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Subtle Orientalism: Moroccan Self-Criticism and Poor Hygiene as Tools for Western Representations

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Abstract*— By analyzing Jeffrey Tayler's Glory in a Camel's Eye (2003) and Tahir Shah's The Caliph's House (2006), this paper considers the more elusive elements of Orientalism in contemporary travel writing . While earlier colonial-era writers were less subtle, often in obvious terms suggesting backward and undeveloped narratives to the point of being almost negative—these visceral accounts are bound up with the skillful deployment of local voices that serve as a weaponized device for endorsing Western constructions. They often use the self-critical words of Moroccans to disguise their prejudices, granting them an appearance of impartiality and legitimacy. The paper argues that even in its most nuanced form, teaching culture through such subtle comparison sustains Orientalist frameworks by comparing a "modern" West with the primitive East. Using a more subtle, strategic representation of Western dominance as instantiation enables the study to show in scrutinizing travelogue passages that local voices of Morocco had been weaponized to promote/propagate white supremacy and live among larger narration for cultural imperialism. This study also explores how these travelogues capitalize on representations of dirt, poor hygiene, and otherness in Moroccan life, serving to highlight how depictions of uncleanliness and animal-like imagery continue to dehumanize and exoticize non-Western peoples.

***Keywords*— Orientalism, otherness, travel writing, stereotyping, stereotypes**

INTRODUCTION

For a long time, travel literature has served to forge and sustain images of the exotic and primitive East. It has long been a site for perpetuating a fantasy that preaches a simple story. It contains the same set piece with potentially different players but always with a Western cast. The narrative is as follows: The traveler journeys out of "his" civilized territory and into the woefully primitive one, falling momentarily under "their" spell and then waking up to the realization that the poor East is but a set piece where "they" (non-Western cultures) perform cultural "theater" for "us" (Westerners). The same story is told differently today in every travelogue but with a simple punchline that is coy about calling non-Western cultures "inferior" or "uncivilized". This study explores how these strategies operate and what they reveal about the enduring nature of Orientalism in contemporary travel writing. Specific passages will be analyzed from two travel accounts written in the 21st century and compared to those written in past centuries. This comparison will uncover similarities, differences, and developments that took shape in the travel writing genre. This essay also examines how contemporary travel writing keeps using clichés, mainly the 'dirty' and 'filthy' other. Jeffrey Tayler's *Glory in a Camel's Eye* describes Moroccan life via many allusions to inadequate sanitation, hence our main attention will be on his work. This paper will show how the genre of travel writing still depends on well-known clichés to appeal to Western readers by contrasting Tayler's work with colonial-era travelogues, including John Davidson's *Notes Taken During Travels in Africa* and Edith Wharton's *In Morocco.*

Local Voices as Tools for Western Validation

Glory in a Camel's Eye (2003) depicts the Moroccan culture, manner, and way of life as primitive. Although Tayler does not outright say that 'they' are uncivilized, he uses what Moroccan people say when he converses with

them to prove their innate primitiveness. In common practice, the average writer in travel writing acknowledges the lack of civilization through direct language and concise depictions of the aspects of the culture he views as backward. Writers also make comparisons between the East and the West, usually insinuating a discourse to the effect of 'we are better than they are'. However, this is not true in Jeffrey Tayler's travelogue. During his interactions and dialogues with Moroccan people, he documented their reflections and criticism about their culture and, interestingly, that is what he chose to include in his book. The following passage demonstrates this perfectly well:

"I think tourism is great," he replied. "I wish we Arabs had the same curiosity about the world as Nasranis. Look at Arabs when they get money: all they do is spend it on booze and sex. Their heads are empty—they're just animals. The Saudis, the Emiratees, they're donkeys with no culture at all. By the way, what are your traditions concerning meat?" (Tayler, 2003, p. 106).

Jeffrey Tayler subtly presents Moroccan culture, customs, and methods of life as primitive. Rather than calling the Moroccan people uncivilized, Tayler uses their voices to support this primitiveness. Including the opinions and complaints of Moroccan people serves as proof and helps Tayler effectively convey his ideas. This strategy helps him to avoid direct criticism, therefore giving his story authenticity and objectivity. It looks as if the criticism comes from within the society, thereby confirming his pre-built beliefs. The excerpt above describes a Moroccan who bemoans Arabs' lack of cultural awareness and interest, especially those of wealthy Gulf states. This self-criticism supports preconceptions of primitiveness and decadence that fit Tayler's perspective without his personally making the assertion. Moreover, the remark made about how Arabs spend their money is a direct smear of the Arab image and behavior. Only this time it is articulated by a Moroccan person rather than a Western travel writer. Thus, it appears from an insider's point of view, which gives the portrayal greater validity and credibility. Usually, travel writers compare the West and the rest by stressing Eastern countries' lack of infrastructure, cleanliness, or education. They then juxtapose these with Western achievements. When a Moroccan describes rich Arabs as "donkeys with no culture at all," for instance, it implies that Westerners (Nasranis, a term Moroccans often use to refer to foreigners) are more civilized, enlightened, and cultured. The Nasrani way of life is thus always superior in the eyes of the Moroccan population, which often aligns with Westerners' beliefs. Tahir Shah, author of *Arabian Nights (*2009) and *The Caliph's House* (2007), also did this multiple times in his works. In the following examples, he uses the same tactic that Tayler relied on which is to highlight Moroccan voices:

"Don't think for a minute people are going to be like Europeans," he said. "They may be wearing the latest Paris fashions, but in their minds, they're Orientals." François paused to tap a fingertip to his temple. "In there," he said, "it's The Arabian Nights" (Shah, 2007, p. 23).

"I learned to work hard in America," he said one afternoon. "Over there people just get on with it. They don't sit about making up excuses, feeling sorry for themselves, or drinking mint tea all day long. If you work hard in the U.S., you can make good money and," he added, "you can get respect" (ibid, p. 109).

By tapping his temple and saying, "In there, it's *The Arabian Nights*," François paints the picture that Moroccans live in a fantastical, pre-modern world. Westerners love reading about the *Arabian Nights* and usually associate that world with Morocco and other Oriental countries. Shah's portrayal of Moroccans as mentally living in *The Arabian Nights* mirrors Tayler's portrayal of Moroccans as primitive and unclean. Both authors believe Morocco to be a place stuck in time and fundamentally different from the progressive West. William Burroughs famously expressed disdain for the Moroccan people and their customs.

"The mistake Burroughs made, which prevented him from getting on with Moroccans and living among them, was that he trampled on their traditions and customs without the slightest concession to civility or courtesy, in contrast to Bowles, who was astute enough to adapt to the local culture. Burroughs, however, considered himself above this kind of humility, as he wrote to Brion Gysin in Paris: 'I have to leave before I open fire in Tangier's ridiculous people with my laser gun'" (Choukri & Shukrī, 2008, p. 172).

Initially, Tayler was reluctant to go to Morocco because he said he would rather go to any Arab country except Morocco. This indicates a preconceived negative attitude. His writings, similar to his demeanor, reveal discomfort, especially with proselytizing, hygiene, faux guides, and primitiveness. William Burroughs' experience in Morocco, particularly in Tangier, reflects a similar disdain. Burroughs disrespected Moroccans because he loathed their habits and beliefs. Burroughs placed himself above the humility required to fit local culture, as the passage above notes. Burroughs's negative perspective of Moroccan culture as well as his incapacity to adapt are confirmed by his hatred and contempt for the people of Tangier. His lack of integration is much more conspicuous than Tayler's since his actions alienate Moroccan people and openly defy local norms. His comment on wanting to "open fire" on the people of Tangier captures his bitterness and incapacity to live in peace with the population. Shah and Tayler's

inclusion of Moroccan voices serves a similar function, albeit more subtly. By including Moroccan voices that criticize their own culture, the authors provide more credibility, authenticity, and insider knowledge which then betters the reader's vicarious experience. On one hand, the authors claim to demystify the East, and on the other hand, their narratives do the exact opposite which is the perpetuation of Orientalist stereotypes. The use of these voices to criticize their own culture serves one purpose: to present the East as a land of inherent difference and backwardness. It is a technique that enables travel authors to interact with the exotic other. This type of writing challenges the preconceptions of the Western reader while fulfilling their need for adventure.

Comparing Early Colonial Narratives and Modern Travel Writing

It is also noteworthy that Shah makes direct comparisons between the East and the West. He emphasizes, for instance, the lack of timeliness in the Draa Valley specifically and compares how Moroccan people prefer squandering time in Cafés.

"Punctuality and timetables were concepts that hadn't reached the Draa Valley" (Shah, 2009, p. 254).

Shah has various phrases that begin with "In the West, we…" or "In the East, …", in which he conveys the differences between sides of the world that are starkly different. In the 20th and 19th centuries, writers used more vulgar and patronizing language to describe Morocco and its people. A case in point is Alec John Dawson's *Things Seen In Morocco* where he refers to people as savages:

"We of the West, with our wireless telegraphy, and our Science Snippets for the multitude, are apt to think that we have said the last word and thought the last thought in most matters. We are apt to forget, too, that many of our most wonderful and well-trumpeted discoveries were matters of common knowledge many centuries ago to folk whose cuticle is different from ours and whom we regard as savages. I suppose this is a fibre of our wholesome British pride, and of that royal confidence in ourselves which alone makes it possible for us to dominate a very large share of the earth's surface. So far, so good. But the under-rating of the powers of the "savages" and "semi-savages" is little misleading, and involves an occasional shock of surprise for us" (Dawson, 1904, p. 163).

Examining these quotes reveals a clear difference in portrayal between Morocco and the West, notably the UK and America, from clearly negative language to more subdued techniques of stressing perceived distinctions between them. Early 20th-century travel writers employed blatantly harsh language. Dawson's book, *Things Seen In Morocco*, confirms this. One excellent illustration of how Western superiority was displayed is his calling of Moroccans as "savages". Words like "savages" and "semi-savages" indicate a condescending attitude widespread in colonial literature due to their dehumanizing of people. Dawson claims that Westerners downplay the knowledge and skills of people they consider "savages." Still, this insight does not lessen Dawson's attitude of superiority. Instead, it clarifies the "shock of surprise" Westerners experience when learning sophisticated knowledge or techniques that belong to non-Western countries. Through their sophisticated depictions, writers such as Shah and Tayler nevertheless do the same basic act of exoticizing and denigrating the people they encountered. In the following quotes, Tayler uses a Moroccan person's voice to portray a deeply negative view of Morocco.

"Moroccans are liars and cheats who think only of money. They have no culture and understand nothing. They do ill even to their own family" (Tayler, 2003, p. 121).

"There is racism here," he went on to say, "between Arabs and Berbers. I've lived in Europe, so I know what racism is, but it's not quite as bad here as it is there. I've never been to America, but I think Americans are very conscious and developed. America is a land of reasonable people, and reasonable people aren't racist. Unlike here. Oh, and I'm not from here, from this village, that is—God forbid. I'm just visiting for a wedding. I'm really from the Sous. Does that mean anything to you?" (ibid, p. 159).

This method implies that these critiques are part of the internal dialogue within Moroccan society, rather than external judgments. By showing that these strong words came out of a Moroccan person's mouth, Tayler highlights internalized negative perceptions within the society. In the second quote, a Moroccan discusses racism between Arabs and Berbers in which he contrasts it with experiences in Europe and idealized views of America. The speaker expresses a belief in American exceptionalism regarding racism. By showing how Moroccans criticize their own culture without having to do any criticism himself, Tayler highlights internal divisions and societal issues. This mirrors Tahir Shah's approach, where local Moroccan people articulate perceptions that align with Western stereotypes of the East. For example, in *The Caliph's House,* Kamal mentions that life was better in America because you can "make good money" and you can "get respect" (Shah, 2007, 109). This presents the East as a place of inherent backwardness and moral deficiency. The second quote's idealization of America as a land of reason and lesser racism illustrates a common theme in travel literature: the backward East and the advanced West. Dawson's *Things Seen in Morocco's* juxtaposition shows the idea that Eastern societies require Western enlightenment. Tayler's

usage of local voices places Western civilization as better. According to these books, Moroccans understand their flaws relative to Western norms.

"for the hotels of Tangier, in the midst of the squalor and wretchedness of a degraded and degenerate Mohammedan population, are European in their commodiousness and comfort, and in their luxury almost Parisian" (Campbell, 1897, p. 19).

"but expressed his pleasure at finding me to be of that nationality" (ibid, p. 21)

"And he did it like a Briton" (Dawson, 1904, p. 112).

The writings of Arthur Campbell and Alec John Dawson vividly show colonial viewpoints. Their travelogues present Britishness as a sign of superiority. According to Campbell's account, the "squalor" of the indigenous populace highlights his feeling of cultural supremacy. From this vantage point, Moroccan society is perceived to be in a condition of deterioration while European influences are made to look like civilizing forces. In his "he did it like a Briton," Dawson's pride in British nationality supports the idea of British exceptionalism. This type of story presents the British as essentially above, able to impose refinement and order on what they consider to be wild and primal settings. The writers aimed to be courteous messengers from society. By juxtaposing the "squalor and wretchedness" of Tangier with the "luxury" of European hotels, Campbell says the West lends comfort and civilization to an otherwise deteriorated setting. Similarly, Dawson's "he did it like a Briton" expresses pride in Britishness, therefore implying that British actions are moral and a benchmark of behavior. Tayler's portrayal of "modern" living in the Moroccan Sahara in the following passage exposes a critical, perhaps condescending viewpoint that contrasts his Western ideas of modernism against the reality of life in this area:

"By any measure, however, Assa was modern. Unfortunately, "modern" in the Moroccan Sahara equates with concrete row houses where the plumbing backs up until people prefer to "go" in the streets, where temperatures inside exceed those outside by a factor of ten, and where the screaming of one child echoes from house to house until it kicks off a crying jag among all the tots in the neighborhood. Modern also means soldiers in sandals peddling bicycles, plainclothes policemen, recognizable by their crewcuts and urban dress, and a walled-off palace with a crenelated roof and white-trimmed windows for the royally appointed governor. And modern of course means electricity, much of which goes to illuminating the governor's residence" (Tayler, 2003, p. 203).

Taylor delivers a somewhat dismal depiction of the concrete homes, leaky pipes, and intolerable temperatures that define this "modern" development. His rhetoric points to a disdain for current living circumstances which he depicts as unsuitable. Described in a slightly sinister manner, the presence of military and plainclothes police suggests an aura of control and surveillance that Taylor links with modernity. Emphasizing a lack of development by separating the daily life of the people from the ruling elite, the walled-off castle of the "royally appointed governor" stresses the illumination of the governor's mansion which makes most of the available power used. Thus, this leads to the emphasis on the unequal distribution of modern comforts to the favored class versus the whole population. Taylor seems to be criticizing a specific type of "modernity" that the Moroccan Sahara is being forced upon, one marked by inadequate living circumstances, militarization, and the concentration of power and resources within the hands of a governing elite. From this point of view, the trappings of development seem to be disconnected from the reality that the common people experience, which results in Tayler's relatively negative and critical evaluation of "modern" life in this area. Perhaps reflecting a Western perspective on what "modernity" should look like, his tone and word choice expose a certain degree of cultural remoteness and judgment. Tayler is suggesting, all things considered, that Morocco's modernism is far behind that of any Western nation. He argues that actual "modernity" can only be ascribed to Western nations, hence his picture of the situation in the Moroccan Sahara is justified.

The Role of Dirt and Hygiene in Exoticizing the 'Other'

During his encounters with Moroccan people in their homes, Jeffrey Taylor shed light numerous times on dirtiness and low hygiene—a recurring trope Western travel writers use in their travelogues for their representations. This was also evident and consistent in John Davidson's *Notes Taken During Travels in Africa,* as exemplified in these passages:

"met many beautiful women, if they were only clean" (Davidson, 1839, p.96).

"on returning, saw some very fine women, but they were beastly dirty" (ibid, p. 95).

"I confess I was pleased with the candour of mine host, who said, when taking- away his carpet, that it was full of fleas, and he supposed I should prefer my own fleas to his. I wish, with all my heart, he had taken his mats also ; we never had so bad a night—almost devoured by vermin". (ibid, p. 63–64).

When Alice Morrison, author of *My 1001 Nights*, arrived at Marrakesh's oldest tannery, she and Najib, one of the people working there, worked on turning animal hides into usable leather. To do that, they were required to engage in a lot of dirty work, including getting in a tank full of gypsum

and poison to remove the hair from the hide. In addition, Morrison worked with pigeon excrement that has ammonia which acts as a softening agent to make the hides more malleable. Though this was repulsive and uncomfortable, Morrison loved it. With a smile on her face, she joyfully tried these 'dirty' experiences despite the inconveniences. Jeffrey Tayler, however, on multiple occasions seemed to have an issue with the filth, squalor and flies he saw. This trope is a technique of 'otherness' that Tayler purposefully overused in his book that paves the way for the denigration of the Moroccan image. The following passages perfectly illustrate this denigration:

"Eventually only the meat remained. The marabout grabbed it and pulled it apart into chunks, which he distributed to all. Grease glazed everyone's hands, and flies were thick on our slippery fingers" (Tayler, 2003, p. 67).

"We entered. The pen was in fact a home. An old black woman sat on the earthen floor tending But a gas burner, making tea, and covering her eyes with a threadbare veil. Her teenage daughter, gaunt, wearing mud-caked rags, lay next to her. The family shared the room, which was open on one side, with goats; there was a stench of scat. Hassan and the woman exchanged greetings, and told each other news about family members. Flies buzzed loudly around the scat" (ibid, p. 125).

Thick flies and hands crusted with grease help to capture the physicality and messiness of the meal. This image generates a situation that accentuates unpleasantness and dirtiness. The phrase "slippery fingers" helps the reader to see less hygienic standards. The dirt and discomfort of the scene are exacerbated by the reference to shared space with animals and the scat. Western travel writers have historically relied heavily on animal images, analogies, sometimes zoological terms, and descriptions to compare Oriental people to nature, particularly by referring to donkeys, camels, dogs, and mules—often presented in appalling circumstances. Edith Wharton, for example, in her book *In Morocco* used animal language to describe the people, turning them into animals meant for observation and investigation. Terms such as "big friendly creatures", "swarm of gnats", "these infants buzzed" and "naked as lizards" (Wharton, 1927, p. 16). The buzzing flies in Tayler's quote, which holds a striking similarity to Wharton's "buzzing infants", intensify the unsanitary conditions. Tayler made four more "fly" references in his book:

"The flies settled on our clothes and hung on tight" (Tayler, 2003, p. 149).

"He set off for the village, the flies resettling over his firwal. The camels turned east, looking homeward, wagging their tails. Hassan stretched out on his foam mattress. I lay down again on the flat earth, put my hat over my face, and tried to sleep, feeling flies skitter over my forearms" (ibid, p. 147).

"Two hours after that, with the sun gone and the flies asleep, we grilled and ate the meat" (ibid, p. 148).

There is nothing new about Tayler's work in terms of this emphasis on filth. Many travel authors who chronicle their adventures in non-Western nations apply similar representational practices. In Paul Theroux's *Dark Star Safari*, for instance, he describes crowded, filthy markets and run-down villages, therefore stressing the chaotic, messy, and deteriorated conditions in Africa. His story regularly contrasts these sequences with his unease and difficulties with these awkward settings. Bruce Chatwin's *In Patagonia* highlights the poor living circumstances and the untamed, unclean environments that help to exoticize the rural South of America and set it apart from Western life. Dalrymple's portrayal of India in *City of Djinns: A Year in Delhi* uncovers depictions of poverty and degradation where he juxtaposes modern dirt and damage with historic beauty, therefore magnifying the exotic quality of the "other." Travel writers exoticize the people they investigate and present them as basically different. Emphasizing the bad features of a country leads to a distinction between the "civilized" West and the "uncivilized" rest. Travel writers from past generations claimed to be more civilized by exposing what is wrong with "others"; today's current travel writers continue to mimic their ancestors. Since the works of Jeffrey Tayler and Paul Theroux were produced in the twenty-first century, it proves that othering native populations in foreign places by showcasing dirt, and poor hygiene, has persisted in contemporary travel writing. Jeffrey Tayler's emphasis on uncleanliness in his representation of Moroccan life is yet another trope that was passed on through generations of travel writers. Here are additional passages from *Glory in a Camel's Eye* that highlight it:

"Inside, Berber boys, kinky-haired and barefoot, snot-nosed and violent, passed around a bottle of Fanta" (ibid, p. 157).

"I had been suffering stomach upsets, possibly owing to my companions' poor hygiene habits" (ibid, p. 182).

The hygiene habits of Tayler's companions are there to prove that they are the cause of his stomach upsets. He is thus sick because of them. It implies that he is cleaner, while they are dirty. He is blaming his sickness on them, showing again that this would not have happened had he not been exposed to these people with poor hygiene habits. One important reason why these depictions exist in travel writing is simply because it is entertaining and interesting to read. Therefore, travel writers contribute to the persistence and profitability of the genre. Tayler emphasizes exotic and unclean aspects of his destinations

because these themes sell well in the Western market. Readers fantasize about adventure and exploration in exotic places and the portrayal of Morocco as a place of adventure matches readers' expectations—where bad, good, and magical things happen. Hence, such portrayals cater to this demand. Ultimately, this makes otherness, showing 'others' as fundamentally different, a lucrative business even in contemporary travel writing. However, travel writers with postcolonial backgrounds must balance their political awareness with a genre that has always depended on producing and profiting from otherness. Though Tayler wants to show a more demystified image, his evocative account of Moroccan life can be seen as maintaining these images. Writers like Tayler seek to document their encounters and highlight diverse cultures. However, the intrinsic tendencies of the genre reinforce already strong preconceptions, hence leading to the othering of people.

"In a postcolonial era, 'otherness' is a profitable business, even if the exotica it throws up might look very different in kind from those of earlier times and places. Postcolonial travel writers, in this context, are necessarily embattled: they must struggle to match their political views with a genre that is in many ways antithetical to them—a genre that manufactures 'otherness' even as it claims to demystify it. And that is reliant even as it estranges on the most familiar of Western myths" (Holland & Huggan, 1998, p.77).

The quotation above implies that travel writing seeks to demystify other cultures. This leads one back to classic Western myths and clichés. By presenting Morocco in this way, Tayler appeals to a deep-seated Western obsession with and contempt of the other. As already discussed, Paul Theroux, Bruce Chatwin, Jeffrey Tayler, and William Dalrymple make references to dirt and the lack of hygiene in their travel narratives. Using this language is consistent with the genre's reliance on exoticism and otherness to engage Western readers. The focus on uncleanliness by all these travel writers illustrates how contemporary travel writing, despite its postcolonial context, continues to carry on the work of previous travel writers by employing and perpetuating familiar tropes and stereotypes simply because they sell well in Western markets. Jeffrey Tayler's *Glory in a Camel's Eye* is a prime example of how postcolonial travel writing may still create otherness and profit from exoticism. This dependence on well-known Western myths and stereotypes guarantees that otherness maintains the money flowing through the travel writing business and Tayler's focus on the unhygienic conditions and exoticism of Moroccan life echoes these old Western narratives about the East being dirty, chaotic, and primitive.

CONCLUSION

Though using more subtle strategies than their colonial predecessors, Jeffrey Tayler and Tahir Shah show in their works how modern travel literature continues to amplify Orientalist preconceptions. Moroccan voices expressing self-critical opinions generate a patina of authenticity and objectivity. As a result, it covers their underlying presumptions of Western superiority. Whether via direct commentary or the inclusion of local voices, such portrayals of Morocco eventually help to cement the binary difference between a contemporary West and a primitive, backward East. This study has demonstrated, that Orientalism is still a recurring motif in travel writing. Though it has changed with the years, it still affects Western perceptions of the East to maintain cultural hierarchies. The books under discussion in this paper are excellent illustrations of how travel writing shapes the more general debate on cultural imperialism. Jeffrey Tayler's *Glory in a Camel's Eye* corroborates this tendency to depend on Western mythology and exoticism. His novel purposefully highlights the dirt and filth that penetrates Moroccan life. This allows us to conclude that by following this method, Tayler reflects the depictions of past travel authors including Edith Wharton and John Davidson. It is evident from contrasting Tayler's travelogue with that of other era-colonial writers that, despite their postcolonial setting, the genre of travel writing stays bound to its colonial past.

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