

**Gazing through the Mashrabeya:
Contrasting the representation of Egyptian women in Islamic architecture, British
nineteenth-century orientalist art and the writings of Aisha Taymur.¹**

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This essay analyses the contrasting artistic representations of Egyptian women in nineteenth-century Cairo, by examining certain examples of Islamic architecture which was prevalent at that time in the city, and British orientalist paintings of the same period. The essay examines two examples of such representations. First, the British Orientalist imaginings of the private quarters of women in houses, often referred to as the harem, and compares this hyper-sexualised view of Egyptian women to the conspicuous absence of female representation in Islamic art. More specifically, I will study the mashrabeya, which is an intricate window wooden latticework that served in many ways as a means to contain women's exposure to the outside world, leaving them only small spaces through which they are allowed to gaze. John Frederick Lewis's 1850 painting, the Hhareem, and the mashrabeya windows from the mansion of Beit al Souhaymi in the old Cairo downtown form the basis of this analysis. Finally, this essay will study some of the poems and writings of Aisha Taymour, the most prominent female Egyptian poet to reflect an aspect of the realities of female Egyptian voices in that period.

All that I had seen before my eyes gazed upon you

My whole existence was all in vain

How can anyone tell me that I had lived at all? ²

Egypt in the earlier part of the Nineteenth-century was a nation in the throes of significant, and accelerated, economic transformation as it began to open its gates to the vast and abounding economic promise of the West. This economic change was not matched by any significant

¹ In acknowledgement and gratitude to Dr. Antony Buxton for inspiring this article and for his enthusiastic and genuine support.

² 'Enta Omri' by Ahmed Shafik Kamel (1964) <<http://fnanen.net/klmat/alaghany/a/am-klthom/ant-3mry.html>> [accessed 6 March 2018]. Translation from Egyptian Arabic into English by Ahmed Shokri.

evolution of social interactions in the daily lives of Egyptians. In particular, women remained in many ways subdued because of their gender.³

The search for any historically convincing representation of women in Islamic art, as practiced by the Cairo craftsmen in the nineteenth century, would most likely be entirely fruitless. Islamic art is essentially a communal form of expression, rather than an individualistic artistic expression of any one Muslim artist. It is meant to improve on classic tradition and is largely utilitarian. Fine arts and crafts are united to lend beauty to every aspect of daily life; from rugs to lanterns and from mosques to palaces.⁴

It is also certainly true that Islamic art, as a form of religious and theistic expression of the faith, has shied away from the depiction of human form. The reproduction of human and animal forms in an Islamic context can be seen as a creative encroachment on God's unique creation of all living things. Another reason may be attributed to fear of reverting to pre-Islamic idolatry, where statues of human figures were traditionally worshipped in the Arab peninsula.⁵ All of the foregoing may have contributed to the absence of any real understanding of the life of Egyptian women living in nineteenth-century Cairo in the Islamic arts and crafts of the period.

However, there is one example of Islamic design which was ubiquitous in almost all of the Cairo households, and it may well tell a different story. The *mashrabeya* is an exceptionally delicate wooden latticework, which had been traditionally used as screens on the façade of households and within the open courtyards of private and public spaces. A derivation from the Arabic word *mashraba*, meaning the room where drinks are served, it is believed that the purpose of the mashrabeya was initially to store urns of water since the mashrabeya is meant to close off a room while, by virtue of its design, allow the room to remain sufficiently shaded and cool during the long summer heat. Another probable translation of the word is a variation on the word for 'terrace', from which the ladies of the house can overlook the streets without being seen.

Practical design reasons to accommodate the Cairo summers aside, the mashrabeya also played an important social role in limiting the physical space which women occupied in publicly exposed places. Respectable women of the household were meant to be hidden from the public gaze, and the intricate design of the mashrabeya, with its limiting of external visual access, served as a perfectly convenient method to keep the women safe from public scrutiny. Even though the women on the other side of the mashrabeya were allowed to gaze at the world beyond their homes, their gaze certainly was

³ Judith E Tucker, *Women in Nineteenth-Century Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p.6.

⁴ Edward H. Madden, 'Some Characteristics of Islamic Art', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 33.4 (1975), 423-30.

⁵ Department of Islamic Art, 'Figural Representation in Islamic Art', *Heilbrun Timeline of Art History* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000) <https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/figs/hd_figs.htm> [accessed 03 March 2018].



Figure 1. *Internal and external images of Beit Al Souhaymi, built in 1797, Cairo* (photo) / Egypt / Bridgeman Images

not returned by any person on the other side of the mashrabeya, least of all by any of the European travelers and merchants increasingly populating Cairo

The fascination that European travellers had had with the Cairo harems has been well documented in fiction as well as in many orientalist paintings. The fact that the harem is by its very nature closed off from the public must have spurred the imaginations of the various European men yearning to access this world beyond the mashraebya. The word harem itself is derived from the Arabic word *haram*, the forbidden. Therefore, the social imperatives that isolated this inner intimate existence from the prying eyes of the increasing numbers of foreigners descending on Cairo, became, themselves, the inspiration for British painters such as John Frederick Lewis to invent his own narrative of the life behind the Mashrabeya.

The Hhareem painted by John Frederick Lewis in 1850 during his ten-year stay in Cairo is a visually thrilling example of a British artist who would certainly never be granted access to the private world of a harem in the private residence of the Egyptian upper classes, effectively creating an entire world from his imagination in which the women are, very much like the mashrabeya in the background, part of the ornamentation of the house.



Figure 2. John Frederick Lewis, *The Hhareem*, Cairo c. 1850 © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

The women in this painting are not just ornamental, they are also very much depicted as highly sexualised commodities in this household. They are clearly complicit in their own and each other's subjugation, as they welcome another member of the harem. The face of the main lady of the house, seated next to the master, betrays signs of dismay and jealousy of the younger and more physically attractive woman, the new addition to the harem. The fascination, and perhaps sexual intrigue, on the faces of the younger women also speak to the complex emotions that exist in the hearts of the women of the harem who orbit the man of the house in complete submission to all of his desires, entirely as imagined by Lewis.

The *Hhareem* may well be described as a hyper realistic painting that is deeply detailed in its depiction of the objects in the room. Certainly, the beautifully intricate mashrabeya is almost a replica of the mashrabeyas of Beit Al Souhaymi. It is in contemplating the significance, and the design, of the mashrabeya that we arrive at the extent to which the mashrabeyas have served as a metaphorical and, in this instance, a literal doorway into two different worlds. First, the public world in which respectable households are meant to be presented to the world. Second, the private world to which no access is allowed and which can only be brought to life if the man of the house allowed access, or if the foreign artist decided to create his own vision of that inner, private world. Certainly, the design of the mashrabeya mirrored in Beit Al Souhaymi and *the Hhareem* is both aesthetically and practically designed to inspire mystery, and in doing so, further isolates the narrative of the women dwelling

behind it. It is interesting to note just how static the women are in this painting. They are presented as part of the set piece; they serve a decorative purpose rather than possessing any genuine human particularity. The women in this painting are reduced to beings that are defined by the perceived failings of their sex - sexual permissiveness and petty jealousy - and they are literally flanked from all directions by men who possess, overpower and rule over them. Every aspect of this room seems to reflect metaphorically on the women in the painting. It had been remarked by contemporary critics that the flowers in the foreground of the painting are a representation of the women. 'The girl, a pretty *plaything* [emphasis added], is herself a flower' and '[e]ach petaled cup is brimful of light and sunshine, and each leaf enjoys the air it breathes.'⁶

Lewis's painting *The Hhareem* followed the traditional style of his Cairo harem paintings, which is one of elaborate perceived realism. This style convinced British Victorian audiences that 'no other painter had depicted the minutiae of Cairene interiors, harem accoutrements, and the traditional garments worn by the harem women in quite the same painstaking detail.'⁷ This appearance of seemingly realistic reporting via painting serves to create to the illusion that Egyptian women really did lead this particular existence in the privacy of their homes. Moreover, Lewis's painting of the detailed furnishings in the painting created an intimacy that invites the viewer to believe they are no longer in the position of a voyeur, but an active participant in the events taking place inside the room.

Lewis's own life, as an apparently fully assimilated expat during his long sojourn in Cairo, also lent a certain authority to what Lewis had to say about the Egyptian society and in particular the Egyptian women. This authority, that derives from a British painter who had effectively 'gone native', is a strong example to his Victorian contemporaries on how to exist among foreigners. William Makepeace Thackeray's account of Lewis's life in Cairo perpetuated the myth of Lewis's life in Cairo. Thackeray was particularly impressed with Lewis's decision to live in the 'Arab quarter, away from the expatriate community, transformed from the dandy of the London club, living "a hazy, lazy, tobaccified life" in the "most complete Oriental fashion."⁸ The desired effect of Thackeray's account was to summon to the mind of the Victorian reader mythological images of the Arabian Nights in which the women played a central role of mystery and desire. This description of Thackeray's entry into Lewis's home sets the scene explicitly for the reader:

We made J.'s quarters; and, in the first place, entered a broad covered court or porch, where a swarthy, tawny attendant, dressed in blue, with white turban, keeps a perpetual watch. Servants in the East lie about all the doors, it appears; and you clap your hands, as they do in the dear old *Arabian Nights*, to summon them. This

⁶ Mary Roberts, *Intimate Outsiders: The Harem in Ottoman and Orientalist Art and Travel Literature* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), p.46.

⁷ Roberts, p.48.

⁸ Roberts, p.22.

servant disappeared through a narrow wicket, which he closed after him; and went into the inner chambers to ask if his lord [J. F. Lewis] would receive us.⁹

Entirely integral to this exercise of bringing to life the mythical East as 'translated' by the Orientalist painter and writer, is the introduction of the female figure as a profoundly unsubtle object of desire that is also, most importantly, voiceless. Very much like the women in *The Hhareem*, there is no real intention to understand the Egyptian, oriental, women as living human beings with their own desires and characters. They are merely present as part of the scenery that contributes to the myth building of the Orient as a setting for sexual fulfilment that is not available in Victorian society.

The *erotic* possibilities of this identification are augmented by Thackeray's description of a woman inside Lewis's house *observing* the writer through the *lattice screens*: 'There were wooden lattices to those arched windows, through the diamonds of one of which I saw two of the most beautiful, enormous, ogling, black eyes in the world, looking down upon the interesting stranger.'¹⁰ The entire narrative entertains an image of Lewis as harem master with slaves at his beck and call, and this allusion to his serving girl encourages the reader to imagine what transpires in the private quarters of the house, which seem veiled in all the mystery of the Oriental harem.¹¹ This description eloquently integrates the mashrabeya as an active ingredient in the British, male narrative of Egyptian women's lives in nineteenth century. The female presence is reduced to a female gaze, a bodiless presence hidden behind the mashrabeya which exists in opposition to the imposing physical presence of the man in the real world on the streets of Cairo. The women can also conveniently become a body that exists in a confined space which serves a specific purpose in realising the 'western' male desires and fantasies of life behind the mashrabeya as exemplified by Lewis's *The Hhareem*. The absence of the Egyptian women's own authentic voice is palpable across the foregoing examples of artistic expression in Egypt and by the British orientalists. It is therefore infinitely easy to rely on the male construct (whether this is the practice of an Egyptian artisan creating a mashrabeya, or a British Orientalist painter imagining the harem in a painting) of the Egyptian women's lives as the only historically representative record of how women fit in the largely male-led lives in nineteenth-century Cairo.

However, in spite of the culturally limiting circumstances in which Egyptian women existed, nineteenth century Egypt saw the emergence of original creative expression by women who managed to escape the confines of society to write in authentic self-expression directly to readers without having themselves re-interpreted for general consumption. Aisha Taymur (1840-1902) (Figure 3) was an

⁹ Roberts, p.22.

¹⁰ Roberts, p.22

¹¹ Roberts, p.23.



Figure 3 - Aisha Taymur, in 'الشاعرة عائشة التيمورية.. مالاتعرفه عنها', *El Fagr*, 1 June 2017

<<http://www.e;fagr.com/2615326>> [accessed 6 March 2018]

Egyptian female poet who was born to an affluent Egyptian-Kurdish family.¹² Taymur belonged to the aristocratic district of Cairo, Darb Al Saada, and her father, Ismail Pasha Taymur, was the equivalent of a Minister of Foreign Affairs in the court of the ruler of Egypt, Khedive Ismail.

Taymur displayed early partiality to reading and writing. These tendencies were encouraged by her father who had his daughter tutored in the Quran and the Persian language. She quickly developed a preference for literature, and poetry in particular. Her father's efforts to encourage his daughter to pursue the more intellectually worthy pursuits of learning, reading and writing were not welcomed by Taymur's mother. Her mother planned more traditionally recognisable pastime activities for her daughter, which involved housework and embroidery. Taymur rebelled against her mother's wishes and we are introduced to a sample of Taymur's eloquent writing from that time of her life which showed a strong tendency to defy the expectations of girls growing up in nineteenth-century Cairo. Commenting on her reaction to her mother's attempt to interest her in the simple, womanly pursuits of embroidery, Taymur writes:

[My mother] began to seriously pursue my instruction, yet I cannot be taught, and I sought no accomplishment in the skills of women, and I would escape my mother like fishes from the nets. I would enthusiastically attend the meetings of writers without a trace of anxiety, and I found the sound of the pen on paper the sweetest of tunes. I was certain that to join this group would be the greatest of blessings.¹³

¹² May Zeyada, *Aisha Taymur, the Pioneering Poetess* (Cairo: Kalimat Arabia Press, edition 2011), p.7.

¹³ Aisha Taymur, *The Effects of Circumstances from Words and Deeds* (Cairo: Kotobarabia, [1st ed.: 1888]), p.2. Translated from the original Arabic by Ahmed Shokri.

Taymur's retrospective of her childhood attitudes to her girlish duty certainly reflected a willingness to oppose the wishes of polite society in a manner that left no room for ambiguity. Unrestricted by merely defending her own attitudes to worthy female occupations, Taymur turned against the arrogance of her fellow men. She engaged in searing social commentary in which she soundly ridiculed the ways of the male-dominated world in which she existed:

The men of vanity have trodden
East and West trampling everything in their paths
They believed that Time will always be their servant
And that He will succumb to all of their whims
Little did they know that He is an Enemy
Like a serpent yearning to its treacherous ways¹⁴

Taymur also thought and wrote often about the concept of love that is felt towards other human beings, and also of love in a religious sense and how it can be articulated to reflect a deep connection to God. This led many contemporary and modern literary critics to consider Taymur as a Sufi poet. The extract below is an example of the tradition in Arab poetry which describes misfortune in love:

All the callous beings were ignorant of all the tonics
That my soul longs to drink and wallow in its drunkenness
They wondered about all the yearning and denial
Suffered by my heart that is full of sorrow
A world separates their thoughts and the secrets of my soul
Only God knows of my deepest desires¹⁵

The imagery of flowing alcohol and its effect on sobriety is traditional in Arabic poetry as an accepted allusion to love. The Sufi poets and practitioners also saw the use of alcohol in poetic imagery as an example of divine love, which is used to denote the absolute devotion to the Creator that is free from any clear headedness.

While Taymur employed traditional poetic devices in her writing of the poem above, the fact remains that she had no reliable precedent in female writing to inspire her own writing. The mere act of an Egyptian woman belonging to a respectable aristocratic family daring to write about love and the less wholesome world of alcohol drinking was highly unusual in nineteenth-century Egypt at best, and highly suspect at worst. Taymur's dissatisfaction with much of the nature of marital life found its way into her prose. She created particular controversy by presenting her own unique interpretation of certain

¹⁴ May Zeyada, *Aisha Taymur, the Pioneering Poetess* (Cairo: Kalimat Arabia Press, edition 2011), p.57. Poem quoted in this biography and translated from the original Arabic by Ahmed Shokri.

¹⁵ Zeyada, p.86. Translated from the original Arabic by Ahmed Shokri.

verses of the Quran which were interpreted by mainstream clerics to reflect greater favour to men in their interactions with their wives:

It would appear that the intention of these young in getting married, is not to preserve virtue and religiosity, but to feed their greed and amass money, and to usurp their women of their property.¹⁶

Taymur continues to condemn the irresponsible manner that many women in nineteenth century Egyptian women were treated by their husbands who Taymur described as 'a lion too lazy to hunt, conquered by cowardice'.¹⁷ Women in nineteenth century Egypt were regarded as very much subjects of a great deal of anxiety by the male population. The mashrabeya was a household invention that, physically and metaphorically, was meant to confine women to a specific and limited space. The British orientalist artists, denied access to the secret world of the harem, resorted to expressing an imagined view of this world, which was expressed in their art via an elaborate, seemingly realistic setting which was meant to present a convincing narrative of life in the harem for the consumption of Victorian audiences.

However, when attention and comprehension is given to authentic female voices in nineteenth century Egypt, figures like Aisha Taymur emerge who presented an alternative narrative in which women did not rely on men to relay their own views. This strong Egyptian female emergence in ideas and writings took a much more pronounced form in the very early years of the twentieth century, and it would be interesting to pursue this research further into the new century.

The mashrabeya may have been the centrepiece of the isolation and reduction of women, both conservatively and permissively. The British Orientalist paintings certainly contributed to the creation of an imagined world that heaves with permissive sexuality that provided a sharply contrasting reality of life to Victorian society, by stepping behind the mashrabeya and creating an entirely new narrative. This British Orientalist view collided with the deeply conservative realities of Egyptian women's life in nineteenth century Cairo which, inspired by a deeply traditional art form, served to also reduce and confine women to a space that shuts them from the world behind the intricate design of the mashrabeya. However, it is only when the Egyptian women ceased to gaze through the mashrabeya and bravely stepped beyond its elaborate confines that they took on their real forms, free from male Egyptian anxieties of inferiority, or a British Orientalist obsessive fantasies, as eloquently expressed by voices such as Aisha Taymur who defied the sexual fantasy and the conservative fear.

¹⁶ Aisha Taymur, *The Mirror of Meditation* (Cairo: Woman and Memory Symposium Press, second edition, 2002), p.32. Translation from original Arabic by Ahmed Shokri.

¹⁷ Taymur, *The Mirror of Meditation*, p.33. Translation from original Arabic by Ahmed Shokri.

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