

## The Representation of the Islamic Countries in Travel Writing: Elias Canetti's the Voices of Marrakesh as a Case Study

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### Abstract

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During the mid 1950s, Elias Canetti visited one of the African countries, Morocco, and spent some weeks in Marrakesh. Here, he recorded his visit in a short book, *The Voices of Marrakesh*, in which he tried systematically to give a unique and sufficient look or description of the city. In a series of vivid scenes such as those portrayed by George Orwell in his essay "Marrakesh", Elias Canetti deepens the description through fourteen chapters which constitute his book to present Marrakesh and then Morocco as a microcosm within travel writing. Indeed, *The Voices of Marrakesh* constitutes a major contribution of Elias Canetti to this genre written about Morocco among other books written mainly in the nineteenth century.

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**Keywords:** Travel Writing, Islamic Countries, Images, Exotic, the Self and the Other

### Introduction

Travel writing is a literary genre which produces texts marked by their distance and description of an ordinary or extraordinary life for various purposes, either secular or religious. Travel writing also has a long history. Thus, the connectivity between the traveller and the writing he records has produced numerous works. Among the literary output which falls under this literary form, Elias Canetti's *The Voices of Marrakesh* is regarded as one of the most interesting works. Hence, the details offered by the author to the apparently contradictory economic, social, and cultural levels of life in Marrakesh give a clearly idea about the themes which Canetti deals with. These themes become a "ritual" for travel writers in writing travelogues about other countries other than their own. Hence, the dominant image which the author wants to construct about the city is an "exotic" one through the themes he highlights. From the beginning of the book until its end, the author provides an accurate description, rather a "poetic" vision to all elements he considered to be exotic.

### 1- Defining Travel Writing

Many writers allude to the experiences the traveller lives when he sets foot to other areas, mainly in dealing with other completely different cultures from his own. Actually, in addition to the movement or the physical crossing of the travel writer to another country (route), he conveys and represents the culture of the people and the area he visits through writing. In this framework, Tim Youngs notices that the most socially important of all literary genres. It records our temporal and spatial progress. It throws light on how we define ourselves and on how we identify others. Its construction of our sense of "me" and "you", "us" and "them", operates on individual and national levels and in the realms of psychology, sociology and economic (2013, p. 1). The travel writer so, crosses the borders into another country in a missionary endeavour, diplomacy mission or a scientific exploration. Then, he records his observations about the space he visits and he introduces himself as the "Self" to the native peoples who remain as the "Other".

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That is to say, to record his observations about the other culture, the travel writer relies in most cases on the representations of the self; the representations of his own culture, because the traveller involves an encounter between the self and the other. On the one hand, many writers notice that travel writing describes the non-Europeans and view them in terms of "Other" who is completely different from the European. That is, formulating some knowledge based on the representation of the self and the other. Here, it is important to note that Edward Said (1993, p. 106) points out that "the one relationship that does not change is the hierarchical one between the metropole and overseas generally, between European-Western-white-Christian-male and those peoples who geographically and morally inhabit the realm beyond Europe" In this sense, there is an opposition between the self/ the European who is civilized and the other/ the non-European who remains uncivilized; without history and culture. The European then, possesses and commands the world. The European embodies high culture, and the non-European is characterized as having no culture. The other culture, alternatively, embodies ideas of primitivism, savagery and exotic. Moreover, Travel Writing is known for its long history, and many books have been written about foreign people and lands beginning with Herodotus (*History of the Persian Wars*, c. 440 B.C.E). In giving a short and versatile glance, Cuddon (1999, p. 937) points out that some of the earliest records of travels come from Egypt; for instance, an anonymous 14<sup>th</sup> c. B.C record known as *the Journeying of the Master of the Captains of Egypt*. Later on, with the exploration of the Middle East, travellers' records began to appear. For this, "we find plentiful narratives by Englishmen travelling abroad. Thereafter, in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was a Positive flood of one sort and another which shows no signs of abating. Since the Second World War, 'arm-chair' travelling has become an occupation for many people; and, as travelling has become easier, so people read more books about the places they have heard of, have been to or are going to (Cuddon, 1999, p. 941).

## 2- About the Voices of Marrakesh and its Author

Elias Canetti is considered to be one of the famous writers of Europe twentieth century. He was "a Sephardic Jew, born on the fringes of Europe in Roustchouk, Bulgaria, in 1905" (Dagmar & Lorenz, 2009, p. 1). As for most of Jews, Elias Canetti's life was unstable. He was living wandering with his parents in some European countries. For instance, he was born in Bulgaria, and he studied in other countries: Zurich (Switzerland), Frankfurt (Germany), and Vienna (Austria). The life of wandering between these countries enabled him to master many languages. Hence, he wrote in German, his third language, his first two being Ladino (Judeo-Spanish) and English. He learned the latter when his parents settled in England. Canetti devoted his life for writing in many disciplines. He was a "novelist and playwright whose works explore the emotions of crowds, the psychopathology of power, and the position of the individual at odds with the society around him" (Encyclopedia Britanica). Concerning Canetti's book under study, *The Voices of Marrakesh*, it is important to note that this book was written at the beginning in German language, and appeared entitled *Die Stimmen von Marrakesh: Aufzeichnungen nach einer Reise* in 1967. In 1978, J.A. Underwood offered an English translation of the book under the title: *The Voices of Marrakesh* which is considered the only book of Elias Canetti belonging to travel writing to introduce Morocco to his readers, since many writers produced scores of travel accounts to remove the veil which screened the knowledge between Western and Muslim countries.

## 3- Marrakesh as a Microcosm of the Orient

### 3-1- Poetic of Oriental Poverty

Through most chapters of *The Voices of Marrakesh*, the author represents Marrakesh and then Morocco as a whole land which is riddled with poverty. To this end, Elias Canetti effectively uses vivid description in order to make his reader think about poverty the natives begging had to endure. Old people, mainly the blinds, and even children stand close together in crowds of eight, ten and maybe more asking for alms. Hence, the author views the local natives sharing common features either as blinds or as beggars as is manifest in the following quote: "arriving in Marrakesh, I suddenly found myself among the blind. There were hundreds of them, more than one could count, most of them beggars" (Canetti, 1978, p. 24). Canetti investigates his knowledge about crowds and considers poverty as a destiny or the discharge behind the formulation of groups of beggars in Marrakesh. Poverty is one of the pervasive phenomenons in Marrakesh. Not only did Canetti through his book, but also George Orwell, before him, described Marrakesh as a poverty-ridden city. During his visit to Marrakesh in 1939, George Orwell wrote an essay in which he recorded his observations and opinions about Moroccan life in this city. The essay has received some attention.

Thus, Orwell states that when "I was feeding one of the gazelles in the public gardens...an Arab navvy working on the path nearby lowered his heavy hoe and sidled towards us. He looked from the gazelle to the bread and from bread to the gazelle...finally he said shyly in French: I could eat some of that bread". (Orwell, 1939). Begging in all squares as it is described either by Orwell or Canetti gives the impression that Moroccan people are confronted daily with total misery. They are seen as inferior, living as non-human for, as noticed by Canetti, "they clutched my knees and kissed the flaps of my jacket. They seemed to be blessing every bit of my body (Canetti, 1978, p. 52). On the other hand, by focusing on some details about beggars: the cries of the blind, the marabout's saliva, the beggar children.... Canetti generates a discourse of the self and the other mentioned above. It is particularly the dichotomy of the self/ the European who is wealthy and lives a luxury human being's life, while the other is strange and unequal to the Western. Therefore, the latter establishes himself as the source of power and centrality.

### 3- 2- Disorder/ Chaos

There are many discourses which the travellers constructed about the East, including Morocco, in an attempt to distinguish it from the West. Because of these discourses or statements, the East has been categorized as a mysterious, exotic and primitive space. Thus, Edward Said argues that "what are striking in these discourses are the rhetorical figures one keeps encouraging in their descriptions of the 'mysterious East', as well as the stereotypes about 'the African mind'" (1995, p. xi). I will be concentrating mainly on the "Souk" to highlight its "disorder" as one of the main characteristics of Moroccan life. Canetti shows a sombre impression of some activities (selling and buying) done in the souk. He dismisses the sight of goods on display for sale, "there are no names or signs; there is no glass...you never know what things will cost; they are neither impaled with their prices, nor are the prices themselves fixed" (Canetti, 1978, pp. 17- 18). Since there are no prices fixed, it opens up so many more opportunities to chaos of bargaining and swindle which perplexes the author. Nothing is organized in the souks of Marrakesh. In this sense, the souk can over project an easy-going image about the Moroccan mindset. The conclusion which the author wants to draw from viewing the souk is that this latter obviously reflects the Islamic life in general and the Moroccan one particularly, as a life of disorder and tampering. Indeed, Canetti is eager to lay stress on this conclusion since he begins his book talking about the souk, and offers details to illustrate its disorder which is deeply the disorder of social life in Morocco as one of the Islamic and African countries.

### 3-3- Primitive Life

There is another image which emerges through the analysis of *The Voices of Marrakesh*, and which goes back to the very ancient times in history; the act of seeing Morocco as a "land", rather than a country, which lacks civilization. That is, considering it as a primitive space within the European discourses constructed about the East, as Marry Louise Pratt wonders "how has travel and exploration writing produced "the rest of the world" for European readerships at particular points in Europe's expansionist trajectory?" (1992, p. 5). In an attempt to answer this inquiry, it seems that the concept of primitivism sums up several sights in which Moroccan peoples have been described. All the descriptions compiled by the author about Marrakesh tend to assert that the life in this city is primitive and atavistic. Through all the chapters of the book, Canetti, explicitly or implicitly, emphasizes this feature. From the beginning of the book, we sense that primitivism. The city was full of donkeys anyway, the camels are sold for slaughter and natives eat the meat of camels. In the souks, as it is mentioned, goods for sale are on display and on which there is no names, no price. Shopping is undergoing bargaining since "the price ethic" lacks.

Moreover, in a primitive society where human rights have not already been established, it is natural to see beggars in different ages spreading everywhere. Also, in a significant quote, the author summarizes some aspects through which he emphasizes primitive life of Marrakesh. He says that In a society that conceals so much, that keeps the interior of its houses, the figures and faces of its women, and even its places of worship jealously hidden from foreigners, this great openness with regard to what is manufactured and sold is doubly seductive (Canetti, 1962, p. 20). It is a clear statement about the differences between the local culture which hides many things from foreigners, and the European culture characterized by openness as a relevant indicator of civilization. That is, a dichotomy between the "self" as a civilized and modern world, and the other world which is uncivilized. It is the discourse of superiority mentioned again by Edward Said in saying that "without significant exception the universalizing discourses of modern Europe and the United States assume the silence, willing or otherwise of the non-European world" (Edward, 1993, p. 50).

### 3-4- Monotone Life

Various stereotypes have been constructed about the other world; the Orient. Among these, monotone life in Marrakesh/ Morocco remains the relevant feature of the local life. During the weeks he spent in Marrakesh, Elias Canetti realizes that the Marrakesh life is monotone. The many sights which the author had seen are repeated every day. Hence, talking about the *Marabout*, one of the beggars, Canetti "saw him once more, exactly a week later, again on a Saturday evening. He was standing in front of the same stall..." (Canetti, 1962, p. 30). In fact, not only viewing the *Marabout* in such situation, but the sight of begging as a whole seems to be the prominent sight which was repeated in the book, and constitutes the monotone life in Marrakesh. Describing such monotony was based also on the activities done in the city, beginning with the souk to the activities of craftsmen. Then, the author arrives to understand that "there is a life that reduces everything to the simplest kind of repetition" (Canetti, 1978, p. 25). He adds wondering "how much or how little variety was there in the activities of the craftsmen I had watched at work in their little booths? In the haggling of the merchant? In the steps of the dancer?" (Canetti, 1978, p. 26).

## 4- Positive Aspects of Marrakesh

### 4-1- Marrakesh as a City of Coexistence

In two successive chapters: A visit to the Mellah, and The Dahan Family, the author moves to describe the daily life of the Mellah (the old city) and the existence of Jews in the city in general. It is important to note at the beginning that the origins of Elias Canetti as a Jew lead him to deal with the existence of Jews in Marrakesh during his visit to this city. As it was the case with all the Moroccan cities where Jews settled, the Life of Ghetto<sup>2</sup> in Mellah is the main feature which characterized the daily life of Jews. Hence, the author says: "I found my way to the Mellah. I came to a cross-roads where there were a great many Jews standing about" (Canetti, 1978, p. 39). During the Diaspora<sup>3</sup> life, Jews lived in Muslim countries in special quarters and dressed in their own style under the Dhimma contract<sup>4</sup>. However, we have not to consider this as a strategy to restrict Jews in specific zones and treat them in terms of segregation. Actually, as the case here with Marrakesh, Elias Canetti never excludes completely the hostile looks among Jews. He draws this conclusion that "even in the case of the few who lay there with Arab indolence, the look was never indolent...there were hostile looks among them, cold, indifferent, disapproving" (Canetti, 1978, p. 41). The author deepens his pessimist impression when he adds that "in the street, the same people feel less secure...who never knew whether someone was not about to pounce on their wretched stock from behind, from left, from the right or from all sides at once" (Canetti, 1978, p. 41). However, historical facts have shown that coexistence and tolerance between Jews and Muslims go further in the past, so "the Jewry of the Islamic West has its roots in a distant past. Historically, the Jews were the first non-Berber people to settle in the Maghreb, and they have lived there ever since" (Zafarani, 2005, p. 1). In many Moroccan cities, Jews settled and lived together with the natives to the extent that it is not sure whether Jews were Berbers who were Jewedized or Jews who were Berberize, for the theory goes to state that "the majority of Maghrebean Jews are of Berber origin is sustained by several historians, for whom the Judaization of the Berbers has acquired the status of a fundamental fact" (Zafarani, 2005, p. 2).

Moreover, Jews had all the liberty of movement like native people. Haim Zafarani (1996, p. 315) writes that "Jews crossed Morocco from the north to the south, from the east to the west. From Tetouan to Taroudant, from Sijilmasa to Meknes and Sale safely and without problems" Obviously, after the aforementioned, Canetti's statements: "the hostile look", "indolence", "to live less secure" remain relative if not incorrect.

<sup>2</sup>- Ghetto was an urban community where Jews were forced to live by the secular authorities, usually surrounded by a wall. The word is Italian, though the original derivation is unclear. Jews in many European countries were often forced to live in crowded walled neighbourhoods in the Middle Ages. The practice became institutionalized in Italy by order of Pope Paul IV (1555). See: (Karesh & Hurvitz, 2006, pp. 175- 176).

<sup>3</sup>- For Jews, to live in the Diaspora means to live outside Israel. The word *Diaspora* (from Greek) literally means to scatter or spread out. See: (Karesh & Hurvitz, 2006, p. 115).

<sup>4</sup>- *DHIMMA* from the Arabic *ah al-dhima*, people of the treaty. The term as such does not appear in the *QURAN* but is found in *HADITH* related to *MUHAMAD'S* treatment of Jews and Christians within the territories controlled by the nascent Islamic state. See: (CAMPO, 2009, pp. 194- 195).

All these judgements have no meaning when we read in *The Voices of Marrakesh* about the status of Jews and their relation with Glaoui, the Pasha of Marrakesh. Elie, the companion of the author, talking about Jews, says: "The Pasha hates the Arabs. ...He loves the Jews. He is the Jews' friend. He does not let anything happen to the Jews" (Canetti, 1978, p. 66). Now, it is clear how these historical facts are identical with the statement of Canetti's companion. Actually, dynasties that ruled Morocco proved themselves particularly friendly towards the Jews. The latter practiced a range of economic activities, commercial, and artisanal with a great skill, thing that has resulted the permanent Moroccans' appreciation for this community.

### 5- Objectivity versus Subjectivity in the Voices of Marrakesh

The reader receives a wide range of information and descriptions about other cultures through the literary production written by travellers. However, does this production present the truth as it is about these cultures? Moreover, are there traces of subjectivity and "otherness" in travellers' endeavour? Actually, it is meaningless to question the credibility of the observer/ traveller if we do not evoke the discourse on which travel writing is based; the discourse of producing a dichotomy between the self and the other, as well as the ethnocentricity in order to distort the other cultures. Postcolonial studies have asserted that travel writing within the colonial era was based on "structures" of the opposition and contradiction between European cultures and cultures of the rest of the world. These structures are interested in promoting binaries of: Superior- Inferior, Light- Dark, Master- Slave... Yet, the discourse of travel writing has never been isolated from a "specific" representation which can never escape the ideology of which it is concentrate from. Thus, the world as it is depicted by travellers is divided into physical material boundaries (Europe- the rest of the world). Also, the cultural differences between these boundaries are not usually taken as natural "differences", but as deficits to enhance that ethnocentricity and the so-called Self- Other dichotomy. In this framework, although some postcolonial theories claim the objectivity of travel writing, it seems, as Tim Youngs notices, that "there are sorts of factors which contribute to that lack of objectivity. Psychological, technological, and aesthetic and material aspects are some these factors enhancing the traveller's subjectivity" (Young, 2013, p. 10).

In most of the literary production of travellers, there are several attending vices of poverty, prostitution as well as depicting the life of Jews within the areas they visit. These themes have all together been portrayed in each book written about Morocco specifically (George Orwell for example). The Mellah, or the old side of the city, is the area in which this "trilogy" exists. The latter is therefore a reference point assumed to emphasize the poetic of the exotic life characterising non-Western cultures. Elias Canetti, in *The Voices of Marrakesh*, involves also in recounting these aspects: beggars dispersed in all sides of the city, some girls among those are sluts, and the community of Jews living in the Mellah is restless and less secure!! as he pretends. Hence, this description gives the impression that the author emphasizes the discourse of authority and power which was mentioned above. To this extent, the "I" of narration used by the author from the beginning of this book till the end, continues to stress an ethnocentric view in depicting the Moroccan daily life. Carl Thompson alludes to this fact when he argues that "All travel writing must be to some degree ethnocentric...all travellers necessarily see the world and communicate their observations through an interpretative framework, or in Foucauldian terminology, through the "discourses provided by their culture". (Thompson, 2011, p. 149).

### Conclusion

Hence, as it is mentioned in the introduction, this paper has shed some light on, firstly, the negative aspects which are the dominant in this travel account and, secondly, on some features which inform the exotic mode of representing and signifying Moroccan's life. Obviously, these images should not be viewed in isolation, but one need to take into consideration both the background and the historical context of Elias Canetti as one of the travel writers who have portrayed foreign countries from highly biased and power vested perspective.

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