

Cultural Encounter in Moroccan Postcolonial Literature of English Expression

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Introduction

Ever since the publication of Edward Said's ground-breaking work *Orientalism* and the subsequent rise of postcolonial studies and discourses, literary scholars have applied his theory to various Western texts that represent or speak about the Orient. The vast majority of these studies have confirmed Said's central thesis that the East is in fact "Orientalized" and depicted negatively in these Western discourses – a systematic negative representation whose ultimate aim is the West's exertion and consolidation of its cultural and political hegemony over its Oriental Others.¹

In this essay, however, the focus will be conversely on showing how the West or Occident is represented in Eastern discourses. This will be done through a brief study of some postcolonial Moroccan texts that deal with the theme of cultural encounter – that is to say, direct contact or meeting between Westerners and Easterners and the tensions or clashes that often ensue as a result of their belonging to two different civilizations with different sets of values and distinct worldviews. This chapter will attempt to raise and answer a number of pertinent questions including the following: What kind of images of the West and Westerners do Eastern writers produce? Are these images almost always uniformly negative, as is the case with the Orientalists' representation of the Orient and Oriental people? If so, can this practice be seen as a form of "writing back"; a counter-discourse that is intended to subvert or interrogate the constructions of Orientalist discourses? In other words, to what extent can these Eastern representations be stigmatized, by the same token, as Occidental-ist? Do these "Occidental-ist" discourses have any value or practical effects, especially when compared with the immense hegemonic function of Orientalist texts? Is there any way out of both Orientalist and Occidental-ist discourses – a third alternative that can promote cosmopolitanism and fruitful intercultural dialogue between Easterners and Westerners?

Before answering these questions, it may be worth shedding some light on the discourse of Orientalism so as to provide the background for the exploration of what appears to be its stark antithesis: Occidentalist discourse. Accordingly, this study will be divided into two parts. The first attempts to define the term Orientalism and show how it operates discursively to construct its Others. The second focuses on discussing and illustrating how Moroccan postcolonial texts deal with the questions of Otherness and cultural encounter.

Orientalism and the Ideology of Otherness

In the first pages of *Orientalism*, Edward Said provides three definitions of the phenomenon he sets out to explore; he also puts these definitions in a nutshell in the following extract from his famous essay “Orientalism Reconsidered”:

As a department of thought and expertise Orientalism, of course, refers to several overlapping domains: first, the changing historical and cultural relationship between Europe and Asia, a relationship with a 4000-year-old history; second, the scientific discipline in the early nineteenth century, one specialized in the study of various Oriental cultures and traditions; and third, the ideological suppositions, images and fantasies about a currently important and politically urgent region of the world called the Orient.²

Orientalism, Said explains, usually conceives of “the East” and “the West” as two separate and monolithic entities; and this essentialist distinction is not so much “a fact of nature” as “a fact of human production” that can be well labeled “human geography.”³ This means that the Orient spoken about in Western texts is a mere linguistic creation and ideological construct that should by no means be associated with the Orient of concrete and objective reality. Given that discourse, as Michel Foucault puts it, has the power to produce rather than represent the things it speaks about, Orientalism can thus be seen as a discourse that characteristically constructs the Orient as Other with the aim of “dominating, restructuring, and having authority over [it].”⁴

Western literary texts have substantially contributed to this hegemonic Orientalist discourse. As a matter of fact, by systematically producing the image of the East or Easterner as a backward, inferior or savage Other, these texts have, in one way or another, helped to promote the West’s colonial enterprise. The discourses

that most readily come to mind as an illustration here are perhaps those of Rudyard Kipling, the British creative artist who can be considered an exemplary Orientalist. His famous poem “The Ballad of East and West” opens as follows: “Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet, / Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God’s great Judgment Seat ...”⁵ These lines support and highlight quite superbly Said’s notion of Orientalism as a discourse that is based on the dichotomy between the East and the West as two opposite worlds that seem to run parallel with each other. In his poem “The White Man’s Burden,” he bluntly urges his “White” (British/Western) people to venture out to “civilize” their cultural Others, described as “sullen peoples/Half devil and half child.”⁶ The ulterior motive of such so-called “civilizing mission” is of course the colonial domination and exploitation of these allegedly “inferior” people.

If one goes as far back as Shakespeare’s age, one cannot also fail to find abundant literary texts that convey such ideology of Otherness. In his play *Othello, the Moor of Venice*, Shakespeare himself portrays his Moorish hero as a bestial Other who threatens to ruin and contaminate the Venetian social order through his decision to get married to Desdemona. The jealous Iago warns the latter’s father in the following words:

Iago: You’ll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse – You’ll have your nephews neigh to you, you’ll have coursers for cousins, and jennets for Germans.

Brabantio: What profane wretch are thou?

Iago: I am one, sir, that comes to tell you your daughter and the Moor are making the beast with two backs.⁷

Apart from the negative cultural connotation of the word Barbary – which refers here to Morocco and North Africa in general – this passage abounds in animal imagery that powerfully strips Othello of humanity, suggesting that he is a mere “horse” or despicable “beast.” What is more, the passage implies that Desdemona herself will “go bestial” if she mates with him, and their children will turn out to be, and will behave like, animals! The underlying idea here is that there is something quite unnatural in this love relationship between the Moorish Othello and the fair Italian Desdemona, and that is why this relationship must be broken at all costs, lest it lead to the disruption of the normal and “human” conditions of the whole society.

In American literature too, one can find obvious traces of such Orientalist ideology that denigrates the Oriental Other and constructs him in the image of a savage

and primitive creature. For example, in Paul Bowles' novel *The Spider's House*, which is set in Fez, the young Moroccan boy Amar is thus described from the perspective of the American tourist Polly:

She sat there ... and stared at him ... A complete young barbarian, she thought, the antithesis of that for which she could have admiration. Looking at him she felt she knew what the people of antiquity had been like. Thirty centuries or more were effaced, and there he was, the alert and predatory sub-human, further from what she believed man should be like than the naked savage, because the savage was tractable, while this creature, wearing the armor of his own rigid barbaric culture, consciously defied progress.⁸

Needless to say, such words and phrases as “barbarian,” “predatory sub-human,” “naked savage,” and “rigid barbaric culture” are highly expressive of how Amar – as a representative Moroccan native – is “othered” and “racialized” in Bowles' discourse. The reference to “the people of antiquity” and to the “thirty centuries or more” that separate Amar from contemporary civilization also stresses the immense, unbridgeable gap that exists between the civilized Westerners and their Eastern primitive Others.

The examples above reveal clearly how Orientalism functions as a discourse of Otherness. The East and the Easterner are systematically perceived as “Others” who can never be equal to the “self” (i.e. the West or Westerner). The two can also hardly meet because of the civilizational gap that separates them. If they ever meet, it is just in an attempt on the part of the benevolent Westerner to bring light and civilization to the helpless primitive Other. But when it comes to other kinds of relationship like marriage (as in the case of Othello and Desdemona) no good results can be expected. As one of Bowles' characters in *Let It Come Down* has put it, “only bad things can happen when Nazarenes and Moslems come together.”⁹

Encountering the Other in Postcolonial Moroccan Texts

It is quite noticeable that the West and the Westerner(s) are conspicuously present in Moroccan texts written in English. Indeed, many of these texts dramatize situations that show different kinds of cross-cultural interaction and relationships between Moroccans and their Western counterparts, and the main setting for such encounters is either Morocco itself or some place in the Western world. But while it is true

that the West/Western is usually perceived and represented as a cultural Other, it is important to note that its/his image is not characteristically negative, as is generally the case of the image of the East/Easterner in Orientalist literature. One can in fact find an amalgam of images that range from very positive to very negative representations, even if nearly all of these discourses remain fundamentally ambivalent, as will soon be illustrated.

The West often figures in Moroccan texts as an “other” world which is contrasted, whether directly or indirectly, with Morocco as a homeland. This world is clearly desired and sought out, whereas the native country is sometimes conceived of as a prison from which the protagonist(s) wishes to escape. For instance, in his autobiographical work entitled *Rewind*, Driss Tamsamani writes: “I longed to flee my home country ... I left home to Miami, Florida; I knew I was gone for good ... In the USA, I had a window of opportunity, and I climbed through it.”¹⁰ Thanks to its promising prospects, America is readily accepted by the author, who wishes to stay there forever; in contrast, Morocco is abandoned and rejected because he regards it as “the land of no opportunity,”¹¹ the land of hungry children where there is “no future, no tomorrow.”¹² Likewise, in his travel book *Alien ... Arab ... and Maybe Illegal in America*, Mohamed Fandi describes how the United States has fascinated him to the extent of his over-staying his visa and attempting to reside there for good. In his view, America is “the land of freedom, the land of business, the land where every day around the country many people become rich, millionaires ...”¹³ It is, in short, “the best country of the world,” and certainly “more than half of my country (and each country around the world) would be ready – anytime – to visit or stay in the States.”¹⁴

Like the United States, Europe is also envisioned as a promised and promising land to which some Moroccans wish to emigrate at all costs. In Khalid Chaouch’s play *Humble Odysseys*, for example, Abdou encourages Raghieb to go to Spain, confirming that “in that country, it’s so easy to get a job ... that country is a real paradise.”¹⁵ Lured by this vision, Raghieb decides to get there even without having the necessary legal papers. Similarly, in Laila Lalami’s *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits*, a group of young people take the risk of travelling illegally to Europe in an overcrowded inflatable boat. They all believe that if they manage to cross to this other world, their miserable lives will soon be transformed into ones of comfort, freedom and prosperity. Just as countless people from all over the world have crossed to the United States with the aim of tasting and enjoying “the American Dream”, these emigrants also believe in the existence of “the European Dream”¹⁶ in which they can equally share.

Such views about both Europe and America are obviously positive, and they contribute to painting a rosy picture of the West as a cultural Other. Nevertheless,

one can notice in nearly all the works mentioned above a certain ambivalence that tends to undermine, or at least besmirch, the positive quality of the image reflected. Most emigrants fail to feel completely at ease in the land of the Other, as they often become disillusioned or nostalgic after some experience there. Temsamani, for instance, cannot help feeling nostalgic despite his former extreme enthusiasm about the American way of life. He explicitly expresses this feeling when he remarks, "I became nostalgic and started to reconnect with my roots, my home, Morocco."¹⁷ What is more, he has now grown fed up with the materialistic and "crazy lifestyle"¹⁸ of the United States, as one may infer from his statement, "We left our country to find a better life, but what we got is a gold-plated identity and a lot of debt."¹⁹ He now realizes that real happiness cannot be achieved far away from one's native home and society: "The hell with the plastic life: give me one day with my family and friends and I will be happy for life."²⁰

In Laila Lalami's novel, the characters who manage to make it to Spain are also disillusioned when their expectations fail to materialize. Faten has even found herself obliged to barter her virginity to be allowed to enter Spanish territory. She lets herself be deflowered by a Spanish officer, then goes on to earn her living as a prostitute. Among her Spanish clients, Martin seems the most humane, as he appears willing to establish a special friendly relationship with her. But she soon discovers that he just wants to satisfy his sexual desire and exotic whims, and thus no room is left for any significant friendship between them.

In contrast, in Ahmed Radi's *Changing Times, Mobile Landscapes*, the protagonist Said – a Moroccan scholar who probably represents Radi himself and who goes to Wales to pursue his studies – succeeds in developing a real and meaningful relationship with a Western girl named Sarah:

He was also lucky to come across and befriend a Scandinavian young girl. Despite their different colors and races and despite the huge distance separating the freezing north from the warm south, they were passionately in love with each other ... "You are my Ali Baba and my Andalusian knight." She made him feel proud of being an Arab, and also an African with his brown skin, so different from her snow whiteness, yet so complementary.²¹

This is a highly symbolic cultural encounter, wherein an Easterner and a Westerner seem to "complement" each other, despite all their differences. Yet Said soon realizes that this relationship cannot last long, as Sarah is motivated by passionate and romantic love, without ever thinking about the possibility of marriage. Said explains

this in terms of the difference of perspectives between Easterners and Westerners: while the latter have a tendency “to enjoy to the full the ephemeral moment,” the former rather “tend to establish something more solid and communal in the form of a social contract, with its obligations and responsibilities.”²² Thus their relationship seems doomed to sudden disruption from the very beginning.

In AnouarMajid’s *Si Yussef*, however, the love and marital relationship between the Moroccan protagonist Si Yussef and the Spanish Lucia proves to be lasting and apparently successful. As a matter of fact, they have already been together for many years and their four children have already reached adulthood. This couple’s love is reciprocal and very profound: while Lucia feels that “the meaning of her life was related to Si Yussef,” who “gave her the satisfaction which no other person or institution had given her,”²³ her husband also believes that he is married to “the best woman in the world”²⁴ who “has given [him] the love of a thousand years.”²⁵ Si Yussef prefers this Spanish woman to any from his home country because he does not want to entangle himself with the complexities of Moroccan customs and social bonds. As he confesses to Lamin, the narrator, he prefers to be free from “the whole mass of tradition and families that our women carry with them. A man here doesn’t marry a woman but a whole tribe.”²⁶ But in spite of all the comfort, happiness and satisfaction which his marriage to Lucia has offered to him, Si Yussef still feels that he is missing something vital in his life – namely, religious faith. Because of his Catholic Spanish wife, he has not only failed to perform his Islamic faith, but he also seems obliged to speak only Spanish in his home:

And this is why I regret not having performed my prayers ... My good life didn’t help me for any encounter with my creator. And this leads to the issue of my marriage to a woman who never accepted our faith. A man like me needs more than a good woman; he needs a Moslem. I mostly spoke Spanish at home; the pleasure to speak my soul was denied me all these years. As you know, the soul of man lives in his language.²⁷

This passage really problematizes the question of cultural encounter between Easterners and Westerners. Although Lucia is portrayed very positively, it is clear that she has engendered an identity crisis for her husband. At bottom, he feels guilty of sacrificing both his religion and language, a fact which implies that he has partly lost two important components of his national and cultural identity. Since Lucia has retained her Catholic faith and imposed – whether directly or indirectly – the use of her Spanish language in their home, one can say that she appears symbolically as a dominant colonizer, while Si Yussef is the dominated and alienated colonized subject.

In his novel *A Chance*, Abderrahmane Sghir tells us a different story of such cross-cultural relations between a Moroccan and a Westerner. The narrative revolves around the sufferings of a young Moroccan man, called Brahim, who goes to work in America. He has already been working in a hotel in his native town and living happily with his native wife, but he is seduced by an American tourist named Amanda to travel with her to the United States. While there, Amanda does her best to prompt Brahim to renounce his wife and become her own lover, but in vain. When she gets desperate, she devilishly traps him in a bank problem that causes him to be imprisoned for ten years and causes a tragedy for the whole family.

Although this novel is very simple – or even simplistic – in its treatment of both theme and narrative techniques, it serves to cast some light on the kind of relationship that can exist between a Moroccan and a Westerner. Here, the Westerner is represented very negatively: Amanda is the image of a scheming, heartless and jealous lover who tries selfishly to “appropriate” another woman’s husband.

In “A Woman From New York,” Mohamed Mrabet presents us with another negative image of Americans. A group of Hippie men and women travel to Tangiers, and El Rifi – the young Moroccan protagonist, who may represent Mrabet himself – has some occasion to interact with them and witness their curious habits and behavior:

Several Nazarene men with long hair sat nearby. Some Nazarene girls were squatting on the floor as they cooked something ... El Rifi looked at the Nazarenes. The men had dandruff in their hair, and their skin was grey with dirt. Some of them had lice crawling in their beards. The girls had pimples and smelled stale, and their clothes needed to be washed and mended. A Moroccan had been cutting kif in the café that day, and they were smoking what he had thrown away.²⁸

In this descriptive passage, Mrabet severely criticizes this group of American tourists and pokes fun at their unusual appearance and strange practices. Although, historically speaking, the Hippie was the latest mode at that time of the late 1960s, Mrabet raises the pertinent cultural question: How can such dirt, bad smell, and animalistic way of life be compatible with the ethics of a so-called civilized nation like the United States?

When El Rifi discusses the matter with one of these tourists (namely the Woman from New York referred to in the story’s title), this American woman tries to defend the group, and she gets angry when the Moroccan criticizes her personally:

She was very angry. And you! She cried. Who are you? It's got nothing to do with me. I'm a Moslem. The poorest Moslem is cleaner than most Americans ... For instance, I think I'm better than you because I wash five times a day.²⁹

Despite its simplicity and directness, this piece of dialogue is highly significant as it establishes a direct opposition between Islamic and Western civilizations. It suggests that Moslems are superior and much more civilized thanks to their Islamic religion which teaches them to be clean, both physically and spiritually. In contrast, American civilization is both implicitly and explicitly ridiculed and shown to be associated with dirt, bestiality and disease.

In "What Happened in Granada," Mrabet writes about another confrontation between him and some Westerners during his short visit to Granada. The story contains a number of significant scenes in which Mrabet openly clashes with these cultural Others, attempting to show them that he is not inferior, but rather superior, to them. For example, when he is offered wine during a family reunion, he decidedly refuses it in a conscious desire to stress his identity as a Moslem: "I don't drink, I said. I'll take a glass of water."³⁰ Once, he even threatens an English woman by brandishing "an Arab sword" and saying to her angrily: "I'm going to finish you off. You and your race! ... You're only an English whore and I'm a Riffian!"³¹ In another scene, Mrabet is surrounded by a crowd of protesting Spaniards who want to blame him for his reckless and dangerous driving of a rented car. He responds, "I yelled at them: I shit on your ancestors and your whole race! I kept walking along, pushing through them. Barking dogs don't bite, I told them. A very fat woman came by. She called me a moro, and I called her a Christian pig."³² In another scene, Mrabet even resorts to the Arabic language to insult some Spanish people by saying: "Inaal din d'babakum (God damn your father's religion)."³³

In a less provocative counter-hegemonic stance, Abdellatif Akbib writes his travel book *Tangier's Eyes On America* to question some Western Orientalist stereotypes and suggest that the West itself can be easily made the object of an Easterner's criticism and ridicule. The title itself warns that America – and the whole Western world, by implication – is now subjected to representation under Tangier's Eastern eyes. The traditional roles are now subverted because it is no longer the West that is representing the East, but the other way around.

Like Mrabet, Akbib engages in a number of confrontations with different Americans, whom he represents as cultural Others. His technique consists in staging a series of encounters between him, as protagonist, and some Americans like the officer at the New York airport whom he skilfully represents as ignorant on the grounds

that he is unable to speak any other language except his own. This ignorance is further stressed by his meeting with the American illiterate woman who stupidly asks him: “Whereabout is Morocco in the United States?”³⁴ While discussing with some Western intellectuals, the author is surprised at their ignorance and misunderstanding of the Others’ culture and social reality, despite their academic background. One of the things he discovers, for instance, is that “Everything they knew about Islam was either exaggerated, distorted, or altogether wrong.”³⁵ Akbib also recounts the story of his encounter with an angry American man who nearly kills him with his revolver. After narrowly escaping, the author says ironically that in America “the survival [is] for the quickest”³⁶ because there “weapons [are] sold like a gastronomic commodity.”³⁷

Such face-to-face encounters give Akbib the opportunity to express direct criticism of America and its people. He puts these latter in the position of cultural Others and depicts most of them as ignorant, shallow, or savage, just as the Oriental Other is depicted in Western hegemonic and Orientalist texts. These open confrontations between the protagonist and those Others permit him not only to subvert the traditional subject/object (or self/other) dichotomy but also to challenge many Western prejudices against Muslims or Orientals and to correct those misconceptions and cultural prejudices. In this way, it can be said that Akbib has succeeded in “writing back” to the West and problematizing its discourse of power and its ideology of Otherness.

The discourses of postcolonial Moroccan writers thus differ quite noticeably from the Orientalist ones. While the latter usually represent the Oriental Other negatively, these Moroccan texts include both positive and negative images of the West/Western as Other. In the majority of cases, they are ambivalent in their attitudes towards Otherness: the image is neither totally positive nor totally negative. Some writers tend to problematize this question of cultural Otherness. Anouar Majid chooses the third space of Tangiers to show that identity is unstable and that the forces of hybridity usually work to negate all notions of purity and fixedness. He also raises some problematic questions concerning the inevitability of cultural interaction between East and West. His narrator Lamin notes that, “There is nothing wrong if we are Europeanized or Americanized – up to a point. For wasn’t the West also Orientalized? ... Their historians say that for ages they had borrowed our skills and knowledge. So what’s wrong?”³⁸

Some discourses like Akbib’s and Mrabet’s are so extreme in their negative representation of Otherness that they can be categorized as Occidentalists. They are obviously counter-hegemonic and counter-Orientalist. Yet, at least in the case of Akbib,

this subversive strategy is used only as a means to an important end: to warn Westerners that Easterners are capable of “writing back” and producing the same cultural stereotypes against Westerners. This is what he implicitly means by stating that, “It is a misconception to suppose that only the West is capable of nourishing stereotypes vis à vis the East. We are capable of that, too. But as it is our duty to stem the tide of such negative attitudes, we can’t afford to deal with the other by adopting what we want him to get rid of,”³⁹ His “tit for tat” strategy is therefore only a means to a mutually profitable end: the creation of a cosmopolitan inter-cultural dialogue which is fit to make us all transcend the ethnocentric ideology inherent in such binary categories as Occident/Orient, West/Rest, or Center/Peripheries.

Notes

- 1 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge, 1978).
- 2 Edward Said, “Orientalism Reconsidered,” in *Literature, Politics and Theory*, ed. Francis Barker, et al (London, New York: Methuen, 1986), 211.
- 3 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1978).
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Rudyard Kipling, *A Choice of Kipling’s Verse*, ed. T.S. Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1941), 111.
- 6 Ibid., 136.
- 7 William Shakespeare, *Othello, the Moor of Venice*, in *The Complete Works* (New York: Avenel Books, 1965), 1114.
- 8 Paul Bowles, *The Spider’s House* (London: Abacus, 1991), 345.
- 9 Paul Bowles, *Let It Come Down* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000), 284.
- 10 Driss Tamsamani, *Rewind* (Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2005), 19–20.
- 11 Ibid., 33.
- 12 Ibid., 122.
- 13 Mohamed Fandi, *Alien ... Arab ... And Maybe Illegal in America* (Charleston: BookSurge, 2006), 13.
- 14 Ibid., 14–15.
- 15 Khalid Chaouch, *Humble Odysseys: A Play in Five Acts* (Fez: Moroccan Cultural Studies Centre, 2002), 17–18.
- 16 Ibid., 9.
- 17 Driss Tamsamani, *Rewind* (Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2005), 162.
- 18 Ibid., 91.

- 19 Ibid., 106.
- 20 Ibid., 108.
- 21 Ahmed Radi, *Changing Times, Mobile Landscapes* (Marrakech: El Watanya, 2007), 42–43.
- 22 Ibid., 45–46.
- 23 AnouarMajid, Si Yussef (London: Quartet Books, 1992), 80.
- 24 Ibid., 139.
- 25 Ibid., 129.
- 26 Ibid., 139.
- 27 Ibid., 142.
- 28 Mohamed Mrabet, “A Woman From New York,” *Mohamed Mrabet: Collected Stories*, trans. Bowles (Casablanca: Annajah Aljadida, 2004), 61.
- 29 Ibid., 62.
- 30 Mohamed Mrabet, “What Happened in Granada,” *Mohamed Mrabet: Collected Stories*, 9.
- 31 Ibid., 19.
- 32 Ibid., 14.
- 33 Ibid., 21.
- 34 Abdellatif Akbib, *Tangier’s Eyes On America* (Tangier: ADO Maroc, 2001), 37.
- 35 Ibid., 46–47.
- 36 Ibid., 30.
- 37 Ibid., 31.
- 38 Majid, 137.
- 39 Akbib, 85.