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Under Moroccan Gaze: Dis/(Re)orienting Orientalism American Style in Abdellatif Akbib's *Tangier's Eyes on America*

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Abstract: This article engages with travel literature and is mostly concerned with the image of America in Abdellatif Akbib's travel-inspired narrative, *Tangier's Eyes on America* (2001). It is devoted to examining a number of patterns of representation especially as they pertain to the notion of counter discourse and counter-hegemonic modalities of resistance and subversion. It also inspects the discursive mechanisms Akbib employs to represent America and highlights how Western cultural prejudices and stereotypes are destabilised, and how the discursively-inflected distortions of the Orientalist mindset are disturbed in his work. The choice of this text is determined by a strong desire to discover how the Other of the Orientalist ideology examines and understands the Western Self and modernity and how he/she dismantles "the Centre/Margin binarism of imperial discourse."

Keywords: Orientalism, Postcolonial theory, counter discourse, Self and Other, Centre/Margin binarism

I will start from the premise that no discourse can be totally silenced, nor can any agency be wholly negated. If the perspective known as Orientalism focuses on the West's perception of the Orient in the process of self-representation, what could then be the discursive ramifications of a strategic reversal of modes of representation inherent in such a perception? *Tangier's Eyes on America* underlines the invertive and counter-hegemonic attitude of the author who is

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functioning not simply as an individual traveller but metonymically as the eyes and voice of long-silenced and misrepresented Morocco. Akbib brings to the fore situations where the inscriptions of a stereotypical discourse find their most powerful expression, and through the use of irony as a subversive narrative device, he plays with the racial stereotypes, twists them and creates discursive terrains for identity affirmation and self-expression. His text adopts mechanisms of decentering Western assumptions of authority through diverse acts of liberation and various strategies of subversion and appropriation. His travel account is replete with powerful situations and recollections which offer illuminating insights into startling and problematic critiques of the modern “empire,” paving the way to a vigorous outpouring of “literature of opposition,” as Edward Said would call it, and to a counter-consciousness that are altogether meant to oppose and contest Western prescriptions about “Otherness.” It offers discursive instances that show how inventively the Oriental Others can answer back, re-act against the West’s disfigured rendition of the Oriental, and take history into their own hands. The main question, as Sura Rath argues, is “no longer whether the subaltern can speak but what s/he is saying, and how loud and clear the voice is” (Rath, 2004, p.352).

It is obvious that Akbib’s text, together with those of other Moroccans who have visited America on different occasions and for different purposes and have written about it,¹ may be viewed as a loud call for radical revisions of the old body of assumptions and misrepresentations that have fostered the American style of Orientalist discourse.² Their subversive strategies acquire greater levels of importance as they have undertaken the task to write back for self-empowerment and self-assertion, through a metaphorical disturbance of the Western colonial mindset that is yet continuous. As a response to the Western conventional paradigms of subordination and exclusion, these traditionally silenced voices have been driven by a strong desire to question the basic assumptions upon which the legacies of Western discourse and canonicity are based.

The Postcolonial Moment: Theorising the Subject and Retrieving Subalterned Voices

The field of colonial discourse analysis, or Postcolonial discourse, starts with Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978). Though it has been subjected to harsh criticisms by critics generally informed by Marxist analyses, some of whom will be outlined later, it has nonetheless maintained much of its paradigmatic stance and continues to inspire discussions in a number of scholarly fields. It seems, indeed, nearly impossible to discuss postcolonialism as a discipline of study without invoking Said generally, and *Orientalism* specifically. Spivak (1993, p. 56) 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". In his *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha (1994, p.ix) acknowledges Said's seminal work as being a pioneering critical endeavour which provided him with "a critical terrain and an intellectual project." Robert Young, too, is unmistakably explicit about Said's groundbreaking work. He contends that "Colonial discourse analysis was initiated as an academic sub-discipline within literary and cultural theory by Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978" (Young, 1990, p.159). Said's theoretical framework has proven useful to a wide variety of analytical approaches, thus securing its ongoing success. His insights on the analysis of Western representation of the Orient have paved the way to scholars and intellectuals in Western academia such as Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, Robert Young, and in the Moroccan context, Khalid Bekkaoui, Sadik Rddad, Mohamed Laamiri, Jamal Eddine Benhayoun,³ to interrogate and problematise the connection between knowledge and power, Self and Other, centre and periphery, inherent in the Orientalist constructions of identity and difference. Such a will to destabilise and rethink the mainstream itineraries of Western humanism and subvert its Eurocentric episteme is what has mainly marked out the postcolonial paradigm of resistance in an

attempt to retrieve silenced voices of otherness and strike back to critique mainstream colonial narratives.

In his *Orientalism*, Said (1978, p.1) 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”, which served, appropriately enough, “to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience” (pp.1-2). 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” (p.1), 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” (pp.2-3). Said, adopting a Foucauldian framework, mainly the connection between knowledge and power and the genealogical aspects of discourse and the workings of institutional foundations of forms of truth that are entangled within power-relations, argues that the vast scholarship collected as evidence about the Orient, served in fact to manage and produce the Orient (p.3). 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. Said argues, therefore, that the Orient as an entity cannot be thought of as apart from the onslaught of “interests inevitably brought to bear on (and therefore always involved in) any occasion when that peculiar entity ... is in question” (p.3). 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” (p.5). In other words, Said concerns himself with “the internal consistency of Orientalism” despite or beyond any correspondence, or lack thereof, with a ‘real’ Orient” (p.5).

Said also questions the epistemological model of surveillance, the “increasingly profitable dialectic of information and control” (p.36) implicit in the discourse of Orientalism. The object, in this scenario, is immediately rendered vulnerable to scrutiny and reduced to a frozen image; to a fundamentally ontological and stable fact

over which the observer has authority because “[he] know[s] [the fact] and it exists, in a sense, as [he] know[s] it” (p.32). 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 as a vision of reality or a mode of thought, rather than an irreducible constraint on thought with overwhelming political consequences.

However, Edward Said’s ground-breaking work has been the focus of severe but insightful critiques, and the main contentious debate revolves around the ‘historical consistency of Orientalism’ and the essentialised monolithic vision of the Saidian model. In mapping out the political effects of the Orientalist discourse, *Orientalism* has fallen into a delicate situation by its “construction of an equally homogeneous Orient” (Bonakdarian, 2005, p.176) and by totalising the ongoing practices and processes of power. His essentialism, thus, describes “the occident,” in Clifford’s words, “as a self-identical, fixed being which has always had an essence and a project, an imagination and a will,” while the Orient remains confined to being “no more than its silenced object” (Clifford, 1988, p.271). Here, it becomes clear that Said’s critical reading of Orientalism focuses on the violence of the Empire rather than on the resistance of the colonised; on the epistemic transgressions of the oppressor 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” (Bekkaoui, 1998, p.32).

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” in a chapter entitled “Resistance and Opposition”. The post-colonial text, therefore, becomes a “conscious effort to enter into the discourse of...the West, to mix with it, transform it, to make it acknowledge marginalized or suppressed or forgotten histories” (Said, 1994, p.260). The postcolonial, thereafter, involves a “...critical reconsideration of the whole project and practice of colonial modernity” (Young, 2001, p.383). The rise of postcolonial consciousness as a revisionist and critical attitude can be seen as part of a larger discourse of resistance to a Euro-centric vision, a continuation of an admirable effort on

the part of the “imperialily subjectified” others to contest Western forms of domination and negation.

If the “dominating, coercive systems of knowledge” have virtually obliterated the culturally, racially and religiously different Other, Akbib’s travel narrative expresses various discourses of opposition to the hegemonic forms of negation and marginalisation. His work displays various discursive strategies of subversion which potentially displace the centre, and articulate “a much more mature and sophisticated resisting discourse that consciously seeks to ‘write back’ to the West” (El Kouche, 2006, p.80). Indeed, the text under study underlies this subversive and counter-hegemonic attitude of the author, whereby the act of writing back takes an extremely important political significance. I consider writing in this sense a conscious political act of resistance which aims at destabilising 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 of the American community. It is also a clear case which shows how the previously silenced voices have managed to express agency and resistance within the ambiguities of the Orientalist discourse. It deploys a much more mature resisting discourse and voices out the subversive postcolonial attitude of the author who emerges as a “dissenting voice” capable of contesting the Western hegemonic discourse. His subversive attitude remains intensely self-conscious and it is meant both to destabilise the West in its essence through a systematic reversal of the binary opposition of Self and Other, centre and periphery, West and East, in order to allow the reader to mock modernity as a political eye-witness who possesses a distinctive postcolonial critical consciousness.

Generally, the main concern here is to show how Abdellatif Akbib 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. Codell and Macleod’s (1998, p.3)⁴ “Orientalism Transposed” best illustrates the intent of this reading which explores “the extent to which the colonized peoples engaged the orientalizing

discourse, resisting its stereotypes, subverting its epistemology, amending its practices and sometimes even re-applying its stereotypes to the (Americans) themselves.” In Akbib’s narrative, the marginal creates and dominates a space that allows for resistance to and subversion of the Western hegemonic discourse. With a postcolonially-inflected awareness, I will try to demonstrate how the author/traveller assumes authority and acquires agency, engaging in a conscious act of “writing back” in order to destabilise and reverse the historically established Western modes of representation that operate along the parameters of inclusion and exclusion; and how his travel account interrogates those “originary” tropes of colonial narratives shaped in important ways by the Orientalist ideology.

Tangier’s Eyes and Voice: The Return of the Gaze of Power

Tangier’s Eyes on America by Abdellatif Akbib bears a skillfully designed picture on the cover which underlines from the outset this invertive and counter-hegemonic attitude of the author. The image juxtaposes the Hercules Cave and “Lady Liberty” in a relatively unbalanced way. Through a natural and inartificial eye-like hole that ornaments the cave, as a mythic setting, the Statue of Liberty appears on the other side of the ocean suggesting the unnaturalness and the artificiality of the space that will host the traveller. Tangier, and by extension the whole country, is endowed with an eyesight; both the Hercules Cave and the Statue of Liberty are symbolically drawn into a binary opposition which engages the reader, from the very beginning, to think of a disfiguration of the Western gaze. The size of the eye is deliberately meant to dominate the picture. It is paradoxically endowed with life through the presence of the shadows of human beings at the background. In sharp contrast, the Statue of Liberty remains passive, motionless and mesmerised by an inverted gaze.

With respect to the visual rhetoric of the gaze, Malek Alloula’s *Colonial Harem* has largely contributed to the articulation of the gaze of the colonised through what he terms “a double operation;” “first to uncover the nature and the meaning of the colonialist gaze, then to subvert the stereotype that is so tenaciously attached to the bodies of the women” (Alloula, 1989, p.5). The inversion of the colonialist gaze is revealing for the most part because it allows the

native (the colonised) to adopt a much more powerful position whereby the eye of power becomes more vulnerable and powerless. The observer is violated and frustrated by the violent gaze of the observed. Hence, the Statue of Liberty, and by implication the U.S., is fiercely overwhelmed and controlled by the natives' freezing gaze.

The Statue of Liberty, the immediate identifiable symbol of New York City, and of the United States, is generally "reproduced romantically, satirically, patriotically, defiantly, or as a parody; the image of a woman holding a torch and clutching a tablet has seeped into the public imagination, worldwide, to represent the United States and its claims to uphold liberty" (Hartman, 2005, p.401).⁵ Poets, fiction writers and intellectuals from the Arab world engage with the Statue of Liberty, and New York city by extension, in gendered and sexualised terms in their textual journeys to the U.S. In his most famous poem "*Qabr min ajl New York*" (A Grave for New York), Adonis associates New York with a treacherous lady; an unmistakably sexualised woman who engages in a sexual intercourse with the poet and thus betrays her vocation. She is viewed, accordingly, as a symbol of treachery and hostile to the values it alleges, representing tyranny and repression, rather than "the liberty to which she lays claim" (Hartman, 2005, p.403). This renders the poet's engagement with the city more complex. The sexually violent and gendered images mobilised by Adonis, as Hartman argues, are meant "to draw on the familiar misogynistic representation of women as betrayers to mount and reinforce the poet's critique of the USA." More interestingly, in Akbib's case the feminine-like attitude which the Statue itself implies in *Tangier's Eyes on America* reduces the whole city into an erotic object of a voyeuristic desire overmastered by the marginal Eye. "Having become an object-to-be-seen," to use Alloula's words, New York is "dispossessed of [its] own gaze" (Alloula, 1989, p.14), and the "right of oversight that the colonizer arrogates to himself" (p.5) is ultimately challenged and metaphorically subverted by Tangier's gaze.

The deconstructive effort undertaken here is primarily meant to unfold the counter-hegemonic discourse that Akbib engages from the outset in his travel narrative, and which is clearly delineated through paratextual elements. As a matter of fact, "Akbib's title indicates quite unambiguously that Tangier has already assumed

the role of subject rather than object and that it is now projecting its scrutinizing ‘eyes on America’ (as well as on the whole world by implication)” (El Kouche, 2006, p.80).

Equally important, the narrator of *Tangier’s Eyes on America* (Akbib himself) “is functioning not simply as an individual traveller but also as symbolically the eyes and voice of Tangier. Being himself a native of this post-colonial city, [he] has responsibly taken it upon himself to operate metonymically as its tongue and as a spokesman of its long silenced and misrepresented citizens” (Akbib, 2005, p.80). So, the counter-hegemonic voice that emerges in Akbib’s work is ultimately that of the whole country which is endowed with agency and power and looks at America with critical eyes, not out of enmity but out of the need to establish a much more rational discourse on cross-cultural contacts. This is clearly stated by the end of his account as he contends that “it is a misconception to suppose that only the West is capable of nourishing stereotypes *vis-à-vis* the East, we are capable of that, too. But as it is our duty to stem the tide of such negative attitudes, we can’t afford to deal with the other by adopting what we want him to get rid of” (Akbib, 2005, p.85).

Subverting the White’s Stereotypes: A Counter-Orientalist Discourse

In “An Early Flight of Imagination,” the narrator recalls one of the most painful incidents which occurred at the Immigration Control in Charles de Gaulle Airport during a stopover in Paris while heading to the U.S. for his first visit. Four passengers “were singled out of hundreds” (Akbib, 2001, p.9); they were meticulously checked and their documents were carefully scrutinised just because of their “rich skin, with its matt-finish” (p.8). This scene clearly projects an Orientalist vision based on racial difference. The narrator and the other three passengers are immediately suspected because they are racially different ‘Others,’ and their presence in a Jumbo jet “that had flown from Israel” (p.9) has to be controlled.

The scene under study finds its expression in the fourth dogma listed by Edward Said in his *Orientalism*. According to him, “The Orient is at bottom something to be feared...or to be controlled” (Said, 1978, p.301). In fact, the Orientalist ideology is built on a basic and radical division between East and West; a dichotomy which

conceives of the “Orient as radically Other, culturally and religiously different and, as a consequence, he deserves to be...controlled by the enlightened and civilized West” (Bekkaoui, 1998, p.16).

What seems to be of ultimate significance is that the presence of the author within a space that is metaphorically reserved for the ‘white man’ has obviously disturbed the immigration authorities and the whole Western authority by extension. In its most innocent configurations, the scene could be read as the usual matter of customs office duties; but when viewed from an Orientalist perspective, it falls into the conventional stereotypical discourse against difference. However, the presence of this difference in such a ‘hybrid space’ as the airport entails another discussion.

Drawing on Homi K. Bhabha’s ambivalence, it seems that this very scene is inscribed within a complex and unstable space which “project(s) and disavow(s) difference” (Young, 1990, p.143). To keep the ‘Other’ under control and to expose his inferiority, the ‘Self’ asserts his difference; thus, as Khalid Bekkaoui (1998, p.59) argues, “in order to possess and appropriate the native, the colonial discourse allows him enough sameness so as to make him knowable and familiar...without really completely erasing the traces of his difference”. Hence, difference in this particular instance is not totally eradicated or rejected since the suspected passengers would board the plane bound to the U.S. Another similar situation occurs in the section entitled “Un Marocain à New York,” but in another different location. The narrator will undergo the same dehumanising situation at J.F. Kennedy Airport in New York but this time we witness the workings of a much more resisting discourse.

The episode entitled “Un Marocain à New York” evaluates another situation which involves the author during his transatlantic journey on a second visit to America. The scene opens with a joyful atmosphere on the plane and ends up at the immigration control office. What is worth stressing in this episode is the author’s valorisation of the Moroccan pilots and flight attendants’ skills. The plane is free of any foreign presence that could disturb or threaten the passengers:

Although people didn't know one another, there was a spirit of brotherhood, and a warmth of feelings spread all over the plane; there was much conversation, joking and laughter, to which ambience the experienced flight attendants contributed very successfully through their amiable attention to everyone on board as well as their hospitality (Akbib, 2001, p.12).

This scene is brought in sharp contrast with a previous one and another one to come later in the narrative just after boarding another jet to Pullman, where the author is supposed to carry out a three-month academic research on short-story writing. During his first visit to the U.S., the narrator experienced terrible moments when the pilot lost control of the plane because of bad weather conditions. However, what is most striking is the attitude of the Western passengers on board. The narrator attempts to shed light on the spiritual emptiness of his others: "some passengers were crying, others had opened their bibles and were renewing their acquaintance with God – perhaps for the first time in years" (p.7). When the captain eventually brings the plane to a rough landing, "the bibles were tucked away for a future ballet, and the renewal of acquaintance with the Almighty – obviously not consummated – was postponed to a later date" (pp.7-8).

The author is alluding to the passengers' otherness which is morally, spiritually and religiously empty and extinguished. For him, the passengers' attitudes showed a questioning of religion. If the Orient is depicted within the conventional stereotypical discourse as sensual, despotic and religiously inferior, Akbib works out a counter-stereotypical discourse, bringing clear evidence that the Other of "his Self" is spiritually aberrant and religion is only a second-hand matter which is called for only in moments of trouble.

The immigration control at J.F. Kennedy airport is already structured to bring the West and non-West into a binary opposition. The space is perfectly arranged into lines of demarcation because even in America "it mattered a great deal whether or not you were a native of Uncle Sam's ranch" (p.13). Being non-American, the narrator finds himself in a queue arranged for non-Western Others who are, as he says, "not treated with due respect" (p.13). Symbolically significant, the narrator is consciously aware of the

absolute difference between the West and the East and of the Orientalist ideology which is inextricably part of the American way of thinking. This does not surprise him at all, but what really makes him uncomfortable is the torture he undergoes when the immigration officer asks him intriguing questions about minute details; sometimes the same questions are repeated in different ways. I believe that the whole episode could be read as a vehement denunciation of injustice and an ironic blow to the Western 'Other' who is devoid of any consideration to human dignity. Akbib's criticism, in this sense, is often mediated discreetly through a sense of humour which is highly expressive of his indicting and sarcastic attitude. Yet, his reaction to the American culture, as Professor Mohammed Laamiri states, is "always imbued with sincere respect for the cultural Other" (p.2).⁶ Here, it becomes evident that Akbib's narrative makes an important shift towards a redefinition of cross-cultural encounters. These encounters may in fact raise intriguing issues on contact between individuals on the one hand, and contact between cultures on the other. For Akbib, cultures and human beings are different, and no matter how individuals would conceive of each other, cultural difference has to be tolerated, respected and reckoned with. Viewed within the global context of cultural wars, Akbib's narrative seems to be unconsciously turning to and spotlighting Moorish Spain as a model of multicultural existence and coexistence. It attempts to offer an historical alternative to the sad spectacularisation of cultural violence all over the world, by bringing into focus the rich multiple cultures of ancient Andalusia, a world in which the tolerance of Muslim rulers for Christians and Jews opened up possibilities for the flourishing of highly productive culture. Moorish rule in Spain lasted for over eight centuries, and during much of that period Muslims, Christians and Jews lived in relative peace and spurred each other on to ever greater achievements. The history of the Moors in Spain led to the development of a genuinely multicultural community during which "the Moors had set a pattern of peaceful symbiosis in their tolerant treatment" (Carew, 1991, p.250).

What is also worth stressing in *Tangier's Eyes on America* is the fact that the protagonist manages to subvert the stereotypical discourse and to create a space which engages a more conscious counter-hegemonic discourse. The immigration control could be

translated at first glance as a celebration of Western dominance, whereby the Western officer, through the investigation and checking processes, attempts to appropriate and contain the narrator. The effort to keep him under control is clearly illustrated in the following passage:

[the officer] took [the passport], looked at it *recto-verso*, read the cover, over the leaves, looked at some of the stamps on the leaves, apparently read them too, went back to the first leaves, read my name a hundred times, looked at the visa, read it closely, went back to my name read it again, then went back to the visa and read it again and again, looked at my children's picture, even felt the picture with his thumb, asked me if they were my own children, read their names one by one ... scanned the visa electronically, looked at the computer screen, scanned the visa again, looked at my picture, then at my face, then asked me to tilt my head slightly up – ... The officer then stared at me for some seconds and whispered “Ok” (Akbib, 2001, pp.14-15).

The officer, as a symbol of authority, deploys the look of surveillance. The power implied by his gaze potentially “conveys a sense of mastery over the unknown and over what is often perceived...as strange and bizarre” (Spurr, 1993, p.15), to quote David Spurr. No doubt, the reader feels the narrator trapped and over-dominated by “the circumspective force of the gaze” (p.16); yet, what emerges quite unexpectedly is an intricately interwoven discourse of resistance through his refusal to be dominated. The ‘answering gaze’ of the Other, which is meant to be totally suppressed, is rearticulated and reinvented in order to destabilise and “dismantle the edifice of colonial authority” (Bekkaoui, 1998, p.63) represented by the immigration officer. Consider, for example, the following dialogue between the American officer and the narrator:

What do you do in your country?

Do you speak Arabic? I asked.

No.

French?

Only English.

Pity. It's written there. In both Arabic and French

What do you teach? He surprisingly asked, English?

I nodded my head.

Do you know the origin of English?

No, I said. *You* must know; it's *your* language not mine. I teach language, not about the language...but I can tell you the origin of Arabic if you like (Akbib, 2001, pp.16-18).

Invested with power and self-confidence, the narrator develops a cunningly subversive strategy that has certainly destabilised, and even disturbed, the American officer. His refusal to answer part of the questions is significantly important; it has created anxiety, has upset the officer and has allowed wonderful moments of the Oriental irony to thrive. I believe Akbib has been busy problematising the Orientalist ideology and has successfully managed to create an oppositional space where he assumes authority, especially through his eloquence. Instead of functioning as a passive and unconscious object of the officer's prejudices, he subversively turns the reader's gaze onto the officer on duty. The narrator in this respect has an affinity with Eleazar, the black Moor in Thomas Decker's *Lust's Dominion or the Lascivious Queen*.⁷ Although both of them are exposed to colonial authority, no doubt to different degrees, they both manage to "drift out of control" and they are neither "submissive to authority nor available to scrutiny" (Bekkoai, 1998, p.92). The encounter with the officer allows the narrator to manipulate the Orientalist ideology, to dislocate surveillance and to displace the hegemonic discourse of control and dominance.

As the conversation with the officer moves on to its end, once again the narrator uses irony, both as a subversive device and a mode of self-defining discourse, to mock the American authority. In fact, the use of irony by Akbib to resist and subvert the Orientalist modes of representation acquires a significant dimension in his travel-inspired narrative. As Rocio D. Davis (1999, p.65) confirms in his discussion of postcolonial Philippine literature, "irony allows the other to address the dominant culture from within that culture's own set of values and modes of understanding, without being co-opted by it and without sacrificing the right to dissent, contradict, and

resist, opening up new space, literally between opposing meanings, where new things can happen” (p.65). This structure of irony as an enabling strategy of authorship allows the voice of resistance to be courteously articulated by the narrator. Hence, instead of being provoked or offended by the officer’s hostility, the author self-consciously reverses the stereotypical discourse and invites the reader to a more ironic ‘cheerful playfulness’, especially when asked about the origin of English:

English is Latin in Origin, he said, handing me back my passport.

Thank you for this valuable information, I don’t think any of my students know that (Akbib, 2001, p.17).

So, as it is the case with Eleazar, “once the racial prejudice is given voice, it is immediately reappropriated and subverted by the Moorish figure” (Bekkaoui, 1998, p.94).

Another equally important episode where racial discrimination is played with, subverted and ironically broken through, and where the stereotype will be reduced to a ‘playful cheerfulness,’ is entitled “A Distinguished Dinner.” On board of the Seattle-bound plane, the narrator is aggressively abused by the flight attendant during dinner time. With a fake smile, the flight attendant gazes at the narrator, disappears for a while and hands him his dinner package. The meal “looked like something supposed to be edible [and] the only indication that it was food was a disfigured, discoloured lettuce leaf” (Akbib, 2001, p.21). He steals a look at the white lady in the nearby seat, an American passenger, and finds out that “she was enjoying a decent meal.”

Once again, the situation brings into question one of those moments of injustice and dehumanisation that the narrator undergoes. What lurks behind this is the discriminating attitude and racial prejudice the stewardess holds against him. Once she is sure of his ‘dark complexion,’ she singles him out as a racially different ‘creature’ that deserves to be treated with less consideration, and to be trodden upon as well. Her racial aggression is backed up in a certain sense by the conspiracy and silence maintained by the nearby ‘white’ passenger.

Thus, it is clear that the inscription of the Orientalist ideology in the form of racial discrimination is emphasised in this particular episode. Akbib himself is definitely aware of the stereotype levelled against him, and “the extinguished dinner” triggers a conscious counter-stereotypical discourse. The following conversation between the narrator and the flight attendant is of immediate importance:

Do you keep dogs? I said.

She looked perplexed. The passenger next to me stopped munching.

Dogs?

Yes,

Where? Here?

That’s right.

Well, no! What a queer question!

She replied, looking at the American passenger next to me, ‘Of course not!’

Well, I think you should keep one or two (pp. 22-23).

The narrator could have made a fuss about it, but since “his dignity was involved [and] could have never protested in matters involving food” (p.23), he ironically twists the stereotype and “counter-acts [it] by reinventing it into a joke” (Bekkaoui, 1998, p.97). The dialogue quoted above illustrates how Akbib succeeds in working out a counter-stereotypical discourse; thwarting the white stereotype and muting its origins. In fact, he has managed to create an unimaginable anxiety for the stewardess and reduced the American passenger, sitting next to him, into a silent and motionless creature. He has also succeeded in bringing both ladies, and certainly all the passengers around, under control and succeeds to triumph over them. Here, Akbib is converting his interlocutors into guilty offenders who have trodden upon human dignity. Sure, he is “treated differently from other passengers, and that’s a distinction in itself” (Akbib, 2001, p.22) but his reaction seems to be ultimately of great influence on his ‘adversaries.’ The flight attendant “looked perplexed” and the passenger next to him “stopped munching.” In the end, what echoes

in the reader's mind is definitely the voice of the narrator which is made heard; mercilessly obliterating the role of the two American ladies who are brought to despair and complete silence. So, the very strategy that was aimed at suffocating the narrator and suppressing his voice has been rearticulated and reinvented into a much more mature and conscious counter-stereotypical discourse that engages the voice of the marginal. Being, actually, aware that the idiomatic epithet "this is America" is forcibly meant "to negate anything non-American" (p.18), Akbib is determined to act and react. The determination to act and react against preconceived ideas about difference is best illustrated in the episode entitled "A Dogtail Party," where we witness a more open confrontation between the 'Self' and the 'Other.'

A few days after his arrival in Pullman, the narrator is invited to a party given by El's friends on the occasion of the beginning of the new academic year. El is Akbib's host and companion during his stay in the U.S. Of course, as he states,

the presence of a Moroccan professor in the North-Westernmost part of the United States was obviously not to pass unnoticed. I was showered with such questions as to why, of all nooks and corners in the USA, I had chosen Pullman. What was of interest in Pullman that they were in the dark about? Was Pullman known all over the world, even in Morocco? And where was Morocco...and what was Morocco like? Like the Sudan? (p.39).

The questions raised by the curious community in this passage might be read at first glance as evoking issues of mere curiosity and innocent understanding of the 'cultural Other'; yet, when viewed within the traditional Orientalist framework, these questions are explicitly informed "by a certain will or intention to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world" (Said, 1978, p.12). It is also within this panoply of questions that Said's fourth dogma is basically best illustrated; "the Orient is at bottom something either to be feared...or to be controlled (by pacification, research and development, outright occupation whenever possible)" (p.301). Indeed, the narrator seems to be projected as an alien 'Other' and a dehumanised object that is dangerous, menacing, and, therefore,

has to be controlled. This brings me back to the earlier discussion of the discursive categories of Orientalist ideology. These ideological structures have reproduced devastating views about difference and the Western hegemonic assumptions about the 'Other' have become a productive fashion and an all-encompassing manifestation in the West's imagination where they find their power.

Soon Akbib finds himself entangled in an unexpected and a too far-fetched question: "of all the questions this was the most disconcerting. How was I to describe what people are like in my country?" (Akbib, 2001, pp. 39-40). This unsettling question comes from a Western European naturalised American who has been considering the narrator throughout the whole party "with some intensity of observation" (p.41). We become immediately aware of the observed position the narrator is relegated to; an attempt to reduce him into "a pet Riffian, a sort of Robinson Crusoe's Friday, a guinea pig for anthropological scrutiny" (Bekkaoui, 2006, p.9).⁸ However, while meticulously scanning his object of study, the would-be ethnographic researcher undergoes an ambivalent moment of anxiety as if brought to terms with his own image. Akbib comments:

He simply stared at me for a moment and lifted his eyebrows in an expression I am still trying to decipher. At that moment I noticed the bags under his light green eyes were swollen and I felt very uncomfortable (Akbib, 2001, p.42).

However, the observer has grown much more uncomfortable than the observed himself. Homi K. Bhabha's theoretical background on the ambivalence of Orientalist discourse is useful in this particular situation.

Bhabha argues for a theoretical position which escapes the polarities Edward Said engaged with in his study of Orientalism. Bhabha's new configuration displaces the colonial authority and subverts the relationship between 'Self' and 'Other' through signs of sameness; and in dealing with the ambivalence and complexity of the colonial discourse, he assumes that in order to possess the native, "colonial discourse allows him enough sameness so as to make him knowable and familiar without really completely erasing the traces of his difference" (Bekkaoui, 1998, p.59). Hence, the Oriental becomes not the Other, but the Westerner's double. This

shift within identity becomes comforting but threatening at the same time. Bhabha uses the term ‘mimicry’ to account for this phenomenon. Mimicry is, therefore, “the desire for a reformed recognizable other (who is) the subject of a difference that is almost the same but not quite” (Bhabha, 1994, p.86). The narrator’s reaction to the situation in the “Dogtail Party” can be interpreted within this theoretical framework. His difference has definitely contaminated his observer’s ‘purity’ and has drawn it in complicit sameness; instead of functioning as a contrast, he turns into a fearful double that disorients American identity. He is fully aware of “the coercive workings of the Orientalist discourse” (Bekkaoui, 1998, p.15), so he appears motivated to oppose the white-biased attitude of “the light-green eyed gentleman,” and by extension resists his racial prejudices. In an act of resistance, the narrator deploys the returning gaze strategy as a liberating force. “So you are from Africa, aren’t you?” (Akbib, 2001, p.43); such a generalised, preconceived dogma and inaccurate production triggers a reversal of the game through a sharp gaze. With “a vigilant eye and an acute sense of observation” (p. 2), the narrator starts scrutinising his opponent:

I looked at him again: he was tall, his head and face were out of proportion with the rest of his body, and his facial features were all level with the cheeks: no ups and downs (p.43).

This physical exploration allows the narrator to break into the white Self and bring it into a mirror image; the former reflecting the latter. It is convincingly apparent that such a description is primarily meant to reverse the conventional stereotypical images whereby the Oriental Other is essentialised as a wicked, ruthless and diabolical villain. The narrator is ultimately self-conscious of the racial prejudice launched against him throughout the whole episode. He is racially rejected but he manages, through the physical description, to direct the reader’s gaze onto the American ‘guest’ and control him in a certain sense. The counter-stereotypical discourse in this respect aims at displaying white villainy and lay bare its inherent hostility. In another equally significant scene within the same situation, the same light-green-eyed American gentleman opens a much more hostile space for a West-East confrontation whereby the stereotypical discourse is challenged, allowing a counter-hegemonic voice to be heard. The man in question suddenly, and with a ‘mocking tone,’

evokes another more brutal preconception which reiterates stereotypical injuries in their most destructive and painful configurations: “A Tunisian woman I knew in France said her father used to treat her to a roast dog on her birthdays” (p.43).

This injury is meant to interpret the Oriental Other and North Africans, in particular, as savage cannibals. No doubt, such a biased declaration aims at projecting the narrator as a backward creature who is in need to be conquered and dominated in order to be civilised. However, the ability of Akbib to thwart this stereotypical injury and subvert it finds its most powerful enactment in the following excerpt:

Well, anyway...it's a matter of taste, as I have said. I felt I had been targeted, so I added: 'You know that frogs are favourite dishes in some European countries, and you can eat them everyday of your life, if you will, not only in your birthdays. Pray tell me, what's the difference between a frog and a dog; they even rhyme in English – and a perfect rhyme too'. 'No difference,' he was obliged to admit. 'So', I said, 'it's actually a matter of taste. You know that Pork is forbidden in Islam. As a Muslim, I am bound to abide by the rules. But even if my religion didn't forbid pork, I would never ever eat it. You know why? Because I find pigs disgusting' (p.44).

Here, it is indeed amazing to see how Akbib ironically plays with the racial stereotype, brings his 'Others' under control and reduces them into mere objects that vanish into silence and simply turn around. This also reminds us, as stated before, of Eleazar in *Lust's Dominion or the Lascivious Queen*, and of the configuration the racial stereotypes take when the 'Other' is allowed to speak. With respect to *Lust's Dominion*, Khalid Bekkaoui argues that “the Moors approach the stereotype inventively and imaginatively. They deftly reinvent, articulate and cultivate the subversive potentialities encapsulated within the mask of difference. By so doing, the Moors actually manage to achieve mastery and control...on the injurious stereotype and the prejudiced community which voices it” (Bekkaoui, 1998, p.95). The injurious stereotypes and biased preconceptions which govern Orientalist ideology are appropriated by the marginal and used against their sources.

"A Poetic Invitation" is also an instance where Orientalist discourse finds its most powerful expression. Akbib and El are invited by an American lady whom they have met during a Sunday outing to "Kamiak Butte". The invitation dramatises another encounter in which both the narrator and his friend are caught in a mundane situation. Certainly, the presence of a Moroccan, the alien 'Other,' is ultimately not welcome. He is immediately neglected and reduced to an invisible object who has to do "all the listening" during the conversations between El and the hostess. The lady "did all the talking to [El], but never turned [Akbib's] way" (Akbib, 2001, p.52). This attempt to annihilate and mute the racially different 'Other' has been cautiously manipulated by the lady throughout the whole episode; "the company were engaged in another conversation – except me" (p.54). Definitely, the white lady's aggressive and non-honourable attitude, which is strategically meant to dehumanise and mock her guests, especially the narrator, is apparent when she serves him with a "nauseatingly warmed up, stale coffee" and "a quarter of a muffin each". At any rate, "the quarter-muffin lady," who is "unbearably self-important and prone to thinking little...of anyone not matching in blood her own pedigree" (p.56) is one of those clear instances whose "vocal cords vibrate with preconceived ideas" (p.84) about other racially different peoples.

As stated earlier, the question of resistance and self-assertion is a major motif that features in most of the situations experienced during the cultural encounter between the narrator as an alien stranger and the Americans he has met. This incidental clash with the "quarter-muffin lady" is revealing and opens a discursive terrain for a self-assertive and potentially counter-hegemonic attitude. For example, when he is received with warmed up coffee, the narrator decidedly refuses to drink it: "I was certainly not going to drink such sewage" (p.52). This act can be read as a conscious desire and a clear determination to react against the lady's self-esteem and her biased attitude. What appears to be equally important is that he has managed to invite the readers worldwide, since the narrative is originally written in English, to judge the lady through his point of view. In fact, choosing to write in English can be considered as a political act which is consciously articulated in order to write back to the centre and subvert the whole of the West's traditional ethnocentric

view towards its Otherness. The narrator's voice and protest against injustice can be heard throughout the whole of *Tangier's Eyes on America*; and certainly the powerful eloquence of the author, through the use of satire and sarcasm, is highly expressive of his subversive attitude.

A much more openly counter-stereotypical discourse and subversively self-assertive attitude finds ample expression towards the end of the visit. The lady is asked to open the presents brought by her guests. She unwraps the first package which is an "expensive bottle of champagne"; the second one is "a roll of toilet paper whose brand name was [the] hostess's namesake!" (p.55). This particular scene deserves a special analysis because the reader feels a kind of justice as it is the woman's "turn to assume a descent blush" (p.55).

Whether the toilet paper is brought by the narrator himself or not remains enigmatically unresolved; yet, the act is ironically meant to serve as a counter-stereotypical discourse whose cultural significance resides in showing how the marginal 'Other' can imaginatively extricate himself from the clutches of blind stereotypes and vigorously attach them to the community that has produced them. Moreover, the scene can be regarded as a subversively powerful strategy where the voice of the previously silenced, neglected and downtrodden narrator is rescued and recovered from the unfair and hostile attitude of the American lady.

Conclusion

Consequently, while the Saidian model of analysis believes that "the West is the actor, the Orient a passive reactor. The West is the spectator, the judge and jury, of every facet of Oriental behavior" (Said, 1978, p.109), it is worth noticing that Akbib is actively engaged in a counter-discourse which subverts the Western-Orientalist tradition in order to assert his identity. It would also be useful to stress how *Tangier's Eyes on America* adopts an omnipresent narrative voice to resist the discourse of mastery and crush its unity. Akbib conversely and subversively adopts the reversal of the rhetoric of 'Self' and 'Other,' and actively and self-consciously assumes the role of a postcolonial subject who strategically and deliberately mobilises discursive strategies of

resistance to twist and subvert the preconceived images of the long-held American views about its Otherness. He adopts travelling as a mode of expression whereby a remapping of the American culture with its “hyphenated identities” (Amine, 2003, p.161) is brought into focus. He draws attention not only to the details of the American reality but also, and more powerfully, to the human interactions entangled within social institutions, and within the cleavages of a violent network of “othering”. Such violence is also leveled against the American citizens (Indians, African-Americans, etc.) who are excluded from “the American dream” and cannot attain it as they are restrained from within. Though Akbib’s work invokes a superficial microcosm of America as a dreamland, it should nonetheless be taken as a call for a coherent discourse on cross-cultural encounters, particularly after the tragic events of September 11, 2001. The need for such intercultural understandings would make it possible to go beyond the narrowed categorisations inherent in the ethnocentric view of binary dichotomies between the Self and Other, West and East, Here and There.

End notes

1. See for example Mohamed Mrabet’s (taped and translated by Paul Bowles) *Look and Move on* (1976), Leila Abouzeid’s *Amrikā, al-wajh al-ākhar* (America, The other face) (1992), Sellam Chahdi’s *Hijrah ilā arḍ al-aḥlām* (Migration to the lands of dreams) (1999), Youssouf Amine Elalamy’s *Un Marocain à New York* (2001), Mohamed Fandi’s *Alien... Arab... and maybe illegal in America* (2006), Abderrahmane Boukhafa’s *42 yawm fi bilād al-‘amm Sām* (Forty-two days at Uncle Sam’s) (2008).
2. Douglas Little’s (2002) book is a historical survey of America’s involvement in the Middle East since 1945. Though his text does not really fit into the framework of Said’s *Orientalism* as the concept within the American context is not plainly elaborated, it has inspired me to relocate some historical junctures where American Orientalism can be interrogated.
3. Mohamed Laamiri and Sadik Rddad have published many articles mostly dealing with the image of Morocco and North Africa in British travel writing. In his *Signs of spectacular resistance*, Khalid Bekkaoui (1998) looks at the representation of Moorish figures in Elizabethan drama and focuses mainly on locating sites of resistance within various texts with the attempt to recover the Other’s point of view. In doing so, he adopts a subversive critical reading of

colonial discourse from within. Jamal Eddine Benhayoun (2006) writes about Christian captivity narratives produced by white Christian captives in a number of European languages in the 17th and 18th Centuries. He points out that such captivity accounts are enmeshed in the “complexities of geography and maritime expansions and shaped up by the impurities of culture, politics and power”. His reading focuses on the politics of representation whereby discourse, culture and history meet at the crossroads, and where narration, navigation and colonialism massively interact and intricately interconnect.

4. Codell and Macleod’s (1998) work relies on postcolonial theorists who have questioned the Saidian model of analysis and is a collection of essays whereby the authors argue collectively that Said’s perspective of orientalism is narrow and monolithic. These essays, in an attempt to challenge the Saidian vision about the passivity of the Oriental Other, try to demonstrate that leaders such as Maharaja Sayaji Rao III and Pasha Mehemet Ali had been influential in the ways their portraits were to be projected for the West.

5. This article explores the paradoxes of African-American identity with reference to two Arabic literary works: Adunis’s *Qabr min ajl New York* (A grave for New York) and Radwa‘Ashur’s *al-Rihlah: Ayyām ṭālibah miṣriyyah fī amrikā* (The journey: The memoirs of an Egyptian student in America). Both texts deal with Black Americans and see them as brothers and sisters in solidarity with Third World struggles.

6. Mohammed Laamiri has written an introduction to *Tangier’s eyes on America*. Professor Laamiri’s research areas focus on British writings on Morocco, mainly travel writings and captivity tales dealing with North Africa. In 1990, he founded and chaired The Research Group for Moroccan Studies in English, a group concerned with research in British writings on Morocco.

7. *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, p.x).

8. *The Riffian* by Carleton Stevens Coon was first published in Boston in 1933 and edited by the Moroccan Cultural Studies Centre in 2006 with an introduction by Professor Khalid Bekkaoui. It is the authentic story of Mohamed

Limnibhy, one of the Riffians (from the Rif, the Northern part of Morocco) with whom Coon struck up a long friendship and whom he featured as the hero of his novels. In this novel, Ali the Jackal enlists in the French army during the Franco–German war to battle against the Germans. At the battlefield, he avoids shooting the Germans and instead he turns his gun towards the French soldiers, “the infidels who have invaded his country.” Coon’s text is also a psychological and physical journey into self-definition and a geographical and cultural quest for roots.

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