



"Black Moon" - Beer Sheva Theater group

Black Moon: Another Oriental Fantasy

A drama about the Bedouin in Israel, written by Moti Averbach, directed by Razi Amitai and performed by Beer Sheva Theater group

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The Bedouin Arabs living in the Negev Desert in southern Israel are among the indigenous Palestinian Arabs who remained in Israel after 1948 and from time to time, they appear as subjects in popular Israeli cultural art forms and events such as novels, plays, museums and tourist attractions. Much of the Bedouins' appeal derives from the fact that, traditionally, they were organized into nomadic or semi-nomadic tribes, who lived in the harsh desert environment and developed their own social, political and legal systems within the context of this unique environment.

After the establishment of the State of Israel, the life of the Negev Bedouin changed radically. Most of the tribes were relocated and all of the Bedouin's land was formally confiscated. In the late 1960s, the government began implementing a program to settle all the Bedouin in urban townships, without taking their traditional lifestyle into consideration, or consulting them in regard to the character of these new communities. Official government rationale for this policy was to provide the Bedouins with the basic modern services a state should provide for its citizens. The government, however, claimed this could not be accomplished for such a widely dispersed population. These policies also coincided with other government aims, such as transferring more Bedouin land to state control and preventing the Bedouin from settling on and demanding rights to their lands.¹ Another method employed by the Israeli government to gain control of Bedouin lands was the establishment of a paramilitary unit called the Green Patrol in 1976. Formally, it was defined as a body meant to preserve nature, oversee state lands and protect them against 'squatters.' In reality, the Green Patrol primarily acts to evict, police and harass those Negev Bedouin living outside the urban townships. Their tactics include destroying Bedouin dwellings, crops and trees, confiscating their animals and intimidating them until they feel forced to leave their lands and move into the townships.

¹ For a more detailed description of the background, see the article by Abu-Saad in this issue.

The play, *Black Moon*, written by Moti Averbach and performed by the theater group of Beer-Sheva under the direction of Razi Amitai, is an effort to portray the Bedouin's modern reality by exploring their conflict with the Israeli government over land rights and the continuing discrimination against women in Bedouin society.

Indigenous peoples around the world share a long history of being defined by their colonizers in the arena of popular culture, as well as in the political, social and academic arenas. Edward Said analyzed this phenomenon in his book *Orientalism* (1978) and numerous subsequent works, in which he examined the way in which Eastern cultures are viewed, described and represented by Western academic scholarship, politics, literature and other art forms. Said's main critique is aimed at how the Western (specifically the British, French and more recently American) economic, political and academic powers have developed a dichotomized discourse in which an inherently superior West is juxtaposed with an Eastern 'Other' according to terms and definitions determined by the West itself. Orientalism has created an image of the Orient as separate, backward, silently different, sensual and passive. It is characterized by despotism and resistance to progress; and since the Orient's value is judged in terms of and in comparison to the West, it is always the 'Other', the conquerable and the inferior.

Inaccuracies and distortions characterize any portrayal of one culture or people by another, therefore these inaccuracies need to be acknowledged and critically evaluated. What sets Orientalism apart is, since the West has dominated the world stage for the past four centuries, its "misunderstanding" and conquest of other cultures by academic or political means has had much more concrete and farther reaching consequences than have the "misunderstandings" of non-Western peoples about the West. The first Orientalists were 19th century scholars who translated the writings of the Orient into English, based on the assumption that an effective colonial conquest required knowledge of the conquered peoples. Thus, Said (1978) asserts that Western study of non-Western peoples was not based on the desire to know those people, but rather on the need and desire to subjugate them, gain access and control over their land and its resources. Indeed, the rise of Orientalism as a way of producing knowledge about the non-West coincides directly with the rise of European exploration and colonization of non-European land and peoples (Brook, 1999). As such, Said's conceptualization and analysis of "Orientalism" has been utilized by many indigenous peoples throughout the world to describe and analyze their own experiences of colonization (Brook, 1999; Burns, 1996; Mohawk, 1989; Pino, 1998; Progler, undated; Shabbas, 1992; Wennie, 2000).

The theoretical work of Said and other indigenous scholars provides an interesting framework for reviewing *Black Moon*, a play written, directed and performed by Jewish Israelis about Negev Bedouin Arabs in Israel today. The plot revolves around an aging Bedouin couple, Abu and Um Yusef, who live in a tent in the Negev desert and who are resisting an Israeli court-order to evict them

from their land. All of their six sons have "deserted" them by moving to the government-planned townships for the Bedouin. The aging Abu Yusef decides to take a young wife who will provide him with a new generation of sons who will fight along with him for the land. He chooses his 24-year-old cousin, Alima, whose father was killed in the 1973 war fighting for the Israelis. Alima, whose mother is also dead, was sent as a young girl to a Jewish boarding school and eventually became a social worker. She was brought by her guardian uncle to visit Abu Yusef, at which time the marriage, as a *fait accompli*, was first announced to Alima, Um Yusef and Yusef (Abu Yusef's eldest son). Alima refused, but was entrapped and eventually agreed to accept the role of bearing sons to help Abu Yusef fight for his land. When Abu Yusef remarried, Um Yusef initially left him to live with her sons in the township, but later returned and soon became like a mother to her husband's new wife. She taught her the secrets of kindling her passion as a woman by dancing with the moon, "her other man." Because Alima left the tent so often at night to do so, Abu Yusef accused her of committing adultery. On the same night the Green Patrol was scheduled to come and evict the family from the land, Abu Yusef was planning to kill Alima (who was by then 7 months pregnant) for committing adultery, or make her prove her innocence using the traditional Bedouin "test of fire." When his eldest son, who had concealed his identity, tried to intervene and save Alima, his own mother killed him. Upon discovering this, Abu Yusef banished himself to the desert, with his young, pregnant wife trailing behind. The Green Patrol arrived to carry out the eviction order and they found only the mother mourning over the body of her son. There was no one left to fight for the land.

Black Moon, touches on a number of interesting and important issues, including the conflict between the Bedouin and the Israeli government over land, the connection between the Bedouin and the desert, polygamy, the status of Bedouin women, the "honor" of Bedouin men and the intergenerational conflict between parents struggling to maintain their traditional way of life and children adapting to "the new reality".

At the outset, the presentation of the land conflict and the relationship between the Bedouin and the government officials policing them seemed to be refreshingly realistic in comparison to portrayals of the Bedouin as aimless wanderers with no attachment to the land. Abu and Um Yusef's attachment to the land was powerfully and authentically presented, as was their relationship to the authorities. While they always extended the customary hospitality and courtesy to the Green Patrol officer who visited them, the look in Abu Yusef's eyes revealed his feeling that he was hosting the enemy. Unfortunately, however, the land issue was lost in the chaos of numerous other issues and conflicts that were introduced and presented in the "same old genre" that so fascinates Western audiences – the primitive, exotic Orient. The implicit message of this representation of the Bedouin land struggle is that they lost the struggle because they are so chaotically exotic, primitive and incapable of change that they are also incapable of keeping the land. This is a self-serving

message that would certainly assuage the conscience of Israeli Jews enthralled by the romantic image of the "desert Bedouin," as their own government pursues policies designed to remove all Bedouin from the land, relocate them to urban townships and relegate this beloved image forever to the arena of nostalgic novels, plays and museums. In reality, however, approximately half of the Negev's 120,000 Bedouin remain steadfast on their land, continuing to resist government efforts to relocate them and the play, *Black Moon*, does not bring us any closer to truly understanding why.

The presentation of several of the other themes, including the relationship with the authorities (Green Patrol), the intergenerational conflict and the position of women in Bedouin society, was marked with the same type of distortions and fabrications commonly found in Orientalism. For example, the officer of the Green Patrol (a paramilitary force known for its use of brutal tactics in policing the Bedouin) was portrayed as a humane, but patronizing, person motivated by liberal values to protect nature from the Bedouin and the Bedouin from themselves. He approached Abu Yusef as a friend - if not even a family member (e.g. he repeatedly referred to Abu Yusef as his father, partook of the generous Bedouin hospitality, brought gifts, urged Abu Yusef to give up his land without a fight for his own good/safety and when alone with Alima, urged her to flee and offered to help her escape). He apparently saw no contradiction between his "close" relationship with the family and his duties to enforce laws designed to destroy their way of life and forcibly remove them from their ancestral lands.

This is strikingly similar to Christopher Columbus' impression of the Arowak and Taino peoples he encountered upon his arrival in the Americas:

They are a gentle and comely people...They are so naïve and so free with their possessions that no one who has not witnessed them would believe it. When you ask for something they have, they never say no. To the contrary, they offer to share with anyone... They willingly traded everything they owned....Columbus, however, did not let his admiration prevent him from taking many of these "gentle and comely people" back to Spain in chains. "With 50 men", he wrote, "we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever we want." (Shabbas, 1992: 2-3).

The contradiction between the Green Patrol officer's affection for the Bedouin and his role in the destruction of their way of life is repeated again and again, in reality, in the larger Israeli society. There are numerous expressions of great affection for the Bedouin and a fascination with this "quiet, loyal group" and their ancient, hospitable and exotic culture while, at the same time, the Israeli government is systematically expelling them from the desert and erasing all traces of their traditional way of life and culture from the land. And, like the sympathetic Green Patrol officer in the play, the same Israeli society that has such a fascination with the Bedouin, by and large remains silent on the subject.

Second, in *Black Moon*, the intergenerational conflict of the Bedouin is often portrayed as a conflict of material values (with Abu Yusef repeatedly referring to his son as *Abu a-shekel*, *ibn al-dollar* - father of the shekel, son of the dollar). This becomes the definition of the intergenerational conflict, while the government policies specifically designed to force the younger generation into the townships by denying them all services (e.g. running water, electricity, roads, local health and educational services) and making it impossible to build even a simple structure in which a new couple can make a home and raise a family, are not even mentioned.

Finally, the story of Alima presents a flashback to the sensual Orientalist fantasies of the 19th and 20th centuries, rather than presenting a realistic picture of the issues women face in Bedouin society today. The scenario of a Bedouin orphan being raised and educated (including university education) within the framework of the Jewish social services adds spice to the story, but is very unrealistic. The function of the extended Bedouin family is to take responsibility for all of its members; thus it is highly unlikely a family would send an orphaned niece off to a Jewish boarding school rather than adopt her into the family. It is even more unlikely that a girl with Alima's background would be reclaimed by her extended family many years later and be forced into becoming the second wife of the "last real Bedouin". While on the surface, the absence of realism in this scenario is disturbing, the underlying message is much more upsetting. This scenario says that it does not matter if a Bedouin woman receives an education or not. Education is not at all respected by her community, nor does it significantly alter her life opportunities. The images presented in the play say, in the end she will still find herself "barefoot and pregnant" and tied figuratively (if not literally) to a tent pole by the harsh traditions and uncompromising hegemony of the Bedouin male.

This scenario is typical of the approach that Westerners, including Western feminists (Croutier, 1989; Minces, 1982) take toward the non-western (and in particular, the Muslim) woman. She remains part of a static objective reality; as opposed to the West, in which women progress over time. As the Western feminist Minces writes:

While women elsewhere gradually liberated themselves – to some extent – from the total supremacy of men, most women in the Muslim world continued to be totally subordinate. They live under a system which has barely changed despite the undeniable evolution of their societies (Minces, 1982:14).

The struggle of women in today's changing Bedouin society is real and vitally important, but the playwright of *Black Moon* fails to address this struggle and falls right into the Western tradition of not "reconstructing real-life women, but the Orientalist fantasy of them" (Maryams.Net-Articles, undated, p. 8). As such, the play fails to deal both with the real issues of polygamy and its social

implications and with the role and status of women in the changing socio-political reality of the Negev Bedouin today.

Recent research among Negev Bedouin parents reveals that a growing majority wants their children (both sons and daughters) to receive a good education and use it (Abu-Saad et al, 1998). Hundreds of young Bedouin women have attended teachers' colleges and have become teachers. At Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, there is a scholarship fund especially designated for female Bedouin university students. This group has grown in number from eight students in 1994 to 120 in 2001, twenty-two of whom are in graduate programs (Perspective: Bedouin Students at BGU, 2000). These young women have worked hard to obtain an education and believe in its capacity to give them more power over their destiny and development, as individuals and as a people. *Black Moon*, however, conveys an opposing message, one that is still colored by a colonialist, Oriental view of Bedouin society.

Given its orientalist approach, this play functions to suppress rather than illuminate the authentic human reality of the Negev Bedouin in Israel today, presenting instead a comfortingly stereotypical picture of Israel's 'tragic, noble savages'. Brook (1999) warned anyone doing intercultural performance work of the danger of falling into the trap of orientalism as they "speak *about* as well as presuming to speak *for* the non-Western Other." From an indigenous perspective, this is indeed what happens in *Black Moon*.

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