

MIRRORING THE “OTHER”: ORIENTALISM, NOMADS AND ETHNOMASQUERADING IN LAWRENCE’S *SEVEN PILLARS OF WISDOM*

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Abstract

Postcolonial theory is mainly concerned with the concept of “otherness”. This term implies complexities to its definition in that it might include other concepts, such as doubleness, identity, responsibility, alter ego and enigma to and of the self. As a complex and multifarious term, Otherness conventionally evokes another pivotal aspect of the theory that is “difference”. This article³⁸¹ ventures into the way in which Thomas Edward Lawrence, in his masterpiece *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, sees “the Other” and, secondly, what possible reasons make him partially change his vision of/on the oriental culture. The focus will be especially set on Lawrence’s journey to Arabia as a crucial point to his personal development. Furthermore, the article will take into account Lawrence’s role in the revolt in which he took part and what kind of relationship he had both with his English superiors and with Arab soldiers. Finally, to better understand Lawrence’s interior change, it will be indispensable to analyse three important theories: Orientalism, the concept of “nomad”, and the notion of Ethnomasquerading.

Keywords: Otherness, identity, ethnomasquerading, lawrence

Lawrence and the Concept of “Nomad”

One such a concept of “nomad” is necessary entangled with the notion of colonial theory, in that it considers the importance for travellers of wandering in unknown places and open spaces, in order to know themselves and to reconstruct their identity. Nomads, indeed, are rootless and can move whenever they want and change place, home and practises, thus reaching complete freedom from social codes and getting the possibility to know themselves deeply. In this light, this introspection process promotes the separation from the old imperialist European traditions, but also the subsequent insecurity and pain for what the traveller does not know and for what he does not understand.

Lawrence, as an Oxford graduate of history, had been involved in the British archaeological excavations of Carchemish, in Syria, but when the war broke out, he volunteered for service in the Military Intelligence Section of the British Army. During his journey to Arabia Lawrence was obligated to move every day to fight and destroy the railway that ran from Damascus to Medina, through Hejaz region. He and the Arab soldiers passed through important towns like Wejh, Akaba and Jembo and spent a lot of time in depopulated areas and desert spaces. Therefore, he had to interact with a different culture and perform actions such as riding camels, marching under the sun for hours and surviving in high temperatures.

The constant moving on foot or by camel from a place to another allowed Lawrence to form a subjective opinion on Arab tribes and to familiarize with his Arab army:

³⁸¹ The article has been jointly planned by the two authors: G. Goracci has dealt with sections 1-2, while S. Corrizato with 3-4-5.

“We marched through the palm-groves which lay like a gordle about the scattered houses of Rabegh village, and then out under the stars along the Tehama, the sandy and featureless strip of desert bordering the western coast of Arabia between sea-beach and littoral hills, for hundred and monotonous miles.” (chapter X)

And again,

“The march became rather splendid and barbaric. First rode Feisal in white, then Sharraf at his right in red hed-cloth and henna-dyed tunic and cloak, myself on his left in white and scarlet, behind us three banners of faded crimson silk with gilt spikes, behind them the drummers playing a march, and behind them the wild mass of twelve hundred bouncing camels of bodyguard, packet as closely as they could move, the men in every variety of coloured clothes and the camels nearly as brilliant in their trappings. We filled the valley to its banks our flashing streams.” (chapter XXIII)

As the extracts above testify, the concept of “nomad” is linked with the basilar postcolonial concept of displacement, which generally implies the subject’s psychological disorientation and the following break with the Western traditions. Indeed, the nomad is continuously bombarded by different uses, ways of living and thinking that, eventually, could lead him to a sort of identity crisis. At the very beginning of the nomad’s experience, being in touch with another culture and tradition, makes him feel a sense of strangeness and alienation; as time goes by, the traveller undergoes instead a factual psychological transformation to the point that the homeland survives only in his memories and thoughts.

Moreover, the presence of the desert, as we can read in Pratt (1992), plays a primary role in this theory: in fact, this type of landscape symbolizes the need of surviving and emancipation. Conventionally, the European people sees the desert as an unreal zone that marks what is habitable and what is inhabitable. We can hardly believe that these two important notions break off from the known theories of colonizing European countries where, at first, we found the importance of being someone and feeling superior to the “Other”.

In *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* Lawrence is forced to spend a lot of time in the desert: he has to march, to eat and sleep on the sand. He luckily learns from the Arabs how to survive in this landscape. In some passages, the main character describes the difficulty of living there and of standing the heat without water. However, this difficult life brings him to several important reflections about himself and the new reality he is experiencing. This “process of interior evolution” is testified in the eighth chapter of the book “Lawrence d’Arabie”, written in 1961 by Benoist-Méchin, where he, talking about Lawrence’s previous travels in the Middle East, writes: “Pour la première fois, il goûtait cette ivresse par la dématérialisation dont il se solerait plus tard dans ses longs séjours au désert.”

Lawrence’s View of “the Other”

As we have observed in the previous lines, the work *Seven Pillar of Wisdom* is a problematic representation of an identity crisis, which begins with Lawrence’s arrival in Arabia and goes on during his permanence with the Arabs. Yet, as such, it consists of private accounts based on memoirs that, to a closer analysis, entail a subtext of “cultural and ethnical relationships”, which is revealed through a series of personal reckonings.

The most fundamental problem is the relationship with “the Other”. Needless to say that, in the light of the historical and political circumstances in which Lawrence found himself involved, the cultural encounter he experienced with others was not, initially, one of respect and recognition, but an epitome of discriminated “otherness”. Who is, then, “the Other” for Lawrence? He/she represents to him the person who, according to his imperial principles, is savage and uncivilized.

When Lawrence arrives, the Arabs “feel” undoubtedly his different roots: indeed, he tends to confront English and Arab military organization and to analyse the Arabs not in terms of people that he meets but only as “subject of study”. He inquiries into Arabs’ history and

costumes and his investigation brings him to classify them according to the different areas in which they live. He describes the Oriental area as “a rough parallelogram”, localizing the biggest rivers, mountains, desert spaces and Arab tribes.

“A first difficulty of the Arab movement was to say who the Arabs were. Being a manufactured people, their name was changing in sense slowly years by years. Once it meant an Arabian. There was a country called Arabia; but this was nothing to the point.” (chapter II) As we can observe, in the first period of his stay in Arabia he is wary and tends to study and analyse the people he meets. That happens for two principal reasons: on the one hand, he is naturally still bound to his homeland and, on the other hand, he observes Arabs with a colonizer’s eyes: he feels automatically superior to these people, who are so different from him for the colour of their skin, the clothes they wear, the language they speak and their religion. On this matter, it is worth mentioning Edward Said’s theory³⁸² of Orientalism: with this word he meant a typical attitude of the European society in the nineteenth and twentieth century that consisted in seeing the Oriental people as inferior beings. Thus, he defined “Oriental” the person represented by such a stereotype, unmodified in Western citizens’ minds. On the same evidence, oriental places are seen as separate, backward, eccentric and passive. This racist attitude involved the necessity to know the conquered people, so the Orient became the core subject of analysis, “the observed, the object”. According to this theory, by analysing Lawrence’s initial behaviour, it is possible to gather thoughts and attitudes that really testify the so-called “latent orientalism”; as a matter of fact, in the first pages of the book, some reflections on the Arabs are entirely the result of an imperialist observation. He sustains that these people are incapable to rationalize reality, they are without any type of moral or material organization and they are incapable to appreciate what is materialistic (chapter III). He goes on arguing that the Arabs do not feel any duty for the state but they are mainly lovers of their houses and domestic easements. (chapter XIII)

There is another fundamental aspect to consider: Lawrence, as the English leader who has to win the war, is forced to understand the Arab soldiers, in order to consider their positive and negative features and to prepare a winning strategy. The following extract highlights Lawrence’s “plan”:

“I concluded that tribes men were good for defence only. Their acquisitive recklessness made them keep on booty, and whetted them to tear up railways, plunder caravans, and steal camels [...]” (chapter XV)

According to Lawrence’s reflection, the Oriental troops were less trained than the European army; Lawrence also noticed that Arabs were divided in several groups and still bound to old uses, that were considered ridiculous by him. From his accounts, for instance, emerges a sharp sense of otherness that, sometimes, goes beyond mere stereotyping racism and verges on ethnic prejudices against the Arab tribes in form of denigration and mockery:

“The actual contingents were continually shifting, in obedience to the role of flesh. A family would won rifle, and the sons serve in turn for a few days each. Married men alternated between camp and wife, and sometimes a whole clan bored and take a rest.” (chapter XV)

Lawrence’s racism is not merely associated with language, skin colour or linguistic difference in that it intrinsically relates to ethnic personality and genetics (cf. Ackermann, 21-22). When he was in the battlefield, he disguised his prejudice against the Arabs and pretended to “assimilate” to their habits in order to suppress his own sense of otherness. The following lines clearly show this feeling of “I versus them”:

“I was sent to these Arabs as a stranger, unable to think their thoughts or subscribe their beliefs, but charged by duty to lead them forward and to develop to the highest any movement of theirs profitable to England in her war. If I could not assume their character, I

³⁸² Cf. <http://www.lehigh.edu/~amsp/2004/09/introduction-to-edward-said.html>

could at least conceal my own, and pass among them without evident friction, neither a discord nor a critic but an unnoticed influence. Since I was their fellow, I will not be their apologist or advocate” (pp. 28-29)

Lawrence’s Re-Construction of Self

In order to understand the quality of Lawrence’s interpersonal evolution, it is important to consider his previous training and experiences. In fact, being an archaeologist, in the years before the Arab Revolt, he devoted himself to research in the Middle East. Surely, this period in foreign places has helped him to approach Oriental people. He began his journeys in 1910 and he stopped in Jbail, where he studied Arabic; he then went to work in the excavations at Carchemish, in the Northern of Syria in 1910 and in 1911. In the following years he continued to make trips to the Middle East until the outbreak of First World War. On these travels Benoist-Méchin writes: “Voyageant à pays, il prit l’habitude de longer chez l’habitant”. In 1914, Lawrence worked as an archaeologist for the British Army on the Sinai peninsula and he visited Aqaba e Petra. It is important to consider that his extensive travels through Arabia, his excursions, often on foot or by camel, living with Arabs, wearing their clothes, learning their language and their local dialects, in a second time, helped Lawrence to see Arabs as people and not only as “colonized”.

This difficult process of “understanding the *other* culture” is narrated in the work *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* in which Lawrence records his inner change. He breaks off from his own cultural, racial and social heritage and begins to live together with the Arabs, “accepting” their traditions. He learns to live as the Arab soldiers and to understand their feelings and their way of thinking. This process will eventually lead him to point of rejecting his “Britishness”. The evolution that characterizes his denial of the original traditions and customs can be clearly seen by analyzing the passages where Lawrence reports the soldiers’ life.

The first periods that Lawrence spent with the Arab Soldiers show that his sense of alienation seems to derive from the fact that he feels himself as a “stranger in the group”. As we can read in the following lines, he tends to notice the difference between English soldiers and the Oriental army:

“This people was black and white, not only in vision, but by inmost furnishing black and white not merely in clarity, but in apposition. Their thoughts were at ease only I extremes.” (chapter III)

To an Arabian essential part of the triumph of victory was wear the clothes of an enemy: and next day we saw our force transformed (as to the upper half) into Turkish force [...].” (chapter LIV)

Embarking on a slow “stream of evolution”, Lawrence’s way of thinking changes. Living together with these men, so different from him, he is able to establish a deep relationship between him and them. What unites the Arabs are the experiences that they share, but above all, the spare time that they spend together. In the twentieth chapter of Benoist-Méchin’s book, we read: “il se sent tenu de défendre ses compagnons d’armes non seulement contre l’ennemi, mais contre les critiques de ses compatriotes, même lorsqu’elles sont fondées.” He shows signs of Arab nationalism, he learns to love his companions-in-arms and to admire two of the most charismatic Arab figures: Emir Feysal and Auda Abu Tayi, who are both leaders of the revolt. He considered the first as a sort of prophet, from whom, he says, he learns a lot of things about the Oriental people and their politics (chapter XIII); and he defines the second as the warrior’s essence (chapter XXXVIII). Lawrence recognizes in these two men the purity of the soul and the nobility of actions. During his journey through Arabia, he succeeds in overcoming his Occidental imperial perspective and principles to really appreciate and respect the Oriental mentality. In the first chapter, Lawrence describes the difference between his people and the Arabs in the camps: he underlines the English general discontent

and their usual idea of superiority, while he praises Oriental people for their tenacity and their respect for the enemy.

“We were surviving a common ideal, without tribal emulation, and so could not hope for esprit de corps. Ordinary soldiers were made a caste either great rewards in pay, dress and privilege [...]” (chapter LIX)

Moreover, in several passages, Lawrence describes the Arab soldiers’ behaviours, presumably shocking to the eyes of the European readers, without showing any critical or ironical vein.

For instance, in the forty-sixth chapter (chapter XLVI), he accurately portrays an Arab typical dinner in an important leader’s tent. All men are all sitting on the floor and they eat mutton and rice. They have only a glass of tee and one dented bowl; they cut pieces of meal from the animal with the sword and eat with their hands. At the end of the dinner, men move outside from the tent and sit down under the stars. Lawrence also eats in this way and, by reading the passage, we understand that he is an integral part of this ritual.

In another passage, in the thirty-second chapter (chapter XXXII) Lawrence, describing a moment in which he is ill, praises the Arabs’ hospitality and includes the description of an evening passed in a tent with fleas and louses.

After these fulfilling experiences, the Arabs become for him people with clear and noble ideals, different from the English people. He is convinced that no English man would have fought without any profit. Lawrence understands that Europeans are not superior to Oriental people and he confirms his opinion with these words:

“there was no excuse or reason, except our laziness and ignorance, whereby we could call them inscrutable or Oriental, or leave them misunderstood.” (chapter XXXVII)

Ethnomasquerading

Ethnomasquerading is defined by post-colonial scholars as the performance of an ethnic identity through the mimicking of clothes, gestures, appearance, language, cultural codes, or other components of identity formation. This phenomenon, observable above all in women travel writers in the eighteenth and nineteenth century during the colonial period, implies the subject’s identification with “the Other”.

As far as we know from the book and pictures passed on to us, Lawrence also wore local clothes. Indeed, after few weeks spent in Arabia, he decided to wear a typical Arab headgear. He reported to have put on the hat in order to protect himself from the sun; afterwards, he adds that an English superior to him disapproves of this choice (chapter XVI). After some lines, he also recounts that during his previous stay in Syria, he got used to wearing Oriental clothes. His total change of garments arrives in the twentieth chapter, in which Feisal asks Lawrence if he would have liked to wear the same Arab clothes. Lawrence accepts with pleasure and justifies his choice with two reasons: on the one hand, these clothes are surely more suitable and, on the other hand, he knows that the Arab army would have accepted him as “one of them”.

This involvement in the new culture implies the Occidental subject’s identification with the new traditions and customs. Thus, Lawrence’s change of identity also happens because he, wearing the new clothes, undergoes a transformation that is physically visible, but that is also interior:

“[...] I should find it better for my own part, since it was a comfortable dress in which to live Arab-fashion as we must do. Besides, the tribesmen would then understand how to take me.” (chapter XX)

What comes out in reading these lines is a sense of “de-westernization” and a patent manifestation of Lawrence’s “ethnic inclusion” in a world that, at the beginning of his experience, he did not accept. Progressively, Lawrence seems to cross the boundaries between “him” and “them”, “here” and “there”, “Occident” and “Orient”.

Conclusion

In recent years, postcolonial studies have brought under scrutiny the relationships that have characterized, and still do influence, colonizers and colonized people. As we have noticed above, Lawrence, at the beginning of his experience, "distorts" the society with which he came into contact, thus inscribing the so-called "inferiority" of the people he met. As his behaviour changed towards the colonized people, he felt as if he were split into two identities: indeed, even though he "accepted" the Arab culture, he did not totally abandon his imperialistic heritage. As a matter of fact, we can find in Lawrence's personality a constant binary opposition between old formation and new identity. As we can read at the beginning of the book, in the first chapter, he declared that through his two years with the Arabs, he lost his English way of thinking and he saw Europe under another light. However, he also adds that he was not able to become an Arab in every aspect. Besides, he says:

"In my case, the efforts for these years to live in the dress of Arabs, and to imitate their mental foundation, quitted me of English self, and let me look at the West and its conventions with new eyes. [...] At the same time I could not sincerely take on the Arab skin: it was an affection only easily was a man made an infidel, but hardly might he be converted to another faith". (cap. I)

This shows how the Western concept of the Oriental seems to be based on the Manichean allegory according to which the world is divided into mutually excluding opposites therefore, if the Occident is ordered, rational, masculine and good, the Orient is considered as chaotic, irrational, feminine and evil. This notwithstanding, Lawrence represents one of the most important figures of the post-colonial period in that he was able to "partially" cross the cultural boundaries existing between Occident and Orient, even if it is clear that he also maintained traces of Englishness. That brings us to a further question: "Do self and other inevitably express the dichotomy "us" and "them"?"

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