Africa through the lenses of the European textual journeys

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Abstract

Africa has always been represented in the Western orientalist texts in deformed terms manipulated for different ideological, colonial or political objectives. Back in time, one such purpose was laying the ground for European colonial expansions. However, the need nowadays to rethink such continuous adoption of the usage of the dark, savage and primitive Africa and Africans in some Western Orientalist literary enterprises is of paramount significance, especially in relation to the idea of the text as becoming an imaginary journey for readers who keep longing for exploring the sinister mystery of places without having to leave their seats.

In this regard, this paper dwells upon the different excuses made as to why Westerns accord such importance to depicting Africa in their texts. More than this, it will venture into the ways wherein writers use images fraught with mystery in their writings to intrigue the curiosity of readers to read more and learn more about things and people from their homes without having to take the risk of venturing to get into close contact with the places or peoples being depicted.

Key words: Orientalism, Stereotypes, Textual journeys, Armchair travelers
For centuries now, Africa has been a virtual site for which many Western Orientalist\(^1\) writers have devoted at least a novel or two. It is Africa with its topographical features, geographical settings, cultures, religions or people that have occupied the main themes of most western Orientalist writings. In fact, different are the interrogations, interpretations or explanations so far as to why westerners accord such an importance to Africa. Understandably, Africa, not to mention Asia or Australia for instance, is perceived to be the repository of all what is primitive. Its people are virtual incarnation of the Stone Age, when people used to go naked and practice some rituals that are centuries afar from ages of civilization.

Starting from almost the 15\(^{th}\) century towards the early twentieth century, Africa was the chessboard in which Western writers could play and move the pawns in the way that would grant them the appeal of the Western audience back home. In fact, many are the novels, travelogues or memoirs that, in a way or another, falsely depict Africans and mis-interpret their practices. The purposes, of course, were many, but the most significant of which was to pave the way for colonial expansion and then provide legitimate proofs that Africans really needed to be civilized and scaled up to the level of Europeans. In this respect, some Western orientalist writers have taken the venture of picturing an African scene for their country fellows in picturesquely relegated terms serving nothing but to entertain the armchair Western travelers with the primitive African people’s stories which are tinged with the fear and sinister mystery of the dark Africa. For those writers the logic that still reigns is that, “every story is a travel story – a spatial practice,”\(^2\) thereby these narratives take the Africans’ past de/formed experiences and practices to be their basic hooking subject matter.

Understandably, most of the Western orientalist narratives have always been considered virtual means of travels to moving locations of exoticism and imagery. In the most basic sense, a novel, for instance, can allow the reader to experience something different or something new. It can also take the reader on a trip through different geographies, thus experiencing the living panorama of the unfamiliar settings around the world as well as the different lives of people while leafing through a novel’s pages. Western orientalist literary narratives journeying through the geographies of the exotic construct their own literary experiences with fantasy landing of the actually existing world. In so doing, the readers can now sense that,

“The world is getting smaller, and [people] travel faster, countries are being brought within hours of each other instead of days, the people of those countries are getting more and more like one great family, and whether they like it or not one day they have

\(^1\) By the concept Orientalist, I draw upon Edward Said’ (1978) designation of the term. For him, “anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient – and this applies whether the person is an anthropologist, sociologist, historian, or philologist – either in its specific or its general aspects, is an Orientalist, and what he or she does is Orientalism.” (See Edward, W. Said. Orientalism. New York: Random house, 1978, p. 3)

to learn to live like one great family.” (From the British wartime film For Freedom, 1940)³

As a matter of fact, readers have always found various sources of pleasure in getting involved in the climax of every story they read about foreign lands. Western orientalist narratives have constituted an essential means of dis/information that could spare the Western readers all the difficulties and dangers of experiencing things live in the location, and they have substituted real attempts of travels with textual realities within everyone’s reach within a novel’s successive pages. Therefore, literary narratives have been widely received for their ability to serve as a kind of surrogate travel, enabling readers to journey around the world without leaving their seats. As Dimitris Eleftheriotis (2010) remarks in his book, Cinematic Journeys: Film and Movement:

The exhibition experience [of a novel] turns the world into an ‘object lesson’, a displayed, attainable object of knowledge, while at the same time the spectator is treated into a virtual trip around the world.⁴

This rhetoric celebrates some novels or travelogues as forms of vicarious travel – the foreign lands narrated in a novel become a virtual experience of travel. All through a novel, the reader is transported into a new “set of cognitive experience of mobile consumption.”⁵ At this level, the novel brings “the fantasy worlds within, into prominence while themselves becoming, literally and figuratively transparent.”⁶ The reader no longer feels the novel obstructs him/her from joining these worlds for real, but is instead feeling as if invited inside the stories being narrated to take part in the actions and to consume with his/her imagination, thereby feeling, smelling and touching the things within.

The novel quite literally presents an exciting experience of daydreaming by providing the reader with an instant travel adventure. The novel, by such token, brings something new to the experience of mobility: representations of movement begin to substitute for actual movement and enact a new experience of imaginative mobility. Literature, in this sense, has been part of a network of representations of mobility and travel in many different works of art, especially in a different yet captivating version of depicting the exotic. This way, new conceptions of tourism appear on the surface: tourists consuming represented travels rather than actual travel.

rather it is itself ‘a kind of traveling’, a process of self-departure, of ‘acting-out’ […] It’s a way of escaping oneself, of being elsewhere, a form of exoticism too. […] It’s not really the image that I produce […] rather it’s this kind of activity.” Accordingly, people have had recourse to the narrated story to know about realities of peoples and places, the results of which have been that stereotypes and propaganda have found an adequate maelstrom to flourish and reign.

Still a significant point is the fact that novels, for instance, create places that are entirely new, geographies that only exist in the writers’ imaginations. This situation has culminated in blurring the boundaries between the real and virtual, thereby creating a virtual reality that is experienced as reality without being so. Therefore, the traveler no longer has to take the hardships of cutting across lines to get somewhere after long and tedious trips full of risks, rather, now more than ever before, thanks to novels there is this growing tendency to provide for readers continuous and easy travels that cut across lines thus naturalizing a desire for the exotic. This fact does not necessarily mean that readers are kind of “globe-trotters’ but they could enjoy the experience of armchair travel […] the “stay-at-home” who lacked either the time or money to see the great wonders of the world.”

In this respect, Robert Dixon (2011) expresses the idea that this vicarious kind of travel offers “the advantages and pleasures of travel without any of its defects, discomforts or inconveniences […] travelogues offer audiences glimpses of faraway places […] by making faraway cultures into commodities that could be enjoyed for the price of admission.” Indeed, literature has the power to capture the experience of travel; nature’s “living panorama” is thought to be perfectly reproduced on many sorts of literary productions. In support of this, David Holmes (2005) quotes Raymond Williams writing about the internet’s ability to provide free travel to everyone just like other literary production in his concept of “mobile privatization.” Williams writes that in the present times, one can easily see the extent to which,

the private ‘shells’ of the motor car, office and home unit gradually become extended by new media in ways in which it becomes possible to travel without physical movement. The paradox of MTV or the World Wide Web is that thousands of images can stream past us every hour, where we can be transported around the world at lightning speed, sampling countless other places, styles and impressions, whilst we are stationed in absolute stasis, our only motion being with a mouse or remote control. New media give us a mobility which exempts the consumer from having to leave the comfort of his or her shell, even his or her armchair. Such shells do not have to be physical; indeed, the space in front of a computer screen is one that is intensely personalized, designed for a

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9 Ibid. p. 170
single user with the right password, and with icons, characters and images which demand a face-to-screen association.\textsuperscript{11}

The internet and literature have indeed made it accessible for everyone to enjoy virtual mobility everywhere in the world. The world out there has become expressible in the internet or novels’ imagery and symbolic forms. Interestingly, literature preserves the world pictorially in the mind of the reader. People tend to remember places and peoples pictured in exotic terms. As such, Western orientalist literature do present stories of real places within the rubric of conventionalized fantasies of exoticism, thereby bringing to the forefront some of the fantasies that fuel our fascination with literature in general. Put in more concrete terms, fantasized stories instigate our fascination with the act of movement, with difference and with the act of imagining itself. In this account, difference, for instance, is manifest in the way, “Western landscape photographers appropriated the magisterial gaze from the tradition of landscape painting – a contention borne out by the reception of Watkins’s images.”\textsuperscript{12}

In their photographs, the Western photographers’ superior gaze assumes that “the whole world might be viewed from [their photographs], and from there ruled and commanded.”\textsuperscript{13} In a sense, the Western white gaze divides the world into two parts: the civilized versus the uncivilized. From their strategic positions, Western photographers choose to gaze upon the uncivilized part of the world and render it susceptible to their control and command. Basically, their controlling gazes favor bringing into the fore downgrading and heinous representations of people, cultures and places they assume as totally different from theirs.

Basically, some Western literary productions are fascinated with the idea of acting upon difference to represent (what they take to be) different landscapes, different people and different forms of everyday life. In view of that, some novels are filled with quite implicit and explicit sensational images. This is a fact that can be attributed to the vision that difference is something freakish or made to be freakish, that is, to represent other peoples and cultures as though they were freaks of nature.

It should be noted that this difference is basically maintained through binary oppositions. It often seems as though all the diversity tirelessly displayed by these novels facilitates comparisons that show how Western ways are the best. In fact, how these racist constructions of differences were constructed is the guarantee of any novel’s success and bestselling. Certainly, people find novels appealing because they make it possible for them to view difference, which has been basically manufactured to fit their desires. Difference, therefore, is the fuelling impulse of the idea of travelling. It is what makes people enjoy traveling without actually traveling and discover and know about new things without even

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid. p. 91
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid. 50
leaving their seats. Therefore, this way of perceiving literature has enacted a new dialectic of distance and proximity, thereby bringing other places nearby and turning locales into commodities. Furthermore, it represents this global world of variety and difference in a particular comprehensible way: exotic and astounding yet comprehensible and manageable.

Some racist Western novels have created the exotic racist views to be an eroticized lure for the readers. A binary relationship is thus established between the reader, who is constructed as a Western subject, and the readable, who is always necessarily the reader’s Other. Hence, one might immediately imagine that the Western orientalist literature was written for the sake of exploring the locales and foreign territories by the intrepid Europeans. What is interesting in these snooping Western explorations is that they take on a form of imaginary travels that are set to implement ensuing purposes by their creators. If we take some literary productions, such as novels to constitute a form of imaginary travel, then it has to be looked at as an experience of virtual mobility. Quite interestingly, such imaginary travel offers a low-price show of realistic yet fantastical images of faraway places and transports the viewer away to infinite possibilities of daydreams. In this sense, it would be of paramount significance to make patent the ways in which the image of the dark Africa was appropriated as the hooking subject matter of textual travelling for Western readers.

As a matter of fact, the image of Africa was first introduced to the Western stage by first hand experiences of earlier explorers and second hand experiences of those who interpreted the stories of Africans in the shadow of other earlier interpretations. Western orientalist writers, whether consciously or not, reproduced false descriptions in more enmeshed ways. Therefore, we can distinguish between two kinds of Western orientalist writers on Africa.

First, there are those writers who paid a short visit to Africa or never visited it before. Hence what they wrote later was a host of false and immature impressions they had during their short visits or from relying on other earlier Western writers’ narratives, to which some modifications worthy of attention were made. In support of this idea, we can site here, for instance, Joseph Conrad’s (1998) *Heart of Darkness* which was produced after a brief sojourn in the former Belgian Congo as a steamship captain.15

Furthermore, there are other Western writers who lived among Africans for a long time and got the chance to understand the real image of Africa and its people. While some of those writers represented the real Africa and collaborated to correcting the stereotypical and racist images with which the European popular imagination of Africa was fraught, others stuck to what they had already known about Africa from their earlier country fellows, thus escape falling in contradictions in what they all depict.

It should be noted that early European awareness of Africa grew out of the writings of Arab geographers and explorers or Western historians, among many others. This awareness has not only encompassed an understanding of geographical facts but also the marvels and mysteries of the other countries located in the heart of darkness, such as Africa. Later on, European explorers, merchants and missionaries who lived in or visited Africa wrote notes and memoirs about the social behavior of people they encountered in Africa. These writings, indeed, were not free from ready-made judgements and misinterpretations. Still, they were meant to crisscross with the expectations or the already formed images of Africa in the European popular. For the European writer at the time, to write or represent some countries or people in a different light oppositional to that of the earlier Western writers is to resist and belie the European realm of thoughts on which the European society was grounded at the time. In this sense, Elleke Boehmer (1995) in her book, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*, explains that:

> Writers of romance, explorers and settlers read one another and were influenced by [each other’s] reading. They conceived of newly mapped or settled places using the terms of reference laid down and tested by those who went before them.\(^{16}\)

European writers read one another and agreed on what to write. They interpreted things in the shadow of earlier writings or other contemporary writers even without getting the chance to see the place or people being represented or misrepresented. Understandably, by the eighteenth century, Africa began to be used as a setting of utter fear and began to be given thematic treatments, especially with the growth of the conventional novel. In so doing, Africa has become the haven of all what is strange, mysterious, erotic, savage or uncivilized. Africans have been transformed into characters that unwillingly take part in the events of a novel that meant to defame and distort their culture. Drawing on the example of Daniel Defoe’s (1719) *The Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*,\(^ {17}\) one can easily observe the inhumane treatment that Crusoe accords to his black servant named Friday. Defoe’s novel is laden with connotations of mystery, barbarism and inexhaustible wealth that all can be traced to Africa. These and other themes have roots in earlier explorations conducted by merchants, historians and sail men who set off in adventurous journeys so as to decipher the mysteries of the unknown lands and get their abundant riches. Such was the characteristics of the eighteenth century writings of westerners, which, in turn, did not escape their overgeneralized stereotypical visions. Instead, they came as perpetuation and maintenance of the already established images about the rest of the world bordering Europe.

Therefore, Europe was conceived of as an interconnected intersexual milieu where metaphors and epithets about Africa were to be found in abundance, and it is also where these images could be exchanged between different writers of different parts of the Western world. Such were the travelling metaphors that were preserved by western writers and handed down on to other generations. “Metaphors translated other lands and peoples,” Elleke Boehmer

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(1995) explains, “developed into conventions of seeing and reading which moved not only between texts but between colonized regions also.” It is these travel metaphors that led to colonial expansions. These expansions, in turn, were inspired by the fact that there were fortunes overseas needed to be exploited and people who were in dire need of Western civilization.

Following such developments, especially during the period ranging from the 19th century to the early 20th century, European colonial expansions reached their zenith in Africa. European writers at the same time exploited the popular European image about Africa in an attempt to gain more fame by weaving exotic and fascinating stories inspired by Africa into their writings for the amusement of the European masses who had no idea about who really Africans were. Besides, the British Empire at the time needed to be maintained by means of textual enterprises. Writing a novel in which Africans are pictured in exotic terms is a bonus for the Empire in the sense that it would justify its exploitations of peoples and lands. This way, African people were cast with an inherent eye of animosity and xenophobia and were projected as foreign infidels, morally decadent, culturally alien and terribly remote. Their habits, customs and behavior were closely observed with despise and were later documented as testimonies for the fact that African are in need of the Empire to civilize them. In this regard, Elleke Boehmer (1995) explains that:

[... ] the British empire at its height required mobilizing symbols-images of treasure and’ wide, open spaces’, of bearing the torch, the national valour, of building cities where all before had confusion. Not only in its attempt to comprehend other lands, but also in its need to propagate itself and, importantly, to legitimate its presence, colonial authority depended on imaginative backing, what have usefully been called energizing myths of the new world, of the empire on which the sun would never set.  

The energizing myths made concrete by means of texts are the engines that back up the presence of any power in the world. Once the falsely documented behaviour of some people is widely read, people tend, then, to sympathize with the torch bearers. Also, people appreciate the efforts of those who assume the burden of crossing miles and miles away just to come and help some primitive Africans to pronounce the names of their masters properly and learn how to say yes as the case of Friday in Robinson Crusoe.

Significantly, most European writers on Africa could only see the African culture from the outside. They couldn’t dissociate themselves from their own cultural presuppositions. It is in their writings that Africa appears to be the land of fantasies and hidden mysteries. European adventurer always sought places where they could taste the real meaning of adventure. Therefore, as an imaginative geography, European writers used Africa so as to document all what is odd and unreadable for their country fellow to venture and hence decipher. In this respect, Elleke Boehmer (1995) explains that:

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For the questing European imagination as for the west’s entrepreneurs, Africa and India, the ‘Exhaustless’ East and the New World of America were filled with wonders. Travel meant imaginative anticipation, and the actual treasures and curiosities encountered on distant chores – gold and ivory, cinnamon and ginger, parrots, exotic beasts, human beings of very different cultures – could only embellish expectation.

The sources for these early colonizers’ interpretations of the beyond were as extensive as were their knowledge and their experience of stories.  

It sounds obvious that the more Europeans read about imaginative lands full of riches and adventures, the more intensified is their determination to come and seek the bestowed riches of such lands. In so doing, later generations of European writers on Africa directed their attention to imagine an African setting full of violence, witchcraft and superstition so as to have the blessing and the appeal of the Western curious readers. Edward Said (1978) in his book, Orientalism further explains the importance of textual means in defining a geographical place with its people, cultures and experiences. He explicitly explains that:

People, places and experiences can always be described by a book, so such so that the book (or text) acquires a greater authority, and use, even than the actuality it describes.  

Said (1978) further goes on to say that:

Geography was essentially the material underpinning for knowledge about the Orient. All the latent and unchanging characteristics of the Orient stoop upon, were rooted in, its geography.

Therefore, it is the African geography that, on the one hand, nourishes its inhabitants and, on the other hand, provides a virtual setting for Europeans who long for defining people according to imaginary, odd and exotic orientations. Such were the examples of writers who have been complacent with what they knew from earlier stories, but now they are still exerting some efforts in their writings by making some slight modifications woven from their imaginations of such a place best describing the dimness of Africa.

In this way, Africa in the most of the European writings is casted into a field of exotic images tinged with connotations of darkness, lechery or violence. In fact, this was, in some way, a colonial legacy that established an unequal relationship between the Africans and their colonizers. By such token, the European orientalist writer acquired the racist means of how to write on the basis of such unparalleled balance between the West that should always be lifted at the expense of the queer and denigrated East that should be cast into an animalistic state. To say the truth, people really like to try their hands at topics which inspire suspense and excitement. Every day, for instance, one is likely to encounter a strange situation that would stimulate the viewer to write a story about it.

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22 Ibid. p. 216
European orientalist writers sometimes use their novels to put forward an attitude, a sociological theory or a psychological statement. They are always fascinated by the changes that are originated from the west and its civilization. This is also can be taken as a colonial legacy which left these writers with a conviction that Africa has always been the protégé of Europe. It is Europe that helped and introduced different technologies into the African context. It has always been part of the white man’s burden to civilize the barbarous Africans. In so doing, some contemporary European writers draw upon the same cultural presuppositions and ideologies while writing their novels by putting forward false assumptions and depictions meant to get deep-seated in the western readers’ minds.

Besides, European writers tend to take up topics defined in advance by their readers’ experiences. For instance, they would anticipate that a curious European reader who would love to venture into the African world of mystery would be in need of some hints and directions to accompany him/her during his/her adventure. In so doing, they prepare the ground for their avid readers by writing the stories about Africans wherein they could find all the pieces of advice which can help them to handle any situation in Africa. A case in point is to write a story describing the ways in which one can tame the native Africans while among them. This is surely going to meet the appeal of thousands of readers who think of venturing into Africa. In this way, other stories would be produced dealing with the same concern of how to tame Africans, so to speak. Edward Said draws our attention to,

Consider Napoleon and de Lesseps. Everything they knew, more or less, about the Orient came from books written in the tradition of Orientalism […] for them the Orient, like the fierce lion, was something to be encountered and dealt with to a certain extent because the text made that orient possible.\(^23\)

In fact had it not been the earlier accounts of Western orientalist accounts, the orient would not have been possible, readable and easy to tame for the other venturing Europeans. The mystery clocking the African world and its people is finally disappearing thanks to books written in the tradition of orientalism. Equally important, it is undeniably a fact that many of the Western writers’ literary works about Africa are imagined or impressions got during short visits to this part of the world. In support of this, Emmanuel Obiechina (1980) further argues in his book, *Culture, Tradition and Society in the West African Novel* that:

Foreign writers on West Africa express their writing prejudices and preconceptions which distort their picture of West African life. Sometimes the writer is aware of these distorting elements and boldly works them into the technique and texture of his narrative: In other circumstances they may operate on him as an unconscious of his reaction to something strange and disturbing.\(^24\)

In fact, though the European writer is aware of his/her distortion of the image of some people and place, he/she sometimes does not consider the repercussions. He/she only cares


about the fame that could be gained from producing stereotypical works instigating the appeal for virtual journeys for armchair travelers.

To bring home this discussion of literature’s travel-based nature and its contribution to the perpetuation of stereotypes, it should be declared once again that though many European writers directed hostile attacks against Africa and its people, others represented Africa and its people in a more proper way. Those latters had the chance to live among Africans and get to understand their real essence. They had freed themselves from the presuppositions and ready-made judgements with which the European popular imagination on Africa is laden. Besides, we should not overlook the fact that the Western orientalist writings on Africa have encouraged Africans to counter the hostile textual attacks of their counterparts. Many African novels were produced as a response to some Europeans who misrepresented something with which African writers are not contented. Such novels of Africans, in turn, have contributed to enlightening people’s vision about Africa and its people and correcting many of the misconceptions and clichés which were used as proofs to provide for the Africans’ barbarity and their inclination to be ruled and nothing but subdued.
References


