Original Article-Open Access

International Review of Literary Studies
ISSN: (P) 2709-7013, (E) 2709-7021 Vol. 7, Issue 2 July-December 2025, pp. 29-41

Orientalism Reversed: Syrian Acrobats and Jugglers in the West, an Occidentalist Literature of Their Own

Abdelaziz Tritha[1]

Abstract

Starting from the mid-nineteenth century, many Arab acrobats furnished the performances' scenes of Western theatres and fairs. Many were recruited to serve as displayers at the World Columbian Exposition (1893) and even earlier as exclusive performers and racial beings to gratify the quest of Western spectators. The orientalist discourse burgeoned and grew out as a consequence of those expositions that used ethnicities as representatives of exoticism. I argue that despite ethnic clustering and racial amassing in such ludo-entertaining space wherein Arabs were exhibited, the discourse of alterity and otherness generated to describe Arab acrobats' weird practices and queer attire failed to formulate a solid argument. Resisting the voices of Arab acrobats neutralized that. This article purports to highlight the fascinating literature that shifts the spotlight downwards and reconsiders the position of Syrian (a term which, in the 19th century, encompassed much of the Levant, including modern-day Lebanon) acrobats as active participants in Western circuses. Starting from the turn of the nineteenth century, these acrobats furrowed their itineraries as fluid identities and dissenting voices. Using a postcolonial micro-historicist approach, this paper aims to undermine orientalist discourse by consolidating Syrian alternative discourses of difference, framing them as occidentalism and as counterproductive accounts.

Keywords: World Columbian Expositions, Occidentalist, microhistoricist, counter-productive, alternative.

[1] Hassan 1 University, Morocco
Corresponding author Email: trithaabdelaziz@yahoo.fr

Publication Details:
Article Received: January 26, 2025
Article Accepted: December 01, 2025
Article Published: December 31, 2025

Recommended citation in APA 7th:

Tritha, A. (2025). Orientalism reversed: Syrian acrobats and jugglers in the West, an Occidentalist literature of their own. *International Review of Literary Studies, 7*(2), pp. 29–41. https://irlsjournal.com/index.php/Irls

Introduction

The hi/story of Syrian[i] acrobats in Western circuses and fairs marked its fascinating debut at the turn of the nineteenth century, when travel and migration opened gates for fluid cultural contact. The Syrian community, including Syrian and Lebanese acrobatic performers, was another testimony of Eastern long-standing presence in the Western cosmos. They were either peddlers, merchants, sellers, or acrobatic jugglers. They performed against the backdrop of human commodities or zoos,[ii] which furnished Western space in the form of "families or groups of exotic peoples or savages, arrived or more usually brought, from distant colonies" (Sanchez, 2013, p. 1). Interestingly, Syrian Jugglers and acrobats forged their circuits to Western circuses and fairs as migratory communities, fleeing the atrocities of Ottoman encroachment, especially in Lebanon and Syria[iii].

The movement of this human capital to the American shore was sheerly accompanied with the rise of racialization and discourses of ethnic stratification as Sami Ullah Khan et all aptly put it "The racial epiphany becomes obvious in Ifemelu while living in America where she realizes that the assumptions associated with skin colours are not prevailing back in Nigeria; enabling her to recognize her homeland identity and it's unprejudiced approach. But America's way of classifying people is dubious and based on false assumptions associated with racial background (2019, p. 12). The outset of their move to Western circuses and fairs was only possible with the consent of the Ottoman Empire. The rising demand in the American consumerist economy drew various Eastern ethnicities, especially at the well-known Columbian Exposition, 1893. The quest for the exotic and the peculiar mobilized the American audience in search of entertainment thrills. Syrian, Egyptian, and Lebanese impresarios and entertainers were urged to participate in the Columbian fair of 1893 and "formed in Constantinople to represent the Ottoman Empire at the fair and named for the sultan" (Jacobs, 2014, p. 3). The majority of Syrian, Egyptian, and Lebanese acrobats performed in the Columbian Expositions of 1893.

While Linda Jacobs (2013) retraced the multifaceted passage of Syrian and Lebanese entertainers to Western circuses and show hippodromes, she differentiated between North African acrobats and those from the Levant (Syria and Lebanon). She alleged that "the Syrian Christians who entertained were fully aware of the irony of dressing up as Bedouins and performing 'Mohammedan" (Jacobs, 2014, p 3). Unlike North Africans who deployed their exoticism to please Western audiences, Syrian and Lebanese Christians were not fit to display Eastern peculiarity. They looked like Westerners and therefore did not have the immediate impact on Western spectators. Such a premise of selectiveness, which categorized Arab acrobats into two divergent factions, turned into a slippery slope since Western audiences already considered all Eastern entertainers as identical Arabs. Such identification was commensurate with the common thought of Western audiences that being an Arab was synonymously correlated with the practice of acrobatics.

Among Syrian and Egyptian circus performers, the focus will be on pioneering acrobats who excelled at asserting their Orientality and resisted Western dogmas of subordination. To begin with, George Hamid was considered a Lebanese pioneer of acrobatics and a magnificent master of tumbling in the United States, Britain, and Canadaiv. Along with his uncle Ameen, they formed a crew and journeyed to different shores, searching for acrobatic acumen and tumbling expertise. At the age of seven, George Hamid "the slim, dark-eyed kid from the tiny village of Broumana" (Valley Morning Star, 1958, P. 4) ventured to the American circuses and fairs. It was in his hometown that he learnt the rudimentary training as a tumbler. Not only was his natal city an interesting setting where the instincts of acrobatics were sown, but it was also a town in which "every man was a tumbler or an acrobat" (Valley Morning Star, 1958, p. 4).

This study significantly contributes to laying the foundations for Occidentalist narratives to emerge as alter(native discourses of difference that de-canonize Western white mythologies. The birth of "Occidentalism" decenters the West and therefore puts it as a subject of scrutiny. Going beyond the monodirectional Western discourse on the Orient, Occidentalism designs the literature that reroutes itineraries towards the West as a locus of investigation.Since "Occidentalism" is often wedded to the process of westernization as it seeks "adopting, or wanting to adopt, cultural elements that have been labeled Western'' (Jouhki, 2006, p. 3), features of Western modernity are salient elements that frame the process of westernization. As a corollary of the adoption of Western norms,

"Occidentalism" refers to the appropriation of Western cultural assets as embodying modernity.

Hassan Hanafi's project of Occidentalism gestures towards establishing a counter-discourse that destabilizes the Eurocentric vision and subverts the Orientalist tropes and polar monoliths. Hanafi defines Occidentalism as a science whose main critical focus is to turn the West into a subject of study, not as an end in itself, but for the ultimate purpose of undermining its culture and civilization. He claims that "Occidentalism aims at undermining the West that stands as the sole representative of humanity and Europe in particular" (2000, p. 32). Hassan Hanafi's tendency to reorient Western Eurocentric vision has led him to reinstall patterns of binary opposition. For him, Occidentalism is a discipline that runsradically counter to Orientalism. It aims at "peripherizing" European culture and history and centering the Islamic ones. Corroborating his thesis, he maintains that "the main purpose of Occidentalism is to put an end to Western cultural invasion and ward off the sway of European civilization" (2000, p. 39).

Looking at Islamic and European history as separate is a strong denial of cultural criss-crossing between the two worlds. Hassan Hanafi even suggests that there are many examples in the Islamic laws that withstand the process of acculturation and alienation: "Islam has forbidden alliance and reconciliation with infidels since the main aim of enemies isto undermine the self's identity" (2000, p. 22). This shows that Hanafi's nationalistic vision ofIslamic identity is parochial. To consider Occidentalism as an opponent to Orientalism is to overlook the alternative discourse of difference that Occidentalist texts are loaded with. My assumption is that Arab acrobats' and dancers' accounts in the West during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are discursive spaces where the representation of the Other is not a reversal of stereotypes and tropes as an end in itself, but an alternative discourse that tries to enhance cultural differences and buttress the Other's acceptance.

As sketched out previously, the orientalist mode of representation homogenizes the Orient as one entity, denying cultural diversity and alternative voices. Edward Said criticizes Orientalism as a form of representation that mythologically constructs the Orient, or rather 'orientalizes' it. Beyond this orientalist discourse that draws demarcations between East and West as two entities put at odds, Occidentalism, as an alternative discourse of difference, tries to foster another form of representation that runs counter to the orientalist one. Inhis book *Moqadima FI Ailm Al Istighrab (An Introduction to 0ccidentalism)* (2000), Hassan Hanafi traces the emergence of Occidentalism as a science that attacks the process of Westernization: "Occidentalism was developed to attack Westernization, which had strong influence not only on our cultural life and imagination of the world but also on our daily practices, purity of language, artistic productions and all aspects of life". (2000, p. 19-20).

Given the fact that Hanafi's view curtails the struggle over re-positioning Arabs' agency to mere clashing and warring thought, he consequently qualifies Occidentalism as a new form of resistance to all corollaries of Westernization. Occidentalism, for Hanafi, is a counter-production which stresses the triumphant national values and emphatically rejects 'cultural contamination'. In this logic, He reinstates the same paradigms of orientalist binarism. He accuses Westerners of their cultural influence, which brought Arab states to an asunder state. Hassan Hanafi's main aim is to examine the extent of Western cultural influence on Arab national values and heritage. From a purely nationalistic perspective, he sees the West as a form of cultural domination that has radically changed the linguistic domains and architectural designs.

The main aim is also to dismantle Hassan Hanafi's project of Occidentalism as best elucidated in his book *Muqadima Fi Ailm Al Istighrab (Introduction to Occidentalism*) (2009). As he argues that Occidentalism is a subversive project to undermine Western cultural legacies, he falls into the same trap as orientalist discourse, consolidating binary logics and rigid bifurcation. The argument stressed here is not to highlight Arab travels, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, to the West as opposing alternatives but rather to buttress the fact that these travels are contoured by historical conditions, individual conditions, and the nature of the travel's mission. These travels are textual records that forefront heterogeneous discourses not necessarily conditioned by Hanafi's classical thought. In this matrix of highlighting Syrian micro-narratives as Occidentalist grounds that bounce back the Orientalist prejudiced logos, a set of skeptical interrogations form the blueprint of this posited argument: how far have these narratives of fact subverted the Orientalist mode of representation? How do they

present alternative venues as Occidentalist grounds?

George Hamid and Ameen Abou Hamid: A Solid Legacy in Acrobatics

At a time when "an Arab was synonymous with an acrobat" (Hamid, 2004, p 11), George Hamid entered the Buffalo Bills as a large enterprise of acrobatics and artistic exhibitions.The terrain was not only propitious for profit-making acrobatic performances but also a setting where identity assertion and the enunciation of cultural differentiation were key markers in Buffalo Bill's acrobatic shows. As overtly stated, George considered the art of exhibition more of a daily challenge than a lucrative professional act. He drew a parallel comparison between the ordinary spectators and acrobats "they have a pride in family tradition. One circus family tries to outdo the other" (The Times Tribune, 1958, p. 2). In that highly competitive sphere of entertainment, George Hamid and his crew were not mere Oriental subjects to garnish the décor and festivities of circuses. They were parallel voices, unheard as they were, that challenged the domineering entrepreneurial agents.

At the heart of that pulsating arena of ludo-entertaining acts, George Hamid's main interest was in crystallizing a new Oriental artistic exhibition that wrought Eastern subjectivities beyond the politics of cultural distinction. The prevailing rhetoric, whether in nineteenth- or twentieth-century ethnic shows, was to consider Arab acrobats' presence in Western circuses as an ipso facto reflection of the Columbian Exposition (1893). In fact, the prevailing image was of a catalogued ethnic minority, Arabs, as exhibitionists who supplied the backgrounds for Western circuses. That mainstream version of representation "became widespread in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Europe and the United States" (Sanchez, 2013, p. 1). Deported natives were deployed as ethnic exhibits "to display their bodies and gestures, their different and singular condition" (Sanchez, 2013, p. 1).

To subvert those tropes of subordination, George Hamid re-narrated a parallel account resting on cultural engagement and exclusive performances. When he started performing as an understander[v], the whole public was baffled and stupefied by George Hamid's tricky moves. Rather than succumbing to Western showmen's and agents' instructions, he created his proper business niche to assert the uniqueness of Oriental acrobatics. He "was still in his early teens but built on the general line and solidity of a graniteboulder" (Lubbock Avalanche-Journal, 1954, p. 54). Since the main philosophy behind acrobatics was an appeal to gratify Western spectators' curiosity, competition between acrobats reached its utmost. Such was the case when George Hamid competed fiercely with two prominent Western figures in acrobatic acts, namely Barnum and Bailey.

The nomadic itinerary of George Hamid made him not only "the champion tumbler of the world" (Lubbock Avalanche-Journal, 1954, p. 54) but a steadfast, resistant voiceto the racialized discourse that staged 'Orientality' and therefore sealed off its inherentpotency of subjectification. As best featured in his incessant quest for Self's articulation, George Hamid's mutiny against the orders of entrepreneurial recruiters reached its apex when he categorically objected to functioning as a horseman. It was with Buffalo Bill[vi] that he commenced his professional career as an acrobat and therefore established his own proper business show at a time of seething rivalries between managers of acrobats. In the course of his journey to become a professional acrobat, he received an offer from Buffalo Bill to become a horse rider. Though Buffalo Bill was a well-established authority in show business and the art of exhibition, George Hamid refused to surrender to his vertical impositions. He majestically decided to fulfill his dream as an acrobat. Such was his declaration, "I did not doubt my ability to ride. Would Haj reduce my acrobatic lessons to improve my horsemanship? Never" (Hamid, 2004, p. 37). In his reference to Haj, he meant Hadj Cheriff[vii], one of the first Moroccan acrobats who practiced acrobatics, namely in Britain and the United States of America. He was performing in Western circuses long before George Hamid's arrival.

George Hamid, as a purveyor of his Christian origin and Lebanese descendant, wore the mask of Westernism as a toolkit to disguise his Orientality. As recorded in one of hisperformances, he quarreled with his Oriental peers and resisted their conservative thoughts. While George Hamid and his fellow, Saleem, were hastening to prepare a thrilling show for the American audience, they were astonished by the presence of Fatima's[viii] husband. The planwas to bring Fatima to a midnight show where she had to strip progressively asthe light dwindled (Hamid, 2004, p. 37). When the show was about to start, George and his fellow were astounded by Fatima's husband's intervention. That latter retorted severely against George's immoral conduct and indecent behavior:

> Saleem looked from him to me. “Every Fatima in the world travels alone,” he grumbled. “Yours has to have a husband”. “this midnight performance, It is a vile and you should be ashamed”. “Do not be silly” I said. “I have explained to Fatima and we have it all worked out”. “ you cannot do what you do” he cried… “No wife of mine makes a public spectacle for herself” the man screamed (Hamid, 2004, p. 37).

George Hamid’s professional life in the United States of America and Britain made him not only a successful businessman and acrobatic talent but also a social and cultural agent. During his sojourn, he established cultural and social ties with various literary figures that marked American history. He surreptitiously walked into Helen Keller’s house and rummaged for the secret of her peculiar life. George Hamid’s house was next to a “green hedged-in within which lay a flowered section 20 feet by 30 feet” (Hamid, 2004, p. 37). It was at that spacious yard that Helen Keller used to spend most of her time wandering to attenuate her triadic affections, dumbness, deafness, and blindness. George’s curiosity led him to unravel the mystery of Helen Keller's solitude. Beneath those initiatives of cultural contact between George and Keller, there lay the humanitarian aspect that characterized Oriental acrobats’ attitudes.

Since he was keen on developing a rudimentary knack for athleticism and acrobatics, George Hamid was also eager to integrate the basics of his skills into his local district. During the visit he paid to Helen Keller, he tried his best to instruct Keller on the rules of sleigh riding. It was preposterous to make a dumb, deaf, and blind lady learn how to ride a sleigh. The funny and the solemn were even signs of his encounter with Helen Keller. As he entered her house, she “touched his mouth, uttering strange sounds” (Hamid, 2004, p:37). George’s intention was to share the merriment of entertainment with her. The jovial moments were dominating as “Helen steered, then rolled on her back. Then she laughed, a laugh of purejoy” (Hamid, 2004, p:37). Joviality infiltrated Keller’s heart and lessened her sorrowful loneliness. George, a great acrobatic tumbler and somersault performer, managed to displace the entertainment show from its official settings in circuses, fairs, hippodromes, and theatres to the nearby district and plain hills. Since he brought Keller from the macabre of her *demi-monde* to the beauty of nature, where she regained her faculty as a rider and surmounted her lethargy, George was able to retrieve Keller from the fringes of solitude to the center of sociability. An entertaining exercise that culminated in a happy ending when Helen “reached George’s moustache, then pulled him to the friendliest hug I have ever seen” (Hamid, 2004, p. 37). Such a hug was reminiscent of the friendship that germinated between an Oriental acrobat and a white female, imprisoned in the sentinel of her physical retardation.

If George Hamid forged a discourse of affection with his Western neighbors, a discourse which cultivated cultural reciprocity, his attitudes towards Lebanese Muslims, or Mohammedans, as he called them, besmirched the long-standing fame he gained. He recalled the years he spent witnessing the frictions between different religious factions in Lebanon. With an acrimonious tone, he remembered with relish the quarrel with a Mohamadan girl:

> She sprawled on the ground, groaning and holding her stomach. I jumped on her. I grabbed nearby stones by the handful and piled them on top of her. I covered everything but her face. Throwing weeds over her face….my father actually called them neighbors (if Joseph, father of George, had possessed plaguing powers, there would be no Mohammedans left in the world)” (Hamid, 2004, p:37).

With his apparent resentment towards the Mohammedan girl, George not only stained the image of tolerance, which held sway between Muslims and Christians, but also showed his blatant bigotry towards Mohammedans. An acrimony exacerbated by an overt call for Mohammedans’ decimation. Such a hostile mindset was fostered by his father, Joseph. In addition to the affectionate kinship he developed with Westerners during his sojourn, he was unable to break free of the reminiscences, as they swarmed back into his mind, of the friction with Muslims while he was in Lebanon.

Seeing that George Hamid’s business fame had gained wide currency in Western circles, his return to Lebanon, along with his wife, Bess, was both a moment of triumphalism, recognition, and pride and a time of self-Orientalization that reinforced his image from that vantage point. The

fixed normative of human deportation as dummies in theculture of the human zoo was demystified by the presence of Oriental acrobats as cultural agents and successful managers of show business. In that era of the nineteenth century, when George Hamid made first steps in a world of entertainment, "Commercial ethnological exhibitions were managed by private entrepreneurs, who very often acted as de facto owners of the individuals they exhibited" (Sanchez, 2013, p: 1). George Hamid's wide acumen in acrobaticsfunctioned as a reversing power against those ethnological enslavement of the exhibited humans. Once he returned to his hometown, the whole country was mobilized due to the great fame he had gained and the wide influence he had on Western spectators' taste.

Coming back to Lebanon, a country where George Hamid was bestowed the instincts of tumbling, was a jovial moment of coronation. As he arrived, the president of Lebanon organized a feast and warmly addressed George, "We of Lebanon are proud of you…As a symbol of our esteem, we present you with the Lebanese Cross, our highest award" (Hamid, 2014, p 216). With such glowing words from the highest authority of Lebanon, one could infer the role played by George Hamid not as a mere exhibitionist who, toput it in the jargon of Linda Jacobs, "played the Orientalist card" but as a successful manager and cultural mediator. That culture of recognition, which acknowledged George's contribution to advancing the art of acrobatics, served as a counterforce to clichés about Oriental acrobats. Reminiscent of the caricaturized portrayal of Arab performers as having" had some joy under their Eastern flat" (Lancefield, 2004, p 251) and " now they are passé, in the way, everyone is just an acrobat" (Lancefield, 2004, p 251). The common racial discourse viewed Oriental performers as representing atavism and backwardness. In the case of George Hamid, he gained his entrepreneurial leadership and undermined the status quo of Arab performers as mere exotic wanderers.

George Hamid's leading role in giving Arab performers credibility in Western theatrical settings was noticeable. However, features of Self-Orientalization were also apparent in his overt declarations upon returning to Lebanon. Being a naturalized American citizen, George Hamid expressed his grandeur over his Lebanese peers and considered his naturalization as a virtue that rescued him from the labyrinth of Lebanon:

> For a moment, I stood speechless because of my emotion and because of I had lost most of my Arabic. Bess tugged at my coattails…and whispered in my ear "thank heavens, they do not understand English. You would talk for an hour". "George" Shaheen philosophized "we had to become Americans to see the Middle East" (Hamid, 2014, p: 217).

George Hamid's sojourn in the United States changed his view towards his native land. As discussed previously, George Hamid's quest was to prove excellence not as an Arab persona but as a Lebanese tumbler and somersault performer. In many incidents, he categorically contested being identified as an Arab. He clung to his Lebanese origin. Self-Orientalization found its discernible manifestation when he sided with Bess, his wife, in considering English as a white elitist lingua. Being raised in Lebanon, where Arabic was widely spoken, George Hamid must have delivered his speech in Arabic. As a vogue of superiority, George Hamid gave free rein to his English to belittle his Lebanese fellows, whom he knew would not decipher his message. American citizenship was also deployed as a tool for self-Orientalization. Becoming American, embedded in Shaheen's words, was a prerogative to freely travel and majestically land in any country you want. At the back of that powerful expression lay traces of cynicism that hampered Arabs' ability to travel in the Middle East.

A parallel occidentalist narrative of fact that contributed to the iteration of an alternative discourse of difference found its plain articulation in Ameen Abouhamad's journey. Ameen Abouhamad or Abou Hamid, George Hamid's uncle, came to the United States as a young acrobat and equilibrist. While there was no reference to the exact date of his inception as an acrobat in American circuses, one could infer that his settlement was long before 1905, the time George Hamid joined his acrobatic crew in America. Known as a tough acrobatic tutor and trainer, as mostly stated by George Hamid in his diaries, Ameen Abou Hamid was portrayed as:

> He is a dark and swarthy, with a fierce, upward-curved mustache. In his eyes sleeps the mystery of ages and the unfathomable grandeur ofthe East, the understandable, the mystic knowledge of psychic phenomena. He is an enigma, an exotic product of that land of quaint

> pictures and romantic stories-Arabia (The Vancouver Sun, BritishColumbia, Canada, 1913, p: 7)

The physical traits, as rhetorically featuring the Orientalist charge of exoticism and mysticism, were enough premises to promulgate the image of the Oriental Other. Such an image was commensurate with the Orientalist fetishes of the Orientals' enigma and preposterousness. Drawing on the general assumptions and nasty postulations that the Orient was conceived as a land of romance, Abou Hamid incarnated traits of exoticism and peculiarity.

To curb that ethos of Western superiority and Orientalist propensity, Abou Hamid made use of his Oriental persona or "played Eastern", to put it in the jargon of Linda Jacobs. Throughout his acrobatic voyage, Ameen incessantly resisted tropes of othering. As reported by his nephew, George Hamid, Abou Hamid tried his best to show the power of his Oriental acrobats. In one of his confessions, when George Hamid first sailed to America, Abou Hamid fiercely asked:

> "Well" he shouted impatiently, as his jaws propelled the ends of his mustaches up and down. "Answer me –somebody!" These are your new nephews, Uncle," Haj whimpered…. "Humph" Ameen grunted. "They look like little girls to me" …. Ameen ignored me. He jerked at Shaheen's lace collar "never have I seen such clothes as these," he grumbled". (Hamid, 2004, p 41)

With his cynical tone and mocking expressions, Ameen Abou Hamid wanted to plainly confirm Oriental superiority in terms of acrobatics. Since acrobatic competitions and performances served as common ground for rivalries between Arab and Western acrobats, the exigencies of the consumerist market in show business urged Ameen Abou Hamid to micromanage the infinitesimal details of his acrobatic crew. Ranging from costumes to whirling techniques, Ameen Abou Hamid wanted to firmly contest Western performers and turn the exotic Oriental trait into a resisting power that could beguile Western spectators.

Abou Hamid was described by his nephew, George Hamid, as a man of stern temper and unyielding charisma who wanted to confirm his excellence in acrobatics. As tension between Ameen and his troupe reached its peak, the struggle was over the assertion of the Arab acrobats' fame. Through the mouth of George Hamid, Ameen Abou Hamid was a tough manager, as he treated his acrobats poorly. One day, when Ameen Abou Hamid was preparing for a future performance, he poured his anger on his boys, as he called them, "we are booked, right now, for five weeks. No one would be fool enough to walk out p, five weeks' booking. My reputation would be ruined". (Hamid, 2004, p 41)

Ameen Abou Hamid's steadfast attitude towards his acrobats was driven by his incessant quest to value the position of Arab acrobats in Western circuses. Since the operating discourse capitalized on Arab athletes as "desert Arabs in the Ottoman Empire and French North Africa" (Nance, 2009, p. 115), Ameen Abou Hamid demystified those clichés, thereby curbing any tendency to besmirch the reputations of Arab exhibitionists. Despite his rigid and reticent temperament, he was able to prove the talents of Arab performers.

Ameen Abou Hamid's circuit in Western circuses was not only dedicated to athletic performances and show business, but also served as a rich cultural facade of his personal life. His cultural encounter with the unfamiliar Western world contoured his view of Western Christians. Being a true Mohammedan, in contrast to his nephew, George Hamid, Abou Hamid was "true to his religion, even though he is far away from the seat of its power" (The Vancouver Sun, British Columbia, Canada, 1913, p: 7). Though Ameen established alliances and affectionate kinships with his acrobatic peers and Western performers, his views of Christians were loadedwith bigotry and animosity. Since the discourse fashioned by Arab acrobats was not monolithic and homogeneous in its essence, representation of the Western Other was also construed through the narcissistic dichotomy of Muslims vs Infidels. Such bifurcation was made clear by Ameen's hostile attitudes:

> In this he is far superior to many of the Christians who disregard their religion when they have left behind the restrictions of observing friends. Ameen Abou Hamid scorns the Christians for this very thingand declares that no Mohammedan would be guilty of such

sacrilege. (The Vancouver Sun, BritishColumbia, Canada, 1913, p: 7).

Similar to the antipathetic discourse crafted by some Arab travellers who considered the land of Westerners as a space of apparent profanity, Abou Hamid gave free rein to his vituperations and considered Christians as carefree and disobedient to religious maxims. The juxtaposition of Islam and Christianity as two warring religions was even a clashing thesis that sealed off the possibility of religious and cultural crossover.

3.George Jabour, Zriek and Saad Dahduh: Orientality Re-wrought and Agency Regained

Along the same trajectory of cultural encounters with Western modernity, George Jabour wrote his history as a manager of acrobats, challenging Western exclusionary accounts. Jabour was a naturalized American citizen who, beyond the xenophobic stances, "became attached to this country and expected to remain here," *The Salt Lake Tribune* (Salt Lake City, Utah).p: 9. He debunked the adhominem allegation of Bernard Lewis, stipulating that "In general, Arabs, even the most educated, knew only Arabic" (Lewis, 1982, p: 72). Contrarily, Jabour, as infused with earnestness to learn about the Western Other, "has traveled over three fourths of the globe and has acquired eight languages" *The Salt Lake Tribune* (Salt Lake City, Utah).p: 9.

As the World Columbian Exposition (1893) was an aural window and artistic venue in which Eastern artifacts were exhibited and entertainment art displayed, the normative fact was that Western recruiters and managers held such an overriding role. Jabour was a fierce resistance to all forms of Western discrimination. In one of his shows with the Elks' circus at Sioux City, Jabour's caravan of acrobats was severely criticized for the promotion of degenerating acts, which offended the Western public. There were many religious controversies over the commensurability of Oriental practices with Western ethical and religious standards. The caravans of Oriental acrobats were often considered as whirling performers who spread immorality. Jabour was heavily criticized by Bishop Carrigan at the Epiphany Cathedral, who advised people, " to stay away from Jabour, as he said, it was not fit for respectable people to attend." *Sioux City Journal* (Sioux City, Iowa). P.5. The main purport of Western religious authorities was to consider Oriental acrobatic performers as unethical whirlers who smudged the moral standards of Western audiences.

Jabour wrote his subject position not as an Oriental instigator of immoral conduct, but as a respectable manager, concerned with the honor and reputation of his Eastern peers. He declared that "I have been in the show business since the World's fair". His long-standing presence in American show business has ever illustrated "a good show and a clean show," *Sioux City Journal* (Sioux City, Iowa). he presented before Western audiences. Similar to the stereotypical images constructed with reference to Oriental belly dancing, Jabour's acts and performances were deemed as "salacious and immoral" (Nance, 2009, p. 181). However, Jabour fulminated against the constructed myth, stressing that he had a reputation to sustain. Definitely, he addressed his threatening speech to the highest religious authorities once he extended his invitation to the Bishop to closely see his acts. Jabour went so far as to state, "I want him to bring as many priests with him as he may desire to bring" (Tue, Sep 23, 1902). *Sioux City Journal* (Sioux City, Iowa). Endowed with an intrinsic satisfaction that none of the priests would be able to detect "an objectionable feature" (Tue, Sep 23, 1902). *In the Sioux City Journal (Sioux City, Iowa) coverage of his performances, Jabour functioned as a catalyst of stereotypes, as* he neutralized American Bishops' biased views.

In fine, at a time of Western dominance in the art of entertainment, due partiallyto the increasing numbers of Western recruiters and managers of acrobats, Oriental recruiters were seen as incapable of setting up a show business on their own. A permanent cliché whichwas validated by the recurrent forms of ethical discursive strategies under the alibi of moralities, which, according to Western religious authorities, were on the verge of degeneration. Jabour, as a zealous Oriental manager, stultified the status quo and reclaimed his agency amid Western managers' wiles.

The story of Elias Zreik was another thrilling account of a legendary personality who/reconstructed the image of the Oriental Other. Zreik's arrival in the United States of America was conditioned by the traumatic experience he witnessed as a Lebanese under the Ottoman regime. He gave free rein to his heroic adventures when he bore out that "we lost just one man, how many

they lost I can not tell, but it was many-two, three hundred, maybe more" (The World: Sunday, October 16, 1898). In his defiant strategy to curb Ottomans, mostly referred to as Mohammadans, Zreik found refuge in American circuses asan outlet from the Mohammadans' hardship. As was the case with many Syrians who fled the atrocities of the Turkish war, Elias Zreik settled in New York and practiced many professions, including as a restaurant manager, merchant, and acrobat with Buffalo Bill's Wild West.

In his genuine Eastern attire that "shows him sitting in a chair with a rifle propped by his side, wearing a Greek-style beret, and sporting a very large bushy moustache"(Jacobs, 2014, p. 2), Zreik Elias was the mouthpiece of a subjugated community. Amid the despotic Ottoman Empire, Elias Zreik immigrated to the United States, along with a considerable number of Syrians, seeking naturalization. His fierce castigation of what he called Turks stemmed from his condemnation of all Mohammadans as a threatening religious sect. He once declared, "Well, I tell my countrymen we will all become American citizens. Then no Pasha can harm us" (The World: Sunday, October 16, 1898). The hostile discourse fashioned by Zreik grew out of the natural conditions that characterized a large mobility of Syrians and Lebanese towards the United States of America.

Skimpy references were made to his acrobatic expertise in Buffalo Bills Wild West, where he was known as a great tumbler. The recording archives of Buffalo Bills Wild West overlooked the existence of Arabs since "there has been very little writing about the Arab performers in the show, particularly as the historical records for the non-Native American performers are sparse" (Haque, 2018, p. 11). Elias Zreik's contribution to the rise of show business was significant enough in the sense that he was considered a "strong man" in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. He was depicted as having almost seven feet tall and bore the appellation of "Big Mike" by some of the other Syrians of the Colony(Jacobs, 2015, p. 249).

Figure 1: A Portrait of Zreik in an oval frame shows him sitting in a chair with a rifle propped by his side.

Syrian entertainers in Metropolitan circuses were even active agents, prowess exhibitors and novelties' creators. That mobility of acrobatic performers as human objects was best conceived by White entrepreneurs as a "belief in modern (white) cosmopolitans and primitive (non-white) natives as human categories that could be juxtaposed for amusement on or off stage" (Lancefield, 2004, p. 252). Then, the amusing and entertaining façade of business shows split the world into two asymmetrical poles. That polarization brought about ethnic and colour-based classification. Arabs were among the minorities that served as showcases and therefore functioned as essentialized identities, leading lives a Bedouins and dervishes. Alberto Sandoval Sanches (Sandoval, 1999, p. 16). names this rhetoric "the Burden of representation"[ix].

An alternative account to that rhetoric of essentialization and aestheticization of the human shows could be best illustrated in the marvelous account of Saad Dahduh, a well-known acrobatic figure (see Figure 1). At the age of nineteen, Saad Dahduh, along with Ameen Abou Hamad, a Lebanese acrobat mentioned earlier, ventured to American circuses and established his proper show business as a great tumbler and understander. Mostly referred to as the "with eight Bedouins" (1905-1906). *The New York Billboard.* p: 6. Dahduh used to be "a most remarkable man. Small,weighing145lbs, he holds the entire company, weighing at least 1,500 lbs, upon his shoulders with ease, exhibiting no appearance whatever of fatigue" (1905-1906).*The New York Billboard.* p: 6. Besides his physical sturdiness, Dahduh managed to gain fame and exclusivity all over the American fairs and circuses.

In one of his letters addressed to some American managers, Saad Dahduh affirmed his significant influence on Western spectators' taste. He confessed:

> I received your welcome letter some days ago and am very glad to hear from you. Would have answered sooner, but have been very busy rehearsing some new tricks and could hardly find time to write. I should have written you regarding our success in the Eastern houses, where we made a terrific hit and received some flattering press notices. (July 28, 1900). *The Billboard*.

At a time when Eastern performers and Bedouin Arabs intervened in Western circuses as an embodiment of stereotypes akin to the "famed Arabian horsemen and the often-nomadic lives of desert Arabs in the Ottoman Empire and French North Africa" (Nance, 2009, p. 115). Dahduh reversed those stereotypical images and proved his talent. His success in "Eastern houses" and subsequent public recognition, documented in American press coverage, demonstrated his active participation as an Oriental figure and a resisting voice. Usually dubbed as the Bedouin with "eight Arabs", therein embedded the nasty generalization as a leitmotif or standard rhetoric of cultural distanciation, Dahduh recast that essentialist logic and asserted his conspicuous influence on the American show business.

In a attempt to spotlight the individuation of his acrobatic crew, beyond the confines of human clustering and essentializing, Dahduh declared that his troupe was not only an acrobatic group of eight Arabs, but comprised dexterous tumblers and understanders. The troupe comprised Prince Muly Ali, a member of the Toozoonin troupe, Simon Bonomor, Hadj Hassan, Hadj Abbarak, Petz Tagula, Mohamed Aguram, and Ben Tagula (Sat, May 27,1905). *The Salina Evening Journal* (Salina, Kansas). All those great performers steadfastly challenged the status quo of ethnic exhibitions as often "managed by private entrepreneurs, who very often acted as de facto owners of the individuals they exhibited" (Sanches, 2012, p:4). Well trained, since childhood, Dahduh's acrobatic peers had had inspiring stories to recount which could hold the "interested listeners in eager attention by an hour" (Sat, May 27,1905). *The Salina Evening Journal* (Salina, Kansas).

If the repertoire of images that Orientalists managed to constellate was that "Arabian desert is thus considered to be a locale about which one can make statements regarding the past" (Said, 1978, p. 235). Saad Dahduh turned his belongings into a weapon of power that obfuscated the Orientalist discursiveness. In one of his interviews, he defiantly asserted that he was raised in the great Sahara Desert until he was a young man. He says his strength stems from being raised on camel milk until he was twelve, and from his role as a messenger who ran the mail across the desert, which laid the foundation for his present muscular development. (Sat, May 27,1905). *The Salina Evening Journal* (Salina, Kansas).

The barren land of the Arabian Desert, with which the aporetic discourse of Orientalism was reminiscent of unproductiveness, void and hollowness. Dahduh, imbued with his acrobatic Oriental expertise, derived his skill and physical robustness from the desert environment in which he grew up. The infertile land that, according to the mainstream version of Orientalists' career, germinated chaos and atavism was deployed by Dahduh as an empowering tool to reverse those clichés. The milk of desert camels and the unlimited horizon of the Arabian Sahara were even impetuses and incentives that formulated Dahduh's identity as a brilliant personality, as mentioned in Figure 2.

Figure

2: Saad Dahduh troupe of Acrobats bearing their Eastern uniform

Conclusion

In fine, the main emphasis of this article has been on the emergence of an alternative discourse of difference in Arab acrobats' accounts from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Being conscious of the reversal of Western Orientalist stereotypes, I have claimed that Syrian and Lebanese acrobats reconsidered Orientality beyond the precincts of exoticism and barbarism. The analysis of these Arab acrobats' accounts, as valuable documents, is extremely important for narrating their standpoints and re-locating their agency as active participants. Most of these exhibitionists are put in the shadows and remain undocumented. Their analysis will by no means enrich, redefine and reorient the relations between the East and the West. They are extremely prodigious at laying the groundwork for a parallel peripheral account to thrive and flourish. The main concern is to foreground "micro-narratives" of Syrian and Lebanese acrobats as parallel itineraries which unsettle the schismatic thought of orientalist discourse.

Despite the ethnic agglomeration that tended to cluster Orientals as mere exotic exhibitionists at Columbian fairs, Arab acrobats and jugglers were dissenting voices that reversed the spotlight downwards and created a topsy-turvy in Western rhetoric of representation. The Columbian exposition (1893), as nurtured by American curiosity to know the Oriental Other and to promulgate its image as a leading capitalist power, Arabs, Arab acrobats, and jugglers, differently, wrought their subjectivities through cultural encounters with American visitors and the display of acrobatic exclusivity. Many references to Arabs in Midway Plaisance portrayed them as showcases of diverse physical types. However, they managed to turn the tropes of subordination and racialization to defiant strategies of resistance.

To broadly reiterate the main underpinnings and the unraveled layers of this study, the analysis of Occidentalist micro-narratives forges alternative itineraries of Arab performers as active interlocutors and agile jugglers who contributed to the rise of American show business. This helps in filling the lacunas of Western historiography and reclaiming the agency Arab performers. Within a broader scope of Arab human Atlantic, these micro-narratives internationalize the existence of Arabs not as fringe dwellers who regained the center as immigrants but rather as dexterous performers who cress crossed different cultural venues to articulate their agency. Their long-standing existence inscribed their giant contribution to the writing of American history.

Notes

[i] The term Syrian as recurrently used in the nineteenth century meant not only the territorial circumvention of what is now referred to as "Syria", but it included Lebanon and a large part of the Levant. As plainly shown by Philip M. kayal and Joseph M. Kayal in their book *The Syrian-Lebanese in America, A Studyin Religion and Assimilation* (1975), Syria encompassed the territorial area extending from Syria until the ArabicPeninsula, except Egypt. It was until 1919, when the First World War marked its end that the disintegration of many Arabic countries brought about a new independent territory under the appellation of "Syria".

[ii] The human zoo as concept cherished a wide notoriety and an unparalleled circulation in the key core discussions among circus theorists and proponents of the exhibition industry. Many waves of Africans, boysand girls, men and women, were deported as human commodities and bodies to satiate Western curiosities by their exotic attire. The discourse of

domestication, as it capitalizes on humans species as docile recipients, throveduring the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the "the United States of America was the live presence of individuals who were considered primitive" (Gomez, 2013, p: 1). it is crystal clear that the human zoo as a theoretical concept forged to cope with the sway of show business in the United States of America recurrently carries under its sleeves the same tropes of colonial frenzied discourse. It looks at humans as atavistic and exoticbeings capable of triggering entertainment's seekers. As such, natives were subject to ethnographers' gazes and fetishized investigations.

[iii] The Ottoman regimental control of Syria, Lebanon and Egypt restricted the flow of entertainers' migrants, namely to the United States, as show business performers in the mid-nineteenth century. Adel Linda Younis (1966) who statistically recorded the number of Syrian, Egyptian and Lebanese immigrants who suppliedthe context of American markets, either as exhibitionists or tradesmen. Including Christians and Muslims, the number of immigrants to Western countries was insignificant. Even "few Muslims few Moslems had attempted to leave, but as yet restrictions imposed on them by the Ottoman regime held back emigration until a later date" (Adele, 1966, p: 167).

[iv] Junior Hamid, George Hamid's son, wrote an extended version of his life and acrobatic experience in Western circuses and fairs. His book *The Acrobat: A Showman's Topsy-Turvy from Buffalo Bill to the Beatles* (2004) is mostly based on the itinerary of George Hamid as full of tribulations, twists and marvelous souvenirs.

[v] The term understander plainly refers to the acrobatic performer who stands at the middle of pyramid building. He is the one who holds all other acrobats on his shoulders. He has to maintain a firm balance and prevent the pyramid from shakiness and any potential fall. The understander has to be physically sturdy. George Hamid, as infused with zest and exuberance to learn the basics of acrobatics, worked under the management of his uncle Ameen Abouhamad who used to be a well-known understander.

[vi] Buffalo Bill, known also as William Frederick Cody, was a renowned American showman and theatrical performer. He was born at Le Claire, Lowa territory, United States of America. At the age of 23, he started performing in circuses and featuring cowboy-based exhibitions. For more information on his professional career, consult the archival journal *Morning Democrat Centennial*, the eleventh of October, 1951 (Ten Daily Sections).

[vii] Hadj Cheriff ben Mohomet, as recurrently referred to in archival newspapers, was introduced to circus art by Barnum and Bailey with whom he performed many years. He was a naturalized American and established his fame through quick spinning and tumbling techniques In 1898, and during his performance in Denmark, he got enthralled by a "beautiful Danish lady that he won her hand in marriage" (Andreassen, 2015, p: 69). Hadj Cheriff's marvelous experience has already been discussed in a section devoted to Moroccan acrobats.

[viii] Fatima or La Belle Fatima, as mostly referred to, was an Egyptian dancer, born in Cairo, who performed in various circuses and fairs. She was also nicknamed the Couchee Couchee dancer. She married Abdo Abdelnour, a Syrian manager. She was also married to Hadj Tahar, a Moroccan acrobat. She finally betrothed George Jabbour, a Syrian manager. Fatima died in Italy, Venice.

[ix] The burden of representation as better elucidated by Alberto Sandoval Sanches, namely in his book *José, Can You See?: Latinos on and Off Broadway* (1999), as a form of vertical imposition that dictates a monolithic discourse of sameness. This theory considers all minorities and ethnic groups as identical and therefore productive of the same discourse. Individual distinctiveness dissolves and racial belonging spawns one sole discourse. Sanchez puts clearly "the burden of representation causes major generalizations that do not apply to each particular experience of Latinos/as" (Sandoval, 1999, p: 16).

References

Acrobat started at top, makes good at bottom. (1958, April 18). *The Times-Tribune* (Scranton, PA), p. 2.

A reader of the Koran at the Pantages. (1913, September 26). *Vancouver Sun* (Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada), p. 7.

Hamid, G. A. (2004). *Circus, as told to his son, George A. Hamid, Jr.* New York, NY.

Haque, D. (2018). Arab performers in Buffalo Bill's Wild West. *Points West Magazine*.

Jacobs, L. (2014). Playing East: Arabs perform in nineteenth-century America. *Mashriq & Mahjar, 2*(2), 79–110.

Jacobs, L. K. (2015). *Strangers in the West: The Syrian colony of New York City, 1880–1900*. Kalimah Press.

Khan, S. U., et al. (2019). Construction of diasporic female identities in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*. *International Review of Literary Studies, 1*(1), 12–24.

Lancefield, R. C. (2004). *Hearing orientality in (white) America, 1900–1930*.

Lewis, B. (1982). *The Muslim discovery of Europe*. W. W. Norton & Company.

Nance, S. (2009). *How the Arabian Nights inspired the American dream, 1790–1935*. University of North Carolina Press.

New York Syrian who killed 200 Turks to save his family from massacre. (1898, October 16). *The World*.

Praises other performers. (1900, July 28). *The Billboard*.

Recent criticism of show. (1902, September 23). *Sioux City Journal* (Sioux City, IA), p. 5.

Sánchez Gómez, L. Á. (2013). Human zoos or ethnic shows? Essence and contingency in living ethnological exhibitions. *Culture & History Digital Journal, 2*(2), 1–25.

Syrian boy acrobat got start at 25-cent wage. (1958, August 6). *Valley Morning Star* (Harlingen, TX), p. 4.

The eight Bedouin Arabs: Something about the Arab who entertained Salina. (1905, May 27). *The Salina Evening Journal* (Salina, KS), p. 3.

Veterans of the circus. (1901, September 27). *The Salt Lake Tribune* (Salt Lake City, UT), p. 9.