

# IMAGINING ARAB WOMANHOOD

IMAGINING ARAB WOMANHOOD

THE CULTURAL MYTHOLOGY OF  
VEILS, HAREMS, AND BELLY  
DANCERS IN THE U.S.

*Amira Jarmakani*

palgrave  
macmillan



IMAGINING ARAB WOMANHOOD  
Copyright © Amira Jarmakani, 2008

Parts of chapter two were previously published as:  
"I Dream of Authenticity: The Evolution and Contortion of American Belly Dance" *Mizna: A Forum for Arab American Expression* 5. no. 2 (December 2003): 33–40.

"Dancing the Hootchy-Kootchy: The Belly Dancer as the Embodiment of Socio-Cultural Tensions" *Arab Studies Journal* Vol. XII, No. 2/Vol. XIII, No. 1 (Fall 2004/Spring 2005): 124–139. Reprinted by permission.

Photographs from James Buel, *The Magic City*, courtesy of the Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

Tobacco Advertisements courtesy of Warshaw Collection of Business Americana—Tobacco Industry, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Behring Center, Smithsonian Institution.

The following photos are reprinted by permission:  
"Sharbat Gula 2002," © Steve McCurry/Magnum Photos  
"Food for Work #1" © 2003 Benetton Group S.p.A.—Photo—James Mollison

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

First published in 2008 by  
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN™  
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010 and  
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, England RG21 6XS  
Companies and representatives throughout the world.

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN is the global academic imprint of the Palgrave Macmillan division of St. Martin's Press, LLC and of Palgrave Macmillan Ltd. Macmillan® is a registered trademark in the United States, United Kingdom and other countries. Palgrave is a registered trademark in the European Union and other countries.

ISBN-13: 978-0-230-60472-8  
ISBN-10: 0-230-60472-2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Jarmakani, Amira, 1974–

Imagining Arab womanhood : the cultural mythology of veils,  
harems, and belly dancers in the U.S. / by Amira Jarmakani.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-230-60472-2

1. Women, Arab. 2. Orientalism—United States. 3. Stereotypes  
(Social psychology) I. Title.

HQ1784.J37 2008  
305.48'8927—dc22

2007032144

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Design by Newgen Imaging Systems (P) Ltd., Chennai, India.

First edition: April 2008

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America.

# CONTENTS

<i>List of Figures</i>	vii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
<i>Preface</i>	xi
Introduction: Excavating Orientalist Images of Arab Womanhood	1
1 Traveling Orientalism: U.S. Echoes of a French Tradition	27
2 Dancing the Hootchy Kootchy: The Rhythms and Contortions of American Orientalism	63
3 Selling Little Egypt: The Commodification of Arab Womanhood	103
4 Veiled Intentions: The Cultural Mythology of Veils, Harems, and Belly Dancers in the Service of Empire, Security, and Globalization	139
Conclusion	185
<i>Notes</i>	191
<i>Bibliography</i>	213
<i>Index</i>	229

## LIST OF FIGURES

2.1	Egyptian Girl in the Street of Cairo	78
2.2	Egyptian Deities Advertisement	87
2.3	Three Dancing Girls From Egypt	92
3.1	Omar Advertisement—"This Reviving Herb"	104
3.2	Fatima Advertisement—Black and White Logo	119
3.3	Fatima Advertisement—"Trip to the Orient"	121
3.4	Murad Advertisement	123
3.5	Omar Advertisement—"Reclining Odalisque"	126
3.6	Omar Advertisement—"Rose-in-Hand"	127
3.7	Omar Advertisement—"Oh Wilderness Were Paradise Enow"	131
3.8	Omar Advertisement—"With Me Along the Strip of Herbage Strown"	133
4.1	Sharbat Gula, 2002	145
4.2	Reebok Classic Advertisement	155
4.3	"Food for Work #1"—Benetton Advertisement	161

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is an honor to have this opportunity to express gratitude to the individuals and institutions that have supported this book from its inception. The Graduate Institute of the Liberal Arts at Emory University provided a fruitful space of incubation as it was there that I first hatched and fleshed out the idea for this book. In particular, I would like to thank Angelika Bammer and Kristen Brustad for their engaged and supportive readings of very early drafts of the book. Without their generous guidance in helping me to craft and frame this project I surely would not have found a way to call it by that coveted four letter word: book.

I have benefited, also, from the institutional support of the Women's Studies Institute at Georgia State University (GSU), specifically in the form of a summer research and writing grant in the summer of 2006. Less tangibly, but perhaps more importantly, I am grateful for the intellectual vigor and wonderful encouragement both from my mentors—Susan Talburt and Meg Harper—and from my colleagues—Juliana Kubala, Layli Phillips, Megan Sinnott, and Charlene Ball—in women's studies at GSU. Their brilliance, humor, and passion have no doubt lightened my load as a junior faculty member. I appreciate also the support of the students in the WSI, in particular Jonelle Shields; my graduate research assistants Elena Weiss, Chanel Craft, and Katie Diebold; and the students in my Cultural Studies of Gender, Globalization and Gender, and Arab and Islamic Feminisms classes, whose thoughtful engagement with me and with my research have invigorated and sustained me.

My analysis has been strengthened in conversation with audience members at Emory University, Otterbein College, GSU, and the University of California—Irvine, where I presented parts of chapters 3 and 4. My deepest gratitude goes to those friends and colleagues who have been generous enough to read drafts of the manuscript, sometimes in a pinch. Many thanks and accolades go to Evelyn Alsultany; Margaret Koehler; Mimi Kirk; Suzanne Ashworth; Terry Hermsen; Joanna Kadi; Kim Segna; Juliana Kubala; and my writing group at

GSU, Lauren Ristvet, Michele Reid, Cassandra White, and Erin Ruel for taking on that task. Though it is sometimes awkward to single people out, I want to specifically acknowledge the support of Nadine Naber, whose commitment to reading and reviewing my manuscript has, in many ways, renewed my own engagement with the book. Any moments of clarity and coherence in my argument are surely indebted to all of the aforementioned readers.

Throughout the various stages of writing this book, I have been nourished by the energy and dedication of my friends and colleagues on the core organizing collective of AMWAJ (Arab Movement of Women Arising for Justice): Katherine Acey, Suzanne Adely, Yasmin Ahmed, Janaan Attia, Lara Deeb, Eman Desouky, Noura Erakat, Huda Jadallah, Nadine Naber, and Heba Nimr. I thank them for keeping me grounded in the ethical commitment that guides and frames this book. In particular, Lara Deeb and Heba Nimr offered both practical and sage advice that helped reenergize me at critical moments during this process.

In addition to the support I received from all those already mentioned, I am grateful for the presence of friends who, in their various ways, have also sustained me along the way: Michelle Roos, Leigh Miller Sangster, Suzy Goldsmith, Mary Gage Davidson, Nader K. Uthman, Katherine Skinner, Patricia Thomas, Kris Segna, and Bobbi Patterson. In particular, I would like to thank Mimi Kirk for believing in me and in my work, and for consistently helping me to believe in my own ability to write this book.

I owe a particular debt of gratitude to my family, whose loving support has strengthened and encouraged my dedication to the issues I take up in this book. I am inspired by the wisdom and strength of my father, Jay Moazza Jarmakani, who has communicated the richness of his history and culture to me in so many silences, gestures, and words. From my mother, Brenda Hopkins Jarmakani, I have learned both the strength of silence and the importance of clear, critical, and pointed speech. I admire my brother, Jeffrey Jamal Jarmakani, for his ability to see things for what they are and for his resolve to maintain his clarity of vision, no matter how painful. I am also grateful for his constant encouragement to, in the words of KRS-One, think very deeply. On both a practical and a profound level, my work has been nurtured and enabled by my partner Kim Segna. Her greatest gift to me—the ability to honor and believe in my story, even when I could not find a way to tell it—reverberates throughout the entire book.

## PREFACE

Growing up in Malibu, California with the name “Amira” was an importantly unique and mystifying experience. As a child, I lived in dread of the seemingly innocuous and well-meaning comment: “What a pretty name! What does it mean?” It was the latter part of the comment, of course, that gave me trouble. As a young girl who did not conform to the dominant beauty ideals of the Southern California scene, I never quite figured out how to negotiate that inevitably fraught moment of lifting my head to the questioner and replying, quietly, “It means princess.” In a town that was located just an hour (by car) from Disneyland and just minutes from Hollywood, it seemed clear to me that “princess” was a category reserved for communicating the confluence of impossibly magical qualities that cohered in Disney characters—those animated figures of idealized white femininity. (This was before Disney’s foray into the wonderful world of multiculturalism with films like *Pocahontas*, *Aladdin*, and *Mulan*, which nevertheless, I would argue, also uphold the aesthetics of white femininity.)

From an early age, then, I knew something about the limits of translatability for cultural categories. Though I knew then that the translation of my name into English did not quite work—that it called up a damaging and, in many ways, toxic caricature rather than the generous, hopeful, modest, and respectful meanings my parents intended when they gave me the name, I did not quite know why. As I grew older, though, I began to link my experience to larger problems of translation when it came to popular U.S. representations of the Arab world. I noticed the way in which imprecise and broad categories took up the space where lives had been and the way in which cartoonish caricatures eclipsed the possibility of considering or representing the realities facing Arabs, Arab Americans, and anyone lumped into the category of Arab or Muslim other in the United States. This realization was the prick that would eventually lead to the book you are now reading.

As I became increasingly interested in the problem of representation, it grew clear to me that the trickiest aspect of confronting images

of Arab womanhood is the fact that they present themselves as accurate and authentic portrayals. They contribute to the prevalence of misinformation about Arab and Muslim cultures in the United States while stubbornly obscuring the dearth of contextualized, grounded knowledge in popular understanding of the Middle East within mainstream U.S. contexts. It seemed clear, then, that the response to this particular problem of representation must be twofold—one must work simultaneously to raise awareness about the complex conditions that impact Arab and Arab American women’s lives and to reveal the inadequacies and blasphemies of popular representations. Ultimately, both projects—creating representations that speak to the multiple realities of Arab and Muslim women’s lives and deconstructing stereotypical images of Arab and Muslim womanhood—must clear space for one another. I began this project with an interest in the former. However, while exploring the realm of literary representation among Arab American feminist writers and Arab women writers who were located outside of the Middle East, I found that it was difficult for Arab and Arab American women to tell their stories without simultaneously responding to the orientalist caricatures that circumscribed their realities. These writers expressed a consistent need to dispel dominant perceptions of Arab women as the quintessential “veiled Woman or exotic whore,” as Joanna Kadi says in her introduction to her 1994 anthology *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-Canadian and Arab-American Women* (xvi)<sup>1</sup>—a need that consistently detracted from their own creative process as it kept them focused on other’s stories about them, rather than on their own narratives about themselves.

Given the collective impact of popular misrepresentations of Arab womanhood on Arab and Arab American writers, I felt compelled to investigate these caricatures further. Following my initial interest, I began with the conviction that popular (mis)representations of Arab womanhood in U.S. popular culture, though not grounded in the actualities of Arab and Muslim women’s lives, nevertheless have real and significant negative consequences for the women they are meant to represent. Pursuing this conviction, however, I eventually became much more interested in asking why—and how—representations of veils, harems, and belly dancers had remained so intriguing and salient to U.S. audiences since at least the turn of the twentieth century. Answering this last question has kept me focused on a close and, I hope, a complex and rich reading of mainstream U.S. narratives—a focus that is, I think, more appropriate to a critical reading of veils, harems, and belly dancers as cultural mythologies. The Arab and

Arab American women's lives they potentially eclipse, though, have remained a critical impetus for my inquiry.

In many ways, academic conventions demand that I refrain from revealing my very personal engagement with the subject matter I analyze in this book. It could compromise the integrity of my argument, the logic goes, to acknowledge that I have a personal, vested interest in deconstructing stereotypical images of Arab womanhood in U.S. popular culture. While a number of scholars in fields like women's and gender studies, ethnic studies, and cultural studies, as well as feminists working in traditional disciplines like Anthropology have worked to debunk the presumption of objectivity in scholarly work, the idea that situating oneself in relation to her work will lead to biased and political scholarship is still, I think, very prevalent. I take this very personal risk, then, in order to clarify the ethical considerations that drive my analysis. I believe, as I have been saying, that orientalist images of Arab womanhood limit the full human potential of the women they purport to represent. However, I believe also that they limit the full human potential of all consumers of the images insofar as they function to obscure many layers of understanding—about the Arab and Muslim worlds, yes, but also about the vague American dreams and imaginings that have sought expression in the shorthand of caricatures rather than in the longhand of thoughtful reflection and introspection. This book, then, is dedicated to honoring the lives of those obscured, maimed, and even killed in the long shadow of orientalist representations.