

STEREOTYPES

OF THE WEST IN EL ALAMY'S *UN MAROCAIN À NEW YORK*

In his dealing with Edward Said's *Orientalism*, John McLeod (McLeod 2000: 44-46) highlights a number of major stereotypes of the Orient in the discourse of Orientalism. These stereotypes can be listed as follows:

- 1- The Orient is primitive, backward and changeless.
- 2- The Orient is associated with strangeness and eccentricity.
- 3- The discourse of Orientalism is built around a number of racial stereotypes.
- 4- Gender-based stereotypes:
 - a- The Orient is feminine.
 - b- The Oriental male is effeminate.
 - c- The Oriental female is closely linked to exotic eroticism.
 - d- The Orient is connected with moral degeneracy.

It is interesting to read Western literature and see how the Orient is represented and how the Orientalist discourse implements these stereotypes. This has largely been done within the context of postcolonial criticism. However, it remains to be seen whether the oriental perception of the West proceeds in the same way, constructing a discourse centred on stereotypes about the West. Is it legitimate to assume that Orientalism has a counterpart, Occidentalism, a discourse built around a set of anti-Western thoughts? Probing into the logic governing Occidentalism could be the best way to understand the mechanism of the Orientalist discourse. With this in mind, we can read a novel written a couple of years before the September attack on the twin towers in New York by a Moroccan university lecturer who devotes his *Un Marocain à New York* to the perception of the great occidental city through the oriental eyes of a Moroccan young man spending some time as a student in the city of mighty skyscrapers. This article will proceed following one by one the four major stereotypes listed above.

1. PRIMITIVE, BACKWARD AND CHANGELESS ORIENT/ PRIMITIVE OCCIDENT

In Orientalism as a Western system of thought, the Orient is associated with backwardness, a backwardness made perennial by an aversion to change or progress. Edward Said asserts that "Orientalism assumed an unchanging Orient,

absolutely different (...) from the West” (2003, 1978: 96). If the West is the place of progress and scientific development, the discourse of Orientalism portrays the Orient as a static and changeless space.

A Westerner travelling to Oriental lands was not just moving in space from one location to the other; potentially they were also travelling back in time to an earlier world. (McLeod 2000: 44)

John McLeod’s statement could be applied following a process of reversal focusing more on the perception of the West through the gaze of an oriental subject. In Youssef Elalamy’s novel, the oriental subject travels to Western lands. The hero of this postmodern jumble of disconnected stories, a Moroccan student, moves in the highly developed space of New York, and as he walks about from one place to another, he seems to be travelling ahead in time to a more developed world, a world infinitely greater than his third-world Morocco.

New York, with its high-rise buildings, namely the World Trade Centre, the symbol of Western scientific development and technological progress, is, under the oriental gaze of Elalamy’s protagonist, infinitely fascinating, greater than he could ever imagine. “Cette ville où tout est plus fascinant, plus impressionnant, plus haut, plus grand, infiniment plus grand.” (Elalamy 1998 : 29).¹ New York symbolises the incommensurable fascination the Moroccan subject has for Western culture and civilisation. *Un Marocain à New York* reflects Moroccans’ powerful attraction the West, as the following quotation may suggest, if we admit that the narrator could be viewed as representing the millions of young Moroccans who dream about migrating to Western cities.

Cela faisait plus de vingt ans que je vivais dans cette attente. Plus exactement, depuis le jour où je reçus des mains de ma maîtresse d’école la photo d’une femme géante, une torche à la main, avec cette légende : **La liberté éclairant le monde.** (...) Debout à l’arrière du bateau, je quittais la ville à reculons (...) Debout sur la pointe des pieds, les gratte-ciel nous épiaient de leur œil de verre, tandis que nous nous éloignions du rivage. (Elalamy 1998 : 19)

This fascination for the West is mingled with the awareness of belonging to a less developed world. The discourse of Said’s Orientalism, which highlights the West’s perception of the other cultures as inferior, also accommodates the inferiority awareness in the mind of the non-western subject. *Un Marocain à New York* is an ambivalent textual construct and, therefore, follows the principle according to which “texts rarely embody just one view” (McLeod 2000: 51).

While denouncing with Edward Said the way in which the Orientalist discourse deploys a number of stereotypes reducing the non-western world to a static vision, a vision blurred in a web of negative connotations, we cannot remain indifferent to the way stereotypes are implemented in this novel to function contrariwise, depicting an ambivalent perception of the West. While advancing ahead in time on the civilised realm of New York, the oriental subject, the hero of

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this novel, seems to be standing rooted to the spot, balancing on one foot, in the vertigo of cultural shock. The Moroccan student, paradoxically, feels at home in New York as landscapes of poverty and homelessness appear in his field of vision. He feels at home when he perceives familiar sights of beggars and homeless people in the busy streets of New York.

New York est une ville riche, riche d'un million de pauvres. Pour le Marocain que je suis, les mendiants qui investissent les rues de New York offrent un spectacle familier. Peut-être est-ce grâce à eux que je m'y sens toujours un peu chez moi, ni trop perdu, ni trop dépaysé. (Elalamy 1998: 16)

When the protagonist meets an American lady who ignores everything about Morocco except that it is a land where living creatures starve to death, he responds by evoking the misery of the South Bronx in Harlem, the broken shop windows, the calcinated buildings and the innumerable ghettos where thousands of destitute Americans are boxed up in deplorable living conditions.

Ne sachant quoi répondre, je lui rappelai seulement la grande misère que j'avais pu rencontrer du South Bronx au nord de Harlem. Les boutiques éventrées, les immeubles calcinés, les innombrables ghettos sans eau ni électricité, où des populations entières s'entassent, rongées par la faim, la peur et le désespoir ; les centaines de mendiants et de sans abri qui, chaque jour, sillonnent les artères de New York et investissent les stations de métro, les hordes d'enfants qui, las de jouer dans des restes de voitures abandonnées, se blottissent les uns contre les autres pour chasser le grand froid. (Elalamy 1998: 131-132)

This perception of New York, as a place of violence, poverty and deprivation, offers a vision which questions the stereotype of the West as Paradise, a stereotype that continues to stick in the minds of millions of potential migrants.

In this vision, the otherness of the West is suddenly reversed into sameness, offering backwardness as a common feature uniting two seemingly irreconcilable third and first worlds. *Un Marocain à New York* therefore deconstructs the West as a space of ambivalence where stereotypes can function contrariwise.

The stereotype of the western colonial travellers moving from one oriental land to another, with the feeling that they were voyaging back in time to an earlier epoch of human history, is used in this book in a contrapuntal way. As the Moroccan student advances on the civilised territory of New York, his movement in space is described as a journey back to the primitive times of prehistory. As he enters a nightclub, he seems to be stepping into a cavern inhabited by strange members of a primitive horde, with the insinuation that Americans are primitive, uncivilised and, above all, strange.

Après avoir longuement hésité, je tombai enfin sur ce qui ressemblait à l'entrée d'une discothèque et, tout en suivant les instructions sur la porte, je sonnai une fois, deux fois, puis trois fois. Au bout d'une minute, un homme

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 apparut, jeta un coup d'œil au travers d'une lucarne et vint ouvrir la grille de fer qui le tenait prisonnier. Un gourdin à la main, les cheveux longs et le visage entièrement couvert de poils, il semblait sortir tout droit d'une caverne. Du haut de ses deux mètres, il m'examina de la tête aux pieds, sans omettre le moindre détail, et, tout en haussant les épaules, il me fit signe d'entrer. (...) Au terme de ce périple, j'accédai à une espèce de cave peuplée d'étranges créatures. (Elalamy 1998: 38)

2. THE ORIENT IS STRANGE, THE OCCIDENT IS WEIRD

Strangeness is a crucial stereotype associated with the Orient in the discourse of Orientalism. In this discourse, the Oriental subject is portrayed as a weird figure whose difference as Other is odd or bizarre. Western writers and artists were eager to depict the assumed eccentricity of oriental people. Needless to assert that the eccentricity of the oriental figure is part and parcel of the implication of the "Orient as insinuating danger" (Said 1978: 57). A strange Arab, for example, constitutes a potential danger in the perception of the western gaze.

In *Un Marocain à New York*, the hero probably adopts the same attitude as the western travellers of the colonial period. He may be considered as attempting to construct the otherness of the Americans as basically eccentric and strange. Most of the people he meets seem to be different from and strange compared with what might be deemed as the average citizens of the USA. The strange aggressive-looking people he meets in one of the night clubs cannot be viewed as typical American subjects. With their tattoos, long hair, parched jeans and leather boots, they are depicted as primitive, rough-mannered, and, implicitly compared to wild animals.

Assis à mes côtés, Skull, *tête-de-mort*, (c'est ainsi qu'il se faisait appeler par les intimes), abritait dans son regard tous les germes actifs de la violence urbaine. Son visage d'ange unissait sous ses traits une noble moustache arabe et des yeux de vampire assoiffé de sang. Comme tous ses copains, Skull avait de longs cheveux raides qui lui tombait sur les épaules, un jean entièrement rapiécé, un ceinturon clouté, un blouson usé et une paire de bottes en cuir.

(...)

Skull me saouhaitait la bienvenue dans le langage de sa tribu.

(...)

Je remarquais à présent cet anneau d'acier qui lui cernait le pouce. Sur l'anneau, une tête de loup, la gueule béante, les crocs saillants et l'air menaçant. (Elalamy 1998: 40)

Their strangeness is symbolised by the head of a wolf on the steel ring around Skull's thumb. Skull is the nickname of the head of the gang in the night club which is compared to a primitive cavern. In the middle of this hostile jungle, the hero considers himself as a lamb in the company of wolves "tel un agneau dans une compagnie de loups" (Elalamy 1998: 39). With its open menacing jaws, the head of the wolf might be interpreted as symbolising the potential aggressive

instinct inhabiting the civilised American self. Such an interpretation fits in well in the process of constructing the stereotype of the West as harbouring potential violence behind the façade of civilisation.

In short, the stereotype of the Orient as being uncivilised, strange and potentially dangerous is reversed in the project of constructing the otherness of the West, symbolised by New York, the place of violence par excellence, a city which reeks of aggressiveness due to the high rate of suicides, mugging, burglary, rape and murder.

un suicide et une overdose toutes les sept heures, deux viols et un meurtre toutes les cinq heures, seize cambriolages et seize agressions toutes les heures, un hold-up tous les quarts d'heures, un vol toutes les trois minutes, une urgence toutes les secondes. (Elalamy 1998: 36)

Although essential in the construction of the stereotype of New York as a violent metropolis, the figures of violence listed during a news television broadcast are comparatively normal, if the impressive number of its inhabitants is taken into consideration.

3. RACIAL STEREOTYPES

If Orientalism is for Said “a system of representations” (Said 1978, 2003: 202) enacting a number of stereotypes about the Orient, Occidentalism, by virtue of a mechanism of reversal, would be a discourse that implements stereotypes about the West with the aim of counterattacking western assumptions about non-westerners. If Orientalism “is a school of interpretation whose material happens to be the Orient, its civilizations, peoples and localities” (Said 1978, 2003: 203), then Occidentalism would be an interpretative system, a body of representations enacting stereotypes of the West.

In *Un Marocain à New York*, the author touches on a number of stereotypes about the Americans and their Western civilisation. Although he uses humour, irony and an extremely playful style of narration to mark his distance, Elalamy ambivalently participates in the construction of Western Otherness by playing with racial stereotypes about the Americans. While doing so, he, paradoxically, seems to be showing that any stereotype is basically ridiculous or laughable. The author’s ironic playful style toys with the stereotype of the American as fast-food eater. He coins the phrase *homo hamburgerus* to refer to the modern westernised man. After comparing the night-club, with its strange customers, to a prehistoric cavern, now the author, once again, alludes to the animality inherent to modern westernised man. “Après l’âge de la pierre et l’âge du bronze, nous voilà passés à l’âge du hamburger.” (Elalamy 1998: 69)

The humorous phrase *homo hamburgerus*, quite in the same way as the terms Orientalism and Occidentalism, is a fabricated construct made up of a series of connotations built around images evoking racial stereotypes. *Homo* evokes *homo sapiens* which connotes the idea of being primitive, the contrary of civilised. The word hamburger alludes to the stereotype of obesity and reinforces the connotation

of animality. The metaphoric allusion to animality is built around the idea of obesity and incessant eating or continuous chewing, which brings the fast-food eater closer to ruminants.

The same connotation is suggested in the chapter entitled “Internet Chewing-gum” in spite of all the distance that the author marks with his sarcasm and biting irony.² The chapter starts with a striking insinuation “une vache qui rumine est une vache heureuse”, a cow is happy when chewing, which rises as a conclusive remark following his observation that the chewing-gum is widely used in America. “Ici tout le monde en mâche, du chewing-gum” (Elalamy 1998: 111).

The ironic style which is meant to distance the narrator from the generalising assumption that Americans love chewing-gum, may have, in fact, the contrary effect, that of contributing to construct a racial stereotype. “S’abstenir de mâcher, c’est trahir la Nation.” (Elalamy 1998: 111) Abstinence from chewing is betrayal for the nation. In this statement, the implied insinuation is closely related to the allusion to chewing and ruminating, indirectly comparing Americans to ruminants.

The allusion to animals is also implemented in “Une vie de chien”, a chapter which draws on another stereotype about the west, that of being fond of pets, particularly dogs, perhaps a western cultural feature that Orientals fail to understand. The narrator of Elalamy’s novel betrays his astonishment at this phenomenon and indirectly voices his criticism through his sarcastic depiction of how dogs can be overspoilt in the west while thousands of people in the third world die of starvation (Elalamy 1998: 75). The author’s biting criticism of the American way of life can be disclosed in the ironic title “Une vie de chien” which might be interpreted as equating Americans to dogs.

4. GENDER-BASED STEREOTYPES

More striking and complex than stereotypes involving animal tropes are gender-based prejudices. The Orient is depicted as feminine in the Orientalist discourse, while the West is represented as masculine. The Orient is gendered into being feminine, which means passive, and therefore submissive. The Orient lures and tempts the Western coloniser who is represented as a masculine, active and dominant figure. The Orient is rendered as a virgin territory, an exotic and sexually mysterious object of temptation for the western explorer. A specific sexual vocabulary is thus deployed in the Orientalist discourse to describe the encounter between the East and the West. The Orient is portrayed in terms of being “penetrated,” “embraced,” or “ravished” by the masculine Western adventurer. (McLeod 2000: 45)³

In *Un Marocain à New York* the author reverses the stereotypes based on gender differences and, therefore, shatters the logic governing the discourse of Orientalism where the West is represented as masculine. In the opening chapter “Féminin masculin” the narrator evokes his child’s vision of the world being divided into two distinct halves: one masculine, while the other half is feminine. In this child’s vision, Morocco is erected as virile while other countries are thought of as feminine. Standing on the 110th floor of the World Trade Center,

the Moroccan student seems to be obsessed by the idea of knowing about the sex of New York. "... du haut du 110^e étage du World Trade Center, je n'ai qu'une obsession, connaître le sexe de cette ville." (Elalamy 1998: 12). The narrator's perception of New York, that mighty symbol of Western "virility", is that of a feminine city. What is ironic is that the narrator questions the sex of New York while standing on one of the highest floors of the Twin Towers which rise erect as a phallic symbol.

The narrator's attitude is reminiscent of the colonial traveller's vision of the Oriental lands, a vision in which the Orient is feminised. In the narrator's sexist gaze, New York is equated with a fascinating, erotically tempting woman, a woman who might seem, at first, to be frigid, but one who could turn out to be a sexually demanding lover.

New York est une ville d'apparence frigide, mais d'apparence seulement. Car si l'on y pénètre parfois sur la pointe des pieds, si l'on s'y introduit souvent avec méfiance, on en ressort toujours étourdi, paumé, obsédé, transformé. New York est une ville fascinante, séduisante et profondément éprouvante. (Elalamy 1998: 12)

Quite in the same way as in Orientalist representations, the author implements a number of words and phrases with specifically sexual connotations: "pénètre", "on s'y introduit", "à croquer", "le va-et-vient." The sexual overtone is reinforced by the author's insistence on the reference to New York as Big Apple; the apple being a symbol of irresistible desire.

Au risque d'y laisser ses dents, Big Apple, la grosse pomme, comme on la surnomme ici, est à croquer. Quelques pas dans la ville et l'on est pris dans le tumulte de la rue, le va-et-vient incessant de la foule, comme dans les bras d'une femme infidèle que l'on sait vicieuse, fatale, mais dont on ne peut plus se passer. (Elalamy 1998: 12)

Like the Orient in Western fantasies, New York is, for the narrator of this Moroccan novel, "a site of perverse desire." (McLeod 2000: 46) This assumption can be corroborated by the comparison of New York with the image of an irresistible, perverse unfaithful woman. The perception of New York's "feminine penetrability," to put it in Said's terms (Said 1978: 206),⁴ and the implication of this highly symbolic Western city as a place of "moral degeneracy,"⁵ as suggested in other chapters, reveals the author's conscious or unconscious attempt to reverse oriental stereotypes into negative generalisations about the West.

5. CONCLUSION

The major concern of this article revolves round the ambivalence and complexity of cross-cultural perception. The protagonist's ambivalent perception is that of admiration and rejection. The striking use of humour, irony, mockery, derision and sarcasm is a stylistic skill to mark a distance between the gazer

and the object of perception. Irony and derision are also used as sharp weapons for satire and criticism. The author's irony and his sarcastic mockery reveal his high intellectual westernised perception, a perception which paradoxically welds together criticism and admiration. His gaze is that of the westernised intellectual who has a thorough knowledge of the West and western values, but, his narrative ambivalently offers a perception through which the West is represented as being degenerate and probably declining. The language and style of narration function ambivalently, breaking the logic governing stereotypes of New York, while contributing to the construction of the West's otherness.

The incoherent form of the novel, with its post-modern fragmentary narrative structure, reflects the incoherence and fragmentation of human perception. The perception of the other is fragmentary because the object of the gaze is often beyond reach. The perception of the West in this Moroccan novel is that of a young man in whose gaze things take different shapes from what can be perceived by, let us say, a middle-aged Moroccan father, staying with his family at his American friends' house.

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- 1 (...) the towers – symbols of U.S. power and wealth ; symbols of imperial, global, capitalist dominance ; symbols of New York City, our contemporary Babylon; symbols of everything American that people both hate and long for – (...) the Twin Towers exemplified the technological hubris of modern engineers.” Ian Buruma & Avishai Margalit, *Occidentalism*, London: Atlantic Books, 2004, pp. 14 -15.
 - 2 The following quotations illustrate the sarcastic and ironic style deployed throughout the novel.
 “Peut-on encore parler d’un nouvel ordre mondial, quand on voit le désordre qu’il y a dans ma chambre ? (...) Et maintenant cette question capitale : pourquoi ma nièce âgée de deux ans a-t-elle prononcé le nom de McDonald ’s avant le mien ? (...) nous assistons aujourd’hui à la naissance de l’*homo hamburgerus*. Non, ce n’est pas une variété de hamburger russes, mais simplement quelqu’un comme vous et moi, un être bourré de complexes, avec un numéro d’état civil et une libido qui l’empêche de dormir le soir.” (Elalamy 1998 : 68).
 - 3 “Orientalism itself, furthermore, was an exclusively male province; like so many professional guilds during the modern period, it viewed itself an dits subject matter with sexist blinders. This is especially evident in the writing of travelers and novelists: women are usually the creatures of a male power-fantasy. They express unlimited sensuality, they are more or less stupid, and above all they are willing.” (Said 1978: 207) See the whole Chapter 3, “Latent and Manifest Orientalism”.
 - 4 “Du haut de ma tour, je parcours une dernière fois la ville du regard. Les avenues sillonnent Manhattan comme les vergetures d’un corps qui aurait grandi trop vite ou qui serait las d’enfanter. A cette distance, Central Park n’est plus qu’une touffe d’ombres aux contours parfaits, ouverte à mon désir. Je tends alors les bras et lance à haute voix : - New York est bien une femme !” (Elalamy 1998 : 13)
 - 5 The suggestion that New York is a place of moral degeneracy is illustrated in the following chapters: Télé blues, Cocktail de fruits, Ana Morena, Rondeur et décadence.

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SUMMARY

STEREOTYPES OF THE WEST IN EL ALAMY'S *UN MAROCAIN* À NEW YORK

This article focuses on cross-cultural perception involving the Orient and the Occident. It attempts to demonstrate how cultural stereotypes are absurd, dwelling on the way the Orientalist discourse implements a number of stereotypes about the Orient. The article goes on to show that the oriental perception of the West may proceed in the same way to construct a discourse elaborated round stereotypes about the West. Based on a reading of a novel by a Moroccan writer, the article raises the question whether it might be legitimate to assume that Orientalism has a counterpart, Occidentalism, a discourse steeped in anti-Western thoughts.

KEYWORDS: Orientalism, Orient, Occidentalism, West, Oriental, Western, Orientalist discourse, stereotypes, post colonialism, ambivalence, irony.