



The Identity of Orientals in French Travel Narratives: a Case study of Nicolas Bouvier's "Le Poisson Scorpion" and Paul Morand's "Bouddha Vivant".

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ABSTRACT

The question of identity has both personal and subjective importance on the basis of which an individual asserts his existence socially. The ideas, experiments, purposes and contents of identity vary from person to person and from a culture to another culture. To define themselves, individuals opt for different strategies like travelling, reading, meditation, etc., but the one who is still not able to find himself in the busy schedules of this chaotic world, accepts his weaknesses and get dependent on time and delusions for the rest of his life. The objective of this study is to identify the Western perception towards Orientals, before the arrival to Sri Lanka. In this paper, the researcher is going to analyze to what extent this preconceived picture corresponds to the experience which the writers had once they arrived at the country. It is important to study why the European travel writers have mixed attitudes either positive or negative towards the East or Oriental Countries – eventually leading to the so-called "clash of cultures". Interviews, primary and secondary sources were used for conducting the research. Edward Said argues that the Europeans divided the world into two parts; the east and the west or the occident and the orient or the civilized and the uncivilized (according to occident's, some oriental people are uncivilized and nomadic.) The orient is seen as barbaric, lower, undeveloped place which should be guided and dominated by the West (Said 1979).

The travel writing is a genre which focuses on real or imaginary places. The travel stories act as a vehicle by which the image of the Orient is conveyed to the Occident. To understand the French perspective in French travel narratives on Orientals, especially on Sri Lanka, it is important to elaborate certain aspects such as modes of life, beliefs, and traditions of the society.

KEY WORDS: culture, culture clash, identity, orient, occident,

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Introduction

“Oh East is East and West is West

And never the twain shall meet”²

The question might be raised is, if westerners find it hard to make the transition to the East, why would Easterners find it easier to make the transition to the west? How much one tries to change the mind set, it is rather a difficult task. The first question anyone to ask about cross- cultural understanding is an essential component? Why would someone want to do this for personal interests, economic reasons, relationships, because they have to or they want to etc... For example, very good business oriented people do tend to think alike with their own unique talents and characteristics. Even if they come from different places like the opposite ends of the earth, most likely two businessmen can understand each other better than if they were to meet someone of their own group with little interests or background in business.

According to Edward Said “the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience” (Said 2003: 1-2). Orientalism still endures in both popular constructions of culture and identity. Most of the travel writers interested in exploring the orientalist images while travelling in East. They play with the concept of “wonder”. Travel writing offers an alternative to the explorers to discover more personal and subjective accounts. The representation of Others in travel writing, imagined geographies produced through structures of orientalism both in the past colonial into the present colonial. According to some Occidents, Orientals are different, colonized, slaves and uncivilized. Travelling of Europeans towards the East was not certainly a new fact. They came as travelers, merchants and missionaries. Once the Occidents have started to discover about Orientals, they might have experienced the violence of alterity of other worlds, languages and identities and clashes with other histories, other places , other people.

On the other hand, travelling opens our eyes and our minds to discover the places that we haven’t heard or so often experience visually through the media. While experiencing new cultures, one comes to see the world around him through a different lens.

According to Nicolas Bouvier’s travel story “ Le Poisson- Scorpion or a Scorpion- Fish”, highlights an important aspect of travelling that is we never enter a new cultural experience without our own pre-conceived notions. He visited Sri Lanka in 1955 and published his book “ Le Poisson- Scorpion” in 1982. He alone came through India and joined the Ceylon where he spent seven months of solitude and doubts. After returning, he published “Scorpion- Fish” in 1982. In 1955 he left Ceylon to join Japan. The “Scorpion- Fish” is the story of an inner journey as an exotic holiday on the island of Ceylon. In this book, Nicolas Bouvier tells the emotional wreck caused by illness and loneliness he suffered on the island but also his personal long and painful life, which allowed him to make a fresh start to Japan.

A story about author’s trip in Sri Lanka and he was going crazy with fever and heat and about his inner torments, his love and hate for this mystic land and its superstitious poor people. He becomes obsessed with the insects that share his room and a Scorpion- Fish that a local shop owner keeps in a glass jar on the shop counter.

This traveler is interested in everything and surprised at nothing. The Scorpion –Fish is a gorgeous but poisonous symbol of Bouvier’s love-hate reaction to Ceylon. In this book, the author says that “unlike Westerners Easterners who believe in spirits. Like the insects who are his most intimate companions. To some extent, Bouvier’s attitude regarding his stay in Ceylon is like a dream. For Bouvier, writing is also a construction of identity (Laurel 2006) a path that has to be taken full of obstacles to be faced fears to be confronted. This temporary departure from the familiar territory makes them outsiders.

Living Buddha (Bouddha Vivant) of Paul Morand takes East to West. The author spent forty five days in Siam. Through this philosophical tour the main character of this travel story discovers Europe. The main character of this travel story is Jali, who dreams to discover Europe and went to London for his studies. It’s a clash between East and West. Jali the young prince of a state of the Indochinese peninsula, Karastra, the imaginary name but owes much to Siam and specially to Laos, meets a young French adventurer, Renaud

² Kipling, Rudyard, 1889, The Ballad of East & West, New York: Dover 6-9.

D'ecouen and Jali dreams to discover the West. Once he discovers the capitals of the West, he was disappointed and returned to Karastra after the death of his father to succeed the throne. In Living Buddha the East is the world of harmony facing to the Wild West, sick of its materialism. Orientals believe that western countries are the brilliant worlds and for some westerners eastern countries are exotic, filled with marvel and vice-versa.

The West declared its dominance over the East in many ways like colonialism, establishing superiority over the East.

Statement of the Problem

According to the concept of Orientalism, the West constructs the East. It's a strategy of engaging positive image regarding the Western world and "East" as its negative exotic strange, mysterious and always the "Other". It is important to study

why the European travel writers have mix attitudes either positive or negative towards the East or Oriental countries?

Are these mix attitudes eventually leading to the so-called "clash of cultures" ?.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of the study is to identify the Western perception toward Orientals, before the arrival to Sri Lanka. It is important to analyze to what extent this preconceived picture corresponds to the experience which the writers had once they arrived to the country.

Review of Literature

As Said influentially argued, the ontological and epistemological distinction between "the Orient" and "the Occident" (Said 2003:2) resulted from a colonial discursive power structure devised for "dominating reconstructing and having authority over the Orient" (Said 2003: 3).

The difficult dilemma between what has been lived and what is being lived of the same journey causes anguish and leads to an inescapable void. The narrative becomes then a "récit fantôme" (Bouvier, 2001, p.407), a place where memory seeks to rebuild the episodes in order to tell them as they were (or as they are remembered). Nevertheless despite the numerous notebooks, memory can be a dark and terrible place that closes upon the subject, which strives harder and harder to "revenir au Château des Païens, à ce trou de mémoire" (Bouvier 2001, p.407) and faces only with "ces souvenirs qui ont séché" (Bouvier, 2001, p.408). Significant experiences which lose life, mobility and there by all the meaning they seemed to have before the attempt to put them into writing.

Orientalism is a Western style for coming o terms with the Orient. For this purpose first the Orient should be known, and scholars, philologists, travelers, administrators, etc... contributed to this end. Later this knowledge of the Orient transforms to power structures and appears in forms of colonialism and imperialism. At this moment the relationship of the Occident and Orient becomes the relationship of power , of domination, of varying degree of a complex hegemony" (Said 1978:3).

The Orient and Oriental are stamped with an otherness (Said, p 97) and this otherness is a threat that should be avoided. In all colonial novels, some negative attitudes and a set of fixed clichés are ascribed to this otherness. Edward Said underscores that the starting point for all Orientalists is to recognize these stereotypes.

Methodology

Apart from deeply analyzing the original texts the researcher take into consideration different travel stories written in French and English and research done by scholars on identity and Orients. Both qualitative and quantitative approaches have been used to collect the primary data from 20 French tourists, who have visited the North Central Province to gather information with regard to the western perception towards Orients. Primary data was collected using a questionnaire which contained both close ended questions for yes or no answers.

Results and Discussion

Studying the 20th century travel narratives that described journeys to the Orient provides an excellent opportunity to reexamine the nature of boundaries, the relationship between travel and the link between geographic location and self definition. The term “ Orient” perpetuated in travel stories is the theoretical framework pointed out in Edward Said’s book, “ Orientalism”. Orientalism according to Said is multi-faceted and exists as a theoretical style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction between “the Orient” and the “Occident” (Edward Said, p.2). In order that the “Orient” would remain manageable and unthreatening to Europeans attempting to enlarge their colonial dominions. On the other hand, travel writers have faced ample of difficulties in dealing with insects, illness, limited or unfamiliar food and thieves. In articulating these adversities travelers made a choice to sacrifice their life to redefine the picture of Orients among Occidents.

Right after reaching India Bouvier settled in Ceylon for about 9 months. He published his memories years after his stay on Ceylon but at the time of writing them he was tired with an overwhelming epic journey he took and found himself deep in troubles.

Ceylon was probably not the best place for a holiday which is excessively warm took his turn on Bouvier from the first day. He summarized later that the main task to all people living in Ceylon is doing nothing just to survive another day until dark. He found the whole island draining and very hard to understand. Lonely, poor and sick he found it difficult to deal with everyday life. When he finally left Ceylon he wrote very clearly “ I stayed here for 9 months, and about 8 months too long”.

It should be noted that the western perception of the Orient “ Others” often negative due to their preconceived mind. The writer had to face many difficulties during his stay in Ceylon. Author wanted to experience the exotic culture in Ceylon. But after arriving he suffered from the bad weather, experienced with many insects and poor life style of people made him disappointed with regard to oriental culture.

Conclusion

“ Are we the same people I wonder when all our surroundings, associations, acquaintances are changed?³

Gertrude Bell’s question, would give the answer for the preconceived picture the travel writers had before they travelled to the Orient. This cross cultural experiences and cultural exchange to organize unfamiliar people, places and behaviors into the familiar structure, are exposed through their creative writings. Nicolas Bouvier and Paul Morand who wrote about their experiences between the real and the imaginary. Each journey motivates new experiences and pointed out the differences between the mental and imaginative. For both travel writers, travelling entailed different emotions, attitudes and expectations although it is always different from moment to moment, trip to trip. After travelling to East, sometimes the author keeps their same preconceived mind regarding Orients and sometimes the author totally changed his views and ambivalent emotions toward the Orients.

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³ Gertrude B, 1894, *Safar Nameh: Persian Pictures*, London: R. Bentley and Son, .p.8.

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