessup also recognises the European misconception of the treatment of women in Islam and recommends “even enlightened European writers be taught that Mohammedans do not believe women to be without souls.” However this is immediately undermined when he emphasises that “their treatment of them may favour such a supposition” (Jessup, 1873, p. 42), quoting a debated saying attributed to the second Caliph Omar Bin al-Khattab (577-644) that “women are worthless creatures and soil men’s reputations” (Jessup, 1873, Chapter 2).

A review of *The Women of the Arabs* published in the *Athenaeum* (1874) describes the book as dealing with “a most important subject, the position of women in the East and the [European, American and British] efforts that are being pursued, in Syria and other places, towards promoting women’s education and advancement” (Jessup, 1873, p. 42). This “brutality” the writer says can only be cured by elevating the “Oriental character” which “can only be done by educating the women” (Jessup, 1873, p. 43). The review hails the Christian civilising missions “cordially” for their efforts to elevate the natives. The well-known apologetic remark, “ajellak allah” (saving your presence) is also quoted to indicate and affirm the “degraded positions” of women which requires “prompt joint action” to “remedy the evil” (Jessup, 1873, p. 43). Although the review highlights wife-beating as universal phenomenon practised by the “Greek Christians” who “are by no means behind their Moslem neighbours in this particular,” (Jessup, 1873, p. 43) he stresses that it is an integral part of Islam because the Muslim’s “Koran” sanctions wife-beating (Jessup, 1873, p. 43). Both the book and the review hold Islam particularly responsible for women’s secondary.

None of the above works hint at the existence of intelligent or educated Arab Muslim women despite the fact that efforts to emancipate women in Egypt, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq had in fact began from as early as 1855 when pioneers of women’s emancipation, such as Gamal El-Din El-Afghani, propagated progressive ideas on women’s education. This was followed by the publication of books such as Ahmad Faris El-Shidyak’s *One Leg Crossed Over the Other* (1855) encouraging women’s emancipation and others such as Rifa’a El-Tahtawi’s *Guide to the Education of Girls and Boys* in 1872 (El-Saadawi, 1980, p. 170).

The generalisations seem to have been more in vogue and more favoured than the objective; the ill treatment of Arab wives was, for example, strongly refuted in Emily Ruete’s (1844-1934) *Memoirs*; “It is an absolute myth that the Arab husband treats his wife with less regard than is the case here” (Al-Rawi, 2008, p. 22). As an Arab Muslim woman, married to a German merchant, she was able to closely examine the positives and negatives of both worlds, affirming that that the “Christian institution” does not “stand much higher than the Mahometan, or insures much greater felicity” (Al-Rawi, 2008, p. 22). However, Ruete’s book<sup>5</sup> attracted very little attention and was somewhat trivialised as being the product of a bitter memory (“Book Review,” 1887, p. 421).

The Ottoman treatment of Christians and the plight of Arab women undoubtedly had their impact on readers and helped raise public sympathy for women. The image of Islam highlighted by Jessup and religious articles would lead people to question: if those people were so cruel towards their women what atrocities can fellow Christians suffer under their rule? Although some Victorian writers emphasised that Arab characteristics have been wrongly attributed to Islam (Poole, 1865), the majority of writers, even those who knew otherwise, were content with the long-held view attributing Arabs’ resistance to modernisation and the secondary

position of their women to Islam. Many used second-hand observations on the treatment of women, even if they themselves observed that there were women who stood up for their rights (Bell, 1947, p. 66).

The image of the barbaric Muslim becomes more influential in an article in a religious periodical if supported by historical evidence. The trivialisation of *Memoirs of an Arabian Princess* (1886), for example, raises the question as to whether it had been intentional because it differed with both colonial and religious interests, whereas the Arab's apologetic expression on the mention of women is highly emphasised. In all the above works, Islamic legislations in favour of women are totally ignored regardless of the fact that Muslim women were in a better legal position than their European sisters. Although Arab Muslim women, like their sisters in Europe, were restricted from exercising their rights by norms and conventions, strong women could always stand up for themselves backed by the law. In comparison, British women, for example, did not gain the right to own property until the First Woman's Property Act was passed in England in 1870 and were only granted custody of infants in 1873 ("Companion," 1875, p. 229). Indeed, their full control over property acquired during marriage was not granted till 1893 and similarly very few women chose to take advantage of these rights in fear of criticism.

### Conclusion

Victorian periodicals became influential means for persuading the public. The accessibility of printed material attracted large-scale readership and converted the newspaper and the periodical press from a luxury into what seems to be a necessity of daily life. In turn the availability of the press allowed public opinion to become a decisive tool for influencing opinions and events. By magnifying an issue and overlooking another the press shaped the Victorian opinion in conformity with the views of the influential elite. Apart from the above, works of religious nature were seen as benign and focusing at the people's good. Therefore publications, refuting the "false claims" of science, claims of Biblical discrepancies (C.K.J., 1854), were more convincing, for the Victorian reader, than most secular arguments. Similarly the depiction of Islam as false and degrading to women in works of a religious nature had a strong impact on the Victorian readers.

Taking into consideration that the first British invasion of an Arab country did not take place until in 1882, it becomes possible to rule out any immediate intension to invade the Arab region and also the British Empire's work on the replication of British life in the colonies (Cannadine, 2002) However, depicting Muslims as brutal, magnifying what the British press regarded as Ottoman atrocities, the plight of women, living under Islamic rule, regardless of their faith and ethnicity, and the recreation of the Crusade scenes gradually built up resentment among generations of readers and helped in sanctioning the later invasion of the Arab region. The handy revival of mediaeval polemic, the praise of pagan Arab culture and chivalry, the analogy with Scripture language, phraseology, style and mode of life suggest that the publication of these religious works was among the "effectual weapons" employed to reinforce belief and contest the faith crisis among Victorians without risking their conviction or conversion to the rival religion. Apart from religious prejudice, the portrayal of abused Arab women, Muslim and otherwise, gradually fuelled readers with animosity to Muslim men, culture and religion. The effect of this type of literature did not merely evoke religious prejudice, it also generated anger and the will to avenge fellow Christians.

This resentment has most likely developed into a sense of obligation and a duty to shoulder the responsibility of elevating the “oriental savages” whether those “savages” wanted it or not. Whether this British obligation, later known as ‘the white man’s burden’, is interpreted as a form of “cultural imperialism” to develop the “undeveloped” nations or philanthropically; to guide natives incapable of self-government towards “becoming civilised”, the impact of this type of material, written by passionately dedicated editors, was effective in generating an impact that laid foundation to some long-lasting pretexts; the plight of the Muslim woman was and continues to be one of the compelling themes employed to gain support for a military intervention (Bush, 2001; Clinton, 2001). To combat Taliban terrorists, the predicament of Afghan women was advertised as a major concern by the West, that it seeks to instill “universal values... throughout the world” (Bush, 2001; Clinton, 2001).

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* was first published in German in 1835 then translated into English by Marian Evans (George Eliot) and published in Britain as *Life of Jesus* in 1846.

<sup>2</sup> “The Arab of the City, Being the Autobiography of a London Thieve,” *Ragged School Union Magazine* (Dec. 1850); “Roland Leigh; Or, The Story of a City Arab,” *The Leisure Hour* (1857); also “Cleg Kelly, Arab of the City,” *Cornhill Magazine* (1895-6).

<sup>3</sup> Jonadab in the Book of Jeremiah prohibited his followers from drinking alcohol, and commanded that they live in tents, rather than houses.

<sup>4</sup> Peter the Hermit in 1095 preached in favour of a war against the Muslims to rescue the Holy Sepulchre and other sacred sites from the hands of ‘Mohammedans’

<sup>5</sup> Ruete’s book originally appeared in German as *Memoiren einer arabischen Prinzessin*. It was published by a Berlin firm in 1886. It was followed by an English edition in 1907. Both editions seem to have attracted little interest and the book soon fell into obscurity and went out of print.

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