

## MAPPING ARABS AND THEIR CULTURE IN GERTRUDE BELL'S SYRIA: THE DESERT AND THE SOWN

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### Abstract

This article fleshes out the representation of Arabs and their culture in Gertrude Bell's *Syria: The Desert and the Sown* (1907). Even though this travel book has already been examined, the nuanced ways in which Bell employs the narrative space to express her views and her varied responses to the different customs and manners she encounters during her travels have not been thoroughly explored. We argue that Bell's uncertain subject position while travelling in Syria has offered her a productive third space where she provides a multilayered mapping of the cultural differences she has encountered. The findings suggest that there are times when Bell's representation of difference is fed by and feeds into the Orientalist paradigm of her time. Yet, there are other times when she throws doubt on and even refutes Western hierarchical evaluative standards regarding the other. *Syria* presents a narrative rich in its various and at times opposing voices embodied in the forms of self-exoticism, self-reflection and self-fashioning.

**Keywords:** difference; race; gender; contact zone; self-reflection.

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## Introduction

The improvement in the modes of travel, women's mobility, and the British expansionist agendas in the second half of the 19th century increased the number of women travellers to the Middle East, which is regarded as the "Westerners' oldest destination of travel" (Melman 1995, 105). Some of these women accompanied their husbands, brothers or male relatives on various diplomatic missions to the Middle East as "men's traveling appendages" (Behdad 1994, 95) or "auxiliary travellers" to borrow Billie Melman's terms (34) and some journeyed to the area as lone travellers and globetrotters. These women recorded their experiences of the region in travel books, diaries, and letters, and mostly published them back home. Lady Anne Blunt, Freya Stark, Isabella Lucy Bird, Mary Leonora Woulfe Sheil, Ella C. Sykes and Gertrud Margaret Lowthian Bell are among the most famous women travellers to the Middle East.

Gertrude Margaret Lowthian Bell (1868-1926) was a prominent English "traveler, mountaineer, stateswoman, Arabist, linguist, archeologist, photographer, and writer" (Howell 2015, 2). She was first home-schooled, like other girls from her class at that time; yet, her "exceptional mind" (Wallach 2005, 35) convinced her family to send her to Queen's College, London, at the age of fifteen. She continued her studies at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford (Howell 2015; Wagner 2004, 19-20). It is noteworthy to mention that Bell graduated with a "first class honours in Modern History at Oxford University" when female students were not warmly welcomed by lecturers and male students there (Ghaderi and Wan Yahya 2014, 125). Bell's travels started at the age of eighteen with her journey to Germany. After graduation, at the age of twenty, her parents sent her to Bucharest along with her step-relatives to help her get rid of her "Oxford manner" and act as an agreeable lady (Wagner 22; Howell 2015).

Bell travelled to the Americas, Asia, Africa, Turkey, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, and Persia, to name but a few destinations, and reflected her responses to the encountered cultural differences in travelogues and diaries. Her upper-middle-class background allowed her to engage with political figures, ultimately fostering both her travels throughout the Middle East and her lifelong interest in the region's affairs. (Laisram 2006, 172-74). Bell's *Persian Pictures* documents her seven-month travel in Persia in 1892, which was published two years later in 1894. Six years later, she journeyed to Jerusalem to learn Arabic. *Syria: The Desert and the Sown* (henceforth, *Syria*) presents an account of her 1905 travel to and stay in the Syrian Desert. The publication of this book established her as a scholar and seasoned traveller (Wagner 47). Her travels and sojourns in the Middle East between 1900 and 1914 earned her recognition as an "expert on Oriental affairs" (Amoia and Knapp 2005, 151); her wealth of strategic knowledge of the region significantly contributed to the British imperialist projects. She was the only woman who served as the "Political Officer in the British forces" of the time (Wallach 180) and was even promoted to the prestigious role of "Oriental Secretary" (Monroe 1980, 19). She is called "the uncrowned Queen of Iraq" due

to her role in the construction of modern Iraq, where she spent the last decade of her life (Wallach 324).

Travel books are presented as objective accounts by their authors (Youngs 2013, 3). However, Edward Said's contention in *Orientalism* (1979) regarding the Western writers' discursive formation of the Orientals in their work raises doubts about the credibility of the picture presented in travellers' supposedly 'eyewitness' accounts (Thompson 2011, 61). As Holland and Huggan convincingly argue, the representation of other people and their culture in travelogues is informed by various discourses in circulation at the time of the journey (1998, 111-32). Western travel books on the colonized and semi-colonized countries are found to be 'systematically involved in imperial meaning-making processes' (Smethurst 2009, 2). Even though Bell is regarded as an "arch-imperialist" (Melman 5) and had a key role in reshaping the Middle East, one cannot reduce her travel book to a tool in the service of advancing British political ends in the region. The traveller's gender is another key factor that informs representations of cross-cultural encounters and needs to be considered when exploring travel texts. Mary Louise Pratt in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992) and Sara Mills in *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism* (1991) as well as *Gender and Colonial Space* (2009) have examined the ways gender ideologies of the time shaped how women travellers mapped their experiences of the countries they visited in their accounts. The in-between and ambivalent subject position of Western women travellers to the Orient is best articulated by Indira Ghose, stating they are "colonized by gender, but colonizers by race" (1998, 5). In other words, because of British racial discourses, Bell is positioned as the 'self' in opposition to the 'Orientals' she encounters, who are regarded as the 'other.' However, based on British gender discourses, she is considered the 'other.'

*Syria* presents Bell's journey from Beyrout to Syria, through towns, villages, deserts, oases, ancient ruins, and tents, camping in the Arab and Turkish Ottoman Empire as well as her communications with Arab Sheiks, their wives, Bedouins, Kurds, Turks, Druzes, among other subjects. Even though *Syria* has already been analysed, the impact of Bell's ambivalent subject position as a British woman travelling in the Orient has not been fleshed out. For instance, Genna Duplisea (2016) looks at the factors of gender and empire in her research on Bell. However, she does not delve into the nuanced ways these markers shape Bell's responses to the cultural difference. Similarly, Angie Blumberg touches on how the element of gender shapes Bell's view of the other in her two articles on her works. Yet, her research focuses more on highlighting the beauty of Bell's works and "the insidious and subtle connections between aesthetic representation and imperialist perspectives embedded in fin-de-siecle travel and archaeological writing" (Blumberg 2022, 603). In the same way, in *Viewing the Islamic Orient: British Travel Writers of the Nineteenth Century*, Pallavi Pandit Laisram focuses more on how travelling gives Bell liberty than on her ambivalent viewing position

and claims that Bell romanticizes the Orient as a locale that provides her with “spiritual and physical freedom” (182).

While traveling in the Orient, Bell is positioned as the ‘self’ within the hierarchical British racial discourse yet simultaneously regarded as the ‘other’ because of her gender. We argue that this in-between and uncertain subject position offers Bell a relativistic perspective on the differences she encounters in the people and their culture in Syria. Accordingly, *Syria* offers a rich text which is multilayered in its registration of various and at times opposing perspectives regarding cultural difference. There are times when Bell translates the encountered difference as an aberration. At other times, she valorises it by engaging in self-exoticism. Moreover, mapping her intercultural encounters in *Syria* provides Bell with a dynamic space for self-reflection and a dialogue—not only with herself about her own values, but also with her British readers back home.

### **Mapping the contact zone in *Syria*: parroting Orientalist views**

According to Said, Orientalist discourse “with [its] supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles” (2) has helped Western powers to construct “geographical sectors as ‘Orient’ and ‘Occident’” (5). Ashcroft et al. explain that this distinction is possible by making comparisons and “binary oppositions” between the traveller’s homeland and the traversed country in favour of the former’s “dominance” (2000, 26). When a “group excludes or marginalizes another”, the result is the binary of self/other in this regard, which becomes possible through othering “anyone who is separate from one’s self” (Ashcroft et al. 186). In what follows, we discuss hierarchical binaristic representations of the Arabs and their culture in *Syria*, which are informed by the Orientalist discourses of the time regarding governing system, religion, medicine, and the harem, among others. We use the term ‘contact zone’, coined by Pratt in *Imperial Eyes*, to underscore the asymmetrical power relationship between traveller and travellee. She defines contact zones as “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination” (Pratt 7).

Earlier in the preface to her narrative, Bell considers her stay in Syria “long enough” to make sure that the Turk/Ottoman Empire is “far from being the ideal” administration for the region (2001, 24). She asserts, “Being English, I am persuaded that we are the people who could best have taken Syria in hand with the prospect of a success greater than that which might be attained by a moderately reasonable Sultan” (24). She further expresses her dissatisfaction with the current position “throughout the dominions of Turkey,” stating: “if I have gauged the matter at all correctly, the root of it lies in the disappearance of English influence at Constantinople. The position of authority that we occupied has been taken by another, yet it is and must be of far deeper importance to us than to any other that we should be able to guide when necessary the tortuous politics of Yildiz Kiosk” (25). The logic behind Bell’s assertion in the above statements through using

“greater success”, “authority” and “guide” is that the fading influence of England in Constantinople is the cause of decline and “failure” in the East (97). Moreover, referring to the British occupation of Egypt, she highlights the superiority of the British rule and hence the need for such a government in Syria too: “all over Syria and even in the desert, whenever a man is ground down by injustice or mastered by his own incompetence, he wishes that he were under the rule that has given wealth to Egypt” (Bell 86).

Bell further encourages the need for British colonial intervention in Syria and the so-called “white man’s burden” (Spurr 1993, 111) by directly quoting locals, which seems a viable strategy to boost the credibility of her political perspectives. For example, describing a landlord, Reshīd Agha, as a man with “an overbearing manner” and “vicious thoughts,” (Bell 300) who cruelly mistreats Mikhail, a peasant, gives Bell a platform through which she engages in a dialogue with her local servant about the differences between ruling systems in Britain and Syria. She quotes her servant’s desperate call for help thus: “in your country the government is just and strong and every one of the English must obey it, even the rich; whereas with us there is no justice, but the big man eats the little, and the little man eats the less, and the government eats all alike. And we all suffer after our kind and cry out to God to help us since we cannot help ourselves” (Bell 305). Bell’s promoting her country’s image through using the words “strong” and “just” and dehumanizing the Orientals through the image of eating each other recalls Pratt’s contention about a Western “planetary consciousness,” (Pratt 15) which positions the West/self as the centre of the universe and relegates the rest/other to the periphery and in need of guidance and education (24–34).

Constructing the binary of Muslims/Christians and representing the latter as being oppressed by the former is another strategy adopted by Bell in *Syria* to accentuate her assertion about the need for British rule in the area. She engages in a conversation with “the Greek Catholic Archbishop, a Damascene educated in Paris” and a Christian banker about the future of Syria under the Ottoman rule and writes that these people “suffer at the hands of the Turk, ecclesiastic, because of a blind and meaningless official opposition that meets the Christian at every turn; the banker, because his interests call aloud for progress, and progress is what the Turk will never understand” (Bell 261). She asks a question on the future of Syria, and the Archbishop answers, “I do not know. I have thought deeply on the subject, and I can see no future for Syria, whichever way I turn.’ That is the only credible answer I have heard to any part of the Turkish question” (261). Denigrating the Orientals’ governing system by referring to their “blind and meaningless official opposition” to progress and accordingly no prospect of a bright future for them allows Bell to justify the need for a British presence in Syria.

Moreover, when talking to a Christian woman in Ba’albek who complains about “violence and fanaticism” of the Arabs, Bell tries to comfort her by saying that the country is “so well known and so much frequented by tourists, who would not fail to raise an outcry” (176), and thus they will be safe. She adds that “the yearly stream of tourists is, in fact, one of the best guarantees of order” in the

country (176). Bell's claim here could be considered inviting a British occupation, as "tourists" are presented as the only hope for establishing order, implying the inefficiency of the present governing body in Syria. Through holding a dialogue with this woman, Bell not only fashions the image of a caring traveller for herself, who sympathizes with the other and tries to comfort her worries, but also serves her country's expansionistic agendas.

Similarly, Bell's use of medical discourse in *Syria* could be read as serving two purposes. In Umm er Rummān, she is begged by a woman to help her husband whom she finds "lying in a dark corner of the windowless room, with his face wrapped in filthy bandages, and when these had been removed a horrible wound was revealed, the track of a bullet that had passed through the cheek and shattered the jaw" (Bell 106). Bell's visiting the man and her willingness to tend to his affliction presents her as a kind-hearted lady traveller. Yet, the only thing that Bell could do is to "give him an antiseptic and adjure the woman to wash the wound and keep the wrappings clean, and above all not to let him drink the medicine" (106). Referring to her "own helplessness" to relieve his pain, Bell once again depicts the image of the West as the saviour and the only hope for the people in the following passage:

This was the first of the long roll of sufferers that must pass before the eyes and catch despairingly at the sympathies of every traveller in wild places. Men and women afflicted with ulcers and terrible sores, with fevers and rheumatisms, children crippled from their birth, the blind and the old, there are none who do not hope that the unmeasured wisdom of the West may find them a remedy. You stand aghast at the depths of human misery and at your own helplessness. (Bell 106)

The large number of sufferers of varying ages and their pressing need for and faith in "the unmeasured wisdom of the West" in the quoted passage implies a binaristic construction in which the Oriental knowledge is shown as lacking. It further indicates how discourses of medicine and politics go hand in hand to raise the call for a British presence in Syria. This section reminds one of a similar approach in Isabella Bird's *Journeys in Persia and Kurdistan* (1891), where she "highlights the people's acute need for, and faith in, the Feringhi Hakim's knowledge and abilities and thus takes on the role of a savior" for them (Ghaderi and Heidari 2022, 457).

Discourses of the harem abound in *Syria*, which are also informed by and inform the Orientalist ideologies dominant at the time of Bell's travelling. Malek Alloula rightly regards the harem as "the very embodiment of obsession" for Western readers (1986, 3). As a Western lady traveller, Bell is welcomed into the harem where men are not allowed. Accordingly, she takes it upon herself to devote lengthy passages to the description of the harem, which echo discourses of exoticized and eroticized Oriental women who are imprisoned for the pleasure of Oriental men. Bell adopts an Orientalist gaze and minutely paints the picture of the women she meets in the harem. The following long example



about the way she describes her hostess, Yūsef's wife, in the Ghor, substantiates her writing of the harem:

She was a woman of exceptional beauty, tall and pale, her face a full oval, her great eyes like stars. She wore Arab dress, a narrow dark blue robe that caught round her bare ankles as she walked, a dark blue cotton veil bound about her forehead with a red handkerchief and falling down her back almost to the ground. Her chin and neck were tattooed in delicate patterns with indigo, after the manner of the Bedouin women. She brought me water, which she poured over my hands, moved about the room silently, a dark and stately figure, and having finished her ministrations she disappeared as silently as she had come, and I saw her no more. (Bell 50)

Bell's description of her hostess aesthetically and, to use Indira Ghose's words, in a "voyeuristic" and "erotic" manner (11) in the passage above encompasses the trope of surveillance over the other's body. Bell objectifies her by describing and commenting on every aspect of her body, from her height and face to her eyes, chin, neck, back, and ankles. The picture of this "exceptional beauty" is made more erotic by a reference to "bare ankles" and the tattooed chin and neck. The repeated reference to her silent movement not only furthers the mystification of her "dark and stately figure" but also highlights that she is silenced by patriarchal culture and lacks a voice. Bell's objectified picture of the woman is exoticized using discourses of costume and cosmetics, which are different from those used by Western women. To the Victorian audience, face painting in various forms, such as a tattooed face, was indicative of savagery; moreover, it was associated with actresses and prostitutes (Melman 116).

Bell accentuates the allure of the harem for the Western audience in another description of an Oriental woman whose eyes captivate her. She expresses her gratefulness to Vali in ElBarah for inviting her to his house and giving her a chance to meet his wife; she describes her as "the most beautiful woman that it is possible to behold. She is tall and stately, with a small dark head, set on magnificent shoulders, a small straight nose, a pointed chin and brows arching over eyes that are like dark pools—I could not take mine from her face while she sat with us" (Bell 258). In the two quoted passages, Bell gazes upon the Oriental woman as "an object of examination, commentary, and valorization" (Spurr 22) using erotic imagery; she deploys the aesthetical surveillance of women's body when gaining access to the interior space of the harem.

Moreover, the objectified and eroticized pictures of the Oriental women in the harems in *Syria* pander to the Orientalist figurations of the secluded women. According to Inderpal Grewal's study of the harem in Orientalist writing, women are depicted as imprisoned and "caged" within the walls of the harem for the pleasure of the tyrannical Oriental men (1996, 45). A telling passage in this regard comes from Bell's narration of her visit to Hassan Beg Nā'I's harem; she writes that Hassan Beg's "womenkind" are "delighted to have a visitor, for Hassan Beg is a strict master, and neither his wife nor his mother nor any woman that is his is

allowed to put her nose out of doors, not even to take a walk through the graveyard or to drive down to the meadow by the Orontes on a fine summer afternoon” (Bell 192). The passage feeds into the stereotype of the “tyranny [of men] and the subjugation of females” in the Orient as Melman would suggest (97). Similarly, Bell comments on the secluded life of Yūsef’s wife (described above): “No one sees Yūsef’s wife. Christian though he be, he keeps her more strictly cloistered than any Moslem woman; and perhaps after all he is right” (50). Interestingly, in this passage, the marker of identity is not the faith of the Orientals. Rather, the emphasis is on gender, implying that all women in the Orient are imprisoned within walls. Moreover, Bell’s mentioning “perhaps after all he is right” in keeping his wife secluded implies that she is not safe outside of the harem, which in turn suggests that Oriental men are immoral and lustful.

Such descriptions of the harem as a prison for women stem from Bell’s refusal to see it as an alternative structure for a British way of life. Based on a Western evaluative paradigm, whatever that is following the self’s norms is regarded as acceptable and superior, and any difference from it is relegated to the realm of inferiority and considered an aberration and thus exoticized. The exoticized portrayal of the harem in *Syria* echoes the Orientalist stereotypes of it as a site of “voluptuousness” where “sexual desires could be gratified” (Kabbani 1986, 16). Bell’s descriptions of the Oriental women not only highlight their exceptional beauty but also their imprisoned status. Here is an illustrative passage: “The women of the house of Aẓam have even a greater reputation than the sumptuous walls that hold them; they are said to be the loveliest women in all Ḥamāh” (Bell 227). Such a description could be read as a viable strategy for Bell to distance herself from Oriental women because, as a Western lady, she is empowered by her mobility. Bell’s mobility and freedom, in turn, promote her country’s image. As Carl Thompson rightly maintains, Western travellers present “notions of [their] cultural and racial superiority” in their travel books (53). The emphasis on the women’s beauty, described in the above passages as “exceptional beauty” and “the loveliest women,” seems to invite a Western penetration of the harem, while the image of their imprisonment suggests a chivalric mission to rescue them (DelPlato 2002, 20). Even though Bell’s gender grants her the unique chance to map the interiors of Oriental life in the service of her country’s expansionist goals, she does not limit herself to the harem discourse; instead, based on the above discussion, Bell takes on the role of an imperial agent who parrots the dominant political, religious, and medical discourses of her time regarding the Orientals. As Elizabeth Bishop has correctly noted, “In the formal service of empire, Bell exceeded the category ‘European woman.’” (2023, 258)

### **Mapping the contact zone in *Syria*: presenting alternative outlooks**

Travel scholars have highlighted the productivity of Western women’s ambivalent position, arguing that female-authored texts represent various perspectives in translating different mores and manners of the other (Kamberidou



2016; Watson 2015). As an effect of her ambivalent subject position due to the discourses of race and gender of her time, Bell's travel book also provides an alternative outlook to the Arabs and their culture, which not only questions but at times refutes Orientalist stereotypes. In many cases, Bell is invited into the interiors of the Arabs, allowing her to 'taste' the other's culture. Charles Forsdick is right to theorize taste as "a means of accessing other cultures, and of the table as a site of intercultural encounter" (2019, 245). Describing her host, Yüsef Effendi, Bell writes: "He is a laconic man, but as a host he has not his equal. He prepared me an excellent supper" (49). As Kevin J. James points out, "Hospitality is central to travel because it can involve encounters with unfamiliar people, institutions, cultures and codes" (2020, 266); he adds that this "virtuous hospitality" comes from cultures of "nobler age" (265). Elsewhere, Bell expresses her appreciation of the Arab hospitality thus: "I thanked him [her host] profusely for his kindness, and declared that I should have known his Arab birth by his generous hospitality" (216). Bell's receptivity to the other while dining in another tent goes to the extent of shattering the demarcation lines between the self/we and the other/they as she affiliates with the other using the pronoun 'we': "When a person of consideration comes as guest, a sheep must be killed in honor of the occasion, and accordingly we eat with our fingers a bountiful meal of mutton and curds and flaps of bread" (83). Furthermore, in an accepting attitude towards difference, Bell adopts the Arab habit of eating with fingers in their house. This suggests that she does not judge the other's different eating practices based on the self's hierarchical system, which renders it as an aberration. Rather, she regards it as an eating custom worthy of adopting, like that of the self.

Bell also debunks the hegemonic view regarding the Orientals in the travel books of her counterparts based on her own experiences. Narrating her visit to the house of a Kurdish sheikh, she finds the house "light and cool, airy and clean" and maintains: "The Kurd has not been given a good name in the annals of travel. Report would have him both sulky and quarrelsome, but for my part I have found him to be endowed with most of the qualities that make for agreeable social intercourse" (Bell 267). Bell courageously throws doubts on the hegemonic representations of the Kurds as being "sulky" and "quarrelsome" and engages in conversation with them which undermines the dividing hierarchical lines of the self and the other. Similarly, she finds the Arabs of Salt and Mādeba as "an intelligent and an industrious race, worthy to be praised. During the five years since [she] had visited this district they had pushed forward the limit of cultivation two hours' ride to the east" (Bell 52). Bell's representations of the Kurds and Arabs here invalidate the picture of the other in the Orientalist archive as "backward, degenerate, uncivilized, and retarded" (Said 208).

Additionally, explaining the power of "the nomad eye", Bell discredits the Western claim that the Orient is a blank space which needs to be filled in by Western knowledge. Here is an illustrative passage:

Though we were riding through plains which were quite deserted and to the casual observer almost featureless, we seldom travelled for more than a mile without reaching a spot that had a name. In listening to Arab talk you are struck by this abundant nomenclature. If you ask where a certain sheikh has pitched his tents you will at once be given an exact answer. The map is blank, and when you reach the encampment the landscape is blank also. A rise in the ground, a big stone, a vestige of ruin, not to speak of every possible hollow in which there may be water either in winter or in summer, these are marks sufficiently distinguishing to the nomad eye. (Bell 76)

Bell is impressed by the Arabs' "abundant nomenclature" and the fact that what seems to be a featureless plain to "the casual observer" has an exact name for the nomads. In the above passage, Bell praises Arab's map-reading skill and looks at it as a laudable alternative to that of the West. Her reference to "the casual observer" could be read as a reference to the Western tourists who lack the power to read the other. This, in turn, gives Bell a space for self-fashioning and allows her to present herself as a true traveller, whose interest in the other offers valuable knowledge. She learned techniques for measuring and projecting maps before travelling to the Middle East (Bishop 257). While there, Bell "ventured far beyond the familiar routes of tourists" and mapped and photographed several sites (Blumberg 596). "Gertrude Bell Archive at Newcastle University" has digitized thousands of photos taken by her throughout her travels (Blumberg 603). The concept of mapping in the context of British travel writing in general—and Gertrude Bell's travel narratives in particular—refers not only to the literal mapping of the regions traversed, but also to the figurative mapping of the customs and manners of the people encountered, which are portrayed as distinct from those of the traveller.

Moreover, the space provided by travel writing allows Bell to engage in self-reflexivity and re-evaluate the British hierarchical evaluative system. In the following passage, she contemplates civilization upon her visit to the Maidens' Fortress:

At *Ḳasr el Banāt*, the Maidens' Fortress as the Syrians call it, I was impressed more than at any other place with the high level that social order had reached in the *Jebel Zāwiyyeh*, for here were security and wealth openly displayed, and leisure wherein to cultivate the arts; and as I rode away I fell to wondering whether civilisation is indeed, as we think it in Europe, a resistless power sweeping forward and carrying upon its crest those who are apt to profit by its advance; or whether it is not rather a tide that ebbs and flows, and in its ceaseless turn and return touches ever at the flood the self-same place upon the shore. (Bell 252)

Awed by the open display of "security and wealth" and excellent "social order" she witnesses, Bell questions the concept of Western superiority and its related binaristic formulations, which present the self as the embodiment of civilization and relegate the other to the realm of inferiority. Indeed, Bell's ambivalent subject position offers her an alternative outlook to what has been

prescribed by the Orientalist paradigm of her time. Her saying “whether it is not rather a tide” seems more like a rhetorical question, intending to make an important assertion here.

There are other times when Bell valorises the East at the expense of the West in her travel book. For example, she expresses admiration for “the independence of Arab women and the freedom with which marriages are contracted between different tribes of equal birth” (95). Bell even allows for self-exoticism in a dialogue with an Arab man, thus: “He questioned me acutely on our customs, down to the laws of marriage and divorce. He was vastly entertained at the English rule that the father should pay a man for marrying his daughter (so he interpreted the habit of giving her a marriage portion), and we laughed together over the absurdity of the arrangement” (108). Interestingly, in this passage, the exoticizing gaze is reversed, and it is an Arab man who finds Western culture as aberrant. This recalls Irene Kamberidou’s point that, in women’s travel writing, sometimes “the power relations inscribed into the traveller’s gaze” is undermined (385). And more importantly, in the quoted passage, Bell shows her agreement with the Arab man by choosing “we” to refer to themselves, saying they “laughed together over the absurdity of the arrangement,” which recalls Victor Segalen’s concept of “exoticism in reverse” (2002, 41). It is worth mentioning that Bell’s unmarried status also plays a role in shaping her independent views of the institution of marriage, both in Britain and the Middle East; it allows her to engage more freely with the subject and voice her opinion more openly. Praising the other could also be looked at as a strategy adopted by Bell to direct a criticism at home and its value, and thus as a pressing call for change. Although Bell’s Englishness at times makes her identify with British imperialism and norms, her gender status in Victorian, male dominated society places her in a position to question the home’s institutions of marriage and accordingly “the subversion of cultural codes” (2009, 4), as Béatrice Bijon and Gerard Gâcon would argue.

Bell’s representation of Islam also showcases her receptivity to difference which refutes the Orientalist outlook of her time. She narrates her visit to the Great Mosque at the time for the afternoon prayer. She says, “I left my shoes” and followed the people and describes the scene thus:

the Faithful made their first prostrations before they entered the Mosque. I followed them in and watched them fall into long lines down nave and aisle from east to west. All sorts and grades of men stood side by side, from the learned doctor in a fur-lined coat and silken robes to the raggedest camel driver from the desert, for Islām is the only republic in the world and recognizes no distinctions of wealth or rank. (Bell 2001, 166)

Bell daringly describes Islam as “the only republic in the world” which “recognizes no distinctions of wealth or rank”. In the mosque, all the hierarchical lines demarcating people based on education, wealth, and the like are shattered in an embracing acceptance of humanity and equality. Her emphasis on people from different classes of society gathering to worship their God side by side gives

the lie to the Orientalist denigrating images of Islam. As Said asserts, Islam has been stereotyped and represented as a “heresy” (67), an imitation of the true religion of Christianity, and as such a “threat to Christianity” (75). He adds that Muhammad, and by extension Islam, were considered as the “epitome of lechery, debauchery, sodomy, and a whole battery of assorted treacheries” (Said 63). As explained above, Bell’s relativistic outlook on the cultural differences encountered in the contact zone in Syria not only questions but sometimes even refutes the hegemonic Orientalist outlooks towards the other. This receptive perspective recalls Angie Blumberg’s take on Bell’s subject position in her travels as “a hybrid or marginalized one,” which allowed her to create “a place for herself at the edges” (2021, 237). This hybrid subject position granted Bell a receptive approach that appreciates cultural diversity.

## Conclusion

*Syria* documents various ways through which Bell responds to the cultural differences she encounters while travelling in Syria. There are many instances where Bell uses the Western hierarchical paradigm to evaluate the different customs of the Arabs. This paradigm does not read difference as diversity; rather, it translates difference as an aberration and accordingly relegates it to the realm of inferiority. Said convincingly argues that Western writers draw from “perspectives, ideologies, and guiding theses” of the Orientalist archive (177). Bell’s mapping of cultural difference through this Orientalist binaristic framework implicitly and even explicitly caters to her countries’ various imperialistic agendas in the region. Yet, Bell’s narrative is not a monolithic text. As a Western woman travelling in a colonized context, Bell is regarded as both the self (British/race) and the other (woman/gender) and as such occupies an ambivalent position. This uncertain subject position affects women’s representation of the other in their narratives, which, as travel writing scholars rightly maintain, are “multi-voiced and at times contradictory” (Bijon and Gacon 2).

Bell meticulously weaves various discourses in *Syria* and adeptly uses the space of her narrative to voice her various concerns. There are times when she uses her narrative as a platform through which she engages in dialogues with readers back home by presenting cases of self-exoticism and asking for a revisionist outlook on self and its values. There are other times when she employs her narrative as a space for self-fashioning and promotes her image as that of an experienced traveller whose sharp eyes yield important information about the other. And more interestingly, there are instances where she shatters the demarcation barriers between the self and other in a receptive attitude which appreciates difference as diversity and a valuable alternative to the version she knew at home. Indeed, Bell offers a nuanced portrayal of cultural difference in *Syria*, shaped by her ambivalent subject position, which creates a productive space where multiple voices disrupt the dominant discourse.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT: Research data available in the text.

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Submission date: 13/12/2024

Acceptance date: 06/06/2025

Section Editor: Magali Sperling Beck