

Representation of the Status of Iranian Women in Western Travelogues and Its Impact on Their Security and Social Presence in Public Spaces

Introduction

Western travelogues particularly those concerning Iran from the 17th to the early 20th century are far more than simple chronicles of observation. They are intricate, multilayered texts that serve as potent discursive instruments at the intersection of politics, culture, and power. These narratives functioned as curated apertures through which a European readership viewed the allegedly enigmatic and exotic world of the Orient. However, these apertures were never transparent. However, they were frames that were influenced and molded by the presuppositions of colonial interests and the prevailing cultural-political milieu of the travel writer. Within this framework no subject was more intensely colonized by Western imagination projection and stereotyping than the figure of the Oriental woman and specifically the Iranian woman. The Iranian woman is rarely depicted as a human subject with agency complexity and diversity in these texts. Rather, she is meticulously fashioned as an enigmatic object, a cultural symbol, and a potent metaphor for the perceived essence of Eastern society. The resulting portrayal is a combination of erotic fantasies derived from the stories of *One Thousand and One Nights*, as well as second-hand and frequently inaccurate information and observations that are filtered through the powerful prism of a dual male and colonial gaze. This gaze ensnared the Iranian woman in the reductive dichotomy of the noble, authentic tribal woman or the passive, confined harem occupant. This representation justified the West's civilizing intervention by systemically erasing her social and political agency, thereby reproducing the dominant Orientalist discourse of an inert, stagnant Orient. Considering these premises this paper seeks to answer two fundamental and intertwined research questions: First how did the representation of Iranian women in Western travelogues evolve historically from the Safavid to the late Qajar period, and what differentiates the portrayals in early commercial accounts from those in the political-colonial narratives of the 19th century? Secondly, what were the tangible consequences of these stereotypical images and the Orientalist discourses that accompanied them on the social agency and security of Iranian women in public spaces, particularly in their interactions with foreign men?

Methodology

This investigation implements a qualitative research paradigm that is founded on a critical and interpretive approach. The primary goal is not to unearth an objective historical truth about the lives of Iranian women, but rather to deconstruct the processes by which a particular version of that truth was constructed, circulated, and granted authority within Western discourse. Therefore, the methodology is intended to analyze texts as cultural artifacts that are profoundly ingrained in historical power dynamics, rather than as transparent reflections of reality. The research design is a historical-textual analysis that concentrates on a curated corpus of primary sources. The corpus consists of influential and representative Western travelogues written about Iran, spanning the period from the Safavid era (17th century) to the end of the Qajar dynasty (early 20th century). The selection of these texts was conducted using a purposive sampling strategy, with a focus on travelogues that were widely read, exhibited a clear evolution in perspective (e.g., from early

commercial accounts to later political-colonial narratives), and contained substantial and detailed descriptions of women and social customs.

Results

The first hypothesis of this study is validated by the historical-textual analysis of the selected travelogues, which confirms a distinct and purposeful evolution in the representation of Iranian women. The Iranian woman is primarily depicted as an object of exotic mystique and fantasy in the earlier accounts from the Safavid era, which were primarily commercial or diplomatic in nature. She is largely invisible, confined to the enigmatic space of the *andaruni* (the interior, private accommodations), and her existence is framed through a lens of romanticized orientalism. Nevertheless, the results indicate a substantial discursive shift during the 19th-century Qajar period, which coincided with the increase in colonial rivalries in Iran. The Iranian woman's portrayal is utilized for political purposes in these subsequent texts. Her status, particularly the veil (*hijab*) and her seclusion, is no longer a casual cultural curiosity; rather, it is systematically re-coded as the ultimate symbol of Persian backwardness, despotism, and civilizational stagnation. The Iranian woman was transformed from a symbol of the East's exotic allure to a barometer of its perceived inferiority as a result of this shift. This transformation provided a potent moral and ideological justification for Western intervention under the guise of a civilianizing mission. The analysis substantiates the profound and specific mechanisms of representation through which the tangible consequences of this evolving discourse on the security and social presence of Iranian women were operative. The Iranian woman was systematically transformed into an object of scopophilic curiosity by the dual male and colonial gaze, which was identified in the theoretical framework. Consequently, her security in public spaces was directly undermined. By representing her as either a hyper-sexualized and hidden prize or a helpless victim, the discourse normalized intrusive observation and unsolicited interaction from Western men, rendering public spaces more hazardous for her. Concurrently, in line with the second hypothesis, this representational strategy actively eliminated her social agency. The travelogues created a reality in which her agency was invisible by consistently emphasizing her confinement and systematically ignoring or trivializing her significant roles in household management, economic production (particularly in rural and tribal contexts), and the maintenance of powerful social networks. The results ultimately show a dual impact: the hyper-visibility of the imagined woman established a climate of insecurity, while the invisibility of the real woman delegitimized her presence and participation in the social sphere, leaving a lasting legacy on both internal and external perceptions of her role in society.

Conclusion

This study has illustrated that the depiction of Iranian women in Western travelogues was never a neutral act of documentation, but rather a politically fraught and robust cultural construction. By tracing the historical evolution of this discourse from the Safavid to the Qajar period, we have shown a clear trajectory from exoticization to politicization. The Iranian woman underwent a gradual transformation from a figure of romantic mystique to a powerful symbol of a stagnant and despotic Orient. This discursive strategy was designed to validate the power imbalances that were inherent in the colonial project. The precise mechanisms through which this construction was accomplished have been revealed by the theoretical framework, which combines

Orientalism, representation theory, and the concept of the gaze: stereotyping, selective omission, and the objectifying power of a dual male and colonial gaze. These travelogues did not merely reflect reality; they actively generated a version of reality that aligned with the ideological requirements of the West. Ultimately, the most significant discovery of this research is its emphasis on the material repercussions of this discourse. The security and social agency of Iranian women were directly impacted by the representational act, which had tangible consequences. The perceptual framework that was established by the relentless emphasis on the veiled, secluded, and objectified woman rendered public spaces hazardous, thereby normalizing intrusive observation and undermining her legitimacy as an autonomous actor. By rendering her agency invisible while making her symbolic status hyper-visible, this body of literature contributed to the very structures of confinement it claimed to merely describe. This Orientalist imagery's legacy endures, underscoring the urgent necessity of critically deconstructing historical representations to comprehend the intricate and enduring ways in which discourse influences the ongoing struggle for social presence, security, and lived experience.

Conflict of Interest

This article is free of any conflicts of interest.