

## Misrepresentation of Orientals in Dave Eggers's *A Hologram for The King*

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### **Abstract:**

This study deals with the colonial perspectives in Dave Eggers's *A Hologram for The King* (2012), according to the postcolonial approach. Although colonialism era is over by now, colonial perspectives remain strong in some literary works. Since its advent in the second half of the twentieth century, postcolonial theory confronts colonial attitudes and experiences as colonialism has been justified in many works of Western writers and scholars who have distorted the real image of non-Europeans and non-Westerners via different means and techniques in masquerade of orientalism. Postcolonial discourse opposes the misrepresentation of non-Europeans and argues that such falsification is driven by political, social, religious and economic motives. In the current study, the researcher aims at explaining the notions of colonialism, otherization and other falsified images of non-Westerners in *A Hologram for the King*. This paper mainly questions Eggers's portrayal of the protagonist, *Alan Clay*, who after bankruptcy and failure at home, flies to Saudi Arabia and capitalizes on the physical and moral assets of the Orientals in this country to convert his story of failure to a success. The characterization of the oriental world and its setting show Eggers's being biased against the Eastern world and ironically mirror clear hints of colonialism and eurocentrism.

**Keywords:** A Hologram for the King, Dave Eggers, Orientalism, Postcolonial criticism, Saudi Arabia, and Alan Clay.

## I- Introduction

A Hologram for The King is a fictional novel, written in 2012 by the American author Dave Eggers who started his literary career first as a journalist. Although *A Hologram for The King* did not become the winner of the National Book Award, it became one of the finalists of the annual event in the same year when it was published. As stated by Eggers, the novel sprouted from a conversation in 2008 which he had with his brother-in-law, Scott Neumann, “who had visited, through an international firm, King Abdullah Economic City the same year” (Eggers, 2012, p.231). This means that Eggers did not visit Saudi Arabia himself; therefore, in portraying Saudi setting, he generally based his novel on the stories he read or heard. In addition, if one reads *A Hologram for The King*, s/he will come across many clues regarding the tendency to still portray non-Europeans as backward, exotic, sexually lubricious and primitive. In reality these flawed images date back to many centuries ago. Edward Said (2003, p.56) states the conflict between Western and non-Western cultures dates back to the ancient Greeks and is called the “first demarcation between Orient and West”. The writer continues to illustrate that in the tragic play of *Iliad*, the Persian king Xerxes is depicted as a tyrant and invader who destroys the sanctuaries of Athens, but he is finally defeated, paving the way for the West to overcome the East. Similarly, Frederick Quinn (2008, p.25) indicates the Greeks started to create “a self-image in relation to the Asian peoples on their frontiers, such as the invading Persians. It was a contrast between (civilized) and (barbarian), the liberty-loving Greeks confronting warlike Asian despots”. Thus, Asia, representative of the East, turns to a wilderness cursed with catastrophes. This vision can be clearly seen in the following ode, which can be regarded as the first geographical distinction between the East and the West:

Now all Asia's land  
Moans in emptiness.  
Xerxes led forth, oh oh!  
Xerxes destroyed, woe woe!  
Xerxes' plans have all miscarried among  
(Said, 2003, p.56)

The misrepresentation of the Easterners continued in the Middle Ages. For instance, in his famous work, *The Divine Comedy*, Dante Alighieri, depicts prominent Eastern figures like Prophet Mohammed, Imam Ali, Saladin and Avicenna as being confined to hell. He writes “While I was all absorbed in seeing him, He looked at me, and opened with his hands His bosom, saying: “See now how I rend me; How mutilated, see, is Mahomet; In front of me doth Ali weeping go, Cleft in the face from forelock unto chin” (Alighieri, 2003, p.75). Here one can see that under the influence of the common position against the Easterners, Dante shaped his story, too.

The issue of preferring the Westerners over the non-Westerners and regarding the former as superior and the latter as subordinate is still found. Under the façade of orientalism many western works like Dave Eggers’s *A Hologram for The King* promote orientalism in the current age. In their co-authored book, *Genealogies of Orientalism: History, Theory, Politics* Edmund Burke and David Prochaska (2008, p.1) claim orientalism is not over, reiterating the “rumours” of orientalism’s demise are exaggerated. Further, the writers, exemplifying the post- 9/11 United States, argue in some contexts the orientalism outlook “has just begun”. From Said’s perspective, there are several intents behind distortion of the non-Europeans’ image by Europeans, including colonial purposes. The author maintains that the orientalist represented and dealt with the orient “for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the orient” (Said, 2003, p. 25).

Eggers's *A Hologram for The King* articulates orientalism in various ways, especially in showing the West's willingness to occupy the East, particularly Saudi Arabia, and in endeavouring to illustrate the non-Europeans as primitive, backward and sexually licentious. One can detect the same notion in *A Hologram of The King* in which the destitute protagonist, Alan, is so frustrated with his life that he heads to Saudi Arabia where he can find everything that can fulfil his ambitions, including a well-paid job in King Abdullah's Economic Centre as well as affection and happiness with a Saudi physician, Dr. Zahra Hakim.

## II- Postcolonial Criticism of A Hologram of The King

### II. I-Colonial Discourse

In colonial discourse, there is a tendency towards providing justifications for colonial purposes. The colonizers “construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the bases of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 70). Therefore, obviously the postcolonial criticism is more directed against this trend, opposing “the conquest and control of other people's land and goods” (Loomba, 2005, p.7).

The setting in the novel under study is Saudi Arabia, the second top member in the OPEC, which besides oil revenues, depends mainly on religious tourism for its relatively enormous income. The country is located in the East “the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilization and languages” (Said, 2003, p. 1), which has always tempted the Western colonizers. Colonial notion is one of the discourses that is overtly illustrated in *A Hologram for The King*. One piece of evidence in support of this claim can be derived from the conversation between Alan and Yousef, a Saudi driver who later becomes a companion to the protagonist. Yousef, as an easterner, asks Alan (who represents the westerners) to help in liberating Saudi Arabia. The Saudi driver feels disappointed in his own country as he believes the people of Saudi Arabia are suppressed, having no freedom of choice in their own homeland. Therefore, he resorts to a western “saviour”:

—But it would be better to stay here, and have things be different.

They lay in silence for a while. Yousef turned to him.

—Alan, would you fight for us?

—Who?

—People like me, in Saudi.

—Fight for you how?

—Like you guys fought for the Iraqis. Or what you said you were fighting for. To give them opportunities (Eggers, 2012, p. 191)

In response to this request, Alan assures Yusef that in America they “have a lot of people willing to fight to support the people who are trying to be free. Americans like a cause. And they don't think too much about it” (Ibid, p. 192). The word “cause” is a key word and it is being repeated over and over in today's political polemic. If there is a cause related to human rights, a country like the US, which proclaimed has itself as the guardian of human rights on the global level, assuming that the people of this country would sacrifice their lives without hesitation to rescue other people may be completely expected. But under the pretext of such causes, the colonial ambitions are accomplished. The attitude that Saudis are living under a despotic authority, that they are destitute

people, who are desperately seeking assistance, has become a focal point in the novel through which the author validates colonizing Saudi Arabia. The pretext resembles the same justification that the Italian explorer, Christopher Columbus, represented to the Spanish Court in 1492. In his letter to the court, Columbus argued the native Americans are primitive people, incapable of ruling themselves and encouraged the court to legitimize colonizing or in his own words “liberating” those people. According to Michael Payne (2005, p.93), Columbus also wrote to the Spanish King, Luis De Sant Ange, stressing that the natives are outlaws or rebels, living on the margins. “This marginal existence, the lives of those who are ‘not us,’ marks their distance from civility.... the Indians have been assimilated to a conception of nomadic barbarism” (ibid).

It is evident that like some other Western scholars and intellectual writers, Eggers uses different modes and styles to legitimize West’s competency over the world particularly the land of Orientals. Eggers’s imperial view reflects his own position in today’s world because the author is influenced by the historical contexts which he lives in as Said (2003, p.10) explains “No one has ever devised a method for detaching the scholar from the circumstances of life, from the fact of his involvement (conscious or unconscious) with a class, a set of beliefs, a social position, or from the mere activity of being a member of a society”.

The concept of orientalism as a means for dominance and colonization manifests itself further in *The Hologram for The King* through the turning point in the protagonist’s life. Alan had already tried many jobs back at home, still he turned to a bankrupt who even failed to financially help his daughter, Kit, to pay her college tuition fees. (Eggers, 2012, p. 11). The author attributes several other negative characteristics to the protagonist, describing the 51-year-old Alan as a “short-sighted” man in the accompany of “short-sighted” friends, adding Alan and his friend’s decisions are only “foolish and expedient” (Ibid, pp.11,16). Despite these undesirable attributes and such an unsuccessful story, Alan becomes the source of hope for the orientalists in Saudi Arabia. This Westerner himself capitalizes on the human and non-human resources in this country to make his dreams come true. Though his work project proposal of a hologram for the king gets rejected, “He wasn’t being sent away after all, and he couldn’t go home yet, not empty handed like this. So, he would stay. He had to” (Ibid, p. 231). He finally obtains a well-paid job as well as a beloved in Saudi Arabia, in other words, everything that a man can wish for in general. In this way, Saudi Arabi is illustrated as a land for the westerners where they can make their dreams come true.

## II. II-Islam versus Christianity

Besides the cause of human rights and the temptations of a dream land, another theme which gives prominence to the pro-colonial nature of *A Hologram for the King* is religious bias. According to Said (2003, p. 80), orientalists regarded Christianity as superior to the rest of religions and the stick yard for measuring them. Such comparison between Christianity and Islam was of great significance especially at the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century when Islam was described as a threat and “the lasting trauma.” The Islamic civilization and its developments created an intellectual, social and cultural problem challenge for Europe. Thus, Orientalism emerged as Europe’s rationale for meeting the challenge of Islam (Sardar,1999, p. 18). Evidence of prejudice against Islam and Muslims in Eggers’s novel can be observed in the words of the protagonist when he mocks Islam while promoting Christianity. Alan claims it is too hard to practice Islam because “in any twenty-four- hour period up there, how it made it hard for certain religions — morning prayers, afternoon, evening, very difficult. But it’s good for a Catholic..... They just want you to check in once a week or so” (Eggers, 2012, p. 203).

Certainly, the sole comparison of religions in terms of one being easy and the other difficult, in itself, does not confirm existence of a colonialist perspective. However, comparing the characteristics of the followers of different religions has proved to be a crafty strategy for the orientalists and the colonizers as well. “It is an ancient human strategy to attack the distant enemy in order to consolidate political control at home. Portraying Jews and Muslims as heretics and sexual deviants allowed Europeans in positions of religious and political power to close their ranks” (Quinn, 2008, p.23). In *A Hologram for The King* the Arab characters who are depicted as sexually unorthodox all carry the names of highly respected figures in Islam, as Yusef and Amina or are related to the prophet of Islam in one way or another. According to the Quranic scripture and Islamic documents, Yusef was the prophet famous for his beauty and sexual restraint; a prophet who resisted the sexual temptations of Zulaikha, the wife of Potiphar of Egypt. Yet, in Eggers’s novel Yusef resembles a sexually licentious man having affairs with several women. One of these women is Noor whom Yusef claims to be “descended from the Prophet Mohammed. I swear this is true” (Eggers, 2012, p.90). Jameela and Amina are two other woman who have sexual relation with Yusef. Amina carries the same name of the mother of Prophet Mohammed. Dr. Zahra is another character in the novel who has a similar name to the name of the daughter of Prophet Mohammed, called Fatima Al-Zahra. In this novel, also Zahra is engaged in extramarital relations and finds love with Alan. One can observe that for Eggers the oriental women worth no more than those who work in the Western brothels because they do everything without caring about any rules solely for the sake of their desires. An attention-grabbing point is that, although all the mentioned characters are involved in adultery, Alan’s adulterous behaviour is hardly highlighted like the rest of the characters. Probably as an orientalist, the author aims at exculpating the West from its crimes and sins of adultery and showing the images of another continent so as to foreground colonizing the Eastern countries.

In addition to exploiting the symbolic names and relations, Eggers takes advantage of the Islamic veil of women in Saudi Arabia to further fabricate the image of the people in the country in favour of the colonial discourse. The author draws the attention of the readers to the Hijab of Saudi women, saying Alan was “terrified” by the sight of some women who wore face veils, looking after children in a park. “With them were three women in burqas, charcoal black. He had been among burqas before, but to see these shadows moving through the playground, following the children — it gave Alan a chill. Was it not something from a nightmare, to be chased by a flowing figure in black, hands outstretched? But Alan knew nothing and said nothing.” (Eggers, 2012, p.28)

## II. III- Otherness:

Postcolonial critics are also interested in is the idea of otherness while analysing literary works. In the colonial representation the word ‘other’ refers to those people who are outside the ring of the self. Otherness is a kind of racial portrayal and is used as a tool by the colonizer for marginalizing the colonized. As stated by Bill Ashcroft, Griffiths Gareth and Helen Tiffin, (1993, p.170) the otherization, “can refer to the colonized others who are marginalized by imperial discourse, identified by their difference from the center and, perhaps crucially, become the focus of anticipated mastery by the imperial ‘ego’”.

The idea of otherness is illustrated through the strange, eccentric and usually illegal behaviour of characters in *A Hologram for The King*. This idea is elucidated mainly through their acts, conversations and impressions. For instance, Yusef makes a sudden U-turn on the street, violating traffic rules. He also rejoices in breaking the laws. This character, who is represented as a Muslim, living in most sacred country for the majority of Muslim, violates the laws by taking a non-Muslim to around Mecca. In his tour around the holy Muslim city, Yusef enjoys driving

Alan through the main route to Mecca not through the exist route designated for non-Muslims. Despite their interest in evading rules and regulations, Easterners are also described as naïve and weird in Eggers's novel. In a conversation between Alan and a stranger whom he meets near a village, Alan jokes with the man, saying he works for the CIA as a freelancer and the villager believes Alan right away (Eggers, 2012, pp.167,170, and 180). In another instance, Eggers describes Saudis in a way as if even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century the technological developments are extremely sophisticated to them. This, in turn, results abuse or misuse of technology in a weird backward manner, according to the author. For example, one of the Saudi men whom Alan meets in the elevator of the hotel is playing with a tablet computer and "was turning the device round and round, the buttons dutifully reconfiguring, and this was giving great pleasure to his friends". Possibly not only in dealing with the technology but as for the social etiquettes the Saudis in particular and the Easterners in general are lagging far behind the Westerners, belonging to a totally different world. This is manifested when "Alan held the door for the Saudis, none of them thanking him" (Ibid, p. 23).

Disorder and impunctuality runs high among the top-ranking officials of Saudi Arabi, including the king himself, as shown in *A Hologram for the King*. King Abdulla detracting his statue as the ruler of the country decides to meet Alan in a tent in the middle of a desert not in his palace in order for Alan to showcase his 3D hologram. However, the king does not show up for the appointment. In addition to that, when Alan arrives at the location, he faces a bothersome chaos in the tent. "IN THE TENT, Alan saw no one. The space was vast and empty, smelling of sweat and plastic. The floor was covered with Persian rugs, dozens of them overlapping. About thirty folding chairs were spread around as if there had been a wedding here and the guests had just left". Alan misses the chance of meeting the king but does not give up. However, whenever he tries to meet the king, the people in the king's office either don't know where the king is, or they say the king travels all of a sudden or the 85-year-old king is incapable of fixing a time for the meeting despite his age. (Ibid, pp. 34,45)

They had given Alan no guarantees. The King is very busy, they told him repeatedly in emails and phone calls. Of course, he is, Alan said again and again, and reiterated that he was willing to meet anywhere, at the time of His Majesty's choosing. But it was not simple like that; it was not just that the King was busy, but that his schedule changed quickly and often. It had to change often and quickly, given there were many who might wish to do the King harm. So not only does the King's schedule change often, given the demands of state, but it must change often, for the sake of king and kingdom. ....It could be any day, and it could be any time, Alan was told. (Ibid, p.21)

The technique used in the excerpt above is exaggerating the degree of disorderliness of the king's schedule. Homi Bhabha has brilliantly noted that to serve colonial discourse colonial authors overstate issues by making "terrifying stereotypes of savagery, cannibalism, lust and anarchy" (Bhabha, 1994, p.72)

Otherness of the oriental world has been tightly bounded with orientalism in defaming the eastern manners. The author of *A Hologram for the King* continues to demonize the oriental world to pave the way for his protagonist to even envisage the land of Saudis occupied by Westerners. "An aerial rendering of a beachfront lined with resorts. A photo of a woman helping her son use a laptop computer. She was wearing a hijab, but was otherwise dressed in Western clothing, everything lavender" (Eggers, 2012, p. 36). This visualization alludes to the author's desire for not establishing the Western type of order and norms in the land of Easterners but also occupying their land.

### III- Conclusion

The current study examined Dave Eggers's novel, entitled *A Hologram or the King*, to find out to what degree the novel conforms to the norms of colonial writing. Colonial concepts manifest themselves in terms of expressing superiority of the colonizers versus inferiority of the colonized in different contexts. It was found that the author employed political, economic, cultural and religious reasons to validate the colonial ends in the same way that the orientalists do. Eggers used the cause of human rights violations in Saudi Arabia (as representative of the Eastern world or the land of non-Westerns) to justify the urgency to terminate a “dictatorship” authority by a foreign actor. As for the economic reason, the author painted such a persuasive image of Saudi Arabi that tempts even the most hopeless undeserving unqualified people in the West with its promise of plenty of opportunities and prosperity. In terms of culture, he depicted Saudi Arabs as backward unprincipled sexually licentious creators from another world who set a harmful example to the well-behaving superiors in the West. The author proved to be very crafty in providing exaggerated details of the negative traits in his characterization to maximize the need for colonization. Like the orientalists and colonial writers, Eggers also made the most of religious prejudice. The use of religiously symbolic names for the immoral characters and the comparison between Christianity and Islam turned to a prolific source for shaping a defamed image of Easterners. Such misrepresentations of the non-Westerners and their norms and behaviour is not but a clear clue that either the author is endorsing the colonial mentality even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century or he is unconsciously under the influence of the orientalists despite living and writing in the post-colonial era.

## شێواندانی کهسایهتی تاکی رۆژهه لاتی له رۆمانی "هۆلۆگرامیک بۆ پاشا" له نووسینی دهیقد ئیگهرز

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### پوخته:

ئهم توێژینه وهیه به گوێرهی ریبازی پۆستکۆلۆنیالیزم له لایه نهکانی بیروکهی کۆلۆنیال یان داگیرکاری دهکۆلیته وه له رۆمانی هۆلۆگرامیک بۆ پاشا" که نووسهری ئهمریکی دهیقد ئیگهرز له ساڵی 2012 دا نووسیویه تی. هه رچه نده ئیستا سه رده می داگیرکاری به سه ر چوه ، به لام تیروانیی داگیرکارانه له کۆمه لیک به ره می ئه ده بیدا وه ک خۆی به به یزی ماوه ته وه. له وه ته ی سه ره له دانی پۆستکۆلۆنیالیزم له نیوه ی دووه می سه ده ی رابردوه وه، ئهم ریبازه به ره نگاری بۆچوون و ئه زموونی داگیرکارانه بووه ته وه، چونکه زۆریک له نووسه ر و رۆشنییرانی رۆژئاوایی شه رعیه تیان به بیروبۆچوونی داگیرکارانه و کۆلۆنیال داوه و به ئامراز و ته کنیکی جیاواز و له ژیر ناوی رۆژهه لاتناسییه وه ناوبانگی و وینه ی خه لکی نئه وروپی و ههروه ها غه یره رۆژئاواییان شیواندوه. پۆستکۆلۆنیالیزم دژی ئهم ره وته ده وه ستیته وه و جه خت له وه ده کاته وه ئهم چه واشه کارییه پالنه ری سیاسی و کۆمه لایه تی و ئایینی و ئابووری له پشته وه یه. ئامانجی توێژه ر له لیکۆلینه وه ی به رده ست بریتییه له پیشاندانی چه مکه کانی کۆلۆنیالیزم و بیگانه یی و ناووناتۆره هه له به ستراوه کانی تر بۆ کهسانی غه یره رۆژئاوایی له رۆمانی "هۆلۆگرامیک بۆ پاشا" دا. لیکۆلینه وه که زیاتر ده پرژیته سه ر ورده کارییه کانی ژیان و گوزه رانی قاره منی رۆمانه که، ئالن کلپی، ده کات که پاش هه ره سه ینتان و شکست له ولاتی خۆیدا، سه ردانی سه عودیه ده کات و به سووده رگرتن له سامانه مروقی و نامرۆقییه کانی خه لکی رۆژهه لات چیرۆکی ژیا نی له شکسته وه بۆ سه رکه وتن ده گۆریت. چۆنیه تی پیشاندانی کهسایه تی مروقی رۆژهه لاتی و ههروه ها چوارچیوه ی جیهانی رۆژهه لات ئه وه درده خات که نووسه ری رۆمانه که بۆچوونیکی جیاکارانه ی له دژی خه لکی رۆژهه لات هیه و ئه مه ش به شیوه یه کی مه جازی ئاماژه ی روون به دهسته وه ده دات سه باره ت به داگیرکاری و چه مکی سه نته ربوونی رۆژئاوا و ئه وروپا.

**کلپه وشه کان:** هۆلۆگرامیک بۆ پاشا، دهیقد ئیگهرز، رۆژهه لاتناسی، ره خنه ی پۆسکۆلۆنیالیزمی، سه عودیه، ئالن کلپی.



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