

Shattering the Illusion of Representation in Leila Sebbar's Sherazade

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Abstract. By using Lacanian theory, I argue that Leila Sebbar's *Sherazade* depicts Orientalist representation which gave a false image and identity to Algerian women. The fact that representation is no longer about the referent but rather more on concepts makes us misrecognize our own identity especially when it is imposed upon us by other people. In order to understand our position, Lacanian split subject will enable us to recognize the false images.

Keywords: lacan, misrecognition, split subject, representation

1 Introduction

This paper analyzes Leila Sebbar's *Sherazade* by questioning the role of representation. Orientalist representation gave a false image and identity to Algerian women [1]. The image embedded is the imagery of colonial desire on which Algerian women presented as racial and sexual fantasies. It means that the problem comprises both female sexuality and national identity. *Sherazade*, the protagonist in the novel undergoes a change in the way she perceives herself. Once shown how she, or to be precise Algerian women, was depicted in a famous painting, she had a strong urge to show that Algerian women, including herself, is not merely an object. To be as such is a misrecognition or a mistaken identity. Therefore, Lacanian Psychoanalysis will be used to demonstrate the misrecognition by examining the issues of female body, body and language, and colonial gaze.

2 Sherazade

Sherazade is a novel written by Leila Sebbar which tells the story of a 17 years old Algerian girl who moves from her family in Aulnay-sous-Bois to a squat in Paris. From the very beginning of the story, *Sherazade* has met with Julian who are truly surprised by her name.

'Your name's really Sherazade?'

'Yes.'

'Really? It's . . . it's so . . . How can I put it? You know who Sheherazade was?'

'Yes.'

'And that doesn't mean anything to you?'

'No'

'You think you can be called Sherazade, just like that? ...'

'No idea.'

He looked at her, standing the other side of the high, round counter at the fast-food, unable to believe his eyes. (p.1)

Julien further continues with questions which are more like suggestion or even an order.

'And why not Aziyade?'

'Who's that?'

'A beautiful Turkish woman from Istanbul who Pierre Loti was in love with, a hundred years ago.'

'Pierre Loti I've heard of. Not Aziyade.'

'He dressed as a Turk and learned the Turkish language for her sake. He even went to live in the poor district of Istanbul to see her in secret. Aziyade belonged to the harem of an old Turk, She was a young Circassian slave, converted to Islam.'

'Why you telling me about this woman? She's got nothing to do with me.'

'She had green eyes, like you.'

'That's not a reason.'

It very clear that from the very beginning that Julien cannot escape from the frame of the Orientalist on how Sherazade is supposed to be. Not only that the name 'Sherazade' is referring to the famous heroine who according to Julien cannot simply be copied as anyone wants but also Julien gives a more common perspective toward what Sherazade is supposed to do, which is of course changing her name to something more common based on the Orientalist perspective, like Aziyade, a girl Pierre Loti was falling in love with. His references to the author of exotic adventure stories, Pierre Loti, is the Orientalist framework and indeed it is this framework which Sherazade seeks to tackle, not only in terms of the representation of the present but also the representation of the past.

3 Misrecognition

Sherazade wants to revolt against the representation which has already been established by the orientalists by shattering the image which essentially is the product of misrecognition in mirror stage. The word *meconnaissance* is a French word meaning misrecognition, which Lacan uses to describe the illusion of the mirror stage [2]. In other words, the infant sees his or her reflection as real, but the image is truly only an "imaginary mode" [1].

When an infant is born, it is not born in an empty space, but in a space which has already been occupied by the symbolic order. The real is the term used to describe the infant before it comes under the sway of the symbolic order. Symbolic order has already prepared for the infant an empty container, which is usually in the form of Proper noun—taken from the family of the infant which has anticipated its birth and indeed already prepared it to learn the family language [3]. The moment the infant accepts such a language, that is to say accept his position in symbolic order or accept its proper noun, it will become what we call as Lacanian Subject [1] [4].

Lacanian subject is a split subject which comprises of ego (consciousness) and subject (unconsciousness). The ego is the totality of a crystallization of images assimilated by the subject when the infant undergoes the process of identification in mirror stage. In short, the ego is what one looks like; it is the totality of the appearances of someone who is called a subject. If the ego is merely the appearances of the subject, then it can be considered as a signifier over the subject [S1 (above)/ \$ (below)]. Signifier over the subject means that ego alienates the subject since it seems that ego buries the subject. Psychoanalysis is the tool used to reach beyond the ego and directly go to the subject by using subject speech [5].

Both ego and subject are the products of the infant's language assimilation. In other words, without language, there is no ego and subject. However, language does not belong to the infant. In Heidegger's words, it is that we always using language second hand; or in Derrida's words, it is that I have only one language and it is not my own. In short, the language used by the infant is given by the Other, then the Other is language [5].

However, what would happen if the Other who has the power and desire over the infant is the colonizer? That is exactly why we need to reframe or shatter the illusion of ego or identity just like what Sherazade did.

3.1 Body and Language

What is the body? What is a body? Is the body a substance, an idea, or a word? Many contemporary philosophers argue that there are no substances or ideas outside language. Substances and ideas are not realities which language reflects but rather cultural categories which language constructs [1] [2] [5]. The body is no exception. It, too, is primarily a product of language, a representation. It is only through language that the body gains meaning [5].

Language organizes the body according to the beliefs of a particular culture. This means that the human body is not a universal concept but rather a flexible idea, which can be interpreted in diverse ways, depending on time, place and context [3]. If images can be made, they can also be unmade. There are many ideal images of the body which we are encouraged to take for granted, as if they were god-given. But once we realize that these images are constructed, it becomes possible to question them, to see them as myths rather than truths. Often, the 'ideal' is only ideal for certain people, it only fuels limited interests. Not to mention that the body image can also be used to represent identity as an individual, race, religion and nation. Again, this tends to raise a question that If body is written with signifiers, then what would happen if the one constructing it is the colonizer?

4 Colonial Representation

Edward Said once said that "The Orient was not Europe's interlocutor, but its silent Other" [1] [2]. It means that there is some sort of dependence on each other, a dependence which is not equal to one another. It is from this separateness and difference that meaning is produced. In other words, the West needs the Orient as the interlocutor to recognize its superiority while at the same time confirming its depiction of the Orient as backward, decadent, and uninformed.

It has long been known that erotic imagery has the power to circulate between eyes and cultures. Paintings are one of the tools to disseminate Orientalist fantasies to an audience spanning colony and metropole and to impose the Oriental gaze upon "native" women [5]. Therefore, the depiction of them must be in un-clothed bodies.

Just as food isn't something we merely consume to keep our bodies alive, so clothes aren't things we wear just to keep our bodies warm or cool. Clothes help us make statements about our sexuality, age, social standing and political convictions. Through the selection and combination of particular items and styles, dress speaks a Language which can be explored and taken apart just as verbal and written languages can [5]. The language of dress has changed dramatically over time, in much the same way as the language of food has.

Fashion tells us that our bodies can stand out as special and unique at the same time as it fosters

uniformity. We often wear certain garments because we want our bodies to be different. But we also wish to belong to a community of style. Dress also makes us aware of the instability of our bodily boundaries. Clothes frame the body and separate it from others. But they simultaneously help one body relate to another body as a kind of connecting tissue. We relate to others whenever we recognize what they are wearing [5].

Clothes are both a part and not a part of the physical body. On the one hand, they are detachable from the physical shape. But on the other, they complete the body in vital ways. We could hardly perform, especially in public, without some artificial casing.

Sherazade confirms this by simply identifying a female figure for not wearing a veil. Sherazade was standing near the window looking at a watercolour that she'd taken down. It depicted an Arab woman with a baby in her arms. A woman from the south, a Berber most likely, not wearing a veil (p.104). Actually, the veil can also function to frustrate colonial dreams of trespassing the boundary and shatter the illusion of exoticizing the colonized women. Therefore, the battle of wearing or not wearing the veil is not only about the female body but also about religious, racial, and national identity. This also explains why the depiction of women by the colonizer is mostly naked which strongly suggests their loss of boundary of the self and identity.

The colonial gaze is probably strongly suggested since early in the beginning of the novel with Delacroix's painting *Women of Algiers*. Edward Said argues that such an image constitutes the "sign of the West's great cultural strength, its will to power over the Orient." Orientalism eliminated humanistic values in order to master its subject. To "capture it, treat it, describe it, improve it, and radically alter it," Orientalism turned the people of the Orient into passive objects of study.

The colonial gaze while truly has quite strong standing points in Ingres' Turkish bath or Matisse's *Odalisque* but it is hardly said to be true in *Women of Algiers*. However, even if it

escaped from sexual interpretation, it could not avoid the depiction of the Algiers as seen by orientalism which bring the stereotype and exoticization.

In order to understand the general characteristics of the colonial gaze then we can learn from Ingres' paintings as examples. Many of Ingres' most famous paintings were Orientalist in nature. His *La Grande Odalisque* is a voluptuous portrayal of a nude woman posed as a harem girl. She reclines on a blue velvet bed with her back to the viewer, her head turned over her right shoulder to look out coyly and seductively. The Orientalist trappings of turban, pipe, and peacock feather fan exoticize the image, which has been described as "redolent of the enchantment of the *Thousand and One Nights*." (H. W. Janson, *History of Art*). The colonial gaze is certainly obvious in Ingres' *The Turkish Bath*. Ingres crowded more than twenty nude figures into a corner of the harem's quarters. Their puffy, sensuous bodies are positioned for maximum display amidst the requisite Orientalist symbols of turban and Turkish rug.

5 Colonial Representation

As we have already discussed above that Proper noun is an identity pre-established by the family for the infant. It means that it is also imaginary, a false representation. This explains why there are so many nicknames used by Sherazade to show that she is at liberty to shatter the illusion of identity. Only Julien who seems to represent the colonizer who has the surname.

Proper names are at issue in *Sherazade* from the title page forward. She has two pseudonyms, Rosa and Camille. The way she treats Proper name lightly strongly suggest that even proper name is not something fixed and it can always be sliding.

When I've got my papers, the forged ones. When my name's Rosa.'

'I prefer Sherazade.'

'I also call myself Camille. You didn't know? Depends who I'm with.' (p. 193)

The character names are not simply sliding toward nothing. When Sherazade says that her name is Camille or Rosa according to the person, it has been clear that the name bear resemblance with a famous figure. Pierrot has explained to her who Rosa Luxemburg is but she has chosen this name before discovering that this Spartacist revolutionary was known as Rosa Lux (p.91)

Indeed, Pierrot often addresses Sherazade with many different names. He writes several, one a day, with a different name everytime: Rosa, Kahina, Olympia, Suzanna, Leila, Roselane, mixing up, unknown to Sherazade who has never heard of any of these famous women, the revolutionary, the prophetess and warrior, the odalisque, the member of the Italian Red Brigade, the Arab poetess, the Turkish Sultana (p.111)

The most interesting part is the fact that the protagonist's name, Sherazade, is derived from a character from the Arabian narrative *The Thousand and One Nights*, Sheherazade. While Sheherazade is very famous for her cunning which can end the cruelty of the Shah, Sherazade seems to be so ignorant. It is actually the most important point of my argument that the novel is about the sliding identity from ignorant Sherazade to heroine Sheherazade.

Sherazade's struggle to such an identity is not without any challenges. Despite Sherazade efforts to understand and fulfill her curiosity, Julien tells her by reading Theophile Gautier's Algerian chronicles, taken out of his Picturesque Journey to Algeria, written about 1843:

'We think to have conquered Algiers and it is Algiers which has conquered us. Our women already wear scarves interwoven with gold a medley of a thousand gaudy colours, which were used by the slaves in the harem, our young men adopt the camel-hair burnous. If this continues, in a very short time France will be Mohammedan and we shall see in our cities the white domes and minarets of mosques mingling with church steeples, as in Spain at the time of the Moors ...' (p.204)

Julien seems to intentionally quote that to convince Sherazade that in the end she can win without any actively participation in making the change. He believes that

'France is becoming multiethnic society . . . First with the Russian and the Poles from the East and if it continues with the dissidents in the USSR and Poland, in the other countries of Eastern Europe as well, but the exodus from there is less serious, and then from the South with the Italians, Spanish, Portuguese immigrants and again from the South with White and Black Africa, not to mention the West Indies and other islands still under French domination . . . Those of original French stock will become the new minority in a few decades,' Julien said with a laugh, 'and all because of girls like you.'

'Why me?'

'Because you are the ones who're going to have two-tone children, half-castes, cross-bred, adulterated offspring, bastards . . hybrids ..mongrels...'

'Me, children? I shan't have any.' (p. 205)

Sherazade refusal of having any children here can be interpreted that the reframing of identity is not necessarily through what Julien suggested since it undermines her power to make a change. Relying on that will again rely on the Other without actively participate in making a change.

5.1 Representation of the Present

It can almost be said that while Sherazade is engaging in changing the frame of present representation, Julien loves colonial representation which still echoes up to the present time.

On Sunday, I seen this picture the day before, and it had gone. I asked the dealer and he said he'd sold it last thing Saturday evening. I was miserable and felt prepared to buy anything as long as it had an Algerian woman... An Arab woman.

'But why are you so keen on all those women?'

'I love them.'

'You love pictures of them?'

'Yes, that's right.... (p.104)

Sherazade does not like such representation. Sherazade refusal to the such fixed image of representation is clearly depicted by her refusal to the photographer's gaze. Sherazade snatched the camera from one photographer she'd seen snooping after her for some time who had taken advantage of the momentary confusion to take a shot of her. She hurled the camera on the floor a few yards away and went off with Zouzou without taking any notice of the crisis she was provoking. The camera had cost a small fortune. Sherazade had thrown it down so violently that it had broken. (p. 134) While it might seem so harsh at first, her refusal is not

merely about the photograph but more on the way it is depicted. At another point in the novel, the reason of her harsh attitude toward the fixed image built by male gaze becomes clearer.

Well this is what you do, first you kiss on the lips you can pretend as soon as I say "Now" you change partners as if you were dancing in a nightclub – there really are discos just for women – and then you lie down one on top of the other in turn, it's quite simple. But see that your tits and bums are visible, you mustn't be prudish. If you were in a sauna or a Turkish bath since that's the thing now, you'd be starkers and it wouldn't worry you, well now it's the same thing. Let's start. You're wonderful the photos'll be t'rif, brill, scoops ... No it's not for a newspaper, I work privately for this kind of photos don't worry. Right, you ready? What are you waiting for? The spots have been on all this time, they'll burn out, they're expensive and you've got to work fast... You ready? We're starting. Come on Zouzou... you think you're stars yet, are you! And anyway in this business there aren't any stars, so don't waste your time imagining you've got there. OK, you've got nice bums, nice tits, you're young, but there are thousands like you queuing up for the job if you don't want it, no problem for me... but I've already paid you; the little one there's got the money, it's not cheap for shags you can pick up anywhere, well come on, I'm not joking. Well, shit, can we start? (166-167)

Sherazade and her friends' response is quite clear. They were standing in front of him, holding their pistols. By doing so Sherazade challenges the erotic fantasy and imagination of photographer's projective gaze. It is her another attempt to shatter the representation of the images of the female body which is highly related to the inscription of sexual and national, in addition to racial, fantasies.

By the end of the novel Sherazade argues with Julien saying that if he keeps on taking pictures he will end up doing porn just like the other photographers since in the end they will love only the representation not women as they are.

For the first time, Sherazade told Julien a bit about her life elsewhere. Anxious at first, he burst out laughing with her as she acted the scene of the screwed-up photo session and the celebrated photographer's panic. She showed him the pistol that didn't look like a toy. When she'd finished telling him the story Sherazade said to Julien, 'You see what you can expect if you go on taking photos.'

'But I don't do porn.'

'It's the same thing.... Anyway, just wait and see...'

She tore down all the pictures of herself that Julien had stuck or pinned everywhere from the kitchen to the bathroom, through the paneled walls of the bedroom and the big living-room, photos of every shape and size, from passport to poster. 'I'm sick to death of seeing my mug everywhere, you understand... you don't need me in the flesh after all....' (pp. 169-170)

By this time Sherazade has already had the understanding and courage to tell Julien directly that what he loves is merely the representation built by the colonial gaze and he still cannot accept the fact that such representation does not really represent them at all the same goes with Sherazade's pictures that all over his place but they do not really represent her and Julien only loves her representation but not her in reality who are made of flesh and bone. Julien knows that she is right and he is not angry at for tearing apart all of the pictures and he does not make any attempts to stop her for doing so.

5.2 Body and Language

Intuitively, Sherazade seems to understand that she needs to roam from museums to museums to recall the representation of the past. Her feeling toward paintings, like *The Women of Algiers* in the Louvre, cannot simply be discussed with her squat-mates for she is quite certain they will laugh at her. They probably will call her a bourgeoisie or a tourist and she will feel insulted and then quarrel will not be able to avoided and resulting her not to be able to see them again. For them, pictures in art galleries represents rotten bourgeois culture, the decadent West, it is old, stale, dead. It does not exist. They live their lives separate elsewhere and If an art gallery has burnt down it will not affect them. Considering that, Sherazade also does not tell her squat-mates what she read for all she knows all they are interested in is only newspapers, political works, detective stories, and most of all comics (pp.255- 256)

Sherazade's awareness of the conventions that surround the representation of odalisques and the dominant culture that imposes certain images of colonized woman as only a passive, watched woman comes to her when she comes across Henri Matisse's *Woman Reading*, against a Black Background, her reaction to seeing a genuine Matisse is so strong that she has to retrace her steps, feeling as excited as she did when seeing *Women of Algiers* at the Louvre.

Matisse

Woman Reading, against a Black Background, 1939.

*Sherazade wrote Matisse carefully, without thinking. She looks at the picture again and on the label on the right she/sees MATISSE. 'Shit! it's Matisse! ...' She says it aloud, as if she were speaking to someone. She reads again: MATISSE; 'It's Matisse' . . . She looks round, turns the pages of her notebook, this is the first genuine one she's seen. She peers again at the woman reading, from close to. She finds nothing exceptional about her. She even thinks the drawing is a bit awkward. She feels heart beating faster. That happened with *The Woman of Algiers*. Sherazade retraces her steps, tries to proceed in order, doesn't succeed, begins again, looks carefully at each picture, because of Matisse, without yet knowing why Matisse. (pp.262-263)*

Sherazade does not know why she is so interested with Matisse, but I argue it is because the painting is no longer about the depiction of nude women but a woman reading. Knowing this then she tries to find other paintings by Matisse.

She's seen all the pictures in the end rooms and those in the middle, without their making any particular impression. She walks straight ahead, thinking she must have made a mistake . . . And then, right in front of her, she sees her, red on a red background. She comes closer, wondering why she hadn't notice her before - it will soon be twelve o'clock. She is standing in front of the odalisque. First she reads:

Henri Matisse

Le Cateau Cambresis 1869 – Nice 1954

Odalisque in Red Trousers, 1922

Purchased by the State, 1922

Lux 085 P (p.263)

She can't understand why it moves her. The reclining woman, with bare breasts, her arms draped in a light gauze behind her head, her hair half hidden by a muslin scarf embroidered with beads, has small round black eyes, a small mouth, almost a double chin - on account of her pose - Sherazade doesn't find her beautiful. The loose red trousers leave her navel exposed. The blouse has slipped to one side revealing her torso and belly. The red trousers are caught in at the calves by a sort of golden yellow band which picks up the colour of the flowers at the bottom of the trousers; yellow and green on the left leg which is folded under her on the almond-green and old-gold striped velvet sofa. The walls around the sofa are covered with tiles, decorated with yellow and red, blue and white, green and white arabesques. On a minute round table, on the right of the reclining odalisque, a vase with three red roses, rather frail. The floor is red, like the trousers.

Sherazade stares at her until midday. (p.264)

Then Sherazade writes the description of the odalisque in her notebook without any details, without stating that she thinks this woman rather ugly but that she is nevertheless moved by her. She does not try to analyse why. But there is only one thing that she is no longer hesitates, she is going to Algeria. (p.264)

It is very important to note here that there are two different paintings which are both by Matisse that maybe confused Sherazade: *Odalisque in red trousers*, by Henri Matisse (*Odalisque à la culotte rouge, par Henri Matisse*) and *Odalisque with red trousers and bare bust*, by Henri Matisse (*Odalisque à la culotte rouge et buste dénudé, par Henri Matisse*). The reason why she cannot understand why the painting moves her I argue is because she is kind of confused by the fact that the same painter is the one who depicts a colonized woman as an odalisque and also a woman reading. It is further accentuated by the fact that the description of the painting and the title is also mismatched. Based on the description, since it contains nudity then it should be *Odalisque with red trousers and bare bust*. On page 203 Sherazade who heard the word odalisque for the first time asks Julian whether the depiction is always naked women. His response is that mostly they are half-draped. It is important because it shows how fragile the women are. Being nude is not only referring to inability to engage in public life but also becoming a product to be consumed by the public. Therefore, if the title of the painting is *Odalisque in red trousers* then it should not depict any nudity, a much better depiction of a woman since it means that she still has boundary for herself, the cloth as the boundary for the other not to trespass.

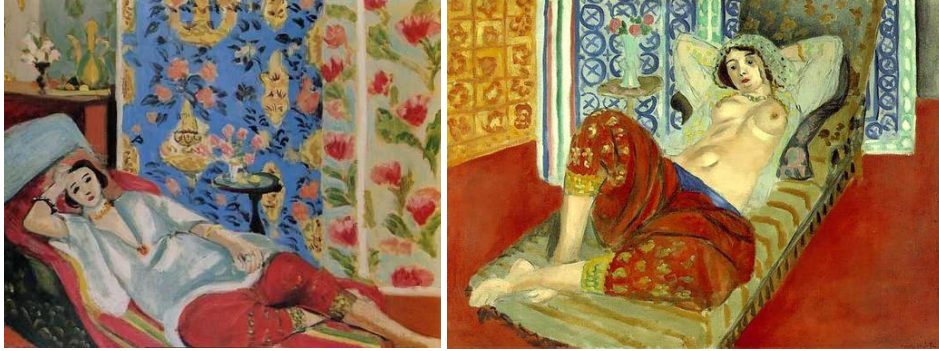


Fig. 1. Odalisque in red trousers

This misunderstanding might suggest that there is a possibility of a different perspective on how women at the time were depicted, a parallax view which may change the way we view entirely. Therefore, Sherazade is so eager to go to Algeria since she wants to have a different representation. Not a representation of a nude woman but rather a woman reading, just like herself who loves reading. It is at this point that Sherazade is becoming Sheherazade.

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