

The Moor in New York: Rethinking the Encounter, Unsettling the Binaries and Un-writing the Centre in *Un Marocain à New York*¹

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Youssef Amine Elalamy's travel-inspired-narrative *Un Marocain à New York (A Moroccan in New York)*² chronicles Elalamy's physical and epistemological journeys to the United States of America to receive an "American education." It is replete with powerful situations and recollections that offer illuminating and problematic critique of the modern empire; furthermore, it foregrounds a counter-consciousness that is meant to oppose and contest Western inscriptions of "Otherness" It also shows how the previously silenced voices have managed to express agency and resistance within the ambiguities of the Orientalist tradition as it voices the subversive postcolonial attitude of the author who emerges as a "dissenting voice" that contests Western hegemonic discourse. Elalamy's subversive attitude remains intensely self-conscious and it is meant to disturb the Western mode of representation of Otherness through a systematic reversal of the "order of things." As will be argued, Elalamy manages to break away from the totalising ideologies and acquires agency that grants him more visibility within the American community. His autobiographical narrative explores discursive instances that demonstrate how inventively the Other can answer back and react against the West's disfigured rendition of the Oriental; as he manages to symbolically "wrestle the power to self-represent" and "take history into [his] own hands."³

The discussion of *Un Marocain à New York* begs another discussion about the Orientalist discourse in its American configuration since Elalamy's text is set in America. Though there was no profoundly devoted tradition of Orientalism in the United States, as Edward Said would argue, the explicit involvement of America in the narration of Orientalism, whereby the European legacy of Orientalist thinking is "accommodated, normalised, domesticated and popularised and fed into"⁴ the American stream of perceptions, can go back to "the period immediately following World War II, when the United States found itself in the position recently vacated by Britain and France."⁵ Probably the idea to keep in mind is not actually whether American Orientalism is temporally located within specific historical junctures; but to consider it as a "productive fashion" and an all-encompassing manifestation whose "greatest potency is within the psyche of the West itself where . . . it has the greatest aesthetic power."⁶

Drawing on postcolonial theory, I argue that *Un Marocain à New York* subversively reverses the rhetoric of "Self" and "Other". Throughout this text, the author is mostly concerned with constructing the otherness of Americans as basically strange. He assumes the role of a subject who strategically and self-consciously manages to resist and subvert the constructed images of the orientalist ideology; he brings to the fore situations where the inscriptions of a stereotypical discourse find their most powerful expression, and through processes of reversal, he plays with the racial stereotypes, twists them and creates discursive terrains for identity affirmation. The main question is "no longer whether the subaltern can speak but what s/he is saying, and how loud and clear the voice is."⁷ Elalamy's text may be viewed as a loud call for radical revisions of the old body of assumptions and misrepresentations that have fostered the Western Orientalist discourse. His subversive strategies excessively acquire greater levels of importance as he has undertaken the task to strike back for self-empowerment and self-assertion through a metaphorically massive penetration of the American society (this last sentence does not make sense, and needs to be re-written. Perhaps you could write: His strategies acquire ever more significance throughout the story, as he assumes the task of striking back for self-empowerment and assertion through a subversion of the prejudices of American society).

The Postcolonial Iceberg Remembered: The Dimensions of the Saidian Model of Analysis

The field of colonial discourse analysis, which has emerged as "a critique of Western totalising narratives,"⁸ starts with Edward Said's *Orientalism*

(1978). Though this groundbreaking work has received harsh criticism, it has nonetheless continued to inspire discussions in a number of scholarly fields. It seems nearly impossible to discuss postcolonialism as a discipline of study without invoking Said generally and *Orientalism* specifically. Spivak writes that, "The study of colonial discourse, directly released by work such as Said's, has, however, blossomed into a garden where the marginal can speak and be spoken, even spoken for."⁹ In his *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha acknowledges Said's text as being a pioneering work that provided him with "a critical terrain and an intellectual project."¹⁰ Robert Young, too, is explicit about Said's work. He contends that, "Colonial discourse analysis was initiated as an academic sub-discipline within literary and cultural theory by Edward Said's *Orientalism*."¹¹ Said's theoretical framework has proven useful to a wide variety of analytical approaches, thus securing its ongoing success.

In *Orientalism*, Said claims that the "Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences"¹² that served, appropriately enough, "to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience."¹³ Said explores the place and function of the Orient as Europe's "cultural contestant," as "one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other"¹⁴ within what he calls the discursive practice of "Orientalism." Because Orientalism is based on "an ontological and epistemological distinction" between the Orient and the Occident, it is readily identifiable as "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient."¹⁵ Said argues that the vast scholarship collected as evidence about the Orient served to manage and produce the Orient.¹⁶ This premise leads to the constitution of a dialectic between "Europe and its others" in which the object of knowledge becomes indistinguishable from the object of conquest. The emphasis in Said's book, then, is on the history and tradition of "thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given [the Orient] reality and presence in and for the West."¹⁷ In other words, Said concerns himself with "the internal consistency of Orientalism" despite or beyond any correspondence, or lack thereof, with a 'real' Orient."¹⁸

Said also questions the epistemological model of surveillance, the "increasingly profitable dialectic of information and control"¹⁹ implicit in the discourse of Orientalism. The object in this scenario is immediately rendered vulnerable to scrutiny and reduced to a frozen image, a fundamentally ontological and stable fact over which the observer has authority. For Said, Orientalism contains the Orient within its representations, classifies Orientals in terms of Platonic essences which

render them intelligible and identifiable, and constitutes, less a vision of reality or a mode of thought, than an irreducible constraint on thought with overwhelming political consequences.

***Orientalism's* Box of Tools (Re) Opened**

Edward Said's work has been the focus of severe but insightful critiques, and the main debate revolves around the "historical consistency of Orientalism." In mapping the political effects of the Orientalist discourse, *Orientalism* has fallen within a delicate situation by homogenising "the sites of enunciation of Orientalist discourse," and by totalising the ongoing practices and processes of power. Said's essentialism, thus, inscribes "the occident as a self-identical, fixed being which has always had an essence and a project, and imagination and a will," while the Orient remains confined to being "no more than its silenced object."²⁰ Said, accordingly, focuses on the epistemic transgressions of Empire rather than on the resistance of the oppressed. His model has not only been criticised for theoretical and methodological shortcomings, but also for an incisive obliteration of the voice of the "very agents he is so keen on liberating."²¹ Discursive resistance remains a central component in postcolonial studies, a strategy of self-representation deployed by the postcolonial text to assert collective voice, resist Western cultural amnesia and participate in the "charting of cultural territory," which heralds the "recovery of geographical territory."²²

After repressing and repossessing the native's resistance in *Orientalism*, Said offers a corrective in his *Culture and Imperialism* and argues for a "culture of resistance." The configuration resistance takes consists of reversal displays, or a rewriting and a reconstruction of the colonial text as a "conscious effort to enter into the discourse of ... the West, to mix with it, transform it, to make it acknowledge marginalised or suppressed or forgotten histories."²³ The postcolonial, thereafter, involves a "critical reconsideration of the whole project and practice of colonial modernity not merely as a particular military and economic strategy of Western capitalist societies, but also itself constituting and generated by a specific historical discourse of knowledge articulated within the operation of political power."²⁴ This critique of colonial dynamics provided by Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Spivak and others can be seen as part of a larger discourse of resistance to Euro-centric visions that have been held for a long time; a cultural endeavour on the part of the "imperial subjectified" to contest Western forms of domination.

Discourses of Difference Re-routed: Contrapuntal Consciousness and “the voyage in” Experience Reframed

To retrieve the native's active access to self representation, Said introduces the evocative concept of “contrapuntal reading,” a postcolonial critical practice that offers the possibility of reading back from the point of view of formerly colonial subjects, and sheds light on the hidden colonial history which permeates literary texts. He defines contrapuntality as a process whereby incongruent social practices, native culture and imperial outline, past and present, are to be mutually considered; and assumes that contrapuntal “mediation” “must take account of both processes, that of imperialism and that of resistance to it, which can be done by extending our reading of the texts to include what was once forcibly excluded.”²⁵ Through contrapuntality, which is mainly founded on the subversion of mainstream colonial narratives, Said attempts to lay bare the “submerged but crucial presence of empire in canonical texts”²⁶ and to demonstrate “the complementarity and interdependence instead of isolated, venerated, or formalised experience that excludes and forbids the hybridising intrusions of human history.”²⁷ As Geeta Chowdhry argues,

Unlike univocal readings in which the stories told by dominant powers become naturalised and acquire the status of ‘common sense,’ a contrapuntal reading thus demonstrates a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history and of those other histories against which . . . the dominating discourse acts.²⁸

Said's theorisation of discursive resistance from within the dominant discourse underlines the historical-material conditions of writers and texts in an attempt to transcend the essentialist view of Eurocentric discourse. The effort of postcolonial writers, thus, is to emerge into the Western discourse adopting a “more playful or a more powerful narrative style” able to grant full recognition to the concealed and “subalterned” histories. This “authorising story of the intellectual” as a “direct experience, or reflection, of the world”²⁹ is what he codifies as the “the voyage in”; that is to say, the incorporation and the “movement of Third World writers, intellectuals, and texts into the metropolis and their successful integration there.”³⁰ Said's re-appropriation of the “expedition motifs” and the inversion of narratives suggest the ways in which the Third World migrant intellectuals and travellers “write back to the centre” across a subversively disruptive liminal zone that stretches the lines of demarcation between the West and the rest. Such a process of “writing back’, far from indicating a continuing

dependence, is an effective means of escaping from the binary polarities implicit in the manichean constructions of colonisation and its practices.³¹ The “Voyage in” experience, therefore, becomes in Saidian analysis an essentially “interesting variety of hybrid cultural work.” Its existence is

a sign of adversarial internationalisation in an age of continued imperial structures. No longer does the logos dwell exclusively, as it were, in London and Paris. No longer does history run unilaterally . . . Instead, the weapons of criticism have become part of the historical legacy of empire, in which the separations and exclusions of 'divide and rule' are erased and surprising new configurations spring up.³²

The movement of the Third-World intellectuals to the metropolis, encapsulated in the concept of the “voyage in,” is a rebellious practice (an “adversarial internationalisation”) that seeks to recover the forgotten histories through a productive engagement with culture, with the aim of both displacing the Eurocentric “logos” from its position of sanctity (“London and Paris”) and allowing “new configurations to spring up.” Both the voyage in experience and contrapuntal consciousness in this sense, though I am not claiming that these theoretical paradigms account for texts that write back, are enabling concepts in reading *Un Marocain à New York* since they allow discursive terrains to recuperate marginal voices that Eurocentric embedded power relations have long obscured.

If the Western “dominating, coercive systems of knowledge” have virtually obliterated the culturally, racially and religiously different Other, *Un Marocain à New York* expresses various discourses of opposition to the hegemonic episteme of marginalisation. This work displays various discursive strategies of subversion that potentially displace the centre, and articulate “a much more mature and sophisticated resisting discourse that consciously seeks to ‘write back’ to the West.”³³ It underlies the subversive attitude of the author whereby the act of writing back takes an important political significance. I consider writing in this sense as a conscious political act of resistance that aims at disturbing the Western discourse of power and mastery. Throughout his travel account, the author assumes the role of a subject who has strategically and self-consciously managed to resist and subvert the preconceived images held by Americans.

Homi Bhabha is among the pioneering critics to question Said’s model about the native’s vulnerability within the intricacies of colonial discourse. Although he manages to locate signs of resistance as discursive attributes within the colonial text, he reduces the native’s voice and agency into just an effect in the coloniser’s split up imagination; “a space which is close to the paranoid position of power, beyond the reach of authority.”³⁴ By so

doing, he fails to locate this very resistance as self-consciously and politically driven acts whereby the native interrupts, disturbs and reorders Western authority to achieve mastery.³⁵ Both Edward Said's and Homi Bhabha's conceptions of the native's resistance are totally challenged in *Un Marocain à New York*. Far from being trapped within the narrative of empire, and through the act of engaging counter discourse, this text develops consciously motivated strategies of opposition and resistance. If Said's model advocates an otherness which is "fixed, muted and reduced to a self-conscious passive object which exists for the West, and if power and discourse are entirely possessed by the coloniser,"³⁶ *Un Marocain à New York* attempts to dismantle the discourse of mastery through the manipulation of Western prejudices and stereotypes in an inventive way.

The Moor in New York: Narrating America, Negotiating Sexuality and Unravelling the Hybrid

a. The Rhetoric of Cultural Encounters

As with Akbib's *Tangier's Eyes on America*,³⁷ where the author has inventively approached the Western stereotypical discourse to assert agency and voice, *Un Marocain à New York* deploys a resisting discourse which seeks to write back to the West. It is set in America, a "contact zone" in which "people geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality and intractable conflict."³⁸ Pratt's emphasis on contact within asymmetrical colonial power relations (instead of domination, repression or control) creates the possibility for a resistance to a totalising hegemonic discourse.

Looked at from this perspective, *Un Marocain à New York* engages a discourse of resistance which confirms that the margin can split the centre and emerge as "a dissenting voice" capable of frustrating the discourse of power. It is also an instance where the traditional configuration of "Self" and "Other" is reversed. New York and, by extension, the whole American community, becomes an object of scrutiny and study. This shift in agency is clearly illustrated in the following passage:

Du haut du 110^{ème} étage du World Trade Center . . . du haut de ma tour, je parcours une dernière fois la ville du regard . . . Central Park n'est plus qu'une touffe d'ombres aux contours parfaits, ouverte à mon désir.³⁹ [Above the 110th floor of the World Trade Centre ... looking down from my tower, I set out the last glimpse over the

whole city . . . Central Park is no more than a bundle of shadows in perfect outlines, opened to my own desires.]

From the outset, the narrator creates a “horizon of expectation” that allows him to explore New York City. Being positioned on some “noble coin of vantage” which permits him to represent the city, the author acquires visual authority and, by the same token, shifts into the rhetorical gesture of surveillance. In his *Rhetoric of Empire*, David Spurr argues that “to look at and speak to not only implies a position of authority; it also constitutes the commanding act itself.”⁴⁰ Thus, the position adopted by the author in his travel narrative becomes similar to the traditional position of the Western traveller during the colonial era when he or she occupied “a privileged point of view over what is surveyed.”⁴¹ Mary Louise Pratt refers to this act of visual observation as “the Monarch-of-all-I-survey-scene.”⁴² The narrator is metaphorically placed in a privileged position that allows him to aestheticise and evaluate the landscape. If Orientalism adopts a strategy which reduces the non-Western Other to an object of scrutiny, available for control, *Un Marocain à New York* allows a counter hegemonic terrain to thrive from the very beginning. It also endeavours to restore the voice of the subordinate through the adoption of an omnipresent narrator endowed with meticulously scrutinising eyes. Hence, the voice we encounter in the text is granted an explicit authority that dominates the object of vision, the seen, or the observed. The metaphor comes full circle when the narrator emphatically stresses the supremacy of his home country; or quite unexpectedly when he reduces New York City to a female body; “New York est bien une femme”⁴³ (New York is definitely a woman), and Morocco to a phallic symbol:

Le Maroc que j’imaginai volontiers viril et pourvu d’une belle moustache [...] Plus tard lorsque j’appris que nous étions **un** Royaume et non pas **une** République, j’exprimai ce même sentiment de puissance en imprimant sur mon banc d’écolier un signe que je ne permettrai pas de reproduire ici.⁴⁴ [Morocco that I proudly imagined virile and provided with a beautiful moustache . . . Later when I learnt that we are a Kingdom and not a Republic, I used to express that same feeling of power by drawing on my school bench a symbol which I shall not dare replicate here.]

This phallic imagery, associated with the author’s native country, grants power and authority to the narrator. But the metaphor gets more complex when the reader becomes aware of New York City as a weak, vulnerable and submissive “woman” open to the author’s desires: “Je parcours une dernière fois la ville . . . ouverte à mon désir.”⁴⁵ New York

City, in this respect, is an erotic space; a vicious woman that is physically possessed by the masculine foreign hero. This phallogentric attitude deployed by the author appears frequently in colonial discourse where the Orient as a female body is available for penetration by the White coloniser.

New York City, as “a rhetorically constructed body,” is what David Spurr alludes to as “eroticisation of the colonised”⁴⁶ This implies a “set of rhetorical instances – metaphors, seductive fantasies, expressions of sexual anxiety – in which the traditions of colonialist and phallogentric discourses coincide.”⁴⁷ Elsewhere, he argues that “this simile of sexual union is elaborated in terms of the dynamics of male desire ... represented as an infinite movement of appropriation and physical possession unbounded by the limits of time and space.”⁴⁸ Hence, the rhetorical images of the Orientalist ideology, where people and nations are allegorised by the figure of the female body, take a subversively counter-hegemonic configuration in *Un Marocain à New York*. The image of the conquering male body is associated with the marginal “Other,” whereas the eroticised space is connected with that of civilised and powerful New York. The author’s deliberate choice of words and phrases loaded with sexual connotations such as “pénètre”, “le va-et-vient”, “à croquer”, “s’y introduit” enhance the availability and submissiveness of the city associated with a “Big Apple” as symbol of desire and lasciviousness:

Big Apple, la grosse pomme, comme on la surnomme ici, est à croquer. Quelques pas dans la ville et l’on est pris dans le tumulte de la rue, le va-et-vient incessant de la foule, comme dans les bras d’une femme infidèle que l’on sait vicieuse, fatale, mais dont on ne peut plus se passer.⁴⁹ [The Big Apple, as they call it here, is ready to be chewed up. Just a few steps inside the city and you’re taken in the uproar of the streets, the comings and goings of the relentless crowds, caught helplessly in the arms of a vicious, fatal and unfaithful wife.]

On the other hand, as is the case with old travellers in exotic lands, the author has managed to privilege sovereignty in his text as a measure of control; he lays out the landscape and “geography” before explaining and inscribing his heroic acts inside that space. The author’s inland journey is loaded with ideological meanings. It attempts to dissect the American society and expose some of its numerous flaws. From the very beginning, the narrator confronts an unprecedented poverty:

En Amérique, il y a les villes riches et il y a les villes pauvres. Et puis il y’a New York : une ville riche, riche d’un million de pauvres.⁵⁰ [In America, there are rich cities and there are poor ones as well. And

then there is New York: a rich city, rich in a million poor people.]

The author's subversive attitude remains intensely self-conscious and it's primarily meant to shake the West through a systematic process of reversal. The presence of a considerable number of poor people, desperately struggling for a living in New York City, allows the narrator to encapsulate a counter discourse meant to subvert the conventional stereotypes which view the racially Other as poor, weak, backward and inferior. Immediately, the reader feels that "the otherness of the West is suddenly reversed into sameness, offering backwardness as a common feature uniting two seemingly irreconcilable third and first worlds."⁵¹

b. Sexual and moral decadence: Disorienting authority

Looking back to the centre is a subversive gesture performed by *Un Marocain à New York*. Elalamy's primary aim is to construct a counter-discourse capable of dismantling the conventional Orientalist dogmas that keep circulating within the Western imagination. The West, paradoxically, emerges in the text as decadent, cruel and bound to crumble. It is helpless because the whole system of values and beliefs is shattered. Fatal diseases, drug abuse, violence and poverty are clear indications of America's decay in Elalamy's narrative. The young teenager, caught up in a miserable condition, is revealing: "De l'autre côté de la rue, une adolescente plongeait sa main dans un sac poubelle noir pour en sortir des canettes vides qu'elle pourrait échanger cinq cent la pièce."⁵² (From the other side of the street, a teenager thrusts her hand into a black rubbish bag to come out of it with empty cans that she could sell at five cents each.) This scene is probably meant to suggest that the Western social system is crippled; American society remains demonstrably unjust and unresponsive. TV programs disseminate images of everyday life, full of horror, rape and sexual abuse. The whole episode, entitled "Telé Blues" depicts Americans as lustful rapists; as if American citizens paradoxically bore all the biased images often associated with the non-West.

The author of *Un Marocain à New York* is trying to lay bare the dynamics that undermine American society. In the section entitled "le Loup et l'Anneau", he successfully manages to transform "the hidden transcripts" of American sexual liberalism into a mere fabricated illusion: "Un phallus géant, prêt à décoller, une femme, les jambes bien écartées exhibant un sexe barré d'une croix gammée."⁵³ (A massive phallus, ready to take off, a woman with wide-spread legs showing off the sexual organ crossed with a swastika.) The Hell's Angels Club, the main setting of "le Loup et

l'Anneau," illustrates a deep-seated malaise of contemporary American society. Penetrating such a hellish space, the writer intends to demonstrate how deteriorated American society is, and how vulgarised sex has become. So, morality and decent behaviour seem to be completely nonexistent; they are swept away by the mechanisms of capitalism and consumption. In short, moral values are totally extinguished and the West is dying. Accordingly, the description of this public space turns smoothly into a metaphoric representation of a deep-rooted ideological crisis in modern America constructed "as harbouring potential violence behind the façade of civilisation."⁵⁴

Equally important, the presence of the narrator in the Hell's Angels Club takes a self-assertive and a potentially subversive configuration. The author has managed to create what Homi Bhabha calls "an empty third space, the other space of symbolic representation"⁵⁵ where the pillars of authority and power are dismantled. "Fuck the Power"⁵⁶ emphatically enhances a counter-hegemonic discourse within that "empty third space" which fractures and disperses authority. Instead of feeling embarrassed, or helpless, the narrator adopts a self-assertive attitude:

Sans réfléchir, je déboutonnai ma chemise, retroussai mes manches, gonflai la poitrine, fronçai les sourcils, crispai les joues et affectai un regard de pierre"⁵⁷ [Without thinking, I unbuttoned my shirt, tucked up my sleeves, inflated my chest, frowned, and with wrinkled cheeks I projected a stony gaze.]

The author is defending his presence instead of repressing it; a process of authority displacement and "a built-in resistance" are at work. He is invested with power and granted a space to challenge the discourse of power. Surveillance is dislocated by a sharp and destructive gaze, "un regard de Pierre." Being self consciously aware that he might be seen as an inferior "Other," he adopts a challenging gangster-like attitude. Such an attitude constitutes a kind of response to America's misrepresentation of its Otherness. Another signifier of a counter discourse in this particular episode becomes evident when the narrator sits himself at the bar in a conscious desire to celebrate his Moroccanness and his cultural identity:

Je réussis à grimper sur un tabouret et commandai un Schweppes. Le barman [skull] n'avait jamais entendu de cette liqueur et je dus me contenter d'un grand verre d'eau minérale.⁵⁸ [I managed to climb on a stool and ordered a Schweppes. The barman [skull] never heard of this liquor and I had to content myself with a glass of mineral water.]

What is most striking in this passage is that Skull, the barman, is dominated by a sense of uncertainty, doubt and anxiety when asked about liquor he has never heard of. He is bewildered by such unpredicted and challenging request. Undoubtedly, Skull's theory of mastery, being physically built with tattoos all over his body, undergoes a crisis. Failure to understand the author's order reveals his anxieties and this could be interpreted as a structural problem that distorts and disrupts the discourse of mastery and problematises the Western discourse on difference.

The narrator has managed to break away from the essentialist ideologies and from the different discourses that have held the Oriental "Other" captive inside codes of authority that speak on his behalf. His defiant self has allowed him to imaginatively acquire authority that grants him more visibility within American society. "Drôles de Oiseaux" is another important episode that dramatises the way he stages his self-assertion, enters the white intellectual community, and dismantles the discourse of authority. During a cocktail party given after a fashion show, the narrator appears to be more predisposed to disengage his discourse from the Orientalist tradition that emphasises the Oriental's silence and servility. His intellectual visibility is clearly illustrated in his ability to give his point of view on a wide range of subjects (finance, ecology, food and fishing industries). His power to deal with such subjects in such an eloquent way embarrasses one of his interlocutors and arouses the audience's curiosity:

c'est alors qu'un petit homme à l'allure impeccable, la cinquantaine passée,[...] mit la main sur mon épaule. 'Et Vous', me dit – il, 'vous êtes dans quoi au juste'? Je restais sans rien dire . . . 'Et vous', me dit-il encore, 'vous êtes dans quoi au juste?'"⁵⁹ [It is at that time that a little man with a perfect look, past fifty, . . . puts his hand on my shoulder, 'And You', he says to me , 'What do you exactly do'? . I said nothing . . . 'And you', he continues, 'What do you exactly do?]

Of major significance, then, is the narrator's powerful presence among "the gentlemen" of the American community. He has brought his audience under total control and reduced his interlocutors to "drôles de oiseaux"; funny birds, or "birds that sing sweetly" to use Eleazar's famous verse.⁶⁰ But, it is certainly "ironical that this should occur in a [space] which is meant to annihilate and silence the Oriental Other."⁶¹

The encounter with a lady at the international house in New York, in the episode entitled "Pauvre de moi," offers another instance on how the author reacts harshly to the overriding hostility of the Orientalist vision. The lady's image of Morocco reiterates aggressively biased preconceptions that target the dehumanization of Morocco and its people. The passage that

follows is significant: “Ainsi, vous êtes du Maroc, me dit – elle . . . ce doit être un de ces pays où l’on a rien à se mettre sous la dent”⁶² (So you are from Morocco, she says – ... that must be one of those countries where you have nothing to eat.) The lady seems to be inventing a distorted picture of what is “manifestly a different (or alternative and novel) world,”⁶³ holding a stereotypical image of Morocco and Moroccans as aberrant, undeveloped and inferior. From the outset, she projects the narrator as “different” and treats him as a starving creature. His response is of immediate importance:

Je lui rappelai seulement la *grande misère* que j’ai pu rencontrer sur South Bronx au Nord du Harlem. Les boutiques éventrés, les immeubles calcinés, les innombrables *ghettos sans eau, ni électricité*, où les populations s’entassent, rongées par *la faim, la peur, le désespoir*, les centaines de *mendiants et sans abri*.⁶⁴ [I reminded her of the great poverty which I was able to see in the South Bronx, North of Harlem, eviscerated shops, decrepit buildings, the uncountable ghettos without water, nor electricity, where the population is dying of hunger, fear, despair; the hundreds of beggars and the homeless.]

As Cherki Karkaba assumes, “this perception of New York, as a place of violence, poverty and deprivation, offers a vision which questions the stereotype of the West as Paradise, a stereotype that continues to stick in the minds of millions of potential migrants.”⁶⁵ The author is ultimately aware of the injurious stereotype and the biased origin that has fabricated it. His reaction is meant to condemn the origin of the stereotype and his defiant voice emerges from the text and becomes assertive when we later realise that the lady is turned into a static object, brought under control and silenced. She adopts a passive position and keeps contemplating the buffet: “la dame parcourait du regard le magnifique buffet.”⁶⁶ (The lady was just staring at the magnificent buffet.) This actually reflects her destabilised state of mind. Symbolically, the author has managed to control the stereotype and has imaginatively and subversively defeated the homogeneous and essentialist discourse of Western ideology. He has also managed to estrange the lady within her own community.

c. Cultural hybridity and contamination

Un Marocain à New York is about a Moroccan student who went to America to complete his studies; but it is also about the various encounters between two “desperate cultures [that] clash and grapple with each other.”⁶⁷ If we assume that all cultural experiences and “all cultural forms

are historically, radically, quintessentially hybrid,”⁶⁸ the interpretation of the protagonist, who is the narrator himself, gets more complex when the reader’s attention is drawn to the important notions of cultural hybridity and contamination which operate literally and symbolically in the text. The focus here is on the protagonist’s sexual encounter with American women. Probably, the question that needs to be asked is: should the reader view the protagonist as a cultural hybrid? Would he be considered as the result of the cultural union of America and Morocco and the intermingling of East and West?⁶⁹ In fact, this cultural union between two cultures which grapple with each other is intertwined with ironical twists in a segment entitled “Nous York” (we York). The “Nous” here is viewed as a single entity that encloses two radically distinct cultures to become almost one. In this episode, the author moves across different locations and associates the emblems of modernity in New York with religious and cultural sites of his home country, disturbing the signifiers of civilisation to create a space for self-affirmation and identity construction. Consequently, New York City turns into “Nous York Sidi,” “Avec ses milles et un minarets ...une ville pas comme les autres”⁷⁰; the twin towers of the World Trade Centre shift into mosques “la grande mosquée du World Trade Centre dont les deux tours culminant à plus de 400 mètres accueillent les fidèles”⁷¹; Central Park is reallocated as an imagined space of palm groves where people enjoy their couscous and tagines after the Friday prayers “après la prière du Vendredi, les calèches longent les interminables murailles de la ville et filent ... vers la palmeraie du Central Park...pour déguster...l’incontournable couscous aux sept légumes et le tagine”⁷²; the sound of water carriers’ bells overwhelms the underground train stations “dans les stations de métro, les porteurs d’eau...font tinter leurs cloches et offrent de l’eau fraîche.”⁷³ In here, the reader becomes aware that an indigenous cultural form of transgression is being fostered as the author dismantles hierarchical structures, subverts and appropriates the codes of power to assert his cultural identity and creates a third space of difference. Such cultural transgression, as Pnina Werbner argues, “is a potential tool of resistance which upturns taken-for-granted hierarchies”⁷⁴ and makes it possible for the author to establish his oppositional agency.

Understanding hybridity from postcolonial studies perspective is to shed light on Homi . K. Bhabha’s insightful analysis of hybridity. Bahabha suggests that the hybrid rejects the passivity and fixity implied by the already accepted notion of colonial assimilation. He stresses the fact that it entails subversion and appropriation of the codes of power and domination. Hence, the authority of cultural hybrids lies in their ability to create, what he calls, “the third space of enunciations” which is a precondition for the

articulation of cultural difference.”⁷⁵ In Bhabha’s analysis, hybridity may be seen as a strategic gesture that returns the White man’s gaze and rejects cultural paradigms of purity and fixity. It “displays the necessary deformation and displacement of all sites of discrimination and domination. It unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power that reimplicates its identifications in strategies of subversion that turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power.”⁷⁶

Bhabha’s concept of the hybrid helps to flesh out the dilemma that centres on the interpretation of the protagonist in *Un Marocain à New York*. In an act of subversion and appropriation of the dominant codes of power, the protagonist seduces and drives a series of women into despair and psychological trauma; I insist on despair because none of his relationships with American women culminate in marriage. Instead of functioning as a contrast, he turns into “an uncanny double” that disorients American identity and contaminates its purity. What is also worth stressing is his self-empowerment characterised by the dominance of his intellect over his emotions. This self-empowerment, through the doubling effect of hybridity, proves to be enabling for the protagonist to transcend the gaze of discrimination and assimilation.

The author’s sexual conquest in New York may be seen as part of a battle strategy, an indication of a conscious campaign which aims to displace authority. The episode entitled “La Chose” (the thing) is revealing. The protagonist is seen at the Chemist’s in Bleecker Street where he is supposed to buy condoms. It is clearly understood that the battle strategy takes the form of sexual exploitation, as an act of resistance and liberation. Through the way condoms are displayed in the text, one would immediately associate the Chemist’s with a weapons store. “Durex Doublex 008,” “Hot Rubber Sweet,” “Khondomz Magnum” and “Dark Rubber” are names that suggest weaponry. The protagonist is sexually motivated to resist the discourse of mastery and exact his vengeance on the mechanisms of power. Accordingly, his concern with sex as a liberating force in *Un Marocain à New York* is relevant if we consider Tayeb Salih’s masterpiece *Season of Migration to the North*. The main character of Saleh’s novel tries to symbolically reverse the history of European colonialism by indulging in sexual adventures with British women. Mustapha Sayeed keeps saying that he is determined to liberate Africa through Phallogocentric recognition that reclaims masculinity as symbol revenge on Europe for its “rape of Africa.”⁷⁷

Viewed from the same angle, *Un Marocain à New York* allows the reading of the protagonist’s sexual adventures within a counter discourse paradigm which challenges the supremacy of Western values and reverses the orientalist vision of the Other. It is important to notice how the author

is retrospectively eroticising and exoticising Lori during a “Boobs Party” in the episode entitled “Cocktail de Fruits”:

Deux moitiés de noix de Coco tenaient ses seins prisonniers. Pendant que je l’écoutais parler, je remarquai ses boucles d’oreilles en grappes de cerises, ses bracelets tranches d’ananas en latex fluo, et cette fraise des bois tatouée sur son nombril. Un véritable cocktail de fruits.⁷⁸ [Two coconuts in halves were holding her jailed breasts. While I was listening to her talking, I noticed that her earrings were like bunches of cherries, her bracelets like edges of a pineapple in fluorescent latex, and this wooden strawberry tattooed on her belly button; a true cocktail of fruits.]

Edward Said has pointed out that the sexual possession of the female is a familiar colonial motif.⁷⁹ In gendered colonial discourse, the orient is characterized by feminine attributes of “sexual promise . . . untiring sensuality, unlimited desire,”⁸⁰ while the West is described by the masculine antithesis of those attributes, namely logic, reason and rationality. The author’s description of Lori is self-consciously meant to work as a deflection of the romanticised and orientalist view of the “Other”; a strategy of subversion that turns the gaze of the racially discriminated other back upon the eye of power. The narrator’s reversed role is not far from that of an invader who brings despair and trauma into the lives of all those women who are caught up in the notion of the exotic and sensuous other. Andrea’s phrase uttered twice in the text is very revealing in this respect “Te Voilà enfin” (Here you are at last). It demonstrates how she is helplessly caught within the clutches of the sensuous protagonist, desperately waiting for the appropriate occasion to dominate him, but what she receives is total neglect and rejection. Andrea, Gloria and Jenny are among many other cases that are locked within the notion of the exotic and sensuous “Other.” The game of seduction is, indeed, acted upon by both sides, the protagonist and his “harem,” but it always turns out to be desperately destructive and disappointing for the women. He often promises to see them but never meets them again.

Conclusion

Un Marocain à New York shows how the protagonist negotiates, subverts and reinvents Orientalist discourse in order to serve his cultural expression, and self-representation. The assumptions that underscore the Western perception of Otherness can be inventively inverted and subverted by the culturally and religiously different Other. Elalamy’s work transposes

Orientalism-American style and explores “the extent to which the colonised peoples engaged the orientalisating discourse, resisting its stereotypes, subverting its epistemology, amending its practices and sometimes even re-applying its stereotypes to the [Americans] themselves.”⁸¹ The marginal creates and dominates a space that allows for resistance to and subversion of the Western hegemonic discourse. The protagonist, the author himself, assumes authority and acquires agency engaging in a political act of “writing back” in order to reverse the historically established Western modes of representation that operate along the parameters of inclusion and exclusion. His text also adopts mechanisms of decentring Western assumptions of authority through diverse acts of liberation and “various strategies of subversion and appropriation.” The fascinating question, I have borrowed from Bill Aschroft, and which has been explored all the way through, is what happens when the marginal “Other” strikes back at the Centre?⁸²

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NOTES

¹ Youssouf Amine Elalamy, *Un Marocain à New York*, (Paris: Eddif, 2001). I was first introduced to Youssouf Amine Elalamy’s narrative when I enrolled for my Master’s degree in Cultural Studies: Culture and Identity in Morocco. I worked on this text for my MA dissertation. My reading of *Un Marocain à New York* has benefited a lot from Professor Khalid Bekkaoui’s, Professor Sadik Rddad’s and Brian Edward’s insightful remarks during my discussion of this work at the Moroccan Cultural Studies Centre, Fez. I would like to thank them and thank all the students for their indispensable role in the development of this essay. The merits of this piece are derived from the excellent advice that I have received both from my teachers and from the peer reviewers of *Colloquy: Text Theory Critique Journal*; its shortcomings are entirely my responsibility.

I am not making a claim too great for this text, that it is doing something very different than other texts in writing a travelogue to America (New York specifically) and in challenging mainstream American perceptions of Arabs (Moroccans and others...). Elalamy’s work is certainly not alone in dealing with the image of America in Moroccan/Arab literature. Indeed Kamal Abdel-Malek has edited a collection of works entitled *America in an Arab Mirror: Images of America in Arabic Travel Literature* (2000). This anthology introduces excerpts by Arab writers who have visited America between 1895-1995 (including Layla Abu Zayd’s *America’s Other Face*). Their narratives articulate non-monolithic and heterogeneously fostered discourses about the country and its people. America, accordingly, is at

once seductive but remains the very contrast of an Arab-centred Self that is most often rejected on cultural, religious and racial attributes.

- ² The translations from *Un Marocain à New York*, originally written in French, are mine unless stated elsewhere.
- ³ Christopher Wise, "A lesson in Orientalist Journalism", *The Star* (Jordan), November 10th, Quoted in Sura Rath's "Post/Past Orientalism: Orientalism and its dis/re-orientation", *Comparative American Studies* 2.3 (2004) 352.
- ⁴ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978) 259.
- ⁵ Said, *Orientalism* 290.
- ⁶ Ziauddin Sardar, *Orientalism*, (Buckingham: Open Univ. Press, 1999) Quoted in Patrick Williams "Versions of Orientalism", *Paragraph* (2001) 11.
- ⁷ Sura P. Rath, "Post/Past-Orientalism: Orientalism and its Dis/Re-orientation", *Comparative American Studies* 2.3 (2004) 352.
- ⁸ Michael Chapman, "Postcolonialism: a Literary Turn", *English in Africa* 33. 2 (2006) 7.
- ⁹ Gayatri C. Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, (New York: Routledge, 1993) 56.
- ¹⁰ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1994) ix.
- ¹¹ Robert Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*, (London: Routledge, 1990) 159.
- ¹² Said, *Orientalism* 1.
- ¹³ Said, *Orientalism* 1-2.
- ¹⁴ Said, *Orientalism* 1.
- ¹⁵ Said, *Orientalism* 2-3.
- ¹⁶ Said, *Orientalism* 3.
- ¹⁷ Said, *Orientalism* 5.
- ¹⁸ Said, *Orientalism* 5.
- ¹⁹ Said, *Orientalism* 36.
- ²⁰ James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature and Art*, (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1988) 271.
- ²¹ Khalid Bekkaoui, *Signs of Spectacular Resistance, the Spanish Moor and British Orientalism*, (Casablanca: Najah El Jadida, 1998) 32.
- ²² Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, (London: Vintage, 1994) 209.
- ²³ Said, *Culture and Imperialism* 260.
- ²⁴ Robert Young, *Post colonialism: An Historical Introduction*, (Massachusetts: Blackwell 2001) 383. Robert Young's work is an interesting guide for students and academics interested in colonial discourse analysis; it sketches the historical and theoretical foundations of postcolonial theory. Developed within an anti-colonial praxis, the book argues that anti-colonial trends are hybrid processes that target a

rethinking of Western knowledge and power.

²⁵ Said, *Culture and Imperialism* 66.

²⁶ Geeta Chowdhry, "Edward Said and Contrapuntal Reading: Implications for Critical Interventions in International Relations", *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 36.1 (2007) 104.

²⁷ Chowdhry, "Edward Said" 104.

²⁸ Chowdhry, "Edward Said" 104.

²⁹ Said, *Culture and Imperialism* 176.

³⁰ Bruce Robbins, "Secularism, Elitism, Progress, and Other Transgressions: On Edward Said's 'Voyage In'", *Social Text* 40 (1994) 30.

³¹ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, eds., *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1995) 8.

³² Said, *Culture and Imperialism* 244-5.

³³ Mohamed El Kouche, "Tangier speaks: A reading in the discourse of three Tanjaoui writers", in *Voices of Tangier: Conference Proceedings*, eds. Khalid Amine, Andrew Hussey, Barry Tharaud (Tanger: Altropress, 2006) 80.

³⁴ Bekkaoui, *Signs* 63. Khalid Bekkaoui's insightful work deploys the notion of history as discourse to deal not only with historical documents but also with all modalities of representation and modes of expression to destabilise the mainstream itineraries of Western universalism and subvert the conventional legacies of Eurocentric humanism. Such a will to subversion is what has mainly marked out the postcolonial paradigm of resistance both from within as well as from without.

³⁵ Bekkaoui, *Signs* 71.

³⁶ Bekkaoui, *Signs* 62

³⁷ Abdellatif Akbib visited America in 2001 and wrote his *Tangier's Eyes on America*. His text is replete with powerful moments and situations which underline the counter hegemonic attitude of the author who is trying to manipulate Western prejudices and stereotypes in an inventive way.

³⁸ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, (London: Routledge, 1992) 6.

³⁹ Elalamy, *Un Marocain à New York*, 12.

⁴⁰ David Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing and Imperial Administration*, (Durham, N. C.: Duke University Press, 1993) 14.

⁴¹ Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire* 14.

⁴² Pratt, *Imperial Eyes* 201.

⁴³ Elalamy, *Un Marocain à New York* 13. See Michelle Hartman's "Writing Arabs and Africa(ns) in America: Adonis and Radwa Ashour from Harlem to Lady Liberty", in *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 37 (2005) 403. Poets, fiction writers and intellectuals from the Arab world, all alike, engage with the Statue of

Liberty and New York City by extension, in gendered and sexualised terms in their textual journeys to America. In his most famous poem “*Qabr min aji new york*” (A Grave for New York) for example, Adonis associates New York with a treacherous lady, an unmistakably sexualised woman who throws herself “down between the poet’s thighs,” and thus, betrays her vocation. It is viewed, accordingly, as a symbol of treachery, representing tyranny and repression, rather than “the liberty to which she lays claim.”

- ⁴⁴ Elalamy, *Un Marocain à New York* 11.
- ⁴⁵ Elalamy, *Un Marocain à New York* 13.
- ⁴⁶ Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire* 170.
- ⁴⁷ Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire* 170.
- ⁴⁸ Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire* 171.
- ⁴⁹ Elalamy, *Un Marocain à New York* 12.
- ⁵⁰ Elalamy, *Un Marocain à New York* 15.
- ⁵¹ Cherki Karkaba, “Stereotypes of the West in Elalamy’s *Un Marocain à New York*”, *Philologia: Journal of the Faculty of Philology, Univ. of Belgrade* 6 (2008) 155.
- ⁵² Elalamy, *Un Marocain à New York* 30.
- ⁵³ Elalamy, *Un Marocain à New York* 38.
- ⁵⁴ Karkaba, “Stereotypes of the West” 157.
- ⁵⁵ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* 101.
- ⁵⁶ Elalamy, *Un Marocain à New York* 38.
- ⁵⁷ Elalamy, *Un Marocain à New York* 48.
- ⁵⁸ Elalamy, *Un Marocain à New York* 39.
- ⁵⁹ Elalamy, *Un Marocain à New York* 160.
- ⁶⁰ *Lust’s Dominion or the Lascivious Queen*, attributed to Thomas Dekker, was first published in 1657. In 1999 the Moroccan Cultural Studies Centre affiliated to Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah, Fez, edited this text with an introduction and notes by Professor Khalid Bekkaoui. *Lust’s Dominion* focuses on Eleazar the Prince of Fez. “Several years before the opening of the play, King Philip has conquered Barbary, has killed King Abdela and captured his young son, Eleazar. The orphaned Prince is brought up in the Spanish court, and is eventually converted to Christianity, marries the daughter of a Spanish nobleman and turns into a crusader against the Muslim Turks. Nonetheless, the alien warrior is constantly exposed to the hostility and racial hatred of the white community, which stigmatises him for his colour and denounces his amorous relationship with the Queen of Spain” (Bekkaoui 1999, x).
- ⁶¹ Bekkaoui, *Signs* 105
- ⁶² Elalamy, *Un Marocain à New York* 131.
- ⁶³ Said, *Orientalism* 12.
- ⁶⁴ Elalamy, *Un Marocain à New York* 131-132. (Italics added)
- ⁶⁵ Karkaba, “Stereotypes of the West” 155.

- ⁶⁶ Elalamy, *Un Marocain à New York* 132.
- ⁶⁷ Pratt, *Imperial Eyes* 4.
- ⁶⁸ Edward Said, "Third World Intellectuals and Metropolitan Culture". *Raritan* 9 (1990): 27-50. Quoted in Patricia Geesey's "Cultural Hybridity and Contamination in Tayeb Salih's *Mawsim al-Hijra ila al-Shamal*", *Research in African Literatures* 28.3 (1997) 48.
- ⁶⁹ Patricia Geesey, "Cultural Hybridity and Contamination in Tayeb Salih's *Mawsim al-Hijra ila al-Shamal*", in *Research in African Literatures* 28.3 (1997) 128-140. Patricia Geesey's article discusses Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*. It focuses on important cultural concepts such as hybridity and contamination that operate symbolically in the narrative, and it has inspired me in the discussion of the protagonist of *Un Marocain à New York* as a culturally hybridised subject.
- ⁷⁰ Elalamy, *Un Marocain à New York* 59.
- ⁷¹ Elalamy, *Un Marocain à New York* 59.
- ⁷² Elalamy, *Un Marocain à New York* 59.
- ⁷³ Elalamy, *Un Marocain à New York* 60.
- ⁷⁴ Pnina Werbner, "The Limits of Cultural Hybridity: On Ritual Monsters, Poetic Licence and Contested Postcolonial Purifications", in *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 7.1 (Mar., 2001) 133.
- ⁷⁵ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* 38.
- ⁷⁶ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* 112.
- ⁷⁷ Tayeb Salih, *Mawsim al-Hijra ila al-Shamal*, Edition 13 (Beirut: Dar al Awda 1981) 139. (My translation.)
- ⁷⁸ Elalamy, *Un Marocain à New York* 66.
- ⁷⁹ Said, *Orientalism* 169-70.
- ⁸⁰ Said, *Orientalism* 188.
- ⁸¹ Codell F. Julie and Dianne Sachko Macleod, *Orientalism Transposed: the impact of the colonies on British culture*, (Aschgate, 1989) 3.
- ⁸² Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures*, (London: Routledge, 1989), which borrows its title from Salman Rushdie's famous line from an article he wrote for the Times newspaper in 1982, is one of the most significant works that deals with postcolonial cultures and texts, and postcoloniality as praxis and critique. It opens up debates on issues about different aspects of postcolonial literatures, negotiates the dynamics of language in the postcolonial text, and demonstrates how these texts constitute a radical revision of the Eurocentric-based narratives. This book has been of considerable help to me in shaping my argument.