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Mrs. Matilda Betham-Edwards's *A Winter with the Swallows* (1867): A Perpetuation of Imperialist Discourse and an Empathetic View of the Colonized Algeria

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Abstract

This research work intended to undertake a study on the representation of the natives in colonial Algeria through the work of Mrs. Matilda Betham-Edwards's *A Winter with the Swallows* (1867). Her account about Algeria is considered as a unique work that should not be overlooked. The uniqueness of her work stems from the fact that it departs from the travel genre which praised colonialism and painted a conceited view of the colonized people. Mrs. Betham-Edwards gave an empathetic view of the natives, without ignoring what her fellow travelers had already claimed. It is true that her account on Algeria is bred with the colonial ideology, prevalent in her society, but her sympathy towards the natives marked her work as a specific one. Moreover, she fetched a sympathetic view of the native women and considered their liberation as a white women's burden. Her sympathy revealed the inferior position of the Victorian women at home.

Keywords: Algeria; Arab/Kabyle dichotomy; Colonial discourse; English travel writing; Mrs. Matilda Betham-Edwards; White women's burden.

1. Introduction

"*The Orient since antiquity has been a place of exotic romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences...*" (Said, 1978:5). The Western writers' fascination with the Orient exercised a great influence on their works, demonstrating their curiosity and desire for more details about the exotic "Other". This fascination is well demonstrated in the English travelogues written about Algeria in the nineteenth century. Most of these works follow the same pattern: travel guide with a detailed description of the country, following the widespread colonial discourse which praises colonialism. Defying her counterparts' attitudes towards the colonized people, Mrs. Matilda Betham-Edwards brought a unique work, where she painted a positive and encouraging portrayal of the natives.

As a Victorian woman, Mrs. Betham-Edwards's world did not go beyond the household and the domestic sphere. Like most of her contemporaries, reading was the only means which enabled her to grasp the surrounding world that overlooked women's key role in society

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buildup. Not only were they acquainted with the British society, but through their readings, they gained knowledge about remote and exotic cultures. *One Thousand and One Nights* is one of the works that fascinated and allured Victorian women and shaped their outlook of the Orient. The former portrayed a wonderful world of fiction that arose from Scheherazade's imagination to spin amazing tales that had ever existed. Upon her first arrival to Algiers, Mrs. Betham-Edwards declared:

I remember wishing as a child that the —Arabian Nights were all true; little dreaming how I should one day discover nothing to be truer than poetic fiction. .. I was no sooner in Algeria than I seemed to hear story after story added to the Thousand and One , all as new, as true, and almost as wonderful. (Mathilda Betham Edwards, 1867:1)

These touching words depict Algiers as the land of mystery and fantasy as heartily as described in *The Arabian Nights*. Tales about the Orient attracted writers and travelers and hence pushed them to know more about this magical and charming world. The quest to know about remarkable and exotic places led the westerners to set their feet on this land, and consequently a direct encounter with the natives took place. But, instead of “rewarding” the Orient by projecting its wonderful image in the Western mind, the Orient was portrayed as backward, savage, and cruel towards women. In fact, much of what was known about this exotic culture was written by men or women who had a definite interest in painting as black a picture of the Orient. As one way of studying women travel writings, Edward Said had provided the best and suitable definition of the genre by saying:

Many travelers find themselves saying of an experience in a new country that it wasn't what they expected, meaning that it wasn't what a book said it would be. And of course, many writers of travel books or guide books compose them in order to say that a country is like this, or better, that is colorful, expensive, interesting, and so forth. The idea in either case is that people, places, and experiences can always be described by a book, so much so that the book (or text) acquires a greater authority, and use, even than the actuality it describes. (Said, 1978:94).

In her book *Discourse of Difference: an Analysis of Women Travel Writing* (1991), Sara Mills argues that women's accounts , unlike those of their male counterparts, did not focus on the colonial discourse which was the prevalent concern of many writers at that time. She states that “*women travel writers were unable to adopt the imperialist voice with which male writers did.*”(Mills, 1991:3). In his way Edward Said devotes twenty pages for the travel writing genre where he says, “*I set out to examine not only scholarly works of literature, political tracts, journalistic texts, **travel books**, religious and philosophical studies.*” (Said, 1978:23). Said contends that travel tales secured ethnocentric perspectives. He further claims that even innocuous travel books contribute to the destiny of public awareness of the Orient. (Ibid: 192)

2. Issue and Working Hypothesis

It is clear from the review of the literature written on the travel writings that they played a great role in shaping the Western vision of the Orient. However, through my readings, no academic research has been conducted on Mrs. Matilda Betham-Edwards, A

Winter with the Swallows (1867). Therefore, the aim of this research paper is to bring to the fore Matilda Betham-Edwards's representation of the natives in colonial Algeria especially women. In her account, she followed the colonial project that praised colonialism with its "civilizing mission", and dehumanized the natives. However, she did not follow the colonial project altogether, for her work is marked by her sympathetic view of the natives especially women. Speaking on behalf of these native women was seen by Mrs. Betham-Edwards as the white women's burden.

It is the purpose of this paper to show the uniqueness of Mrs. Betham-Edwards's work. Unlike her male and female travel writers, Mrs. Betham-Edwards portrays the natives as individuals through her sympathy; in addition to her desire to emancipate the native women, who were seen as oppressed and in need to be freed by her English counterparts.

In fact, the book's maintenance of colonial discourse will be read through Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) where he surveys the history and nature of the Western attitudes towards the Orient. He claims that the travel writings maintained an ethnocentric standpoint and imperial attitude of domination and power. Whereas Mrs. Betham-Edwards's empathetic view of the natives, defying the imperialist voice of the travel genre of her time, will be revealed through Sara Mills' *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism* (1991). The latter examines women travel writings' "inability" to adopt the imperialist tone adopted by their male counterparts. Antoinette Burton's *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865-1915*, which focuses the study on colonized Indian women, will be made use of. Her conclusions can be applied to native women of colonized countries in general as well. She assumes that the emancipation of the native (Indian) women is the white (British) women's burden.

3. English Travelers to Algeria

Men have unquestionably travelled more, and left more records of their journeys; but this does not mean an intrinsic exclusion of women from the genre (travel writing). Before the nineteenth century, female travel writing was not frequent, and was mostly restricted to aristocracy because of the question of financial resources and physical security that should not be underestimated. As a woman, Mrs. Betham-Edwards's representation of Algeria disavows the testimony of earlier male travel writings, by drawing on her access unavailable to male travelers: the household and private sphere of the native women. In this sense, Sara Mills argues that women travel writing inclined to present people as individuals (Mills, 1991:3).

During the nineteenth century a significant number of British travelers visited Algiers. Their choice was not fortuitous, rather it was a by-product not only of the ideal climate for poor health, but for many other reasons. Even the book's title in fact, *A Winter with the Swallows*, suggests the agreeable climate of Algiers with the presence of swallows which are the sign of spring's coming. The mild climate was the greatest advantage of this country, which attracted more and more sojourners, "I have never seen people who came up with hollow cheeks and hard coughs, gaining fresh and vitality every day, without coveting what they enjoyed for all victims to our fogs and March winds." (Betham-Edwards, 1867:238).

She even hoped to copy the wonderful landscapes as some "mosaicists" had copied D'Vinci's *Last Supper* in Vienna. Her esteem for the country and its culture is apparent in her learning the Arabic language and her knowledge of the famous figures that marked the

country's history and the Oriental world in general, in addition to supporting her arguments by verses from the "Kuran", "Hadith" and the Muslim patrimony. She even stated that her work is unworthy if Algiers attractions and advantages were overlooked. She was wondering about the English ignorance of invalids' winter residence within four or five days from London.

4. Description of the Book

Matilda Betham-Edwards was born in 1836 in Westerfield, Suffolk, the daughter of a farmer and an antiquarian mother. She was a nineteenth-century writer who represented France to the British public in articles, reviews, magazines and books. In fact, Mrs. Betham-Edwards offered a rich guidebook of Algeria; abound of description of everyday life without passing over a mere detail. Not only did she describe the architecture of the country and its different towns, but also she described the weather, physiognomy, and the riches of the country. Besides, customs and traditions were revealed with related tales and anecdotes to show her influence and esteem of the host country. Edwards' sympathy towards the Algerian women was because, according to her, they were in need of liberation at the hands of their British sisters.

Mrs. Betham-Edwards wrote her book, *A Winter with the Swallows*, as a manual for all the Arabian nights' admirers by providing directions for the travelers to rely on. The places she visited such as Algiers, Cherchel, Teniet-el-Haad, and the Kabyle mountains were described in a detailed manner, to make the reader travel with her within the book pages. she confessed that some of the houses that she described are reminiscent of Scheherazade's description in *The Arabian Nights*.

5. The Algerian Women as the White Women's Burden

The "plight" of Muslim women, according to travel writers, is worsened through veil and polygamy. For these two aspects set the ground for westerners to claim their right and mission to free these oppressed and secluded women. The emancipation of the colonized native women was seen by their English counterparts as a "white women's burden." In her book *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman* (1999), Mohja Kahf explores the tendency of these accounts to portray the Muslim women as victimized and oppressed due to the veil and polygamy since the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. In these travel writings, Muslim women are represented as oppressed by backward misogynist men and "backward" and "barbaric" societies. In her book *Burdens of history: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865-1915*, Antoinette Burton argues:

It is important to understand exactly what was at stake here in order to fully appreciate the significance of British feminists' preoccupation with imperial authority and with Indian women as their special imperial burden. (Burton,1994:17)

It is the case with Mrs. Betham-Edwards who showed her prejudice against the religion which preaches such principles that locks women behind the bars. She shows the oppression of veil by saying:

Behind them, _it is a mummy or a ghost_? _a Moorish lady shuffles along in her comical and ungainly dress of full white trousers, reaching to the ankles, and white

shawl of woven silk and cotton, wrapped round her so as to form hood and mantle in one. Only her eyes are visible.....A bright sash is the only relief to this queer toilette. (Betham-Edwards, 1867:12).

She quoted Mme. Luce, who was the first woman to open a school for Arab girls, who contended that the Moors did not like their daughters to be more educated than themselves. The Arabs' attitudes toward women, according to her, held back their social and intellectual progress (Betham-Edwards, 1867:49). Her argument is supported by the Saint-Simonian writer Michel Chevalier who wrote in 1865 that, "*polygamy in Algeria prevents the development of social institutions, social movement, refinement of usages, culture of the spirit, and the progress of arts, literature, and science.*" (Smith-Clancy, 1999:162).

The distinction between the Arabs and Kabyles is well demonstrated through the issue of polygamy. In fact, the latter is among the most controversial issues that caused unsettled debates and raised questions that had never been answered. As for the westerners, it is synonymous with oppression, and represents an inferior state of human development. In this respect Betham-Edwards contended, "*The Kabyle builds up houses, plants, trees, till the ground, and is monogamist. The kabyle woman is really a woman, and not a piece of furniture, or a beast of burden, as with the Arab.*" (Matilda Betham-Edwards, 1867:57).

According to her, Algerian women, in general, were sold to their husbands and inherited nothing, yet the Kabyle women enjoyed some liberty unlike their Arab counterparts. To elucidate her claim, Mrs Betham-Edwards argued that the Kabyle women had no rivals (because of monogamy), they eat with their husbands and go unveiled to the market and fountain (Betham-Edwards, 1867:84). The Kabyle women in some cases become "Marabouts" because they not only incite their husbands to battles, but they take the leadership themselves. This was the case with Lalla-Fatima-bent-ech-Sheik (Lalla Fatma N'soumer) who was a one of female heroines. She drew French attention and gained their respect through her courage and large influence among her fellow men.

In another context, Betham-Edwards demonstrated that the Arabs not only hide their wives, but they do never mention them not from jealousy but from inconsideration. They argue that their wives are so inferior to the British ladies that they had better be kept away. Mrs. Betham-Edwards pitied the seclusion of the Moorish women who were aware of their inferiority and servitude. She declares, "*You can know about the life of the Arab simply by a book in the French library, however, women's life is hidden.*" (Betham-Edwards, 1867:57-8) Even in trials for divorce, women are not seen but their voices came from wall holes, she stated,

Once a woman was petitioning for divorce. We could not see her in the trial, but her voice came from the shrill and loud from an aperture in the wall, and when all was over, she waddled away with her [negress]mumbling and mouthing despondently enough. (Betham-Edwards, 1867:224)

Madame Luce and other French colonists, such as Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell, and Miss Garrett, were highly estimated by Mrs Betham-Edwards, for their superb work. She praised their endeavors to bring education to the Moorish children, though they met superhuman difficulties. Whereas the boys were allowed to go to school, girls' education was considered a waste of time (Betham-Edwards, 1867:235).

6. The Arab/Kabyle Dichotomy

Despite all the distinctions between Arabs and Kabyles that had been mentioned before, Mrs. Betham-Edwards defied the then widespread attitudes of preferring the Kabyle over the Arab. It must be mentioned that she drew a separation between the Kabyle and the Arabs just to show their different attitudes towards women, their traditions, and their way of living. But she did not believe in the superiority of the former over the latter as it was common at that time, unlike Mrs. Ellen G. Rogers who preferred the Kabyles over the Arabs in her book, *Winter in Algeria* (1865). Mrs. Rogers perpetuated the cliché of Arab inferiority by describing him as effeminate, lazy, and deceitful:

The Arabs are a most litigious people, [and I have often heard that]it is impossible to form an idea of the tenacity with which they spin out a lawsuit , or of the means they employ for defeating an adversary. They shrink from neither fraud nor falsehood. (Betham-Edwards, 1865:22).

Actually, Mrs. Betham-Edwards was influenced by westerners' belief in the inferiority of the Arabs to the Kabyle through her readings. Yet, whence in Algeria, she did them some justice by stating:

It is not... easy to forget that splendid comet of Arab civilization which has left a trail of light behind it. For as, Earnest Renan has said, —We may, without exaggeration, attribute to the Arab half of the intellectual work of humanity;|| and whatever the present condition of this race may be, a very slight consideration of the past is a prejudice in his favour. Setting the glories of Arab architecture and the enchantments of Arab poetry against the less poetic but solid Berber virtues of stability and thriftiness, the former naturally touch the beam. (Betham-Edwards, 1867:57-8).

Moreover, she esteemed the Arabs enchantress in answering her questions without embarrassment, though they do not understand her language at times. She affirmed that there is no such dignity as the Arab dignity. Unlike the ragged Kabyles, the Arabs are praised for their personal beauty, elegance, and great love for horses, referring to the Muslims' noble qualities.

7. The Ambivalent view of the Natives

The Orientalists, according to Edward Said, do not innocently describe the Orient but also create and maintain the Orient and create texts influenced by the ideology of imperialism. Orientalism is also “*a will to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate even to incorporate the other*” (Said, 1978: 5). As a matter of fact, Mrs. Betham-Edwards supported the French colonizer who, she believed, brought civilization to the indigenous people who were abstained by “kuran” teaching. Influenced by the prevailing ideas of her time, the colonized is portrayed in her account as passive and opposite to Europeans whose mission is to bring civilization to these “primitives”. In this sense, she contends, “*It seems to that the colonists deserve all the good that is said to them, and little of the evil*” (Betham-Edwards, 1867:185). Thus, she supported the colonists for their hatred and prejudice against the Arabs

who worship "Mahomet", marry two wives and burn the French lands out of their hatred for Christians.

From the very opening of the book, she contended the Arabs and the Kabyles are savages for their quarrel over her "portmenetau". Edward Said argued that Orientalism is a discourse informed by notions that the West is strong, upright, and rational, while the Orient is weak, passive and irrational (Said, 1978:137-8). In wandering in the country, she admired the locally made treasures, but she claimed that Arabs are higher than artificers, but lower than artists. Furthermore, she wondered how those miraculous colours came from the Arabs' little ateliers. In her attaining "Aissaoua Dance" with its "barbarous music", she declared that the Moors are not in any degree human beings as the westerners. She felt blackmailed in giving money to these "savage people" who torment themselves as humans had ever done.

Despite these prejudices, Mrs. Betham-Edwards seemed, in some places of her book, to depart from the widespread colonial discourse of her time to sympathy for the natives. She sympathized with the natives in general to make her work a unique one, defying the view of the colonized people which praised and legitimated colonialism. Sara Mills argued that women travelers were less influenced by the imperialist ideas prevailed at that time. Unlike their male counterparts, women travelers portrayed the natives as individuals and sympathized with them because, as Victorian women, they were also objectified and oppressed at home. (Mills, 1991:3)

Though she considered fasting Ramadan a bit inhuman, she paid tribute to Islam for its tolerance and allowing pregnant women, imbeciles, and children to eat. She supported her argument by stating, "*Women, who are [enceinte], or nursing infants, imbeciles, young children, and very old men are permitted to eat, the latter on condition that they give little corn to the poor*" (Betham-Edwards, 1867:98). She showed also that the Arabs treated well the European ladies by noting:

Coming as we do, full of prejudice against the [Mahometan] theories concerning women, it is impossible to be struck by the deferential behaviour of the Arabs to all those European ladies, with whom they come in contact. In this café, for instance, could but be in the way, yet an honourable place was held to us, and every respect was paid to our comfort in a manner quite touching to witness. (Ibid:43)

She also praised the Muslim artists for their architecture, philosophy, and poetry. In addition to her great admiration for the Muslim culture and its great artists by stating:

The Fatimides possessed portraits of all their celebrated men, and decked their tents with statues, whilst in their treasuries were elegant porcelain dishes on which were represented armed men, figures of animals... In the same city was a picture of another artist, Al Kitami, representing Joseph at the well, greatly celebrated for life-like expression and colour. (Betham-Edwards, 1867: 215-216)

8. Conclusion:

Mrs. Matilda Betham-Edwards's book is an outstanding work which, though in many ways adopted the prevailing colonial discourse of her time, challenged many views held by other travelers at that time. Other women travel writers followed the way paved by their male counterparts, who adopted an imperial vision which legitimated colonialism under the so

called “civilizing mission.” Since the question of travel is inseparable from desire for power, the travel writing genre has molded a conceited position of the colonized reflected by a glorified one for the colonizer. But her work shows sympathy to the native and a great desire to free the native women who were portrayed as victims in the Western minds. Moreover, the native women were considered as “white women’s burden” to reflect the struggle of Victorian women against the social conventions and the rigid laws of their society.

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