# The Whore, the Text and the Critics:

## Flaubert's Kuchiuk Hanem as Postcolonial Fetish.

On the 6 March 1850 Gustave Flaubert and his friend Maxime du Camp visited the house of a woman living in Egypt who went by the professional name Kuchiuk Hanem. Kuchiuk was a famous dancer and courtesan, perhaps incorrectly described as an *almeh*.[1] We know some of the details of this encounter from Flaubert's notes and letters, and Du Camp's published accounts. With the two visitors were a translator, servants, hangers-on, musicians, and other dancers; a pet sheep was also briefly present. Roughly speaking the events were as follows. The travelers first saw Kuchiuk at the top of the stairs in the courtyard of her house, fresh from her bath, silhouetted against the blue sky. They both had sex with her, then she and Bambeh, another courtesan, danced. They drank raki and then went out for coffee together; Kuchiuk showed them around her neighbourhood, sharing jokes and horseplay with them. They returned to her house in the evening for more music, dancing, and sex with her and another woman, Saphiah-Zougairah. Reluctantly Kuchiuk allowed them to spend the night in her house (she was worried about thieves targeting foreigners), and she slept holding Flaubert's hand, under his coat for extra warmth. He spent a sleepless and emotional night. In the early hours of the morning they had sex again, with tenderness according to his account. On their way back down the Nile, on 26 April, the travelers saw Kuchiuk again, but she had been ill and was less physically splendid. Flaubert's notes reflect his melancholy at the thought that the encounter will inevitably fade from his memory.

This encounter has had an extraordinary afterlife. Flaubert's travel notes were not published until 1910, but there were strong reactions among the few people, close to Flaubert, who read his letters or notes straight away. Louis Bouilhet, the friend to whom he wrote his most explicit

letters, wrote a poem called "Kuchiuk-Hanem, Souvenir" in 1851 (published 1853). In 1853 Flaubert's lover, the poet Louise Colet, after much pleading, convinced him to let her read his manuscript *Voyage en Orient* and was outraged both by his forthright descriptions of sexual encounters and by his sentimentalism in relation to Kuchiuk. Much later, Colet recounted how she herself went to Egypt and tried to find Kuchiuk in 1869 (her account is analyzed by Janet Beizer). Other voyagers, having read Flaubert's manuscripts, also went to try to find her, but without success. Kuchiuk's international fame was however truly launched in 1978, with the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism*.

**Said's Account: Establishing a Critical Paradigm**

*Orientalism* argues that an over-arching discursive formation imposes constraints on how any Westerner can experience the Orient (43). There has been an extraordinarily rich academic response to Said's thesis, both building on it and critical of it, and this article cannot possibly hope to do justice to its full impact. It will, instead, look at the destiny of this one example taken from Flaubert's travel notes, which plays a key role in *Orientalism*. One of the more critical responses to Said points out, among other things, that the strongest elements of his argument are in fact analyses of canonical literature, often French (Ahmad 177, 186). Said himself acknowledges that writing within an aesthetic project may be an exception (*Orientalism* 168, 181). He avoids this problem of exceptionality by focusing not on the more obvious manifestations of highly wrought literary works but instead on travel notes that Flaubert chose not to publish (Harrison 223–226). This article examines not the thesis of *Orientalism* as a whole, but a specific critical paradigm that begins with Said's treatment of the Kuchiuk episode.[2] It explores a structural parallel. On the one hand, Saidian criticism sees Kuchiuk as emblematic of the Orient itself for Flaubert. We might call this *Kuchiuk-as-femme-*

*orientale*. On the other hand, the key passages in Flaubert's travel writing—which we will call *Kuchiuk-as-text*—play a similar role in the critical tradition begun with Said.

Said's factual errors, partly due to his reliance on the English translation of selected passages from Flaubert's travel writing, have been discussed elsewhere, notably by Robert Irwin.[3] The aim of this article is, rather, to argue that we need epistemological awareness of *how* we think when we are undertaking criticism. Looking at a wide, though by no means exhaustive range of (mostly anglophone) critical responses to the Kuchiuk Hanem episode, it is possible to distinguish three overlapping approaches. Roughly speaking, they are postcolonial, psychoanalytical, and *dix-neuviémiste* or Flaubertian. I should declare from the outset that my own critical practice belongs to at least two of these categories. In arguing that we should strive to be aware of the tropes that govern our thought processes, I am using "we" in the inclusive sense.

I also aim to show that Flaubert's writing resists the usage that has been made of it. Flaubert's account of the Kuchiuk encounter reveals a lot about homosocial boasting and sentimentalism, as well as about the normalisation of recourse to prostitutes at the time. Similar traits are apparent in his life in France too, but the extreme discrepancy of economic means and the relative anonymity offered by geographical distance facilitate, then as now, sexual exploitation abroad. Flaubert's attitudes and language are also those of a profoundly racist era. Nevertheless, his focus on individual, contingent details puts him very far from the racialism that was to become common in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Traveling shortly before Arthur de Gobineau published his infamous *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines* (1853–55), on the cusp of the French turn towards a more overtly racialist approach to human difference, Flaubert himself sought to *avoid* the kind of generalizations in which an individual is taken as representative of her "race". In this he is very far from the views developed implicitly in Gobineau's *Nouvelles asiatiques* as well as explicitly in his *Essai*. Arguing

passionately in favor of a study of human societies that would include *l'histoire naturelle*, he explains social differences by the effect of climate rather than inherited factors, claiming that the religious instinct, for example, is "de même matière partout" (*Corr*. II 378). Flaubert's attitude to race reflects a robust resistance to systematization and hard-and-fast conclusions; perhaps we can learn from him in order to reach a better understanding of our own critical practice. Let us turn the tables and ask Flaubert to provide us with a paradigm for reading Said.

## The "Oriental Woman", the *marque du pluriel* and Postcolonial Synecdoche

When Said writes that "[t]he Oriental woman is an occasion and an opportunity for Flaubert's musings" (*Orientalism* 187), he employs a term that is not part of Flaubert's habitual vocabulary in the travelogue. Kuchiuk is not described as a "femme orientale", much less *the* "femme orientale". When Flaubert first sees her, silhouetted against the sky at the top of her own staircase, she is simply "une femme debout" (*Voyage* 659), and his subsequent description of her is meticulously specific about individual details. Indeed, during his travels Flaubert seems to have failed to find *the* Orient, encountering only specific, clearly differentiated individuals, and rather repetitive temples. Flaubert does use the general expression "la femme orientale" in a defensive letter to his jealous lover, some years later, in his infamous declaration—on which more later—"la femme orientale est une machine" (*Corr*. II 282). Later still, in another very defensive, and this time public, letter following the publication of *Salammbô*, he again uses "la femme orientale" in a very general way: "ni moi, ni vous, ni personne, aucun Ancien et aucun Moderne ne peut connaître la femme orientale par la raison qu'il est impossible de la fréquenter." (*Corr.* III 277). It is striking that in this instance the generalization is about an epistemological failure. In marked contrast, his personal travel notes focus on specific *distinguishing* details, not overall generalizations.

Albert Memmi's famous work on the colonial stereotype argues that it relies on depersonalization via the "*marque du pluriel*". The "*colonisé*", he says, is drowned in the "collectif anonyme": "Ils sont tous les mêmes" (his italics, 106). This movement from the singular to the plural is key to the process of racist stereotyping. It is a form of *synecdoche*, in which the part stands for the whole: the individual is taken to stand for the whole race. It is not what Flaubert does in writing of Kuchiuk. But the process adopted by Said himself—and, as we shall see, many critics since Said—does rely on the very same trope of synecdoche.

Said launched a certain critical tradition in which Kuchiuk embodies an undifferentiated generalization, *the* "femme orientale", or even the Orient as a whole. In turn, the passage in Flaubert's notes takes on an extraordinary status, standing for how the Orient itself is constructed by Orientalist discourse. The significance of this role is such that it dwarfs any individual details, which helps to explain why Said describes Kuchiuk as Egyptian despite Flaubert's observation that she was a Syrian from Damascus. If she is "plus blanche qu'une Arabe" (*Voyage* 659), that is a trait that Flaubert sees as reflecting her Syrian origins. The same lack of interest in specific individualizing details is also apparent in Said's statement that she lived in Wadi Halfa, near the upper reaches of the Nile in what is now Sudan, although in fact Flaubert met her in her house in Esna, in Egypt, about 500 km further North, where many prostitutes and dancers had been exiled from Cairo. For Said's purposes these details of individual identity do not matter, because this encounter "fairly stands for the pattern of relative strength between East and West, and the discourse about the Orient that it enabled", and Kuchiuk is "the prototype of such caricatures" of Oriental women (*Orientalism* 6, 207). His focus on identifying symptoms of a discourse, and thus questioning "the very facticity of facts" (Ahmad 194), means that the specific facts of Kuchiuk's identity are not important to him.

In Said's account, Kuchiuk stands for the Orient as a whole in Flaubert's eyes. Indeed, Orientalism in general is characterized by this part-for-whole substitution: it is "a discipline of

detail in which every minute aspect of Oriental life testified to an Oriental essence" (Said, "Problem of Textuality" 712). Synecdoche is not only a postcolonial anglophone habit: French *dix-neuviémiste* critics also sometimes see Kuchiuk as "l'Égyptienne", "l'incarnation de l'Orient" (Marchal 164). Such criticism sometimes reads Kuchiuk principally as a precursor of Flaubert's much later Oriental dancer in "Hérodias" (1877), although Flaubert's Egyptian voyage predates the main surge of interest in Salomé. For many it is Kuchiuk's dance itself, interpreted retrospectively in the light of Salomé's dance, that comes to stand for the Orient. When Rana Kabbani views the dance in "Hérodias" as fascinating "the onlooker" because he sees it "as a metaphor for the whole East", presumably the person referred to is Flaubert watching Kuchiuk more than Herod watching Salomé, since it is not clear why the latter would find the East exotic (69).

This synecdoche is so fundamental that Lisa Lowe uses it for the title of an article: "The Orient as Woman". Said again observes "the conventional European practice of making Oriental women central to any exotic practice" (*Culture and Imperialism* 146). He is pointing to the existence of a trope that one might call *Orientalist synecdoche*, in which the Oriental woman stands for the Orient as a whole. Ironically, the same underlying trope is in evidence in second-degree or *postcolonial synecdoche*, in which Flaubert's account, or what I am calling Kuchiuk-as-text, is used to stand for nineteenth-century discursive Orientalism as a whole. Flaubert's "encounter with an Arab *courtisane* sheds light on the way he perceived his encounter with the Orient more generally", Kabbani tells us (73), showing the subtle slippage from Kuchiuk as synecdoche of the Orient to Kuchiuk-as-text as postcolonial synecdoche, standing for Orientalist discourse as a whole.

I am not alone in observing this synecdochical thinking at work. Graham Huggan observes a certain hostile critical reaction that sees *Orientalism* as "reinstat[ing] broad transhistorical and cultural generalization in the service of magisterial expertise"; some critics are almost

apologetic, he says, in observing that it appears to mimic the "essentializing discourse it attacks" (126). Daniel Martin Varisco points out Said's "reduction of the fantasized *femme orientale* to the preeminent symbol of oppression", with Kuchiuk as the "paradigm of Orientalist domination of the Oriental other" (158). The Flaubert specialist Mary Orr has also pointed out the extent to which interest in the *Voyage en Orient* has focused on the "distilled titbit" of the Kuchiuk encounter. Kuchiuk, she contends, "has been set up and framed […] by the cultural stereotypes not of Flaubert, but his Occidental critics" (194, 195).

Flaubert himself is well known for his acute awareness of the *idée reçue*, or mindless repetition of received verities, and Said admired him for this. And yet he implies that Flaubert is simply copying earlier accounts, so that any "'[a]uthentic' human encounter can be portrayed as subjugated to the dead book", as James Clifford puts it (23). Said sees preconceived notions derived from "the written statement" as "having excluded, displaced […] any such *real thing* as 'the Orient'" (*Orientalism*, 21, his italics). Nevertheless, the *real thing* does remain present for Flaubert. He sees it as something that we can only grasp in a limited way: it is fragmentary, contingent, imperfectly observed, and incredibly important. His letters and travel notes are remarkable for their paucity of generalization and their emphasis on specific encounters. This refusal to generalize was no accident, but a long-term theoretical stance of Flaubert's according to Maupassant. It was part of the informal "lessons" that the latter received from the older writer:

> Ayant, en outre, posé cette vérité qu'il n'y a pas, de par le monde entier, deux grains de sable, deux mouches, deux mains ou deux nez absolument pareils, il me forçait à exprimer, en quelques phrases, un être ou un objet de manière à le particulariser nettement, à le distinguer de tous les autres êtres ou de tous les autres objets de même race ou de même espèce. (Maupassant 713)

In 1852 Flaubert had also warned Colet of the dangers of essentialism: "plus [la figure] sera ressemblante au type, plus elle se rapprochera d'une abstraction, c'est-à-dire de quelque chose d'anti-artistique, d'anti-plastique, d'antihumain, d'antipoétique par conséquent" (*Corr*. II 62). Curiously, this is reminiscent of Said's own claims of anti-essentialism, when reconsidering *Orientalism* in 1995 (333–334); it seems nevertheless rather different from his approach to Kuchiuk-as-text.

The episode with Kuchiuk, though the most memorable, is one among many sexual and non-sexual encounters that Flaubert is careful to differentiate.[4] His notes also include details of animals alive and dead, insects, bird droppings, men and children. Moreover, Flaubert's focus on corporeal, contingent details presents Kuchiuk as experienced phenomenologically from one individual perspective. His insistent corporeality has shocked some critics, who are particularly exercised by his observation that one of her incisors is beginning to rot (*Voyage* 659–660), which has been seen as "unkind" (Karayanni 127) and a way of putting her in her place. This is however typical of Flaubert's inclusion of highly individualized contingent details in all his writings, both metropolitan and oriental (notably the description of the very physical stages of Emma Bovary's death, though one is also reminded of Flaubert's own dental problems, recounted in his letters). Flaubert's observation of Kuchiuk's incipient dental problem, like his melancholy on seeing her weakened by recent illness when he comes back to visit the following month, situates her within the bitter-sweet time of mortality in a way that is typical of his writing. And yet Orientalism is purported to project the Orient as unchanging and timeless. Flaubert's account is cited as an example of how "the male conception of the world, in its effect upon the practicing Orientalist, tends to be static, frozen, fixed eternally" without the possibility of development or human movement (Said, *Orientalism* 208); "[t]he Orient, then, is caught in a state of timelessness" (Kabanni 73). Despite her weariness when the

travelers return for a second visit, Kuchiuk "does not fatigue […] her resources are never exhausted" (Lowe, *Critical Terrains* 76).

We need to think about what this synecdochical "setting up and framing" means for critical practice. How can an approach that sets out to undermine a discourse avoid becoming yet another rigid and self-perpetuating paradigm, just another set of *idées reçues*? Flaubert's insistence on the contingent detail might help us question the reliance on synecdoche within postcolonial critical thinking. There are parallels with what Hayden White calls by the more pejorative term "fetishism": "Fetishism […] is a mistaking of the form of a thing for its content or the taking of a part of a thing for the whole, and the elevation either of the form or the part to the status of a content or an essence of the whole" (133). Janet Beizer uses the same term self-critically, acknowledging the "potentially fetishistic logic of certain contemporary forays into a feminist past" (43). By using the less loaded term "synecdoche", rather than "fetishism", I hope to focus more precisely on a specific mode of thinking. We cannot easily escape from synecdochical thinking—indeed I am engaging in it right now. But we can call it by its name and observe its workings in order to mitigate their reductive threat.

I'm now going to look at three specific traits attributed to what I am calling Kuchiuk-as-text: silencing; unknowability; and castration.

## Kuchiuk-as-Text: Silencing the Oriental Woman

The silencing of the Oriental other is a key trait of Orientalism denounced by post-Saidian criticism. This has a strongly gendered aspect: the West is masculine and articulate in contrast to a feminized Orient whose voice is stifled. Kuchiuk is the key example of this silencing, since she "never spoke of herself […] *He* spoke for and represented her", and she is "[l]ess a woman than a display of impressive but verbally inexpressive femininity" (Said, *Orientalism* 6, 187).

In this episode the "onlooker" is "admitted into the Orient by visual seduction", gazing on the half-dressed Kuchiuk, and "armed with language—*he* narrates the encounter […] *he* creates the Orient" which is "hushed into silence by its own mysteries, incapable of self-expression, mute until the Western observer lends it his voice." (Kabbani 73). "[H]e never allowed her to speak for herself" (Mortimer 94). While Kuchiuk's own choreography of her dance gives her some agency as an artist according to Stavros Stavrou Karayanni, Flaubert's account is an attempt to "record and confine her linguistically", likened to a sadistic attempt to impose a European-style corset on her; the evidence for this lies (somewhat confusingly) in Flaubert's expression of admiration for the absence of stays and corsets (127; also 124).

And yet Kuchiuk's silence, in Flaubert's account, is only relative. They lack a common language and his notes emphasize this, focusing, as is typical of him, on the few words that are used and on the difficulties of verbal communication. Kuchiuk jokingly slaps the guards she employs, saying to her visitor, in an Italian-based *sabir*, "ruffian, buono ruffian" (*Voyage* 663); during the night she calls her slave, Zeneb; in the early hours, she talks to the interpreter and, after warming herself over some glowing coals, she says "basta" and goes back to sleep (664). She thinks he should not have a moustache (701). On their return visit they exchange polite greetings and she says she thinks of the two men as her children (700). Flaubert notes that she has writing (a verse from the Koran) tattooed in blue on her arm (660) and on the wall of her room (701).

Flaubert also highlights the difficulties of communication between himself and other women he has sex with. Earlier, in Cairo, a prostitute named Hadély knows a few words of French but also speaks to him in Arabic and waits for a response to her questions. He has some assistance from an interpreter (incongruously present throughout, he points out), but he emphasizes the intensity of their eye contact in the absence of verbal communication (*Voyage* 622–23). In a novel, of course, Flaubert could have made these women "speak", though he might still have

emphasized problems of communication and linguistic inadequacy, since the subject fascinated him. In his travel writing he focuses instead on the difficulty of finding a linguistic shared terrain. There is perhaps only a narrow "space from which the sexed subaltern subject can speak" (Spivak, 307) in the nineteenth century.

Kuchiuk the woman spoke, gave orders, made jokes, and appropriated sacred writing for her own body; but Kuchiuk-as-text is used synecdochically to stand for the silencing of the Oriental woman.[5]

## Kuchiuk-as-Text: the (Un)knowability of the Orient

Another paradigm of the postcolonial essay sub-genre uses Kuchiuk-as-text to show how Orientalism produces the Orient as the subject of knowledge. "Every learned (and not so learned) European traveler in the Orient felt himself to be a representative Westerner who had *gotten beneath the films of obscurity*", Said wrote, including Flaubert in a list of those for whom this is "obviously true" (*Orientalism* 223, my emphasis). As Homi Bhabha puts it, colonial discourse produces "the Other" as "entirely knowable and visible" (70–71).

In contrast, Flaubert himself felt that description was *unable* to get to the inner life of the Orient. Said acknowledges this but focuses on the strikingly phallic metaphor Flaubert uses, comparing his own inadequate attempts at writing to oral sex, in contrast to sexual relations that lead to the begetting of a child/an original work (*Orientalism* 189, *Corr*. I 628). Said occults the tenor of the metaphor (the inadequacy of writing), focusing on the vehicle, which he cites as an example of Flaubert"s "almost uniform association between the Orient and sex" (187–188), rather than between writing and sex. He posits the centrality of sexuality in Orientalism and then leaves the issue to one side (as Yegenoglu points out, 25).

Indeed, the Kuchiuk Hanem episode is one of the few points in *Orientalism* where Said touches on gender issues. Later approaches that try to fill this gap, often influenced by psychoanalysis, tend to treat the episode as a synecdoche for the complete *un*knowability of the Orient or for the revelation of a lack. This inverts the more straightforwardly Saidian argument that Orientalism reduces the Oriental to an utterly *knowable* other.

Kuchiuk performs a striptease called the dance of the bee, during which the musicians are blindfolded. In many critical readings this striptease is, like the veil, a symbol of the Orient but also revelatory of a fetishism in which Flaubert enacts scopic mastery and/or his own castration complex. It shows a "scopic drive that associates knowing with a laying bare" (Porter, "Perverse Traveler" 29), and the unveiling reveals only "nothing—no thing, or death", the fetish or simultaneous denial and avowal of the "lack" that constitutes the female body and potentially thus threatens the male (Beizer 55). Kuchiuk-as-text reveals Flaubert's fetishization of phallic loss, and his focus on the details of the encounter reveal pleasure in confronting castration (Bernheimer, *Figures* 137–8). This tension between postcolonialism (for which Orientalism reduces the Other to absolute knowability) and psychoanalysis (for which Orientalism reveals lack and unknowability) is reconciled by Ali Behdad. Normal Oriental women being unavailable, he writes, Flaubert turned to "Egyptian brothels" for his "pathological search for the lost object". To represent the other, the Orientalist "must negate the experience of lack and his sense of disorientation". Flaubert thus remains, for Behdad, an anal, melancholy traveler but his Orientalist project is to represent "asymbolia" (68, 71).

These approaches to Kuchiuk-as-text suggest the deep, if not always avowed, influence of Freud on twentieth-century postcolonialism. The difficulties of knowing and writing about cultural difference are often described using terminology taken from psychoanalysis: lost object, fixation, drive, castration complex, fetishism. Is this itself an example of "disavowed colonial desire"?[6] In any case it is a striking example of analogical thinking in which inter-

cultural communication is understood in terms of the lost object of infantile sexuality. The destiny of Kuchiuk-as-text is thus closely tied to the heritage of psychoanalysis, which remained very influential during the last decades of the twentieth century when postcolonial theory was emerging.

**Vulnerable and invulnerable Kuchiuk, or, Who is castrated anyway?**

Kuchiuk-as-text shows us the Oriental woman as a victim, with the male narrator in a position of power: "he encounters the woman in a state of undress […] in a state of pleasing vulnerability. *He* is not vulnerable: he is male, presumably in full dress, European, rational" (Kabbani 73); he describes her house to recreate "the imaginary scene of the harem" in which the male is dominant (Behdad 68). An alternative reading, sometimes by the same critics, nevertheless sees her in a position of power as a femme fatale, "represented as the unapproachable Oriental queen" (Behdad 68). Flaubert's own account suggests a professional, confident woman rather than domineering queen or harem captive: Kuchiuk sends her colleague to intercept travelers when boats arrive; she takes her clients to a café nearby; she is a skilled dancer and mistress of her household, who employs male musicians and security staff.[7]

The imbalance of power relations between male, wealthy European client(s) and Egypt-based prostitute(s) is of course all too real, but psychoanalysis takes us a long way from the pragmatic details of Kuchiuk's professional arrangements. Flaubert is a "perverse traveler" driven by a "desire to overpower and to despoil", who is both voyeuristic and sadistic. When Flaubert observes her decaying tooth, it is "the mark of a mutilation that recalls the mutilation constitutive of femininity in male fantasy, castration", and Flaubert's irony "masks the

satisfaction of the sadistic as well as the scopic drives" (Porter, "Perverse Traveler" 26, 32–3).[8]

Half-asleep at Kuchiuk's side, with one finger caught under her necklace, Flaubert thinks of Judith and Holofernes. This may be a source of inspiration for the night Salammbô and Mâtho spend together in his novel of 1862. Some argue that the association shows Kuchiuk in chains, while also linking her to Salomé and the castration complex. Perhaps more obviously, Flaubert's musings explore cross-cultural captivity in which the apparently submissive partner (Judith) is the unexpected victor, leading to what may be masochistic pleasure in the reversal of power relations (Soussou, 259). Tantalizingly, Richard Terdiman suggests this daydream shows a (momentary) surfacing of the "repressed threat of violence that is the inseparable counter-condition of his own domination" in a "powerful fantasy of the revenge of the oppressed" (251). I am not sure that the castration complex is necessary to such a reading.

In any case, whether or not Kuchiuk embodies fears of (male) symbolic castration in a Freudian sense, one might ask whether she was *literally* mutilated, and how Flaubert responded to the phenomenon of *female* genital mutilation (FGM) which was, and is, wide-spread in Egypt. This issue is not always discussed, perhaps because the English translation and some earlier editions were censored, and because the castration complex, which focuses on the (imaginary) male body, is generally considered a more suitable topic for literary criticism than the (real) female body.

One of the key documents here is not the travel notes themselves but a letter to Colet written in 1853, in which Flaubert writes that "la femme orientale est une machine, et rien de plus". He goes on:

> Quant à la jouissance physique, elle-même doit être fort légère puisqu'on leur coupe de bonne heure le fameux bouton, siège d'icelle. Et c'est là ce qui la

> rend, cette femme, si poétique à un certain point de vue, c'est qu'elle rentre absolument dans la nature. (*Corr*. II 282)

The last comment reflects a troubling notion of the relation to nature. According to Lowe, Flaubert's "glib fascination with the custom of clitoridectomy" constitutes woman as representative of nature in contrast to civilized man ("Orient as Woman" 53). The "virulent sexism" of his comment may, as Bernheimer plausibly argues, reflect the idea that it is natural for women to experience no sexual pleasure of their own (*Figures* 294 n.15). It may also draw on a whole set of contrasts that, in the nineteenth century, placed procreative sexuality alongside nature in opposition to non-penetrative sexual pleasure which was aligned with the artificial.

In this now infamous letter, written some years after his journey, Flaubert does not state that Kuchiuk had been mutilated, and instead generalizes (uncharacteristically) about "la femme orientale". Critics have usually taken these comments to include Kuchiuk.[9] Flaubert is, however, responding defensively to Colet's retrospective jealousy. In his notes written at the time of his voyage he does observe the effect of FGM very explicitly after having sex with Hadély, already mentioned. A prostitute in Cairo, Hadély is, unlike Kuchiuk, actually Egyptian. Probably tubercular, she seems tired and sad, and tries to speak with him though they have no shared language. Flaubert notes "les grandes lèvres coupées, le poil rasé. L'impression de son con était celle d'une graisse sèche." He makes no judgement (indeed this is a key trait of his notes, as of his mature works), but he does comment on the subjective effect: "L'ensemble était un effet de peste et de léproserie." (*Voyage* 622).[10]

Critics sometimes merge Hadély and Kuchiuk, but Flaubert makes no observation of mutilation in his longer description of Kuchiuk. He refers to giving Kuchiuk oral sex (*Voyage* 663) —he has "gamahuché 3 fois" according to his letter to Bouilhet (*Corr*. I 605; also 607)—which suggests at the very least that he would have noticed had she been subject to FGM. Flaubert

was struck, in the case of Hadély, by what the WHO calls Type 2 FGM, which can include the excision of the outer labia as well the clitoris, and it is possible that Kuchiuk may only have undergone the less visually striking Type 1 (clitoridectomy).[11] But it is also possible that Kuchiuk had escaped mutilation. Although it is hard to ascertain the precise extent of the practice of FGM in the nineteenth century, we do know that it was fairly systematic in Egypt but probably not as common in Kuchiuk's native Syria, as appears to be the case now.[12]

Said, although he quotes the letter to Colet, does not discuss FGM. That may be why he sees Flaubert's Kuchiuk as embodying "unlimited sensuality" and as "peculiarly Oriental in her luxuriant and seemingly unbounded sexuality". She is also "a disturbing symbol of fecundity", though he goes on to say that she remains barren, like all Flaubert's Oriental heroines (207, 187). It is a curious aspect of this particular critical paradigm that an apparently childless woman, often thought to have been mutilated so that she cannot experience sexual pleasure, is seen as symbolizing both fertility and sensuality.

**Kuchiuk's "Race" and Kuchiuk-as-Text**

Flaubert's use of the word "race" does in rare instances reflect the later racialist meaning (though more often he uses it in the other senses common at the time, referring to familial lineage, aristocratic breeding, or the human "race"). The term indicates identity within a group when he writes that "Hérodias" is set in an era when "La question des races dominait tout" (*Corr*. V: 58). But he rarely uses the term with this anthropological meaning (Dord-Crouslé 294). In *Salammbô* the identity of different "races" is largely a political construct (Saminadayar-Perrin 402–406). Bernheimer meanwhile sees race as interesting Flaubert mainly as a stimulus for "wonderful-sounding names and exotic cultural practices"; the dismembered bodies in *Salammbô* are homogenized, marking the absence of any historical

direction. Flaubert's artistic practice, he adds, obscures every "mode of totalization to which the text both invites and blocks access" —woman, history and the Orient among them—in favor of saturation by "particulars" (*Decadent Subjects*, 48–49, 54). When Flaubert does talk about race the emphasis is on plurality and specificity rather than any overarching concept or hierarchy. So too, Flaubert's writing on Kuchiuk gives us individual, phenomenologically observed details.

Kuchiuk-as-text, however, has had a very different afterlife. In asking what lessons can be drawn concerning our critical reading practices, we may conclude that synecdochical reasoning is inescapable; as I said, I am using it now. But we can pursue the enquiry further by looking at the function of literary genre. Jonathan Culler observes that texts are naturalized to correspond to readerly expectations. That is, they are brought "into relation with a type of discourse or model which is already, in some sense, natural and legible"; this naturalization reduces strangeness and creates intelligibility (162, 164). Along these lines, one can see how Kuchiuk-as-text has been framed according to the rules of a literary sub-genre established by Said: the postcolonial theory essay. Tzvetan Todorov and Gérard Genette argue that genres create their own type of *vraisemblance*: a text not only appears plausible in relation to the outside world, but also in relation to a system of expectations defined by its genre. Todorov shows that these two forms of *vraisemblance* may be at odds, as in the case of the detective novel where the culprit is never the most obvious person, although that person might be the most likely culprit in the real world (91-93; see also Genette 76). So too, for a postcolonial or psychoanalytic approach, the apparently obvious reading is the wrong one. "Flaubert tells how he had sex with a prostitute in Egypt and felt melancholy" would be the wrong reading. The postcolonial *vraisemblable* makes it "Flaubert portrays all of the Orient as subject to Western knowledge and power in his account of one woman". Inflected by psychoanalysis, this becomes something like: "Flaubert's castration complex and scopic drive are apparent in his account of

one woman, thus portraying the entire Orient as unknowable". One can measure the stature of Freud and Said by the fact that they redefined the critical *vraisemblable* and, as a result, what seems plausible to us now.

Said denounces synecdochical thinking in nineteenth-century theorists and writers for whom "a generalization about 'the Orient' drew its power from the presumed representativeness of everything Oriental; each particle of the Orient told of its Orientalness, so much so that the attribute of being Oriental overrode any countervailing instance." He calls this "radical typing" (*Orientalism* 231). Ironically, one of the underlying tropes of the postcolonial essay as a sub-genre is a similarly radical typing: a summing up of Orientalist discourse itself via a single textual episode. J. Hillis Miller observes a comparable "uncritical acceptance of the extremely dubious trope of synecdoche, part for whole" in the field of Cultural Studies (608). It may not be possible to escape synecdochical thinking entirely, but we should strive to be aware of it.

In postcolonial synecdoche one episode stands for a whole civilizational encounter, but this happens at the expense of decontextualizing the episode. This decontextualization neglects the specificity of genre: Flaubert's brutal honesty about bodily matters in his notes and some letters would not have been possible in a published account (Varisco 230–233).[13] The synecdochical episode is also read in isolation from other encounters with prostitutes in Egypt, Marseilles or Paris. In any case, the sheer mass of responses to the Kuchiuk episode now requires us to take a doubly historicist approach: we need to understand Flaubert's travel notes in their historical and generic contexts, but we also need to situate our critical practice in relation to its own generic horizons. Along similar lines, Burke and Prochaska argue that literary criticism should historicize its own conditions of production, exposing the tendency towards an ahistorical view in *Orientalism* and its followers and underlining the need to move beyond "ritual denunciation" (13).

Flaubert's writing was a long struggle to resist facile generalizations. A deterministic theory of racial difference such as Gobineau's would, after all, fall into what he called "la bêtise de vouloir conclure" (*Corr*. I 680). Perhaps we can be humble enough to learn from his close observation of specific individuals, even as we reject the morality of his sex tourism. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak puts it, we need to identify a "heterogenous Other" rather than a homogenous version, although, she claims, "the subaltern woman will be as mute as ever" (288, 295). I believe that little traces of the individual Kuchiuk are present in Flaubert's text; we should be wary of ironing them out in favour of a homogenous account of *la femme orientale*.

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[1] According to Robert Irwin, both Flaubert and Said are mistaken in calling Kuchiuk Hanem an *almeh* or learned woman; she is in fact a *ghaziya*, a dancer and courtesan (43). The name Kuchiuk Hanem could mean 'little madam', 'little princess' or possibly 'madam dancer', and it appears spelt in various ways; for simplicity's sake I call her 'Kuchiuk' throughout. Her real name was probably not Saphiah, as is sometimes thought (Biasi, *Voyage*, 281).

[2] Some of this work was presented at a conference of the Society for Francophone Postcolonial Studies on the legacies of Edward Said, held in London, November 2018, and I wish to thank those present for their comments, particularly to the much regretted Kate Marsh, who I saw there for the last time. I also wish to thank Julia Hartley for her helpful feedback.

[3] Said relied on Steegmuller (1972), and the incomplete 1973 Club de l'honnête homme edition. Even Jean-Claude Berchet's 1985 anthology *Le Voyage en Orient* removed all the sex, which considerably shortens the Kuchiuk episode (918–920). We now have a landmark edition of the Egyptian notes by Pierre-Marc de Biasi (1991), as well as the whole *Voyage en Orient* in the Pléiade by Claudine Gothot-Mersch (2013).

[4] Said assumes that fundamentally heterosexual binary oppositions underlie Orientalism and determine Flaubert's account (male/female, colonizer/colonized, active/passive). Critics including Biasi (*Une manière spéciale*), Karayanni, Bernheimer and Rexer have however pointed out the variety of the sexual activities recounted by Flaubert, including some homosexual experimentation and the overriding homosocial context of his voyage and letters (see also Varisco 167, Huggan 133).

[5] Critical focus on Kuchiuk alone may in itself, according to Varisco, be a form of silencing since it implies "that there was no other voice to be found" (160).

[6] Emily Apter, looking at critical responses to Oriental dance, asks whether "disavowed colonial desire haunts even the most rigorous, well-intentioned efforts to unmask the colonial gaze" (176).

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[7] Orr sees Kuchiuk as an *almeh* in the sense of learned, even noble, and emphasizes her autonomy (194, 195).

[8] Porter is also the author of a very thoughtful response to Said's *Orientalism* that evokes the need to take into account literature's capacity for "self-interrogating density of verbal texture" and counter-hegemonic discourse ("Orientalism" 182).

[9] For example Karayanni 134, Tooke 181 and Beizer, who deals with the issue in more detail 52–55.

[10] This episode does not appear in the 1910 Conard edition (see Flaubert, *Voyage* 1473) or Steegmuller's selective 1972 translation.

[11] https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/female-genital-mutilation [consulted 09.30.2020]

[12] On the question of the extent to which FGM is practiced in Syria, see Diana Geraci and Jacqueline Mulders, "Female Genital Mutilation in Syria?" (April 2016) https://www.endfgm.eu/resources/studies/female-genital-mutilation-in-syria/. FGM is generally practised between the ages of 4 and 12, but we do not know at what age Kuchiuk left Syria.

[13] On Flaubert's wariness of travel writing as a genre, and refusal to publish his notes, see Tooke 171–174.