

Orientalism in Armenia and its influence on national identity

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## **Abstract**

This research delves into Orientalism in Armenia, exploring the presence of an Orientalist gaze on the country during the 18th to 20th centuries and its impact on national identity. Utilizing the works of renowned cultural theorists such as Edward Said and Stuart Hall, the study aims to understand how Armenian culture and identity have been portrayed in literature, films, and artworks produced in different historical periods, ranging from the end of the Ottoman Empire to Soviet and post-Soviet times. The study examines Western paintings from the 19th century portraying Armenians as homogeneous group, as well as 20th-century posters related to the Armenian Genocide and Soviet-era films with stereotypical Armenian characters. The study further examines how the hegemonic power of Orientalism has affected the self-perception of Armenians, leading to a cultural inferiority complex and a desire to adopt Western values. This study highlights the critical importance of analyzing media representations of marginalized cultures and identities to challenge and deconstruct Orientalism.

## **Orientalism in Armenia and its influence on national identity**

What does the Middle East look like? You will likely have a clear, detailed image of what the Middle East looks and sounds like in your head. Perhaps you imagine a dry, deserted terrain with distorted air heated by the sun and filled with sandstorms. You may also visualize the image of an oud being played or a soulful voice singing. These impressions are a result of how the Middle East has been depicted in the Western world through various mediums such as literature, art, and media. These depictions have created a stereotypical image of the Middle East, which often ignores the complexity of the region's cultural heritage.

The issues of political, social, and cultural interaction between the East and the West and the West's perception of the East have never lost their relevance. The relationship between these two different worlds brought us to the term "Orientalism." In 1978, Edward Said invented the term Orientalism; he contributed significantly to postcolonial studies; his insights offer a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in the concept. However, since there are many different models, images, and concepts of the East, there are many interpretations of "Orientalism." It is a transforming and multifaceted concept. Orientalism is not a fixed or static set of ideas but rather an evolving phenomenon shaped by historical, political, and cultural factors. It is interpreted as a science, as an ideological and political discourse beneficial to Western civilization, as a doctrine of the conquest of the East, or as a synonym for racism (Said, 1978). We can say with certainty that Orientalism has had a noticeable impact on people's lives in the East and the West. The ideas of the East promoted by Orientalism contributed to the formation of identities, the construction of geopolitical alliances, and the persistence of the power imbalance between East and West.

The term Orientalism did not pass by Armenia; Western countries have imitated

Armenians in various literary works, paintings, films, etc. Armenia could be a subject of Orientalism because of its rich culture, religion, and history. Western Europe and Russia portrayed Armenia in a way that differed from the actual reality. Each side had its unique depiction and story of Armenia. For Western countries, Armenia was a typical Eastern country; they mixed Armenia with other Eastern countries. It seems that for Western countries, all Eastern countries have similar cultures, values, and appearances. For example, Russia portrayed the Armenians as cunning merchants or wealthy people. In every Soviet film, people of Armenian or non-Russian origin are easily distinguished from other characters by their appearance, unique features and attitudes. Both Western countries and Russia have given a stereotyped depiction of Armenians.

Orientalism covers not only cultural and social aspects but also political ones. For E. Said (1978), the main thing in all interpretations is the idea that Orientalism is a way of designating the East chosen by Europeans, its cultural and ideological definition based on a complex theory created by many generations. In the 19th and especially at the beginning of the 20th century, Orientalism became more of a political concept, clarifying not only the fundamental geographical difference between East and West but also expressing the desire to understand, even control the East (Said, 1978).

Countries that have undergone Orientalism may have had trouble defining their national identity. This portrayal can impact how people from these countries view themselves and their place in the world. Under this influence, they began to play a role, using self-orientalism to fit in with the Western world. The main idea of this research is to find Orientalist works related to Armenia and its influence on Armenians. By exploring Armenian artworks, performances, and

other forms of cultural expression, it is possible to understand how Orientalism has influenced Armenian national identity and how Armenians have responded to this influence.

### **Literature Review**

Orientalism originated during the age of imperialism or colonialism when Western countries (especially England, France, and later America) were empowering their empires and expanding their control over the vast territories of Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa. Western nations established colonies and trading centers in regions such as India, the Middle East, and Africa during this time (Syed, 2021). These colonies were often rich in natural resources, hence the European powers sought to exploit them for their economic gain. For more than three millennia the East and everything connected with it has occupied the mind and imagination of Western society. Another trigger for the West was that the East fundamentally differs from the West, and Western people have long noticed this difference between themselves and their eternal neighbors. Born in ancient times, Europeans' interest in the East did not fade away, just as the confrontation between the West and the East did not stop. According to Said (1978, p. 137), the East attracts through its history and culture, the peculiarities of its social structure, the relationship between man, religion, and resources. It is no surprise that Armenia has been in the spotlight as part of the East for many decades. Armenia's popularity may be because it is one of the first countries to adopt Christianity, one of the oldest nations, or due to its occupation for many years. Consequently, European ideas about Armenia are more than a complex set of myths. In general, the East was stereotyped as tyrants and cunning merchants under the domination of the West. All those depictions, characterizations, and myths about the Eastern world generated by Western society are the result of Orientalism. Armenia has been under Orientalism for many years due to its religious, cultural, and social structures.

Orientalism is among the essential concepts in post-colonial studies today. Throughout time two concepts have been established to designate the East as a whole: East and Orient. In *Orientalism* Said (1978) speaks by what logic or from what point of view the West views the non-Western part of the world. The word "East" refers to the geographical community of countries that lie outside the boundaries of the Western world. Orientalism defines the East, not in a geographical but cultural sense (Orient). Orientalist discourse creates a hierarchy between the West and the East, where the West is portrayed as rational, developed, and humane, occupying the top of the hierarchy, while the East is depicted as wandering in the dark, undeveloped, and occupying the lower steps (Said, 1978, p. 300). Orientalism is a specific style of thinking that relies on the ontological and epistemological distinction between "East" and "West" (Said, 1978, p. 2). In this case, Orientalism served as the basis for constructing various social and political theories about the East - material for creating fiction about it. Also, Orientalism has been perceived as a method for maintaining business relations with the East. In this case, the study of the East aimed at creating tools with which the West could dominate, transform and control the East.

In his book Said (1978) argues that the West has consistently portrayed the East as a primitive, exotic, and inferior "Other," perpetuating a dichotomy between the civilized West and uncivilized East. He traces the development of this Orientalist discourse from the 18th century to his present day, analyzing works of literature, art, and law that have contributed to this discourse. Said's analysis goes beyond merely critiquing Orientalist representations, arguing that Orientalism has played a crucial role in justifying Western imperialism over Eastern societies. By constructing the East as exotic and inferior, the West could justify its own hegemony and its right to impose its values on the East.

Orientalism has significantly impacted postcolonial studies, challenging traditional Western representations of the East and encouraging a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between the West and the rest of the world. Said develops these concepts, and if you rely on his arguments, then Oriental studies look almost like pseudoscience. It was based on the notes of various adventurers who visited the East, who did not understand a foreign culture and did not delve into it. This is how the "Wild East" image was formed in the West, an image now replicated by the world media.

Moving forward, Armenians were also stereotypically presented during the Soviet period. Being under an Orientalist viewpoint, in literature, artworks, and films, Armenians were pictured as conservative, and emotional. As argued in Anisimova's (2017) *"Post-Soviet "orient" in the stories by Vladimir Makanin and Liudmila Petrushevskaia,"* in the movie "Kidnapping, Caucasian Style," we notice that soviet ideology has shaped a discussion of ethnic differences. The Soviet movies show the difference between Caucasian people and Russians. Russians are more intellectual, balanced, and serious, while Caucasian people are emotional, limited, traditional, and funny-looking. In the movie, Armenians are described as merchants who only think about money and always joke around. However, that is not the only Soviet movie that uses stereotypes in its character depictions; among them are "Mimino," "The Diamond Arm," "Operation Y and Shurik's Other Adventures," etc. In multiple Soviet movies, Armenians were portrayed as wealthy figures or merchants. The question is, did such movie depictions influence Armenians to self-orient themselves? Russian Soviet films may have influenced Armenians to think they are conservative and funny.

In the Soviet Union, countries under tight control were limited in expressing their national identity. The countries shared one national identity, which was under the control of



Stalin's totalitarian leadership. In the short essay "Soviet Armenian Identity and Cultural Representation" by Hrach Bayadyan (2007), the author states that the Soviet national policy and methods of keeping control over Soviet peoples and the development of a single Soviet nation had features that can be characterized as Russian-Soviet Orientalism. Countries' national identity was pressured and controlled by the Soviet dictatorship. That is why we can assume that Armenian national identity was under control and Russian Orientalism influenced people's self-identity.

As we already know, orientalism can manifest itself in art, literature, science, politics, and other branches of knowledge. One of the most significant aspects where orientalism was used is art. Many Western painters have portrayed Ottoman Armenia, showing Armenian culture, civilization, and practices. For instance, Ralph Elmer Clarkson's "Nouvart Dzeron, A Daughter of Armenia" is a portrait of an Armenian woman.



*Figure 1 "Nouvart Dzeron, A Daughter of Armenia," painting by Ralph Clarkson, 1912*

Weber's (2011) "*Circulation, exchange, and race in Ralph Clarkson's 'Nougart Dzeron, a daughter of Armenia'*" analyzes the painting and mentions that it contains an oriental woman in oriental clothing and appearance. Looking at the painting, we notice a woman with long dark hair, a hawk nose, and dressed in traditional blue Eastern clothes. She is holding a bead line, which is common both in Islamic and Christian cultures. The woman is a representation of Orientalism in this painting; she is dressed in elaborate and luxurious oriental garb, such as harem pants, combined with a headdress that emphasizes the idea of "veiled" nature associated with women of the East. The artist emphasized her physical features by depicting her with long dark hair and a prominent nose, which are often related to the stereotypes of Eastern people. This shows how Western painters perceive Armenian women and culture. Multiple paintings by Western artists depict Armenian people and cultures that can be considered Orientalist artworks, for instance, Van Lennep Henry John's "Armenian Ladies (At Home)" and "Wealthy Armenian" by Louis Dupré.

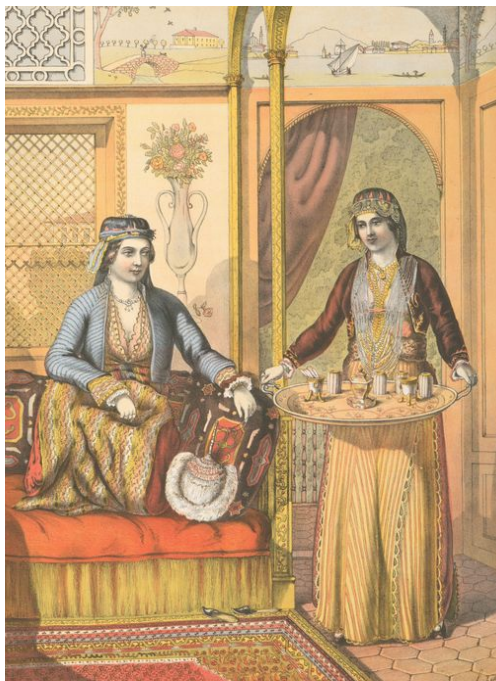


Figure 2 "*Armenian Ladies (At Home)*" illustration by Henry John Van Lennep (1862)



*Figure 3 "Wealthy Armenian" illustration Louis Dupré (1825)*

Under the influence of Orientalism, Eastern peoples deliberately "played for others" in order to gain recognition and place themselves in the Western-dominated global economy and system (Kobayashi et al., 2019). Several psychologists and philosophers stated that the problem of Orientalism is often associated with a lack of self-representation or voice from the Orient itself (Hall, 1997; Macfie, 2000; Said, 1978; Young, 1995). Being in the role of "Others" and playing by the rules of Western countries, Eastern people could lose their national identity. Spivak's (2003) short essay "The Subordinate Can Speak" provides insight into different aspects related to the concept of the "Other" and the psychological effects of Orientalism. The essay explores post-colonial theories, the impact of colonization on people, and the spread of power to other countries. The author speaks about Orientalism and the concept of "Others" explaining the psychological impact on people under that pressure.

Studying the history of the concept of Orientalism and its reflection in different works, we come to the following conclusion: Orientalism, having passed the stage of purely geographical and cultural ideas, has grown into a concept that influenced the policy of major European powers. In this capacity, Orientalism was formed as a set of negative stereotypes associated with the East.

Unfortunately, the theme of Orientalism in Armenia did not attract attention and was not studied much. During my research, I found only a few articles about Orientalism in Armenia and its impact on national identity. The lack of information on this topic indicates the need for this study. As an Armenian, it is crucial to wander through the history of the Armenian national identity to find out how it was formed and how it was influenced. It is important to understand whether Armenia has changed its national identity during these long years of being under the Western influence or not. My research paper examines the relationship between East and West. Indeed, the sources mentioned earlier guide us to understanding more about Orientalism and its reflection on Eastern countries. Each chosen article helps us understand different aspects, and each has its role in this research paper. Since the study also analyzes the work of various Western artists, it includes visuals to help readers better understand orientalism in art.

### **Research Question**

This study aims to answer the following question: How has Orientalism shaped Armenian national identity from the end of the 18th century to the present day? To achieve this, I drew on scholarly papers, prior research, case-based writing, methodological guidelines, and observation. I examined specific examples related to the representation of Armenia and Armenians in Orientalist literature and art to better understand how these depictions have impacted the construction of Armenian identity over time.

## **Methodology**

The research topic of Orientalism in Armenia and its effects on national identity is a relatively under-explored area. Therefore, I employed several methodological strategies to answer the research question accurately and validly. I utilized various research papers, analyses, and credible sources to understand the topic comprehensively.

For this research paper, I have used qualitative research methodology, specifically content analysis. This approach involves analyzing various articles, books, reports, essays, and other relevant materials related to the topic. The content analysis provides insights into the representation of Orientalism and Armenians depicted in Orientalist literature, art, and visual culture. The content analysis helps to identify how Armenians have been viewed as a colonial country and stereotyped as a typical "Other" country from the Middle East. The study investigates the influence of these representations on the evolution of Armenian national identity and how Armenians have perceived themselves through the lens of Orientalist perspectives.

To further strengthen the analysis, I utilized multiple sources of information, including articles and short essays on oriental studies in Armenia from different periods starting from the 18th century till nowadays. The analysis also shows that most Orientalist representations of Armenia have come from more prominent countries, such as France, England, and Russia. This highlights the power dynamics inherent in the Orientalist discourse, where smaller and less powerful countries are often the subject of the representations created by larger and more dominant countries.

In addition to analyzing literature and historical sources related to Orientalism in Armenia, I also examined the portrayal of Armenians in various works of art, including paintings and films/animations. Western artists have created numerous works of art depicting Armenia,

and to provide readers with a more immersive experience, I included several paintings, such as Ralph Elmer Clarkson's "Nougart Dzeron, A Daughter of Armenia," Van-Lennep, Henry John's "Armenian Ladies (At Home)" and "Wealthy Armenian" by Louis Dupré. I analyzed these works of art in detail, paying close attention to the context and background of each painting and the artist. To better understand what Armenians looked like during the 18th and 19th centuries, I decided to visit the Armenian National Gallery and observe how Armenian artists depicted our people. This visit allowed me to see how our inhabitants were portrayed from a native viewpoint, which was an important contrast to the Western perspective I had previously researched. As a result, I decided to include the work of Armenian artists in my research paper to demonstrate this contrast to my readers and establish actual reality. For this purpose, I selected two prominent artists from the 19th centuries: Panos Terlemezian, and Stepan Aghajanian. Besides analyzing paintings, I also examined the Soviet movie "Mimino" by Georgiy Daneliya to gain a better understanding of how Armenians were portrayed during the Soviet period. Also, in my work, I delve into the portrayal of Armenia by the West and America, which often portrays the country as a victim, primarily because of its history of genocide. This portrayal contributes to the Orientalization of Armenia, reinforcing the perception of the nation as powerless. In my analysis, I study a specific poster from the charity Near East Relief, which depicts a powerful female figure protecting a vulnerable child while holding an American flag symbolizing America's ability to protect Armenia.

Through the analysis of visuals from various historical periods, I wanted to show how Western and Russian artists wanted to misrepresent Armenia and its people and how this continues to this day.

I also wanted to interview Vigen Galstyan, who is an art curator with thorough

knowledge of Orientalism. Sadly, he was overburdened with work, and I could not interview him. However, I visited his exhibition and found many books about Armenian culture and history. These books helped me enrich my background and gain more confidence in what I am doing.

### **Through the lens of Orientalism**

"The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, domination and a complex hegemony" (Said, 1978). For many years, the Middle East, Africa, and Asia countries have been under the hegemonic gaze of Europe and America. According to Said, Orientalism is not just a matter of cultural representation but a system of domination that the West has historically constructed. Orientalism, therefore, is not just a set of ideas or stereotypes about the East but a distribution of geopolitical awareness into various fields such as aesthetic, scholarly, sociological, historical, and philological texts. Orientalism has been shaped by several historical events, including colonialism and imperialism; hence hegemony gives Orientalism durability and continuity. One of the main features of Orientalism is how it keeps the hierarchy between West and East. Said argues that the West has always seen itself as superior to the East, which has been reflected in how the East has been represented in Western culture. The Orient was almost a European invention and had been a place of romance, exotic beings, and landscapes since antiquity (Said, 1978). The West has always been fascinated by the East, and this fascination has been a fundamental factor in the construction of Orientalism. Western scholars, writers, and artists have created a set of images and stereotypes that have become deeply ingrained in Western culture through their representations of the East. One of the characteristics of Orientalism is its tendency to homogenize the East. The West has tended to see the East as a monolithic and undifferentiated entity rather than a diverse region, leading to a narrow

perspective of the East. Spivak (1988) has discussed this idea in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" where she critiques how Western colonial powers constructed a homogenized and simplified image of the "East" to justify their subjugation of the region. She argues that this construction of the East as a homogeneous entity was used to mask the diverse realities of the region, which in turn strengthened Western power. Hall (1997), in his book *The Spectacle of the 'Other* argues that "the Other" is a term used to describe those perceived as different from the dominant group, and it is often used to justify the exclusion of these groups, hence in the context of Orientalism, "the Other" is the East.

Another significant aspect of Orientalism is religion. Orientalist writers and artists often represented the religions of the East in an exoticized manner. In particular, Islam has been the primary focus. Western scholars have often portrayed Islam as a religion of violence, backwardness, and fanaticism. One of the reasons for this is the historical conflict between Christianity and Islam. Christianity has a long history of representing Islam as a threat to Western civilization. For example, the Crusades, a series of military campaigns waged by Western European Christian powers against Muslim territories, have significantly shaped Western perceptions of Islam (Rich, 1999, p. 435-445). Islam was often described as an alien religion incompatible with Western values. One of the most prominent examples of this can be the representation of the Prophet Muhammad in Western literature. Many Western writers have portrayed Muhammad as a violent and oppressive figure, even though Muslims widely honor him as a prophet and a source of spiritual guidance. For example, in his *Divine Comedy*, Dante depicted Muhammad as being punished in hell for promoting schism and violence;

How mutilated, see, is Mahomet;

In front of me doth Ali weeping go,



Cleft in the face from forelock unto chin;  
And all the others whom thou here beholdest,  
Disseminators of scandal and of schism (Dante, 2009, Cane 28)

While it is true that Muslim countries have often been the primary target of Orientalism, it is essential to note that non-Muslim countries have also been Orientalized. As a Christian country in the Caucasus region, Armenia was also subject to Orientalism and homogenization. Armenia is indeed a unique case of Orientalism, as it is not part of the Middle East, Africa, or Asia but instead located in the Caucasian region. This demonstrates that Orientalism is not just a matter of religious difference but rather a broader system of hegemony that the West has gradually formed.

### **Orientalism during the Ottoman Empire**

Despite its unique geographical location and cultural heritage, Armenia has also been Orientalized and viewed as an "Other" by the West. Armenia has a long history of being subject to Orientalism, beginning with being under foreign rule, particularly by the Ottoman Empire and later by the Soviet Union. These periods of foreign domination allowed the West to construct Armenia's identity further, emphasizing its perceived "Otherness." In the eyes of the West during the Ottoman Empire, Armenia was often considered a part of the Muslim world due to its location within the empire and its historical ties to Islamic culture. It is worth noting that Armenians were subject to the laws and regulations of the Ottoman Empire. These regulations mandated specific colors and materials for Armenians, such as black skirts, while prohibiting them from wearing certain colors, like yellow, which was reserved for Muslims (Faroqhi, 2009, as cited in Khatcherian, 2015, p. 12-13). This context adds to the perception of Armenians as a

minority within the predominantly Muslim Ottoman Empire. Consequently, Western portrayals of Armenians often incorporated elements of Islamic or Middle Eastern culture, including clothing, architecture, and language, which were associated with the dominant culture of the Ottoman Empire.

Several Western artists have portrayed Armenians in their paintings and artworks, and many have incorporated Orientalist elements in their depictions. According to Elisabeth Fraser's (2018) "The Color of the Orient," Ottoman costume albums played an important role in shaping European perceptions of the Orient. These albums contained detailed drawings and descriptions of Ottoman clothing and accessories, often reproduced in European print culture. I want to focus on three illustrations from such albums that caught my eye, Ralph Elmer Clarkson's "Nouart Dzeron, A Daughter of Armenia," Henry J. Van-Lennep's "Armenian Ladies (At Home)," and "Wealthy Armenian" by Louis Dupré.



*Figure 2 "Armenian Ladies (At Home)" illustration by Henry John Van Lennep (1862)*

Henry J. Van Lennep was a well-known Christian missionary, author, and educator of the 19th century. He was born in Smyrna (now called Izmir, located in Turkey) and, in 1830, moved to the United States for his studies. He is known for his travels to the Ottoman Empire and his publications on the Middle East's geography, culture, and languages. He has published "The Oriental Album," a collection of illustrations and descriptions of people, places, and culture in the Middle East and North Africa. It was intended to give Western audiences a glimpse into the exotic Orient. The album includes illustrations of various ethnic and religious groups, including Armenians, and presents them as part of a homogenized Orient. In his "Armenian Ladies (At Home)" illustration, we see several elements indicative of an Orientalist perspective. One of the

most notable is the pose of the woman sitting on the couch, which is typical in Islamic cultures but not generally associated with Armenian culture. This suggests that the artist combined different cultural traditions to create a more exotic image of the Armenians. Another element is the window in the background of the illustration, which has an Islamic design. This design may reinforce the notion that Armenians are part of the larger Islamic/Middle Eastern cultural world rather than having their distinct cultural traditions. This is a common trope in Western depictions of the East, where various cultures are often homogenized. Using an Islamic design for the window, Van Lennep suggests that Armenian culture is not unique from Middle Eastern cultures but is part of it. Also noteworthy is the jewelry worn by the Armenian women in this illustration. The women are depicted wearing many ornate, intricate jewelry, such as necklaces, earrings, and bracelets. The jewelry is depicted in great detail, suggesting the idea of Armenians being luxurious. It is worth noting that the jewelry depicted in the painting does not necessarily reflect the jewelry worn by Armenian women during that period. In the 18th and 19th centuries, Armenians wore jewelry that reflected their cultural heritage and social status. Within this period, the art of filigree work held a prominent position among the jewelry Armenians wore. Armenians skillfully crafted intricate designs using fine metal wire, resulting in beautiful filigree earrings, necklaces, bracelets, and rings. Coins were another remarkable element of Armenian jewelry. Armenians attached local and foreign coins to necklaces, belts, or bracelets, giving their jewelry a historical and unique touch to their jewelry. These silver or gold pieces varied in style from simple and elegant to intricate and ornate. Armenian jewelry has not only an aesthetic value but also an ideological meaning; they have different symbols; birds, trees, grain, sun, dragon, snake, and even frogs are depicted on jewelry, belts, and buckles (Mkhitarian, 2022).



*Figure 4 Armenian jewelry of the 18th-20th centuries, History Museum of Armenia*



*Figure 5 Armenian jewelry of the 18th-20th centuries, History Museum of Armenia*

Instead, Van Lennep likely included elements of Orientalist fantasy in his depiction of women. We can also notice that the illustration contains vivid colors in clothing and furniture with red and yellow dominant colors, a typical feature in Orientalist paintings. What is the secret behind these colorful depictions? Western culture has an ambivalent attitude towards vivid colors, which can be seen as both exotic and dangerous. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's "Theory of Colours," published in 1810, reflects this concept. He argued, "Men in a state of nature, uncivilized nations, children, have a great fondness for colors in their utmost brightness, and especially for yellow-red" (Goethe, 1810, as cited in Taussig, 2009, p. 259). He also mentioned that "people of refinement avoid vivid colors in their dress and the objects that are about them" (Goethe, 1810, as cited in Taussig, 2009, p. 259).



*Figure 3 "Wealthy Armenian" illustration Louis Dupré (1825)*

The second painting I want to focus on is "Wealthy Armenian" by Louis Dupré from his *Voyage à Athènes et à Constantinople (Trip to Athens and Constantinople)* (1825). The illustration portrays an Armenian man in luxurious clothing that embodies his wealth. The man is shown wearing a long, loose-fitting robe or kaftan made of fine silk or velvet fabric. Blue kaftan with fur lining on the collar, which further emphasizes the richness of the product. The man also wears a turban on his head, a traditional head covering in many Middle Eastern cultures. The turban is made of brightly colored silk or cotton fabric wrapped around his head. The hat is made of a more subdued fabric and has a flat top with a tassel hanging from the center. Man's clothes are more common in Persian culture. Also, the water pipe is not a traditional Armenian smoking device but a specific item in the Middle East, including Iran and other parts of the Persian world. The fact that the figure in the painting is holding a water pipe could be interpreted as another Orientalist element. Moreover, in traditional Armenian portraits, people would sit or stand in a relatively still and formal pose, often resting their hands on their laps or at their sides. In the "Wealthy Armenian" illustration, the man's pose is much more relaxed and informal, with his hand casually resting on his knee and his body turned slightly to the side. The man's clothing is brightly colored, with blues and greens, which shows the stereotype of the vibrant Orient (Taussig, 2009, p. 259). The overall atmosphere of the painting is to present a romanticized and fantasized view of Armenian wealth and culture, created through the lens of Western Orientalist imagination.



*Figure 1 "Nouvard Dzeron, A Daughter of Armenia," painting by Ralph Clarkson, 1912*

The last illustration I want to discuss is Ralph Elmer Clarkson's (1912) "Nouvard Dzeron, A Daughter of Armenia." The painting was created by prominent Chicago portrait painter Ralph Clarkson in 1912. It depicts a young woman dressed in "traditional Armenian clothing" posing against a blank background. As mentioned in Weber's text (2011) "Circulation, exchange and race in Ralph Clarkson's "Nouvard Dzeron, a daughter of Armenia", the painting's title underwent several changes over the years, demonstrating how socio-political concepts transformed how people read the composition. Between 1912 and 1915, Clarkson used the painting to depict a generic idea of the Orient, strengthening his status as a fine artist. However, with the Armenian



genocide of 1915, the painting's subject moved into the realm of symbolism. Dzeron's Armenian ethnicity gained prominence and value. The painting has been turned into a memorial artifact, representing the tragedy and serving as a symbol of raising awareness of the Armenian genocide (Weber, 2011, p. 1-2). Weber (2011) notes that the details of the painting, including the woman's clothing and jewelry, serve to exoticize the woman's Armenian identity. At the same time, the painting's blank background and focus on the woman's face give her a sense of individuality, potentially humanizing Armenians for a Western audience. However, I want to pay attention to the woman's clothing that is not traditionally Armenian but rather Middle Eastern style. Her clothing in the painting differs from traditional Armenian clothing and instead draws inspiration from Middle Eastern fashion, showing the influence of Orientalism. Traditional Armenian clothing of the period usually included long dresses known as "taraz." These garments featured modest cuts, often with long sleeves and high necklines. However, in the painting, Dzeron is shown wearing a dress with elements commonly associated with Middle Eastern clothing. In particular, bloomers are not a traditional Armenian item; they are usually associated with Middle Eastern and Ottoman fashion. Dzeron's clothing has many golden ornaments, symbolizing wealth. The artist deliberately chose this to maintain the Orientalist perspective prevalent at the time, which aimed to depict non-Western cultures as exotic and "Other."

To see the contrast with Western artists' depictions of Armenians, we can look at paintings of Armenians by Armenian artists - for example, Panos Terlemezian and Stepan Aghajanian's artworks. Panos Terlemezyan was born in Van, Ottoman Empire in 1865. His paintings primarily depict portraits and landscapes that showcase life in Armenia and Armenian culture. Similarly, Stepan Aghajanian, born in Shushi in 1863, spent most of his life in Armenia

after studying in Paris. His paintings also feature portraits and landscapes that reflect the lives of Armenians in their environment.



*Figure 6 "Portrait of the Artist's Mother" painting by Stepan Aghajanian (1900)*

Stepan Aghajanian's "Portrait of the Artist's Mother" (1900) depicts an old woman dressed in all-black clothes wearing a traditional Armenian headdress. She is posed formally and still with one hand resting on the side. The background of the painting includes an Armenian ornamented carpet, emphasizing the woman's Armenian identity. The painting contrasts Henry John Van Lennep's "Armenian Ladies (At Home)" in many ways. Van Lennep's painting features women wearing colorful and luxurious clothing and jewelry, with non-Armenian furniture and decoration. The woman in Aghajanian's portrait exudes a sense of formality and austerity,

lacking the luxurious jewelry and embellishments seen in Van Lennep's painting. In general, Aghajanian's painting depicts a more modest and truthful Armenian woman, in contrast to the exotic depiction of Armenian women in Western portraits.



*Figure 7 "Shepherd from Lori" painting by Panos Terlemezian (1905)*

Panos Terlemezian's "Shepherd from Lori" (1905) is a portrait of a young pastor in traditional Armenian clothing, wearing a Papakha (փափափ), a woolen hat commonly worn by men in the Caucasus region. The shepherd's clothes are simple and modest, typical of the region's traditional clothing with shades of gray, brown, and blue. He carries a knife on his belt, with a metallic and wooden case. This depiction starkly contrasts Louis Dupré's "Wealthy Armenian." Terlemezian's painting shows a more realistic and accurate representation of Armenian clothing

and the lifestyle of an ordinary person from the region.

We saw how Armenians had portrayed Armenians, which seems more natural and closer to Armenian culture. This might be because Armenian artists have a deeper understanding of their own cultural traditions, language, and customs, and they can represent them more authentically in their paintings. Additionally, because Armenian artists have lived through the experiences of being Armenian, they may have a nuanced and insightful perspective on the struggles and triumphs of their people, which is reflected in their art.

### **Orientalism after the Armenian Genocide (1915)**

In addition, the West's and America's representations of Armenia have often centered on its history of genocide and victimhood, further contributing to its Orientalization. In the aftermath of the genocide, the Armenian people were displaced and forced to flee to other parts of the world, including Europe and the United States. This created a diaspora of Armenians who have been vocal in their efforts to raise awareness about the genocide and seek recognition for it. The Armenian Genocide, which occurred in the early 20th century, has been a significant factor in how the West and America have represented Armenia, describing Armenia as a helpless victim in need of powerful Western and American support. While America and the West did provide aid to Armenia after the genocide, they also used the situation as an opportunity to showcase their power and promote themselves as godlike nations to the rest of the world. For instance, during the Armenian Genocide, The Near East Relief charity organization in America created a series of posters to collect donations for the victims, particularly children, and survivors in need. One poster from this series stands out the most.



*Figure 8 "They shall not perish" The contribution poster of Near East Relief, 1918*

It features a powerful image of a woman holding a sword in her hand with a frightened child clinging to her clothing. We can assume that the child symbolizes the vulnerability and helplessness of Armenia as a country under attack. The woman, depicted as a strong and determined character, represents the protective stance of the United States, whose flag is draped over the child, suggesting that they are under the protection of the United States. America is symbolically portrayed as a powerful nation capable of protecting vulnerable Armenia.

## **Orientalism during the Soviet Period**

During the Soviet period, Armenia was still subject to Orientalism, although it took a different form. Hrach Bayadyan (2007) mentions in his short essay "Soviet Armenian Identity and Cultural Representation" during the Soviet period, where was Russian-Soviet Orientalism, he says "Soviet nations and formation of the united Soviet people had peculiarities, which could be characterized as Russian-Soviet Orientalism" (Bayadyan, 2007, p. 198). One way in which this Orientalization manifested was through the Soviet Union's attempts to create Soviet individuals and the Soviet community. The Soviet Union sought to transform Soviet countries into industrialized societies, eradicating traditional practices and promoting a new Soviet identity (Bayadyan, 2007).

In addition, the Soviet Union also brought Orientalist views of Armenia through its cultural policies. Armenian culture was often represented in Soviet culture as alien, emphasizing traditional folk practices and music. This reinforced the idea of Armenia as a primitive and "Other" place and contributed to a wider Orientalist discourse that viewed the East as fundamentally different from the West. Soviet films were a significant part of this effort. They often brought stereotypes about the Caucasus region and its people, including Armenians. These films were widely viewed and played a role in shaping the perceptions of the broad Soviet public about the region and its people. Anisimova (2017), in her article "The post-Soviet "Orient" in stories by Vladimir Makanin and Liudmila Petrushevskai," wrote that Soviet movies depicting Caucasian regions used the prevailing stereotypes of these regions. "As Soviet classics and blockbusters, these films influenced perceptions of the regions among the broad Soviet public. Despite these popular images, the discussion of ethnic difference was largely shaped by official Soviet ideology" (Anisimova, 2017, p. 4). For example, the Soviet movie "Mimino" by Georgiy

Daneliya (1977) tells the story of a Georgian helicopter pilot and an Armenian truck driver who become friends and embark on various adventures together. While on the surface, the movie may seem like a positive portrayal of the friendship between two individuals from different ethnic backgrounds, it can be argued that the movie contains certain Orientalist stereotypes.



*Figure 9 "Mimino" movie poster*

The portrayal of Rubik in the movie "Mimino" perpetuates Orientalist stereotypes about Armenians and people from the Caucasus region. Rubik is depicted as overly emotional about his country, supporting the stereotype that Armenians are obsessed with their homeland. In the movie, Rubik lacks manners and education. For example, in the scene where Valiko is talking on the phone, Rubik frequently interrupts him. Additionally, Rubik and Valiko frequently raise their

voices, portraying people from the Caucasus region as lacking in manners and prone to emotional outbursts. This portrayal further creates negative and reductive ideas about the region and its people. It is important to note that this type of portrayal was not unique to "Mimino" but was a common feature in Soviet-era movies about the Caucasus region. These films were part of a broader Soviet policy of cultural homogenization, where non-Russian cultures and identities were suppressed to conform to Soviet norms (Weeks, 2010).

### **The Influence of Orientalism on Armenian National Identity**

Said argues that Orientalism affects not only the West's representation of the East but also how the East perceives itself. Through centuries of colonialism and imperialism, the West has imposed its own cultural values on the East. The result was that many people in the East began to view their own cultures as backward and uncivilized, and they began to see themselves through those stereotypical lenses. This has had a lasting impact on the East's self-perception, with many people still looking to the West as a development model. Hall also mentions that "Identity is a structured representation which only achieves its positive through the narrow eye of the negative. It has to go through the eye of the needle of the other before it can construct itself" (1991, p. 89). Hall's idea highlights the power dynamic between the West and the East. The West, through its dominant position in the global political and cultural arena, has the power to shape the identity of the East. As a result, the East is forced to define itself with the West and to accept the negative images created by the West. This can be supported by the idea of the "gaze," which is central to Orientalism. The West, through its gaze, constructs a different image of the East. The East, in turn, begins to see itself through the eyes of the West. In this way, the West's Orientalist image becomes a part of the East's identity (Zhong, 2012, p. 2417-2718).



Armenia is not immune to the influence of Orientalism and its impact on self-perception. Armenia has a complex history of being under foreign rule and influence, including Persian, Ottoman, and Russian imperial powers. During this time, Armenians had to navigate and keep their national identity while subjecting external pressures and expectations. As a result, the Armenian self-perception has been shaped by internal and external factors. Indeed contemporary Armenia is a mixture of traditional culture and the culture created due to Orientalist imitations. Also, I want to point out that during the Ottoman Empire, as we already know, Armenians were depicted in Western art and literature as a homogenous group, similar to Muslim countries in the Middle East. This portrayal contributed to a cultural inferiority complex and a desire for Armenians to differentiate themselves from Middle Eastern cultures. Christianity, an integral part of Armenian identity for centuries, symbolized this distinction. As a result, Armenian national identity became closely tied to Christianity and the preservation of Armenian Christian culture.

### **Limitations and avenues for further research**

Researching and writing a capstone project on Orientalism in Armenia has been challenging and rewarding. One of the key challenges that I faced during this project was the lack of available information on the topic. Initially, it took a lot of work to find sources that discussed Orientalism in Armenia, and I found that most of the literature on the subject focused on the Middle East or North Africa. However, after conducting extensive research and seeking help from experts in the field, I found some books, essays, and articles. Despite this progress, it is essential to acknowledge that the available literature on Orientalism in Armenia still needs to be expanded. There are few scholars who have explored this topic, and many of the sources I found were not accessible, due to their restricted access. They were not freely available, and my

university library did not have a subscription with the websites or libraries hosting those sources. As a result, I faced difficulties in obtaining the information I needed. I would have to either purchase the sources or try to find short parts or relevant sections that could provide the necessary insights. This limitation is compounded by the fact that there is still a lack of awareness about how Armenia has been orientalized. This knowledge gap is a significant obstacle to developing a more complete understanding of orientalism in the region.

Another challenge I faced during this project was the time and effort required to conduct thorough research and analysis. The concept of orientalism is complex and multifaceted, and it took significant time to understand the topic thoroughly. Additionally, collecting data and analyzing information from a wide range of sources was a time-consuming process. These challenges made it difficult to begin writing the capstone project, as I needed to feel confident in my understanding of the topic before I could begin to articulate my ideas effectively. In light of these limitations, I want to expand my knowledge on the topic, study it more deeply and write more papers on it in the future.

## **Epilogue**

As I reflect on my capstone project, I am reminded of the power of cultural representations and their impact on shaping our understanding of the world around us. Through my research, I have come to appreciate the complex ways in which Orientalism has shaped perceptions of Armenia, both within and outside the region.

At times, it can be disheartening to recognize how stereotypes and misrepresentations have influenced the world views of Armenia and Armenians. However, as I conclude my project,

I am struck by the resilience of Armenian culture and identity, which have persevered despite centuries of external pressures and influences.

Moving forward, we must continue to challenge and dismantle Orientalist stereotypes, not just for Armenian national identity but for all misrepresented communities to show how diverse and unique cultures we are. I am grateful for the opportunity to explore such a fascinating and important topic. I hope that my work will contribute to a broader conversation around the power of cultural representation and the importance of recognizing and celebrating the diversity of human experience. I want to end my capstone with William Saroyan's quote, "It is simply in the nature of Armenians to study, to learn, to question, to speculate, to discover, to invent, to revise, to restore, to preserve, to make, and to give."

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