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The exotic style in English travel writing and its role in shaping the historical image of Maghrebi society during the 18th and 19th centuries: A critical reading

Le style exotique dans la littérature de voyage anglaise et son rôle dans la construction de l'image historique de la société maghrébine aux XVIIIe et XIXe siècles : Une lecture critique

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Abstract:

This study investigates English travel writing as a historical source for understanding how stereotypical images of Maghrebi states were constructed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These two centuries were by no means uniform in character: the eighteenth century saw Maghrebi states operating beyond the reach of direct European colonial rule, yet increasingly drawn into an Orientalist framework that was still finding its footing; the nineteenth century, by contrast, witnessed a sharp escalation in European colonial rivalry, giving rise to hardened stereotypical discourses that placed themselves squarely at the service of colonial ambition. Against this backdrop, the study raises the following question: in what ways did English writers employ the mode of exoticism to generate a colonial discourse that distorted the historical identity of Maghrebi states, and embedded within European consciousness a demeaning portrait of the Maghrebi person, landscape, and past?

The study brings together literary, sociological, and historical perspectives, approaching travel narratives not as straightforward historical records but as discursive and literary constructs shaped by the ideological and social conditions of their time. Its method is the critical reading of historical texts, with the aim of drawing out the strategies concealed beneath an outward appearance of neutrality. The primary corpus consists of accounts by English travelers including Pellow, Tully, Shaw, Hamilton, Broughton, Leared, Wingfield, and Trotter. The theoretical grounding draws on the work of Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Mary Louise Pratt, and David Spurr. The study is organized around four axes: the first traces the historical emergence of exoticism and its gradual transformation from an aesthetic device into a political instrument; the second analyzes how stereotypical images were constructed in descriptions of geography, urban space, and the human figure; the third examines the ideological drift toward what might be termed "justificatory exoticism" in the nineteenth century; and the fourth reflects on the lasting consequences of this literature for the distortion of the historical memory of Maghrebi states.

The study concludes that a substantial body of English travel writing on Maghrebi states functioned as a structural component of a politico-epistemic apparatus that lent legitimacy to colonial projects and cemented fixed stereotypes of the Maghrebi Other. Through the interlocking strategies of exoticism, Orientalism, and primitivism, these texts participated in a project of symbolic domination whose traces have not entirely disappeared from Western academic discourse. The study therefore calls for critical, emancipatory readings of this corpus — readings capable of restoring what colonial representation labored so hard to obscure.

Keywords: Travel literature — Exotic style — Colonial discourse — Maghrebi historical memory

Résumé :

Cette étude examine la littérature de voyage anglaise en tant que source historique permettant de comprendre la manière dont les images stéréotypées des États maghrébins ont été construites au cours des XVIIIe et XIXe siècles. Ces deux siècles ne présentaient nullement un caractère uniforme : le XVIIIe siècle vit les États maghrébins évoluer en dehors de toute domination coloniale européenne directe, tout en étant progressivement intégrés dans un cadre orientaliste encore en voie de constitution ; le XIXe siècle, en revanche, fut marqué par une intensification aiguë de la rivalité coloniale européenne, donnant naissance à des discours stéréotypés figés qui se mirent délibérément au service de l'ambition coloniale. C'est dans ce contexte que l'étude soulève la question suivante : de quelle manière les écrivains anglais ont-ils mobilisé le mode exotiste pour produire un discours colonial ayant dénaturé l'identité historique des États maghrébins et ancré dans la conscience européenne un portrait dégradant de l'individu, du paysage et du passé maghrébins ?

L'étude articule des perspectives littéraires, sociologiques et historiques, appréhendant les récits de voyage non comme de simples documents historiques transparents, mais comme des constructions discursives et littéraires façonnées par les conditions idéologiques et sociales de leur époque. Sa méthode repose sur la lecture critique des textes historiques, visant à mettre au jour les stratégies dissimulées sous une apparence de neutralité. Le corpus primaire se compose de récits de voyageurs anglais, notamment Pellow, Tully, Shaw, Hamilton, Broughton, Leared, Wingfield et Trotter. L'ancrage théorique s'appuie sur les travaux d'Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Mary Louise Pratt et David Spurr. L'étude s'articule autour de quatre axes : le premier retrace l'émergence historique de l'exotisme et sa transformation progressive d'un dispositif esthétique en instrument politique ; le second analyse la manière dont les images stéréotypées ont été élaborées dans les descriptions de la géographie, de l'espace urbain et de la figure humaine ; le troisième examine la dérive idéologique vers ce que l'on pourrait qualifier d'« exotisme justificatoire » au XIXe siècle ; et le quatrième s'interroge sur les conséquences durables de cette littérature pour la déformation de la mémoire historique des États maghrébins.

L'étude conclut qu'une part considérable de la littérature de voyage anglaise consacrée aux États maghrébins a fonctionné comme une composante structurelle d'un dispositif politico-épistémique ayant légitimé les projets coloniaux et consolidé des stéréotypes figés sur l'Autre maghrébin. À travers les stratégies conjuguées de l'exotisme, de l'orientalisme et du primitivisme, ces textes ont participé à un projet de domination symbolique dont les traces n'ont pas entièrement disparu du discours académique occidental. L'étude appelle dès lors à des lectures critiques et émancipatrices de ce corpus — des lectures susceptibles de restituer ce que la représentation coloniale s'est si longuement appliquée à occulter.

Mots-clés : Littérature de voyage — Style exotique — Discours colonial — Mémoire historique maghrébine

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Introduction:

Few developments in modern European cultural history are as telling as the transformation that overtook travel writing during the eighteenth century. Accounts of distant lands — among them the East, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Maghrebi states — gradually lost their earlier quality as personal testimony and acquired something of the character of a political document. The English men and women who traveled to the Maghrebi states across this period and the century that followed did not simply observe and record; they produced a substantial archive of texts spanning captivity narratives, diplomatic dispatches, records of scientific inquiry, and memoirs of prolonged residence. This archive has never been examined with the seriousness it deserves, and the questions it raises are far from trivial: how did a stereotypical image of the Maghrebi states take hold in Western consciousness, and through what mechanisms did literary writing and colonial ideology become, in so many of these pages, effectively one and the same thing?

Scholars have not been entirely inattentive to the relationship between European travel writing and colonial discourse, and the field has grown considerably since the final decades of the twentieth century. Yet the Maghrebi states have rarely been more than a footnote in this conversation. Said's Orientalism remains the indispensable starting point for anyone working in this area: his argument

that Western knowledge about the East was not disinterested scholarship but a system built to produce and police the image of the non-European world fundamentally altered how such texts are read. For all its power, however, Said's framework was oriented primarily toward the Arab Mashreq, and the Maghrebi states appeared at the edges of his analysis — acknowledged in passing but never subjected to sustained scrutiny. Pratt's Imperial Eyes brought something different to the table with her notion of the "contact zone", that asymmetrical space where cultures collide and where travel writing, she argued, does not merely describe places but actively brings them into being for a particular readership. Her corpus, though, was rooted in Latin America, and the distance between that context and the Maghrebi states is considerable. Spurr's The Rhetoric of Empire offered a more systematic inventory, cataloguing twelve recurrent strategies through which colonial writing fashions its image of the Other — a useful taxonomy, though one that paid relatively little heed to the particular historical texture of the Maghrebi states. What unites all three works, despite their differences, is a shared blind spot: none of them treats English travel writing about the Maghrebi states as a body of texts in its own right, with its own internal logic and historical specificity. That is the gap this study seeks to fill.

At the heart of this inquiry lies a deceptively simple question: how did the exoticist mode operate, across a significant portion of English travel writing on the Maghrebi states, not as a matter of aesthetic taste alone but as a discursive instrument capable of distorting historical identity and lodging a demeaning image of the Maghrebi states deep within European consciousness? Several more specific questions follow from this. What gave the exoticist mode its distinctive shape, and how did it develop over time? What particular techniques did English writers bring to their depictions of the landscapes, cities, and people of the Maghrebi states? How did exoticism shift its register during the nineteenth century, moving from the aestheticization of difference toward what this study calls "justificatory exoticism" — a mode in which the strangeness of the Other becomes grounds for intervention? And what damage, if any, has this literature done to the way the past of the Maghrebi states is remembered and understood?

These questions are approached here through a framework that is simultaneously literary, sociological, and historical. Travel texts are not treated as windows onto a reality that exists independently of them; they are read instead as constructions, shaped at every level by the ideological pressures and colonial assumptions of their moment. This means attending to aesthetic choices as political acts, and to narrative conventions as carriers of ideology. The method is primarily that of critical close reading, extended by an intertextual attention to the broader archive of European writing about the Maghrebi states within which each individual text takes its place. The primary sources — accounts by Pellow, Tully, Shaw, Hamilton, Broughton, Leared, Wingfield, Trotter, and others — span roughly a century and a half of English engagement with the Maghrebi states. They differ in genre, in purpose, and in the explicitness of their ideological commitments, but they share a remarkably consistent reliance on the strategies through which the exotic image was constructed and kept in circulation.

1. Defining Travel Writing and Its Forms

Travel writing resists easy categorization. At its most basic, it is a genre organized around the experience of movement through time and space, but what makes it genuinely difficult to pin down is the tension it sustains between two competing impulses: the documentary and the literary. A travel text makes referential claims about the world — it purports to tell us what a place looks like, how its people live, what the traveler saw and heard — yet it does so through narrative choices that are anything but neutral. The author occupies two roles simultaneously, and not always comfortably: that of the correspondent obliged to convey information with some fidelity to fact, and that of the storyteller drawn to shape that information into something readable and compelling. It is precisely this double obligation that blurs the line between fact and fiction in travel writing, for

every such text is, at bottom, a constructed object — one that selects from experience, arranges what it selects, and inevitably leaves much out (Thompson, 2011: 27).

Mary Louise Pratt pushed this insight in a more explicitly critical direction. In Imperial Eyes, she argued that a significant portion of European travel writing was not simply describing the world but producing it — fashioning places as empty, vacant, and awaiting development, and in doing so preparing the ground for European intervention and control (Pratt, 1992: 5). This critical perspective informs the analytical approach of the present study, which proceeds from the recognition that some of these texts — not all of them, and the distinction matters — may function as ideological discourse, one that generates and entrenches stereotypical images within a broader historical and colonial framework.

The English writings on the Maghrebi states do not belong to a single, uniform category, and the diversity of forms they take is itself analytically significant. The first is the exploration narrative, motivated by scientific and geographical curiosity and driven by the ambition to document the natural and human realities of what Europeans then called "Barbary" (Kashrud, 2017: 46). The second is the captivity narrative — an account written under constraint, by those who found themselves living in the region against their will. In Protestant Britain, which lacked a well-developed ransom infrastructure, such writers tended to frame their experiences through the lens of religious endurance and the need to demonstrate Christian steadfastness before British courts and a skeptical public, producing texts that weave lived testimony together with an identity-defensive posture (Colley, 2003: 81). The third is the diplomatic journey, which carries an explicit political agenda that inevitably shapes how place is seen and described; Britain maintained a network of consuls who combined their official representational duties with the production of detailed reports on the economic, political, and social conditions of the Maghrebi states (Al-Sulaymani, 1993: 70-71). The fourth is the resident witness account, which differs in kind from the passing traveler's narrative by virtue of its depth of familiarity with local conditions — a difference well illustrated by Arthur Leared's article "Tangier as a Winter Resort for Invalids," published in The Lancet in 1873 (Marzouk Chouche, 2020: 286). This variety of forms is a reminder that "travel writing" should not be applied as though it named a homogeneous category; to do so would be to flatten distinctions that matter both textually and historically.

2. Travelers and Travel Accounts

2.1. Miss Tully

When Miss Tully stepped off the boat in Tripoli in the summer of 1783, she had little reason to imagine she would still be there a decade later. She had come simply as the sister of Richard Tully, the newly appointed British Consul, whose posting would stretch until 1793 (Dearden, 1976: 98). Yet that unplanned length of stay transformed her into something far more valuable than a passing visitor: a witness who watched, recorded, and reflected over ten continuous years — producing what stands as one of the richest examples of resident-witness writing in the entire tradition of English travel literature on the Maghrebi states. Her account unfolds through 143 letters addressed to a friend back in England, written from the British Consulate between 3 July 1783 and 20 November 1793, covering the full reign of Ali Pasha al-Qaramanli (1754–1793), the third ruler of the Qaramanli dynasty (Al-Shwerif, 2016: 213). The letters were never published in her lifetime. It was Seton Dearden who eventually gathered and edited them, twenty-three years after her return, and they appeared in multiple editions in 1817 and 1819, before a French translation followed that same year (Tully, 1816: 24).

2.2. Elizabeth Broughton

Elizabeth Broughton was six years old when she arrived in Algeria — hardly the profile one expects of a travel writer. She had come with her father, Henry Stanyford Blanckley, who served as British Consul-General there from 1806 to 1812 (Martin, 2010: 1). Her published account, Six Years' Residence in Algiers (1839), is therefore a more complicated document than it first appears. It rests not only on her own childhood impressions, but draws heavily on the detailed notes kept by

her mother, Mary Richards, which Broughton later reworked and shaped for publication between 1816 and 1827 (Broughton, 2011: 11). The result is a text with genuinely layered authorship: a child's memories filtered through a mother's careful observation, then refined across decades of literary revision — a combination that gives the work an epistemological complexity that rewards close attention. Within that complexity, the narrative manages to document the political structure of the Ottoman Regency, its dealings with the European powers, and the social life of Algerian society, including its religious minorities (Broughton, 1839: V–XVI). The book found a wide readership, and its dedication to the Duchess of Kent was no accident — it was a deliberate move to place the work in front of as many readers as possible, through the most visible patronage available (Broughton, 2011: 13).

2.3. Thomas Pellow

Thomas Pellow did not choose to go to Morocco. He was eleven years old, sailing with his uncle toward Genoa in 1715, when Salé corsairs seized the vessel and took him captive (Pellow, 1740: 5). Born in 1704 in Penryn, Cornwall (Abouadriss, 1999: 93), he was transferred to Morocco the following year and would not leave for twenty-three years. During that time he converted to Islam, fought in the army of Sultan Moulay Ismail, and built a life — including a family — within Moroccan society (Lebel, 1939: 91). He finally escaped in July 1738, reached England that October, and with the help of a local editor published his account around 1740 (Lebel, 1939: 94). His narrative belongs to the captivity genre and is inevitably shaped by the need to reclaim a Christian identity before a skeptical British audience. Yet precisely because he did not arrive as a curious visitor but was absorbed into Moroccan life for over two decades, his account carries an intimacy with local reality that no voluntary traveler could honestly claim.

2.4. Thomas Shaw

Thomas Shaw (1692–1751) arrived in Algiers in 1720 as chaplain to the British Consulate, a post he would hold for twelve years. He was an Oxford-trained scholar with a command of classical and modern languages, including Arabic and Hebrew (Moukranta, 2018: 521), and he approached the Maghrebi states with the systematic eye of a natural scientist alongside the firm convictions of an Anglican clergyman. His account, Travels, or Observations Relating to Several Parts of Barbary and the Levant, was published at Oxford in 1738, reissued in an expanded edition in 1746, and went on to circulate widely across Europe through translations into French, German, and Dutch (Zehor, 2010: 22–23). The result is a work of genuine scholarly ambition that is simultaneously marked by a cultural condescension difficult to miss — one that reads Maghrebi society through an unapologetically civilizational and religious lens, and whose influence on later writers about the region proved lasting (Belaamri, 2017: 145).

2.5. James Hamilton

James Hamilton came to North Africa with two things: a solid command of Arabic and a deep fascination with the Greek and Roman past of Cyrenaica. Leaving Malta in mid-1852, he made his way to Benghazi and then traveled overland through Cyrene, Derna, and Tobruk, before turning south through the oases of Aujila, Jalu, and Jaghbub toward Siwa — a journey that brought him into repeated and sometimes violent confrontation with local communities who had little interest in granting a foreign stranger access to their archaeological sites. He sat down to write up his experiences in Cairo, completing the account on 1 September 1853, and published it in London with John Murray in 1856 as Wanderings in North Africa (Wright, 2006: 58). What makes Hamilton's case particularly striking is that his journey was not quite what it appeared. Contemporary scholarship has since established that behind his publicly stated archaeological mission, he was quietly gathering strategic intelligence for British imperial purposes (Rekowska, 2000: 10).

2.6. Lewis Wingfield

Lewis Wingfield (1842–1910) had tried his hand at the London stage before deciding, apparently without great reluctance, to become a travel writer instead (Sutherland, 2009: 684). He arrived in Algeria on Christmas Eve 1866 (Wingfield, 1868: 3) and eventually sailed on to Tunisia (Wingfield, 1868: 233), a journey that produced his two-volume Under the Palms in Algeria and Tunis — a comparative study of colonized Algeria under French rule and Tunisia still governed by the Husainid dynasty. What distinguishes Wingfield from many of his contemporaries is his candor about why he made the trip at all. He was quite open about the fact that Britain knew far too little about the region and had allowed French commercial influence to grow largely unchallenged — a gap he clearly felt someone ought to address (Wingfield, 1868: 272). That imperial framing makes his account a particularly telling document for the purposes of this study.

2.7. Arthur Leared

Arthur Leared (1822–1874) was an Irish physician from Wexford, a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, and the man credited with developing the binaural stethoscope in Dublin in 1851. He traveled to Morocco twice: the first time in 1872, hoping to meet the Sultan in Marrakesh, though political unrest made that impossible; the second in 1877, when he joined the Portuguese mission to Fez as its medical officer, arriving just as Sultan Hassan I (1873–1894) was consolidating his rule (Chawich, 2014: 300–301). The two journeys produced two books: Morocco and the Moors (1876), a substantial seventeen-chapter work covering the political, economic, and social dimensions of the country (Leared, 1876: Preface), and A Visit to the Court of Morocco, which began life as a public lecture in Dublin in 1878 (Leared, 1879: Preface) and appeared in a revised posthumous edition in 1891, prepared by Sir Richard Burton at the request of Leared's widow (Leared, 1891: Introduction). The precision of Leared's geographical and ethnographic observation is not in question. What is equally clear, however, is that his meticulous cataloguing of Moroccan cities, populations, and natural resources was not a neutral exercise — it responded directly to the growing European appetite for mapping and ultimately appropriating the country's cultural and material wealth (Lebel, 1939: 137).

2.8. Philip Durham Trotter

Philip Durham Trotter is hard to overlook among British witnesses to Morocco in the late nineteenth century. In 1880 he traveled with the British diplomatic mission headed by Consul Sir John Drummond Hay to the court of Sultan Moulay Hassan I (1873–1894), and the account he published in Edinburgh in 1881 traces every stage of the journey — from Tangier through Larache, Asilah, Rabat, Meknes, and Fez — with detailed attention to daily life, social structure, and cultural practice. Trotter was not traveling out of personal curiosity. His perspective was shaped by the specific aims of a mission whose purpose was to improve trade relations and push for the opening of Moroccan ports to British commerce. That context colors everything he writes, and it is precisely what makes his account so useful here: it is among the clearest illustrations of what this study calls "justificatory exoticism" — a mode of representing the other that simultaneously naturalizes and advances imperial ambition (Chaouch, 2004: 15–16).

3. Defining the Exotic Style and Its Historical Origins

The exotic style had no fixed name in its own time, yet its presence was unmistakable. Across the literary and artistic production of early modern Europe, a fascination with foreign cultures left a clear and consistent imprint — one that shaped genres, redirected philosophical debate, and opened spaces that more domestic forms of writing could not easily reach. A decisive moment in this process came in 1704, when Antoine Galland published his French translation of One Thousand and One Nights, effectively establishing the Oriental tale as a literary genre in its own right and placing at European writers' disposal an entirely new set of narrative possibilities. What they discovered in this genre was a double utility: it offered a way of criticizing their own societies without naming

them directly, and a way of entertaining philosophically dangerous ideas at a comfortable remove from censure (Yee, 2015: 153–154).

The exotic setting, in other words, functioned as cover. Foreign characters and distant lands gave writers the freedom to ask questions that would have been far more costly to ask at home. Jonathan Swift understood this mechanism well enough to satirize it. In Gulliver's Travels, he turned his attention to the travel literature of his day with characteristic impatience, writing:

"I could heartily wish a Law were enacted, that every Traveller, before he were permitted to publish his Voyages, should be obliged to make Oath before the Lord High Chancellor, that all he intended to print was absolutely true to the best of his Knowledge; for then the World would no longer be deceived as it usually is, while some Writers, to make their Works pass the better upon the Publick, impose the grossest Falsities on the unwary Reader." (Swift, 1726: 323)

Swift's complaint points to something deeper than mere literary dishonesty. It exposes the structural ambiguity at the heart of exotic writing — its capacity to tell the truth about Europe while lying about everywhere else. That ambiguity only deepened as the eighteenth century progressed. The exotic style did not develop along a single coherent line; it pulled in contradictory directions simultaneously. On one hand, it served genuinely critical purposes, providing writers with a means of challenging European despotism and entrenched conservative thought. On the other, it hardened and circulated stereotypes about non-European peoples that had nothing critical about them, and everything to do with the consolidation of a particular image of the world (Yee, 2015: 156). Lisa Lowe was therefore right to insist that exoticism was neither incidental nor superficial. It was, she argued, an instrument of colonial domination and a discursive structure whose underlying function was to construct the figure of the Other in ways that confirmed and reinforced Western supremacy — not by accident, but by design (Lowe, 1991: 2–3).

4. Characteristics of the Exotic Style in English Writings on the Maghrebi States

4.1. The Depiction of Geography and Nature

One of the defining preoccupations of Romantic literature was the experience of the self-displaced in an unfamiliar world — and from that preoccupation grew a persistent tendency to seek out what was most "typical" about foreign cultures, to dwell on local colour, on the details that marked a place as decisively other. English travel writing about the Maghreb was thoroughly shaped by this orientation. Travelers consistently approached the region's natural landscape not as something to be described plainly, but as something to be charged — with mystery, with strangeness, with an atmosphere calculated to arrest the European reader's imagination. Even the most ordinary geographical features were recast as scenes from another world (Laâmiri, 2013: 88).

James Hamilton's description of the Benghazi coastline offers a clear illustration of this tendency at work:

"Gems and medals are frequently picked up on the beach after a winter storm. On the land side of the town, the sea has also made an encroachment, forming a shallow lake in winter, which dries up in summer, and leaves the surface glittering with salt… On the other side of this lake, the summits of the hills lying to the south-east of the town are covered with ancient sepulchres."
(Hamilton, 1868: 47)

The passage moves with quiet deliberateness from the gleam of gems washed up by storms to a lake that vanishes in summer and leaves the ground shimmering with salt, before arriving at hills lined with ancient tombs. The effect is less geographical description than atmospheric staging — a landscape assembled for wonder.

Miss Tully's account of a solar eclipse works in a similar register, though here the boundary between observation and fantasy becomes still more permeable:

"The screech-owl was heard… and disturbed the morning with its cries. Lizards and serpents were seen crawling about the terraces… The Moors fired volleys of shot at the sun, to frighten the monster or dragon, as they termed it, which they supposed was devouring it." (Tully, 1816: 166)

What is being described is an astronomical event. What is being constructed is something closer to a scene from folklore — a world in which owls shriek at dawn, reptiles emerge from the shadows, and people fire guns at the sky to drive away imaginary beasts. The gap between the natural phenomenon and the way it is framed could hardly be wider.

This tendency to cast the Maghreb as a space of the extraordinary persists even in moments that appear, on the surface, to acknowledge local skill and achievement. When Arthur Leared encounters a vessel used in the preparation of orange-blossom water, his response is telling: "It is strange to find such a piece of neat workmanship… to find it in use in this manner and in these remote regions" (Leared, 1876: 359–360). The compliment barely conceals its own contradictions. Competence is recognized, but only as something surprising — something that should not, by implication, be there at all. This is precisely the mechanism that Spurr identified as the "negation of competence": a strategy of colonial discourse in which acknowledgment and dismissal are performed in the same breath, leaving the fundamental hierarchy between observers and observed entirely intact.

4.2. The Depiction of Maghrebi Cities: The Labyrinth and Enclosure

English travel writers were drawn to the cities of the Maghreb with a fascination that was, from the outset, more symbolic than descriptive. What captured their attention above all was the quality of enclosure — the thick walls, the gates shut at nightfall, the sense of a world folded in upon itself. Rather than reading these features as the product of a specific historical and civilisational logic, shaped by centuries of defensive necessity and social organization, English writers consistently transformed them into signs of mystery and primitiveness. The architecture became a metaphor before it was ever allowed to be a fact.

Lewis Wingfield's description of Tunis gives this tendency one of its most elaborate expressions:
"We went out to explore the town, threading our way through its magnificent streets to its very heart. Winding alleys and dark squares lay before us, the pavements and passages narrowing until they almost suffocated. Long bazaars with vaulted roofs extended before us, interlocking in a complex system resembling an intricate labyrinth, such that wandering through them alone became impossible without a guiding thread to lead the traveller through its branching paths."
(Wingfield, 1868: 273)

The passage is carefully constructed. The city does not simply have narrow streets — it suffocates. Its markets do not simply branch and intersect — they form a labyrinth, and the word is not chosen casually. The allusion reaches back to Greek mythology, to the Minotaur and the thread of Ariadne, investing the Tunisian medina with a darkness that is less urban than archetypal. What disappears entirely from this picture is the intelligence behind the design. The Arab city, with its inward-turning layout, its shaded passages, its calibration of privacy and communal life, embodied an urban wisdom finely attuned to climate, social structure, and the rhythms of daily existence — a sophistication the English description neither acknowledges nor appears to suspect
(Salama, 1988: 160).

Arthur Leared's encounter with Fez operates on the same principle, though with less mythological elaboration and more blunt unease:
"What struck us more than anything else was the extreme narrowness of the streets in which the private houses are situated. Nothing can be imagined more gloomy or depressing than such a confined gap between high walls utterly devoid of windows." (Leared, 1879: 54)

Leared stands in the street and sees only walls. What lies behind those walls — the interior courtyards, the gardens, the intricate tilework and carved plasterwork of some of the most refined domestic architecture in the Islamic world — does not enter his account. The house, seen only from outside, becomes a prison. The observation is not dishonest, exactly, but it is radically incomplete,

and the incompleteness is not incidental. It is the product of a gaze that stops at surfaces and mistakes enclosure for emptiness.

This same exotic logic extended naturally into descriptions of palace life and the spaces of the harem. Elizabeth Broughton's account of her visit to the palace of Dey Mustafa Pasha (1805–1808) in Algiers reveals how the fascination with luxury and strangeness could work together to produce a particular kind of distortion:

"We dined in regal splendour, a varied assortment of delicious dishes being served to us on small tables decorated with silver and mother-of-pearl. We sat upon comfortable cushions… and the Sultana expressed great pleasure at my evident admiration of the finely embroidered napkins and the rose-wood spoons tipped with amber." (Broughton, 1839: 32)

There is genuine pleasure in this passage, and a degree of careful observation. But the overall effect is less a description of a specific place and moment than an evocation of a world already familiar to the reader from One Thousand and One Nights — silver, mother-of-pearl, amber, embroidered linen, cushions. Each detail confirms what the reader already expects to find. Strangeness here does not open Maghrebi reality up for examination; it closes it down, fixing it within a set of images so well established that no further inquiry seems necessary. The stereotype is not challenged but reproduced, and in being reproduced, quietly made permanent.

4.3. Exaggeration and Sensationalism in the Depiction of Individuals

The impulse to exaggerate did not stop at landscapes and cities — it extended with equal force to the people who inhabited them. Thomas Pellow's treatment of Sultan Moulay Ismail (1672–1727) offers one of the most instructive examples. Pellow refers to him throughout as an "Emperor" — a designation that is, in itself, a quiet distortion. Morocco was ruled by sultans, not emperors, and the difference is not merely terminological. By mapping a European monarchical title onto a Maghrebi ruler, Pellow superimposes a familiar political framework onto an institution with its own distinct constitutional character, reshaping it in the process to fit expectations his readers already held. The misrepresentation is so smooth it barely announces itself.

What follows is considerably less subtle. Pellow writes: "This Emperor had no less than eight thousand wives, by whom he had nine hundred sons and about three hundred daughters" (Pellow, 1740: 23). The figures are, on any sober reading, fantastical. Yet Pellow does not present them as rumor or hearsay. He frames them with the confidence of a man reporting verifiable facts, and elsewhere supports similarly implausible claims with precise details — specific numbers, particular taxation arrangements, the kind of granular particularity that mimics documentary evidence. It is a calculated rhetorical move: the more exact the detail, the harder the claim becomes to dismiss.

This combination of the incredible and the meticulously specific is, in many ways, the defining signature of the exotic style in English travel writing about the Maghrebi states. The reader is not asked to wonder — they are given enough apparent evidence to believe. Spurr identified this mechanism as part of what he called the "rhetoric of empire": a discursive strategy through which colonial narratives dress themselves in the authority of objective observation, making ideologically motivated accounts appear to be straightforward records of fact (Spurr, 1993: 1). The exaggeration surrounding Moulay Ismail is not, then, simply a failure of accuracy. It serves a purpose. By rendering the sultan as a figure of almost mythological excess — thousands of wives, hundreds of children — the narrative strips him of the qualities associated with rational governance and historical agency, and replaces them with spectacle. The Maghrebi subject becomes something to be looked at and marveled over, rather than understood or taken seriously. That, ultimately, is what the exaggeration was for.

5. Ideological Transformations of the Exotic Style during the Nineteenth Century

5.1. From Critical Exoticism to Justificatory Exoticism

The eighteenth century had used the exotic, however imperfectly, as a critical instrument — a way of holding European society up to uncomfortable scrutiny from a safe distance. The nineteenth century did something rather different with it. As European imperial ambitions hardened into policy and then into conquest, the exotic style underwent a corresponding shift in function. What had once served, at least in part, to question power increasingly served to justify it. Some writers took this further still, moving toward what might be called the dematerialisation of urban space: cities ceased to be physical, inhabited realities and became instead atmospheric projections — stages for myth, dream, and fantasy — drained of the actual human life that gave them meaning. Spurr mapped this tendency with precision, identifying "the insubstantialisation of the Other" as one of twelve core strategies through which colonial discourse operated (Spurr, 1993: 144).

Philip Durham Trotter illustrates the mechanism with particular clarity. His first encounter with Fez produces something close to reverence — the city appears before him laden with the weight of history and the romance of distance. But the admiration does not last long. Almost in the same breath, he writes: "you cannot cross ten feet in this city without finding a hole capable of breaking the knee of an English horse" (Trotter, 1881: 123). The drop is sudden and telling. The city that inspired wonder at a distance becomes, on closer acquaintance, a place of neglect and dysfunction — measured, characteristically, against the standard of an English horse rather than the lives of the people who actually live there. This oscillation between distant veneration and proximate contempt is not a personal inconsistency on Trotter's part. It is, as Laâmiri observed, a structural feature of Orientalist discourse: the imagined city is elevated precisely so that the real city can be diminished, and that act of diminishment quietly performs an ideological function — furnishing an implicit justification for foreign intervention in a place that, by this account, can evidently no longer look after itself (Laâmiri, 2013: 86).

5.2. The Deployment of Myth and Legend to Strip Cities of Their Historical Character

One of the more insidious habits of English travel writing about the Maghreb was its treatment of legend and oral tradition as though they carried the same evidential weight as direct observation. Myths, popular stories, and inherited tales were woven into travel narratives without any clear signal that they were anything other than reported fact, arriving before the Western reader dressed in the authority of the eyewitness account. The effect was cumulative and damaging: as legend crowded out history, the genuine civilisational substance of the Maghrebi cities — their architecture, their institutions, their commercial networks, their scientific traditions — was quietly displaced, leaving in its place a landscape of the marvellous and the cautionary (Laâmiri, 2013: 82).

The account recorded by Francis Flinders upon passing near the shores of Essaouira makes the point with uncomfortable directness:

"We passed near the Moroccan shores in the vicinity of a city called the 'City of Lions', which was once a thriving and prosperous city until its inhabitants grew arrogant and tyrannical, whereupon God punished them by sending against them an army of ferocious lions that attacked the city and devoured its inhabitants, seizing the city in its entirety." (Laâmiri, 2013: 82)

Essaouira was, in reality, a city with deep commercial roots and considerable strategic significance. None of that survives this passage. In its place stands a fable of divine retribution — a city that flourished, sinned, and was consumed. The historical city has been replaced by a moral tale, and the substitution is presented without apology or qualification.

Thomas Shaw's description of the so-called "Petrified City" at Ras Sem in the district of Derna takes this further still, and repays closer analysis:

"The Petrified City is a large circular settlement containing streets, shops, and a great citadel. Everything within it has been turned to stone in a blue or grey colour: the trees, particularly olive and palm, and the people in their various postures — craftsmen practising their trades, individuals

carrying various objects such as bread, and women nursing their children or kneading dough." (Shaw, 1738: 156)

The passage is written with the calm precision of a man describing something he has seen. Yet what it describes belongs entirely to the realm of legend. Reading it carefully, three distinct and interlocking layers of meaning reveal themselves.

The first is doctrinal. The city is implicitly portrayed as a community punished — frozen in stone for its failure to embrace Christianity. The Maghrebi urban space becomes a site of religious moralization, a lesson in the consequences of living outside the true faith.

The second is aesthetic and literary. The image of a city suspended mid-gesture — bread in hand, children at the breast, craftsmen bent over their work — is genuinely arresting. It is the kind of detail that keeps a reader turning pages, and Shaw clearly knew it. The marvellous serves the text's readability even as it distorts its subject.

The third is colonial, and perhaps the most consequential. Embedded in the description is an implicit summons: a city petrified, abandoned to its punishment, awaiting the Christian civilization capable of liberating it. The call to intervention is never stated outright, but it does not need to be. The imagery does the work.

It is worth pausing here to note that Shaw was writing in 1738, well before the age of direct European colonial expansion in the Maghreb. His work cannot be read as imperial propaganda in any straightforward sense — the political context that would have made it so did not yet exist. What it represents, rather, is a foundational moment in the longer genealogy of Orientalist discourse: a pre-colonial text that nevertheless laid much of the discursive groundwork on which the justificatory exoticism of the following century would be built. Shaw stands, in this respect, at a pivotal transition point — chronologically prior to colonial domination, yet structurally and ideologically anticipating it with a precision that is difficult to read as entirely coincidental.

6. The Impact of Orientalist Writings on the Distortion of Maghrebi Historical Memory

6.1. The Erasure of Civilisation and the Substitution of Stereotype

There is a great deal that English travel writing about the Maghrebi States simply does not say, and the silence is as revealing as anything that makes it onto the page. The cities described as dark labyrinths and crumbling enclosures were, at the very moment those descriptions were being written, functioning centres of learning, commerce, and civilisation with histories that dwarfed anything their visitors could claim. Marrakesh had been the capital of an empire that once stretched from the banks of the Senegal River to the Iberian Peninsula. Fez was home to the University of al-Qarawiyyin — the oldest university in the world, still in continuous operation. Tunis carried within it the living inheritance of Andalusian culture and the civilisation of the Aghlabid dynasty. None of this appears in any meaningful way in the accounts under discussion. The Maghrebi States are written about as though they had arrived at the moment of European contact without a past — as though history began, for them, only when a European eye turned in their direction.

Edward Said's analysis of Orientalist discourse helps to explain why this erasure was not simply a matter of ignorance or limited curiosity. The opposition between "our world" and "their world," Said argued, was never a neutral act of classification. It was an evaluative judgement — one that systematically positioned the European world as the standard against which all others were measured and found wanting. In doing so, it performed a specific ideological function: it transformed colonial intervention from what it actually was — an act of conquest and appropriation — into something that could be narrated as a moral and civilisational obligation, even a form of rescue (Said, 1979: 44). Seen in this light, the silence of English travel writing regarding Islamic civilisation in the Maghrebi States is not an innocent gap. It is a discursive act with consequences

— one that cleared the historical ground, made the region appear empty of achievement, and in doing so helped to make its subjugation appear not only possible but justified.

6.2. Systematic Distortion and the Entrenchment of the Image in the Western Collective Consciousness

The damage done by these writings did not stop with their first readers. What began as individual accounts — partial, distorted, ideologically motivated — gradually hardened into a shared reference library that later writers drew on without pausing to question where the material had come from. Thomas Pellow's extravagant claims about Sultan Moulay Ismail were picked up and repeated in subsequent works as though they had been verified. Wingfield's portrait of Tunis became, for writers who followed him, simply the way Tunis was. Each retelling added another layer of apparent authority to accounts that had never deserved it in the first place.

Mary Louise Pratt, in Imperial Eyes, identified the mechanism behind this process with considerable precision. Travel writing, she argued, does not merely describe the world — it produces it, discursively, within what she called the "contact zone": the space in which cultures meet, but meet under conditions of radical inequality (Pratt, 1992: 200). In that space, colonial discourse does not stand still. It accumulates. Each writer inherits from his predecessors, builds on what they have established, and in doing so makes the inherited image a little harder to dislodge. The stereotype is not born fully formed — it is constructed slowly, citation by citation, repetition by repetition, until it achieves the solidity of something that has simply always been known.

This is precisely what makes these portrayals so consequential, and so resistant to easy correction. They are not merely errors of perception that time and better information can dissolve. They are discursive structures with deep roots and long reach — structures whose effects can be traced not only through the travel literature of the nineteenth century but into the academic writing, journalism, and political discourse of the twentieth and beyond. To treat them as cultural curiosities or period pieces is to misunderstand what they did and, in some measure, continue to do.

6.3. The Reverberations of Distortion in Subsequent Academic Writing

These texts went largely unchallenged until Edward Said's Orientalism forced a reckoning that the field had long deferred. Said's intervention was unsettling precisely because it did not stop at nineteenth-century travel writing — it followed the assumptions of Orientalist discourse into the heart of Western scholarship itself, showing that studies on Arabs and Islam had gone on reproducing the same foundational stereotypes "in measured scientific language without subjecting them to critical scrutiny" (Said, 1979: 300). The notion that the East is "eternal, monolithic, and incapable of defining itself" had not withered with the age of empire; it had been quietly absorbed into academic method, where it continued to reduce the societies of the Maghrebi states from historical agents to objects of study, classification, and control (Said, 1979: 301).

The reach of this legacy into twentieth-century historiography is traceable in concrete terms. Raphael Danziger's Abd al-Qadir and the Algerians approaches pre-colonial Algerian life through climatic and geographical determinism, arguing that environmental conditions "precluded sedentary life" across most of the territory (Danziger, 1977: 3) — a framing that rehearses colonial assumptions rather than interrogating the historical record on its own terms. John Ruedy's Modern Algeria, similarly, reduces pre-colonial social organisation to a "segmented tribal order" (Ruedy, 2005: xi), a formulation whose debt to the colonial archive is difficult to overlook. That debt is most plainly visible in Chapter 8 of Danziger's study, where Abd al-Qadir's character is reconstructed exclusively through French colonial memoirs, with Arabic and Algerian sources structurally absent from the analysis (Danziger, 1977: 180). These are not incidental methodological oversights — they confirm Said's broader argument that Orientalist assumptions migrated into the disciplinary language of area studies, where they acquired renewed authority by virtue of their scientific register (Said, 1979: 300–301).

It is against this accumulated weight of distortion that a critical re-examination of the Orientalist legacy becomes not merely useful but methodologically necessary. Engaging seriously with this

heritage is, at the same time, a call to rewrite the history of the Maghrebi states from within — drawing on Maghrebi travel accounts, indigenous scholarly and literary production, and local archival documents that have long been sidelined in favour of the Western colonial archive. That reorientation is not a supplementary gesture; it is the precondition for any history of the region that aspires to speak honestly about what actually took place.

Conclusion

Proceeding from a literary-social-historical approach, this study has demonstrated that the exotic style in a significant portion of English writings on the Maghrebi states was not merely a literary and aesthetic instrument, but rather functioned as an integrated discursive system operating to construct a fixed stereotype of the "Maghrebi Other" within the European consciousness. It must be emphasised that this observation does not apply uniformly to all English travel writing on the region: the degree of ideological embeddedness varies considerably across the corpus, and certain texts, particularly those produced in the eighteenth century before the consolidation of direct colonial projects, do not lend themselves to the same reading as those of the following century. This system evolved across two distinct phases: the eighteenth century, in which exoticism was deployed as a tool of internal social critique alongside the nascent formation of Orientalist stereotypes; and the nineteenth century, in which it was transformed into an explicit means of justifying colonial domination and entrenching the logic of the "civilised white man" in opposition to the "primitive and backward East."

The study has revealed that this style drew upon multiple intertwined techniques: exaggeration in the description of natural and human phenomena; the deployment of myth and legend to strip the cities of the Maghrebi states of their historical character; personification that transforms geography into an entity inspiring awe and mystery; and dematerialisation, which reduces the existence of the Other to a dream or fantasy far removed from reality.

The study arrives at four essential conclusions. First, the exotic style was not a spontaneous literary phenomenon but a carefully constructed discursive strategy in which colonial interests and literary production were deeply intertwined. Second, this style underwent a structural evolution between the two centuries, moving from critical exoticism to justificatory exoticism. Third, certain of these writings contributed to a systematic distortion of Maghrebi historical memory by effacing Islamic civilisation and substituting legend for history. Fourth, the texts of these travellers, despite their varying degrees of ideological embeddedness, constitute a historical archive that cannot be ignored, provided it is read critically and with full awareness of the ideological context that produced it.

The critical and historical re-reading of this Orientalist heritage does not imply retroactive moral condemnation, but rather the uncovering of the mechanisms through which power and knowledge, literature and politics, become intertwined in the production of stereotypes about other cultures. In the context of Mediterranean relations today, this study remains a call for critical reflection on how our perception of the other is formed, and for awareness of the Orientalist legacy whose manifestations continue to be present in contemporary cultural and media discourse.

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