

Summer Scholarship Report 2004/2005

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Receiving the Faculty of Arts Summer Scholarship enabled me to dedicate time over summer to developing and clarifying my honours project. As the result of research and consultation undertaken over summer, I was able to address significant methodological and theoretical problems presented in my research proposal, and to some extent change the focus and direction of my study. It also gave me time to complete practical exercises, such as text summaries, media studies, chapter plans and summaries, and a bibliography, which have been immensely useful. Subsequently I am more confident in my ideas, and well researched and prepared for the actual execution of my thesis.

Honour Lost? : The Norma Khouri Scandal, ‘Authenticity’ and the ‘Feminising’ of Orientalism.

My initial research proposal outlined two central concerns in looking at the recent Norma Khouri controversy, issues of literary ‘fraud’ and authorship, and issues of representing the Middle East in a post-September 11, ‘war on terror’ context. I had attempted to draw tentative links between these two concerns, yet my attempts were somewhat unsuccessful. My independent research over summer and the suggestions of my supervisor, Dr. Guy Davidson, enabled me to clarify these concerns, and develop and strengthen them within a theoretical framework. I had suggested in my proposal that my project would focus on theories of authorship and identity, but did

not really have any clear ideas about how to link this with what I perceived to be an imperative issue of essentialism and representation.

Using the notion of 'authenticity' as a conceptual focus point for bringing other ideas about 'race', representation and authorship together, I am looking at theories of Orientalism, such as the work of Edward Said as well as contemporary feminist revisions of his work. I will be focusing specifically on what Said identifies as the West's search for the authentic 'other' to consolidate its cultural dominance over the East. Of particular interest has been the work of Reina Lewis, whose text *Gendering Orientalism* has been immensely influential in providing a framework for shifting the focus of my research. In this text, Lewis revises Said's *Orientalism* and questions notions of Orientalism as a 'potentially unified and unparadigmatically male' (p.3) gaze, exploring the ways women have contributed to the project of Orientalism and produced alternative ways of representing racial difference.

I argue that Lewis' notion of a 'feminised 'Oriental gaze is typified by Khouri's text, and by the co-option and commodification of Middle- Eastern' testimonial narrative by the Western mainstream. I will suggest that of recent there has been a preoccupation with finding 'authentic' representations of the plight of women in Islamic countries, and 'hijacking' such accounts to reinforce Western presumptions about the Middle East. Texts of this genre, which have proliferated in recent years, contain distinct and formulaic clichés and conventions that work to reinforce ideas about Middle Eastern men as violent monsters, threatening, oversexed and irrational.

The notion of the text as being 'Mills and Boons in a Chador' is also something I intend to address in my thesis. This is an expression used by Gillian Whitlock to describe how Islamic women's life writing has been appropriated into serial and clichéd 'pulp' fiction, to be consumed as an 'exotic' and 'exciting' venture into the dark, dangerous and sensual world of the 'East' in a manner that is dramatic and titillation, but confirms the ultimately superiority, comfort and 'enlightened' values of the West.

In looking at notions of authenticity and the Khouri scandal, I will still be referring to theories of authorship and authority, though the focus of my analysis has shifted slightly in this regard. Whilst making use of the work of critics such as Ruthven, whose have looked at frauds and hoaxes as both 'disturbing' and reinforcing notions of 'real' authors and literature, I intend to work closer with material addressing the genre of Autobiography/ 'testimonial' literature, such as the work of Leigh Gilmore on the limitations of autobiography and testimony (2001). Such texts have sought to question traditional assumptions about autobiography as non-fictional, and argued that because the self at the centre of autobiographical narratives is a fictive structure, so to is the genre of autobiography (Adams 1994).

Practical Outcomes Of Summer:

The research time over summer that the Faculty of Art's scholarship allowed enabled me to complete several practical tasks that will be of immense help in the actual execution of my thesis. My first task was to collect as many newspaper and magazine articles as I could find covering both the release of the book and its initial reception,

and of Khouri's 'outing' as a fraud. After reading these articles, and noting the ways Khouri and her text were constructed differently before and after the 'outing', I wrote a summary of the main themes I saw recurring which provided a rough sort of sketch for what ideas I would need to research further, what sort of reading I should do of Khouri's text itself, and how would the surrounding controversy shape my analysis of the text itself.

After reading and summarising the main ideas of these articles I sought out texts theorizing authorship and fraud, attempting to locate Khouri's work within a 'tradition' of hoaxing in Australian literature. Comparing and contrasting the scandal with other literary forgeries, such as the Helen Demidenko/Darville, Leon Carmen and Mudrooroo 'outings' enabled me to clarify the central concerns of the Khouri hoax, and consider the analysis others have given of forgery and cross-racial identification where relevant. I wrote summaries of the ideas and arguments of what I thought were the most relevant and important texts on authorship and identity for later use in developing my arguments about how Khouri's text fits within this tradition of 'fakery'.

My next task was to read 'Forbidden Love' and summarise each chapter, paying close attention to the construction of Jordan, and the Middle- East more generally within the text, and the text's central theme, gender relations and 'honour'. Looking particularly at the imagery Khouri uses to describe Jordan, its landscape and its people, I considered the ways the text itself perpetuates common presumptions about the East. Reading other texts representing women in the Middle East, such as Jean. P. Sasson's *Princess* and Fatima Merssini's *The Harem Within* enabled me to situate Khouri text

within a genre with some distinct conventions and clichés. Having read Said's *Orientalism* in undergraduate coursework, I noted that Khouri's text, like Sasson and Merssini's, was formulaic and Orientalist. Describing her 'homeland' as 'a stifling prison, tense with the risk of death at the hands of loved ones' (p.2), 'a society that unfurls banners of welcome to the future, yet holds tenaciously to its ancient roots and traditions' (p.3), Khouri is clearly not adverse to clichés and stereotypes about what it means to be Middle-Eastern. These observations raised many questions for me about the usefulness of Orientalism as an interpretative framework for these ideologically laden writings about women in the Orient, to which my supervisor suggested the works of Reina Lewis and Ann. E Kaplan.

Finding Lewis's *Gendering Orientalism* to be an interesting and useful framework to look at the Khouri scandal, I wrote a summary of Lewis' main ideas and of the most important general quotes about the ways women have contributed to Orientalism.

Whilst Lewis' argument is more historically based, and uses the work of women artists and writers such as Henriette Brown and George Eliot to support her ideas, it is an argument that lends well to contemporary portrayals of the East by Western women. Using both my previous summaries of *Forbidden Love* and *Gendering Orientalism*, I wrote a short piece about how Khouri's text exemplifies the kind of 'feminised' Orientalism that Lewis addresses, and how more generally the fascination in the 'veiled woman' by Western, pseudo-feminist literature has created a new, 'female' gaze at the Orient which conjures many clichés and assumptions, which whilst purporting to be primarily concerned with the position of women is strongly racialised.

Finally, my extra time over summer enabled me to compile a bibliography, of texts both read and yet to be read. Doing so has already been a great advantage, as it both enabled me to reflect on what I had and had not read, and any obvious 'gaps' in my research, as well as being a practical advantage for referencing in thesis related work I have done since summer.

The research conducted over summer clarified my ideas and gave me a strong enough sense of where my thesis is heading that I have now written a draft chapter summary of my thesis, and have begun writing my first chapter. Without the advantage of having received a summer scholarship I do not feel that I would have reached this point in executing my thesis by now. I am immensely grateful to the Faculty of Arts for providing this opportunity, and to Guy Davidson for his help and supervision over summer.

References

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