

Demythologizing the American Dream: A Rereading of Layl Ab Zayd's *Amr k , al-wa h al- khar* [*America's other face*] (1991)

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Abstract

Amr k , al-wa h al- khar [America's Other Face] (1991) is a travel account about Layl Ab Zayd's journey to the United States, the first travel-inspired narrative about America after *Bid u Sunbul tin Khudr* (1978) [Few Green Spikelets] which includes a collection of impressions about her life as a student in England. As a renowned postcolonial feminist writer, her America-bound narrative records the seven-month stay in different American states and articulates discursive constructions of a counter narrative that attempts both to uncover the American global policy and to demystify the myths of essentializing discourses. Her travel narrative condemns American policy towards third world nations and views America as an advanced state but with an explicit imperial project engaged in practices of re-colonization. Adopting a counter hegemonic stance, Ab Zayd seems to be turning on different occasions into an oppositional force that reconstructs the long suffered invisibility of America's others.

Keywords: *America, Orientalism, postcolonialism, counterdiscourse, travel writing.*

Before moving forward into the discussion of *America's other Face*, it is an urgent choice, drawing on cultural studies perspective, to underline the critical importance of the visual vocabulary on "the front cover and explore its significance in the light of what Gerard Genet calls the paratext". This paratextual element is not fortuitous at all; decoding it allows an insightful reading into the main aesthetic and intellectual concern of this travel account. The front cover of Ab Zayd's travel-inspired narrative bears a delicately caricatured image that shows the statue of liberty as the most powerful and instantly recognizable icon of the USA, in a blemished, disfigured and metamorphosed way. Instead of the usual poetic image of the woman "holding a torch and clutching a tablet", the figure

emerges out of a totally black backdrop as a huge featureless male, with strikingly bulging eyes, holding, an almost ready to-go-off rocket with his right hand raised up in a lofty way, and a book in the left one. So, it becomes clear as the signifiers of the image speak about themselves in straightforward terms that the transfigured statue is meant to invoke the other side of the American discourse on the rest of the world. As Michelle Hartman argues, “like other politically committed texts that critique the United States and its policies in the Third World”, Ab Zayd’s work uses “the statue of liberty as a symbolic site of protest and contestation – particularly against the war”.¹

It is clear from the outset that cartooning materializes a political assertion in explicit imagery in this text, namely in the introduction whereby visually caricatured set of images, satirical in nature, cover most pages to reveal the American policy towards its Otherness. The caricatured image of the Statue of Liberty, as a contextual cue, is worth more consideration. It stands as a metonymic symbol in the text that underscores this counter hegemonic attitude of the author, and clearly denotes how much Ab Zayd is doubtful and unconvinced of Lady Liberty and the freedom it claims to represent in America. The provocative clues and the subversive possibilities that the picture offers free Lady Liberty from its supposedly iconographic symbols of American values such as freedom, equality and the pursuit of happiness. What comes to the surface, instead, is an unbridled desire to conquer, dominate and build an empire. This meaning is so much animated by a powerful discursive claim on behalf of the image which reads “America’s Other Face” and which activates the assumption about the visibility of illicit motivations to remap the cultural geography of the world.

Layla Ab Zayd’s critique of the United States in *Amr k , al-wa h al- khar* has much in common with other Moroccan writers such as Abd latif Akb b in his *Tangiers Eyes on America*, Y ss f min al Alami in *Un marocain à New York* [Moroccan in New York], and Sal m Sh hdi’s *Hi ra il ardi al- a l m* [Migration to the Lands of Dreams], at least in their engagement with the intricacies of a counter discourse. Her text is politically-oriented; it condemns the war in Iraq and USA’s policy towards Third World states, views the US as an advanced state with an explicit imperial project engaged in practices of re-colonization, and launches a harsh attack on America’s complicity with the Zionist movement. Also like Y ss f al Alami, Akb b and Sh hdi, she is contemptuous and cynical of the statue of liberty and the freedom it is supposed to promote in United States; yet, she does

¹ Michelle Hartman, “Writing Arabs and Africa(ns) in America: Adonis and Radwa Ashour From Harlem to Lady Liberty,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 37, no. 3 (2005), 401.

not share, for example al Alami's strategies for undermining its figure.² Rather than eroticizing New York and its statue, or insisting on its femininity, she adopts a gendered reversal strategy. This strategy challenges and brings a corrective to the Orientalized notions of exoticism, passivity and sexual availability which hinder the identity of native women who have been "silenced by an amnesic, neo-colonial historical discourse and a regressive, medievalist patriarchal rhetoric".³

The concern, thus, is not merely a violent call for self-expression or a protest against imperialism, but an explicit claim to destabilize the ubiquitous male dominant ideologies. Once in New York, Ab Zayd does not pay a visit to Lady Liberty, she focuses on different issues particularly on poverty, unemployment, prostitution marginalized groups and economically promising sites of civilization but avoids talking about the Statue: "when we think of America we immediately think of New York, and when we think of New York we imagine Manhattan".⁴ She seems, therefore, to share many affinities with the famous Egyptian writer Radwa Ashour in her travel account *al-Ri la: Ayyam liba mi riyya f Amr k* [*The Journey: The Memoirs of an Egyptian Student in America*]. Ashour marginalizes it, "replacing its importance in her text with other places, people, and issues, [...] she layers her interactions with it with gendered elements, many of which propose the feminine as positive".⁵

Ab Zayd offers an important segment of her narrative to the discussion of Islam and Muslims in the US and attempts to highlight the stereotypical discourses that have produced racially devastating views about Arabs. Quoting Evan Haddad, she brings the most shockingly disturbing prejudices that circulate in the American media. She states that

*Arabs are not like people of Philadelphia, France or even Israel... They believe in a non western religion of war... The Arab in any case feels gratified only in drawing out his sword and does not feel closer to God till he is done with his butcheries... Arabs, especially, those believers, are loathed neighbors... savages, racists because they reject Israel, ruthless, powerless, degenerate, sex maniac.*⁶

² In his travel account, *Un marocain à New York* (2001), Y ss f min al Alami eroticizes New York City and its Statue of Liberty while insisting on its femininity and its sexual vulnerability.

³ Salah Mokhlis, "A History of Hopes Postponed: Women's Identity and the Postcolonial State in *Year of the Elephant: A Moroccan Journey toward Independence*," *Research in African Studies* 34, no. 3 (2003), 169.

⁴ Layl Ab Zayd, *Amr k , al-wa h al- khar* (America: The Other Face) (Casablanca: Najah al Jadida, 1991), 121.

⁵ Hartman, "Writing Arabs and Africa(ns) in America," 404.

⁶ Ab Zayd, *Amr k , al-wa h al- khar*, 67-68.

Though the US did not engage in any prolonged, blood-shed encounters with Muslim states as was the case with Christian Europe,⁷ it is useful to consider, using Edward Said's words, how European bitter legacy of Orientalist thinking is "accommodated, normalized, domesticated and popularized and fed into"⁸ the American stream of perceptions.

What seems to be of paramount significance in this section is not only how Islam and Muslims are conceptualized within an Orientalist discourse of American framework, or the extent to which these stereotypical ideologies are mostly resisted by the author; but also how Ab Zayd is determined to go beyond the histories of conquest and authoritarianism; and travel outside the conventionally chained histories written from the perspective of the culture in power. Ab Zayd uses Evan Haddad as an inter-textual vehicle to interrogate the historical events suppressed by the Eurocentric version of history, but which aided in the discovery of the American continent. She declares that:

During the celebration of Christopher Columbus's fifth hundred birthday in 1955, it was declared that this explorer owned a book by the Moroccan geographer Al-Idr ss in which he states that eight Arabs had already discovered the Eastern coasts of America, and it was this same book that motivated Columbus to start his famous journey. A Spanish translator of Arab descent called Luis Torres assisted Columbus [...].⁹

These authenticated accounts of the Other's narrative, especially Al-sher f Al-Idr ss 's, assuming the arrival of Arabs in America before Columbus's trip, complicate the historical narrative of the discovery and invite Ab Zayd, through an inter-textual play, to interrogate the claims of Eurocentric historians who suppressed the Arabs' intervention in the cultural Renaissance of the West. Hence, the endeavor to create a heterogeneous space establishes a shift in Ab Zayd's narrative that challenges the Eurocentric constructions of the original discovery, and allows the author to redefine Columbus's story, or the western narrative of history, with a postcolonial-inflected consciousness

Moreover, in her attempt to undo the grand narratives of history, Arabs, according to Ab Zayd, were not just mediators or mere translators during the Renaissance, but cultural contributors as well. Al-Idr ss 's book, in this sense, is metaphorically endowed with a liberating force and significant meanings. It is evoked within a self-consciously creative process of revisiting and remodifying historical facts since it unearths the official discourse about the historical claims of

⁷ *Ibidem*, 68-69.

⁸ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge, 1978), 259.

⁹ Ab Zayd, *Amr k , al-wa h al- khar*, 72.

discovery on the one hand. On the other hand, it disturbs the Eurocentric vision of history as being entirely shaped up from a Western ideological viewpoint, while inviting the reader at the same time to look at history as a construct of hegemonic formations.

This act of “memory from below”, as Anne Pitcher terms it, is, in fact, another configuration of the discursive subversion and counter-discourse. These are deployed by Ab Zayd’s narrative within a textual logic to dismantle the “organized” amnesia of the west that has suppressed Arabs’ cultural influences on western modernity, to “highlight the defeat of the Orientalist discourse, and foreground the discourse of the Other.”¹⁰ Otherness, which has historically been constructed as peripheral, becomes a force to be reckoned with in this case.

What seems to be so interesting with Ab Zayd’s critique of the United States once more is that she allows the voice of America’s suppressed Otherness to be heard in the course of her narrative. Focusing on Black Americans and invoking the figurative potential of renowned black figures such Martin Luther king and Malcolm X, she provides a complex picture of the American policies of racism at home, and highlights the unjustified isolation and presumed inferiority that American blacks have witnessed in white America. She even seems to identify herself with the black American community in an act of stressing her moroccaness as part of an African identity. She declares “I experience a kind of warmth towards them. Whenever I find myself within an American black community, the barriers get removed, thoughts of being an outsider or in a foreign country draw to a close, and I discover powerful feelings within me as if I were on an Arab land.”¹¹

This empathetically racial affiliation with “blackness” underlines a symbolic gesture that takes up an antiracist position and expresses an explicit solidarity with the oppressed Other. The fact that she feels as an “insider” calls attention to how third world struggles are coupled with the subjugation and repression of African Americans in the US. It also highlights, as Michelle Hartman states, “the affinities

¹⁰ Khalid Bekkaoui, *Signs of Spectacular Resistance: The Spanish Moor and British Orientalism* (Casablanca: Najah al Jadida, 1998), 53. Khalid Bekkaoui’s *Signs of Spectacular Resistance: The Spanish Moor and British Orientalism* deals with the analysis of the representation of the Moors of Spain in Thomas Dekker’s *Lust’s Dominion* (1599), John Dryden’s *The Conquest of Granada* (1670), William Congreve’s *The Mourning Bride* (1697) and Percival Stockdale’s *Ximenes* (1788). It is an important contribution to colonial discourse analysis which attempts to historicize, contextualize and problematize the dichotomy between Self and Other. His major contribution lies in his consistent focus on locating sites of resistance within colonial texts with the aim of both retrieving the native’s point of view and offering new possibilities for a theoretical opening “from which colonial dominance can be contested”.

¹¹ Ab Zayd, *Amr k , al-wa h al- khar*, 77.

that might link aggrieved communities of color in the United States to anti colonialist struggles overseas”.¹² Ab Zayd, in this instance, through a feminist conscious consideration and valorization of blackness, is refuting the ideological beliefs of patriarchal regimes that have negated Otherness; while condemning America for its abusive undertakings during the political upheavals that targeted the eradication of black identity during the 1960s.

Her narrative, accordingly, seems to be turning into an oppositional force that seeks the reconstruction and rearticulation of the long suffered invisibility of America’s others. In her section entitled “Itineraries of Violated Treaties”, Ab Zayd, acting as a passionate condemner of racial injustice, evokes other similarly racialized, subalterned and disempowered groups. She reveals the hidden transcripts of an imperial culture filtered through notions of racial and cultural superiority. With the aim of uncovering the agendas of hegemony and defanging the codes of power, she foregrounds the American Indian natives who have traditionally been besieged, alienated, victimized, depersonalized and objectified by imperial attitudes and conspiracies.

From the very beginning of this section, the author seems to be determined to denounce the material disparities, social inequities, exploitation and economic marginalization that American Indians have endured for long because of the white man’s expansionist fervour. The first straight encounter with the Indians, as she declares, is in the Red Lake Reservation. She expresses a deep regret and disappointment at the exclusion of people who make up the “Other” America on the basis of race and ethnicity. Her dissatisfaction with the inaccurate and inhuman conduct of civilization towards its disempowered Indians is allegorically projected on the landscape; “everything has become dishonourably dull, dusty desert, ugly bridges, even autumn colours have lost their beauty”.¹³ It is at this particular moment that the author undergoes a psychological frustration as she experiences, through a close contact with the “natives”, the real disastrous and upsetting effects of imperial expansionism. Her tragic moment, suffused with emotional compassion but produced primarily by an overt expression of hostility, would result in a counter discourse that defends the Eastern religious and cultural values and condemns the western notion of expansion based on the eradication of its Others. She declares that she often asks people she meets

how the Anglo-Americans could live with this entire calamity in their minds [...], a white American said: “wouldn’t it be true to say that Arabs themselves had invaded a

¹² Hartman, “Writing Arabs and Africa(ns) in America,” 399.

¹³ Ab Zayd, *Amr k , al-wa h al- khar*, 92.

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lot of nations?” I said: “yes, but they got married and mixed with each other, they co-existed covalently under Islam; they did not exterminate them in the name of barbarism.”¹⁴

According to Touria Khannous, “Colonialism has intensified racial divisions not only between the French and Moroccans, but also between Arabs and Berbers”¹⁵ and Abouzeid in this instance seems also to be turning “at the divisions in Morocco between Berbers/Arabs, and the “divide and rule” colonial policy which fostered such Divisions”.¹⁶ However, as she may appear to be projecting an orientalist vision over the space and its people by invoking both Marrakech and Imilishil, Ab Zayd is divergently trying to define the self through the empowering return to her locality, which allows her to engage in a constructive way with Otherness. This seems to be instrumental for her own agency and for the empowerment of her Moroccan Muslim identity as well. What becomes apparent in this section is that the use of memory is not meant for a reflective and nostalgic recollection that fixes the past in romanticized and idealized descriptions. There is a conscious struggle within her to define a mode of agency capable of reacting against the historical and political subjugations of ethnic minorities both in America and in Morocco, bearing in mind that she is herself born from a Berber father. As Fayad Mona states, “the need to retrieve memory, generally, in many Arab women’s writing, becomes a counterpart for the re-reading of history. With this comes the impetus not only to record their own past, but that of their community”¹⁷ in order to highlight the strategies of exclusion they are confronted with.

Ab Zayd’s travel-inspired narrative has grown not only out of the need to travel and study American international relations but also out of a desire to explore the cultural formations of the “other”. If Metropolitan anxieties, fear, unconscious frustration and uncertainties enunciate the European female narratives about the encounter with distant lands, Ab Zayd seems from the very beginning to be assured of and self-confident about an unusual alien space:

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, 94.

¹⁵ Touria Khannous, “Islam, Gender, and Identity in Leila Abouzeid’s *The Last Chapter: A Postcolonial Critique*,” *College Literature* 37, no. 1 (2010), 180.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷ Mona Fayad, “Reinscribing Identity: Nation and Community in Arab Women’s Writing,” *College Literature* 22, no. 1 (1995), 151.

*There is a world in front of me that I feel like exploring, and because this was my major concern I have no preset psychological fear or anxiety about understanding or mixing up with people.*¹⁸

This self-determination impulsively convinces the reader about the author's conscious ability to assert authority over the Minnesotan space, and to voice out her subversive postcolonial attitude which resists the western totalizing hegemonic discourses. She brings figuratively powerful rhetorical devices, reminiscent of a rich Arab literary tradition, to reduce America into a kind of "laurustinus, the evergreen shrub with attractive flowers but with intensely distasteful roots".¹⁹ This simile gives an already insightful inspiration into the intricacies of a counter discourse at work in Ab Zayd's narrative.

In fact, Ab Zayd's journey itself to the US might be initially regarded as encompassing this reactionary discourse against the whole patriarchal societies. The fact that she travels by herself becomes an already subversive act of resistance to the hegemonic constructs that have confined women to interior spaces. This view seems to be evident if one considers how women are traditionally "relegated to a subsidiary position, as dependent variables, who only move as part of family units", as Rogaia Mustapha Abusharaf assumes. Hence, her travel inspired-narrative to America should also be understood in this light as counter acting all oppressive systems at different levels; from within and from without. Unquestionably, her critique of America structures the major sections of her work, but the act of traveling itself acquires much more relevance as well. As a female traveler, she could be viewed as undertaking a daring trip that would symbolically allow her to break up from the "male protection and patronage [as] essential guarantors of a woman's respectability"²⁰ and at the same time to reject the rhetoric that makes women the ahistorical "pure signifiers of interiority". As Eva Hunter states, Abouzeid "registers her immersion in negotiating the experience of being a modern Moroccan woman".²¹ In so doing, she joins other feminists, such as the Egyptian Nawal Saadaoui and the Moroccan Fatima Mernissi, who have focused in their writings on the protest against gendered social and psychological experiences of women.

¹⁸ Ab Zayd, *Amr k , al-wa h al- khar*, 36.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, 35.

²⁰ Rogaia Mustafa Abusharaf, "Migration with a Feminine Face: Breaking the Cultural Mold," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 23, no. 2 (2001), 61.

²¹ Eva Hunter, "Feminism, Islam and the Modern Moroccan Woman in the Works of Leila Abouzeid," *African Studies* 65, no. 2 (2006), 139.

Adopting the discursive strategies of colonial discourse and with a politically-inflicted desire to authorize her authority over the place, Ab Zayd's first confrontation with Minnesota is expressed through a visual possession of the landscape, depicting it in what Mary Louise Pratt terms "the monarch-of-all-I-survey". She fictionalizes her moments of discovery and reproduces the scenes she is depicting as a complex painting. Using the language of travel-inspired narratives, she states: "I got the impression of somebody waking up in a place not hers; it was suffused with serenity, breathtaking views of big buildings and trees, squealers' leaps in private gardens and in the main streets".²² Hence, Minnesota makes her first appearance in statically aestheticized terms; and by representing it as a static landscape, there is an already predicted relationship of mastery.²³ This act, together with the erasure of the residents at least at this particular moment, establishes the author as an authority over the place, reinforcing the city's availability for the Other's scrutinizing gaze which inventories and evaluates at the same time.

Ab Zayd, as a traveller, seems to develop a positive mental picture of the landscape throughout the first chapter of her narrative. She is caught by the exquisiteness and splendour of Minnesotan sceneries; yet, her revelations about the attractiveness of the landscape accentuate a subversively self-conscious counter discourse that creeps around. She appropriates space to "rethink the terrain common to whites and non whites", as Said argues, with the aim of spotlighting the harshness and ruthlessness of the white man and the injustice oppressors inflicted upon the land and its natives:

*Amid this magnificent arrangement of both forests and lakes, the creator has laid the crude beauty of nature around the Great Lake banks, known as "boating areas"... This reminds us of the red Indian boats and their struggle against the forces of Mississippi and the harshness of the white man. Those endless struggles that we all watched on TV in our childhood, and in which we, due to our ignorance, were predisposed to side with the white man.*²⁴

The textual recognition of the Mississippi is significant in the narrative as well. It stands as a metaphorical vehicle through which the landscape is subversively marked out by an oppressive past. In other words, as the river becomes textually recognized as "one of the mysteries of the world" it figuratively spills over with significant meanings since it is primarily used to denounce the

²² Ab Zayd, *Amr k , al-wa h al- khar*, 35.

²³ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), 204.

²⁴ Ab Zayd, *Amr k , al-wa h al- khar*, 42-43.

harshness of the white men as masters and their repressive policies towards the natives. What she sees in the Mississippi, accordingly, are brutality and violence mobilized by the Whites in the name of expansion, domination and exploitation. Adopting a reversal technique, Ab Zayd seems to consider her journey moving into the heart of savagery, unfairness and violence.

With classical Arabic style and an admirable use of figures of speech, Ab Zayd uses travel writing to her own purposes to denounce the American tyrannical modes of unfairness in their true rapacious aspects, depicting atrocities and violence perpetrated by the American policy towards Third World countries. She recognizes the uncanny strategies that the US mobilizes to manifest its expansionist and imperial ambitions, “its capitalist premises of acquisition of wealth and conspicuous consumption”²⁵ stressing the irrationality of Americanization in its mostly devastating forms. The whole discourse of power turns in Ab Zayd’s narrative into a “shattered mirror”, as she accurately states, and the motifs of civilization become unmistakably shaky: “the road networks, the massive bridges, the mysterious Walt Disney, the enormous and extraordinary buildings, the beauty of nature, order, competency, commitment to work and modesty, they all appear on a shattered mirror”.²⁶ In an act of resistance to the supposedly tempting image of the US, she matches up the whole western cultural, social, institutional progress and modernity to a laurustinus, the evergreen shrub with fanciful flowers grown out of distasteful roots, as the Moroccan saying goes.

In fact, the Minnesotan space seems from the outset split up and in crisis. With a gendered consciousness, she reconsiders the toponymic construction of both Saint Paul and Minneapolis, the two main cities in Minnesota which are often “referred to as the twins”, but the truth for Ab Zayd is that “they are step sisters. Their relationship is built upon stereotypical beliefs and demeaning viewpoints”.²⁷ This politically rhetoricized act of naming and fracturing, which, somehow, deviates from the colonial tropes of naming and controlling, and which is gendered as it appears, implies a renaming gesture that reconfigures Minnesotan space as morbidly fractured; reflecting in indirect forms an identity or a culture that is ostensibly shaped by biased views and prejudices. The dissolution of space into an arena of preconceived assumptions is politically arranged by the author to foreground other signifiers that project the idea of fragmentation into human relations as well.

²⁵ Sura P. Rath, “Post/Past-Orientalism: Orientalism and its Dis/re-orientation,” *Comparative American Studies* 2, no. 3 (2004), 354.

²⁶ Ab Zayd, *Amr k , al-wa h al- khar*, 48.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, 38.

Ab Zayd's text remains an interesting work that documents a Moroccan female traveller to America in the 1990s, though it has not received much consideration from literary and cultural critics worldwide. The other question to be explored for further investigation is why Ab Zayd's travel inspired-narrative is not translated into English for the Anglo-American readers, bearing in mind that a great deal of her works which project an "Orientalized" version of Moroccan society and life have been translated and have witnessed a large circulation within the American academia and elsewhere.

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