

# Marrakech in Travel Literature

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**Abstract:-** The paper aims to examine images of Marrakech in travel literature and their relevance to and impact on tourism. Many of the pioneer works conducted by painters, writers or simply adventurers from the 17<sup>th</sup> century to the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century depict Morocco as a no man's land; a country inhabited by savage, fierce looking men, living in a primitive, atavistic society. Their customs, beliefs, and behavior were exotic if not weird and therefore deserving anthropological research. Women were also subjects of much conjecture and criticism. They were often depicted behind barred windows, and closed doors, subservient, walking non-entities, draped in 'haiks' and veiled. They existed only for the pleasure of men.

These stereotypes continue to inflame the imagination of tourists heading to Marrakech today. In this connection, Jemaa Elfna is considered the heart and soul of the city particularly because it caters to the fantasies of the tourists looking for exoticism.

My purpose is to demystify the place and critique what it stands for. The snake charmers, henna ladies, disguised prostitution and homosexuality, con dentists and monkey trainers, who populate the place, in no way reflect the richness and authenticity of the country or the hospitality of the people.

**Keywords:-** Cultural Heritage, Demystification, Exoticism, Harem, Jemaa El Fna , Orientalism, Travel, Tourism,...

## I. INTRODUCTION

For centuries Morocco has inspired artists, writers and painters locally and internationally. Over the years, a rich and varied travel literature has come into existence. It would be difficult to gauge its scope or delimit its contours given time constraints and space limitation. Therefore I would like to limit myself to a survey of the images prevalent in some English and American travelers' accounts of Marrakech.

Next I would like to critique the politics of mystification that underscore such literature. Finally I would like to offer some suggestions with a view to correcting stereotypes and misconceptions.

As one screens guidebooks and travel journals, one is immediately struck by the recurrence and preponderance of some ideas which smack of Orientalism, paternalism and exoticism. For example, some of the 19th century artistic imagination depicts Morocco as another oriental country inhabited by turbaned men and semi- slave women lazily basking in the sun or lying on sofas in ill-lit palaces, gazing

at cedarwood carved ceilings. A case in point is Eugene Delacroix. The underlying implication is that Morocco is a patriarchal, phalli-centric country where men have the upper hand and women only exist as sex objects, waiting on men's pleasure. The inability of the foreign traveler to accede the private and hermetically sealed space of the harem has incited him to conjure up images of morbid and unhealthy sexuality, of domineering men and subservient wives and mistresses; a world inspired by 1001 nights. One thinks of Clairin's Entering To the Harem or Anatole Pavil's myriad paintings of half naked, fat Moroccan women bathing in the sun. The ideal female as a corpulent with layers of fat recalls minding Renaissance paintings.

In addition to the motif of the harem, there is equally a strong impetus to capture the essence of the native through portraits and etchings of the ordinary and average Moroccan. Benjamin Constant's The Tailor's Workshop grotesquely amplifies the Moroccan paraphernalia. The profusion of details serves to depict 'life as it is'

Usually the foreign traveler's first encounter with the local indigenous culture comes as a shock. In this regard, the titles of some writings are self-revealing. Consider the following: James Curie's A Journal of Travels in Barbary in the Year 1801-1803; William Lithgow's Rare Adventures and Painful Peregrinations (1614-32); Mark Twain's Travelling with the Innocent Abroad; or Sacheverell Sitwell's Mauretania: Warrior, Man, and Woman. These titles are informed by racial prejudice and reflect feelings of estrangement and bafflement similar to those experienced by Joseph Conrad or Kipling's characters as they embarked in Africa or India. The journey into 'Barbary' is a journey into the heart of darkness, so to speak.

Owing to its narrative nature, a travel book is forcibly selective in its emphasis and at best reductionist. There is a great temptation on the part of the author to encapsulate a whole culture in a few sentences or paragraphs. At face value travel books are meant to be a didactic, informative and objective rendering of the host culture under study. At the same time, they can be exercises in cultural misrepresentations.

Writing in 1927, Edith Wharton describes Marrakech as "the market of the south , and the south means not only the Atlas with its feudal chiefs and their wild clansmen, but all that lies behind of the heat and savagery: the Sahara of the veiled Touaregs, Dakka, Timbuctoo, Senegal, and the Soudan." (p.107)

While Wharton's account apparently focuses on the topography of the country, words like 'veiled', 'savagery', and 'wild' betray the writer's irrational fears of the other, in this case—the Moroccans.

Wharton's descriptions confirm what has now become a familiar pattern in cross cultural representations: to judge the other according to a scale of Western ethical and normative values. She establishes incongruent similarities and stretches comparisons to breaking points. She writes,

Eight or nine dark figures, nuns and priestesses, snake goddesses of ancient cult, with something Phoenician in their air, votaries of Ashtoreth or Astarte, sacred prostitutes who would dance in the temple precincts, such as the Sheikhat dancers of Tiznit. (p.94)

A simple professional female dancer becomes, in the author's eyes, an enchantress, a devil worshipper and a temptress of men. Other travelers such as George Montbard reduced Morocco to a huge junkyard. His descriptions echo Dickens'. He saw only the sordid and seamy sides of life. He writes: "What pestilent streets! A black sewer full of foul things emitting abominable smells, along dilapidated walls, hideous shops, with pendant, dislocated weatherboards". (pp.10-11)

As for Percy Wyndham Lewis, his observations on sexual practices in rural Morocco are compounded by a total disregard for the local customs and unwritten laws. He states:

He who fornicates with a she-ass inside the Agadir, in view of the porter, or in view of any other witness (in whose testimony reliance must be placed) will pay a fine of 2 dirkems to the Oumanas and 3 Sosa's of corn to the she-ass. (p.23)

Such grotesque descriptions typify a certain predisposition for caricature of the locals and their way of life. It will be more profitable to rationalize the desire to copulate with animals as the result of a rigid sex education rather than innate perversion.

Similarly superstition and black magic seem to have fascinated the early travelers. The following excerpt is very telling.

The traveler may find some danger in his journey, but perhaps the most unexpected is the Jinni's widely believed to lurk down the toilet, where they're liable to fall asleep. If unpleasantly surprised they may react with hostility; hence it's considered prudent to warn them before using the conveniences with a formula such as rukhsa, ya Mubariqin (with your permission, O blessed Ones) we are warned, 'during the night one should never go to a lavatory, where Maezt Dar L'oudou, the goat of the lavatories, is in possession. She appears in any lavatory, but is most dangerous in the public ones outside the mosques. (p25)

In parallel manner, in his writings about Morocco, Paul Bowles concentrates on two main features of the Moroccan culture, mainly the popular and the oral while he "deliberately" ignores other aspects. He ends up constructing a very confining image about the other which reiterates and buttresses the same orientalist assumptions that the West has previously constructed about the East as 'backward', 'inferior', 'illogical' and 'unchanging'.

Harem, witchcraft, ignorance, unhealthy sexuality and unbridled appetite constitute then the core themes of this literature.

## II. JEMAA ELFNA OR LA PLACE

Even today travel books continue to cultivate otherness and exoticism as the most desirable qualities in descriptions. In this connection, Marrakech is no exception. To illustrate my point I have selected two locations to test out what I will call for lack of a better term, 'the politics of mystification.'

The first locus is the Mamounia Hotel which is closely identified with Marrakech. It is almost impossible to talk about the city without mentioning the hotel. In fact each has sustained the reputation of the other. Although the history of Mamounia is recent, it has over the years been a temporary home to the powerful and the rich, the bold and the beautiful, to use a hackneyed expression. Churchill, Richard Nixon, Bill Clinton, Nelson Mandela, to name just a few, stayed there. Hitchcock's *The Birds* or Stewart's *The Man who knew too much* were shot there. Celebrities such as Demi Moore, Joan Collins or Bruce Willis took the relay and have helped sustain the mystique of Marrakech as a special and enchanting city. The hotel's architecture epitomizes this image of Morocco as the crucible of diverse cultures and civilizations, a place where East meets West and tradition blends nicely with modernity. The hotel allies top quality services and *savoir faire* with Moorish décor; cedar wood ceilings and arched doorways harmoniously coexist with Jacuzzi and luxury. Desk clerks dressed to the nines in western clothes cohabit with porters in traditional Moroccan wear.

This apparent oasis of opulence, this display of abundance and magnificence exclusively reserved for the rich and mostly foreigners, exists just within a stone's throw from Jemaa Elfna square- the most celebrated Marrakech touristic attraction.

The Jemaa Elfna Square is the locus of collective fantasies, a symbol of national identity; in short the *smum* bonum of Moroccan culture. Why has the square acquired such an international reputation? In order to answer the question one needs to take into consideration what has been written on the place in travel literature. The square is the pulsating, throbbing heart of Marrakech and as such exudes what Nina Epton describes as "heathen incantation, the savagery and voluptuousness of a black mistress, indifferent to the workings of the mind, with little use for the brains." It is this equation city/mistress or city/whore

celebrated in literature that deserves special attention. No other place in the world exudes this magical aura like the square.

In *The Alleys of Marrakech*, Peter Mayne refers to the square in the following terms:

A huge crowded place but something more than that too. It has a strange quality. It has something of the sea, an island, tide less sea, waves of Jellabah-hoods, moving closely together, so close that identities merge into the general turbulence. There is something living here which I would like to share, a sort of animal force that we have forgotten about in the temperate zones.(p78)

What attracts the visitor is the proximity, the merging into one, the intimacy. The sexual connotations are barely disguised. This is an aspect which I will touch upon later. One can also infer from the quote this animalism which both attracts and repels the traveler.

Sometimes even apparently innocuous descriptions may be informed by value judgments that could be excused on naïve ignorance. The following statement is a case in point.

At Jemaa, one encounters traditional story-tellers, musicians from the south with their unusual instruments, water-sellers in their exotic costumes, snake charmers in their hordes, itinerant acrobats, Berber tattoo-artists, magicians and weirdoes of any imaginable variety all day long and for a considerable part of the night as well. The whole place was full of excitement all year round. It's like entering a live circus. You won't understand what I mean unless you are there yourself.(p78)

Of paramount importance in the quote are the words 'weirdoes' and 'circus'. The locals are characterized not only as eccentric and different from the author/observer but also as clowns performing tricks for the amusement of the audience in this instance, the tourists. They have become jesters, clowns not different from the snakes and monkeys which populate the square. In conclusion, humans and animals are placed on the same footing.

### III. DEMYSTIFICATION

It's the assumptions of the square as the locus of promiscuity and entertainment which I wish to critique. What foreigners perceive as an exotic product a place where sexual fantasies thrive and intimacy obtains runs counter to mainstream view espoused by the local authorities and the guardians of national identity. The place is an agora of art, oral culture and centuries-old folklore. It is no surprise then that UNESCO declared Jemaa Elfna square a protected world cultural heritage site. If the intention were to stress and preserve its original cultural and educational function and privileged locus of oral culture epitomized by story tellers, acrobats and musicians, then some aspects need to be removed or reshuffled,

others, however need to be removed altogether to keep up with modern times.

The deification of the square serves the purpose of pandering to those tourists seeking exoticism. The mystification of the square derives its strength from the assumption that the city exists outside time and is therefore eternal. As Andre Chevrillon, visiting the city at the turn of the 20th century put it:

A civilization rich in models and types unchanged for centuries, ideas and customs, moral and physical aspects of mankind that are eternal simply because they have never changed... But that it has survived until our own time; that we can see, we can touch it, we can mix with its people, is a miracle that never ceases to astonish (p.25)

Even today's guidebooks continue to perpetuate the myth of the country's timelessness and exoticism. "It's the difference, the unique, the timeless, the unchanged which forms the impression of Morocco in the mind of traveler and is the impetus of his journey," boasts a travel brochure.

Exoticism, however, is a double edged sword. It sometimes does more harm than good. In my humble opinion, the Jemaa Elfna square minus story tellers and acrobats and musicians has come to symbolize the worst of Moroccan culture. Anatomize the square and you will be shocked to find snake charmers wrap a snake around some gullible tourists and demand money or worse pseudo dentists ready to pull out a tooth for a few Dhs but never heard or care about HIV or other STD. There are also all sorts of con men such as 'charlatan doctors' who offer magical herbal concoctions to cure anything from sexual impotence to cancer; fortune tellers who promise bright lives and rosy futures; Fkihs, specialist in occult sciences, who will cure sexual inhibition and reunite with the special one; half-veiled women ready to grab the unsuspected tourist's hand and henna tattoo it for exorbitant sums of money. Even entertainers sometimes make a living by playing on racial segregations between Arabs and Amazighs.

In brief, most of these shows and spectacles are motivated by poverty, greed and deceit, male female prostitution, sexual harassment. They take place every day under the benevolent or tolerant eyes of the authorities and send the wrong message to the outside world.

It's time we demystify the square; instead of deifying culture let's professionalize and humanize it. One way to do it is for the local authorities to provide decent salaries for the 100 or so people who live on the place. Proper work legislation need to be implemented to protect 'worker's rights' and oral literature will be preserved if it is stored on DVDs and other visual aids and if a new generation of story tellers is trained to take over the pioneers' art.

Since tourism is the city's first employer- at least 1/3 of the population directly or indirectly benefit from it, it might be profitable to reevaluate and revalorize it without altering the city's cultural and historical specificity.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Cultural tourism and eco-tourism should be encouraged. I believe the tourist whether blasé or a backpacker, deserves a better treatment than the one he is exposed to. Cultural tourism implies immersion in the local culture and interaction with the local population. In association with the ministry of tourism, NGOs, the university can play a fundamental role by developing programs to this effect, for example, workshops in Moroccan art, cuisine, architecture, oral literature. It can also develop hotels staff linguistic and communicative skills.

Most importantly there is an urgent need to preserve the cultural heritage and humanize it. The tourist today is better informed and more demanding than in the 70s. Therefore he's entitled to more respect and quality service.

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