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Orientalism

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**Lane's misrepresentations of the Egyptians in his *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians***

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| Edward William Lane (1801-1875) was a distinguished English scholar of the Arab world who made voyages up the Nile in 1825 and 1827. He composed a complete *Description of Egypt* which was never published. Fascinated by Egyptian lives and customs, he traveled to Egypt frequently and lived in Cairo from 1833 to 1835. Lane took up his residence in the Mahommedan quarter, and under the name of Mansur [Effendi](http://www.1911encyclopedia.org/Effendi) lived the life of an Egyptian scholar. His residence in Egypt produced his classic *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* which was partly based on his former *Description of Egypt*. His scholarship was recognized by many learned European societies. He was a member of the German Oriental Society, a correspondent of the French Institute, &c.  Lane’s fascination with Egypt must be seen in the context of the obsession with all things Egyptian of his day. At that time, the prevailing European vision of the Levant was one of mystery and magic. Unlike earlier travelers, Lane elected to adopt a seemingly closer and more objective approach, through which he integrated into the Egyptian society. He disguised himself as an Oriental in order to maintain an "objective distance" in relation to his topic. It is this distance that gave his topic its power, as Edward Said posits (158-64). Lane used disguise as an empowering strategy that simultaneously enabled him to be among them and see, yet be concealed and not seen. He explicitly stated his justification for it: "for I wished to avoid being seen." (Lane 11) He familiarized himself with "their language, their customs and their dress," as necessary items for the deception: (Lane 12)  I have lived as they live, conforming with their general habits; and, in order to make them familiar and unreserved towards me on every subject, have always avowed my agreement with them in opinion whenever my conscience would allow me, and in most other cases refrained from the expression of my dissent. (Lane xiii)   |  | | --- | | But while lane manages to immerse himself among the native Egyptians, in their lifestyle and habits and "to escape exciting, in strangers, any suspicion of . . . being a person who had no right to intrude among them" (Lane xiii), he exerted to keep his European consciousness at work. He justifies his actions to his European readers in order to maintain his objectivity by saying that he conformed only to the "*words* (his italics) of the Koran", and that he was always aware of his difference from an essentially alien culture. "Lane could appear to be an Oriental and yet retain his scholarly detachment. The Orientals he studied became in fact ***his* Orientals, for he saw them not only as actual people but as monumentalized** objects **in his account** of **them**" (Said 234).Thus, the first half of Lane's identity in Egypt takes the shape of an Egyptian and conforms to his behavior and the second half works to maintain its European originality that enables him to grasp and control what he sees.  Lane's sister, Sophia Poole, came to complete her brother's work by getting into the Egyptian women world which he was not allowed to enter. She, too, wore the Egyptian dress, and "never left the house except heavily swathed and veiled." (Lane 6) In Egypt, Poole, also, had to live with a double identity: she was brought there mainly to report as an English observer, but one who had to live as an Egyptian. Thus, Lane's book was complemented by Poole’s book *An Englishwoman in Egypt* which looked into more depth into Egyptian women’s lives. |   In Lane's classic, *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the**Modern Egyptians*, "Lane entered the impersonality of a technical discipline: his work would be used, but not as a human document" (Said 176). Lane took the role of the objective observer and tried to decorate his work so that it takes the appearance of a neutral and honest study. "No pilgrim, French or English, could so ruthlessly dominate his **self** or his subject as Lane did." (Said 171) What Lane did, in fact, is that he concealed his prejudices under the disguise of objectivity the thing that gave his work validity and authority. He mentions that his work is the result of direct examination which makes it different from the previous works and so gives it authority that continues till today. Few works about the Middle East have exerted such wide and long-lasting influence as this. First published in 1836, this book has never gone out of print, continuously providing material and inspiration for generations of scholars, writers, and travelers, who have praised its comprehensiveness, detail, and perception. In fact, this book functions as a main reference to which every Orientalist must return event if his intentions were directed to other places in the Orient.  In the time Lane took up his work, Egypt had not then gone through the forces of modernization. This made him able to describe aspects of Arabian life that no longer exist.Thus it helps to deepen the already available stereotypes about the backwardness of Arabs and authenticate them. The fact that this book is still widely read and used as a reference explains the reason for the continuing impression about the Orient as a deserted place whose inhabitants still live in the Middle Ages. "Lane is a typical instance of the way an individual believes himself to have subordinated his ideas, or even what he sees, to the exigencies of some "scientific" view of the whole phenomenon known collectively as the Orient, or the Oriental nation" (Said 240).  *Manners and Customs* is recognized for its wide-ranging scope of detail of daily life on many topics. It is a large volume of some 600 pages and 128 illustrations. In 28 chapters, the British Orientalist describes the 19th century Egyptian society, especially that of Cairo, focusing on material culture. There are chapters on infancy and early education, religion and laws, government, domestic life, language, industry and science, superstitions, magic, astrology and alchemy use of tobacco, coffee, hemp and opium, bath, games, music, public dancers, storytellers, festivals public and private, death and funeral rites. The book style and the intelligent detailed information it provides combined with its author residence in Egypt illustrate its establishing success. However, this does not necessarily mean that these details are accurate. In the contrary, under their truthful appearance, Lane infuses many of his stereotypes, misrepresentations and recreation of Egypt.  *Modern Egyptians* is organized as a narrative. This narration is not about a single individual but rather about the structure and lifestyle of a whole nation. It is as if "Lane sensed the dangers of narrative when he refused to give linear shape to himself and to his information, preferring instead the monumental form of encyclopedic vision" (Said 241). The book opens with an account of country and setting, followed by chapters on "Personal Characteristics" and "Infancy and Early Education." Twenty-five chapters on such things as festivals, laws, character, industry, magic, and domestic life precede the last section, "Death and Funeral Rites." So, it follows the usual narration pattern beginning with birth, moving to adventures and marriage and ending up with death. Lane's method symbolizes what Orientalists are doing with the Orient. They take up an individual case, rather a peculiar one, and over generalize it on the Orient as if this case is actually the dominant case. For example, Lane tells us that the heat "excites the Egyptian to intemperance in sensual enjoyments." This is one of the most stereotypes that are generalized by Lane and his Orientalist fellows.  However, Lane's seemingly narrative style is slowed down and prevented by the enormous details he provides in every chapter in addition to his lengthy descriptions. Each chapter is introduced with a large number of general details. Although the book is outlined in a chronological sequence, the number of details that are inserted in each chapter prevents its narration to be completely achieved. In fact, the narrative appearance of the book is only a formality and does not reflect the book's real method of treatment that tends to be descriptive. Lane's objective is to make the Egyptians totally visible, but this visibility is made superficial by providing details and descriptions that do not go in depth. Examples are the cruelty of judges, the blending of religion with licentiousness among Muslims, the excess of libidinous passions, and so on. Thus the reader will be lost in the dizzying details that do not have a great importance. What Lane is doing is that he controls his subject matter by being a typical European. He manages to restrain his emotional reactions in contrast to the Egyptians and thus keeps a cold distance between him and his Egyptian subjects. Said states him in his Orientalism that "Lane's human identity disappeared into the scientific grid of his Egyptian classifications."  One of the goals that Lane tries to achieve in writing this book is advertising *the* *Arabian Nights* which Lane has translated. In every chapter of the book and in many instances, Lane keeps on referring to *The Arabian Nights* as a good presentation of what he is saying. He tries to prove the authenticity of his data by relating them to those of *the Arabian Nights.* Also, Lane mentions, in many places in the book, that the tales that are narrated in *The Arabian Night* are realistic; they are a true reflection of the social life of the Orient. On the contrary, it is well known that *The Arabian Nights* is one of the most vitiating and untruthful books that describe the Orient. However, Lane, like many other Orientalists return to this book as an authentic source that mirrors the life of the Orientals. Lane, as an attending observer of the Orient, tries to affirm this book's status in the literature of the Europeans by presenting images that agree with its representations.  From the very beginning of the book and in the preface, Lane's ironic tone becomes clear. He utilizes this tone in order to convey his contempt of the manners of Egyptians and at the same time maintain objective neutrality. For example, he speaks about his principal informant and friend, Sheikh Ahmad, sarcastically. Through his description of this eccentric person, Lane establishes many stereotypes about Egyptians. Sheikh Ahmad is portrayed as a lair; by suspecting his telling about his age, polygamist, bizarre glass-eater and coward. While the Western readers regard Lane's style as bearing a sense of human comedy, which he finds abundant in Muslim piety and that his presentation is free from contempt, the distance between Lane and his Muslim readers increases, for the book was written originally to please its European audience. Lane did not commit himself to the morals of friendship and worked to portray every embarrassing detail in the life of his loyal friend. His main goal was to maintain an apparent dispassionate objectivity free from human sympathies.  Mr. Lane had no close acquaintance with the real Muslim life. Although his book is entitled *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, its main focus was on Cairo which Lane saw as the epitome of what he called "the Arab city":  In every point of view, *Masr* (or Cairo) must be regarded as the first Arab city of our age; and the manners and customs of its inhabitants are particularly interesting…. There is no other place in which we can obtain so complete a knowledge of the most civilised classes of the Arabs (Said 22).  He had seen nothing of Nile-land save what was shown to him by a trip to Philæ in his first visit (1825-28) and another to Thebes during his second, he was profoundly ignorant of Egypt as a whole. Accordingly, Lane continues in the stream of Orientalism in their overgeneralization method. He takes certain people in a certain city and presents their manners as the dominant manners in all the Orient. The people he encounters and describes are considered as samples of all the Cairns, then all the Egyptians and finally all the Orientals. Moreover, his choice of those people is never naïve. He chooses those who conform to the existing stereotypes he bears in his mind and presents them to his Western readers in order to fix those images about the Orient in a more authentic way.  Lane, in an account of the Egyptian courts, dwells on the harsh punishments that they impose. In one of these he reports how a woman found guilty of apostasy is strangled to death and then thrown into the Nile. He explains that in an earlier case this result was prevented by the intervention of the Europeans. Thus the representations of the activities of these courts are either of the cruel or of the uncivilized. The implication is that similar practices do not take place within European systems of law and that European intervention assures the protection of humanitarian principles. As legal culture becomes an object of colonization, Islamic law has to be conquered. The inevitability of European victory impels Lane and others to record Islamic legal culture so that it can take the place of the Islamic law.  Lane describes the Egyptian kids in a very humiliating way. First he characterizes their mothers' treatment with either indulgence or neglect. Then he describes their profound respect for their fathers as humble and that they are usually not allowed to eat in their fathers' presence. An incident is mentioned that shows how a generous Egyptian who is inviting many to have breakfast with him in Ramadan after fasting, have his two sons standing up and watching them while eating. When one of the guests asks the father to let them eat, he gives them his allowance but they refuse out of respect. Moreover, Egyptian kids are presented as very dirty to the extent that their sight suggests the filthiness of the whole nation. Lane contrasts them to their mothers' appearance that suggests the ultimate kind of cleanliness. This habit is done purposely out of their fear that their kids might be hit by an evil eye. Furthermore, Lane asserts that Egyptians do not care about the intellectual development of their kids as they do about the physical. All of this information stimulates negative connotations in the minds of the Western readers about Orientals as tyrants, naïve, uncaring and uneducated. Lane did not mention the good side of kids' treatment in Egypt and Islam in general, for example, how Islam teaches kids how to grant their parents goods with them by good treatment especially when they become old and in an excessive need for care. These descriptions, like many others, do vitiate and misrepresent the Orientals. They are running on the same line that is set by the institution of Orientalism.  The main characteristic of this work is a claimed superiority over his subject; no scholar can ignore its painful superficiality. His studies of legal theology gave him much weight with the Olema. However, there is a number of lapses which disfigures his pages. These would have been excusable in an Orientalist working out of Egypt, but Lane had a Shaykh ever at his hand and he was always able to command the assistance of the University Mosque, Al-Azhar. Although the book was written upon a close examination, it is characterized by many inaccuracies. For example, Lane states that most of the well off Muslims pray at home except in Fridays and that it is the poor ones who perform their prayers at mosques. This is incorrect because performing prayers at mosques is done by those who fear God most and not by the poor ones. There are many poor Muslims who pray at their homes as much as there are many rich Muslims who pray at mosques.Anothermistake occurs when Lane mentions the actions that a Muslim has to do in order to tone for committing the sin of lying by an oath (the inconsiderate oath). This is not true; such a mistake cannot be toned with those actions because it's considered to be one of the great sins that are toned only by the asking of forgiveness from God and an honest regret.  Lane ensures his authority of being able to mock the Egyptians by refusing, at the beginning, to marry. In spite of the great pressures that are placed upon him to get married, Lane refuses to indulge into the Egyptian society. It is as if this marriage will make him a part of this society and thus takes from him the right to comment, judge and contempt. Moreover, Lane wanted to maintain in front of his Western readers an apparent objectivity. Furthermore by refusing to marry, Lane denies himself the sensual enjoyments that are usually attached to Orientals and affirms that he is a true European only disguised in an Oriental outfit. Soon, after he agrees to get married to an Egyptian woman, Lane justifies his action as a further tool of disguising himself as an Egyptian and simultaneously to be more acquainted with the Egyptian woman world.  In each chapter in the book, Lane finds his way of making fun of the Egyptians by providing stupid reasons for certain acts that are done by the Egyptians. For example, in the first chapter of the book, Lane, in his description of the outlook of the Egyptian men states:  The Egyptians shave all the rest of the hair, or leave only a small tuft (called “shoosheh”) upon the crown of the head...originated in the fear that if the Muslim should fall into the hands of an infidel and be slain, the latter might cut off the head of his victim, and finding no hair by which to hold it, put his impure hand into the mouth in order to carry it; for the beard might not be sufficiently long.[2](file:///C:\Users\Najla\Documents\Second%20Level\Orientalism\Edward%20Lane.htm#n1.9) With the like view of avoiding impurity, the Egyptians observe other customs which need not here be described (Said 25).  The source of this reason is mysterious. Lane wants to prove to his Western audience that the existing image of the Orientals is right. They are naïve and hostile towards other religions to the extent that they do not want a non-believer to put his hand inside a Muslim mouth while killing him. This awkward reasoning is utilized by Lane to support his point.  Moreover, Lane's way of organizing his information is not arbitrary. He begins the chapter of the Egyptian religion by explaining its divisions and number of sects. It seems that Lane wants to emphasize that Islam is religion of inner conflicts as it is of exterior struggles. Islam, implied by Lane, is an intolerating religion both inside and outside.  Lane's representation of the Egyptian woman is also loaded with contempt and scorn. He criticizes those women because they do not conform to the Victorian rules such as propriety, silence and euphemism. He states that:  The most immodest freedom of conversation is indulged in by persons of both sexes, and of every station of life, in Egypt; even by the most virtuous and respectable women, with the exception of a very few, who often make use of coarse language, but not unchaste (Lane275).  Furthermore, Egyptian woman are accused of being the most "licentious" females by Lane. He exaggerates their cunning and says that husbands use keys to stop their wives and that these efforts usually fail. Lane employs his scientific method and attributes this characteristic to their improper learning and to the conduct of their husbands. A lot of incidents are provided in the book to support this view. One incident, for example, narrates the story of a woman cheating her husband with a Christian merchant and shows that after she finds out that his merchant is stealing her, she pretends that she loves him and invites him again to her house. Later, this man discovers that she was going to poison her in revenge. After narrating this story, Lane asserts that this is the usual case and that Egyptian women tend to revenge anyone who hurt them. This is a very offending picture of Egyptian women in particular and Muslim women in general. The contrary is true; Muslim women are faithful and they do obey their husbands both in their presence and absence.  Lane uses an ironic tone in describing the rules that are imposed by society on the relationship between men and women. He looks down on the fact that a man is not allowed to see his future wife until the contract is made. Moreover, he asserts that although the "laws" that are imposed on women are "tyrannical", they are happy about them because they indicate their preciousness in their husbands' hearts. It is obvious that Lane is being sarcastic here. His language takes the appearance of objectivity but he provides the information in a way that mocks his subjects.  Egyptian men did not escape from Lane's criticism. They are also misrepresented and described in many negative ways. Whereas Lane praises their generosity, he accuses them of greed and generalizes this adjective to all Egyptian men. Moreover, envy is attached not only to Egyptians but namely to the entire Arab race. Another adjective that Egyptians and Arabs are famous of is lying. According to Lane, truthfulness is rarely found among Egyptians and all Arabs. If anyone is found to be honesty they call him as the (Englishman). This is an instance where the Orientalist spirit occurs in its complete form. A binary opposition occurs which contrasts the superior Occidentals to the inferior Orientals. Lane who had never been to the other parts of the Orient, takes a very negative adjective and connects it to a whole nation most of whom had never seen.  Lane uses every possible way to present his Egyptian subject in the most humble way. He describes Egyptian men as violent who frequently tend to fight. But shortly after a fight happens between two and after each one curses and hits the other, they conceal, kiss and hug each other. This is very humiliating; Lane, throughout his book, tries to pick each embarrassing detail he may have encountered in Cairo and represent it in a way that asserts its being dominant.  In many places in the book, Lane accuses the Egyptians of being sensual. He claims that this feature is usually an essential characteristic of the people living in a hot climate in contrast to the northern people; which means the Westerners. But Lane provides another reason for this trait that is more suggesting for him and his readers. It is the allowance of polygamy and the simplicity of divorce procedures. This simplicity allows a person to divorce his wife by uttering one word whenever he wants to marry another one. For example, he narrates how an Egyptian can manipulate with the law that prohibits prostitution by marrying every time he wants to sleep with a prostitute. It appears that Lane is making fun of the simplicity of the marriage rituals in Islam and that a person can get married by only uttering certain words. Lane shows how men exploit the simplicity of these rituals in order to escape the punishment imposed on the ones who violate the laws. Here, Lane does what each Orientalist must do; that is affirming the most famous attribute of the Orientals. But Lane here distinguishes himself from others by putting his evidence on a scientific basis that makes his work more authentic.  In writing his book, Lane collects all the evidences that support the European impression about the Orient as an exotic place full of superstitions. In addition to the incidents that he narrates in many chapters of the book, he specializes two chapters about superstitions and a chapter about magic. It appears that Lane tries to grab any opportunity he encounters in Egypt that would support the current Western vision of the Orient as an exotic place full of fantasy. He begins the superstition chapter by saying that it is the Islamic religion that enhances such beliefs and lists some of the Muslims' supernatural beliefs but later, he provides many examples of stupid beliefs that are held by natives. His way of organization suggests that Islam stimulates its followers to believe in any supernatural thing. For example, he mentions that most Egyptians believe in the existence of a guardian genii in every quarter. He also narrates how his servant refused to enter with him the Great Pyramid because he believed that it is inhabited by a genii. These examples show the foolishness and stupidity of the Egyptians and imply that this foolishness is the result of the teachings of their religion. The Egyptians' beliefs in superstitions, according to Lane, reach to the extent that Muslims, Christians and Jews adopt each others' superstitions. This trait is attributed, by Lane, not only to the Egyptians whom he saw, but to the whole people of the East. It is very easy for Lane to generalize any negative trait he finds in the Egyptians to all of the Orientals. The Egyptians, for Lane, are only a sample of the greater organization of the Orient which is characterized as a united whole that bears the same characteristics.  Also, the romantic side of Egypt is emphasized by Lane as he specializes three chapters on public recitations of Romantics. Egypt is presented by Lane as the central presentation of the Orient's romances. Many story tellers occupy places in coffee shops and tell exotic stories full of romances and chivalry. The specification of three chapters suggests that romance is an essential part of the Egyptian life which is not true. The stories that are told by Lane as samples of those romances imply that their inherent beliefs are real representations of the current life of the Egyptians. This helps to strengthen the existing stereotypes of the Oriental people as naïve, backward and ignorant. Lane tries to say to his Western readers that what you already know about the Orient is totally true. Moreover many real incidents are provided by Lane to assert the peculiar habits of the Egyptians that show them as foolish:  When the seyyid `Omar, the Nakeeb el-Ashråf (or chief of the descendants of the Prophet) . . . married a daughter, about forty-five years since, there walked before the procession a young man who had made an incision in his abdomen, and drawn out a large portion of his intestines, which he carried before him on a silver tray. After the procession, he restored them to their proper place, and remained in bed many days before he recovered from the effects of this foolish and disgusting act (Lane 154).  Such an incident is very disgraceful as it presents Egyptians in a very foolish and stupid way. This rare story is mentioned in way that makes it look as if it is common and ordinary in the Orient which is wrong.  So, Orientalism is placed by Lane on "a scientific and rational basis". Lane, along with other pioneering Orientalists, created the vocabulary and ideas that continues to be used by the subsequent Orientalists. What did the work of Lane and his Orientalist fellows do is that it:  established the figure of the Orientalist as central authority *for* the Orient; it legitimized a special kind of specifically coherent Orientalist work; it put into cultural circulation a form of discursive currency by whose presence the Orient henceforth would be *spoken for;* above all, the work of the inaugurators carved out a field of study and a family of ideas which in turn could form a community of scholars whose lineage, traditions, and ambitions were at once internal to the field and external enough for general prestige (Said).  This passage is very expressive as it summarizes the work of Lane as much as others. It is true that the apparent impersonality and objectivity employed by Lane have a tremendous effect in uniting and legitimizing the images utilized by Orientalism. If these images will be found in the work of one of the most objective Orientalist, then it is very likely that they are going to be present in more detail and depth in the works of more personal Orientalists.  Unfortunately, it is pathetic that many Egyptian scholars have praised this work as an authentic and neutral representation of the Egyptian. Many failed to note its implied intentions of misrepresenting the Egyptians in particular and the Orient in general. Mursi Saad El-Din; a writer in Al-Ahram newspaper have referred many times in his column that is called "plain talk" to this book as great in its depicting the real details of the life of the Egyptians. He states at the introduction of one his articles that "Edward Lane's *Manners and Customs of Modern Egyptians* never fails to feed my nostalgia for the period with which it is concerned." In another article he shows his fascination by saying "It is astonishing how much information he managed to gather by direct observation of, and often active participation in, the day-to-day life of Egyptians." If this writer. In addition to others, fell in the trap that Lane made with his detaches style, so his Western readers will be more likely to do as his work in considered as a classic in Europe.  **Works Cited**  [Abdel-Hakim, Sahar Sobhi. "Sophia Poole: Writing the Self, Scribing Egyptian Women." Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics (2002): 107](http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=5007239264)  [Haq, S. Nomanul. "Islam and Ecology: Toward Retrieval and Reconstruction." Daedalus 130.4 (2001): 141.](http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=5000888454)  Lane. Edward. The Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians. Houston, Tx: Rice University, 2005  Saad El-Din, Mursi. "Plain Talk." Al-Ahram Weekely. 14 - 20 October 2004: 45  Said, Edward. Orientalism. London: Penguin books, 1978.  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