



**Between East and West:
Manifestations of the Hypothetical
'Clash of Cultures' in Hilary Mantel's
Novel *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street***

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Abstract:

This paper aims at showing how Hilary Mantel in her novel *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street* (1988) utilizes a threatening cultural “clash” between East and West; how she examines the various frictions between the two cultures; and how her novel provides conventional articulations of the East-West encounter. Since Mantel’s text presents the East-West encounter through the structure of a grand “clash” of ideas and cultural values between the two cultures, I am going to point out the way the novelist captures in minute details all the challenges faced by Western expatriates working in the Middle East where the socio-political scheme is totally different from what they have previously known. I also discuss how the cross-cultural conversations between Mantel’s Western protagonist and her Muslim neighbors bring to the fore the many long-held misconceptions each holds about the other, the dangers inherent in the vast gulf of misunderstanding between Eastern and Western cultures, and the novelist’s assumption of the utter incompatibility of the two cultures. Meanwhile, attention is given to a series of salient themes used by Mantel, in a manner that creates an overarching narrative of Western moral superiority vis-à-vis an allegedly backward, corrupt, authoritarian, and misogynistic Islamic culture.

In highlighting the way Arabs are conceptualized in Mantel’s novel, I seek to stress how Mantel’s depictions of Arabs, especially the Saudis and their customs and places, are so gloomy, so distorted, and characterized by extreme Orientalist perspective. I also argue that Mantel’s novel can be read as a chilling anticipation of the dangers inherent in the vast gulf of misunderstanding between

Eastern and Western cultures and the assumed incompatibility of both cultures. The novel renders a much more negative picture than many would believe and verifies that the lurid and insidious depictions of Arabs are a standard fare, because Arabs, from the writer's point of view, continue to surface as the threatening cultural "Other".

Since the depiction of the West and Western expatriates is a case in point in Mantel's text, this paper explores the way she strips the West of its thin veneer of politeness to reveal the rotten core beneath. Throughout, Mantel describes with crystal clarity how Westerners are rigid, cynic, and xenophobic in their evaluations of the "Other". Likewise, the novel brilliantly exposes the racism of the wary Western expatriates and is really a crushing indictment of Western egocentrism. I argue that Mantel views with increasing alarm the hypocrisy of the Westerners' attitude towards Saudi Arabia and attacks their willingness to turn a blind eye as long as their business ventures are guaranteed. I also elaborate on how Mantel believes that it is greed, not philanthropy or idealism, that moves Western expatriates to accept lucrative offers from Middle Eastern countries, though they internally despise and detest the Arab people and their culture.

Keywords:

Hilary Mantel, Saudi Arabia, 'Clash of Cultures', East, West, Orientalism, Expatriatism, Xenophobia, Satire, Misogynism, Egocentrism.

Introduction:

Hilary Mary Mantel (b.1952) is a contemporary British writer who has published twelve novels, one memoir, and two collections of short stories. Recently, Mantel dominated the literary scene for becoming the first woman ever and the first British author to win the Man Booker Prize twice¹. Congratulating Mantel, the chair of the Man Booker panel described her as “the greatest modern English prose writer,” an accolade that was widely endorsed (cited in Clare Hansen, 23). Even though Mantel is considered a conventional writer, yet she has also explored topics, such as displacement, identity and otherness, usually associated with postcolonial literature. Yet, Mantel is best known for her novelized treatments of history, and as being a darkly imaginative storyteller whose work has focused on such topics as family life, the nature of time, and the consequences of political and social policies.

Eight Months on Ghazzah Street is described by Nick Rennison as Mantel’s “most overtly political novel,” as it is “filled with a sense of outrage at the Saudi social system and Western willingness, for financial reasons, to turn a blind eye to its human rights abuses” (98). The novel is based upon Mantel’s own four-year-stay in Saudi Arabia during the 1980s. It is told through the eyes of Frances Shore, an English cartographer, who joins her engineer husband, Andrew, who works for a private construction company in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. There are other expatriates—Americans and British—who form a sort of social circle to move in.

The couple, however, choose to live among the natives, in a grim four-flat building on Ghazzah Street. After a cross-cultural encounter with her two Muslim women neighbors—one Saudi and the other Pakistani—Frances finds herself unable to come into terms with the religious and cultural differences between East and West. Alone, as she is for most of the day, she becomes obsessed with a theoretically vacant flat directly above her, with rumors that it is used by a junior member of the ruling royal family for illicit trysts. When she begins to hear unexplained noises—a woman sobbing, footsteps and furniture moving around—Frances comes to suspect that the rumors about the flat are simply a tale put out to satisfy a foreigner's curiosity. However, when she sees a strange presence in the apartment block's stairwell, Frances is convinced that something immoral is going on, but no one, including her husband, believes her when she voices her concerns. When Adam Fairfax, another British expatriate, arrives to Jeddah, the Shores invite him to their house. After celebrating Fairfax's arrival, the couple retire to bed, leaving Fairfax by himself. Fairfax, then, stumbles drunkenly up to the roof of their building for some fresh air. When the couple wake in the morning, Fairfax has disappeared from the flat. Following Fairfax's disappearance, Andrew arrives at work to be given a text of a telephone message from Fairfax, advising them to leave the building as soon as possible, as he had seen two men carrying a dead person down the stairs. The individuals Fairfax sees remain anonymous, and their actions and intentions stubbornly mysterious. When Frances is informed of Fairfax's death in a car accident on the

same day, she assumes that someone might have killed him on account of what he had seen. The mysteries of the flat and Fairfax's death may be connected, but Frances cannot find any clues. She discovers only more mysteries and willingness on the part of the Saudis to leave them unexplained. Eventually, the couple moved to the company's compound because they realized that they can no longer live on Ghazzah Street. From that time on, Frances, who had previously always tried to go out and discover new things, feels reluctant to leave her house. Instead, she can only think about the moment she will leave Jeddah once and forever.

Besides being a riveting psychological narrative that depicts life in Saudi Arabia, as it is seen both from the inside and from the outside, Mantel's *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street* is a mixture of a thriller and a record of its heroine's disintegration. As such, Mantel's experience of living in both England and Saudi Arabia has enriched her understanding of many social and political issues concerning Arabs and their culture. In her interview with Arias Rosario, she maintains that *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street* is a "true record," a "true accurate account" and a "form of recovered memory" that has "the texture of lived experience" (286). Structured in chapters identifying the months in the lunar Hijrah Calendar, the novel fluctuates between its actions and Frances's diary entries. It is not only a fictionalized account of personal events, but a story of conflicting cultural beliefs propelled by suspenseful ambiguity. Mantel's day-to-day experience, as the wife of a British employee in

Saudi Arabia, was similar to that of Frances Shore in *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street*, except that Mantel spent six times as long in the country. In her "Last Morning in Al Hamra," which won the Shiva Naipaul Memorial Prize for travel writing in 1987 and informs us about *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street*, Mantel writes: "When I travelled [to Saudi Arabia] at first I used to ask what I could get out of it, and what I could give back...I saw the world as some sort of exchange scheme for my ideals, but the world deserves better than this. When you come across an alien culture you must not automatically respect it. You must sometimes pay it the compliment of hating it" (23). In her memoir, *Giving Up the Ghost*, Mantel further describes her life in the Middle East "like life in jail" (206), and when she was once asked about her "happiest moment," her answer was, "[l]eaving Jeddah" (*The Guardian*, 11). The novel, therefore, grows out of a difficult time in Mantel's own life in Saudi Arabia and, in a sense, it may be described as a dramatic representation of her 'ordeal' there. In this narrative, one senses that Mantel is exploring unresolved, and perhaps unresolvable, questions generated from the contexts and experiences of her own life. Thus, Mantel's exploration of the complexities of 'cultural conflict' and the prescience and vulnerability of the outsider is hardly theoretical or arbitrary but, instead, personal and even urgent.

Mantel is like Samuel Huntington, the noted American polemicist, who places culture as the central threat to international communication and is obsessed with imagined cultural conflicts that distinguish a Western from an Islamic view of the world². In her

interview with Brendan Stone, Mantel describes her novel as “a political novel about power relations, and a huge clash of values.” That “clash,” she goes on, “would soon resound throughout the world” (3). She further assumes that the conflict between Muslim culture and the West is “unbridgeable,” and that her narrative anticipates later developments in the hypothetical “culture clash” between East and West in view of the growing sense of misunderstanding between the two cultures. Mantel also tells Jasper Rees that her novel is a “forewarning”: “I felt a bit frustrated because as events developed, I had a sort of I-told-you-so feeling” (1). In her interview with fellow novelist, Mona Simpson, Mantel states how “prophetic” her novel is, because it predicts many of the events that happened later on: “The odd thing about *Ghazzah Street* was that a lot of what I said proved to be pretty accurate when terrorist activity was exposed in Saudi Arabia. People were doing just what I said—they were stockpiling arms in little flats around the city” (47).

Arguably, Mantel foresees the future conflicts between East and West as a result of their utter cultural incompatibility. She, who is the product of British colonialism, seems to build a conceptual framework around the notion of ‘us-versus-them’. This attitude always necessitates a fair amount of compression, reduction, and exaggeration. Mantel's narrative, therefore, reflects the explosively repressed emotions of a Western, educated woman living in an alien culture in which the female is “revered” by being imprisoned in a nexus of social constrictions. It is, moreover, not only a novel about

Arabs or Saudi Arabia, but it is also about the psychological impact of being submerged in a culture far different from what she has ever lived or known.

Mantel relates how Frances Shore, in her flight from Heathrow airport to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, hears horrible stories about the place she is going to live in. She is warned of some of the hardships she might encounter in giving up her Western life and moving to the unknown: "No alcohol... And women aren't allowed to drive" (19). She is told matter-of-factly that, as a woman, she is "not a person anymore" (21). She cannot even take a taxi on her own since it is not allowable to pick up a strange woman in a car and women can go to jail for doing so (21). Likewise, she cannot leave Saudi Arabia unless she acquires an exit visa from the Saudi government and a permission by her "sponsor". The steward on the airplane warns Frances that the customs men will confiscate her books if they contain any drawings or pictures on them; and that they will not allow any video tapes or art books because they believe it is "un-Islamic" and a kind of "idolatry" to worship the human form (20). Distressed from all the warnings and rumors she heard before her arrival, Frances thought that Islamic religious laws will make her life a nightmare, even before landing in Jeddah.

Though Jeddah is less conservative than other parts in Saudi Arabia, and though it is a place to experience extraordinary cultural diversity, Mantel's Western protagonist's first responses to the place have been feelings of "boredom" and "inertia" (28). Frances feels deeply lonely in her new home, an apartment with no telephone and

strange sounds coming from a neighboring—but supposedly empty apartment. She is physiologically adrift and totally “paranoid” as there are strong feelings of distrust and estrangement throughout. These feelings intensified the protagonist’s sense of loss and disorientation. Her withdrawal and unease also reveal the existence of impenetrable boundaries that keep her disconnected from the society in which she lives: “When she goes out into the hallway she is watchful; she listens; she casts a glance over her shoulder and up the stairs. If she hears a door open, her heart leaps. There is a feeling that something is going on, just outside her range of vision” (126). In other words, Frances feels trapped in multiple ways: within the building that she lives in, by cultural and religious attitudes she despises, and ultimately in a country that she longs to leave as soon as possible.

Obviously, Mantel is concerned about the dangers of being an expatriate in a country like Saudi Arabia. Even though she had previously lived in other parts of the world, it is her experience in Saudi Arabia that she still describes not only as “very unpleasant,” but as being the worst experience of her life as well (Molino, 235). Like Mantel before her, Frances suffers from an extreme case of culture shock in this unchartable place for which the only available map is outdated and useless. Despite the fact that Frances and her husband are used to strange cultures—they lived in Zambia, where poverty, violence and corruption go hand in hand, for many years—she is immediately uncomfortable in her new surroundings. She always feels “under threat” (122); always obsessed with the

“elusive” people who “lurk on the street corner with a rifle” and the persons “who walk overhead, who go up and down, veiled, armed” (250). She struggles endlessly with the sense that she is under scrutiny, to find the truth in what she is told, what she observes and what she imagines. Since she suffers from “neurotic imagination” (215), Frances always believes that their phone is trapped and feels herself “screwed up” (220).

However, Frances tries to persuade herself that her early impressions about the country will be corrected once the first tremors of culture shock subside. She tries to calm herself by reflecting on her years of living in other countries and cultures, suggesting that living in Saudi Arabia is far better than living in Africa³. Hence, she assumes that if she was able to adapt to life in Africa, there is no reason why she cannot do so in Saudi Arabia. She believes that people accumulate skills to adapt to new environments. Once a person gets over the initial cultural shock of the new place, it is much the same routine as the old. Frances soon realizes that an open mind and common sense are not enough to deal with the way of life she has to live in Jeddah. Despite all the things she has read and heard about the host country, she is not prepared for what she finds there, and she has not even been able to imagine what her life in Jeddah would be like:

After all, she said, comforting herself, there's only the world. Travel ends and routine begins and old habits which you thought you had left behind in one country catch up with you in the next, and old problems

resurface, but if you are lucky you carry as part of your baggage the means of solving those problems and accommodating those habits, and you take with you an open mind, and discretion, and common sense; if you have those with you, you can manage anywhere. (10)

Mantel further builds a sense of disorientation, claustrophobia and paranoia in rendering the abysmal quotidian existence of her heroine. Though Frances believes that “there is no color prejudice in Saudi Arabia” (39), and Jeddah is “a cosmopolitan city” (93), she is unable to adapt herself to the place. Instead, she finds herself sinking into despair and lethargy. She discovers that life around her is more lurid than a nightmare. Her sense of isolation and alienation, therefore, becomes undeniable with the description of her endless days of nothingness, with the choice of staying in a blank apartment breathing the stale air-conditioned atmosphere or venturing outside into the blazing, fly-bitten heat and hazarding the leers and catcalls of Saudi men whenever she steps out of her flat. Confined in her flat, Frances finds her sense of self begin to dissolve. She has only rumors, no facts to hang on to, and no one with whom to share her creeping unease. As her days are empty of certainty and purpose, her life becomes a blank—waiting to be filled by violence and disaster.

Frances’s sense of estrangement is further heightened by her inability to find her way around (though she is a cartographer by trade). This is because Saudi Arabia—according to Mantel’s

narrative is a place where, in a frenzy of development, buildings disappear, roads change course, and even the coastline shifts as more land is reclaimed from the sea, a process that symbolizes, for outsiders, this alien country's ungraspable nature. Unlike her husband, who seems almost immune to her profound culture shock which results from entering a new, unpredictable and therefore uncertain environment, Frances's experience in Saudi Arabia will result in feelings of displacement and marginalization. The conditions under which she lives make her lose her own identity, to the point of not knowing who she really is. Her forcibly impaired life, along with what she is told is "a neurotic imagination" (215), lead to her emotional paralysis. She admits to herself how "incompetent" she is becoming about "even quite ordinary things" (75). Gradually, her grip on reality becomes "shaky, each day a degree worse" (213).

Frances further finds herself marginalized by the other British expatriates who always criticize her for her behavior and believe that she is "a misery" and "not a bit broadminded" (171). Frances, thus, becomes a victim of her own fears and delusions which become her "habitual" state of mind (55). In other words, Frances's attempts to maintain her sanity in the face of threats from the outside and her own imagination ultimately lead to her exclusion from the culture of her host country, and, by temperament, from the community of British expatriates living in Jeddah, whose currencies are gossip and received opinion.

Yet, one may argue that the reason for this lack of understanding between Frances and the rest of the British expatriates lies in the different ways in which they regard their situation in Saudi Arabia. Whereas these expatriates are able to adjust themselves to the local customs and laws, Frances feels alienated and oppressed; and while they gather to socialize and celebrate their festivities, like Christmas, she is still unable to swallow her objections and come to grips with Muslims and their way of life. "I'm not one of those people", says Frances, "who think that when you go to a foreign country you must leave your judgment at home" (210). She refuses to keep her views to herself, but her needs for herself and every other woman are what she considers fundamental human rights: to be independent, to work, to walk on the streets unmolested, to be treated as a human being.

Frances, thus, constantly rails against the injustices and 'misogyny' she experiences. She assumes that if she were molested on the street, "she would physically fight..., she could not contain her rage, she would spit and scratch and disable and mutilate, and be damned to the consequences, because if she did not, the humiliation would kill her, it would eat away at her like a cancer until she died" (205). She has done everything she has been warned against and is ready to impose her judgment on others if she could: "*I would like to stride up to the next veiled woman I see and tear the black cloth from her face, and rip it up before her eyes*" (italics mine, 156). Her husband, Andrew, often blames her for being nosy: "[Y]ou're very down on people... You take them apart... You have your own

ideas, about how people should live. And God help anybody who doesn't come up to your standards" (95).

These and other experiences in Jeddah make Frances fall into a state of profound disillusionment and depression. As she explains, "I knew the facts, but I didn't know what impact they would make on me... I knew there were restrictions, but I didn't know what it would feel like to live under them" (61). Thus, feeling displaced in such a different society and marginalized from the community of British expatriates living in Jeddah, Frances decides to mix with Saudi women, and to try to understand their way of life. Consequently, when she befriends two Muslim women—Yasmin, the Pakistani, and Samira, the Saudi—Frances is eager to learn more about their culture as she believes that expatriates "should be more open minded, and not think that we are the ones who are right, and that we should contrive to be more pious about other people's cultures" (51). It is through these cross-cultural conversations between Frances and her Muslim neighbors that she will learn many things about the functioning of Islamic societies and exchange their points of view about the East and the West. However, it is through these conversations too that they run into a lot of misunderstanding about each other. Accordingly, the genesis of the 'cultural conflict', which provides the central premise of Mantel's novel and which this paper is meant to examine and evaluate, mainly stems from such a cross-cultural encounter.

As will be shown, Mantel finds in her novel the "culture clash" of her Western values in an Islamic culture jarring, if not

frightening. On the surface, we are presented with a tongue-in-cheek “clash of cultures” as the characters position themselves in ideological opposition to one another. In other words, since Frances and her Muslim neighbors represent two very different ideals and values, she cannot help but judge, and they become defensive. Hence, the polarity of experience and sensibility between Frances and her Muslim neighbors cannot remain hidden. While Yasmin and Samira try to dismiss Frances’s concerns and reassuring her that the “restrictive” role of women in the Arab world is quite reasonable, they repeat to her firmly held beliefs about the West that are wild exaggerations. Mantel recounts how the Saudi Samira, for instance, believes that the West is all about “women and nightclubs” and the Western ways of life are always “corrupting” (132). Like Samira, Yasmin also assumes that the West is “so decadent” (71); that “many people who own shops in London...are Zionists” (111); that “most girls in the UK have lost their virginity by the age of twelve;” and that “the British Parliament will pass a law decrees that all young girls in England must not go out at night, except with their fiancés” (71). Frances tells Yasmin that the way she perceives the West is often extremely distorted: “That’s rubbish...You must have got it wrong. We don’t have those sort of laws. We don’t have laws to make people moral. We don’t think that’s what law is for” (71). Also, Samira touches on the issue of Islamophobia in the West and on how the British police, for instance, always suspect Arab gatherings and often shoot Arabs, thinking that they are “bombing,” while in fact they are just socializing or discussing their home

countries (136). The Western media, as Samira states, are unfair to Arabs because they are always depicting them as “thieving and ignorant and suffering from diseases.” Frances, however, assures her that the British people do not have such “prejudices” against Arabs (111).

Apparently, Frances is unable to break through a wall of prejudice about Westerners to come to a common understanding with her Muslim neighbors. She repeats to them “contrived images” (19) about Arabs and their culture that are outright myths. Though Yasmin tells Frances that it is just “a perversion of the real message” of Islam to believe that women have “a secondary kind of soul” (105), Frances, or Mantel, insists that the patriarchal phenomenon in the Arab world has its deep roots in the Qur’ān. She assumes that Muslim women have to accept that “the male is created superior to the female,” because “God has meant it this way” (184) in the Qur’ān. Likewise, when Frances inquires about divorce in Islam and whether it is valid or not that a Muslim husband can dismiss his wife simply by uttering the formula ‘I divorce you’ three times (114), Yasmin corrects her misunderstanding vis-à-vis this issue and gently tells her that this is “a common misunderstanding,” because there are certain regulations for the divorce to be enforced (114). However, Frances still presumes that Christianity and the West are more realistic in this respect than Islam and the East: “In the West we take marriage more seriously. We think if you don’t like it you have to try to put it right. We promise it’s for life” (123).

Mantel further allows Frances and her Muslim neighbors to explain their rationalization for the role of women in their respective societies. Frances states that although her Muslim neighbors inform her that women are not “veiled” because they are despised, but because they are revered, she is still unconvinced: “At first this is plausible—but it bothers me. Something is wrong. I know what it is. I just don’t believe it” (155). Rather, Frances finds it ridiculous to decide on what women can wear in public. This, however, is not the case in England where women are given the freedom to put on what they like (146). Moreover, while Frances finds it odd to separate men from women at work and public transportations (117), Samira finds it logical because it would be like the West if they mingle with each other. Hence, there would be “harassments” and “love affairs” (133). Also, whereas Frances believes that women should not be happy to let men financially support them, but they should work to support themselves (135), Samira assumes that “home is best” for women, because women’s main “responsibility is “to bring up the next generation” (135). Samira further blames the Western culture for allowing women to work and use contraception all their lives:

[Y]ou women in the West, you think you are very free, but Islam has given us all the women’s rights...We can have our own money...Men must provide for us, that is their duty...You women in the West are just exploited by men. They drive you out to work in offices and factories, and then when you

come home you must cook for them and look after the children. (134)

Relevant to the theme of “cultural clash” is the way Mantel draws some parallels between the public lives of the Western women and their Middle Eastern counterparts to justify her feeling of cultural superiority. Unlike the West in which women are free to go to school, socialize as they like, wear what they want, and drive wherever they choose, Mantel maintains that the life of women in more restrictive cultures, such as the Arab culture, might seem incomprehensible. She writes about the Saudi newspapers which debate “whether women are the source of evil and sin” (163), and the “religious police” who keep a close watch on everything. They constantly patrol bazaars, shopping malls and any other place where men and women might happen to meet, and always “have cans of spray paint, with which they spray revealing garments, or exposed flesh forearms for instance” (205). She further argues that both Arab men and women always live in “a state of deep mutual suspicion” (51), or in a state of “mutual terror” (90). She exemplifies her Saudi neighbor, the “superpuritanical” (187) and “religiously strict” Abdul Nasr, who keeps his wife locked into the apartment all the time so that she could not go out in the hall, where she might run into one of the male neighbors (66).

Unlike Western countries where women enjoy egalitarianism, the novelist states that women’s decisions in the Middle East “do not operate” (15), because it is a restrictive world in which patriarchal values prove insidious and deadly. She also maintains

how the Arab husband always keeps his wife locked up like a “nun in the Dark Ages” (27), or as if she is “invisible or nonexistent” (97). Unlike Frances, who always goes up to the flat roof, her Muslim neighbor “does not come out to take the sun and air,” because the doors to her balcony remain “firmly closed” (54). Mantel further depicts the East as not being the right place for men “who like women” (234), because Arabs “have no emotions (122). Instead, Arabs, Mantel recounts, believe that “love may be a most important basis for marriage only in novels and poetry,” but it “does not provide a firm foundation for a happy married life,” because in all societies that the overwhelming majority of marriage cases based on love “do not last long” (179). She goes further to assume that Arabs’ social and cultural heritage does not allow women to mix with men either in life activities or at work, because they believe that the right place for a woman is to look after her husband and children, prepare food, and manage the housework (61).

Mantel is quite explicit in her opinion, and uses very strong language when dealing with ideological issues. She believes that it is religion that had “trained” Muslims to act that way towards women,” (272) insisting that Islam makes no pretense of treating women with equality, and allows no place for female perceptions. Thus, fueled by a dangerous concoction of the feeling of cultural superiority and paranoia, Mantel chafes at gender restrictions in the Arab world. Mantel’s depiction of Arab women’s conditions goes over the top to the extent that she considers the situation of women in Saudi Arabia as equivalent to the “apartheid” of South Africa.

She assumes that the only difference between the two is that the “apartheid” of South Africa” is based on race, but in Saudi Arabia it is based on gender (84). Reflecting on her own experience as a woman living in Saudi Arabia during the 1998s, Mantel writes:

What I found fascinating is faced with being powerless as a woman in Saudi Arabia, and faced with a return to the control that eighteenth-century women had to put up with, the lack of status, the lack of control of their own lives, put back into this powerless situation, I had automatically reached for the form that many eighteenth-century women novelists used. (Arias Rosario 286)

The fact that Mantel depicts Muslim women as inexcusably oppressed is a manner that accurately reflects fanatic Western beliefs about Islam. The parallels the novelist juxtaposes throughout the novel are meant to support her assumption that women in the Arab world are at the mercy of their men, as the barriers against women are erected by a stodgy, patriarchal interpretation of Islam. The status of women is, therefore, construed both as a major defect in Muslim culture and as a potential wedge issue in the assumed “clash” between Islam and the West.

However, a reasonable argument can, of course, be made that traditional forms of patriarchy pose barriers to the advancement of Muslim women and that women in the Arab world, as it is the case in many other cultures, are deprived of their rightful status as evidenced by limited legal rights or limited involvement in society.

This, however, does not mean that Islam endorses such patriarchy or subjugation. Rather, Islam recognizes that men and women have different abilities and strengths that complement each other. They differ physically and emotionally, but their differences do not lead one gender to be superior to the other. The Qur'ān, as Karen Armstrong asserts, "give[s] women a legal status that most Western women would not enjoy until the nineteenth century," and the "emancipation of women" from the shackles of pre-Islamic Arabia was a "project dear to the Prophet's heart" (147).

Ironically, while Frances educates herself well about Arabs before arriving and living among them, understanding the complex cultural and religious differences of her new position, yet all the Western "contrived images" about Islam and Muslims seem to linger in her mind. Throughout her stay in Saudi Arabia, she always views Arabs with distrust, suspicion and incomprehension. She assumes that nothing in the Arab world "can be taken for granted," because the Arab nature is "not something that can be relied on" (122). As such, when the Pakistani Raji is shot in the hotel, Frances assumes that the Saudis try to kill him because he stands for "progress" and plans to introduce modernity into the Kingdom (265), and also because of his liberal life and pro-feminist attitudes (212). However, it has been proven that Raji's wife, Yasmin, is "mixed up in a plot" to kill him out of "personal" reasons (270). Also, when Frances hears the sound of sobbing coming from the neighboring flat, she, without even making sure from which flat the sound comes, says that it is the sound of her Saudi neighbor, Abdul

Nasr, “exercising the right the Koran [Qur’ān] gave him to beat his wife” (91). However, it later proves that it is the voice of the Indonesian maid, Sarsaparilla, who sobs for leaving her young children back home in Indonesia (132). Besides, when one of the expatriates, Fairfax, is killed in a car accident, Frances assumes that he is killed in “part of some conspiracy” (257), and the Saudis “could have killed him and dumped him from one car and run his own car off the road” (250-251). Close to the end of the novel, however, it proves that Fairfax was drunk and all the various pieces of information provided by the Saudi police about his murder were consistent and accurate.

At the core of Mantel’s assumed ‘clash of cultures’ is also an attempt to define Western values and identity in relation to—and at the expense of—a threatening Islamic “Other”. For Frances, each attributed virtue or positive quality of the West, Islam provides an idealized foil or contrast. Throughout Mantel’s text, the West appears without a taint of historical errors or injustices, whereas Islam is essentialized as the West’s antithesis, or counterpart. Rachel Jones notes that the goal of such tactics is to “induce feelings of guilt and shame in a native culture, a realization that European culture has much more to offer and the superiority should be peacefully accepted” (138). Thus, whereas the West is portrayed as a fundamentally sound civilization, embodying the peak of idealism and human achievement, Islam is characterized as a confounding diseased tradition that is rotten to the core.

Silvia García Hernández argues how Mantel, throughout her text, represents religion as playing a very important role, to such an extent that most of the problems arise because of religious beliefs in Saudi Arabia, where laws and social conventions are based on the Qur'ān, and where, therefore, there is no difference between sins and crimes (88). Mantel, for instance, argues that there is no “private vices” in Islam because it “does not distinguish between private morality and public order. Hence, “there is no difference between sin and crimes.” This, according to Mantel, is a kind of “theocracy,” because “if one commits a crime he has to appear before a religious court” (72).

In his “The Clash of Definitions,” Edward Said points out that Islam, like any other major world religions, contains within itself “an astonishing variety of currents and counter-currents, most of them undiscerned by tendentious Orientalist scholars for whom Islam is an object of fear and hostility, or by journalists who do not know any of the languages or relevant histories and are content to rely on persistent stereotypes that have lingered in the West since the tenth century” (580). According to Said’s perception, whereas the West is represented as inherently benign and peaceful, (there is no denunciation of Western colonialism and the imperial era), and focused on the liberation of human potential, Islam is always equated with violence, an irrational drive towards world domination, and an absence of human liberty.

Like typical tendentious Orientalists Said refers to in his seminal book, *Orientalism*, Mantel alleges that Islam is “a bloody

awful religion” (172) and that the Qur’ān is all about “gouging out people’s eyes, and cutting off their hands and feet alternately” (112). Feigning objectivity, she admits that there had been “capital punishment” in England until quite recently (102) and that people “are naturally good, and they have free will, and Allah does not ask very much of them,” but the Islamic penal code and the general tenor of society “do not reflect this optimism” because “they seem to expect depravity” (133-134). To justify her Eurocentric paranoia and her feeling of cultural superiority, the novelist further assumes that life in Islam is “cheap enough” (271) and that the Islamic penal code is no more than a sort of barbarity: “To me it seems incredible to kill a woman for something like that [adultery]” (58). Although the Pakistani Yasmin assures her Western neighbor, Frances, that there are many “safeguards” which make the implementation of the penalty close to impossible, such as the testimony of four male witnesses, or “voluntary” confession, Frances still believes that the punishment is illogical and Islam is irrational: “That’s not real religion...It’s just law enforcement. Keeping people in a state of fear doesn’t make them good people. You’re just controlling their actions...Why should anyone confess then? Unless of course they were forced to?” (103).

It is important to note that Mantel uses Yasmin—who is not an Arab—as the spokesperson who gives “the Eastern viewpoints” (58) over various heated topics. As such, whereas Mantel allows her Western protagonist to debate and express her Western perspective freely, her Muslim characters seem naïve and their argumentations

on religious issues sound irrational, even hilarious. For example, when Frances debates with Yasmin over the legal punishment of adultery, Frances is reassured by the supposedly “enlightened” Muslim who has lived in England for a while that Muslim women condemned for adultery are not actually stoned to death: “Not nowadays. They just throw a few stones, as a ritual, and then somebody shoots [them]” (106). Nor are the amputation punishments for lesser crimes so cruel as Westerners think, for an anesthetic is usually used: “When they do an amputation...there is a doctor in attendance. It doesn’t go poisoned, they make sure of that. Really, Frances, it isn’t like you think” (112). Frances’s reaction is always satirical and her tone sarcastic: “This cheered me enormously. I had to bite my tongue to stop myself saying, oh well that’s all right then, isn’t it, very merciful” (106).

The fact of the matter, however, is that since Islam seeks to make social stability and security widespread, making life in society secure and peaceful, it has made this consideration a platform for action, legislating punishments that will discourage crime. Though the Islamic penal code is based on ideals such as justice and due process, Mantel understands it to be harsh, characterized by brutal punishments and inhumane treatment of defendants and those who are convicted. Although the penalties for the mentioned crimes are mandated, there are a number of factors which decrease the likelihood that these punishments will be carried out.

Besides, the aforementioned legal punishments for adultery and theft are intended to deter those who might commit crimes that

are dangerous to an Islamic society. In other words, legal punishment is not the basis of the Islamic approach; its basis is prevention, education and cultivating people's finer feelings and consciences so that they refrain from even contemplating this offence. Meanwhile, while Islamic law does prescribe the death penalty for adultery, for instance, there are difficult hurdles on the path to proving adultery that make the implementation of the penalty virtually impossible. A confession of the accused or the declarations of four eye-witnesses to the act of intercourse are required. Muslim schools of jurisprudence often require that the confession be repeated four times in definite and unambiguous words, and on four separate occasions. A confession can be withdrawn at any time, which will negate any doubt that the person was guilty of adultery on account of that confession. Witnesses must be of full legal capacity and of good character. Other schools of jurisprudence also require that the witnesses be men. In addition, all witnesses must be able to testify that they saw the act at the same time, and that it was unlawful. False accusation by one who testified regarding adultery is in itself a punishable crime⁴.

Mantel's narrative explores tensions between the West and the Muslim world, through the prisms of domesticity, everyday life, and women's experience. Like Huntington in his essay on the "Clash of Civilizations," Mantel foresees the fault lines of future conflicts between the incompatibility of East and West as based on cultural grounds⁵. As Edward Said notes, the author of the 'clash' pays a great deal of attention in his details to Islam than to any other

civilization, including the Western civilization (569), and “defines the Islamic civilization reductively, as if what matters about it is its supposed anti-Westernism” (573).

In a Huntington-like manner, Mantel assumes an utter incompatibility of the Islamic and Western cultures. Central to this incompatibility is her insistence on Muslims' lack of commitment to the ideas of “democracy” and “liberalism” as naturally true, because such values “are not part of [Muslims'] mental furniture”. This, however, is not the case with Westerners who “grow up” with these ideas (210). In her interview with the *Scottish Review of Books*, Mantel maintains that “[Muslims] didn't think democracy was an ideal worth pursuing,” but “they thought it a bad thing...,[and] ungodly” (6-7). The implication here is that Islam and Islamic culture do not value such principles as highly as Westerners do. Mantel's assumption, moreover, implicitly reflects the self-described positivity of the West, dichotomies that are unequal in praising the West as more “progressive” while viewing the East as static, non-progressive, or even backward.

Yet, the thesis that the Christian West and the Islamic East are, and have always been, fundamentally different cultures, has been recently reiterated by other polemical personalities, including novelists and prominent members of the Christian clergy, employing old Orientalist rhetorical stereotypes. Ian McEwan, the British Booker Prize-winning novelist, for instance, writes: “I myself despise Islamism, because it wants to create a society that I detest, based on religious belief, on a text, on lack of freedom for

women, intolerance towards homosexuality and so on—we know it well” (cited in Claire Norton, 222). Like Mantel and McEwan, Michael Nazir-Ali, the Bishop of Rochester, England, represents these cultural differences within a wider confrontational framework; that of a “clash of civilizations”. He assumes that British values, which ultimately derive from “the Judeo-Christian tradition,” consist of dignity, hospitality, equality, freedom in the context of the rule of law, and democracy (12). He goes further to assume that Islam “emphasize[s] the solidarity of the *ummah* against the freedom of the individual,” and “instead of valuing the Christian virtues of humility, service and sacrifice, it prefers honor, public piety, and the importance of saving ‘face’ (12-13). By excluding Islam from the phrase “the Judeo-Christian tradition,” Nazir-Ali thereby situates the development of such values explicitly outside the Islamic tradition.

Edward Said, the Christian writer, argues against this popular designation of two distinct entities in current global politics, distinguished as Islam and the West. In “The Clash of Ignorance,” he endeavors to emphasize the lack of evidence required to confirm a clear-cut divide between Islam and the West by briefly referring to the numerous plural societies where people from both cultures peacefully coexist. In addition, Said draws attention to the persistence of anti-Islamic perspectives in the West and indicates police reports as evidence of the hate speech and actions against Muslims living in Western countries. He contends that this anti-Islamic standpoint, which first manifested itself in 7th century

Europe when the first great Arab-Islamic conquests instigated the destruction of the Christian-Roman Empire and the unity of Europe, has been reignited (13). However, Said maintains that numerous aspects emphasizing the positive relations established in the past are wrongly overlooked; for example, the humanism, science, philosophy and sociology of Islam, which the West for centuries gladly embraced.

Said further revisits this notion of a failure to highlight the intricacies of a shared past and present and speculates that it is easier for people to focus on the vast differences and adopt a 'them' and 'us' approach rather than attempting to acknowledge or accept the vaguer similarities. He draws further attention to this failure in acknowledging similarities when he criticizes the lack of parallels drawn between terrorist attacks committed in the name of Islam, with similar atrocities committed in the name of Western religions (11-13). Said successfully demonstrates some difficulties in separating Islam and the West by drawing attention to tangible evidence of integration between the two. This is clear in disputing the ways in which Mantel, Nazir-Ali, McEwan, and others, utilize the actions of a few extremist Muslims to reinforce the alleged gulf between Islam and the West.

Throughout, the "typical" Orientalist images about Arabs and their culture are on full display in Mantel's narrative. Arabs, as the novelist characterizes them, are "crooks" (143), "disease-bearing" (181), "maniacs" (49), and "nignogs" (159). They are also "primitives" because they are used to herd camels and live in tents"

(101); they are “backward” to an extent that they consider bus shelters “a big advance,” and write about them in the newspapers “as if they were moonshots” (117); Arabs do not trust one another, “even one’s own relatives” (150). They are also “unsociable,” because they have “never mixed with the expatriates” (44). They do not “necessarily” regard taste (83) and lack in the proper etiquette which Westerners enjoy (44-45). In addition, Arabs, as depicted in Mantel’s text, are either “oversexed” or “rapists”. The novelist relates how a Saudi landlord who, once saw Frances in the street, “darted a look of horror at her short skirt and bare legs” and “seemed about to cross the road and remonstrate with her;” had not she “folded her arms” and “gave him a hard look” (182). On another occasion, the same landlord tried to “sidle up to her, and pat her waist,” but she moves away (163). Also, when Frances once visited one of the hotels in Jeddah, the clerk’s eyes “flickered over her, like some mechanical scanner,” and she saw on his face “a cruel suppressed avidity” and “a destructive infantine greed” (259). Besides being “oversexed” and voluptuous, Arabs are also depicted as rapists. To support her allegation, Mantel makes up the story of an Australian mother and daughter who were raped in a Saudi market, simply because they were walking around in shorts (118). She also recounts the story of two Filipino nurses who “were found dead” after “they’d been raped” by Saudi police (145).

Conscious or unconscious, Mantel’s imagery of the East is a fantasy filtered through Western fears and desires. In sharp contrast to the supposedly “merciful” Westerners, Arabs are no more than

killers and assassins. To lend credence to this claim, Mantel utilizes individual historical incidents that took place in Arabia. She first cites the story of the assassination of the British Consul in Saudi Arabia in 1951 at the hands of a Saudi prince, and then cites the death of the British nurse, Helen Smith, who died in allegedly suspicious circumstances in Jeddah after apparently falling from a balcony at a party given in Jeddah by a British surgeon and his wife⁶. Unlike the violent and ruthless Arabs, Westerners are represented as being more sympathetic and compassionate, even towards animals. The novelist recounts how Frances who, once saw stray cats on the street, began to “leak out” slow tears out of her eyes and decided that “she could no longer live with doing nothing for these cats” (265). Clearly, the citation of such instances is meant to highlight how Arabs are cruel, compared to the “humane” Westerners. Also, the deaths of Western characters in Mantel’s narrative make Arabia the den of violence and evil where the Westerner is constantly at risk of barbarism. Mantel, however, never mentions, implicitly or explicitly, the various atrocities committed by Western powers in many parts of the Arab and Muslim world under the guise of democratization and human rights.

In the same respect, Arabs are portrayed in Mantel’s text as xenophobic and arrogant. While the British expatriates working in Arabia make a useful contribution to the infrastructure of a country with a surplus of oil and wealth, the Saudis look at them with contempt, because as individuals they are just “on surface” and “very unimportant” in the Saudi scheme of things” (31). Also,

whereas the Western expatriates construct a missile base in the Kingdom, the Saudis loathe and make fun of them in their cartoons (62). The Saudis are “not interested in the *khawwadjihs* ⁷[sic]” (141), because they consider them an “immoral influence” (100). They only see expatriates as “robots” (120).

Besides, when Frances's husband, Andrew Shore, first arrives in Saudi Arabia Eric Parsons, another British expatriate and the manager of the construction company in Jeddah, takes him to meet the Saudi Deputy Minister, but the latter “left them for some time unheeded”. Eventually, he “had waved them each to a chair without looking at them,” and continued signing papers and talking on his special phone “with an air at once listless and grim” (29). Andrew does not feel himself valued in the Kingdom, because whenever he goes to the Ministry “nobody seems prepared to deal with him”. The Saudi officials “seem not to know who he is”. Ultimately, they give him “a blank stare, and return to their conversation” as if he is invisible or inexistent (124).

Mantel further accuses Arabs of bigotry and intolerance towards Western ways in general, and Western festivities in particular. She assumes that since virtues, like “tolerance,” are not “necessarily” virtues for Muslims (210), Westerners are always discriminated against and persecuted in the Arab world on account of their religious affiliations. To lend credibility to her claim, the novelist narrates how the police in Saudi Arabia carry out “blitzes” to put a “damper on expatriate festivities” (156), while they make sure that Westerners take account of Muslims' festivals (158). She

also recounts the story of the New Zealander girl who “was sentenced to ninety lashes “for having drunk alcohol” and “for being in a car with a man who was not her husband” (171).

Besides, since there are “major preoccupations with the dress rules” in the Kingdom, Mantel maintains that Western women are always treated depending on how they are dressed (79) to an extent that workers in shops “will not serve” Western women unless they are “properly covered up” (77). She further writes about how the wives of the expatriates in Saudi Arabia always complain about “sexual harassment,” about “the bottom-pinchers in the supermarkets,” about “the men who gave [them] trouble on the streets because of [their] blond hair[s] (119), always seeing on their faces signs of “laughter and contempt” (219). They also complain about the insulting they receive and the way people “stare” at them, and “shout” obscenities as they drive by, though they are “*very respectably dressed*” (italics Mantel, 117).

Here, Mantel seems to say that the “cultural conflict” between East and West also stems from a country eager to employ foreigners to build and rebuild their country while nonetheless resenting their presence at every moment. In other words, Mantel assumes that because of these and other restrictions that Western expatriates feel not only displaced in such a different society and culture, but are also discriminated against and trapped for being non-Muslims. On their part, the expatriates only compound this “cultural conflict” while making it a continual topic of contemptuous conversations. Thus, wherever they get together they

talk about their “grievances,” and about “how badly the Saudis have treated them” (218). They consider their time in the Kingdom “like a prison sentence, or a stint in an up-country field camp” (89). The expatriates, thus, are the “Other”, the outsiders, and that is how people in Saudi Arabia make them feel.

Mantel's claims, however, are grossly exaggerated, since the tolerance extended by Islam towards non-Muslims is unmatched by any other religious law, secular government, or political system in existence even today. The Qur’ān, for instance, instructs Muslims to treat non-Muslims courteously in a spirit of kindness and generosity, given that they are not hostile towards Muslims⁸ (**Qur’ān, 60: 8-9**). Muslims, thus, believe that it is not permissible, under any circumstances whatsoever, for a Muslim to transgress upon non-Muslims, not in their person, nor in their wealth or their reputations if they are formal residents in a Muslim country, have a treaty with Muslims or are under Muslim protection. An example of the preservation of the human dignity of non-Muslims is the right that their feelings be respected; and that they are shown good manners in speech and debate in compliance with the Divine Command. Non-Muslims also have the right not to have their religious beliefs mocked. Besides, Islam does not compel non-Muslim citizens living in Muslim lands to be ruled by Islamic laws. Thus, Mantel’s claims that non-Muslim women are biased against and persecuted in Saudi Arabia on account of their code of dress are far from being Islamic, simply because the rules of dress do not apply on Western women living in Muslim countries.

In *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street*, Arabs' complexions and traditional costumes do not escape the target of contempt of Mantel's sarcasm. The Saudi Deputy Minister, for instance, is depicted as having "jaundiced" eyes like Victorian plums" (30); and the landlord is a "fat little greasepot" (163). Arab men on the streets, in their white *thobes* and headdresses, look "thuggish" and like "some obscene tribe of nuns" (237). They resemble nothing so much as a "basket of laundry animated by a poltergeist" (30-31).

The racial profiling of Muslims in Mantel's text also comprises their rituals and code of dress. Throughout, the novelist refers to the veil as "ridiculous" (210) and "sinister" (75), and women wearing it as "black shapes" (79, 95), with blind muffled eyes. Rather, veiled women are further reduced to "headless monsters" (74) trussed up in their veils like "funeral laundry" (47). Thus, when the Pakistani Yasmin informs Frances about her intention to wear the veil like the Saudi women do, the latter is not only "unsympathetic," but finds the idea "repugnant" as well (208).

Along with such sarcastic depictions ascribed to the Islamic code of dress, Islamic rituals become the target of contempt in Mantel's narrative. Throughout the narrative, Andrew Shore expresses his resentment of the Call to Prayer. When he, for instance, was in the bank with his wife he hears "the *wail* of the muezzin," and he exclaims: "Bugger... You always lose a half hour somewhere" because of the Prayer time (94). Also, when Frances knows that the Saudis are planning to set up "the biggest central air-conditioning system in the world" close to the Prophet's Mosque in

Medina, she mockingly states: "I suppose the Believers have to be kept cool" (125).

To lend credence and bring intrigue and mystery to her novel, Mantel paints the Arab world in irrational and mysterious hues. In so doing, she introduces the story of a "vacant" flat in the complex that is veiled in secrecy. Since her arrival to Jeddah, Mantel's heroine has been obsessed with this supposedly "empty" flat directly above hers. Feeling bored and frustrated, she finds herself fixating on the mysterious activities and strange, painful noises emanating from upstairs. She always hears whispers, sounds of distress, and sobbing coming out above her head. Though she is told by fellow expatriates that the flat is "an illicit love nest" (184), and that it is "kept empty" for the use of the Deputy Minister's brother who is already married, but has "a long-running affair" with a married woman he meets there (105), Frances is not convinced. Instead, she assumes that the whole story has been "made up" (166), and all the rumors about the flat are a "conspiracy" (221). She debates with herself: "[T]here are no lovers. Someone is in the flat, but it is not who we think. I have swallowed down the rumor. It is a rumor that was tailor-made. It was tailor-made for Westerners, with their prurient minds; it was a rumor that we cherished, because it said everything about the Kingdom that we wished to believe" (201). Frances further imagines that "upstairs there is an arms cache, a hideout, a torture chamber, a mortuary" (221), places which are unlikely to happen in a country like Saudi Arabia. Yet, Frances's inability to pinpoint exactly the nature of what is going on gives the

situation its sting. In her review of Mantel's narrative, Francine Prose, a prominent American novelist and critic, links this "mystery" in the novel with its cultural context. She assumes that the violence that shatters the final chapter is represented as "an almost unavoidable consequence of the tension rife in contemporary Arab culture." Prose further adds that what makes this trickier is that the crimes and disasters are "so plausibly rendered that we never feel we're reading dire jingoist or racist fantasies... Some readers may find themselves re-examining their own ideas about the artist's right or obligation to render politically uncomfortable truths" (9).

In addition, the Saudis and their geography have been subjects of Mantel's sarcasm and biting satire. For her, the surroundings are so glum and the lifestyle is gruesome, holding such barriers of restrictive movement and solitary boredom. The novelist depicts the whole country as being too mysterious and "too bloody secretive," because reality is seldom clear; fear and rumor dominate the lives of people there; and "[n]obody knows the half of what goes on" (18). She is also tormented by the fact that reliable news is all but absent from Saudi society, and "[a]ll what you hear is rumors" (41). It is a closed society and one just learns whatever he/she will be allowed to know. In the Kingdom, moreover, one is not allowed to see any "malfeasance" (255), because it is "a private" society which does not publish its "flaws," or disclose its "reasoning" (116). Eric Parsons, the manager of the construction company in Jeddah, tells Frances: "I have been dealing with these people [the Saudis]

since you were a little lamb in your school blazer. They don't tell you anything. That is their habit. That is their policy" (253). Thus, rumors replace news; gossip takes on the authority of fact: "You hear what they want you to hear...[and] think what they want you to think" (146). One, therefore, "mustn't believe the picture you get from the newspapers" (106). Mantel further lambastes the Saudi newspapers for their lack of transparency, depicting them as inaccurate and misleading, because they "don't carry reports of crimes," but "just reports of punishments" (40) and "keep out news from abroad" (236).

Obviously, Mantel does not find any virtues in life in Saudi Arabia, because it is characterized by "deprivations" and "falsity" (44) and living there is "like being under house arrest" (51). There is no life in the land, Mantel assumes, there is nothing to "release" or set one free, but one feels as if he is "starving" (172). The novel's protagonist and other expatriates cannot make sense of the place they live in (235), because it is "not a logical world" (261). It is also depicted as "problematic" (126), and "unsafe," and hence "living in it is a sort of madness" (236). In particular, Jeddah is depicted as a "dislocated city" (274) and its infrastructure signals much more terrifying exceptions, capricious traffic lights, and inaccurate maps. The houses in Jeddah are also "shabby" (88) and "stultifying" (77). The post offices are "difficult of access; the post boxes are a "failure" (127); the customs men at Saudi airports are "rude" (25); and the Saudi laws are "ridiculous" (80) because they are "not

safety-conscious” (221). On the whole, Saudi Arabia is an “exotic” world, “just like the Arabian Nights” (236).

Mantel is also critical of the Saudi “whimsies” of bureaucracy. She alludes to the obstacles that must be overcome or colluded with to be able to live in Saudi Arabia. She exemplifies the suffering Frances and Andrew underwent when they attempted to get into the mortuary where the body of their murdered houseguest, Fairfax, has been taken. The couple must, as ever in Jeddah, drive for miles through a “manmade wilderness as empty of association as the surface of the moon” to find the hospital. When they reached the hospital and went to the mortuary to identify Fairfax’s body, the clerk in charge told them that the body “cannot be released until he has the paperwork” (268), and they cannot identify it unless they “bring four Muslim men as witnesses” (257). When fellow British expatriates further tried to inquire about Fairfax’s personal effects and passport, the Saudi police “den[ied] all knowledge of practically anything” (253), and when they insisted on knowing the truth about the car accident, the police misled them. Frances complains: “We have been given various pieces of information, all of them inconsistent, and none of them necessarily accurate (255). Eventually, they have been advised to “leave it alone” because it is impossible in Saudi Arabia “to sort out what has really happened” (261).

Arguably, Mantel’s Orientalist discourse in *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street* is built upon binary oppositions contrasting the ‘typical’ features of East and West. While “peace” and “freedom”

are the abstractions that the typical Brit goes for (194), Mantel assumes how Saudi Arabia is “not a free society,” and how the Saudis “have not had any practice at being free” (51). Thus, the Kingdom is extremely difficult for Westerners to live in. When Frances and her husband are once burglarized, they have been warned against reporting the issue to the police, because “there are endless forms to fill in, and they never catch anybody at the end of it all” (127) and the police “make everything ten times worse” and they “might have ended up in custody” (230). Ultimately, Frances tries to persuade her husband to break his contract with the Saudis, but they know it is not easy to leave the Kingdom: “They [expatriates] cannot cut and run; they must go through the formalities, or they will not be allowed to leave. What they cannot do is go without attracting attention. You cannot slip out of the Kingdom. You go with permission, or not at all; your intentions must be advertised” (248).

Moreover, Mantel assumes that “there is a lot of hypocrisy” in Saudi Arabia to an extent that it becomes “a science” (106). In Mantel’s view, the whole country is just “a network of pretenses and counter-pretenses.” and it possibly “has the best liars in the world,” because the Saudi Princes “excoriate” America, at the same time they “beg” it for missiles (194). She further recounts how hypocritical the royal family is to commit every sin denounced and warned against in the Qur’ān while inflicting this code on its citizens. She exemplifies one of the Saudi ministers for whom the expatriates work, and who always consumes imported Scotch (51).

In addition to the Saudis, there is also the Pakistani Raji, who works for the Saudi Minister, and who “prays and fasts,” meanwhile he “drinks and eyes up other women” (209).

Besides being depicted as “hypocrites,” the Saudis are also “corrupt” to the core, starting “from monarchs to tea boys, from ministers to filing clerks” (7-8). Mantel alludes to the royal family who consider the country a “family business” (31); or the rich Saudis who go to Europe “to drink and take drugs and gamble,” and all they want is “white-skinned prostitutes and cocaine” (172); and the business practices which are characterized by “tardiness,” “doublespeak” and “graft” (42). The novelist further states that the regime’s totalitarian atmosphere contributes to a culture of lawlessness. She, for instance, maintains how the religious police dare not stop or arrest the Pakistani Raji if he is caught drunk because he has “influence,” as he enjoys strong connections with the Saudi royalty (138).

Though Mantel admits that bribery is a very “serious crime” in Saudi Arabia, and people charged with it can be put in jail and deported for it, she still insists that the Saudi officials are always “paid”. She exemplifies Hassan, who is supposedly employed for driving and making tea for Western expatriates, but it turns out that his specialty is “bribing people” and “slipping baksheesh to some prince’s factotum” (41). When Frances and her husband go to the hotel to inquire about Fairfax’s death, the clerk refuses to give them any information, even denying the presence of his manager and undermanager. Yet, when Raji takes his wallet out and bribes the

clerk, the manager “soon appeared” (261). Also, when the traffic police once brought Frances and her husband to a halt, Andrew hoped the drivers are carrying “plenty of ready cash” to bribe the police, or they will spend the whole night on the road waiting” (262).

Relying on binary oppositions contrasting the alleged immorality of the East and the morality of the West, Mantel recounts how the Western Andrew was haunted by a sudden sensation of misgiving and a pang of conscience when he once bribed an official to get his wife’s visa: “I did not know it would be like this. I didn’t know there would be so many layers to the situation... I realize what I I’ve let myself in for... It’s like being kicked” (41-42). The implication here is that Western characters are more principled and have qualms of conscience about bribing, unlike the Muslim characters for whom the giving and taking of bribes has become the norm!

In his extensive study of Western fictional representations of the East (which predates the writing of this novel), Edward Said emphasizes that Western perceptions of the East, from the time of Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt to the present, tend to be characterized by ambivalence, alternating between denouncement and exoticism, and by a simultaneous attraction and repulsion towards oriental objects. Said further argues that this particular imagery has been historically encouraged and provided by an ethnocentric conceptual framework—Orientalism—which is a system of knowledge about the inferiority of the Orient, in other

words, an imaginative construction, an almost European invention that lies within the existence of the Western's fear and desire. Arabs, as Edward Said puts it, "were viewed in a framework constructed out of biological determinism and moral-political admonishment. They were linked thus to elements in Western society having in common an identity best described as "lamentably alien". In addition, Arabs "were rarely seen or looked at; they were seen through, analyzed not as citizens, or even people, but as problems to be solved or taken over" (207). Such tactics or tendencies, as Said suggests, became "a standard component of most Orientalist training, handed on from generation to generation" (260).

Besides its opprobrium of Arabs and their culture, Mantel's narrative is also a crushing indictment of Western materialism and egocentrism. Mantel depicts Western expatriates working in Middle Eastern countries as money-grubbers, who go to the region, with all its known hardships, because the money is so good. Therefore, when Western expatriates come to the Middle East, they just intend to stay on until they get a certain sum of money in the bank, but as they get toward their target, they decide they need more: "*No matter how much they complain about life here, they hate the thought of leaving. They see some gigantic insecurity staring them in the face, as if their lives would fall apart when they got their final exit visa, as if it would be instant ruin...*" (italics Mantel, 89). Mantel explains how Frances first panics when her husband informs her about his potential travel and work in Saudi Arabia: "Oh no...I'd

have to go around with a headscarf on all day. I couldn't put up with that" (11). She only agreed to the idea once her husband told her about the concessions of his new post:

They're doubling my salary... We could be in and out within three years... Your salary is paid in riyals, tax-free. All you need out of it is your day-to-day living expenses and you can bank the rest where you like, in any currency you like. [They] are offering free housing, a car allowance, paid utilities, yearly leave ticket, school fees... (14-15)

Thus, though the couple believe that the Kingdom is "not a very comfortable place" to live in, yet they are willing to stay there "at any price" (220) and take on the deprivation because "money's the thing" (26) they prioritize above all else. Mantel, in a way, assumes that there is no idealism involved in the effort of Western expatriates working in the Middle East to help develop a third-world country, but only a wish to make as much money as possible. Though the Saudis pay lavishly, those "parsimonious" Western expatriates "*stash away everything they can*" (italics Mantel, 89), and once accustomed to a stream of hefty salary vouchers, it is hard for them to imagine life without them. These expatriates are further willing to put up with a little hell to get ahead: "We're just here to do our jobs, make our pile, and get out. All we hope is that it will last our time" (151). It is, thus, greed, not philanthropy, that moves these Western expatriates to accept lucrative offers from third world countries, like Saudi Arabia. Also, the fact that these Westerners

only work for money, makes them a kind of industrial or technical mercenary for hire.

In the same context, Mantel describes with crystal clarity how money turns Westerners into egocentric and self-obsessed human beings. When Fairfax dies in a car accident, Daphne Parsons does not lament his death, but she is more concerned about her car: "Imagine...what a peculiar thing to do, to take off like that! He planned to leave the car—my car—at the airport! Just dump it there! Of course, I did think when I met him, what a very strange young man. He did seem to be rather...erratic" (255). There is also the story of Marion, another American expatriate, who always complains of her "miser" husband who does not take her shopping (119). Ultimately, she engages in an affair with another expatriate, Jeff Pollard, because he accompanies her to malls and jewelers' shops. But after finding out about the affair, her husband, Russell, "packed her off home" (219) to "live on social security" (234-235).

Besides being materialistic and egocentric, Westerners, as Mantel's text brilliantly exposes, are characterized as racists. Throughout, there are many Western characters who are uniformly unlikable for their xenophobic attitudes towards Muslims. Mantel depicts, for instance, Frances Shore as a "xenophobe" (173) who wants to leave the Kingdom because she detests the Saudis and believes that "the longer" she lives there, "the more" she seems to resemble them (231). Jeff Pollard is also depicted as a "fascist" (120), "a bit of a racialist" (152), and a "cynic" (143). For Pollard, the Saudis are "dreadful types" of people because they look the

same in the “white frocks” they wear and the “filthy” food and “goats” they consume (153). Pollard is also an Islamophobe. He does not like the Muslim immigrants in the UK because they have “different customs,” “different values,” and “a different way of life” (152). Mantel further shows how these British expatriates are just as rigid in their evaluations of the “Other”. Although they earn “far more than they would anywhere else in the world” (89), these expatriates believe that they “take risks” (98), because they live amongst people with whom they “do not necessarily have anything in common” (53). Thus, when Frances is offered the job of a filing clerk, she maintains that she is above office work: “I’m just not cut out to be a filing clerk...” (143).

Conspicuously, Mantel views with increasing alarm the hypocrisy of the West’s attitude towards the oil-rich Kingdom, and attacks its deliberate blindness to the country's unfavorable aspects. As the text shows, there is a whole host of Western characters who are uniformly unlikable, mainly for their willingness to turn a blind eye as long as their business ventures turn a profit. The novelist presents Jeff Pollard who “hates” and “resents” the Saudis, because they have all the money and he has not, meanwhile he is always “*on the take*,” “*working the system to suit himself*” (italics Mantel, 53) and “there is nothing he hasn’t done, for a riyal” (193).

As the novel culminates in a sequence of violent acts that remain tantalizingly mysterious, Frances guesses that the British company for which her husband works is in some way complicit with Saudi police in the cover-up of the allegedly empty flat

overhead, a probable site of torture and murder. Frances realizes the politically pragmatic strategy behind a remark of her husband: “To me, the point is that there are things that might be true...but you can’t afford to believe them... Because if you believe them you’re really screwed up, you can’t function. I have to function. I mean, I only want another year, but I have to stay here at any price” (220). Here, Mantel seems to say that if human rights were in fact an influential factor in the West’s foreign policy, then Saudi Arabia would be considered an ignoble pariah. In terms of human rights—as seen, admittedly, from a Western point of view—the Kingdom is at the bottom of the barrel. The reason it is tolerated in the international community is that it is wealthy and a major producer of a vital commodity. It is also the reason why people flock to work there, as Mantel shows throughout.

Though serious critical examination of Mantel’s *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street* remains unexpectedly difficult to find, especially in light of the praise her other novels have received, some critics and book reviewers have admired this narrative. Joyce Carol Oates, for instance, describes the work as “a very funny dark comedy of manners” and as a “cry of distress” that “draws the reader into its protagonist’s experience in a foreign culture as enigmatic, and as sinister.” Oates, further, celebrates Mantel as a “cultural anthropologist of her own kind” (20). Like Oates, Adam Mars-Jones described Mantel’s narrative as a work of “exemplary force and fastidiousness” (552). Nick Rennison also commends Mantel for examining what he considers the “inequalities of class, race and

gender” in Saudi Arabia, and for capturing both “the claustrophobia” of Frances’s world and “the draconian restrictions under which Saudi women are forced to live” (98-99). Besides, David Lodge, a prominent critic, hails the novel as a “fine” and “very different book” (42). Charlotte Innes applauds the novelist for “illuminating” what she considers the “societal evils” of the Middle East. Innes, further, considers Mantel’s “outrage” against the Saudi society as “palpable” (6). Celebrating Mantel as “one of England’s foremost authors” (313), Sarah Knox maintains that the novel “resonates with the nineteenth century incarnation of the genre (in which female protagonists found themselves stranded in a domestic world ‘strangely askew’) and a contemporary Gothic ‘critically’ engaged ‘with feminist discourse on violence against women’”. Knox further applauds Mantel for presenting a world that is simply deepening the author’s themes of belonging, exclusion and exile (314). In addition to assessing the novel as a “critique of Saudi culture,” Jean Richardson maintains that Mantel’s narrative “recreates with menacing brilliance the chilling isolation of life in Saudi Arabia” (61). Despite this high praise, Anita Brookner criticizes Mantel’s narrative because of its failure to “tie up the loose ends,” for “explanations are lacking”. Brookner further contends that readers of the novel will feel “fiercely uncomfortable, as if one had been trapped inside a complete delusional system” (43).

In brief, written from the point of view of a Western woman, critical of Arabs and their culture, Mantel’s narrative does provide

conventional articulations of East-West encounters. Even though she has journeyed to the East, like so many travel writers in English literature before her, Mantel's internal turmoil is directed towards Muslims and their values. Her novel sketches a facile dichotomy, together with the ambivalence toward the Eastern "Other". One can argue that the text can be wholly read as a depthless adventure story that plays on people's misconceptions about Islam and the Middle East. In her interview with Brendan Stone, Mantel admits that, when her novel was published "many people in the West were unaware of the tensions between fundamentalist Islam and a more liberal and progressive version of the faith, and to be frank they didn't know much about Islam at all; it was remote from them..." (3). Such simplistic views of the Oriental people and their culture can, therefore, be accepted by Western readership as facts, simply because they mostly lack in the depth and proper knowledge about Islam that enable them to filter what they read. Mantel is, thus, to blame for her incorrect generalizations, reckless distortions of Islam and Islamic rituals, and for her overall demotion of Arabs into a gang of immoral, barbaric, oversexed, and misogynistic creatures. These generalizations, however, are not a recent fabrication, but they had been operational and deep-rooted in the West's conceptualization ever since the first contacts with Arabs and Muslims. Yet, such generalizations and distortions will ultimately reinforce images that are already a part of Western culture, and expand the prevailing flood of misunderstanding between the two cultures. Also, such negative, inaccurate representations will

undoubtedly add more obstacles on the path to reaching a mutual understanding, where both sides would benefit. It is important, thus, for both cultures to reach out to each other so as to coexist, and work on correcting such stereotypes, such as these scattered throughout Mantel's text, and replace them with in-depth representations.

Conclusion

Hilary Mantel's *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street* is a fertile ground for investigating the East-West encounter in British literature as it explores characters' struggles with cultural differences and misunderstandings between Arabs and Westerners. As is shown, the novel presents a 'clash' of two worlds, two moralities, and, ultimately, two cultures. It, therefore, can be read as a chilling anticipation of the dangers inherent in the vast gulf of misunderstanding between Eastern and Western cultures and the assumed incompatibility of both cultures. It can also be read as a superficial adventure story that plays on Western readers' misconceptions about Islam and the Middle East. The novel does not paint a flattering portrait of the East in general or Saudi Arabia in particular. Instead, the novelist gives an exaggerated picture of life there, as her representations of Arabs and their culture are so gloomy, so distorted, and characterized by an extreme Orientalist perspective. Such racial profiling and misrepresentations of Arabs verify that the lurid and insidious depictions of Arabs and their

culture are a standard fare, because Arabs continue to surface as the threatening cultural "Other".

However, Mantel's narrative is also a crushing indictment of Western materialism and egocentrism. In particular, British expatriates working in the Middle East are hit hard for being greedy, in such a sweeping indictment of unfettered capitalism. At heart, the text is also filled with criticism of Western hypocrisy and its willingness, for financial reasons, to turn a blind eye to other countries' human rights abuses. It also brilliantly exposes the racism of the wary Western expatriates, through Mantel's attempt to show how Westerners are just as rigid, cynic, and xenophobic in their evaluations of the "Other".

Technically, the merit of Mantel's novel, despite its racial profiling and inaccurate generalizations, is in the subtle and visceral unease. It moves at a simmering pace, carefully placing important pieces of information to keep the reader feeling tense and uncomfortable. Mantel also makes a skillful use of thriller techniques, as a way of keeping readers involved with her heroine, who is tense and lonely, and anxiously trying to make sense of a world she fears, dislikes, and certainly does not understand. Mantel, further, draws very broad implications while describing an almost comically narrow world, with a fine mix of black humor and psychological terror. The novel's main flaw, however, is the lack of resolution in the central mystery of the "vacant" flat in which "immoral" activities seem to be going on. The novelist leaves the reader with more questions than answers, because there is neither a

tidy narrative deciding which horrible possibility most typifies the situation nor a clear-cut solution of the mystery. Except for this flaw, one can safely assume that Mantel is unique in her subtle perceptiveness, sharp wit, as well as her dealing with profound questions about the human being and about life in general.

Endnotes:

¹ This achievement also makes Mantel the first writer ever to win the prestigious literary accolade for a direct sequel. She won the 2009 Man Booker Prize, the United Kingdom's best-known literary award, for *Wolf Hall* (2009) and the 2012 prize for its sequel, *Bringing Up the Bodies* (2012). There have been only two double winners—J. M. Coetzee and Peter Carey. Coetzee is South African; Carey, Australian—both men. So Mantel became the first British novelist ever, and the first woman, to achieve the prize twice.

² Samuel Huntington (1927–2008) was the first to popularize this simplistic worldview in an article he published in 1993. Huntington, who had little exposure to Islam and the Middle East, presented a global picture of eight major civilizations, of which Islam was one, and concluded that “the dominating source of conflict will be cultural” (“The Clash of Civilizations?,” 22). He later expanded his thesis in a 1996 book entitled *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. Bernard Lewis (1916–2018), though holding a similar view of 'enraged' Muslims versus 'the enlightened, successful West,' presented a somewhat more nuanced analysis than Huntington's. The old dualisms were revived. For more on this theory, see Huntington's “The Clash of Civilizations?,” *Foreign Affairs, The Council of Foreign Relations*, 1993, and Lewis's “The Roots of Muslim Rage,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, September 1990.

³ Still, Mantel compares and contrasts in more than one place in the novel between living in Africa and living in Saudi Arabia, assuming all the time that living in Africa was easier, especially with regard to the freedom of movement. In Africa, Mantel writes, “nobody cared whether you came or went” (26), but in Saudi Arabia foreigners feel observed and controlled: they cannot leave the country without applying for an exit visa.

⁴ Allowing people to slander chaste women, whether married or not, without a clear proof means that people could always make up such accusations, fearing no repercussion. This means that the Muslim community finds itself with a stained reputation. Every individual is threatened with false accusations. Thus, in order to protect people's honor and their suffering from suspicion as a result of uncorroborated accusations, the Qur'ān prescribes for false accusation a punishment that comes close to that of adultery. The punishment, known as 'slander', is flogging with eighty lashes in public, rejecting their testimony in any case or situation, and giving them the label of 'rebellious'. Allah, Exalted be He, says: **“As for those who accuse chaste women 'of adultery' and fail to produce four witnesses, give them eighty lashes 'each'. And do not ever accept any testimony from them—for they indeed are the disobedient.”**

[Qur'ān: Surat An-Noor, 24: 4]. As is clear, the first part of the punishment is physical, whereas the second is moral. The third part of the punishment is a religious one. The one guilty of false accusation is following a line that deviates from that of faith. The only way to protect himself from such punishments is that the accuser should provide four witnesses who have seen the offence being committed, or three alongside him if he himself has seen it. So it is wise to prescribe such a legal punishment for slander so that people will refrain from falsely accusing one another of immoral actions.

⁵ For more on this essay, see Samuel Huntington's "The Clash of Civilizations?", *Foreign Affairs, The Council of Foreign Relations*, Vol. 72, No. 3 (Summer, 1993), pp. 22-49.

⁶ Helen Linda Smith (1956—1979) was a British nurse who died in allegedly suspicious circumstances in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, after apparently falling from a balcony at a party given in Jeddah by British surgeon Richard Arnot and his wife. The official Saudi investigation into the incident concluded that the couple had fallen from the balcony while drunk, possibly after or during a sexual encounter. This conclusion was endorsed by the British Foreign Office. The official version of Smith's death was never disproved and her father refused to accept that her death was an accident, and alleged that there was a conspiracy to conceal the truth. Smith's body was stored for thirty years before being buried in 2009. For more details on Smith's story, check *Arabian Nightmare* by Richard Arnot.

⁷ In her attempt to bring the Arab culture closer to the Western reader, Mantel utilized many transliterated terms. However, she puts it incorrectly in more than one occasion. We can see, for instance, mistransliterated terms, such as "iquama" (39); transliteration of "stay document" in Arabic; "khawwadjihs" (141), transliteration of "foreigners." and "sucran," transliteration of "thank you" (83).

⁸ The general rule that Muslims should follow when dealing with non-Muslims is based upon Allah's, Exalted be He, Saying: **"Allah does not forbid you from those who do not fight you because of religion and do not expel you from your homes—from being righteous toward them and acting justly toward them. Indeed, Allah loves those who act justly. Allah only forbids you from those who fight you because of religion and expel you from your homes and aid in your expulsion - [forbids] that you make allies of them. And whoever makes allies of them, then it is those who are the wrongdoers"**. (Qur'ān, 60: 8-9).

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