EUROPE'S MYTHS OF ORIENT

Devise and Rule

Rana Kabbani

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For Samia and Ali

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Rana Kabbani

'It is only natural that they insist on measuring us with the yardstick that they use for themselves, forgetting that the ravages of time are not the same for all, and that the quest of our own identity is just as arduous and bloody for us as it was for them. The interpretation of our reality through patterns not our own serves only to make us ever more unknown, ever less free, ever more solitary.'

Gabriel Garcia Marquez
'The Solitude of Latin America'

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Introduction

I can never romanticize language again
never deny its power for disguise
for mystification
but the same could be said for music
or any form created
painted ceilings beaten gold
worm-worn Pietàs reorganizing victimization
frescoes translating violence
into patterns so powerful and pure
we continually fail to ask are they true for us.

Adrienne Rich,
A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far

The idea of travel as a means of gathering and recording information is commonly found in societies that exercise a high degree of political power. The traveller begins his journey with the strength of a nation or an empire sustaining him (albeit from a distance) militarily, economically, intellectually and, as is often the case, spiritually. He feels compelled to note down his observations in the awareness of a particular audience: his fellow-countrymen in general, his professional colleagues, his patron or his monarch. Awareness of this audience affects his perception, and influences him to select certain kinds of information, or to stress aspects of a country that find resonances in the culture of his own nation. His social position also colours his vision, and (since he often belongs to a leisured class, which enables him to embark on voyages which are both expensive and prestigious) he usually represents the interests and systems of thought in which he was schooled.

The traveller who sets out from a strong nation to seek out curiosities in lands less powerful than his own is to be found in many different civilisations.[1] The Islamic world, for instance,

from the seventh to the fourteenth centuries composed of military and political powers which held sway over an area that came to stretch from Spain to China, sent out travellers, either as emissaries or as explorers, to bring back knowledge that could be used to enrich the store of politically useful information. As the Arabs grew more powerful, the number of travel books in their literature increased accordingly.[2] These found a receptive audience, since they conveyed information both about the Arabs' own dominions and about areas outside their empire which were of economic importance to them. Arab travellers and geographers took a strong interest in economic history, since the Arabs travelled primarily for purposes of trade. But the travel narrative also produced an ethnological discourse, of great relevance to the empire since it offered information about the peoples ruled.

As the Caliphate expanded and the power of the central authority became more fragile, there arose a desire to know in order the more effectively to rule.[3] But the travelogue also included more fanciful information, exaggerating or inventing accounts of distant lands for the sake of pleasing the reader. Travellers depended on each other's testimony in order to forge a communal image of the lands in which they travelled. They quoted each other in their accounts, as for example Mas'udi and al-Sirafi did,[4] and breathed new life into old stories that would otherwise have passed out of currency. Thus Idrisi, writing about South-East Asia in the twelfth century, incorporated material which was by then three hundred years old.[5] And although most of the travellers who wrote were increasingly learned and careful, aspiring, like Abu Zaid al-Sirafi, to avoid the distortions prevalent in the accounts of sailors and merchants,[6] they could not help confirming certain myths to which their countrymen had grown accustomed.

One of the mythical realms that Arab geographers and travellers described was that of *Waq waq*, a land that came to be associated with different geographic locations, most often with Japan. Ibn Khurdadbih, writing in the ninth century, saw it as a land of conspicuous wealth:

> East of China is a country called Waq waq, which is so rich in gold that the natives manufacture with this metal chains for their dogs and collars for their monkeys. They sell tunics

> embroidered with gold. One finds there ebony of excellent quality.[7]

Al-Maqdisi thought *Waq waq* was a region in India, so named because it produced trees whose fruit had mouths that cried: 'Waq! Waq!'[8] Thus the travellers who wrote such descriptions, often depending on hearsay or on their own creative suppositions, came to regard 'this name as referring to a country just beyond their reach in the general direction of the east'.[9] And as they explored new ground, *Waq waq* slowly receded, always to be the last unexplored island just over the eastern horizon.

Descriptions of distant lands peopled by fantastic beings have universally abounded, as one dominant group became able to forge images of the 'alien' by imposing its own self-perpetuating categories and deviations from the norm. Pliny's *Natural History*, with its numerous entries on the customs of Anthropophagi, Astomi (who lived by smelling apples), Gymnosophists, Sciopods, Amazons and Brahmins, provides an early example of ethnocentric discourse. Consequently, the popularity of Pliny's work in medieval Europe lay mainly in the fact that it catalogued the beliefs about obscure races prevalent until then: an intellectual *mappa mundi* of sorts, it reinforced and reiterated current *idées reçues*. In the same manner, medieval and renaissance travel accounts as a genre came to depict voyages of a deliberate and self-conscious strangeness as they catered to the needs of sedentary audiences desiring depictions of the extraordinary.

The persona of the traveller, whether merchant like Marco Polo or sailor like Pigafetta, imposed itself with considerable force on the popular imagination. He introduced horizons, negotiated with alien cultures, solidified the data of geographical and ethnographical enquiry, and was the agent of the superior civilisation. He came to be a chronicler of conquest and conversion also. Describing Magellan's voyage of the early sixteenth century, Pigafetta wrote in a strain that would be echoed by nineteenth-century colonialism:

> That day we baptised eight hundred persons, men, women, and children. The queen was young and beautiful, covered with a white and black cloth. She had a very red mouth and nails, and wore on her head a large hat made of palm leaves.[10]

The encountered natives had somehow to be converted, controlled. The Calibans of the New World, they were tolerable only when subdued. In order to justify such servitude forced upon a people, this kind of narrative stressed the conspicuous cruelty, the lechery, or the perversity of the natives. It was thus that Columbus cultivated the theme of cannibalism as he urged Spain to enter into slave-trading, or Cortes depicted in graphic detail the sacrificial rites of the Mexicans to exonerate those measures he saw fit to take against them. Such a narrative reads differently, however, when compromised by the fact that between the years 1494 and 1504, three million South Americans died as a result of Spanish 'pacification'.[11]

The forging of racial stereotypes and the confirmation of the notions of savagery were vital to the colonialist world view. In colonial America, for instance, there was a systematic attempt to portray the Indian as an abductor of women, a killer of children, and a collector of scalps, as an apology for white brutality against him.[12] Thus as late as 1896, Theodore Roosevelt could write: 'The settler and the pioneer have at bottom had justice on their side; this great continent could not have been kept as a game preserve for squalid savages.'[13]

Having realised his possession of territory, the white man could afford to wander from the fixed notion of the evil native. The twin vagaries of American guilt and European Romanticism blended to produce a 'Noble Savage'; the discrepancy remained, however, between such an imaginative portrayal of the Indian, and the extermination he was faced with in real life. The savage was noble if he belonged to a dying species: the last of the Mohicans is majestic precisely because he *is* the last of the Mohicans. And Fennimore Cooper's magnanimity, as befits this particular narrative tradition, is limited; the Indians, if occasionally noble, are barbaric and blood-thirsty at large. In one episode, they are almost cannibalistic:

> The flow of blood might be likened to the outbreaking of a torrent; and as the natives became heated and maddened by the sight, many among them kneeled to the earth, and drank freely, exultingly, hellishly, of the crimson tide.[14]

The savage could sometimes win favour if he aided the white man in the latter's attempt to dominate the environment, as Friday

aided Robinson Crusoe. The persona of Pocahontas, for instance, fulfils the role of the good native, since she forsakes her people and renounces her royal stature in order to save a white man. She is submissive, self-effacing and subject to conversion: from Indian princess, she is transformed into dutiful Christian wife. Her 'incorporation' into white society is meant to belie suspicions of that society's inhumanity, and also to appease its conscience.

The projection of evil onto marginal or powerless groups within a society has always been a convenient method of producing scapegoats. Medieval Europe, for example, tried Jews for a medley of mythic crimes: poisoning wells, killing children for their blood, crucifying victims, and eating them too.[15] By the same token, women were associated with the devil, and seen as enemies of the Church and civilisation.[16] This went to justify the witch-hunts that tried women for sexual rapaciousness, cannibalism, consorting with evil spirits, and being generally intractable and capricious.[17]

The projection of evil onto a faraway culture was also a significant aspect of medieval Europe's bulwark of bigotry. And since it had a portentous opponent in the Islamic state, it fashioned a polemic to check whatever influence such a rival state might have. This polemic was highly charged with hostility, and notable for the fanaticism that engendered it. Islam was seen as the negation of Christianity; Muhammad as an imposter, an evil sensualist, an Antichrist in alliance with the Devil. The Islamic world was seen as Anti-Europe,[18] and was held in suspicion as such. Christian Europe had entered a confrontation with the Islamic Orient that was cultural, religious, political and military, one that would decide from then on the very nature of the discourse between West and East. Post-Crusader Europe would never wholly emerge from the antagonism its 'Holy Wars' had plunged it into. Its old desire to assert itself against its Islamic rival converted easily into a determination to dominate; this would become the psychological motivation of imperialists from Napoleon onwards. In precisely this spirit, the French general Gouraud entered Damascus in 1920: he proceeded immediately to the tomb of Salah al-Dîn al-Ayoubi, who had defeated the Europeans in the Third Crusade, and announced gloatingly: 'Nous revoilà, Saladin!'[19]

In the European narration of the Orient, there was a deliberate stress on those qualities that made the East different from the

West, exiled it into an irretrievable state of 'otherness'. Among the many themes that emerge from the European narration of the Other, two appear most strikingly. The first is the insistent claim that the East was a place of lascivious sensuality, and the second that it was a realm characterised by inherent violence. These themes had their significance in medieval thought, and would continue to be voiced with varying degrees of forcefulness up to the present time. But it was in the nineteenth century that they found their most deliberate expression, since that period saw a new confrontation between West and East – an imperial confrontation. If it could be suggested that Eastern peoples were slothful, preoccupied with sex, violent, and incapable of self-government, then the imperialist would feel himself justified in stepping in and ruling. Political domination and economic exploitation needed the cosmetic cant of *mission civilisatrice* to seem fully commendatory. For the ideology of empire was hardly ever a brute jingoism; rather, it made subtle use of reason, and recruited science and history to serve its ends. The image of the European coloniser had to remain an honourable one: he did not come as exploiter, but as enlightener. He was not seeking mere profit, but was fulfilling his duty to his Maker and his sovereign, whilst aiding those less fortunate to rise toward his lofty level. This was the white man's burden, that reputable colonial *malaise*, that sanctioned the subjugating of entire continents.

Nineteenth-century Britain produced a growing mass of travel literature, in a frenzied attempt to know the world it was in the process of conquering. The travellers travelled for their *pâtrie*, as it were; they were the seeing eye, and the recounting voice. They often had financial backing from officialdom, since their travelogues ultimately served to forge the imperial representation of the world.

Although the eighteenth century had also produced a travel literature of some scope, it remained a genre that offered instruction of anecdotal quality only. Neoclassical taste dictated to a large extent what the eighteenth-century traveller could say.[20] He observed the generic convention of descriptive rather than autobiographical narrative. Wary of being dubbed a 'vain' traveller (as Sterne's Yorick had put it), he avoided delineations of the self and gave detailed accounts of the scenery instead. Like William Combe's Dr Syntax, he went in search of the Picturesque. The narrative he produced did not rival in ambitiousness its

nineteenth-century counterpart, whose scope was imperial.

The nineteenth-century traveller was concerned with the scenery only as it served as backdrop for his progress. He was the journey's hero – not merely its narrator – and he spelled out his complacency, cherishing every opportunity to speak of the self. The *moi haissable* of classical sensibility was appropriately revamped to accommodate a Victorian glorification of individuals. The traveller was now Pilgrim and Hero and Christian Soldier; his reputation could quickly take on mythic proportions, as did those of Gordon and Lawrence. Indeed, any attempt to discredit him was viewed disfavourably as a transgression of sorts: Wilfrid Scawen Blunt's discriminating critique of Gordon's folly was badly received by his countrymen at large, who thought it recreant and even perfidious. After all, the mythic Self of the traveller contained the sum of what he transported – his education, emotions, biases and beliefs, laced with a strong dose of racial conceit, as befitted a century of imperialist travellers. Richard Burton was one of the most prolific among these, a staunch empire man through all his wayward wanderings. And significantly, it is his narrative that did most to asseverate the fiction of an erotic East. The Orient for Burton was chiefly an illicit space and its women convenient chattels who offered sexual gratification denied in the Victorian home for its unseemliness. The articulation of sexism in his narrative went hand in hand with the articulation of racism, for women were a sub-group in patriarchal Victorian society just as other races were sub-groups within the colonial enterprise. Oriental women were thus doubly demeaned (as women, and as 'Orientals') whilst being curiously sublimated. They offered a prototype of the sexual in a repressive age, and were coveted as the permissible expression of a taboo topic.

Although there were notable instances of Victorian women who travelled and wrote about the lands they passed through or took up residence in,[21] the very essence of Victorian travel writing remains an intrinsic part of patriarchal discourse, for it fed on and ultimately served the hierarchies of power. And although some women were bound to those hierarchies by birth or marriage, they remained token travellers only, who were forced by various pressures to articulate the values of patriarchy. Thus Isabel Burton's tomes were watered-down versions of her husband's works: she rewrote for the 'angel of the house' what he had produced for the gentleman's club.

Travel writing of the Victorian period was linked to the nascent discipline of anthropology. Although anthropology was later to become a leveller of cultures and races, its beginnings often served to bolster the self-esteem of the European by convincing him that he was the culmination of excellence in the human species. Other races were his inferiors, lower down on the great scale of being (how low depending on how dark they were). And since they were lower down on that chimerical scale, they shared many qualities with animals, of which unbridled sexual ardour was one. It is illuminating to note how often the native is compared to an animal in this narrative. Iago's reference to Othello as a 'Barbary horse' is only a foreshadowing of the more opprobrious epithets that the Victorians were to coin.

The gist of anthropological writing was shared by fiction as well as travel narrative. The self-conscious reinforcing of racial otherness was strikingly similar in these divergent genres. For example, Rider Haggard's classic, *King Solomon's Mines* (1885), which sold 30 000 copies in its first year of publication, and which was read by the public schoolboys who were to become the empire's administrators,[22] perpetuated all the crude stereotypes of primitive man, propounding the racial superiority of the Anglo-Saxon. Baden-Powell's vision of the Boy Scouts borrowed a great deal from anthropological descriptions of the initiation rites of primitive peoples (he had carefully read Fraser's *The Golden Bough*) in order to invent mock trials for European youths, who would naturally excel at overcoming them, given their innate superiority. Edgar Rice Burrough's Tarzan, King of the Jungle, is, after all, an aristocratic Anglo-Saxon; the Victorians could not be expected to lose their hearts to heroes of the wrong class, and race.

The traveller as hero was above all a survivor in all conditions. He could cross jungles, ford rivers, brave hordes of savages yet still retain his urbanity. Thus Stanley, meeting Livingstone at long last in the African wilderness, addressed him with the affectation of drawing-room decorum. He presumed, in his capacity as white man in the 'dark' continent, that his polite parlance, like his political power, would prevail over the rude environment.

The European in the East was preoccupied with his stature and status. He remained terrified of crossing racial barriers abroad as he had been of crossing class barriers at home. Afraid that he would somehow lose caste, he had to cling, as Norman Daniel has

pointed out, to the idea that Westerners were intrinsically different from Easterners, in order to preserve intact the wholeness of the imperial myth.[23]

The colonies provided niches for misfits, for unruly or impoverished sons (of whom Clive and Burton were notable examples). Such men could rise to distinction and exercise power in the colonies in ways that would have been unimaginable in their own birthplaces. Thus the traditional fantasy about the East became linked to a new fantasy about the travellers themselves in the East. Kinglake's Oriental Grand Tour as described in *Eothen* is remarkable for its self-importance: he carries himself with the conceit of a master among servants throughout. The Oriental is a mere mental mummy[24] who is often entertaining, but always despicable. Indeed, Kinglake supposes him to be so servile that he grows in respect for the European who mistreats him:

> the Asiatic seems to be animated with a feeling of profound respect, almost bordering upon affection, for all who have done him any bold, and violent wrong, and there is always too, so much of vague, and undefined apprehension mixed up with his really well-founded alarms, that I can see no limit to the yielding, and bending of his mind when it is worked upon by the idea of power.[25]

One Oriental Governor whom Kinglake meets entertains great admiration for the English; this, the author tells his audience, is because he was once threatened with destruction by an English ship's captain.[26]

Often the travellers became the self-created heroes of the colonial world, who advocated firm rule in order to exorcise the phantom of their own insignificance. If they abased the natives, then their own stature would seem much greater by contrast. Burton's description of a Sindhi illustrated this attitude concisely:

> He is idle and apathetic, unclean in his person, and addicted to intoxication; notoriously cowardly in times of danger, and proportionately insolent when he has nothing to fear; he has no idea of truth or probity, and only wants more talent to be a model of treachery.[27]

Such descriptions could double as upper class perceptions of

England's lower classes. As V. G. Kiernan has stated, the racial alien and the class alien were interchangeably offensive to Victorian hierarchical thought: the 'discontented native in the colonies', and the 'labour agitator in the mills, were the same serpent in alternate guises'.[28]

In attempting to document the Orient (the Other, the opposite, the enemy, the foil), as Edward Said has argued, the Occident came to document itself.[29] Although the travel narrative of Victorian England did reflect the personal idiosyncrasies of individual travellers, it was mainly a recapitulation of inherited ideas. It ultimately produced (with rare exceptions, of which the writings of W. S. Blunt were one) a communal image of the East, which sustained a political structure and was sustained by it. The ideology of this political structure whilst forming itself can be talked about as taste, as the dominant culture. This is not to say that *all* travellers discussing the East misrepresented it, but that the dominant misrepresentations were, unfortunately enough, the ones that captured the public imagination in the West. The travelogues were, after all, part of the Orientalism that abetted empire. Curzon referred to Orientalist studies as the 'necessary furniture' of empire, and no doubt they were precisely that. Power has always needed knowledge, but it is not necessarily coercive or in control all the time. It more often licenses and chooses, offering benefaction here, patronage there. Thus, European culture came to be framed by warped representations of the East – since in the end the dominant taste and mythologising instinct triumphed.

To write a literature of travel cannot but imply a colonial relationship. The claim is that one travels to learn, but really, one travels to exercise power over land, women, peoples. It is a commonplace of Orientalism that the West knows more about the East than the East knows about itself; this implies a predetermined discourse, however, which limits and in many ways victimises the Western observer. It is as if the imagination of the traveller, in order to function, has to be sustained by a long tradition of Western scholarship, by other Western texts. This makes for some antiquated metaphors and archaic concepts to which the Western traveller is nevertheless inescapably subservient. Thus, Chateaubriand, before embarking on his pilgrimage to Jerusalem, prepared himself by reading 'à peu près deux cents relations modernes de la Terre-Sainte'; he had *made* the journey before ever having set foot outside of France. Yet this