

Algerian Woman Through a 19th Century English Woman's Eyes.

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A winter in Algeria is a travel writing published in 1865 by the English writer Mrs. Ellen Albert Rogers. It is a day to day account on her stay in Algeria from October 1863 to May 1864. The present travel writing has already been examined within the general framework of the Postcolonial studies. In her article "Mrs. Ellen .G. Rogers's A Winter in Algeria and the Perpetuation of the Colonial Discourse" published in the Revue Campus N° 18-2010 of Mouloud Mammeri University of Tizi Ouzou, Sadia Seddiki attests rightly that this work underpins significantly the colonial discourse of the 19th century Europe. Our reading of the work confirms this claim to a higher degree. *A Winter in Algeria* constitutes, in fact, an epitome of the English imperialist ideology. It is highly imbued of the discourse which urges to overseas expansion and other nations' domination in the name of a "civilizing mission" by emphasizing their inferiority and presenting them as being in need to be raised from their primitive state.

The present paper explores, however, the representation of Algerian women in *A Winter in Algeria* in the light of Edward Said's theory of *Orientalism* (1978) which describes the process of the construction of the Western representation of the Orient (a mere invention according to Said) aiming to dominate and control. The paper also sheds light on the standpoint from which the author constructs the image of the country she visits and more importantly the people she encounters. That is to say, it examines the extent of the distance from which Algerians and

particularly Algerian women are looked at because this distance determines the degree of the “otherness” of the described country and people. Moreover, it considers the degree of the author’s involvement in this constructed image, an aspect which undeniably has considerable influence on the nature of this representation. Thus, the paper is meant to answer the following set of questions. Which image does Ellen Albert Rogers convey of the 19th century Algerian women? At which distance does she stand in relation to the people she describes? Are they looked at as a scientific object in the sense of Martin Heidegger’s concept of “Enframing the Orient”? The latter means the description of the Orient apart from its real context and which becomes a mere scientific object under the observer’s gaze.

Mrs. Rogers travel writing seems to be an encyclopedic work which encompasses a wide array of information about Algeria. It follows, thus, the prevailing tradition of the 19th century travel writing in form and content. It is apparently about, first of all, her visit and wanderings in Algeria. Second, it is about the Europeans and their civilizing mission. Finally, it is about Algeria and its people. I put Algeria and its people in the last position because this is actually the place they are granted in the travel narrative. Despite the thorough descriptions of the country and of the local population with much less interest, the author, in effect, puts forward both the English and French people.

Before considering carefully the Algerian women’s representation it is worth having a look at the representation of the natives in general. The outstanding feature of this travel writing is, unsurprisingly, her little interest in approaching and comprehending the Algerian population. She is far more interested in physical descriptions than in the people she encounters. The picturesque depictions hold the biggest part in the account while the indigenous people are relegated to the last position. In his book *The image of Algeria in Anglo-American*

Writings, 1785-1962 published in 1997 Osman Benchérif argues that the American and English literatures about Algeria are descriptive literatures meant to entertain and more importantly display little interest in the local population. It is obvious that the author makes a kind of promotion of the Algerian climate and nature. Several times all along her account she praises this unique and unfamiliar natural beauty. She also appears to urge English people and artists, in particular, to come and immortalize this beauty, a fact which is undeniably positive. Yet this appeal to visit Algeria seems to be dubious as it hides the ultimate undeclared purpose of exploring distant regions which is colonization and domination.

To Grant much attention to a particular aspect instead of another is merely a subjective choice. Writing an account about a sojourn in any given region involves inevitably making selections and taking decisions about what will be the subject of interest. And this is made, obviously, according to the author's cultural background, values and preferences. The following quotation is a convincing evidence of the writer's selection of the element to describe "*I have been repeatedly invited to witness these ceremonies, but the early hour is one objection, and altogether I have not quite made my mind on the subject.*"¹In fact, the author decides on what to see and what to ignore, what to value and what to devalue; what to understand and what to consider incomprehensible. "*The various Arab costumes which we daily see are as yet beyond my comprehension*"²declares she. It is at this level that lies the possibility of a prejudice to be done. The choices she makes are more likely to be made on the basis of her beliefs and even her preconceived ideas about the world beyond Europe's boundaries. Unlike Mrs. Rogers who seems to be more

¹- Ellen A. Rogers, *A Winter in Algeria*, London, Sampson Low, Son, and Marston, p72

² -ibid.p23

concerned with sights description in her travel account, Princess Ekaterina (Catherine) Romanova Varontsova Dashkova (1743-1810) a Russian traveler granted almost all her attention to the people she encountered during her tour throughout Europe in the 18th century. She wrote: "*I shall abstain from describing [Switzerland], for more skilful pens than mine have done so, contenting myself with naming persons I had the privilege of meeting there.*"³The readership is another factor which influences the author's decisions as it is important, at that time, to meet the readers' expectations. We can presume, therefore, that what the travel writers depict and put forward in their travelogues is more a question of selection and subjective choices made according to a set of requirements. This is already a sufficient disclosure of the author's attitude towards the natives.

The picture the author conveys in the present travel writing about the Algerian people in general is prejudicial and degrading all around. It corresponds to the already existing stereotypical images of the Orientals. They are illiterate, idle backward-looking people, "*The lazy natives who lie coiled up in all parts of the Jardin Marengo, or prostrate along the pavements, especially in the Rue d'Isly start into life endowed with almost inconceivable strength, when engaged as burden-bearers*"⁴Mrs. Rogers describes. The natives are repeatedly shown inactive. They spend the whole day in cafes doing nothing and in total submission. The verb "prostrate" refers to this idleness. A little further she adds: "*All is life and animation, all but these poor torpid, purposeless, and degraded-*

³- DashKova, Romanovna Vorontsova, in Alba, Amoia& BettinaL. Knapps (edts), *Great Women Travel Writers From 1750 to the Present*, The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc, New York, London, p 12 (131)

⁴-Ellen A. Rogers, *A Winter in Algeria*, London, Sampson Low, Son, and Marston, 1865, p37

looking natives."⁵As such they are shown deprived of any quality and all that they worth is to be "burden-bearers".

There is evidently occasional positive portrayal of the natives. They are shown open-minded, loyal and rational. There are those who display good manners too. The following depiction of a Turk man who invites her to his house is a good illustration: "*Sidi-Bou-Kandoura is a very enlightened man. He said he had been desirous of taking his wife to see the recent ceremony of installing the first president, but did people stare at a veiled lady, that he had been afraid.*"⁶For the author, these are but rare exceptions when compared to the majority. She seems to be skeptical as regards these exceptions. What Mrs. Rogers conveys in her work and the way she does it make her an epitome of 19th century imperialist. In fact, she puts forward the European well-intentioned enterprise in Africa. She praises their work and their noble goals in raising these 'backward people' to a degree closer to the civilized Europeans. It is thanks to the Europeans and especially the French that Algiers enjoys tranquility just like the big European cities. She follows the prevailing fashion of the Orient representation as it is shown in Edward Said's influential work *Orientalism*. The writer distinguishes openly between the two worlds. She repeatedly refers to Europe, that civilized world which should be taken as a model for the other nations. Hence the author vehicles the imperialist ideology in her book and this is what she suggests in her preface.

It follows from the above discussion that the representation of the Algerian people in *A winter in Algeria* corresponds remarkably to the set of Orientalism's assertions about the Orient and Orientals. The strangeness and the

⁵ -ibid. p40

⁶-Ellen A. Rogers, *A Winter in Algeria*, London, Sampson Low, Son, and Marston, 1865, pp307-308

unfamiliarity of these places and people are a straightforward fact in the travel writing. The dichotomy ‘Self’ verses ‘Other’ appears evident all along the travelogue. The author is engaged in the process of othering these people with a so-called attempt at understanding and reducing the cultural distance which stands between “us” and “them”. I content myself with this concise examination of the natives’ representation as the principal subject of the paper is the representation of the Algerian women.

Women’s representation, a dismissive attitude:

The cover of the book is a picture of an Algerian woman in her outside dress and I presume it is not a fortuitous but rather a skeptical fact. It may be read as a manifestation of the author’s consideration and interest in the Algerian women and her dress. It may also be seen as a means to attract the readers’ interest and raise his curiosity about this “strange dress”. Finally, it is a way of emphasizing this difference but rather this weirdness because the picture is one of the strangest pictures the author discovers in Algeria. It is so strange that it deserves to be put on the cover of the travel writing. The last hypothesis is likely to be true as the following quotation confirms our statement:

One of the most singular sights here is that of the Moslem veiled women, who are to be seen in every direction. They never leave their homes without a sort of handkerchief across the face fastened below the eyes, called cudjar, and a large white wollen or muslin cloak, which they call khaik el telhbil, veiling the entire person. The eyes and painted eyebrows are alone visible⁷.

⁷-ibid. p40

It is clear that the author considers this sight as being rare and unfamiliar in comparison to what she is familiar with. However, her description goes beyond the simple physical description in some passages. They unveil her true perception of these far distant people and her ideological beliefs.

*Met as usual to-day troops of Arab women, when in the Jardin Marengo. These poor veiled creatures- veiled alike in mind and body- bound in shackles which none but their own sex can loose, how one mourns over them, and longs to be able to reach them! But without a knowledge of Arabic, the hope is futile. The sight of them at almost every step recalls Miss Whateley's "Ragged life in Egypt" with such added interest. I would we could employ an Arabic- speaking Bible woman amongst them. the generality seem poor, miserable, stunted, frightened, and squalid; and I am sure, as far as I can glean from the mute language of looks, that they would gratefully welcome any such agency to their home. It is seldom that they venture to extend their henne-dyed hands for alms, and when they do so, it is with such timid imploring accent.*⁸

In the above description the author demeans presumably the Arab women. To do so Mrs. Rogers resorts to the use of words like 'creatures' and 'crowd' to refer to the native women. These words are recurrently used in the travelogue to refer to the indigenous people. Here are further illustrations in which the word crowd is again used "Again a crowd assembled to see les Anglais off"⁹, "We saw several veiled figures eagerly crowding around this little aperture."¹⁰ Using those words shows that the author does not look at them as humans. It is a procedure meant to dehumanize the natives by describing them as a vague unclear "mass". Carl Thompson calls this procedure a rhetorical strategy used by Western writers to dehumanize those people. By

⁸Ellen A. Rogers, *A Winter in Algeria*, London, Sampson Low, Son, and Marston, p 58.

⁹-ibid. p300

¹⁰-ibid. p23

dehumanizing them they not only maintain the distance between those non-Europeans but they also extend it. At times we wonder if there is really what is called “domesticating the distance” between ‘us’ and ‘them’ as many critics suggest. It is indeed hard to recognize in their writing this attempt at domesticating this distance as they continue to see in them but beasts. Their difference is significantly exaggerated while they paradoxically affirm willing to bring that far distant ‘other’ closer. The English woman presents Algerian women as miserable ignorant women. They are in a prisoner like situation as the word “shackles” alludes to. This depiction refutes Elisabeth Eastlake claim that “[English] [*a woman traveler*]... *is less troubled with preconceived ideas as to what is most important to observe, goes picking up material much more indiscriminately.*”¹¹ This is what has been proved earlier. The author seems to say implicitly that the Algerian women condition is incomparable with that of the Europeans who enjoy great respect and freedom. Both are in utter opposition. “*Here may always be seen in perfection the contrast between Western, and primitive Eastern manners and customs*”¹² she points out. In some it is a representation which reveals a kind of disgust and scorn mingled occasionally with a sort of sympathy toward these Arab women. And here lies clearly the process of Othering the people the writer encounters by emphasizing their difference. This marked difference appears to be hard to domesticate.

Mrs. Rogers occasionally delivers very detailed and quite long descriptions of Arab women’s situation as the ones stated earlier. They are shown in pitiful hopeless situation. Being rich

¹¹-Elisabeth, Eastlake in Nigel, Leask, *Curiosity and Aesthetic of Travel Writing 1770-1830*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, p 203

¹²-Ellen A. Rogers, *A Winter in Algeria*, London, Sampson Low, Son, and

or poor this does not make a difference in their conditions. They seem, for the writer to be slaves of and for their husbands. I quote: "*Few positions in life, not even excepting American slavery, can be so utterly wretched as that of the very poor Arab woman. Amongst the richer Moslems the degradation of the women is mental and moral.*"¹³ Comparing them to slaves is an amplification which is a straightforward fact here and in other passages. She describes in detail her endless daily tasks in the passage on page 58-59. In her family she has no consideration at all. She is the last person about whom we think when it is a question of food but she is the first to call for work. It is the writer who sees their situation a slave like one according to her own conception and view. What about the Algerian women's opinion? Do they complain about their situation? In any case in the travelogue does a native woman complain? She is speaking for them as they are unable to do it for themselves. This is why they need to be freed from the slave like life. She asserts that no one is able to free them if they do not do it themselves; "...bound in shackles which none but their own sex can loose."¹⁴ We have the impression that the writer suggests implicitly European civilization as the only solution to them. They live in darkness and the Europeans have the duty to bring them light: "*Poor creatures, who is to give them light?*"¹⁵ Furthermore, she openly advocates the French colonization which she sees as a blessed opportunity to enlighten those dark areas and primitive people. «*French rule has reduced Algiers, and its environ, to the most perfect state of tranquility, and ladies can now walk about alone, with perfect safety, as in London or Paris.*"¹⁶ She acknowledges at the same time the benefits the Europeans enjoy from this enterprise of

¹³-Ellen A. Rogers, *A Winter in Algeria*, London, Sampson Low, Son, and Marston, p 58

¹⁴- *ibid.* p58

¹⁵-*ibid.* pp73-74

¹⁶-*ibid.* p64

expansion over other territories. “*But as even they cannot but acknowledge the French administration to be an improvement upon their own, my belief is, that were success now to crown their futile hopes...*”¹⁷

Mrs. Rogers’s description of the Black women is another case in point. She affirms being totally against the Darwinian Theory concerning human races. However, encountering them in the streets of Algiers calls into question her opposition. She ascribes them animal features by comparing them to monkeys.

With every feeling of heart and head enlisted against the Darwinian Theory, it is certainly strains ones fraternal sentiments to the uttermost, at all the corners of the arcades to stumble upon the negresses, enveloped in their invariable blue check takhelila...They are usually to be seen in pairs, squatted on the ground, or leaning against a pillar, looking very like monkeys on a large scale, and earning a scanty livelihood as vendors of bread, broiled fish,¹⁸ ...

It is worth evoking, at this level, a French woman’s description by a way of comparing to that of the natives. The author devotes more than three pages to Mrs. Allix, (Madame Luce) a French woman who succeeds to open a school for native girls in Algiers. She narrates her full story from birth until her settlement in Algiers. We do not see any necessity in narrating her story with such eagerness and enthusiasm except praising her actions as she is a European woman who is playing a role in the civilizing mission, a fact which reveals the writer’s unfair treatment of the natives. Once again this confirms our earlier claim which states that the travelogue is about the English and French people.

¹⁷ - ibid. p190

¹⁸-ibid. p71

A further striking element in this travelogue is the impression which rises, at times, while reading some passages. In fact, the author seems to be bothered by the presence of the Algerians in the streets. Now and then we read comments which make allusion to this trouble caused by the presence of the natives:

“...who are to be seen in every direction”, “The sight of them at almost every step...”, “One has to penetrate through a labyrinth of close, narrow streets, jostled every moment by dirty Arabs vociferating at their long file of patient, heavily-laden donkeys...”¹⁹

This recurrent emphasis on the fact of seeing these people everywhere is surprising and dubious. We wonder how the author expects to visit a country without meeting its people. She would have probably preferred to visit Algeria in the absence of its population. She says about the black women she meets in the street “If they would only adopt the Moslem fashion, and hide their repulsive features, it would save one many a shock.”²⁰

The objectification of Algeria and Algerians:

As it is stated earlier, Mrs. Rogers travel writing is more an encyclopedic scientific work than a mere a day to day travel account. Considering *A Winter in Algeria* as such implies a set of characteristics and procedures proper to a scientific experiment. We may surmise, thus, that Algeria and its population are looked at as a scientific object which means that they are studied as in a laboratory. In this sense Sibel Bozdogan describes the way the Orient is looked at by some orientalists in her article “Journeys to the East: Ways of looking to the Orient

¹⁹-Ellen A. Rogers, *A Winter in Algeria*, London, Sampson Low, Son, and Marston, p305

²⁰- Ibid. p71

and the question of representation as follows: “[*the Orient*] is turned into an independent, frozen reality outside the self-knowing subject.”²¹ She looks at the subject of the description as a scientific object. In one of the passages she states clearly that before attesting anything about the local population she investigates about them by consulting books and questioning scholars in the domain. The ultimate goal of this inquiry is to understand the natives’ character. We can but praise this method whose ultimate goal is to reach the truth. She declares: “By dint of questioning the best authorities oral and written, we have gleaned such information as makes us better be able to analyze the component parts of the crowd by which we are surrounded”²² The quotation also shows the purpose of this enquiry. The latter enables her to “analyze the component parts of the crowd.”

Perceiving them as a scientific object has both advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, applying scientific methods means a higher degree of objectivity in the treatment of the subject of study. To reach this objectivity it is necessary to stand at a certain distance vis-à-vis the studied object in order to reduce the degree of influence and interference. It raises, at the same time, the extent of impartiality. The result at the end is a reliable truth used for noble purposes. Mrs. Rogers’s descriptions are likely to be

²¹-Sibel, Bozdogan, “Journey to the East: Ways of Looking at the Orient and the Question of Representation” in *Journal Of Architectural Education* (1984-), Vol. 41, N°4 (Summer, 1988), pp 38-45 published by Taylor& Francis, Ltd in <http://www.jstor.org> accessed on 19/10/2013. p 3

²²- Ellen A. Rogers, *A Winter in Algeria*, London, Sampson Low, Son, and Marston, p

scientific ones as for the amount and the detailed information they contain. In this sense Sibel maintains:

*The Orient-descriptions and depictions- bring the oriental into view just as the technological consciousness brings Nature into view. Just as Nature is systematically discovered, studied abstracted into theoretical constructs, so is the Orient explored*²³

The book is full of accurate descriptions of various elements and traditions like that of the ceremony of a Moorish wedding on several pages.

However, when it comes to consider a human community it is hard to consider it as a mere scientific object. Humans think and have emotions. We cannot deny the influence of the environment in shaping the personality of any given group of people. The consideration of the context is thus a key to the understanding of those peoples, their tradition and their style of life.

The last issue to be discussed in this section is the author's degree of involvement and relation to her work. While reading Mrs. Rogers travel writing we have the impression that she stands at a quite significant distance from the element she describes. She is a bystander who depicts from the outside her subject in question. This distance provides a sort of objectivity but not without shortcomings. There was not a true rapprochement for the sake of a better understanding of the people to be enlightened. In addition, the period she spent in the country is not sufficient to reach such generalizations especially about the natives and their manners and traditions. In this context the writer Volney says:

²³ -Sibel, Bozdogan, "Journey to the East: Ways of Looking at the Orient and the Question of Representation" in *Journal Of Architectural Education* (1984-), Vol. 41, No, 4 (Summer, 1988), pp 38-45 published by Taylor& Francis, Ltd in <http://www.jstor.org> accessed on 19/10/2013.P03

Sans le temps, l'on ne peut juger sainement; car le premier aspect des objets nouveaux nous étonne, et jette le désordre dans notre esprit; il faut attendre que le premier tumulte soit calmé, et il faut revenir plus d'une fois à l'observation, pour s'assurer de sa justesse. Bien voir est un art qui veut plus d'exercice que l'on ne pense [...] ²⁴

However, groups of people and cultures cannot be looked at as a pure scientific object. In order to understand other cultures the author should be very close if not greatly involved in the life of the group to be described.

In addition to her indirect involvement in her work by conveying and advocating most of the time the values and the ideology of her time, she seems to do everything for the reader. That is to say, she provides the reader with a finished work. She sees, describes and interprets for him everything. He is rarely given an opportunity to see and, above all, makes his own opinion about what he is exposed to. In doing so, Mrs Rogers influences greatly the reader's opinion and participates in spreading ideas which concur with the mainstream of the English imperialist policy. Sibel Bozdogan defines this kind of representation as follows: "*Representation then becomes an affirmative project, its goal being to show rather than to let one see, to explain rather than let one understand*"²⁵

In some, like the great majority of her contemporaries Mrs. Rogers displays dismissive attitude towards the native people and particularly women. She follows in the steps of the predecessor orientalists who spread a degrading image of the

²⁴ -Jean Claude, Berchet, 1985. *Le voyage en Orient Anthologie des voyageurs français dans le levant au XIX siècle*. Np, Robert Laffont, p26.

²⁵Sibel, Bozdogan, "Journey to the East: Ways of Looking at the Orient and the Question of Representation" in *Journal Of Architectural Education* (1984-), Vol. 41, No, 4 (Summer, 1988), pp 38-45 published by Taylor& Francis, Ltd in <http://www.jstor.org> accessed on 19/10/2013.

non-Europeans in general and Africans in particular. Their representation meets the requirements of the imperial ideology which, in order to justify its expansion policy abroad, they represented those people as primitive and inferior to them. Mrs. Rogers's slave-like portrayal of the Algerian women confirms Said's assertions in *Orientalism*.

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