

Tereza Měkotová, *Orientalism and the Orient: Representing the East in H. Rider Haggard's Novel She*

BA Thesis

Opponent's Review

Ms Měkotová's thesis consists in two major parts: an interpretation of the term Orientalism as introduced in Edward Said's book of the same name (1978) and her reading of Haggard's late Victorian romance *She* in the light of Said's concept. Unfortunately, neither of these parts sounds convincing and the application of Said's Orientalism as the student understands it to the chosen work of fiction seems to work rather poorly. As a piece of academic writing, the thesis shows deficiencies both in form and content. Formally, it is hardly more than a mosaic of quotations, as if the student were not able to use her own words and to develop the ideas she found inspiring in critical texts. Moreover, she presents the quoted texts as apodictic, almost never taking a critical stand towards them. This results in repeated information, incongruence and even contradictions.

Her presentation of Said's ideas is rather confusing, because on the one hand it stresses the polarised Occident-Orient dichotomy as a one-way attempt of the West to impose its power over the East by making the picture of the Orient inferior compared to western culture, politics, economy and religion (how does this correspond with the actual application of the Orient's political power in the Balkan and Spanish peninsula? – is the silence about this part of history a weakness of Said's book or of the student's reading?); on the other hand she in fact identifies this culture-based definition with colonization (as a political act), which necessarily excludes other parts of the world, especially the entire American continent (with Spain and Portugal as dominant colonial powers in the area). Another problematic (because simplified) term is "otherness" (or "the other"); originally, the term was used in a metaphysical sense, but the student narrows it down to an expression of a trivialized political agenda, an outcome of the bugle-call of defenders of their own positions (mostly feminist and post-colonialist critics), and she does this without questioning, without testing its validity. Taking these views at their face value, she can then accept such clichés as "women are to men as the Orient is to the Occident", both "created by Western male discourse as 'the other'" (34). Which males represent this discourse and when? And how? Victorian writers? Does George Meredith create his women in such a way? Does Thomas Hardy? Or does John Stuart Mill? And how about the female discourse – why is it silenced in this interpretation and entirely excluded, while in fact it has always played a significant cultural role since the times of Napoleon (which are presented as the beginning of Orientalism)?

Further, what I don't understand at all (or what I find not sufficiently explained in the thesis) is why Haggard's *She* can stand for an Orientalist text; the story is set in the heart of black Africa, where the "African wilderness represents the opposite to the Western civilization" (30) But the "African wilderness" is also the opposite to the Oriental cultural and religious traditions (and not only Islamic but also Buddhist, among others, which the student also does not mention). Not being, apparently, able to defend her position, she turns away from the Saidian Orientalism to the question of the New Woman and consents, quoting R. Roy, that the romance "ultimately concerns itself with the social landscape of Victorian Britain". (40) Not the Orient, not even black Africa, but Britain. What sense does it make?

The last chapter on Islamophobia in the current world is the ultimate sign of the conceptual muddledom the thesis manifests. Again, it reduces the Orient to the Islamic territory and focusses on the political bipolarism. This political bipolarism is perhaps a fact of the modern world, but political constructs and cultural constructs can hardly be taken as identical. And it is hard to find how this part relates to the previous chapters.

To conclude, I consider Ms Měkotová's thesis not a success. There are parts which bring bright ideas but the overall result is rather disappointing. In spite of this I recommend the thesis for defence (mostly for the student's attempt to discuss a somewhat marginalized work of Victorian fiction), but cannot suggest a better preliminary mark than a "good" (**dobře**).

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