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The Representation(s) of Morocco in Elias Canetti's *The Voices of Marrakesh*

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ABSTRACT

Elias Canetti's (2009) the Voices of Marrakesh depicts a set of cultural features about Marrakesh city, Morocco. In such travel writing text, different are the issues of representation about the country which are discursively figured in negative perspectives. Relatedly, the gaze of the Westerner theoretically and practically helps target the extent to which the Moroccan landscape and identity are constructed. At this point, debates about the nature of concepts like the 'civilized', the 'primitive', and the 'savage' are very common and form the intellectual background for the travel writer. The dichotomy between center and periphery is highly examined in the present article since there are images or processes of decentralizing Morocco. Following post-colonial analytical approach, the current article problematizes the way the West represents Morocco and its cultural geography. Importantly, the article focuses on Moroccan geography which is given little if not no importance pretending that it is a deserted space where the uncivilized natives dwell. It serves nothing but fear and mystery. This paper serves as a basis for the readership to understand the way Morocco is portrayed by Canetti. By representing Morocco in different images, Canetti ideologically generates a socio-cultural discourse about Arabs and about Morocco in particular. By doing so, he confirms the fact that there is no innocent text including travel narrative.

Within the interdisciplinary field of Cultural Studies, too much academic research has been conducted on the way the West represents the Orient. With the construction of stereotypes about the Orient, Morocco is no exception as it is being viewed as 'backward', 'black', with deserted lands and the West as civilized, white, and the like. Such binary oppositions are examined through what is called travel literature.

The word travel implies that there is either a physical movement from one place to another; or a movement which occurs in the mind without any actual movement on earth. In the first, there is a movement which can usually occur inside the traveler's geographical region or outside it regardless of distance. In the second, travel takes place in and through ideas. It is an activity which does not precede the human brain, but it is considered as a travel though it does not actually happen in reality. The idea and the act of travel should not be separated from writing. This is because through travel many travelers tend to write about their experiences in the countries they set foot and live in. By doing so, they participate in enriching literature: more particularly travel books --an example of which is precisely the center of interest in this study. Such literary works, as constituents of travel literature, assist, to a certain degree, in understanding people and their culture(s).

Traditionally, and even now, people did not hesitate to travel for many reasons. They tend to travel for the purpose of pleasure (grand tour) or to discover a place, to look for jobs, to be cured from an illness, to visit some relatives, to study, and the like. However, there is, perhaps, another chief purpose behind such an activity which is related to the mission of some people who

were sent once to foreign and/or colonized countries as missionaries or those who were exiled or imprisoned due to certain reasons mainly political ones.

Anthropologists and ethnographers are vivid examples of people involved in travel and devote much of their time and effort to it. They both tend to write about the areas they visit and its inhabitants. The task of an anthropologist is to see, record, and write the places s/he visits and its natives, while the work of an ethnographer is essentially based on "participant observation,"[2] mainly through a fieldwork. But what imports here is the work of a traveler precisely that of a travel writer.

The work of the two categories mentioned is different from that of travel writers. In this sense, travel writers who set foot in countries other than their own ones, gather and record information about such countries—without focusing on fieldwork for example. Hence, one cannot talk about travel, especially for those people, without mentioning a produced literature called travel literature. Briefly, travel writers are meant to write or represent the landscapes they set foot in and the people of these areas and their culture. However, the very representation traced by Anglo-American travel writers, mainly during the colonial and the post-colonial times, consists of an ambivalent discourse inherent of stereotypes about the Orient.[3]

Travel writing, also known as travel narrative, and travel accounts, conveys information about the geographies and the human nature and engenders a multiplicity of discursive practices that range from the political, to the social, to the religious, to the cultural etc. It mirrors the cultures, values and beliefs of the natives as well as those of the travel writers themselves. It also represents their geography including landscapes, mountains, rivers, deserts, oases, streets, castles, houses, and rooms.

Travel literature, recognized as a non-fiction sub-genre of literature, carries a number of meanings and reflects the travelers' experiences in the visited place(s) about which they inscribe their experience and their interaction with the peoples of these place(s)—by articulating their voices and expressing their reactions—through travelogues. James Clifford (1997) writes:

> Travel emerged as an increasingly complex range of experiences: practices of crossing and interaction that troubles the localism of many assumptions about culture. In these assumptions authentic social existence is or should be centered or circumscribed places -like the gardens where the word culture derived its European meanings. Dwelling was understood to be the local ground of collective life, travel a supplement; roots always precede routes (p. 3).

"Roots" and "Routes," two terms mentioned by Clifford, are of authentic use in travel and travel literature. Roots of travelers are different from the routes they take in their travel. Simply put, the origin(s) of a traveler should not be isolated from her/his work which itself comes as a result of crossing boundaries or traveling through routes. Travel narrative emphasizes direct observation of the events and the people –mainly the ex-colonized-- being narrated.

From another angle, some writers consider travel accounts more or less as autobiographies. Bowles (2010) argues that "there is a category which in its approach and subject-matter comes closer to autobiography than to travel, but which because it deals with the displaced person in relatively unfamiliar surroundings is conceded to be a part of travel literature" (p. 241). Put differently, travel writers rely on observing the life practices of the people they have in mind and their geographical space and place. Travel literature can by no means be dissociated from the involvement of the geography of the places to which travel writers belong as well as those they visit.

However, the work of a travel writer may be understood from a different viewpoint in that the travel writer may be a provider of a form of translation. According to Piotr, K. and Karin, L. (2007), the travel writer:

> Creates a version of another culture, producing what might be described as a form of translation, rendering the unknown and unfamiliar in terms that can be assimilated and understood by readers back home. The dominant model is one of domestication, making the unfamiliar accessible through a set of strategies that enable the reader to travel

[2] The term participant observation (Bennett, K. (2002) refers to the process of understanding the everyday lives of other people from their perspective. It requires researchers to situate themselves in the lives of others and to allow their voices and actions to influence the research agenda. To study cultures, subcultures, and the value systems and social structures, researchers work within the patterns of relationships in a given setting. This method embraces a range of fieldwork experiences with researchers adopting different roles and levels of participation depending upon the demands of the research context. (cited in Pamela Shurmer, S. p. 139).

[3] The term Orient, according to the West, is any land which does not belong to the West.

> vicariously guided by the familiar. The travel writer operates in a hybrid space, a space in-between cultures, just as the translator operates in a space between languages (p.22).

Through writing, the travel writer's work aims at transmitting a culture in the sense that s/he shapes the ideas and culture(s) of unfamiliar spaces and audiences; hence, operating in a hybrid in-between space. Canetti acts as a mediator of two cultures that are dissimilar in terms of space and place. Travel writers produce travel books, constituting, as Casey Blanton (2002) asserts, "vehicles whose main purpose is to introduce us to the world other, and that typically they dramatized an engagement between self and world" (p.XI). Nevertheless, it is essential not to neglect the importance of language in the task of the travel writer since s/he is, according to Bahdad (1994), "displaced by other forms of knowledge" (p. 1).

Language is thus a tool that can be used to render the unfamiliar domesticated and understood by readers back home. The meaning(s) these readers perceive are different from the ones they had before. Mikhail Bakhtin's (1957) notion of "heteroglossia" is at work here. That is, done by means of language, the work of a travel writer is replete with voices; it is not univocal. It is not characterized by fixity and stability, rather it is linguistically negotiated. In short, travel literature designates written works performed by foreign travel writers who set foot in foreign lands and who inscribe the life practices of the people.

From another perspective, travel writing has always been at the core of Cultural Studies. As travel literature deals with the theme of representation, which is itself cultural, it is inclusive of cultural features that could be put into question and studied at many universities worldwide. Chris Baker (2003) writes:

> A good deal of cultural studies is centered on questions of representation. That is, on how the world is socially constructed and represented to and by us in meaningful ways ….The central strand of cultural studies can be understood as the study of culture as the signifying practices of representation… Cultural representations… are produced, enacted, used and understood in specific social contexts (p. 8).

Baker focuses on the concept of representation as a major component of cultural studies, which make of literary texts necessary tools as they represent people regardless of their place of origin or place of living. Additionally, travel literature, in this sense, may be of great use especially in shaping ideas and culture of unknown spaces and places.

Clifford Geertz (1967) argues that the souk is 'a social institution'[4] where many relationships may take place. Although Canetti (2009) describes the souk positively "spicy … cool and colourful" (p. 17), the place is rather represented as a space for peculiar things. Also, the Moroccan souks, according to him—especially in Marrakesh--are described as condensed: "twenty different shops, one immediately adjointing another" (p. 18). This place, however, is portrayed as overcrowded with people and shops. People are also portrayed as crowds positioning themselves here and there. For Canetti, this seems strange to the extent that he cannot provide a positive portrayal of the souk.

Canetti (2009) finds it difficult to establish contact with the vendors in the souk. According to him, these people are unlikely to welcome the Western visitor: "I did not find it easy to get used to them [vendors]" (p. 41). In this regard, the travel writer may normalize a typical discourse about a man who comes to the souk to sell a lemon. Ironically, the man seems busy selling a shrivelled lemon, and this reflects his poverty, especially while spending most of his time doing trivial things: "it caused me no particular surprise to see an aged and infirm man squatting on the ground and offering for sale a single, shrivelled lemon" (p. 42).

The image in which the Moroccan souk is portrayed goes back to the very ancient times. Canetti's message to the reader is that such places still lack civilization and they are spaces where foreign visitors feel some sort of boredom and monotony. In a sense, they reflect the Moroccan society as they include almost all categories of people who seek to spend long hours in bargaining.

Voice acts as a significant cultural element in understanding how the West constructs Morocco. In Canetti's (2009) travelogue, Moroccan people are described as noisy. They are most often associated shouts mainly on a collective ground as if they all share common features and behaviours. The collective description of Moroccans reveals that what may be said about one can also be said about the other, belonging to the same community. In this, the native is subsumed within a discourse which

[4] In 1967, Clifford, Geertz conducted a study on the 'the souk of Sefrou.' The place is described as a particular social institution which characterizes the Moroccan civilization. His book *le souq de Sefrou* is worth mentioning.

homogenizes a whole nation and it also legitimizes a power of discourse for the favour of the self over that nation: "the largest crowds are drawn by storytellers. It is around them that people throng most densely and stay longest" (p. 77) and people "stood close together" (p. 24).

Through Canetti's eye, Moroccan people are described on a collective basis. Being 'throng most densely' is an image that gives Morocco a homogeneous characteristic. In this context, the people described collectively may not even profit from their time since, according to Canetti, they 'stay longest' watching the storytellers. In Marrakesh, like the social space, the temporal space is not seen from a positive perspective. The voices of the local people, according to Canetti (2009), may seem to the Western traveler as strange and repetitive and "they [the people] felt together, just as they murmured and called together" (p. 24). Such characteristic is better exemplified in what Canetti says: "repetition of the same cry characterizes the crier … he is there in sharply defined capacity: in his cry … in this one place he is precisely what he cries" (p. 25). For Canetti (2009), repeating sounds is a matter of a fixed cultural feature: "I understood what those blind beggars really are: the saints of repetition … there is the unchanging cry" (p.26), and "they begin with God, they end with God, they repeat God's name ten thousand times a day" (p. 24).

In an attempt to understand the people's sounds, Canetti faces a problem of the language used in the city: "it is the language I did not understand there… there were incidents, images, sounds, the meaning of which is only now emerging; that words neither recorded nor edited; that are beyond words, deeper and more equivocal than words" (p. 23). Arguably, the travel writer finds it difficult to understand the language of the natives, which can be added to the mystery of his stay in the country. Ultimately, he expresses a feeling of happiness in response to Spanish words uttered by the natives: "to my delight I had become aware of women's voices speaking Spanish" (p. 33), which reveals another problem concerned with the colonial discourse: a clash between two languages: Moroccan dialect, as the natives' language, and Spanish as the language of the colonizer.

The 'negative' about Morocco has constantly been integral to the Western intellectual background in the process of representing the Other. The self, paradoxically, with its 'total' subjectivity, sees itself superior to the Other. In this context, it is important to consider the Western imaginative descriptions of the African space in terms of being an exotic one.

From a psychological perspective, this consistent and debatable dichotomy of the self and Other may lead to many consequences. The Other is represented by the West as problematic although the West tries to gain power over it. Since Canetti finds himself separated from the Other, he consciously describes the Moroccan local people within the category of the Other—as blind. The West within such category seeks to strengthen itself as well as its voice of the self (at the expense of the Other) as the latter finds it hard to socially interact with the "native" Other.

Concerning the problem of contact with the Other, Canetti (2009) thinks that the local people hide places from him, for he is a foreigner. This is an essential element in such a dichotomy: "in a society that conceals so much, that keeps the interior of their houses, the figures and faces of its woman, and even its places of worship jealously hidden from foreigners" (p.20). Simply put, the conflict between the self and the Other which, by and large, generates discourses of difference between the two poles. Therefore, Canetti's view of the local people as 'blind beggars' is clearly stated in the following quote: "arriving in Marrakesh I suddenly found myself among the blind. There were hundreds of them, more than one could count, most of them beggars" (p.24). The view that Marrakeshi people are 'blind beggars' is a bias because blindness may be applicable not only to the Marrakeshi people but also to the other natives.

Due to the Other's refusal of the West hidden agendas, the immediate reaction of the West is to normalize, generalize, and legitimize a specific hegemonic rhetoric against such a refusal. Hence, the representations of Moroccan people may not be positive. Even children are included within such a discourse especially as "the beggar children's favourite pitch was near the 'Kutubia' restaurant" (p. 82). This implies that children who are supposed to be the future generations are ironically indulged in the activities of their fathers—like begging: "they [the beggar children] followed me right to the restaurant door, feeling safe under my protection" (p. 83). The act of begging which is associated with Moroccan people gives the impression that these people are ranked at the lower social class positions. Therefore, they are considered as inferior "native" other who is never seen as equal to the Western.

The Moroccan social space has discursively been reduced to the lower levels. If most people in Marrakesh, for instance, are likened to 'blind beggars'--including their children—there will be no chance for them to express their voices because they

belong to a very low social class which obstructs such an act. Thus, the collective description of the local people generates a much more homogenized discourse which emphasizes the authoritative voice of the self rather than empowering that of the other. The voice of the West articulates itself as a central source of power not as a result to it.

There are many stereotypes that a set of travel writers construct about Africa and the Arab world. Many travel writers like Edith Wharton, Walter Harris, Cunningham Graham, and others construct negative stereotypes about Africa and the Arab world. The Western eye categorizes Morocco in terms of three essential stereotypes which are emptiness, darkness, and silence. Such stereotypes reveal that Morocco is a land of monotony not to the natives, rather to the Westerners. This image is more or less the same as what Eberhardt conceives of Algiers.[5] The discourses that the West constructs about Africa, as part of the Third World and as a geographical space, are within the assumption that these areas are characterized by mystery. Edward Said (1995) writes: "what are striking in these discourses are the rhetorical figures one keeps encountering in their descriptions of the 'mysterious East', as well as the stereotypes about 'the African mind." (p. XI).

The emptiness of Moroccan geographical space may act as a reminder of an imaginative constructed canon to serve the Western agenda. It is empty because the West wants it to be so not because it is really empty. Emptiness is understood as a cause to the non-presence of the local people. The empty character of the Moroccan landscape as the West sees it is exemplified in a number of passages within Canetti's *the Voices of Marrakesh*. The deserted areas, houses and rooms give the impression that people of these areas do not have major functions on earth and thus this reflects their passivity. In describing a house in Marrakesh, Canetti (2009) says: "it was not an inviting house: you could not get in, and inside it was dark and very likely dilapidated; just around the corner was a cul-de-sac, but it was deserted and silent…" (p. 35). The deserted areas in the country constitute a real problem for the Western visitor that of living a 'strange' period of time in an unfamiliar space. "I find myself", Canetti (2009) says "in a very bare, open space where not a blade of grass grew" (p. 48), and "it was strange, crossing that great square as it lay almost empty" (p. 87). Interestingly, houses in Marrakesh are described as 'walls', an image which stresses the flatness if not the emptiness of such places, which is a sort of surprise to Canetti (2009) as he is unable to construct an idea about them:

> There are few windows on the street and never anyone looking out of them. The houses are like walls; often you have the feeling walking for a long time between walls: you can see the sparse, unused windows. They are shapeless sacks, guess at nothing, and soon grow weary of the effort of trying to arrive at a firm idea of them (p. 35).

The description of the Moroccan geography as being an empty space carries with it the implication that Canetti (2009) himself witnesses a status of loss in space and he expresses this by saying that "the scanty furniture was piled high in the courtyard and the rooms into which one could see were empty; there was nowhere we could have sat down" (p. 68).

The term 'dark' is often associated with pessimism, fear, and insecurity; as opposed to the term 'light' or 'white' which is linked to optimism, life, and joy. In Canetti's travel account *the Voices of Marrakesh*, one reads the following: "the room she stood in was dark; in the street, where I was standing, the sun shone harshly" (p. 34). This suggests that darkness is an inherent feature of the Moroccan space, which may prevent any Western visitor from enjoying the space s/he has already imagined in her/his mind. Therefore, the space turns into a dark one and the ultimate outcome of such an imagination is the impression of an unexpected surprise. Such image may be construed as an action of denying and negating the geographical space of Morocco. Furthermore, framing Morocco in the dark land, may lead one to question Canetti's intentions. In fact, darkness here does not only concern the geography of the country but it also concerns the natives. What is more is that it is an appeal to another complicated issue relating to the construction of race in Morocco. In this, it is possible to refer to the "dark faces" and the "dark eyes" Moroccans have: "I looked up at a house opposite and saw, a first floor level, behind a woven grille, the face of a young woman. She was unveiled and dark…" (p. 34). These dark or black faces are most often opposed to white faces which belong to the West.

Significantly, silence is another cultural feature that most travel writers use to describe the colonized lands in Africa. Readers back home construct this image of silence about such a space. In his description of a house in Marrakesh, Canetti (2009) says: "… it was often deserted and silent…" (p. 35). Canetti reinforces the idea that silence in Marrakesh is so scary and creates a sense of anticipation and anxiety. He writes: "the silence of the houses communicated itself as a kind of wariness" (p. 45). Even

[5] In Eberhardt's *the Nomad: The Diaries of Isaballe Eberhardt*, there is a dominant ambivalent discourse; the travel writer finds Africa (basically Algiers) both attractive and deceptive.

the gaze of woman has been part of this silence in the sense that "it had been her eyes that had drawn me into the house, and now she was staring at me in steadfast silence as I chattered away, though not to her" (p. 56). However, depicting Djema el Fna, known for being one of the most dynamic places in the world, as a silent and lifeless space leaves no doubt about Canetti's hidden discourse. Canetti seizes upon any given opportunity to distort the image(s) of Morocco and its spaces. "It was," he writes, "very quiet here, the quietest part of Djema el Fna" (p.79). However, if a place like Djema el Fna is depicted as silent it will be naïve to consider this as something favoured by the Western visitor. It is rather a symbol of passivity and death.

In a similar way to Eberhardt's narrow and ideologically oriented description of Africa, Canetti also considers it as a land of fear and anxiety. He states that "in the streets, the same people feel less secure" (p. 41). Unsafely and insecurity are two main characteristics of Marrakesh city that, in fact, stands for the whole Arab world. Canetti wants to convey the message that one just feels insecure outside his own country, especially if he sets foot in one of the Arab world countries. But is Morocco really the way Canetti as well as other Western travel writers describe it?

Overall, the article tries to unmask some aspects of the Western hegemonic discourses which trigger or rather violate the idiosyncrasies of the Orient. It makes it clear that Westerners' main goal, in the context of travel narrative, is not to narrate a foreign land. It is rather to explore what does not belong to them. Narrating a remote place, as they claim, is just a pretext for their ideological agendas. Canetti, among other Western travel writers, seeks constantly to homogenize and domesticate Morocco and its inhabitants. His travelogue *the Voices of Marrakesh* reflects the extent to which representing Morocco is rather ideologically oriented. The so called "contact zone" (Marry L. P. 2001), bringing both the West and the Orient together, articulates itself within a complex discursive struggle which was and still is in the making. On this basis, the Western representation(s) of the orient does not have an end; it can never be an end in itself.

About the author

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