

# **Colonial Fez as Seen by Anglo-American Women Travellers: A Comparative Study of Two Female Western Travelogues, Edith Wharton's *In Morocco* and Anais Nin's Short Narrative, "The Labyrinthine City of Fez"**

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## **Abstract**

Numerous 'tales' have been told by a number of Western travel writers about Eastern territories since the dawn of the European geographical discoveries. Among these travellers there were women writers who excelled in documenting impressing details about the visited spaces, admiring on the one hand the virtues and the beauties of the East, and exoticising its geography and people through deploying their literary genius on the other hand. Their travel writings, though conceived of by many critics as discourses of difference in travel writing, were not dissimilar from the accounts of their counterpart men. Most of their writings seem to have relied on a mode of representation that is replete with Orientalist modalities that foreground the Western logic of comprehending otherness. Colonial Fez was among the Eastern Geographies that hosted well-known female travel writers. The city was seen as one of the West's most desired targets within the boundaries of what has been fairly known as the Orient. The paper examines two Anglo-American female travel accounts, Edith Wharton's *In Morocco* and Anais Nin's short narrative, "The Labyrinthine City of Fez". It focuses on how colonial Fez is seen by these two female writers, drawing a comparison between Wharton's book and Nin's short narrative, with an eye towards interrogating the legacy of female Western travelogues. This serves to highlight two different ways of seeing alterity, Wharton's colonial discourse of difference and Nin's fruitful depiction of Oriental culture.

### **Keywords**

Colonial Fez,  
cultural diversity,  
difference,  
Orientalism,  
Western female  
travelogues

## Introduction

The idea of travel and exploration has played a significant part in opening routes for nineteenth century Europe to access new territories. The quest for appropriating new geographies was guaranteed through dispatching travelers, painters, and explorers overseas. Their prime task was to collect 'informative' accounts of these territories in order to facilitate Europe's 'civilizing' mission. Europeans did not, during the first decade of the nineteenth century, consider the Western conquest of the Orient as a colonizing act for the Western presence in the Orient's land was presumably aimed at bringing life to a lifeless world (Edward Said, 1978, 172). Nineteenth and early twentieth-century travellers did not rely on empirical evidence or practical experience to build up a reliable body of knowledge of other cultures. Instead, they were highly preoccupied with an abstract demarcation of difference, which allows the disappearance of focal facts from their vantage point. Most of their encounters with other cultures and peoples were governed by their tendency to materializing the static mental images of the unknown 'Other', existing in their shared imagination. The act of materializing these mental images depends on assimilating the 'Other's world' to the conventions of the West's, a form of colonial demarcation through which, as suggested by Barthes, exoticism works. (Lisa Lowe, 2000, 154-55)

Generally, Western travel writers acted by common consent to construct a form of knowledge about Fez which does not necessarily reflect the City's depth of cultural heritage. They were conspicuously engaged in reshaping the City according to an already acquired conception of a fictional geographical entity called the Orient. Said explains, in this respect, that the learned Orientalist traveller was committed to proving the validity of the abstract musty "truth" that he/she learned about the civilization of the visited country (Said, 1978, 52). More specifically, these travelogues have created a fictional presence of Fez with a tireless endeavor to reinforce this presence with supposititious descriptions of both

land and people. These supposititious descriptions are based on Western logic of racial difference that sees the Orient in terms of either identity or difference, as argued by Abdul R. JanMohamed. He explains how the European sees the Other either as essentially identical ignoring the significant divergences and judging non-Westerners according to Western cultural values, or as irremediably different but still considered from Western cultural perspective (Abdul R. JanMohamed, 1995, 18).

Since the work of most travelers was not based on only documenting the City's socio-cultural aspects but inventing them as well, it has led to the accumulation of a repertoire of misinformation adequate enough to authenticate the Western preoccupations of the mysterious Orient. Edmund Burke writes:

As enshrined in the paintings of Eugène Delacroix and the books of Pierre Loti, one city above all loomed in the French imagination as the apotheosis of all that was most captivating, most mysterious in the Orient. It was the Moroccan city of Fez, 'the setting sun of Islam.' (Edmund Burke, 1977, 1)

Burke also refers to *The Mission Scientifique du Maroc*, which, he claims, stimulated research on Moroccan society and institutions, and was one example of France's quest for cultural leadership through accumulating a store of knowledge that constitute European understanding of other territories (Edmund Burke, 1977, 1). However, his depiction of Fez as the "most mysterious in the Orient" is still consonant with Said's claim about the Orientalist traveler's writing, which he considers as "a kind of free-floating mythology of the Orient." (Said, 1978, 53)

On that account, the need for interrogating the process of naturalizing cultural difference and addressing the West's misconceptions of non-Western cultures fostered by certain 'miseducated' readings/writings of the city of Fez has a particular pertinence to this comparative study. For this reason, I take account of the shift, made by some postcolonial researchers and

thinkers, “from a focus on Western discursive constructions of the “Orient” as hegemonic to an engagement with Orientalism as heterogeneous and contested.” ( Beaulieu and Roberts, 2002, 2)<sup>i</sup>

The representation of Morocco in Western travel narrative does not only appear as men’s concern. There were women travelers who visited Morocco and transmitted throughout the world images of its culture and people, which were not, in their entirety, identical copies of what was mentioned in the narrative of male travellers. For instance, the narratives of Edith Wharton, Anais Nin, Mary Heaton Vorse, Jane Bowles and Maureen Daly (Khalid Bekkaoui, 2008, 1) count as impressive texts attracting critical interest. These women did not go through their travelling experiences with *aphantasia* as they excelled in documenting impressive details about the visited spaces. The one hand, they admired the virtues and the beauties of the East, and on the other, they exoticised its geography and people, through deploying their ‘conventional’ literary genius on the other.

The choice of two Anglo-American female travelogues, Edith Wharton’s *In Morocco* and Anais Nin’s *The Labyrinthine City of Fez* seeks to draw a comparison between two modes of writing. *In Morocco* that owes allegiance to the stereotyped images that have so far tainted the Orient and *The Labyrinthine City of Fez* that reflects the desire of its owner to discover the cultural specificities of man living outside the geographies of the West. Undoubtedly, Nin’s narrative allows the engagement with Orientalism as a heterogeneous Western discourse in that Nin seems to use her retina to document and then appreciate the Orient and its culture, whereas Wharton’s book is framed with a way of seeing that presents her as a highly knowledgeable colonial agent, ‘knowledgeable enough’ to know the ‘Other’ no matter how illusory such knowing might be.

### Edith Wharton’s *In Morocco*

The travel writers who visited Fez were numerous and some of them were invited by the French authorities, like the case of Edith Wharton. There

were indeed other travelers who came to Fez, as Wharton says, “on special missions” or “under escort”, and whose journeys did not go beyond the city of Fez (Edith Wharton, 2005, 17). Wharton, in this regard, intends to belittle the efforts of former travellers of pre-colonial Morocco as she claims that they were not allowed to penetrate deep into far regions in the country because of the barbarism prevailing at the time. She adds, praising the virtues of colonialism, that the French occupation of Morocco put an end to this threat and it is on its way to make the whole country accessible for tourists “from the straits of Gibraltar to the Great Atlas,” (Wharton, 2005, 18). Wharton, therefore, considers her book, which was the harvest of three weeks of traveling across Morocco, as the first travel guide of Morocco, shedding light on famous cities at the time like Rabat, Salé, Meknes, Marrakech and Fez. (Wharton, 2005, 5)

Wharton’s *In Morocco*, provides ethnocentric ways of seeing which stem from her un/conscious use of her culture as a tool of comparison. Most possibilities of travel suggested by her book seem to appertain to a Western frame of reference, which a large number of travelers had so far relied upon and produced travelogues that share the intent to celebrate the Western self image and denigrate the cultures of the lands ‘visited’. More specifically, Wharton’s ‘documentation’ of Fez as an Oriental geography reenacts stereotypical scenes previously constructed by former travelers and ethnographers which primarily depicted the Orient as existing outside the sphere of time. This timelessness of the Orient was seen as a threat by Westerners, notably a threat, as termed by Edward Said, of ‘imaginable antiquity’ (Said 1978, p. 167). In the following passage, she exposes an ‘amazing’ Orientalistic description of the harem sanctuary where she seems to have been transported through both space and time. She writes describing her historical paces towards the entrance of one of Fez’s harems, belonging to a chief dignitary of the Makhzen:

...these thoughts came to me as I sat among the pale women in their mouldering prison. The descent through the steep tunnelled streets gave

one the sense of being lowered into the shaft of a mine. At each step the strip of sky grew narrower, and was more often obscured by the low vaulted passages into which we plunge. The noises of the bazaar had died out... Then fountains and gardens ceased also, the towering masonry closed in, and we entered an almost subterranean labyrinth which sun and air never reach. (Wharton, 2005, 100)

The “subterranean labyrinth” to which Wharton and her escort entered may allude to Said’s “threat of imaginable antiquity.” It counts, in this respect, as a spatiotemporal reality, “which sun and air never reach”, representing sense of timelessness and lack of progress. The notion of timelessness is deep-rooted in Wharton’s conception of the City of Fez. The idea is tackled in various respects by writers like Edward Said, who argues that the Orient was “*an idea to which anyone dealing or writing about the Orient had to return, as if to a touchstone outlasting time or experience.*” (Said, 1978, 231) Also, Robert Young affirms that “For the other to remain other it must not derive its meaning from history but must instead have a separate time which differs from historical time.” (Young, 1990, 15) Wharton, in her turn, says:

Nothing endures in Islam, except what human inertia has left standing and its own solidity has preserved from the elements. Or rather nothing remains intact, and nothing wholly perishes, but the architecture, like all else, lingers on half-ruined and half-unchanged. (Wharton, 2005, 53)

Wharton considers the Moroccan Islamic architecture as being defeated by time. Her description goes beyond her approaching of architectural designs to cover metaphorical and metaphysical implications as she relates the “half-ruined” architecture with the faith of Islam as vanishing before the ongoing hegemony of Christianity. She adds depicting, in a broad-based manner, people, buildings and customs as susceptible to “*fall about to crumble and fall of their own weight: the present is a perpetually prolonged past. To touch the past with one’s hands is realized only in dreams; and in Morocco*

*the dream-feeling envelops one at every step.*” (Wharton, 2005, 53)

To render the crossing of alien space more captivating, Wharton promises her readers a time-travel journey. Picturing the backwardness of space, people and their customs in such an utmost indefiniteness reveals a metaphorical murder of the overlooked details, which if they were objectively documented would serve to avoid Wharton’s fictional depiction of the City. Wharton’s deployment of Orientalist stereotypes is scented through her generalized depictions of the ‘deplorable’ vestiges of Fez’s architecture. This has resulted in overlooking previous historical contexts in which the Islamic civilization managed to establish political ascendancy over its Western rivals. The remains of the historic Merinid Tombs, for instance, restore certain historical fragments which bear witness to the City’s past glories.

Additionally, the Orientalist understanding of the harem is also a primordial point generating a number of tropes framing Wharton’s conception. She is influenced, as affirmed by Justin D. Edwards, by André Gide’s *Prétextes* (1917), as she adopts his “discourses of North Africa in the reconstruction of her Moroccan travels” (Justin D. Edwards, 2001, 108). For this reason, her description of the harem’s complex spatial and human compositions is so thorough that it does not overlook the tiniest detail. One may wonder whether such a description has been a direct observational reaction to a visible physical reality or just another Orientalistic stream of consciousness that tends to reflect the author’s mental images of the Orient, in a form of descriptive approximations to the observed. The thoughts which were the seeds of her imaginative description of the harem came to her, as she says, when she was sitting among “the pale women in their mouldering prison,” (Wharton, 2005, 100), a simple detail which sows seeds of doubt on her commitment to provide a trust-worthy depiction of the harem.

Wharton's picturing of her access to the harem can be seen as a female privilege of which the male travelers were deprived. For Wharton, being a female visitor, she was allowed a full access to the hidden cultural ingredients of one of Fez's forbidden interiors. Her visit can be seen as an instance approximately reminiscent of the Lady Montague's experience with the Turkish Harem. The way she reacts to such an inaccessible depth brings into light emergent insights into the motives prompting her visit. In her depiction of the place 'visited' she appears more tied to describing her unspoken desires rather than transmitting faithfully what was made available for her retina. This hindrance to verisimilitude of documentation stems from her literary talent which inevitably mediates her descriptive skills.

Wharton might have prided on her ability to access such alluring spatial details. However, her 'adventure' in colonial Fez was recurrently interrupted due to the inaccessibility of some spaces. She writes:

Until a year or two ago, the precincts around Moulay Idriss and El Kairouiyin were *horm* [sic], that is cut off from the unbeliever... Now...all comers may pass...and even pause a moment in their open doorways. Farther one may not go, for the shrines of Morocco are still closed to unbelievers; but who ever know Cordova, who has stood under the arches of the Great Mosque of Kairouan can reconstruct of the hidden beauties of its namesake, the "Mosque Kairouan" of West Africa. (Wharton, 2005, 57)

Wharton's standpoint is being realistic to a certain extent as it is based on her symptomatic reading of the space in question. Yet, her desire to break into the internal depth of the City's religious places, either to demarcate and contain what may constitute possible outside dangers for the Western 'Self' or to gain a share of the Eastern charms, is strongly scented in her deployment of a tool of comparison, the mosque of Cordova. This demarcation of alterity does not operate according the logic of cultural diversity which is "the object of empirical knowledge" but with strict adherence to the notion of cultural difference. (Homi K.

Bhabha, 1995, 206) Wharton seems to reiterate the preoccupations of former *Orientalisms*. The passage apparently mirrors nineteenth century paintings and travel accounts' desire to penetrate into 'un/known' spaces and achieve 'dreamlike' goals. This is a pertinent dialectic of the known and the unknown that has overwhelmed the West's tools of demarcating the 'Rest'. For one hand, the West has always claimed to be highly knowledgeable and able enough to know the 'Other' no matter how illusory such demarcation might be. On the other hand, the West can cling to the previous mythical descriptions or resort to a tool of comparison to create of the truly unknown other, a recognizable one.

Wharton's book, *In Morocco*, shows that the existence of Western female narrative within the context of travel account does not thoroughly problematize the question of the Western discourse of difference. Most women travel writings are also believed to have greatly sustained the colonizing mission of Europe. The 'white woman' fulfilled the same task (or rather carried the same burden) that her counterpart, the white man, did during his voyages to the East. Edith Wharton's narrative on Fez seems to have been woven with a photographic vividness accurate enough to perpetuate what has traditionally been known as the 'picturesque', the 'exotic' and the 'mystified' Orient.

### **Anais Nin, *The Labyrinthine City of Fez*.**

The Western female and male travelogues took part in the building of a system of knowledge about the Orient's territories and peoples. This system is coined by Edward Said as "cultural hegemony", which is a collocation that better explains how Orientalism as a Western academic institution communicates forms of knowledge about the Orient with the assistance of hegemonic agencies, such as travelogues, painting and literary works. (Said, 1978, 7) Sixteen years after the writing of *In Morocco*, Anais Nin wrote her short narrative, *The Labyrinthine City of Fez*. Nin's short journey to Fez is conspicuously dissimilar to Wharton's mission. Her short narrative provides an impressive depiction of the



City's well-entrenched traditions. Most twentieth-century travel writers, including Wharton, tend to share similar interests in colonial Fez. Their accounts reveal their pro-colonialist attempt to capture the city in linguistic constructions, which most of their predecessors indirectly used as initial precursors of their representations of non-Westerners. However, Nin's travel narrative is seen as a "genuine attempt to foster the conditions for a fruitful cross-cultural dialogue" (Khalid Bekkaoui, 2008, 6). In this respect, Edith Wharton and Anais Nin provide a spate of textual tradition where we can subvert the uniform way of looking at the Orient and see which of the two women writers is well-versed on the previously produced tropes of Western representation of the City of Fez.

Unlike Wharton who has a penchant for documenting dust, ashes and blind beggars in the souks of Fez, Nin uses her five senses in order to experience deeper truths about the City. She describes the narrow streets as being:

built narrow originally for coolness against the relentless sun. Some of the ninth-century streets are only a yard and a half wide...you enter the medina, or old Arab city. The beauty of this labyrinth is that it takes you into a world of crafts and arts and awakens your five senses every bit of the way. Every small boutique, sometimes as small as eight feet by eight, is a revelation of some skill. (Anais Nin, 2008, 127)

Anais Nin's depiction of the souks of Colonial Fez incorporates a plain documentation that escapes colonial demarcation of otherness. Her journey of discovery is not subjected to the host of expectations, framing Wharton's way of seeing, of the colonial Self. She exhibits the City's economic and social life, transporting her readers to the realms of a new culture, in a fashion that acknowledges the city's cultural richness and its capacity to evolve as a viable organism. Instead of relying on the West's shared imagination, Nin uses her retina to tell her readers about colors which she finds seeping into one's consciousness as never before. (Nin, 2008, 127) The concept of *labyrinth* for Wharton alludes to a

journey into the unknown that is fraught with unspeakable danger. For Nin, the same labyrinth, already described as beautiful, is a new welcoming cultural environment full of beautiful and attractive things, whether they are crafts, merchandise or a way of, and for every pace she makes forward she expects "*a revelation of some skill.*"

We may agree, literally speaking, that this comparative study is having two ways of seeing the Orient as its subject matter. For Wharton, she clings to the dictates of her preoccupations<sup>ii</sup>, the repertoire of abstractions counting as a Western collective way of seeing, coming across no flower-sellers and almost no colors in the souks, (Wharton, 2005, 57) As for Nin, she denotes the overwhelming influence of both colors and odors on her as she gradually enters into the market squares, not to mention her scented eagerness to explore rather than rely on previous travellers' experiences:

...a sky-blue jellaba with a black face veil, a pearl-grey jellaba with a yellow veil... The clothes conceal the wearers' figures so that they remain elusive, with all the intensity and expression concentrated in the eyes. The eyes speak for the body, the self, the age, conveying innumerable messages from their deep and rich existence. (Nin, 2008, 127)

Nin does not displace the described elements to forge cultural meanings or a form of representation, as explained in James Clifford's phrase which he uses in his explanation of *travel* as a range of practices of displacement constitutive of cultural meanings. (Clifford, 1997, 3) Her conception of the City's cultural identity is about a celebration of diversity, a claim that is well-defended by her scrupulous attention to details. Her accurate documentation of details entails her untiring desire to get acquainted with the City's cultural specificities, which "chart ambiguous and ambivalent visions of cultural otherness." (Bekkaoui, 2008, 5)

The 'innumerable messages', received by Nin, conveyed from the eye's "deep and rich existence" are but glamorous aspects of a host

culture that invites its visitors to engage in a cross-cultural interlocution to further recognize its recondite inside. Being innumerable, these messages signal the writer's awareness of her inability to fathom the real nature of the specificities framing the host culture. Nin's impressions of the people of Fez contradict Wharton's prior knowledge of the Orient recounted at 'home'. The fertility of Fez's cultural environment reflects the City's cultural wealth and meanwhile refutes the Western epistemic knowledge on non-Westerners.

Subjecting her entire visit to Fez to her five senses, Nin uses her eyes and nose to explore Fez's markets that are oversaturated with products of all sorts. Seeing a medley of bright colours and smelling distinctive scents of alluring perfumes was an irresistible impulse behind evoking in her description images of Fez's beauties that are reminiscent of long-forgotten ones in her tradition. She writes:

The smell of fruit, the smell of perfumes, and the smell of leather intermingled with the smell of wet wool hanging outside the shops to dry—gold bedspreads hanging like flags in the breeze... Bleu is the symbolic colour of Fez, a sky bleu, a transparent blue, the only bleu that evokes the word long-forgotten and loved by the poets: azure. Fez is azure. You rediscover the word 'azure'. (Nin, 2008, 127-8)

Nin's depiction of material as well as abstract ingredients of Fez's identity does not depend on the Western logic of otherness. The descriptive process reveals her zeal for discovering what count as purely local curiosities of the City rather than engage in authenticating the Western "Marketable abstractions", a phrase used by Said to refer to the Western communal form of 'knowledge', found in numerous Orientalist texts, upon which depends the Western way seeing the Orient. (Said, 1978, 109) For example, Nin's reception of Fez's colours, notably the colour *bleu*, "The symbolic colour of Fez", foregrounds the City's taste for colours not as a cultural construct but as a cultural component characterizing the City's cultural identity.

## Conclusion

The properties of Orientalism were what fuelled Wharton's propensity for demarcating Fez as a 'static' geography lagging in archaism behind the West. She seems to be imprisoned in her stagnant pseudo knowledge since her first glimpse of the fortresses and walls. Therefore, Wharton's *In Morocco* shares with other previous travelogues a uniform vision of Fez, a vision that tends to miss the sights reflecting the real identity of the City. In Nin's narrative, *The Labyrinthine City of Fez*, the reader is engaged in a spectacular celebration of cultural diversity as the writer does not present Fez as an Oriental city that counts as a foil for its Western counterparts. Her exhibiting of the City is received as haunted with the purpose to enrich the universal scale of world cultures. Throughout Nin's narrative, though there are plenty of instances where spatial difference is stressed, there are no traces of racial difference which would instill or rather validate the Western undervaluing assumptions of the Orient.

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<sup>i</sup> Beaulieu and Roberts consider Edward Said's book, *Orientalism*, as the point of focus round which a number of debatable assessments were made to generate this shift, in Jill Beaulieu and Mary Roberts, eds., *Orientalism's Interlocutors: Painting, Architecture, Photograph* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), p. 2.

<sup>ii</sup> The idea here is inspired by a recurrent description of markets, notably those of Fez, in some travel writings whose prime target is to produce descriptive accounts that bear strong testimony to what already exists within the European shared 'knowledge' about the orient. The example of Abel Bonnard's travel narrative, *Au Maroc* (Editions Emile-Paul, 1927) in Alain Lavaud, *Fès Années 20*, p. 72, explains how the Orientalist quest for producing fictional accounts is fulfilled even within genuine encounters with the Oriental space, where the Western eye is required to gather information that does not destabilize its already acquired (or rather forged) 'familiarity' with the Orient.

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