THE NATURALIZATION OF ORIENTALISM IN HERMAN MELVILLE'S *MARDI*: WHITEWASHING *ARABIAN NIGHTS*?

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Abstract: The nineteenth-century American novelist, Herman Melville, is oftentimes viewed as a multi-cultured innovator who possibly anticipated post-modernism. In his epic romance, *Mardi*, Melville incorporates aspects of Orientalism within a Westernized framework, thereby eroding cultural borders. This article focuses on *Arabian Nights* as one possible parent text for *Mardi* on the one hand, and on Melville's naturalization of certain Orientalist concepts in his novel on the other. Furthermore, it explores the question of whether Melville "whitewashes" the Eastern narrative to naturalize the text and thus familiarize Westerners with a foreign culture in the spirit of multi-culturalism, or whether he simply subscribes to the Orientalist stereotypes prevalent in nineteenth-century America.

Keywords: Melville, *Mardi*, *Arabian Nights*, Orientalism, whitewashing, naturalization

In his novel *Mardi*, Melville creates a labyrinth-like texture full of exotic tales much akin to the richly woven, fantastic array of *Arabian Nights*. Melville seems to rewrite the ancient narrative of *Arabian Nights* within a Western milieu in an attempt to naturalize certain extraordinary elements of the foreign cultures depicted in his tales. Due to his naturalization of Orientalist stereotypes, Melville may at some level be viewed as an early practitioner of "whitewashing." He retells the story of *Arabian Nights*, recasting the primary roles with white, Western characters instead of the original, Eastern ones. On the one hand, Melville's motives for his attempt to whitewash *Arabian Nights* may stem from his desire to bring the Orient closer to his Western readers in a show of multi-culturalism. On the other hand, Melville may have been catering to the taste of his white reading public who would possibly empathize and interact more with white characters rather than romanticized Arabian ones.

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"Whitewashing" is a contemporary term that has appeared most discerningly in the Hollywood movie industry with regard to the "cultural practice" of "having white people play, replace and stereotype characters of color" (Tierney, 2017). Such a Hollywood trend has been met with considerable criticism due to its implications of racism and its lack of authenticity in the representation of Otherness, as opposed to whiteness. According to Tierney, whitewashing has existed in Hollywood "because from its early and silent periods Hollywood has, as Daniel Bernardi points out . . . 'constructed whiteness as a norm'" (Tierney, 2017). Naturalizing characters of color for the white audience as a possible motive for whitewashing is reiterated by Tom Brook (2015), who explains that "these casting practices have to do with people in Los Angeles film industry just hiring people who are familiar." In this article I will expand this term of whitewashing to analyze Melville's naturalization of Orientalist concepts in *Mardi* and his possible "whitening" of *Arabian Nights* in the process.

Nineteenth-century American literature witnessed the trend of "whitening" America and an attempt to conceal any trace of its black/African connection. According to Bridget Heneghan (2007: 5), "The 'whitening' of America [in the nineteenth century] was in part a process of trying to establish boundaries between races." Therefore "white consumers knitted around themselves signifiers of whiteness, helping the nation attempt to segregate, deny, expel the blackness of slavery" (5). Such a practice continues today in what has come to be termed "whitewashing," or the appropriation of black heritage and history by whites, whether it be in literature or the cinema. This act of whitewashing may be extended to include the appropriation of all non-whites by whites; consequently, Melville's naturalization of Orientalism may be viewed as a form of whitewashing.

By highlighting instances in the novel in which Melville appropriates Eastern elements within a "whitened" framework, I will clarify Melville's attempt at rendering the Oriental narrative more familiar to his Western readers. Thus, the term whitewashing in the following discussion will be treated as a form of naturalization on the one hand and a manifestation of Melville's multi-culturalism on the other. Moreover, in the analysis below I seek to explore Melville's untraditional Orientalism. While he does seem to demonstrate some of the prevalent nineteenth-century American stereotypes regarding the East, Melville exhibits certain notions, specifically embedded within his multi-cultural lens, that do not always correspond with his native Western discourse.

Orientalist images of Islam can be traced far back in American history. According to Timothy Marr (2006: 1) in his book *The Cultural Roots of American Islamicism*, such images were employed "as a means to globalize the authority of the cultural power of the United States." Marr continues to point out that Orientalist discourse also led to a sort of "romantic exoticism" (13) that resulted from the

creative richness of the hugely popular *Arabian Nights*, "a book as important as the Qur'an for its influence on Western attitudes towards Islam" (13). Romantic Islamicism exhibits such notions as "eastern opulence, the fantastic supernaturalism of oriental tales, legends of Muslim chivalry, and images of indolent patriarchs enjoying captivating harems" (13). In his discussion of Herman Melville, Marr explains that Melville employs stereotypes about the Orient and Islam in his works "to launch into dimensions of the critical, the subversive, the celebratory, the symbolic, the sublime" (220).

The utilization of exotic romanticized Oriental tropes comes to light most discernibly in *Mardi*; within the fantastic folds of Melville's epic romance lies a subtle scrutiny of his country's volatile relationship with the Other. The protagonist of Melville's whimsical tale engages in a series of interactions with a myriad of diverse cultures in which the Western, or more specifically, the American attempt to globalize its authority comes to the fore alongside the inherited white guilt that accompanies this act of cultural domination. For Melville, his enchantment with the phantasmal realm of Orientalism comes to form the site upon which he can piece together his nation's mercurial narrative with the exotic Other.

Critics continue to engage in dialogues pertaining to Melville's untraditional Orientalism and his fascination with the East. In the article entitled "Herman Melville Returns to Jerusalem," Hilton Obenzinger (2010) documents the conference held in 2009 in Jerusalem in which eighty scholars explored Melville's visit to the Holy Land and the East. Obenzinger draws attention to Melville's unorthodox vision of the East:

> Melville was an intense, troubled traveler—not a typical pilgrim in the traditional sense, but a man on a quest, nonetheless, as revealed by the journal he kept of his travels, as well as by *Clarel*, a narrative poem filled with dialogues on all the great spiritual and political issues of his day. As his great epic novel *Moby-Dick* demonstrated, Melville was a seeker of answers to ultimate questions, a deep diver, a radical skeptic never satisfied with expected responses. (31)

Melville's experience in Jerusalem was one marked with disappointment; he could not "align biblical text with imagination and lived reality" (32). Perhaps such a disillusionment was anticipated by Melville in his naturalization of exotic romanticized Orientalism clearly evident in *Mardi*. Rather than adopt a short-sighted "textual attitude" (Said, 1988: 295) (to borrow Edward Said's concept) towards the East, Melville actually traveled on more than one occasion to experience Eastern culture first hand and seek answers to his daunting questions relating to the West's interactions with the Eastern Other. In fact, in the same article by Obenzinger, Melville is quoted as saying "We expatriate

ourselves to nationalize with the universe" (cited in Obenzinger 2010: 32). Such a statement, taken from Melville's *White Jacket*, reveals his inclinations towards a hybrid, globalized multi-cultural discourse. As Melville traveled to the East, whether it be the South Seas or Jerusalem, his endeavors to verify the textual content of Orientalist discourse through real world experiences permeate throughout his writings.

Melville's fascination with Orientalism, and more particularly with *Arabian Nights*, is discussed by Jalal Uddin Khan (2015) in the book, *Readings in Oriental Literature*. Khan argues that *Arabian Nights* "deeply colored and characterized several of his [Melville's] works, both late and early, and came to provide him with a sense of the romantic 'other'" (45). Khan continues to state that "Melville's concept of the Orient as the origin of all mankind and civilizations characterizes the whole scope of his Orientalism" (46).

In *Mardi*, the influence of *Arabian Nights* comes to light most evidently in the story of Taji and Yillah. In *The Arabian Nights Encyclopedia* by Ulrich Marzolph et al. (2004), it is mentioned that the tale of Taji and Yillah could possibly be traced back to the story of Taj al-Muluk and Dunya in *Arabian Nights* (642). In this tale, Prince Taj al-Muluk hears about Princess Dunya in the story of the merchant Aziz and his cousin Aziza. Without even meeting Dunya, the prince becomes unwaveringly convinced that he must have this maiden for his wife; he then overcomes numerous obstacles to gain her. After seeing the gazelles she has embroidered on a kerchief, he feels a great sense of longing for her: "Now when Taj al-Muluk heard that account, fires raged in his bosom and his heart and thought were occupied with love for the Lady Dunya; and passion and longing were sore upon him" (Burton, 1885/1886: 9). In the same manner, the minute Taji hears about Yillah, the sacrificial maiden in the tent, he puts himself and his companions in peril's path, going up against a much larger number of natives, just so he could rescue the damsel: "hearing of the maiden, I waited no more . . . how stirred was my soul toward this invisible victim; and how hotly I swore, that precious blood of hers should never smoke upon an altar" (Melville, 1978: 131).

In her dissertation entitled *Resisting the Vortex: Abjection in the Early Works of Herman Melville*, Jennifer M. Wing (2008) explicates that "The drives and emotions Yillah arouses in Taji (actually the *idea* of Yillah, since he hasn't even seen her at this point)" indicates his "desire to conquer" (97) and in this scene "the Occident meets and saves the Oriental (to borrow Edward Said's terminology from *Orientalism*), the great white savior delivers the helpless young, white maiden from the savage customs of the native" (101). Taji's purpose is not simply to rescue the maiden as much as it is to assert his self-acclaimed superiority over these natives and to stop what he considers a barbaric ritual.

When Taj al-Muluk tries to marry Princess Dunya, her father approves but she does not; she is against marriage and men. After the eunuch informs her of the wedding proposal, he explains:

> she was wroth with exceeding wrath and rose at me with a staff designing to break my head; so I fled from her, and she said to me: If my Father forces me to wed him, whomsoever I wed I will slay. (Burton, 1885/1886: 11)

Seeing how abhorred she is to marriage, the prince devises a plan to win her heart. He goes to her kingdom in the guise of a merchant, and slowly makes his way into her palace. In a similar fashion, Taji also uses deception to win over Yillah's confidence. By feeding her false fairy tales, he hopes to dispel her doubts and fears at the loss of Aleema, her former guardian. Similar to the prince in *Arabian Nights*, Taji has to assume an alternate identity in order to reach the mistress of his heart. However, unlike the prince who takes on the identity of a merchant who has an inferior social status, Taji plays the part of a superior demigod.

In *Nights*, the prince finally is united with his princess; however, Taji loses his Yillah and everything she represents to him, his dreams, his inspiration, and his heavenly companion. He longs for her in the same manner that Taj al-Muluk yearns for his beauty before he has attained her. Taj al-Muluk informs his father:

> I desire none other, for she it is who wrought the gazelles which I saw, and there is no help but that I have her; else I will flee into the world and the waste and I will slay myself for her sake. (10)

Unlike the conventional love story in *Arabian Nights*, the story of Taji and Yillah takes on a more allegorical meaning. In striving for Yillah and the pure innocence she symbolizes, "Taij seeks to disown the heritage of guilt that is his as a man; but in yearning to become all good, he becomes all evil, in attempting to be God, he becomes a devil" (Miller, 1962: 53). In order to reach her in the first place, he has to kill the priest Aleema, and when he fails to acknowledge this mortal sin, Yillah is snatched away from him forever.

In her article "Traces of the *Thousand and One Nights* in Borges," Evelyn Fishburn (2004) highlights some common features between *Arabian Nights* and Borges. Two of these features, namely "infinity" and "the labyrinth" (215) can also apply to *Mardi*. Fishburn argues that Borges describes *Arabian Nights* "not as an exotic other but as a constitutive component of our culture, part of our memory" (215). Such post-modernistic intertextuality through the integration of the Oriental narrative within a Western text hybridizes the Western work in question and

endows it with a tone of polyphonic multi-culturalism that takes it beyond the centralization of monolithic narrative.

The first characteristic found in *Arabian Nights* discussed by Fishburn is infinity. This tale cannot be traced to a specific "canonical text: the movement from orality to writing, the *Nights'* uncertain but widespread origins and open-ended and many layered composition . . . make this an infinite text" (215). Similarly, *Mardi* cannot be pigeonholed as one specific genre. It is a mixture of a travel narrative, a romantic allegory, a satire, and possibly a nineteenth-century epic. This hybrid multi-genre structure gives *Mardi* a uniqueness that sets it apart from previous literature.

The multi-genre structure of *Mardi* stems in part from the endless travels that the characters engage in. According to James Miller (1962) in his book *A Reader's Guide to Herman Melville*, the journey that Taji embarks on with his companions in search of Yillah represents "man's yearning for a transcendent ideal, for a transfigured past" (39). During their travels, the journey loses purpose and Yillah is not clearly remembered except "as a religious, political or social ideal . . . Island follows island in a phantasmagorical dreamlike sequence of several hundred pages in which allegory slides into satire, satire into allegory" (39). This surreal type of narration reminds one of Scheherazade's exotic tales that transport Shehreyar from one fantasy realm to another, without any clear destination.

The countless travels in Melville's epic may be viewed from another angle as the source of the protagonist's identity crisis. Tom Goddard (2017) discusses the concept of "placelessness" in Melville's works, which manifests itself "as the void, a boundless and eternal 'nothing' akin to infinity and zero wherein all distinctions of identity and place disappear" (249). The resulting nihilistic sense of identity loss experienced by the central character and, consequently, by the reader, further adds to the exotic sphere of the narrative; it is these fluctuations between existence and non-existence, reality and illusion that bring Melville's epic romance closer to *Arabian Nights*.

In addition to the flux representation of place and identity, the dreamy structuring of events in *Mardi* alludes to what Fishburn (2004) terms a "labyrinth construction" or the elaborately interwoven tales embedded in other tales that are constantly narrated by Scheherazade in *Arabian Nights*. Scheherazade's purpose in her incessant narratives is to "enthrall and entrap the king" and to stay alive in the process (216). In a like fashion, *Mardi* is also structured within multi-layered narratives. It begins with the narrator's story aboard the *Arcturion* and moves on to the adventure he has with the Viking in the open sea. Upon encountering the seemingly abandoned *Parki*, the narrator hears the story of Annatoo and Samoa. The narrator alludes to the story of Cleopatra and Mark Anthony as paralleling the tumultuous relationship between Annatoo and Samoa: "For not harder the life

Cleopatra led my fine frank friend, Mark, than Queen Annatoo did lead this captive of her bow and spear" (Melville, 1978: 69). According to Miller (1962), Samoa and Annatoo represent a comical version of Adam and Eve (38). This multi-layered narrative structure found in *Mardi* parallels the labyrinth construction of *Arabian Nights*. These countless tales create a polyphonic texture in *Mardi*; the multi-cultural myriad of voices in this novel may act as centrifugal forces that deconstruct the previously dominant centripetal Western depiction of Otherness. In that sense, Melville incorporates components of Eastern cultures within a Westernized platform to naturalize the Otherness of these various cultures, thereby dissipating the formerly centered Occidental discourse in relation to the Orient.

The multiplicity of narration continues after Taji meets Yillah and hears of her romanticized past. Yillah's fairyland story "that combines the myths of Daphne and Aphrodite" (Wing, 2008: 100) of her mystical origin serves as yet another narrative. She claims that she was

> a maiden from Oroolia, the island of delights . . . by some mystical power she had been spirited from Amma, the place of her narrative . . . hardly had the waters of Oroolia washed her olive skin, and tinged her hair with gold . . . she was snared in the tendrils of a vine . . . it gently transformed her into one of its blossoms. (Melville, 1978: 137)

She was then taken by Aleema, the native priest, so that she would be sacrificed into the whirlpool.

Consequently, her tale contains all the magic, supernaturalism, and mystique that are quite dominant in *Arabian Nights*. Furthermore, Yillah's story gives way to another narrative, that of Aleema, which lies intertwined with hers. The fantastic elements of her past repeated to her over and over again by Aleema "must have assumed in her mind a hue of reality" (53). Wing (2008) points out Said's explanation in *Orientalism* that:

> *Alemah* in Arabic means a learned woman. It was the name given to women in conservative eighteenth-century Egyptian society who were accomplished reciters of poetry. By the mid-nineteenth century the title was as a sort of guild name for dancers who were also prostitutes. If Melville was indeed relying on the mid-nineteenth-century Arabic etymology of the name Alemah as a substitute for Aleema, then it might suggest that Aleema's relation to Yillah could be likened to that of a sheik and a member of his harem. (102)

The harem concept recurs extensively in more than one of Melville's novels. The author seems fascinated with this stereotypical image of an Ottoman

sultan surrounded by swarms of wives and possibly concubines. His awe at such a notion reveals the influence of Orientalist discourse in the shaping of Melville's perception of the East, despite his apparent enlightenment. Perhaps Melville's repeated references to the harem space in his works may substantiate Said's (2003: 204) contention that "It is therefore correct that every European, in what he could say about the Orient, was consequently a racist, an imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric." Melville cannot be considered an Orientalist in the strictest Saidian sense of the word due to the nineteenth-century author's tendencies towards the inclusion and recognition of multi-cultures in his works; at the same time, Melville's vocalization of certain concepts that concur with nineteenth-century Orientalist stereotypes such as the harem and Eastern eccentricity cannot be denied.

Certain other Orientalist nuances may be inferred from the depiction of Yillah's romanticized essence. In the course of the story's events Yillah comes to manifest Taji's quest for the metaphysical truth. Her captivating loveliness "is more essence than substance" (Marr, 2006: 243) and the way she is portrayed "emphasizes her angelic insubstantiality as houri and peri"; moreover, she embodies "the romantic paradigm of the Muslim woman" (243). Marr defines houris from an Orientalist perspective as enchanting maidens who await the righteous in the Islamic Paradise. Peris, on the other hand, are fairies who are nourished by the sweet scents of flowers and "are idealized as incarnations of love at its highest and purest" (237). The nuances of Yillah's name are highly significant in her characterization and symbolism. According to Marr, it might allude to the lily or the "Muslim invocation 'la ilaha il Allah'" (243).

Clearly, Yillah's image is influenced by Orientalist stereotypes of Eastern women, although Melville does redefine the traditional view of the Oriental woman by surprising the reader with a white, blue-eyed blonde in the tent, instead of an exotic dark-eyed, olive-skinned maiden. She is sheltered away in this canopy, and after Taji forces his way into her tent using a sword, reminiscent of Arabian warriors, he finds her demurely crouched before him. Her release from the natives by Taji represents a "chivalrous emancipation" that may signify "an adventurous means of performing a more global American masculine identity" (281). Wing (2008) elaborates on Berthold's perspective that *Mardi* is a group of captivity narratives. Amongst these stories is the tale of Yillah and her captor Aleema. Taji ultimately maintains this captivity sequence by taking Yillah as a lofty ideal that he wishes to obtain for himself (97).

The scene of Yillah's emancipation depicted above, with all its Orientalist tropes, further underscores Melville's whitewashing of the *Arabian Nights* narrative. The sword-wielding hero who rescues the helpless maiden from her tent resonates with Eastern modes of storytelling, yet, in a narrative twist, the primary

characters in this story are white Westerners, not dark-skinned Orientals. Melville merges elements of Romantic, Orientalist exoticism with conventional nineteenth-century American and Victorian components.

Such instances of whitewashing can be detected at a much more initial stage in Melville's writing, specifically in his first novel *Typee* (1846). Similar to the protagonist in *Mardi*, Tommo, the main character in *Typee*, engages in a romantic episode with Fayaway, the sensual islander he encounters during his travels in Polynesia. She is a lovely, mysterious native Polynesian with whom Tommo becomes exceedingly fascinated. Nevertheless, as Michel Despland (2004: 107) points out, Melville "clothes the relationship [between Tommo and Fayaway] with euphemisms—including Victorian romantic stereotypes: we hear that the dark-haired Polynesian beauty has blue eyes." In a sense Fayaway is only partially whitewashed; Yillah represents a more advanced stage of whitewashing. In both instances, however, the two romanticized beauties enchant the Western hero of interest to the point of obsessive idealism, especially in the case of Taji and Yillah.

When Taji first beholds Yillah in the tent, he is spell bound and speechless. Once Taji establishes eye contact with Yillah, he tries to communicate with her first in English then in Polynesian. He states that "she chanted to herself several musical words …; but though I knew not what they meant, they vaguely seemed familiar" (Melville, 1978: 137). Right from their initial encounter, Yillah addresses a deep spiritual niche embedded within Taji's psyche. Her words seem to trigger sensations of a forgotten past and hence the ambivalent familiarity of her alien utterances. At one point Taji states that "she signed me to address her as before" (137), i.e. in English. Taji's initial speechlessness and Yillah's use of signs could illustrate what Muhsin J. Al-Musawi (2005) refers to as "nonverbal language." In his article entitled "Scheherazade's Nonverbal Narratives", Al-Musawi discusses the use of signs and gestures by the mysterious woman in the story of Aziz and Azizah, a tale embedded within the tale of Taj al Muluk and Dunya (349). Decoding signs by characters is a recurring characteristic in both *Arabian Nights* and *Mardi*. On more than one occasion, Yoomy, the poet in *Mardi*, interprets the flower messages from Queen Hautia to Taji. In a similar fashion, Azizah has to interpret the mysterious woman's gestures to her cousin. This vague form of silent communication adds a certain aura of intrigue to both narratives.

From another angle, Melville merges such Orientalist depictions of Yillah with the flower symbolism that was prevalent in the nineteenth century. According to Merrell R. Davis (1942), Yillah's association with the lily of the valley brings forth the flower's symbol of the "return to happiness" that Taji so desperately seeks. When he ventures into the enchanted bower of the sorceress Hautia, the only trace of Yillah that he finds is her rose-pearl; in contrast, Hautia is connected to the dahlia, which symbolizes heartless beauty and instability (634).

Taji's encounter with Hautia and his inability to regain Yillah conveys the deep conflict within Taji. Because he has been corrupted by killing the priest Aleema, and cannot come to terms with this act of mortal sin, "he can never attain the perfection and innocence of Yillah, nor can he abandon himself to the totally physical life of the senses with Hautia" (Miller, 1962: 52).

The most relevant narrative of all is Taji's labyrinth construction, which he weaves in order to allay Yillah's worries and keep her from awakening to the reality around her. Melville restructures *Nights* by reversing the roles of the male and female. While Scheherazade tells her stories in order to distract King Shehreyar from killing her, in *Mardi*, Taji tells his stories to Yillah for the sole purpose of enthralling her. Melville here whitewashes his narrative for his American audience by depicting two white Westerners, Taji and Yillah, to play the reversed gender roles of Scheherazade and Shehreyar. Once again it seems Melville tries to naturalize the Oriental tales of *Arabian Nights* by replacing the central Eastern characters with the two white Westerners. Furthermore, by exchanging the gender roles of storyteller and story-recipient, he may try to endow the male character in *Mardi* with a more authoritative stance than that of Shehreyar in *Arabian Nights*. While Scheherazade is in control of all the narratives in *Arabian Nights*, it is Taji the man who takes charge of the narrative sequence in *Mardi*. It may be argued that such a narrative ploy on the part of Melville may reveal his absorption of nineteenth-century nuances of white, Western, canonical literature that tends to centralize the male voice in narratives.

When Taji first transports the fair-skinned maiden to his boat, he wonders to himself how he can soothe her doubts and fears: "How subdue these dangerous imaginings? How gently dispel them?" (Melville, 1978: 142) He decides to deceive her into thinking that he too is a demigod from Oroolia, referring to their common white skin as evidence. He addresses her stating, "Am I not white like yourself? Am I brown like the dusky Aleema . . . Did we not dive into the grotto of the seashore . . . I have a lock of your hair, ere it was golden . . . am I forever forgotten?" (143). The fact that he alludes to Aleema's skin tone as brown and dusky reveals what Said refers to as notions of "Oriental backwardness, degeneracy, and inequality with the West" (cited in Wing, 2008: 102). These ideas were prevalent in the early nineteenth century and were linked to "biological bases of racial inequality" (102).

On the matter of race, it may be argued that the aforementioned incident is an example of racializing whites. Such a concept comes to light in Richard Dyer's (2005) work, *Whiteness*, wherein Dyer explains how whites never refer to their own whiteness, despite their tendency to draw attention to the characteristics of other races. In other words, whites see themselves as "the norm, the ordinary, the standard" as far as humanity is concerned, since "whites are people whereas other

colours are something else" (10–11). By drawing attention to the two characters' whiteness, Melville here seems to be turning the tables through his naturalization of the Oriental characters while simultaneously defamiliarizing and racializing his white characters.

Critics have extensively investigated Melville's stance to race and slavery; their diverse analyses of his works have produced mixed reviews. For example, Ole Wagner (2009: 6) describes *Mardi* as Melville's "most explicit attack on slavery." In this novel the narrator embarks upon "an allegorical trip through the fictitious Republic of Vivena (the United States of America), a country of free and equal men" (6); however, "the narrator has to find out there are some people, the Hamo that are not free at all" (6). At the same time Wagner is quick to point out the issue that prevents some critics from considering Melville as an abolitionist. Though

> Melville does not conceal his opposition to slavery which is called "a blot, foul as the crater pool of hell" (Mardi 533) . . . there is a problem for Melville that will be echoed in *Benito Cereno*: The philosopher Babbalanya expresses that war against slavery "would be greater than slavery itself" (Mardi 533). (6–7)

In a sense Melville cannot completely escape the implications of his nation's white, Western discourse with all its stereotypical notions, particularly the West's sense of superiority towards the Other and the whites' self-acclaimed privilege in relation to non-whites.

The internal crisis that arises within Taji after he kills the dark-skinned priest Aleema in order to 'liberate' Yillah, the white, blue-eyed captive, may reflect Melville's own conflict between his absorption of white, Western discourse on the one hand and his personal inclination towards a more hybrid, multi-cultural discourse on the other. On that note, Miller (1962) describes Taji's attitude during the early days with Yillah as a struggle between two forces: his guilt about taking the priest's life: "guilt laid his red hand on my soul" (Melville, 1978: 145) and his lofty sense of ecstasy in Yillah's company which resembles heaven on earth (Miller, 1978: 38). Of course Taji sets all notions of guilt aside when he and his companions land at the King Media's island of Odo.

It is only here on Odo after the encounter with the natives does the narrator actually assume the name of Taji. As Marr (2006): 236 illustrates, it is here also that the narrative shifts into the form of a romantic allegory. The Oriental aspect of Taji's character comes to light: he "strikingly improves" (Melville, 1978: 127) his costume by making it "free, flowing and eastern" so that he declares that "I looked like an emir" (127). The novel's shift into an exotic realm is further brought to light by the exotic apparel and appellation of Taji; he undertakes the role of a

demigod slash Arabian prince. Taji's newly acquired Orientalist role can readily fall into the category of whitewashing; the white character is appropriating the traits of the romanticized Oriental prince. The typically chivalrous Arabian knight has been replaced by a white, Orientalized self-assumed emir. Either Melville has conducted this racial reversal to penetrate the borders of cultural binaries or he is simply retelling the Arabian tale within a Western hue in order to appease his Western readers. At any rate, such racial merging places Melville amongst the earliest practitioners of multi-culturalism.

On the island of Odo, the Orientalist concept of despotism comes to light. King Media is a demigod who rules his island as a dictator. In chapter sixty he beheads a rebel and scorns a group who want to be jury. He then declares to his subjects "so long as I live I will rule and judge you alone . . . I am king: ye are slaves" (Melville, 1978: 185). In chapter sixty three, it becomes clear that this island harbors a dark secret; it is structured around a ruthless class system wherein the lower class dwells in "noisome caves, lairs for beasts, not human homes; or built them coops of rotten boughs" (191). Members of this miserable group live their days toiling away and cursing King Media. Here in this narrative episode, Melville's assimilation with his own native Western discourse emerges most discernibly. It appears he subscribes to some of the prevalent nineteenth-century Orientalist stereotypes such as the image of the Oriental despot who rules with an iron hand in order to maintain a lavish lifestyle at the expense of his people. Despite Melville's apparent tendencies towards multi-culturalism, he retains a considerable portion of his national Western discourse.

In yet another narrative sequence, Yillah disappears from Odo, and Taji is deeply crushed, so he decides to go after her, accompanied by three travelers. Lawrence Thompson (1952) observes in *Melville's Quarrel with God* that these three natives, namely Babbalanja the philosopher, Mohi the historian, and Yoomy the poet, may be manifestations of the "psychological fragmentation" inflicting the disillusioned Taji; respectively they stand for the faculties of reason, memory, and imagination. He listens to these three characters argue, thereby formulating an outlet to his own disparaging aspirations and skepticism (67). The conflicting conversations among this travel group and all their references, allusions, preaching, and narratives further reinforce the labyrinth structure of this novel.

In addition, by making Taji the Westerner silent and the three natives conversational, Melville reverses the common feature of Orientalism elaborated by Edward Said (1988) in "Crisis [in Orientalism]," whereby Western expressionism is often met by Oriental silence that is "the result of and the sign of the West's great cultural strength, its will to power over the Orient" (296). It is noticeable throughout the novel that a variety of foreign cultures are given validation by means of ancient scrolls, chronicles, philosophies, and temples. This daring attempt by Melville to portray alien cultures once again draws attention to the

post-modernistic multi-cultural milieu of his novel. Melville's position towards the Other is multifaceted and cannot be pigeonholed in one way or another. As Frances Stonor Saunders (1999: 193) points out, the CIA ordered that Herman Melville be "harpooned." This quotation is from Saunders' book, *Who Paid the Piper?* Consequently, Melville cannot be considered as the typical Orientalist who simply subscribed to the stereotypical images that were circulating within the discourse of Orientalism. In fact he could be considered one of those rare voices of opposition from within the Western paradigm of thought in his use of the multiplicity of narratives from a variety of cultures which, in turn, decenters the dominant Western discourse of imperialism.

It should be duly noted, however, that Melville vacillates in *Mardi* between conforming to traditional Orientalist depictions on the one hand and departing from these conventional notions on the other. There are some instances in the novel that evoke the general sense of "eccentricity" (Said, 1988: 303) that is attributed to the Orient. This eccentricity is found in the self-amputation of Samoa's arm; it resurfaces in the story of Little King Peepi in the island of Valapee. Apparently teeth have a deep value in Valapee; therefore, King Peepi requests that Media give him Hohoria's teeth as a gift. Seen from another angle, these two examples reveal the atypical attitudes that these natives exhibit towards parts of the human body. By presenting such queer aspects of these cultures in a rather customary manner, Melville may be naturalizing these strange cultural notions, thereby thinning out the borders between different civilizations.

When the travelers land at the island of Juam, they encounter King Donjalolo, an extravagant ruler who has a harem in a similar manner to a Turkish sultan. As this king makes his way towards his visitors, a number of attendants "blew an aromatic incense around him" (Melville, 1978: 226). The narrator comments that "it was his harem that stamped the character of Donjalolo" (241). He has thirty wives, each one "corresponding to the nights of the moon" (241). On this island, the natives adhere to a lunar calendar much like the Muslim one. Donjalolo's harem is described as being "carefree, content and rejoicing as the rays of the sun" (243). Melville familiarizes the notion of the harem to the Western reader by having the narrator relate the detailed routine during which Donjalolo organizes his time with his wives. Taji declares that "Donjalolo's wives were so nicely drilled, that for the most part, things went on very smoothly" (241). This supposedly exotic lifestyle is depicted as more down-to-earth; instead of marveling at the fact that Donjalolo has thirty wives, the narrator simply states that this king has a big, extended family. Such an episode serves as further testimony of Melville's vacillation between stereotypical Orientalist discourse on the one hand and his inclination towards a more globalized narrative in the other. His captivation with the Orientalist concept of the romanticized space of the harem comes to the fore, yet

his endeavors to tone down its exoticism reveal his desire to naturalize this foreign culture, rendering it more accessible to white Western readers.

Later on in the novel, Melville goes even a step further and playfully twists this notion of the harem by portraying Queen Hautia as also having a kind of harem, even though she is a woman. Mohi the historian explains to Taji "that the maidens of Hautia are all Yillahs held captive; and that Hautia, their enchantress is the most treacherous of queens" (648). The Bower of Hautia could be an allusion to Acrasia's Bower of Bliss in Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queen*; however, here the sorceress does not bewitch men; she places damsels under her spell. In this multi-layered narrative there can be found the retelling of different literary works, not just *Arabian Nights*. Miller (1962: 63) illustrates that Taji, much like Spenser's heroes, denounces the sin of the flesh by breaking free of Hautia's dreadful clutches. All the suffering and hardships that Taji faces may, at some level, be interpreted as a type of atonement for his white, Western guilt over the killing of Aleema, the Eastern priest. Despite all of Taji's desperate attempts, he is unable to attain his precious Yillah; the elusive ideal she represents continues to haunt him in his endless quest for penance and self-validation.

Throughout the novel Melville integrates aspects of Orientalism with Western culture in his apparent attempt to minimize the element of the Orient's exoticism. By adopting a similar style of narration to that of *Arabian Nights*, yet, at the same time furnishing his tales with two Western characters who take on the roles of Taj al Muluk and Princess Dunya, as well as the reversed parts of Scheherazade and Shehreyar, Melville naturalizes and at some level whitewashes this Oriental narrative to fit in with familiar Occidental thinking. Moreover, the author presents each foreign culture that appears throughout the course of the novel as an autonomous entity of its own with a history, heritage, civilization, philosophy, and narratology that are all worthy of the Western audience's acquaintance. It becomes clear to the reader how Melville takes conventional nuances of Orientalism and molds them anew in accordance with his overall inventiveness, multi-culturalism, and extensive readings. Melville's utilization of intertextuality and his validation of the Other, despite his inevitable absorption of stereotypical nineteenth-century Western discourse, place him within the frontrunners of post-modernism long before it came into existence.

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