



# CULTURAL APPROPRIATION IN CRAIG THOMSON'S GRAPHIC NOVEL *HABIBI*

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Craig Thompson's *Habibi* (2011) is an American graphic novel based on a romantic fable that is set in an imaginary and modern Middle Eastern country. For the past century, the political turmoil in the Middle East has been caused to a large extent by Western geopolitical interests in the region (Ehteshami 2007, 123). The West, fueled by its power, has managed to control the East. Consequently, societies have evolved ways of labeling inclusion and exclusion based on the following factors: economic, political, ideological, societal, and cultural domination of another population. This phenomenon created a polarized spectrum of power using a binary approach of West versus East. Thompson's graphic novel presents a political message in the context of social activism that has advanced the rationality of post-9/11 escalatory foreign policy in the Middle East. This neoliberal geopolitics, or neo-orientalist approach, has supported capitalistic economic ideologies in the way it has historically emerged. The domination of Western capitalism reflects European/American culture as distinctive and liberal in comparison to other cultures. This process is called "Othering" whereby the world is divided between "us/civilized" and "them/savage," with those who are different being judged as inferior. The attempt to imitate the West in dress, speech, behavior, and lifestyle is accepted in cultures which continue to oppose each other. Such actions are associated with cultural appropriation or cultural misappropriation when authors adapt details of one culture assuming accuracy and epistemology, sometimes creating controversy. *Habibi* includes several examples of cultural appropriation, including some that express ideas unique to Orientalism. Despite its form, the contemporary graphic novel is profuse with thematic (e.g., power and politics, religion, philosophy, etc.) and aesthetic (i.e., intertwined in an artistic manner) frames that simplify, and appropriate, Middle Eastern cultures.

Graphic narrative is a method used by contemporary writers and illustrators today to illustrate controversial topics such as Orientalism and cultural appropriation, illuminating the path of power structures that distinguish between ideologies of the East and the West that essentially favor the latter. Works that utilize this method powerfully influence American culture, one example being the graphic novel *Habibi*, which demonizes and parodies Islamic cultures and the Middle East. In its pages, author Craig Thompson reflects on topics related to repressed sexuality as seized by people who abuse their power in society and culture. Thompson's *Habibi* tells the impossible love story between two Orientalist cultural stereotypes: Dodola (a beautiful Arabian female sex slave) and Zam (a castrated black slave child). The themes that are discussed in this novel shed light on a dark tunnel of women abused by religious authorities, patriarchal societies, and the so called "norms" of culture in the Middle East. In *Habibi*, everyday life clashes both visually and culturally with modern day ideology. Thompson mythologizes the Middle East as an Outsider perspective from an American point of view and represents Arab culture from what is believed to be the Middle East, not what it actually is. Unfortunately, Thompson, like too many authors, portrays Arabs as violent, cruel, and primitive characters that cannot be argued with and need to be peripheralized.



Figure 1 The looting, kidnapping, and killing that occurred to Dodola early in the story (Thompson 2011, 21).

Readers of *Habibi* have noticed its oversimplification of Arab people, including the character Dodola. In an interview with Nadim Damluji, Craig Thompson is asked:

I'm familiar with French Orientalist paintings and it feels that you are expanding on the snapshots those painting provide — like the scenes of *Habibi* that take place in the Slave Market or in the Sultan's Palace — but those images are very loaded with this implicit "White Man's Burden" element. In other words, we need to save the Arab women from the Arab men, and that's how the French imagined "the Orient." Did you ever fear that you were carrying the baggage of the medium by imitating that style? Specifically, I'm curious to know how you set a limit for yourself when sexualizing Dodola to avoid reducing her to simply another exotic Arab woman in Western literature? (Damluji 2011)

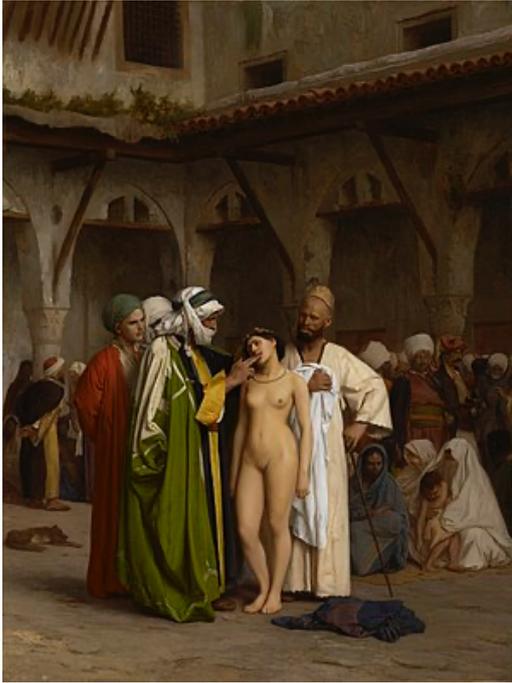


Figure 3 The Slave Market by Jean-Léon Gérôme (1866)



Figure 2 *Habibi* (Thompson 2011, 63) exact replica of the image more than a century later by Craig Thompson

Thompson responded:

Throughout the book even the *Orientalism* is a commentary on exoticization. Which isn't just about any specific culture or ethnicity, but a stereotype of what men do in general or what a lot of people do in romantic relationships. I'm examining American guilt and I'm examining male guilt. In male guilt, there is so much of this energy of objectification and idolatry and eroticization. When I think of those French paintings I don't see the "White Man's Burden" of the French needing to save the beautiful Arabic women from their oppressors, I see the opposite: French men swarming in a perverted sort of way and trying to make fantasy reproductions of what those ladies look like under their hijab. I don't think it paints the colonists in a positive manner, it makes them seem like these creepy little voyeurs. (Damluji 2011)

What Thompson did not grasp was that by consciously copying Oriental stereotypical symbols, he would not create an accurate representation of Middle Eastern people. Instead, he merely establishes the same excessively used, over-simplification of the exotic oriental portrayal of the Middle East. *Habibi* contains Orientalist elements like those identified in Edward Said's *Orientalism*:

In newsreels or news-photos, the Arab is always shown in large numbers. No individuality, no personal characteristics or experiences. Most of the pictures represent



mass rage and misery, or irrational (hence hopelessly eccentric) gestures. Lurking behind all of these images is the menace of jihad. Consequence: a fear that the Muslims (or Arabs) will take over the world. (Said 1978, 287)

*Habibi* likewise places Eastern cultures at a lower status, with the assumption of cultural dominance of the West, and the belief that the Oriental East cannot represent itself, therefore necessitating “saving”.

The novel’s colonialist thinking on the abuse of Middle Eastern women also projects Oriental stereotypes into the twenty-first century. Though Thompson may try to universalize his depiction of male protagonists, he cannot avoid the reality that he is playing into Western culture’s “sheik stereotyping” of Arab men as excessively sexualized, violent, and selfish rapists. This stereotyping may explain American aggression in the Middle East under the pretext of deploying moralistic action to civilize it. It is also part of the bigotry aimed against Muslims and Arabs in the United States, who have recently suffered from increasing rates of targeted hate crimes. The false view of barbaric patriarchal Middle Eastern cultures where their men are savages, and their women marginalized, sends the message that Arab women are voiceless, exploited, and in need of American aid to grant them dignity, equality, and freedom. Through heroic American acts, the men trying to help Middle Eastern women still openly admit to the male gaze, a problem that Western women debate in feminism.

In feminist theory, the male gaze objectifies women by illustrating them in literature and visual arts as merely sources of male pleasure. Laura Mulvey’s theories on the pleasurable and manipulating facets of vision have been widely influential in a variety of scholarly disciplines and is specifically noticeable in Craig Thompson’s *Habibi*. She states that “in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female form which is styled accordingly” (Mulvey 1989, 19). Mulvey argues that art and literature present and represent the sexual pleasure of men by spurring eroticism through fixations on nude women’s bodies or body parts. *Habibi* shows the main female character in isolation, beautiful, set out solely for sexualized purposes, used as a sex slave, and always as a possession of a male character. Women in the graphic novel are equated with desire. Moreover, such connotations are culturally not Eastern ones. Western writers spread dream depictions of the exotic East for Western audiences. Artists fill their works with enslaved women and mistresses.

Since several Eastern cultures conservatively depict sexuality, such representations come from Western cultures, which are less conservative.



Figure 4 The male gaze of the numerous men that wanted a piece of Dodola one way or another. (Thompson 2011, 631)

This study investigates the partiality of Craig Thompson's external focalization throughout his novel. He filters facts, judgment, and tone by guiding, constraining, and developing an argument. Furthermore, the modern idea of the Orient often places it in the past, as a backwards place that is 'beneath' the technologically advanced West. English is the only appropriate language and other languages are considered alien; therefore, any miscommunication stems from the exotic Arabic language.

American authors in the colonial and neocolonial periods frequently depict the polarization of nations, first nation citizens, and second nation citizens. The indigenous



individuals of the Middle East are presented as lazy, backward, dirty, inferior, primitive, and underdeveloped in comparison to modern, industrialized Westerners (Loomba 2005, 20). Each new text composed on the Middle East reinforces specific stereotyped pictures and ways of thinking. Thompson's graphic novel, his narrative, and its source (the adaptation of Arabian Nights), as well as the inclusion of theology (holy books such as the Quran and the Bible), represent the Eastern social and cultural practices in an unpalatable manner.

There is a difference between cultural appropriation and cultural appreciation. Cultural appreciation is inspired by a desire to learn about, and contribute to, another culture. Indeed, such a response to Middle Eastern cultures drove Craig Thompson to write his book. Thompson claims that *Habibi* was inspired and motivated by the objective of countering increasingly widespread suspicion of Arabs and Muslims in the U.S following 9/11. However, it seems like he crossed into culture appropriation. Culture appropriation is "the unacknowledged or inappropriate adoption of the practices, customs, or aesthetics of one social or ethnic group by members of another (typically dominant) community or society" (Oxford dictionary). Its practitioners typically adopt or select unique elements such as ideas, icons, objects, art, pictures, traditions, symbols, behavior, music, or images that belong to one culture or are used by another culture in a generalized way that ultimately belong to an entire region of the world: in this case, the Middle East.

To understand this concept, one must understand what leads to its logic. I will start with stereotypes. Stereotypes are an extreme or twisted generalization of a whole group or community of people that does not recognize individuality and variation. Stereotyping is the foundation of bias and prejudice that undermines opportunities and rights for people. This phenomenon is explained by the "Thomas theorem" which states, "if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Thomas and Thomas 1928, 572).

Is there Cultural appropriation in *Habibi* where important cultural symbols are used inappropriately? Yes, and such examples often take the form of "microaggressions": a term that describes a kind of discrimination against race, gender, religion, and sexual Orientation.

Dr. Derald Wing Sue defines microaggressions as:

the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership. In many cases, these hidden messages may invalidate the group identity or experiential reality of target persons, demean them on a personal or group level, communicate they are lesser human beings, suggest they do not belong with the majority group, threaten and intimidate, or relegate them to inferior status and treatment. (Sue 2010, 3)

Craig Thompson uses microaggressions in an interview by saying:

I think anywhere in the so-called 'developing countries' there's this boundary where the old and new brush up against each other. That doesn't mean you see palaces with sultans and modern plumbing and all of that. But my experience is that being in the Global South, as they call it, you can see people living in a very medieval way— alongside Western development and globalization. (Armstrong 2011)

As exhibited in his own explanation of his work, Thompson does not normalize or show the multi-dimensionality of his characters. Thompson continues to show a generalized, distorted, and one-dimensional representation of the entire East, that is already too common to the portrayal of the Middle East and its people. The stereotypical image in which the West is presented as logical, civilized, predominant, and legitimate, while the East is represented as backward, inferior, illogical, abnormal, and illegitimate. The novel exudes an aesthetic curiosity with Eastern graphic design and political platforms in the context of social and environmental advocacy. Instead of seeing this colonial "Othering" as something locked in the past, the American culture constantly projects it into the present. Through his writing, he applies the colonizer's ideologies of stereotypical representation and shows racist inclinations toward nonwhite communities, e.g., Arabs.



Figure 5 The contrast in modernity between the main characters, who are Arab, and the rest of the people in the picture, who are Westerners. (Thompson 2011, 651)

It seems that Thompson reinforces and spreads the idea of physical and social differences between the Western and the non-Western races and renders the latter in an inferior position to the former, from different physical, cultural, and social aspects.

Thompson's exaggeration and collective classification of countries into what he considers "developing countries" and a "Global South" creates an unforeseen confirmation that he is participating in the same Orientalism present in his narrative setting. This research sheds light on the style of narrative, focalization, bias, and the limitations of the novel. These concepts help the reader study how the novel presents the East as exploited, marginalized, inferior, and in need of control in every aspect of its inhabitants' lives (i.e. cultural, historical, social, economic, and political). Thompson, being from the West, has developed a polarizing role. He divides the world into two regions: first world (Western) and third world (Eastern) countries. Such polarization is simplistic and dangerous

since it ignores the continuing processes of history (Bhabha 1994, 196). This example is evident from the desert setting.

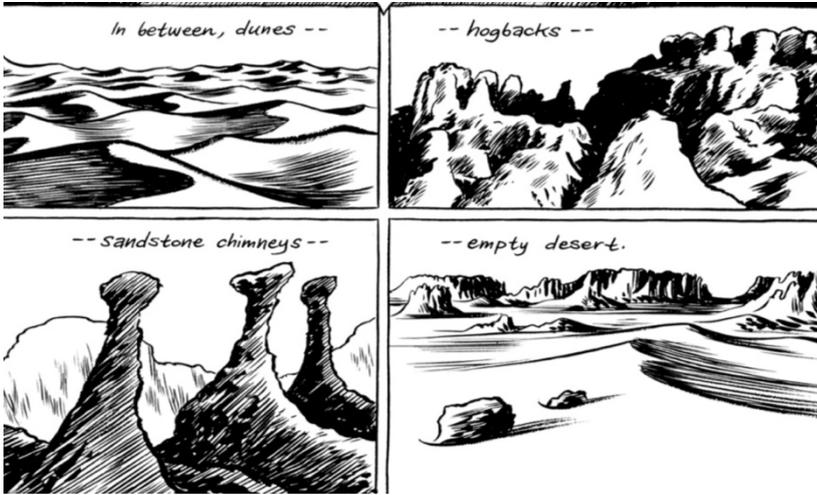


Figure 6 Typical orientalist setting, mainly deserts. The book primarily offers visions of deserts and camels by rarely depicting urban settings, further enforcing the polarized roles of Eastern deserts versus Western metropolitan cities and civilized.

The geography and landscape of the book is mainly in the desert, and the desert is sketched as evil, savage, and dangerous. It is illustrated as a place where everything becomes dangerous, people lose their sanity, and love becomes violent.

The global world is governing countries by dividing them into two polarized categories: ally and enemy. This largely economic interest is well explained in *Empire* (2000) by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in which they add to Edward Said and Homi Bhabha's arguments. The globalization of economic and cultural exchanges is not intended to decrease the power of nations; on the contrary, it is intended to increase universal independence. However, more often the reverse is occurring, with declining national sovereignty to satisfy capitalist greed. Political power justifies ultimate power to one hegemonic nation, in this case, the United States. Today, technology gives global actors easy access to the world; however, it is often utilized negatively by drawing and erasing borders ac-



Figure 7 The following picture illustrates the desert and the Middle East as a harsh place. The hardship of life ensures people to do whatever it takes to put food on the table, even if that means inflicting harm on others. (Thompson 2011, 126)



cepted by the more powerful. In literature, the commonly reproduced discourses and ideas regarding globalization elude American dominance (Sparke, 373).

In conclusion, Craig Thompson cherry picks cultural images and ideas for his representation of the East. The aesthetic purpose of his drawings and narrations are a mere accessory to make an eye candy creation for his graphic novel. Rather than representing Eastern cultures from an academic platform and using extensive research, Thompson picks and chooses what to include in his novel, arbitrarily filling its pages with misrepresentations rather than appropriate representations. Too many artists assume this depiction of the Middle East, and some, like Thompson, have never travelled there, taking their influences from media and Western sources for their work. The representation of the East as inferior forces Middle Eastern people to accept being called and categorized as Other. Authors must levy criticisms on concepts so that we do not dehumanize people in the process. Regrettably, Thompson played a worn-out parody of Muslim men which reproduced racial prejudices. As a white privileged man, Craig Thompson engaged in cultural appropriation, failing to humanize Muslims, and therefore marginalizing them with mixed messages.

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