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Edith Wharton's Endorsement of the French Colonialism of Morocco in the travelogue "*in Morocco*"

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Abstract

This paper probes into demystifying how French colonialism of Morocco is endorsed in Edith Wharton's travelogue, "In Morocco". This travelogue is one of the most important works by Wharton as it depicts Morocco's major cities along with their people, history, and traditions. Equally important, the travelogue gives positive representations of French colonialism of Morocco. Thus, Wharton's travel to Morocco was in a critical time when General Lyautey was the Resident-General in Morocco. Her friendship with General Lyautey made the trip easy and thus she was able to meet different types of people such as authorities, Harem...etc.. Her trip was sponsored by French authorities, which absolutely made her accounts about Morocco skewed and serve the agenda of the French protectorate, in that she devotes a chapter entitled "General Lyautey's Work in Morocco" to dwell on the mission of the French in Morocco, that of "having twice saved Morocco from destruction". She praises and advocates French conquest of Morocco by claiming that it saves Moroccan culture and history from obliteration. Put otherwise, Edith Wharton views French colonialism as a shield of Moroccan art and history from the destruction of its owners. Hence, Wharton's support of French intervention in Morocco is grounded on Orientalist thinking. Adopting a content analysis approach, this paper will unveil the different aspects of celebrating French colonialism Wharton entails in her novel "In Morocco" as well as her typifications and representations of Moroccan people and their culture.

Keywords: French Colonialism; Morocco; endorsement; representations; travel



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Introduction:

North Africa or the Orient in general has been a center of interest and curiosity for a host of American and European travelers. Being a European invention, the Orient is a source of mystery and exoticism that appeals to these travelers. This geographical space is seen by Western travelers as a fertile ground to be discovered and enlightened. The Orient, then, is a bride that the Western travelers rush to lift her veil (Kabbani 67). Morocco is not an exception; it has been depicted in many travel books by many Western travelers to Morocco such Mark Twain, Nina Epton, Gavin Maxwell, Peter Mayne, Paul Bowles, Edith Wharton, to name but a few. In this paper, we will shed light on Edith Wharton's travel book *In Morocco* and probe into how she endorses French colonialism of Morocco as well as her representations of Moroccan people and culture.

Edith Wharton and the travelogue “*In Morocco*”:

Edith Wharton was born in January 24, 1862. Her family was well-known in New York. After the cold war, they moved to Europe as they lost some of their fortune, then back to New York. She was a voracious reader of literature, which makes her grew intellectually, though she was not allowed to read novels having to do with romance. She was raised in a wealthy family; this helped her in pursuing her literary work. She was addicted to travelling thus she travelled all over Europe, which feeds her travel writing. Travelling pushed her to tell stories, which made the bulk of her creativity and self-discovery (Benstock,1995). She was then considered as a “consummate professional” (Singley 7). *In Morocco* was published two years after Wharton's visit to Morocco. The travel book consists of a preface, five chapters each deals with a different experience of Wharton, and three other chapters that range from General Lyautey's Work in Morocco, a Sketch of Moroccan History, to Note on Moroccan Architecture. Then, a section is devoted to the books consulted.

“*In Morocco*” is a product of many accounts and notes Wharton takes in her visit to Morocco in 1917, which is viewed as the height of her literary career. Her travel writing “*In Morocco*” has not received much study and attention as was the case with her other works. That travelogue “*In Morocco*” documents her visit to Morocco. It should also be noted that she won the Pulitzer Prize for her best-selling book “the House of Mirth”.

Her Friendship with General Lyauty prompted her to accept his invitation to attend a fair in Rabat. Additionally, her publishers' approval of her demand to write some articles on Morocco pushed Wharton to make a book about her visit to Morocco. That visit was sponsored and facilitated by General Lyauty in that he provided her with the basics she needed such as a motor coach, a driver, and a French officer (Hunter 62). Needless to say, she was offered luxury accommodation and the way was paved for her to conduct her travel wherein she studied



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Moroccan people and culture. The invitation is viewed by Charlotte Rich as “an idealization of the colonial enterprise” (Jabbur 5-11), and the book is a work of propaganda.

It is now obvious that Wharton travel account of Morocco tends to be skewed as the travel to Morocco was a product of her friendship with Lyautey. *In Morocco* and many other travel books go hand in hand with the establishment of the essentialist perceptions of the West vis-à-vis the East. Hence, an overview of Edward Said’s Orientalism needs to be dealt with in this paper.

Orientalism:

Edward Said’s work of Orientalism has been considered as polemic and controversial as it uncovered the relationship between the East and the West. The first is Europe and America and the second Oriental countries. Said defines Orientalism as “a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident” (Said 2). It is a western style for “dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient (13). Thus, it believes that the superiority of western powers over the East is like “a scientific truth” (47). The orient is a space invented and discovered by Europeans. It was seen as a location where exoticism and romance take place (1). It is constituted of Europe’s oldest colonies, which trigger western civilizations (2).

Orientalism claims that the Oriental is an “object” characterized by its passivity, non-participation, non-activity, and dependency (97). That is, Orientalists view the Orientals from an essentialist perspective. While “the West is the actor, the East is a passive reactor”. The first is what brings life to the second (109 - 57).

Orientalist thinking is predicated on the binary opposition as it was first used by Kissinger in his article “Domestic Structure and Foreign Policy”: The East and the West, the weak and the powerful (46). In this regard , Said refers to an Encyclopedic work entitled “La Renaissance Orientale” by Raymond Schab who associates the Oriental with the exotic and the mysterious, which means that this oriental should be discovered and made known (Said, 51). Instead of being based on real and objective facts, the knowledge given by orientalists about the orient is mere accounts of personal experiences and adventures (Said 52).

The job of the orientalist is to save the Orient from the predicaments of darkness and oddity, enlivening, thus, its languages, ethics, and mentalities (Said 121). The Orient, which is constructed by the West as “a system of representations” (Said 203) about its people, culture, and places, is presented as truths which are defined by Nietzsche as “illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are”.



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The West believes that the Orientals need to be colonized since they are weak. They are also seen not as citizens but as problems to resolve (207), to the extent that Orientalists should stay “there more or less forever” (215) because the Orient cannot represent itself. Orientals are depicted as irrational, depraved, childlike, and different; whereas Europeans are described as rational, virtuous, and mature (40). The Orient is deemed as a geographical, fertile space that the West should take care of and protect (219). In order to prove its existence and superiority, the West needs to find an inferior, hence a projection of their power over the Orient (Poole 29).

Edith Wharton’s visit to Morocco falls within this scope of revealing the mysterious Morocco, attempting thus to penetrate the land and view it with a Western eye. She aims at experimenting with what she was told about Morocco. Her travel book advocates the French colonial administration in Morocco, dedicating thus that book to General Lyautey and his wife due to the great help she received from the French administrator.

Endorsement of French Imperialism in the Travelogue:

In her preface for the book, Edith Wharton begins by lamenting the fact that Morocco has not yet discovered and it needs a guide-book. Thus, Wharton is ready to reveal this mysterious land and surpass that “deficiency”. Although she further celebrates the promising future of this country in terms of landscape and architecture, she lambastes some European interventions that can not value this treasure. In this vein, she paves the way to establishing the productive and effective intervention and intercession of the French administration headed by General Lyautey, an administration that helps “to preserve the old monuments of Morocco from injury, and her native arts and industries from the corruptions of European bad taste” (Wharton 3).

The situation in Morocco, according to Wharton, was alarming and frightening; for instance, many Christians were killed there and pirates move freely across the country. Additionally, Morocco used to be desolate and havoc, wherein there are no signs of civilizations nor development, which hinders any traveler to embark on a journey. However, with the French colonial administrations, the development and investments have been made in Morocco, including the infrastructure which make the country accessible and secure (Wharton 6).

Wharton emphasizes that General Lyauty saved Morocco twice from destruction in two main events. The first event took place in 1912 when Sultan Abdelhafid was unable to fight tribes that attacked him in Fez. The second event was in 1914 when Germany announced war against France. Sultan Abdelhafid failed to protect the country from the tribes dissenting with his policy. This led to the convention of Fes that required of France to intervene to restore order. This was aggravated when a new violent outbreak took place in Fez, which showed that French officers along with Moroccan ones failed to control the situation, especially after Sultan Abdelhafid’s



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alienation from his people. After Moroccan soldiers killed many French officers, in addition to the population of Fes who attacked the European civilians, France decided to send General Lyauty to Morocco. General Lyauty strived to throw down all those tribes threatening the Sultan in Fes. He then moved to administrative reforms. The aim, according to Wharton, was “to support and strengthen the existing government” (Wharton, 54). Suddenly, a new leader in the South emerged, with the support of Sultan Abdelhafid. Wharton contended that the populations in the South were suffering from his tribes, so the population called for protection of the French who were able to get Marrakech back from El-Hiba (Wharton, 54).

Wharton describes these battles and intervention conducted by General Lyauty in Morocco as “swift and brilliant results”(Wharton, 54). The action taken by General Lyauty was described as “swift and decisive” (Wharton, 55); Wharton continues that he had “endless patience” whereby he can achieve great success. She depicts his policy in Morocco as well-thought and vigorous. Lyauty did not endeavor to put into practice the French policy which might not be fair to the local population, yet he was vigilant enough to make decisions and carry out policies that account for the natives’ needs and expectations. Unlike other Great Chiefs who “knew no methods of administration but those based on extortion” (Wharton, 55), Lyauty wisely managed to make a good government, and educated those Chiefs so that they can serve the natives. He was seen as “a great patriot and a great general” (Wharton 55).

General Lyautey, according to Wharton, established Morocco in its culture, and its institutions. Thus, in the travelogue, he is painted as always the leader who subjugates other natives to perform various acts that served Morocco. Equally important, if General Lyautey saves Morocco and enlivens it, the natives as well as other European invaders are about to destroy it. In light of this, he gives the example of Tunisia and Algeria that witnessed great havoc from other colonial powers (Wharton 56).

The successive Sultans holding power in Morocco do not protect what their predecessors have built and made. They opt only for change that destructs the heritage; the Sultans are selfish in their governance. Needless to say, they are short-sighted, unlike the Western governors especially General Lyautey (Wharton, 61). Unskilled and primitive, one of these Sultans calls for assistance to fight rebellious tribes. Thus, he receives provisions by French government via the sea, yet he can not get them since he has never seen the sea (Wharton 66).

Moroccan architecture, according to Wharton, needs to be written and it is due to General Lyauty who can “clear up and classify the history of Moroccan art” (Wharton 67). This cannot be done by Arabs who “have never been creative artists, nor are the Berbers known to have been so” (Wharton 67). The suitable and qualified person to document Moroccan architecture is Mr. Henri Jules Saladin, a French architect, under the supervision of General Lyauty. Saladin already wrote



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a book entitled “Manual of Moslem Architecture”, which shows that he can save that architecture from obliteration. Morocco is also an object of study in that Mr. Saladin assumes that it is “urgent that we should know, and penetrate into, Morocco as soon as possible, in order to study its monuments” (Wharton 67).

Representations of Morocco in the Travelogue:

It should be noted that Wharton’s travel book about Morocco corroborates and echoes the Orientalist stereotypes and conceptions about the Orient. The book then depicts many Moroccan cities and traditions and is confined within this Western perspective view of the other, the mysterious and the uncivilized.

Wharton describes the life of the natives as being intimate and private, in that it hard for a foreigner to intrude into that life and community. She attends one of the great religious feasts which is Aid-El-Kebir. Crowds surrounding him, the Sultan is typified as a fat man unable to move and viewed by the crowds as a symbol and a God (Wharton 45).

Wharton then moves to the palace of the Sultan, a place laden with mysteries and exoticism. Of these mysteries is the Harem. The latter are a number of young women who are extensively portrayed by Wharton. Enforced to put into a large cage, Harem are young and beautiful women aspiring for freedom, yet they are imprisoned by the Sultan. These women are dressed and decorated in the same manner, in that one can not distinguish between them. They are then dehumanized and their unique identity is ignored, being solely “Sultan’s favorites” (Wharton 52).

In another encounter with the Moroccan cultural customs, especially the performances of the Aissawa and Hamadcha, she typifies these practices as savage, painful, and unendurable. Here, Wharton reminds the reader that her view of these scenes is that of a civilized person that attempts to demystify the mysterious aspects of Moroccan culture. Thus, she states that “the Aissauas swallow thorns and hot coals, slash themselves with knives, and roll on the floor in epilepsy..... The Hamadchas are much more savage.... I had wondered how long I should be able to stand the sight of what was going on” (Wharton 17).

Conclusion:

Edith Wharton’s *In Morocco* is one of the emblems that reflects the relation between the inferior East and the superior West, an East that needs to be developed and civilized. This could be done through military intervention to save the Orientals from havoc they might cause to their countries. Wharton then devotes the bulk of that travel book to advocating the French colonialism in Morocco, which was headed by General Lyautey. The impetus driving Lyautey, Wharton asserts, was solely to conduct a civilizing mission (*Mission Civilisatrice*) to help the



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country to develop. French colonialism of Morocco is represented as a positive step towards a country that lives chaos and destruction from its owners. Wharton maintains that General Lyautey manages to rebuild Morocco, set order, and restore life in it by marshaling all the resources he has.

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