

**Imagining Arab Womanhood:
The Cultural Mythology of Veils, Harems, and Belly Dancers in the U.S.**
Dr. Amira Jarmakani

Perhaps the best way to describe Imagining Arab Womanhood is through the example with which I begin the book—a short, presumably light-hearted piece, written by Maxim magazine columnist Michael Dojc, entitled “How to Start a Harem: When It’s Time to Sheik Your Booty and Chase Some Veil.” Predictably, the images and text in this “how to” guide employ stock orientalist and sexist tropes, sometimes combining them in crude and seemingly unrelated ways, as in the caption underneath an image of a man riding a camel, which reads: “The worst case of camel toe we’ve ever seen.” What is perhaps most striking about the column, however, is its ability to incorporate such a wide range of orientalist caricatures in just a few brief paragraphs. It invokes the categories of the harem, the sheikh, and the veil while simultaneously deploying the image of the Middle East as a space of erotic, sexualized fantasy. Further, it reaffirms the grossest misperceptions of the harem as a space of pure sexual fantasy, where a man can have “a few dozen ladies on the side,” and as a space of absolute male power, where the master of the harem surrounds himself with eunuchs so he’ll “never have to worry about [other men] dipping their pens in company ink.” While the Maxim column clearly exemplifies orientalist and misogynist attitudes toward Arab (and “Middle Eastern”) womanhood, it also illustrates the major research questions that provided impetus for the book: Why are representations of veils, harems, and belly dancers so intriguing for U.S. audiences? How have they maintained salience and power for such audiences—re-emerging again and again in countless permutations—since at least the late nineteenth century? Indeed, the Maxim column is important for its banal, everyday orientalism, rather than any unique or exceptional qualities. It gestures to the profusion of orientalist images in U.S. popular culture, from representations of veiled women in recent Reebok and Benetton advertisements, to belly dancers on popular sitcoms such as *The Simpsons* and *Sex and the City*, to the invocation of the harem on a movie poster advertising the 1977 James Bond film *The Spy Who Loved Me* and in the Maxim column itself. Moreover, the fact that the harem column appeared in Maxim’s January 2001 issue indicates the popularity of orientalist representations of Arab womanhood before that mythical origin story of U.S. engagement with the Middle East—“9/11.” Though the events of September 11, 2001 certainly stimulated an upsurge of images of veiled women in U.S. news media and popular culture,

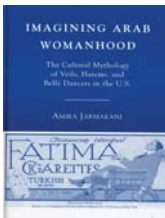
“By learning more about the way these cultural mythologies have operated in several U.S. cultural and historical contexts, one can understand something about these national and cultural interests that have animated mainstream U.S. fascination with veils, harems, and belly dancers for so long.”

U.S. audiences have been imagining Arab womanhood for far longer. In fact, the categories of the veil, the harem, and the belly dancer have circulated in U.S. popular culture for over a century as interpretive schemata through which U.S. consumers of the images could engage with the themes of erotic fantasy, patriarchal domination, and tradition and timelessness, to name a few.

In order to explore these themes more fully, and because I have been interested in exploring the enduring function that such images have held for over a century in the U.S., I do so by focusing my analysis on three specific contextual strata: the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair, U.S. tobacco advertisements featuring orientalist imagery in the 1910s, and contemporary (1970s–present) advertisements and images of veiled women, belly dancers, and harem girls. Through comparative analysis of these three contexts, *Imagining Arab Womanhood* argues that images of harems, veils, and belly dancers have operated, for over a century, as cultural mythologies through which mainstream U.S. audiences grapple with sometimes disorienting social processes, such as consumerism, expansionism, and globalization. Like myths from all cultural and historical traditions, these visual mythologies have a purpose; they serve as texts through which to make sense of unarticulated or inexplicable forces. By learning more about the way these cultural mythologies have operated in several U.S. cultural and historical contexts, one can understand something about the set of national and cultural interests that have animated a mainstream U.S. fascination with veils, harems, and belly dancers for so long. Beyond mere figments of erotic fantasy, they have served as nostalgic emblems for the “lost” past effaced by the progress narrative and as signifiers that function to rationalize militarism and imperialism.

Dr. Amira Jarmakani is Assistant Professor of Women’s Studies and a member of the Middle East Institute at Georgia State University.

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www.gsu.edu/mideast

THE MEI HAS A NEW HOME!

Come and visit us in our new location on the 20th floor of the 34 Peachtree Building. We are happy that our language faculty have joined the director, business manager, and outreach director in our new location and we look forward to hosting lectures and events in our new space. Our library space has expanded; as always you can view our list of films on our web site, along with the latest on our upcoming events. Please send an e-mail to aschwartz@gsu.edu to join our list of e-mail updates or for more information about the MEI.

MEI RECEIVES FEDERAL GRANT

The MEI received a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, Undergraduate International Studies and Foreign Language (UISFL) program in the amount of \$176,912. The grant, entitled, “GSU: Building Critical Language Competency and Middle East Studies” will support the following activities:

- Intensive Arabic courses leading to achievement of advanced proficiency
- Regular assessment of Arabic students’ proficiency
- Creation of our first course in Egyptian colloquial Arabic
- Development of a Turkish language program
- Workshops and seminars for non-specialist college educators
- Expansion of Middle East content area courses throughout the GSU curriculum
- Increased student opportunities to connect with the Middle East through study abroad

ANNOUNCING THE MEI ARABIC COFFEE HOUR

The MEI is happy to announce a weekly Arabic Coffee Hour. Beginning on Tuesday, September 2, we will gather every other Tuesday from 3:00 PM to 4:30 PM in the MEI Conference Room. Our Arabic faculty invite all their Arabic students and Arabic speakers in the GSU community to enjoy coffee, tea, and other treats from the Arab world while practicing their Arabic and learning more about Arab culture. During the month of Ramadan, we will serve tea only in deference to those who are fasting.

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INSIDE

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FACULTY UPDATES

Melinda Hartwig just finished shooting a segment for National Geographic on the Tomb of Menna Project that she directs for GSU (www.mennaproject.com).

Congratulations to Kathryn McClymond on being named the new chair of Religious Studies! She has also released a new book, *Beyond Sacred Violence: A Comparative Study of Sacrifice*, with Johns Hopkins University Press in which she argues that the modern Western world’s reductive understanding of sacrifice simplifies an enormously broad and dynamic cluster of religious activities.

Silma Shelbaya has entered the Communication PhD program at GSU, concentrating in Public Communication with a research focus on public perceptions of the Middle East developed through media coverage of the Middle East by American media outlets vs. Middle Eastern media outlets.

WELCOME NEW MEI FACULTY!



Ian Almond is Associate Professor of Postcolonial Literature in the English Department. He taught for six years in Turkey, for the most part at Bogaziçi University (Istanbul), and has just come from Berlin, where he was finishing a history of Islam in German thought. Dr. Almond has written four books, including one on the Arab thinker Ibn Arabi.



Ian Campbell graduated from the University of Michigan with a degree in Finance and worked for General Motors before joining the Peace Corps, where he taught mathematics and geography in the Republic of Benin. He received his Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from Emory University in 2003. Dr. Campbell taught Arabic as a visiting instructor at Georgia State for two years, then served as Assistant Professor of Arabic and French at the University of Mary Washington in Fredericksburg, VA, where he established that school’s Arabic program. His main area of research is the Arabic-language Moroccan novel of the postcolonial period.



Joab Eichenberg-Eilon former senior official in the Israeli civil service, was Head of the Knesset Interns Program of the Israel Democracy Institute in Jerusalem, and a Senior Fellow at the Interdisciplinary Center for Technology Analysis and Forecasting at Tel Aviv University (ICTAF). There he was part of a team of prominent economists who pioneered Arab-Israeli economic cooperation research. Later he served on the Board of Directors of the Israel-Palestine Center for Research and Information (IPCRI), a joint Israeli-Palestinian public policy think-tank. A Hebrew University graduate, Dr. Eichenberg-

Eilon also holds an MBA from INSEAD in Fontainebleau, France, a doctorate from the Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales (EHESS) in Paris, France, and rabbinic ordination from the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. He is actively involved in Jewish-Christian-Muslim and Arab-Israeli dialogues. Besides Hebrew teaching and translation, his academic interests include Israeli-Palestinian peace research and his micro- and visual history of Jews in Germany.



Allen Fromherz received his PhD from St. Andrews University. He has two primary research and teaching interests in Middle Eastern Studies. First, he examines how the informal institutions of tribal societies can become almost instantaneous institutionalized and settled, especially in the Near East and North Africa. Dr. Fromherz’s upcoming book, dealing with the rise of the powerful Almoḥad Empire in North Africa in the twelfth century and the transformation of Berber tribesmen from the Atlas Mountains into rulers of an empire. He is currently conducting research on the transformation, modernization and institutionalization of the traditional Bedouin and pearl fishing tribes of Qatar. Secondly, he is interested in the Mediterranean and the history of the Mediterranean as a sea of exchange between Islam and Christianity. Another subject of current research is the life and autobiography of the 14th century Mediterranean scholar Ibn Khaldun whose experience travelling through the “Middle Sea” and his insightful observations forms the basis for our understanding of the late medieval Muslim Mediterranean.



Fareeha Khan received her BA/B.S. from Loyola University Chicago and her M.A. in Middle Eastern Studies from the University of Chicago. She received her doctorate in Near Eastern Studies from the University of Michigan in the spring of 2008. Dr. Khan has worked on traditionalist Muslim scholars’ approach to Shariah reform in the modern period, with a particular focus on the legal work of ulama in pre-partition India on the issue of women’s right to divorce. She has a strong interest in the formation and continued evolution of the Islamic scholarly tradition, and the ways in which authority and legitimacy are claimed through the articulation of this tradition. Dr. Khan’s future research interests also include the intersection of Islamic law, ethics, and gender, and how these overlap with other non-legal Islamic sciences.



Nur Yigitoglu is a Fulbright scholar from Turkey. She has recently earned her Master’s degree in TESOL from Michigan State University. During her degree, she also worked as a learning support lab consultant in English Language Center at MSU. She is now continuing her studies in the Applied Linguistics program at Georgia State University. Her research interests are teaching second language writing, genre theory, and language assessment.

STUDENT AND COURSE UPDATES

NEW COURSES

Classical Arabic Literature in Translation

(ARBC 4501) Spring, 2009
Dr. Ian Campbell will offer this introduction to classical Arabic literature from its beginnings in the fifth century to the thirteenth century C.E. The course includes selections from the Qur’an as well as texts and poetry representing different literary periods: Pre-Islamic, Early Islamic, Umayyad, Abbasid, and Hispano-Arabic. All readings will be in English translation. No knowledge of Arabic is required.

Spring Symposium: “Human Rights in an Age of Insecurity”
March 27, 2009, 9:00 AM to 4:30 PM in Speaker’s Auditorium. More information will be available at www.gsu.edu/mideast.

Arabic Study Abroad, Maymester 2009

This course will focus on spoken Egyptian Arabic and cultural immersion.

STUDENTS

The MEI welcomes Kari Storla as our new student assistant. Ms. Storla is a sophomore and an MEI major.

Amber Sansbury received the Born Fellowship and will spend this Fall semester studying in Morocco.

Austin Branson graduated in May, 2008 and has been accepted to the National Security Education Program’s (NSEP) Language Flagship Fellowship Program for Arabic studies. His advanced Arabic proficiency will allow him to forgo the first year of domestic study and participate in the overseas component in Damascus, Syria, administered by the American Councils for International Education and hosted by the University of Damascus.

**GEORGIA STATE’S
MODEL ARAB LEAGUE TEAM**

Congratulations again to Georgia State’s Model Arab League (MAL) team and their faculty advisor, Dr. Rashid Naim. This was the third year that the GSU Model Arab League Team participated in the National Model Arab League Conference in Washington, D.C.

At the invitation of the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations, the sponsors of the competition, the GSU team represented Egypt. On the Arab Court of Justice - Ben (James) Etheridge won the Outstanding Justice Award and the following six delegates won Outstanding Delegate Honorable Mention Awards: Adam Garvey, Kyle (Richard) Proctor, Brett Duvall, Nicholas Taylor, Will Pesante and Amber Sansbury. The GSU team was further recognized by the selection of two of its members (Alma Lyuca and Charles Keller) to be chairs of two of the six councils at next year’s conference; these are highly competitive positions.

Congratulations are in order to the team for its performance at the regional conference, prior to the National competition. In this sixth year of participation, the GSU team won six Outstanding Delegate Awards, one Honorary Mention Outstanding Delegate Award and one Outstanding Justice on the Arab Court of Justice. The Team also won the Outstanding Delegate Honorary Mention Award.

The Department of Political Science and the Middle East Institute provides funding and support for the GSU MAL team.

**CONGRATULATIONS TO THE WINNERS OF THE
FIRST ANNUAL MIDDLE EAST STUDENT PHOTO CONTEST!**



First Place:
Wadi Musa (Jordan), Sara Miller



Second Place:
Istanbul, Sevil Goksu



Honorable Mention:
Ouds, Lindsey Stephenson