

Unknown portrayal of modern egypt in edward lane's book "manners and customs of t...

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Edward Lane's *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, first written in 1836, is now a classic which was formerly deemed the most accurate, unknown portrayal of 'modern' Egypt. This book tries to be less contemptuous of the Egyptian culture contrary to earlier studies shown in the west that had depicted Egypt as both barbaric and uncivilized due to Islam or as a fixed remnant of its Pharaonic past. Although Edward Lane is prejudiced by a belief in British cultural superiority, he does dive into great detail to shape almost every feature of Egyptian life opposing those who still associate it as the once glorious Ancient Egypt.

The book comprises of 36 chapters (including indices) which are laden with detailed descriptions and illustrations that follow their respective titles. The chronology of this book is worth noting: it begins with a brief and general introduction of the capital's population and its residential architecture and then directly jumps into an impeccably detailed depiction of how Egyptian men and women dress. From how the 'kohl' and 'henna' are applied, the significance of the turban and many other details, constitute the beginning of this book: which seems to be created to attract the western reader rather than give a better account of the overall picture of their culture.

Although the book does describe housing and culture more deeply in later chapters, it seems as though Lane is trying to hook the reader from the start with the most notable difference between the west and the east: through their appearance. Speaking of appearances, there is an excerpt in the text worth highlighting as it contests the books aims at describing the Egyptians as 'modern'. "The Muslim Egyptians are a mixed race. Copts who became proselytes to the faith of El-Islam, have resulted in the production of a race

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bearing, in general, much resemblance to the ancient Egyptians; whose type was predominantly Caucasian..." (Chapter I, pg. 26)

Therefore, it seems that Lane also associates the period of the Ancient Egyptians as Egypt's glory days, and so a critical reader of this book would be able to notice Lane's biases on several cases. What Lane chooses to depict in this book resonates with how Edward Said introduces the structure of Orientalism, as a "European representation of the Orient", making Egypt seem as a spiritual and exotic place without considering its scientific and civilized aspects; although, his objectives were to argue that modern Egypt is no longer under the umbrella of its Pharaonic past. So what is Lane's true position and objective behind this book, is it to become orientalized?

Lane's significance lies in his role as the introducer of ideas on the Near East which are more accurate than previous studies of that time. According to Said, "Lane was able to submerge himself among the natives, to live as they did, to conform to their habits..." (Orientalism pg. 160) Consequently for Said, Lane's residence in Egypt (the orient) is a form of scientific investigation which developed his knowledge on Islamic Studies. Lane is thus seen as a 'user', maintaining a scientific impartiality while being a discreet westerner in Egypt. This statement is shaped through Lane's interactions with the society, like praying at the mosque and refraining from wine and pork consumption. The sincerity behind these actions is debatable and is mostly regarded as an approach to advance in his research. Because of his supercilious attitude towards these interactions Said states that Lane is keen on making himself an authority on the Orient.

Edward Lane has undoubtedly presented England, and Europe in general, with an account of Egypt as a lived experience, but was this account at the expense of many Egyptians who were used for his own benefit? The ulterior motives behind Lane's work can never truly be confirmed but it is worth considering due to the time and context within which it was written.