

Orientalist Elements In Voltaire's Zaire

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ABSTRACT

The article explores the Orientalist themes in Voltaire's celebrated French tragedy, *The Tragedy of Zaire* (or *Zaïre*) (1732), examining how the work reflects eighteenth-century Western perceptions of the East. Set in an exoticized version of the Orient, the play constructs and perpetuates cultural stereotypes, fabricating illusions that served to justify European claims of superiority. Central to the analysis is the characterization of Orosmane, the Muslim Sultan, whose depiction is steeped in Orientalist motifs such as despotism, sexual intrigue, and religious fanaticism. His fierce anger toward Zaire, a Christian woman, captures the thematic tensions that arise from the clash of distinct cultural and religious identities. This confrontation is emblematic of the broader narrative framework that rigidly divides the world into an advanced West and a backward East. Employing Edward Said's concept of *Orientalism* (1978) as a critical lens, the article contends that Voltaire's dramatization of Eastern societies not only exoticizes these cultures but also systematically misrepresents them as morally depraved and inferior. The article situates *Zaïre* within the framework of colonial discourse and analyzes how Western depictions of the East functioned to legitimize colonial power. The play's dramatic tensions, marked by jealousy, violence, and religious conflict, reflect the prevailing European discourse that has historically contributed to widespread cultural misunderstandings and prejudices. Moreover, the analysis explores the play's reception and enduring impact on Western perceptions of the Orient, challenging the ethical implications of such reductive representations. While the play *Zaïre* embodies typical Orientalist portrayals of the East, it also contains elements that critique European religious intolerance using the 'Orient' as a backdrop to highlight the universal nature of human suffering. By situating the play within the context of Enlightenment thought, the essay argues that Voltaire uses the East as a lens through which to critique European orthodoxy and the consequences of Eurocentric assumptions. Ultimately, *Zaïre* serves as a complex exploration of Eastern-Western tensions and the enduring legacy of colonialist ideologies.

Keywords: *Orientalism, Voltaire, Zaire, Exotism, Binary Division*

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Voltaire'in *Zaire*'sinde Oryantalist Unsurlar

ÖZ

Makale, Voltaire'in ünlü Fransız trajedisi *Zaire* (veya *Zaire*) *Trajedisi*'ndeki (1732) Oryantalist temaları ve eserin on sekizinci yüzyıl Batı'sının Doğu algılarını nasıl yansıttığını inceliyor. Oryantalle edilmiş bir Doğu versiyonunda geçen oyun, kültürel klişeler inşa ediyor ve sürdürüyor, Avrupalıların üstünlük iddialarını haklı çıkarmaya yarayan yanılsamalar üretiyor. Analizin merkezinde, despotizm, cinsel entrika ve dini fanatizm gibi Oryantalist motiflerle dolu tasviri olan Müslüman Sultan Orosmane'nin karakterizasyonu yer alıyor. Hristiyan bir kadın olan *Zaire*'ye duyduğu şiddetli öfke, farklı kültürel ve dini kimliklerin çatışmasından kaynaklanan tematik gerilimleri yakalıyor. Bu yüzleşme, dünyayı katı bir şekilde gelişmiş bir Batı ve geri kalmış bir Doğu olarak bölen daha geniş anlatı çerçevesinin simgesidir. Makale, Edward Said'in *Oryantalizm* (1978) kavramını eleştirel bir mercekle kullanarak, Voltaire'in Doğu toplumlarını dramatize etmesinin bu kültürleri sadece egzotikleştirmekle kalmayıp aynı zamanda onları sistematik olarak ahlaki açıdan yozlaşmış ve aşağı olarak yanlış tanıttığını ileri sürmektedir. Makale, *Zaire*'yi sömürgeci söylem çerçevesine yerleştirmekte ve Batı'nın Doğu tasvirlerinin sömürgeci gücü meşrulaştırmak için nasıl işlev gördüğünü analiz etmektedir. Oyunun kıskançlık, şiddet ve dini çatışmalarla işaretlenen dramatik gerilimleri, tarihsel olarak yaygın kültürel yanlış anlamalara ve önyargılara katkıda bulunan hakim Avrupa söylemini yansıtmaktadır. Dahası, analiz oyunun Batı'nın Doğu algıları üzerindeki alımını ve kalıcı etkisini araştırarak bu tür indirgeyici temsillerin etik sonuçlarına meydan okumaktadır. *Zaire* oyunu, Doğu'nun tipik Oryantalist tasvirlerini bünyesinde barındırırken, aynı zamanda insan acısının evrensel doğasını vurgulamak için 'Doğu'yu fon olarak kullanarak Avrupa'nın dinsel hoşgörüsüzlüğünü eleştiren unsurlar da içeriyor. Oyunu Aydınlanma düşüncesi bağlamına yerleştirerek, makale Voltaire'in Doğu'yu Avrupa ortodoksluğunu ve Avrupamerkezci varsayımların sonuçlarını eleştirmek için bir mercekle kullandığını savunuyor. Sonuç olarak, *Zaire* Doğu-Batı gerginliklerinin ve sömürgeci ideolojilerin kalıcı mirasının karmaşık bir incelemesi olarak hizmet ediyor.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Oryantalizm, Voltaire, Zaire, Egzotizm, İkili Bölünme*

INTRODUCTION

The five-act play *Zaïre* (1732) by the eminent French author François-Marie Arouet, known as Voltaire, exemplifies the Orientalist tendencies in eighteenth-century French literature. The drama, which takes place in a made-up "East," maintains Western stereotypes of the Orient while also telling a story of love, betrayal, and envy through its narrative. Voltaire's *Zaïre* is best comprehended within the expansive framework of the Enlightenment and his scathing examination of religious and cultural institutions, especially concerning emerging Orientalist concepts. Similar to several European intellectuals of his era, Voltaire interacted with the East as both an object of wonder and a reflective medium for critiquing European culture. The play embodies specific Orientalist motifs, depicting the Ottoman realm as foreign, fervent, and ruled by autocratic authority. Instead than merely maintaining a binary dichotomy between East and West, *Zaïre* employs this setting to examine the perils of extremism and religious intolerance issues that were important to European institutions. Voltaire's portrayal of Islam and the Ottoman court serves not just as a juxtaposition to Christianity but also as a means to reveal the inconsistencies of European religious and moral authority. By contextualizing *Zaïre* within Enlightenment philosophy and the evolving discourse of Orientalism, the article attains a more profound comprehension of Voltaire's approach to cultural otherness while concurrently promoting his critique of orthodoxy and irrationality.

In addition to Voltaire's *Zaïre*, Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*, and Goldsmith's *The Citizen of the World* all address eighteenth-century Orientalist subjects, albeit in unique manners. *Zaïre* offers a dramatic depiction of religious and cultural conflict, focusing on the tragic romance between a Christian Frenchwoman and a Muslim ruler. This differs from *Persian Letters*, which employs the oral format to critique European conventions via the insights of Persian travelers, subtly reversing the conventional Orientalist perspective. *The Citizen of the World* critiques British society through the lens of a Chinese guest, employing irony to contest both European and non-European prejudices. *Zaïre* portrays the East-West interaction through individual sorrow, but Montesquieu and Goldsmith employ the outsider's viewpoint to emphasize the fabricated essence of cultural identity. Collectively, these works illustrate the complexity of eighteenth-century Orientalism, containing both romanticized portrayals of the East and analytical critiques of Eastern culture.

Edward Said identifies this inclination in Western literature to depict the East as an exotic and inferior "other" in contrast to the rational, superior West in his seminal work, *Orientalism* (1978, p2). The article references Edward Said's *Orientalism*, as it is a work in postcolonial studies, analyzing how Western discourse fabricated the East to legitimize colonialism. Published in 1978, *Orientalism* contends that Western depictions of the East were not impartial but functioned as instruments of colonial authority. Said, utilizing Michel Foucault's discourse theory and Antonio Gramsci's hegemony notion, asserted that Orientalist academia established a framework that portrayed the West as superior and the East as passive, alien, and

regressive. Western depictions of the East in literature, art, and academia have historically been used as instruments of colonial control, according to Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978, p2). He argues that, in contrast to a logical, civilized West, "Orientalist" language portrays the East as irrational, foreign, submissive, and inferior (p.3). Said contends that this paradigm, which shaped colonial policies and upheld Western domination, was not only scholarly but also intensely political. Orientalist representations frequently presented Eastern societies as immobile and unalterable, unable to modernize or govern themselves without assistance from the West. These portrayals were not innocent; they framed colonialism as a mission of civilization, which served to legitimize it. For example, Eastern depictions of tyranny, sensuality, and mysticism served to maintain a binary worldview in which the West represented reason and development. Even though Said's writings generated a lot of discussion and some academics criticized his methodology, Orientalism is still essential to comprehending the ways in which power and knowledge interact in colonial settings. The core idea is still the same: the West's 'knowledge' of the East has never been neutral. Later theorists like Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak have broadened the conversation by looking at hybridity and subaltern voices. Engaging with its counterarguments enriches the discussion on colonial discourse, historical inquiry, and cultural representation.

Voltaire's *Zaire* depicts the East with both curiosity and distortion, highlighting cultural and religious contrasts. While the play reinforces certain stereotypes—portraying the East as a land of passion, violence, and moral ambiguity—it also serves as a critique of European society. The relationship between Christian slave Zaire and Muslim sultan Orosmane reflects the dangers of rigid dogma and unchecked emotion, themes that resonate beyond the Eastern setting. Orosmane's jealousy, while fitting the Orientalist trope of the irrational despot, also mirrors European anxieties about power and love. His inability to reconcile love with cultural identity critiques not just Eastern "barbarism" but the universal consequences of intolerance and fanaticism. In addition, the play frames the story in terms of Christian superiority. Islam is depicted as authoritarian and misguided, while Zaire's faith is presented as a source of virtue and moral clarity. As Edward Said argues, such binary distinctions reinforce a hierarchical perception of East and West, marginalizing the former and portraying it as dangerous (1978, p.40). However, Voltaire's critique is not solely directed at the East; his portrayal of religious dogmatism and power struggles also reflects concerns within European society. By highlighting the destructive consequences of intolerance—whether in Orosmane's jealousy or Zaire's tragic fate—Voltaire invites reflection on the rigid structures that define both Eastern and Western worlds. By examining themes of gender, religion, and cultural conflict, the article highlights how Voltaire's depiction sustains the divisions central to Orientalism while also offering a critique of European attitudes toward faith, power, and identity.

Orientalist Themes in Voltaire's Zaire

The Tragedy of Zaire is a five-act play in verse penned by the French philosopher and writer Voltaire in the eighteenth century. *Zaire* was first translated into

English by Aaron Hil as *Zara: A Tragedy*. The play is set in Muslim-ruled Jerusalem during the Crusades—not in France. This Eastern setting allows Voltaire to stage a clash between Christianity and Islam, central to Enlightenment reflections on religion and cultural identity (Said, 1978, p. 59). Zaire, a Christian raised in a Muslim court, falls in love with Sultan Orosmane. Just before their wedding, she learns her true Christian heritage. Orosmane, misled by intercepted letters, suspects her of betrayal and kills her, only to discover her innocence and take his own life. Orosmane reflects Orientalist tropes: emotional excess, violent jealousy, and despotic masculinity. Critics see him as part of a tradition portraying Muslim men as irrational and dangerous (Said, 1978, pp. 69–70). His tragic passion fits Western stereotypes of the "Eastern tyrant." Voltaire chose the name Zaire deliberately to emphasize the exotic setting and the heroine's cultural hybridity—she is Christian by birth but raised in a Muslim court. This aligns with the Orientalist tradition of using Eastern-sounding names to heighten dramatic contrast and appeal (Said, 1978, p. 69). The name Zaire is not a traditionally Christian name; in fact, it has Islamic or Arabic resonances. It is derived from the Arabic name "Zahira" (قَرَاهِظ), meaning *bright, shining, or evident*. In French transliteration during the 18th century, this could be rendered as "Zaire." Just like many of his Western contemporaries, Voltaire's understanding of the Eastern world was shaped largely through the lens of Orientalism. Orientalist scholars argue that Western authors constructed a framework to depict the Orient—often inaccurately and through a series of generalized tropes. For example, Ashcroft (2001, p.57), in his work *Edward said*, affirms that "Orientalism emerged in the late eighteenth century and has since assembled an archive of knowledge that has served to perpetuate and reinforce Western representations of it." He suggests that Orientalism appeared as a distinct field of study, one that accumulated a body of knowledge with the primary function of supporting and perpetuating Western interpretations of the East as an exotic, backward, and often barbaric place. This framework has been instrumental in shaping Western attitudes toward the Orient. *The Tragedy of Zaire*, in particular, stands as a representation of these Western misrepresentations of the East. While the play itself deals with themes of love, power, and cultural conflict, it does so within an Orientalist framework. The depiction of the Orient, as seen through the lens of Voltaire's narrative, reflects the typical elements associated with Eastern societies in Western literature—elements such as despotism, sexual intrigue, and religious fanaticism. Said (1978, p.190), in his *Orientalism*, discusses how many Western literary works are built around these very stereotypes of the East, and *Zaire* is no exception. "In all of his novels Flaubert associates the Orient with the escapism of sexual fantasy. Emma Bovary and Frederic Moreau pine for what in their drab (or harried) bourgeois lives they do not have, and what they realize they want comes easily to their daydreams packed inside Oriental clichés: harems, princesses, princes, slaves, veils, dancing girls and boys, sherbets, ointments, and so on." (1978, p.190). Western authors, according to Said, projected their desires for excitement and indulgence onto the Orient. These fantasies were not only exotic but also tied to a sense of escape from the dull, monotonous lives of the bourgeois class. The Orient, in this sense,

became a dreamscape where desire, in all its forms, could be explored. The concept of the harem, in particular, is a central theme that embodies this fantasy. The action mainly takes place in the Sultan's palace in Jerusalem. While the play does not explicitly focus on the detailed life of a harem, Zaire lives in the Sultan's private quarters, which function similarly to a harem environment — a secluded space where the Sultan's favored women reside. In the play, the harem isn't just a physical space but also a cultural symbol used to highlight differences in freedom and identity between East and West. Voltaire is no stranger to the portrayal of the harem as a symbol of decadent luxury and sexual freedom, either. The harem is depicted as a space where Sultans divide their hearts among beautiful women: "The Sultans who the kneeling world behold. Inert and idle—slaves to pleasure sold! Who 'mongst the Harem's fair their hearts divide" (*Zaire*, 1.1, p.9)*. Voltaire presents the Sultans as weak and indulgent figures, whose lives revolve around the pleasures of the harem. The image of Sultans as idlers, slaves to their own desires, is in keeping with the Western portrayal of Eastern rulers as decadent and morally corrupt.

Moreover, the French critique of the harem, as depicted in *Zaire*, is also reflective of the cultural values of the time. In his article, Cherpack (1977, p.50) examines the play through an Orientalist lens, criticizing it for juxtaposing the harem with the supposed freedom of French women. He asserts, "Thus, Christianity in this play is an important part of French culture, more important, but not really more spiritual, than the freedom of French women which is opposed to the harem life". (1977, p.50) Here, Cherpack highlights the central role of Christianity in Western identity, and how the harem is used as a foil to the perceived freedom of French women. The women in the harem are portrayed as subjugated and deprived of their autonomy, while French women are presented as liberated and free to exercise their will, even if their freedom is defined within the constraints of the period's gender norms.

The play further explores the complexities of harem life through the character of Orosmane, the Sultan. In a moment of introspection, Orosmane reflects on the role of guards who oversee the harem, noting the potential for betrayal and deceit. He states, "Guards of the Harem—prompt to lead astray—Who watch both sides, and both sides oft betray! Far be such jealous caution from my soul; I'll trust thine honor to thine own control" (*Zaire*, 1.1, p.11). Unlike his predecessors, Orosmane strives to distance himself from the jealous and controlling behaviors associated with the traditional harem. He believes in trusting his fiancée, Zaire, to maintain her honor and not to let jealousy dictate their relationship. In this way, Orosmane stands in contrast to the despotism typically attributed to Oriental rulers.

Row (2017, p.5), in her analysis, claims that "Orosmane's unique magnanimity is insufficient; he believes he must behave like an Occidental lover. Love and proof of virtue seem contingent on adhering to samenesses (whether in religion or in cultural tradition), and thus the emotional, intimate connection is only fostered and only valid when it pairs like with like, instead of loving another in spite of

marked differences”. According to Row, Orosmane’s attempt to act as a more progressive, Western lover is rooted in the belief that love and virtue are only valid when they conform to certain cultural and religious similarities. Orosmane, therefore, seeks to reconcile the cultural and religious differences between himself and Zaire, but his belief in the necessity of sameness in relationships betrays his inability to truly transcend the Orientalist framework. His attempts to love Zaire despite their differences, rather than because of them, ultimately reflect the limitations of his worldview.

The comparison of the Orient with the Occident leads us to a growing, more and more dangerous gap that separates the Orient and the Occident. “Yet the Orientalist remained outside the Orient, which, however much it was made to appear intelligible, remained beyond the Occident” (Said, 2014, p.222). Despite efforts to make it seem understandable, the Orient remained outside of the Occident, and the Orientalist stayed outside of that. Voltaire attempts to modify Orosmane to become an Occidental lover in order to look more western. However, he shows that the Orient cannot be accepted into advanced Occidental society and remains barbaric. “Barbarian! — yes —'tis true —but haste to drain. Her blood's last drop, which these my veins retain!” (*Zaire*, 5.1, p.87). Voltaire characterizes Orosmane as a barbarian who spills Zaire's blood due to his jealousy, illustrating the fundamental divide between the Eastern and Western worlds in his view.

The representation of the Orient in *Zaire*, through the use of the harem, sexual intrigue, and the contrast between Eastern despotism and Western freedom, encapsulates many of the stereotypes and misconceptions that Western authors perpetuated about Eastern societies. By examining these themes, we can better understand how Voltaire’s portrayal of the East is shaped by Orientalist discourse—a discourse that continues to shape our understanding of the Orient today.

The Tragic Effects of Jealousy and the Orientalist Narrative

The play follows the tragic romance between Zaïre, a Christian captive, and Orosmane, a Muslim king, whose jealousy leads to murder. These themes—love poisoned by distrust, cultural and religious friction, and tragic jealousy—are a strong reminder of Shakespeare's *Othello*. While not a direct intertext, *Othello* provides an effective point of allusion, since both plays depict the disastrous effects of mistrust in interracial or interfaith relationships. The use of such themes in both works highlights a long-standing concern in European literature about the perceived hazards of cultural hybridization. Zaïre follows a literary pattern in which an Ottoman sultan falls in love with a Christian captive, a common theme in early modern and Enlightenment-era European novels. This stereotype represents a complex obsession with the "Orient" as both alluring and threatening, with the East being portrayed through the prism of power and exotic difference. Such images were not impartial, but rather led to the perception of the East as essentially different, frequently subjected to Western moral or cultural supremacy. Furthermore, Orosmane’s jealousy is another Orientalist representation in the play.

Jealousy and rage propel the narrative toward its tragic conclusion. Throughout this five-act tragedy, the word "jealousy" appears five times, underscoring its significance in the development of the plot. As Weber (2004, p.48) exclaims, Orosmane's jealousy begins even from the very start of the story. "Orosmane's thoughts on love and happiness quickly reveal themselves to be fraught with potential acrimony and corruption, suspicion and enmity. Before even telling his future bride that he loves her, the sultan indicates that he is keeping an eye peeled for the slightest hint of betrayal on her end". The potential for jealousy, distrust, dishonesty, and anger in Orosmane's ideas about love and happiness becomes immediately apparent. Even before expressing his love to his future wife, the sultan signals that he is watching for any sign of betrayal. Orosmane demands an unwavering devotion from his Zaire. When Corasmin questions him, "Sire, thou'rt not jealous of a Christian slave..." (*Zaire*, 1.1, p.16), he replies, "I jealous! — I! — no, Corasmin, you rave" (*Zaire*, 1.1, p.16). Despite this, Neresten also senses Orosmane's jealousy, which is evident when she says, "Will the Seraglio open at my call, The tyrant jealous of his Christian thrall?" (*Zaire*, 2.1, p.24)." Even as she opens the door at his command, Neresten feels the weight of Orosmane's jealous nature. Orosmane's jealousy in *Zaire* not only emerges through remarks of other characters, but also most vividly through his own conflicted language and behavior. Upon discovering Zaire's letter to Nerestan, Orosmane initially attempts to resist his suspicions, declaring: "Love's last fond effort shall, tho' vain, be tried. / Of Zaire the faith or falsehood to decide." However, he quickly succumbs to his rage, asking rhetorically, "Should I, from her example, assume false calmness?— my just rage restrain?" (*Zaire* 4.1. page 72). This shift from doubt to presumed betrayal marks a turning point: instead of seeking clarification, Orosmane indulges in the belief that Zaire has wronged him. His jealousy escalates as he commands the letter to be taken and Zaire kept from his sight: "No—take this letter, fatal to all three / Alike to Nerestan?—to Zaire—to me! / Haste—stop her coming—let these eyes no more / See what at once they hate so—and adore!" (*Zaire* 4.1, p72). Here, love and hatred collapse into one overwhelming emotion, revealing the obsessive and irrational dimensions of Orosmane's jealousy. His inability to reconcile affection with suspicion ultimately drives him to destroy the very person he adores, embodying the tragic consequences of jealous passion.

In addition, *Zaire* bears significant thematic and structural resemblance to Shakespeare's *Othello*, particularly in its portrayal of jealousy, cultural conflict, and interfaith relationships. This intertextual connection reflects what Edward Said describes as a "cumulative and interdependent" tradition in Western discourse on the Orient, where literary representations of Islam and the East are repeated and refined across time (Said, 1978, p. 122). Both plays depict Muslim men as passionate and unstable, and portray love between Christians and Muslims as tragic and ultimately impossible. Such continuity suggests that Orientalist narratives are not isolated literary inventions, but part of a larger ideological tradition in which earlier texts inform, reinforce, and legitimize subsequent portrayals (Macfie, 2002, p. 4). This intergenerational discourse demonstrates

how cultural representations of Islam have been shaped by a recursive process, with canonical works like *Othello* influencing Enlightenment authors such as Voltaire.

Row (2017, p.2) also connects *Zaire's* tragic end with Shakespeare's *Othello*, stating, "The whole tragedy ends in an Othello-like turn, in which the racialized lover (Orosmane) is overcome by feelings of jealousy". Just as Othello succumbs to his jealousy in Shakespeare's play, Orosmane ultimately succumbs to his passions, causing his own undoing. Orosmane himself acknowledges the depth of his feelings when he declares, "I love thee, Zaire, to such fanatic rate" (*Zaire*, 1.1, p.11). This obsessive jealousy drives him to the point of paranoia, a hallmark of the extreme characters often associated with Orientalist portrayals. Such portrayals frequently characterize Eastern rulers as irrational and emotionally unstable, a strategy that serves to legitimize Western imperial authority as a civilizing force. By constructing a dichotomy between the emotional Orient and the rational West, these narratives reinforce cultural hierarchies and dehumanize their subjects. Moreover, this paranoia often reflects Western anxieties about loss of control, projected onto the figure of the Oriental Other. Figures like Orosmane or Othello exemplify how these stereotypes underpin broader narratives that justify colonial dominance and assert Western superiority. "Paranoia might be thought of as an addictive emotion, especially as depicted in the drama. It appears that Orosmane enjoys the pleasures of paranoia more than love itself" (Row, 2017, p.9). The depiction of paranoia as an addictive sensation highlights how Orosmane, much like other Easterners in the Orientalist narrative, finds more satisfaction in his suspicions than in the purity of love itself. This growing paranoia manifests as an expression of deep-seated jealousy, reinforcing the negative stereotypes about Eastern men as irrational and consumed by obsessive emotions.

The tragedy also draws on Orientalist ideas that have circulated in Europe since the time of the Crusades. One such idea is the perception of Muslims—especially Turks—as barbaric "infidels" in need of Christian salvation. This is evident in *The Manual of a Christian Knight*, which urges, "Let us not turn Turks (barbarians): let us not fight them with weapons but win them by words, by Christian religion" (Row, 2017, p.5). This rhetoric reflects a civilizing mission narrative, positioning Christianity as morally superior. Shakespeare echoes this sentiment in *Othello*, when the title character chides his men, "Are we turned Turks, and to ourselves do that / Which heaven hath forbid the Ottomites?" (2.1, p.118), equating Turks with lawlessness and chaos. These earlier depictions of Muslims-Turks- as violent or spiritually misguided inform the character dynamics in *Zaire*, where Orosmane is described as an "infidel," and even Zaire, despite her love for him, mourns his difference: "Who far from friends removed, in bondage kept, / Has for an Infidel in silence wept;" (*Zaire*, 3.1, p.45). Her grief highlights the tension between love and religious identity, and reflects the Orientalist trope of the East as both outsider and a foreign unbeliever. Row (2017, p.2) comments on the significance of the term "infidèle" in the play, noting, "The play's drama hinges on the word infidèle, a term that triggers a chiasmus between faith and bond.

That is to say: the love that binds Orosmane and Zaïre generates a certain type of lover's fidelity but a religious infidelity". The word "infidel" acts as a pivot in the narrative, generating a paradox between the lovers' emotional bond and their differing religious beliefs. Their love, though sincere, is marred by their religious differences, with Orosmane representing the "unbeliever" and Zaire the Christian who must navigate the tension between love and faith.

Zaire's father cannot accept the union between his daughter and Orosmane, denouncing him as "profane." "Good Heav'ns! of Orosmane! — a man profane! — The daughter of full twenty kings a slave!" (*Zaire*, 3.1, p.44). He regards Orosmane as a corrupt man, unworthy of the daughter of kings, because of his status as a Muslim. Lusignan's words further illustrate the hostility between the East and the West. He accuses Orosmane, saying, "Ascended 'midst her blood, shed by brigands, Who since have kept thee in their butcher hands? Thy murder'd brothers too — this shrinking eye. By the same infidels beheld them die!" (*Zaire*, 2.1, p.36). Lusignan frames Orosmane as the villain who, through his affiliation with the infidels, is directly responsible for the deaths of Zaire's brothers and the bloodshed in her family's past. In this way, the East is portrayed as a source of violence and betrayal, forever tied to the death and suffering of those in the West. The Orientalist narrative in the play underscores the tensions between Eastern and Western cultures, particularly when it comes to love, loyalty, and religion. The complex emotions of jealousy and distrust that define Orosmane's character mirror the broader cultural rift between the East and the West. His jealousy is not only a personal failing but a reflection of the social and political ideologies of the time, in which the East is seen as irrational, volatile, and governed by passions that the West seeks to control or escape. As the tragedy unfolds, the intersection of love and religious conflict drives the characters to their inevitable fates, with the Eastern characters symbolizing the exotic and dangerous "other" that challenges the Western sense of order and morality.

Through these layers of jealousy, religious infidelity, and cultural differences, the play becomes more than just a tale of personal betrayal. It reveals the destructive impact of Orientalist ideas on relationships, showing how cultural and religious divides can lead to tragic outcomes. In Orosmane's obsessive jealousy and paranoia, the play critiques the very notion of Eastern irrationality that was often perpetuated in the literature and ideology of the time. His jealousy, while portrayed as a deeply personal emotion, is also a manifestation of the larger cultural anxieties surrounding the East and its perceived threats to Western values. Although the West has often perceived itself as superior, it views the East as a threat because the cultural, religious, and political differences challenge Western identity and dominance. This perceived threat arises from fears of losing control, competition for power, and anxieties about the East's contrasting values undermining Western norms. The play's tragic ending, shaped by the Orientalist stereotypes of the time, leaves a lasting impression of how deeply entrenched ideas of cultural superiority and religious difference can poison even the most intimate of relationships. In the 18th century, a Christian woman marrying a Muslim man was a revolutionary act

that defied rigid religious and cultural norms. Such unions challenged sectarian divisions and symbolized the complex interplay between East and West amid increasing cross-cultural encounters. Through the characters of Orosmane and Zaire, the play not only tells a story of love and betrayal but also reflects the broader social and cultural conflicts that define the relationship between the East and the West.

The Binary Between East and West in Drama and Orientalism

The drama serves to highlight the binary that exists between the East and the West. Ashcroft (2001, p.59) makes clear that this binary is based on the study of the East rather than the West. “The division of the world into East and West had been centuries in the making and expressed the fundamental binary division on which all dealing with the Orient was based”. The separation of the world into East and West had been in the works for centuries, and it was an expression of the fundamental binary division that served as the foundation for all dealings with the Orient. The line between East and West is not merely a geographical one; it is an unequal boundary that divides these two worlds. Accepting this basic distinction between East and West becomes a subject matter from which different kinds of theories regarding the Orient emerge. As Said (1978, p.2) utters at the very beginning of his *Orientalism*:

Thus a very large mass of writers, among whom are poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists, and imperial administrators, have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, ‘mind,’ destiny, and so on. This Orientalism can accommodate Aeschylus, say, and Victor Hugo, Dante and Karl Marx.

Poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists, and imperial administrators are just a few of the many writers who have used the binary division between East and West to construct complex narratives about the Orient, its inhabitants, traditions, mind, fate, and more. Even figures such as Aeschylus, Victor Hugo, Dante, and Karl Marx find themselves situated within this Orientalist tradition. We can attach Voltaire’s distinction of East and West to this list as well. Orosmane, while releasing the Christian slaves from ransom, makes them art free and sends them back to the West to display that distinction between East and West. “Let them go with thee; and thy country show. That eastern breasts can feel a generous glow!” (*Zaire*, 1.1, p.14). Orosmane wishes them to return to the West and show that Eastern people are capable of generosity, despite the prevailing assumptions about their nature. This act symbolizes a reclamation of Eastern traditions, a practice Orosmane seeks to revive in his rage. “The ancient customs of an eastern king, Back as a model for my Harem bring” (*Zaire*, 3.1, p.57). His anger drives him to bring back the age-old practices of an Eastern monarch as a model for the Harem. The impulse to return to these traditions signifies not only a desire for revenge but also an assertion of Eastern power and identity against the dominance of the West.

The distinction between East and West has ancient origins, evolving over centuries through religious, cultural, and political developments such as the division of the Roman Empire and the Great Schism of 1054. While medieval Eastern civilizations—including Islamic empires and Byzantium—often surpassed Western Europe economically and culturally, Western narratives gradually framed the East as exotic or inferior. This binary opposition became especially pronounced in the early modern period, as European expansion fostered ideas of Western superiority used to justify colonialism and imperialism (Said, 1978). On the premise that the Renaissance announced the universal victory of the better ideals of Western humanity, the rhetoric of the East-West civilizational conflict has taken its lead. “The rhetoric of the clash of civilizations between East and West has taken its lead from the assumption that the Renaissance represented the global triumph of the superior values of Western humanity,” says Jerry Brotton (2006, p.18) in his book *In Search of the Roots of the Renaissance*. This clash of civilizations is quoted by Orosmane in *Zaire*. “That dang'rous sex which o'er man's will would sway, May rule in Europe, but must here obey!” (*Zaire*, 3.1, p.57). Even if they dominate in Europe, that troublesome force which sways a man's will must be subjected to Eastern control.

The tragedy in *Zaire* is no longer about Zara's battle between valid yet contradictory loyalties; instead, it centers on the threat of Eastern bloodshed. As Del Balzo (2015, p.517-518) claims, “the tragedy is no longer Zara's conflict between legitimate yet incompatible loyalties but rather focuses on the danger of Eastern violence”. The belief that the Orient is a place from which violence and bloodshed spring maintains one of the principal dogmas of Orientalism. According to Said (1976, p.105), the Orient is thought to be an additional problem for the West, raising the so-called Eastern question. “There is an unbroken tradition in European thought of profound hostility, even hatred, toward Islam as an outlandish competitor; one finds it in Dante, in Voltaire, in Renan”. Said explains the hostility as part of a larger system of power relations and knowledge production—Orientalism—that constructed Islam as an exotic and dangerous “Other” to support Western dominance.

A long history in European thought exists, filled with deep hostility—almost hatred—toward Islam as an absurd rival. These sentiments are found in works by Dante, Voltaire, and Renan. This antagonistic portrayal is evident in Voltaire's expression in *Zaire*, where Eastern violence is emphasized. “And, tho in childhood, can remember well. Those scenes of slaughter whereupon you dwell: And that from-out the blazing temple shorn, Some other infants too, were rudely torn” (*Zaire*, 2.1, p.23). Voltaire's characters recall the horrors they witnessed in their youth, with vivid memories of slaughter in places of worship and the brutal treatment of infants. This harrowing recollection underscores the narrative of Eastern violence.

Moreover, a dialogue between two French knights, Nerestan and Chatillon, further emphasizes this theme of ‘Eastern violence’: “Wherein we saw these consecrated

walls, (The conquest of our ancestral bands!) Fall into a barbarian's faithless hands. Heavns! had ye this forsaken Temple seen; The Tomb of God, which worshiped long had been" (*Zaire*, 2.1, p.21). They describe the fall of sacred walls, once the triumph of their ancestors, into the hands of a faithless and barbaric enemy. This reference to the "Tomb of God" hints at the perceived desecration of something holy, reinforcing the portrayal of Eastern forces as barbaric. Through these various portrayals in *Zaire*, Voltaire contributes to the Orientalist narrative—commonly dated to begin in the late eighteenth century—that sees the East as a place of backwardness, violence, and moral corruption. Although *Zaire* was written in 1732—decades before Napoleon's 1798 invasion of Egypt, which Said (1978) identifies as the beginning of modern, systematic Orientalism—earlier forms of Orientalist discourse were already embedded in European culture. Since the Crusades, Islam had been perceived as both a religious and political threat. This perception endured through the Enlightenment, shaped by ongoing tensions with the Ottoman Empire. In 18th-century France, Islam was often portrayed as despotic, irrational, and culturally alien (MacKenzie, 1995). Voltaire's depiction of Orosmane draws on these inherited stereotypes, reflecting broader Western anxieties about power, religion, and identity.

This binary between East and West is not merely a cultural divide; it serves as a way of justifying Western superiority, claiming the East as a constant source of danger and chaos. The play itself becomes a vehicle for exploring the racial, cultural, and ideological distinctions that were often used to support colonialism and imperialism. By continuing to draw on this binary opposition, the characters in *Zaire* serve to reinforce the idea that the East is something to be feared, to be contained, and ultimately to be controlled by more civilized West. As this drama continues to unfold, it becomes clear that the East-West dichotomy is more than just a geographic or political division; it is a deeply entrenched ideological framework that shapes both the characters' actions and the audience's perceptions of the Orient. The drama thus serves as a microcosm of the broader cultural and historical forces at play during the period, offering a critical lens through which to examine the enduring power dynamics between East and West.

Islamophobia and Cultural Tensions in Voltaire's Zaire

The negotiation that takes place in *Zaire* occurs against the backdrop of an uncertain and unstable East-West relationship. According to Del Balzo (2015, p.518), "It [*Zaire*] presents that negotiation within a context wherein the relationship between the East and West is unstable and unpredictable". This instability gives rise to complex tensions that influence cultural and political dynamics. Among these tensions is the emergence of the term Islamophobia. Defined by Bazian (2015, p.162) as "fear," "anxiety," or "phobia" of Muslims, the term also represents a far more encompassing process that impacts law, economy, and society. This pervasive phobia of Muslims leads to a misrepresentation of Islam and its followers, a theme deeply rooted in the literary and cultural production of the West.

The comparison between Islam and Christianity has historically provided a lens for writers to highlight perceived "defects" in Islam. As A.L. Tibawi asserts, "The early attacks on Islam and Muhammad were maintained for centuries" (Bazian, 2015, p.146). These critiques, often steeped in bias, became embedded in Western narratives, persisting through generations. One striking example of such narratives is Voltaire's *Zaire*, a work emblematic of eighteenth century French literature that critiques Islam. In *Zaire*, the titular character abandons her Christian roots to embrace what is described as the "false Mahomet." Voltaire writes, "Who since estranged from all her Christian race, Exchanges for false Mahomet, Christ's grace" (*Zaire*, 2.1, p.24). Here, *Zaire* is portrayed as having forsaken her Christian identity, trading divine grace for what is framed as the falsehood of Islam. This framing reinforces a long-standing Western depiction of Islam as a deviation from truth. Central to the play is Nerestan, who vehemently labels Mahomet as a false prophet. This attitude reflects broader historical perspectives, as noted by Daniel in *Islam and the West*. "Similarly, since Mohammed was viewed as the disseminator of a false Revelation, he became as well the epitome of lechery, debauchery, sodomy, and a whole battery of assorted treacheries, all of which derived 'logically' from his doctrinal impostures" (qtd. in Said, 2014, p.62). By portraying Mohammed as the originator of a fabricated doctrine, he is depicted as embodying various immoralities, a characterization that serves to discredit both the religion and its adherents. This perception is echoed in *Zaire*, where Nerestan's love for Christ is juxtaposed with his unrelenting hatred for Islam: "For the false Mahomet eternal hate—And love for Christ at the same endless rate!" (*Zaire*, 3.1, p.44). This dichotomy underscores the play's broader cultural commentary, illustrating how Christianity is exalted while Islam is vilified.

The misrepresentation extends further when Nerestan openly expresses his contempt for Islam without understanding its traditions. He declares, "A fearful malediction then awaits. Your daring to announce the God he hates" (*Zaire*, 4.1, p.62). This statement encapsulates the fear and animosity that underpin Islamophobic narratives. It is not merely a rejection of a different faith but a condemnation of its very existence. Such depictions perpetuate stereotypes and deepen the divide between the East and West.

The culmination of the play's tensions occurs in its tragic ending, where Orosmane, a Muslim man, kills his fiancée, *Zaire*, a Christian-born woman, driven by jealousy. This act cements the portrayal of Orosmane as a figure of violence and irrationality. Fatima's anguished cry highlights the gravity of the act: "Therein, thou tiger! eager for her gore, Therein arose her crime — she did adore!" (*Zaire*, 5.1, p.88). Fatima's description of Orosmane as a "tiger" eager for blood amplifies the imagery of savagery often associated with Muslims in such narratives. Similarly, Nerestan's condemnation of Orosmane as a "tyrant" reinforces this perception: "What are thine orders? tyrant — I await. With an unflinching brow, my coming fate!" (*Zaire*, 5.1, p.89). The labels of "tiger" and "tyrant" resonate with the broader Western depiction of Muslim characters as

inherently brutal and despotic. Before taking his own life, Orosmane issues a final command to Nerestan: to leave the land where “war and murder unremitting reigns.” This statement, while reflective of Orosmane’s personal despair, also serves as a broader commentary on the East, depicted as a realm plagued by violence and instability. By ending the play on this note, Voltaire reinforces the contrast between the “civilized” Christian West and the “savage” Muslim East. Through *Zaire*, Voltaire not only critiques European orthodoxy and the consequences of Eurocentric assumptions, he also contributes to a literary tradition that misrepresents Islam and Muslims, a tradition rooted in fear and misunderstanding. The play’s portrayal of characters, its framing of religious differences, and its ultimate tragic resolution all serve to perpetuate stereotypes that have persisted for centuries. This cultural production reflects and reinforces the broader societal anxieties of its time, where the relationship between the East and West was marked by instability and mistrust. As Del Balzo’s (2015) observation suggests, the negotiation within *Zaire* mirrors the unpredictable and fraught dynamics of the East-West relationship, a dynamic that continues to shape perceptions and interactions to this day.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Voltaire’s *Zaire* functions as a nuanced critique of the combination of Enlightenment ideology and Orientalism, emphasizing the conflicts between Eastern and Western principles. The drama not only embodies the Orientalist tendencies of the eighteenth century but also offers a nuanced critique of European cultural and religious institutions. The drama, set in an exoticized “East,” revolves around the tragic romance between the Christianized slave *Zaïre* and the Muslim Sultan Orosmane, blending themes of love, betrayal, jealousy, and religious struggle. *Zaïre* depicts the East as morally ambiguous and governed by irrationality, so reinforcing prevalent prejudices; nevertheless, Voltaire’s critique of religious intolerance and despotism provides a more profound and nuanced commentary on European culture.

Voltaire’s portrayal of the East corresponds to the Orientalist paradigm articulated by Edward Said, wherein the West characterizes the East as foreign, irrational, and inferior in comparison to the logical and superior West. Sultan Orosmane’s jealousy and irrationality exemplify the symbol of the Eastern dictator, whilst *Zaïre*’s purity and devotion embody Western virtues. This binary dichotomy between East and West underscores the cultural stereotypes of the era, portraying the East as primitive and aggressive, while depicting the West as enlightened and moral. Nonetheless, *Zaïre* serves as a critique of European religious fanaticism. The figure of Usbek, the Christian priest, symbolizes the harmful impacts of religious intolerance, providing a contrast to the inflexible convictions of the Eastern characters. Voltaire employs the East not merely as a backdrop for cultural discord, but as a reflection of European society’s weaknesses, revealing the perils of uncontrolled religious power. This constitutes a comprehensive critique of European institutions, especially the church, which Voltaire frequently condemned for its dogmatism and oppression.

By placing *Zaire* in the framework of Enlightenment philosophy, Voltaire's work critiques both Eastern and Western power structures and ideologies. The drama examines cultural conflict, transcending mere stereotype reinforcement to interrogate the effects of colonialism, religious intolerance, and cultural pride. In *Zaire*, Voltaire presents an examination on the complexity of human values and the perils of ideological inflexibility, rendering the play an important piece for comprehending the intellectual movements of the eighteenth century and their enduring significance in the critique of cultural representation.

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