



التفاعل الحضاري في كتابات الرحلة النسوية: دراسة لأعمال مختارة

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*Transculturalism in Women Travel Writings : A Study of  
Selected Works*

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## المستخلص

ان للنقد الثقافي في كتابات ادب الرحلة دورًا حيويًا في الأدب متعدد الثقافات والتفاعل الحضاري. فهو يفتح آفاقًا جديدة للفكر ويعزز العلاقات الثقافية ويجسر بين الاختلافات. ويعتبر ادب الرحلة مصدرًا للمتعة وايضا هو وسيلة للإضاءة الفكرية لكونه وسيلة مهمة تمكن الثقافة من التفاعل مع الثقافات الأخرى وخاصة الثقافة العربية والغربية. من خلال سفر المستشرقين دخل الشرق والغرب في حوار تاريخي . على الرغم من أن هذا الحوار اختلف في نبرته عبر مراحل التفاعل ، إلا أنه ساهم بشكل كبير في عالم الفكر. كانت روايات الرحلة هي العين السحرية التي تمكن الغرب من خلالها من كشف حجاب الشرق. حمل المسافرون أوصافهم للشرق بالمشاعر والعواطف التي خلقت صورة واقعية في أذهان القراء. وبالرغم من ذلك ، فإن العديد من العوامل الدينية والسياسية والاجتماعية والدينية تحدد تأطير الصورة الثقافية الشرقية والتي اعتمدت بشكل أساسي على كيفية فهم الرحالة والمستشرقين للثقافة العربية أو إساءة فهمهم لها. يسلط هذا البحث الضوء على بعض الرحالة الغربيين ممن تعتبر آراؤهم الثقافية حول الثقافة العربية والشرقية أساس دراسات النقد الثقافي والتفاعل الحضاري.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ادب الرحلة، النقد الثقافي، متعدد الثقافات

## Abstract

*Cultural Criticism through the travel writings plays a vital role in transculturalism and multicultural literature. It opens new horizons of thought, enhances cultural relationships and bridges differences. Besides being a source of enjoyment, travel is also a means of mental illumination in being a significant medium that enables a culture to interact with other cultures and especially the Arab culture. It is through travel of orientalists that the East and West went into a historical dialogue. Though this dialogue varied in its tone along the phases of interaction, yet it highly contributed to the realm of ideas. Travel accounts were the magical eye through which the West was able to uncover the veil of the East. Travelers burdened their descriptions of the east with feelings and emotions that created a lifelike picture in readers' minds. However, many religious factors political, social and religious factors determined the framing of the Eastern cultural image depended basically on how the travelers understood or misunderstood the Arab culture. This paper sheds light upon some feminine western travelers whom their cultural views about Arab and East culture are a foundation studies for cultural criticism .They stand with no rival, because they transcends time and gender ,and they still a lively source for contemporary studies of transculturalism .*

**Keywords:** Travel Writing, Cultural Criticism, Transculturalism



Cultural criticism is a literary theory that deconstructs the artificial divide between high and low culture. This distinction is based on what is considered to be conventional and worthy in a certain culture. Cultural critics think that culture is a dynamic social construct that encompasses all activities and beliefs, rather than a fixed and unchanging entity. It examines the common privileges of race, class, and gender, as well as the traditional differences between high art and low art. Cultural studies explores works by minority ethnic groups and postcolonial writers, as well as folk, urban, and popular culture products, rather than focusing on the canon. Cultural criticism emerged in the 18th and 19th centuries among writers such as Jonathan Swift, John Ruskin, and, especially, Matthew Arnold, and has profoundly altered older concepts of culture, tradition, and value. While Arnold saw culture as a force for good and social transformation, 20th-century cultural critics tried to broaden and complicate such notions. Stuart Hall aimed to make theoretical discussions more worldwide and to establish *Cultural Studies Review* as an interdisciplinary field. In these lectures, he discusses cultural theorists' views. Culture was defined by theorists such as Raymond Williams, Antonio Gramsci, and those associated with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham, England—as well as French intellectuals such as Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault—as a process that connected knowledge, interest, and power. As Hall says: “a culture is a collection of interactive cultures, each of which is growing and changing, each of which is constituted at any given moment in time by the intersection of gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, occupation, and similar factors that contribute to the experience of its members”. (Curthoys & Docker, 2017, P 89)

Cultural critics deconstruct the traditional canon and focus their attention on a wide range of texts and discourses, tracking their relationships using a diverse range of interpretive tools that

include economics, psychology, anthropology, sociology, gender studies, and new historicism. Cultural critics avoid prioritizing one cultural product over another when analyzing the traditional canon, and they frequently analyze texts that are usually considered as minor and irrelevant in traditional criticism, such as those associated with various forms of pop culture. Cultural criticism and cultural studies, which are essentially cross-disciplinary, have become crucial instruments in conceptualizing the emergence and importance of postcolonial and multicultural literatures. Alice Templeton in her *Theories For Cultural Criticism*, defines cultural criticism as “the study of literature at work in its social context.”(Templeton,1992,P 19)

Since 1940, when the Cuban scholar Fernando Ortiz coined the word "transculturation", transcultural theories have been employed and explored. He use this term to depict the mutual cultural impacts and fusions that occur between so-called "peripheral" and colonizing cultures(Ortiz ,1940). Mary Louise Pratt expanded on the concept of transculturation in her important text *Imperial Eyes*, which was written in a postcolonial perspective.( Pratt,1992) Multiculturalisms and transculturalisms have forced a discussion and questioned the ideals of cultural purity, resulting in a powerful impact that has transformed the pattern of national identity substantially in some situations. The terms transcultural and transculturalism, in comparison to multiculturalism and postcolonialism, are used to refer to the transcultural condition peculiar to certain writers, based primarily on Epstein's theorizations and views of transculture as a mode of cultural individual development and transformation, namely “a mode of being experienced at the crossroads of cultures.”( Epstein, P 48) Transculturalism entails crossing cultural boundaries. To do so, one must first understand one's own cultural identity. Because we can only know ourselves through our differences from others, it is a requirement of transcultural fiction that the discourses that the transcultural perspective crosses stay distinct. Transculturalism, according to critics like

Ann Brooks, is no longer just a theoretical concept, but a practice that has influenced people's conceptions of their cultural identities. Here is Ann Brooks's view:

Transculturalism and transnationalism have produced new conceptions of subjecthood , subjectivity and identity as new cultural and ethnic boundaries have emerged. These new cultural and ethnic identities carry with them the need for new conceptions of subjectivity and require the opening-up of new subject positions and new spaces and places from which to speak. This emphasis requires transdisciplinary approach to the analysis of representation and identity. (Brooks, 2007,P 148)

Cultural studies, according to Ann Brooks, has evolved into a "global multidisciplinary forum"<sup>6</sup> that has played a critical role in the spread of transcultural conceptualizations. Even if cosmopolitanism has not developed many negative connotations as a result of critical debates, it fails to provide the greatest solution to the current plurality of cultural identities found within nation-state borders.(Ibid, P 158) Roy L. Brooks also discusses cosmopolitanism and transculturalism. This approach, he believes, reflects a "cultural convergence," with "each social group" contributing "something of value to a new, blended mainstream culture"(Brooks,R.L. ,2012,P 24) Brooks, unlike Cuccioleta, does not believe that transculturalism is the answer to amicable cultural interaction. He promotes what he refers to as cultural pluralism, which is a multicultural perspective. According to him: : " Transculturalism creates a dilemma for groups thrown into the mix. These groups cannot escape cultural hegemony, as each group contributing to the new melting pot will have to surrender some (perhaps most) of its own identity as it

assumes a new identity in the mainstream." P 25 Transcultural perspectives modify and develop literary canons by reflecting previously unrepresented spaces.

Aspects of transculturalism can be investigated in texts dealing with travel. It is no coincidence that the emergence of cultural studies in the universities coincided with the rise of travel writing in the 1970s. Travel, in accordance with cultural studies, is now a means of comparing how culture, nation, race, class, gender, and ethnicity are understood in various regions of the world. Travel becomes a tool for investigating how cultural contacts are represented in today's hybrid communities. Peter Brent once stated that Western visitors played an important role in the East-West interaction , saying:

They have been able to form to us a vivid picture of the world they we're trying to enter, and in which, sometimes for many years, they were able to live...For we rely on interpreters for our understanding of the world .We send out scouts and build our image of the way things are from the reports they bring back for us. Once we have an image, however, it proves hard to change it.(Brent , 1977,P24)

The transcultural features can be viewed as a metaphor for cultural exploration, with the tenor representing the cultural background and travel as the vehicle or frame. A literary frame helps readers focus on specific sections of the text, similar to how a frame isolates a picture from the wall. Travel inspires comparisons between the traveler's own nation and the countries he visits. Travel is one of the oldest literary tropes. Journeys, like maps, can be used to represent time, space, life, or the artistic

language. Travel is a metaphor for the procedure in this case. They have no knowledge of the domestic concerns of the country they are visiting. Third parties are occasionally admitted to the private spheres—a child, a servant, or an actress. As a result, third-person narratives are used to depict or criticize a foreign country from within. Europeans, from the 15th to the early 20th century, re-imagined the world as created in the image of an ever-expanding Europe during the long period of European imperialism . With an imperialist vision that Europeans came, saw and conquered. In the regions where Europeans landed, the acquisitive masculine vision perceived profit. People and goods were turned into commodities, and the capitalist entrepreneur, along with the daring missionaries, left their imprint on the colonies.

During the Enlightenment, science and reason were used to temper the raw masculinity that sought to conquer and rule. Scientists and botanists, however, imposed themselves and their taxonomies on the rest of the world, creating a new sort of masculinity based on the idea of males chasing knowledge. The idea of The Grand Tour in the 18th century created a new form of masculinity: the aristocratic and subsequently bourgeois gentleman. The traveler has remained steadfastly masculine - one who awes, supplicates, survives, conquers, claims, surveys, colonizes, analyzes, catalogs, organizes, civilizes, critiques, celebrates, absorbs, and goes native.(Smith ,2001, P 10-11)

Women travelers are the ideal writers for studying aspects of transculturalism in travel texts. Women's travel literature, which has long been dismissed as the domain of second-rate writers, is a valuable resource for teaching world history. Recent study has dispelled long-held biases, and there is a considerable secondary literature on many elements of this genre, indicating its expanding significance. It has several advantages as a source for learning about world history. To begin with spanning both time and location. It is important to discuss the mechanisms that women writers from various cultural backgrounds and social



classes have devised in order to reflect the discursive construction of feminine topics in a context of cultural and social displacement, transnational dialogues, and a variety of forms of cultural interaction in the context of a transcultural journey to the East. These women writers portray the essential role of women in social and cultural contexts in their writings. Women have always traveled, but the ideological gendering of travel makes it difficult for women to travel and leads to inappropriate attitudes to women travelers and their stories. Despite traveling frequently and writing about their experiences, women have yet to establish a genre for women's travel writing . Despite the fact that women's travel tales are generally about female experience, they have been viewed as inferior to, or in opposition to, the long heritage of men's travel literature until the late twentieth century. It was in this social context that these mobile women writers began to express a transcultural views and self-criticism of one's own cultural identities and assumptions, as they moved across cultural and national boundaries.

Women's travel writings are researched for their historical insights on female identity and gender specific characteristics of travel. Women's travel texts provide a diverse range of viewpoints on distant places and people. They were able to cross not only geographical and cultural boundaries, but also private and public ones, by commenting on local cultures, such as dress codes and domestic arrangements, while also reflecting on major political events, as well as social and cultural changes, in the regions they were covering. Mary Kingsley, Isabella Bishop-Bird, Alexandra David-Neel, Amelia Edwards, Gertrude Bell, Lilius Trotter, Freya Stark, and Lady Mary Wortley Montague, produced journals of their travels in which they frequently depicted cloistered women in their private space, inaccessible to the Western man's gaze, thereby showing previously unknown ideas to their Western readers.

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu traveled to the Ottoman court with her husband, Edward Wortley Montagu, in 1717.

Montagu wrote what would become one of her most renowned works during their stay in Turkey: *The Turkish Embassy Letters*, a collection of edited letters. When reading the Letters, it obliges to place Montagu's language, particularly her famous remark that Turkish women enjoy greater freedom than British women, in the material and discursive context of eighteenth-century England and the geopolitical ties of the time. Even and especially when gendered or Orientalist expectations are defied, Montagu's travel narrative reproduces prevailing discourses that naturalize class relations in her day. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu appears to take a feminist approach to presenting Eastern women in *The Turkish Embassy Letters*. She portrays Turkish women in a nonjudgmental light, implying that they have greater freedom than Western women. She frequently supported Turkish culture and criticized literature written by some colonial male tourists who portrayed the East as archaic and authoritarian. (Montagu 1993, 40-48) Montagu stated that these travel accounts were made up, "I have now entertained you with a narrative of a sight that you have never seen before in your life and that no travel guide could tell you about." ( P.45) While she showed Oriental ladies in a different light than the typical picture, she also emphasized the differences between Oriental and English women, so dividing the East and the West. Despite the fact that her writings took different approaches to describe Oriental ladies, she nonetheless exploited their exotic and mysterious representations to construct her own interpretation of fantasy. Whereas most men fantasize about enslaving Orient women, Montagu fantasizes about their liberation. Her writings also contributed to a shared Westerner's perception of the East. The writers who attempted to depict the Oriental world in contrast to the traditional representation, which was founded on prejudice towards the Orient, employed prejudice in their descriptions of the Orient as well. Even though Montagu's letters, like those of other writers, formed part of the traditional image of the East,

they nonetheless showed the distinctions between the East and the West. (Asli,2001,pp. 49-68)

Freya Stark was a British explorer and travel writer who lived from 1893 until 1993. She published almost two dozen books about her travels in the Middle East and Afghanistan, as well as autobiographical works and essays. She was one of the first non-Arabians to travel through the southern Arabian Deserts. Stark also portrays herself as an educated and knowledgeable observer of the Arabian people in the West. Said (Said,1978,P 272) thinks that when an Orientalist represents the Other, she imbues her own western culture, institutions, and political beliefs into what she portrays as truth about the people she represents. The topic of respect runs through all of Stark's work: who gets it, who provides it, and why. Among her contemporary Arabian travel authors, Stark's use and interpretation of this theme sets her apart. She treats the indigenous peoples and civilizations she meets with an exceptional level of respect in colonial travel literature. Stark (Stark,1936,P.58) believes that in the 1930s, travel writing became a suitable medium for writers who questioned established ideas and sought new allegiances. She values feminine contemplation over masculine production in the east. She enjoys observing other people's activities, however she would classify this as an Arabic quality rather than a feminine one. In her *The Southern Gates of Arabia* ,Stark warned the British:

To the Arab, manners are everything; he will forgive any amount of extortion so long as “your speech is good.” To us, since the end of the eighteenth century, they [manners] have become dangerously unimportant ... It is in this heart of our philosophy that we amateurs disagree with your unmitigated expert, whose object is so supremely important that he cannot count, or at any rate notice, the jostling and hurting of others ... However important the appointment, one does not run over human bodies to catch one’s trains. If this were merely individual it would not matter, but it appears as the very core of difficulty in present dealings with the East, now flooded with experts, of commerce, of science, or oil. (Stark,1963,p.60)

Stark openly detested the snobbery and bigotry that prevented British authorities from interacting with Iraqis. Stark writes in a socially acceptable genre for colonial women in *Baghdad Sketches*, but her sketches become a rebellious style of writing. She displays sympathy for the other's dislike of imperial agents, as well as her own difficulties with British officials as a result of her exclusion from the imperial club. In *The Southern Gates of Arabia* 1936, Stark describes her travel into the Hadhramaut .She concentrates on her cultural interactions with the people she met along the way. Stark uses three narrative voices in *Gates* to criticize European arrogance: the third-person who objectively reports observations with statements that register as an Orientalist response; the first-person who establishes credibility and reflects respect and liking for the Eastern Other; and the third-person who belongs to the Other for whom she speaks. When contrasting the West with the East, however, Stark's writings show a greater

awareness of sameness than of otherness throughout her story. She says "one can only really travel if one lets oneself go and takes what every place brings without trying to turn it into a healthy private pattern of one's own and I suppose that is the difference between travel and tourism." On the surface, Stark became more imperialistic, yet she continued to explore for connections between herself and the Other, valuing her personal relationships and avoiding stereotyping.

Another great women travel writer is Gertrud Bell. Gertrude Bell was a scholar and a spy whose amazing career spanned the British Empire's heyday and concluded with the establishment of Iraq. She was an explorer, travel writer, translator of Sufi verse, clever, fearless. Bell began her career as an Arabist by producing travel literature on the Arabian Peninsula and then assisting the British government in influencing the politics of erstwhile Mesopotamia. Bell wrote seven articles for various periodicals and six books about her Middle Eastern travels between 1894 and 1914. With the outbreak of WWI in 1914, Bell began providing reports and advise on the Middle East to the director of military operations in Cairo, at the request of the British government.(Wallach,1998,p.46) Bell, according to Wallach, is the best knowledgeable European when it comes to the peoples and politics of northern and central Arabia As a result, Bell took over the analysis of tribal clans and their sheikhs in order to assess political alliances, leading to her appointment as the only female British officer on Percy Cox's political staff in 1916, when she traveled to Basrah to persuade Arab tribes to collaborate with the British.(Ibid p 48) Lucille Becker praises Bell's ability to accurately describe the East in her book *Great Women Travel Writers*, citing passages from *Persian Pictures*. Becker thinks Bell is enthralled with the East, and he backs up his claim with quotes from *Persian Pictures* about Bell's reaction to Shaharazad and the Sultan Shahriyar: "Everything about the East excited her, bringing back the magic of her childhood

reading of the Arabian Nights” (Becker,2005,p.147) Becker, who also admires Bell’s observations and talent of clear descriptions, quotes Bell in the essay “*In Praise of Gardens*” from *Persian Pictures*:

There was, indeed a part of his domain where  
even his hospitality  
would not have bidden us enter. Behind the  
house in which we were  
received lay the women’s dwelling, a long, low,  
verandaed building  
standing round a deep tank, on whose edge  
solemn children carry on  
their dignified games, and veiled women flit  
backwards and forwards ...  
So in the wilderness, behind high walls, the  
secret, mysterious life of  
the East flows on – a life in which no European  
can penetrate. (p 50)

According to Becker, Bell's account reflects a vivid and clear image of the East, demonstrating her outstanding ability to convey both the terrain and the people who captivate her. Becker describes Bell as “an intrepid traveler, gifted writer, linguist fluent in Persian and Arabic, archaeologist, and expert on Turkish Arabia ... who broke down the barriers of gender and class of Victorian England to reach fame in the Middle East and to become the most powerful woman in the British Empire after World War I”. (47) Workman explains that Bell's translation allowed her to convey her grief at Henry Cadogan's death indirectly through her choice of emotional poetry by Hafiz. In fact, Workman believes that “her translation serves as an indirect rebellion against family strictures – also against British colonial prejudice. Just as her later life in exploration and diplomacy challenged traditional gender roles, this early work established

her credibility as a linguist and interpreter of Middle-Eastern culture". (Workman,2010,p 185) Bell's translation of Hafiz differs from that of prior western translators because of her alternative approach to the literature of the Other. Workman shows , "Bell was quite aware of the dominant points of view regarding Hafez and The Divan, but she undercuts their authority by offering the possibility that the verses mean something very different. In her own work she subverts the hegemonic discourse of her English predecessors and peers".(p 194) Bell claims that Hafiz was a better poet than Dante, in contrast to earlier interpreters, who she believes undervalue his poems. She then became involved in politics before going on her one-woman journey around the Middle East. With her remarkable style of humor and incisiveness, she recorded her travels through Iraq, Persia, Syria, and beyond, as well as her crucial diplomatic job. Bell's translations convey her real excitement for Persia, the people, and the poetry as a result of her respect for the wisdom of the Other - not because of a political need to know the Oriental through the study of the poems as manifestations of cultural facts.(Ibid p 200)

## Conclusion

In studying women's' travel writing one might notice a greater willingness, in general, to cross cultural boundaries and enter into dialogue with 'the other' – to enter into more reciprocal relations than we have become accustomed to in men's travel writing. Perhaps women are used to seeing their own culture in relative terms. They have not been used to shaping their own culture, and are less defensive of it. Women travelers who did publish their writings were celebrated for struggling against social convention. They were exceptional women that their writings transcends above social and cultural constrains shaping a canon for transculturalism.

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