

Ideological Manifestations: An Analysis of Alexander William Kinglake's Journey to Ottoman Syria

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ABSTRACT: This paper will look into A. W. Kinglake's travel book *Eothen* (First published in 1844) focusing on the episodes of his journey concerning Greater Syria in particular in an attempt to critique it as a work of pure ideology whereby the region is portrayed as a lawless jungle dominated by oppression and violence taking into consideration the socio-political environment of the country at the time. It is a contextual reading of the text as an endeavour to point out to the author's failure in capturing the entirety of Syria's reality and in giving it justice by focusing on transient situations and magnifying them while ignoring all that is positive. Constructed upon the extremity of a utopic/dystopic society, that is of West and East, *Eothen* does not manifest any form of positive cross-cultural encounter. On the contrary, it affirms the separation between a European progressive civilized self and a degenerate other.

KEYWORDS: *Travel, Colonialism, Ideology, East, Syria*

The 19th century was undeniably an age of adventure and exploration in England. As the boundaries of the British Empire expanded, a new colonial relationship evolved between England and a number of countries that were under its political, economic and at times military hegemony making Britain an imperial nation. "Travel and its by-product travel writing, were both enabled by and essential to, both cause and effect of, the project of imperial expansionism.", writes Douglas Ivison (Ivison, 200). Under the flag of imperialism, many travellers flocked to Eastern nations driven by a patriotic duty to serve their country 'destined' to lead the world. The genre of travel writing on the East in particular became quite popular with readers that it demanded more and more productions. It offered a fascinating alternative world of sensuality and impulsivity that contrasted with mundane Victorian lifestyle.

This atmosphere encouraged ambitious writers like A. W. Kinglake, to set on a two-year trip to the Near East documenting his travels in *Eothen*; a book that would become one of the Victorian classics. In the year 1834, A.W. Kinglake visited Syria for a short period of time. In this brief stay and with limited contact with the locals, he 'managed' to penetrate the social life of the country and as a result of his observations he portrayed it as a dystopic space. This negative imagination is the most distinctive aspect of Kinglake's narrative and it monotonously recurs through *Eothen* whereby the entire geography which encompasses modern-day Turkey, Syria and Egypt is presented as a 'bad place' governed by oppression and corruption and infested with disease.

When Kinglake set on his trip across the region in the 1830s, travelling to that part of the world and documentation of such journeys had already become a wide-spread practice among the English youth who desired to widen their experience and knowledge of other cultures. This was part of the Victorian spirit of adventure and discovery. The majority of these

travellers carried with them not only their luggage through long tortuous routes but rather all the ideological preconceptions on the East and its people which they have absorbed at home. This burden they often failed to dislodge in order to interact constructively with those culturally different. Kinglake felt compelled, having political aspirations himself in joining the British parliament, to achieve what he believed a "... first-hand knowledge of the vast, sprawling old Ottoman Empire, a cockpit for contending policies of the great powers," (De Gaury, 24). *Eothen* was, therefore, composed exclusively for personal reasons. The axis of the book is Kinglake himself, the traveller hero, his inclinations and sensibilities not that of the Turks, Syrians or Egyptians he claimed to represent in the narrative (Taha, 55). This is why it comes out as an ideological construct which adheres to notions of Western racial and cultural superiority against an inferior less-developed other.

To understand why W.H. Kinglake painted such a bad image of Syria, it would be necessary to give a brief account of the region's political and economic status at the time of his arrival focusing on the position of Christians during this tumultuous time in Syria's history motivated mainly by Kinglake's effort to make their victimhood the central point of his argument. Kinglake visited Damascus, the capital of Syria, during a troubled phase of its history. Two years earlier, in 1832, the city was captured by the army of Ibrahim Basha whose father Mohammad Ali was reigning over Egypt. In Egypt, Ali was hailed as a national idol. His governance which was characterised by a series of constructive political, military, educational and economic regulations reflected positively on the welfare of the people. A revolution towards modernity was taking shape placing the country ahead of other Ottoman territories in development. To complicate the matter further, the English and the French; being the main colonial powers then were striving against each other for influence in the Near East taking advantage of the Weakness of Ottoman control over its provinces.

In 1831, the winds blew in favour of Muhammad Ali and his ambitions to occupy Syria. First, the area was almost free from military presence as the Ottomans were busy suppressing mutiny in Baghdad. Second, Damascus itself was in a state of rebellion against the Turkish Wali Salim Basha. This paper depends for historical information on this period on memoranda written by an anonymous Damascene who was working as an agent sending reports either to the Turkish authorities or some European consul. This work is one of the rare local sources where these happenings are elaborated upon in minute detail starting from the eruption of the revolution leading to the great fire. According to the memoranda, Salim Basha was dreaded by the people of the city. He was a brutal man appointed to the position of Wali to suppress mutiny which started against his predecessor, Abd Al-Raouf Basha, who attempted to collect taxes and establish order by sheer force. His short rule was bloody. When he tried to extract taxes from shop owners and minor merchants violently, they formed an alliance against him. As a result, he started attacking the city from the castle. Some women of the Qanawat neighbourhood were raped by his soldiers. Perceived as a violation of the honour of the people, this incident sparked a revolution. The heavy bombardment caused a great fire which destroyed a sizable part of the city including many of its antique markets which disappeared completely. (Spanu, 22-40) Europe, at the time, was distracted in managing the outcomes of the French revolution. All these reasons encouraged Ali to send his son Ibrahim to take over Syria which he successfully did.

Minorities, particularly Christians, supported Ibrahim Basha because his father's policies in Egypt came in favour of the Christian Copts. In him they saw a chance for improving their social status and achieving equality with Muslims. Before the Egyptian expedition, Syrian Christians and religious minorities in general were suffering dire circumstances. At best, they were treated as second-degree citizens. Laws were against them and their chances for social advancement were close to zero. The Ottoman system of governance imposed a protection tax or jizya on non-Muslims since they were not allowed to serve in the military. They were also banned from taking up official positions in public institutions. They were not trusted and generally they were considered traitors who supported European interests in the region. (Zakkar, 60-64)

The restrictions imposed on Christians appear in Kinglake's narrative as to show the suffering of religious minorities living under a totalitarian regime. Members of the clerical establishment and merchants were among the few who could lead a prosperous life. Their position allowed them to escape such punitive restrictions. This being said, the majority of Muslims who were not rich and had no direct protection from influential notables suffered in a similar manner for they were also extorted to pay taxes and they often had to send their sons to faraway lands to forcefully participate in the never-ending wars of the Ottomans. Many had to work for the Bashas and Aghas for scraps to support their families. They even had to mortgage their properties in order to survive. The revolution of 1831, reflected gravely on the Christians even more than it did on the Muslim population. Since it was a state of complete chaos, robbers spread throughout the city forcing them to pay to the Aghas to recruit men to protect their properties. This added to their already frail financial capacities. Even churches had to utilize parts of their revenues to employ guards to avoid theft. So, when the army of Ibrahim Basha approached, it was a sigh of relief.

Kinglake describes Damascus in a short chapter of around ten pages only as a multiple of momentary sketches photos taken by a camera. These sketches are incidents which the author claims to have experienced and do not offer in any way a detailed description of the city famous for its beautiful orchards, carefully ornamented houses, antique markets, open cafes and numerous mosques and churches. Kinglake was not interested in writing the sort of travel narrative that describes Eastern cities in detail any way. It was a treaded road that no longer excites English readers. In the introduction he declared his purpose of writing as to create impressions of the places he visited and the peoples he met as they have been imprinted upon his mind, by their effect on his consciousness and by the emotions they aroused in him. He saw that first impressions were enough to give a truthful insight into the oriental character and way of life. The characters he portrayed were often types not individuals for Easterners had not reached such state of individuality. One of these characters is the oppressed Christian who sees in the European a saviour that would protect him from tyranny. In one incident for example he meets an anonymous Christian being harassed in the road and forced to walk in a canal full of mud and dirt. The poor fellow looks up to him to save him from this predicament. Here comes to the fore the white man's burden to protect the weak and oppressed.

Kinglake played the role of an observer while minimally interacting with the people of the city especially Muslims. He did not visit any known landmark be it an archaeological site or a famous building. Therefore, the chapter comes out as lacking noticeable scenic descriptions.

Shortly after his arrival, he goes to one of the monks of Damascus, residing at the Franciscan Sanctuary who tells him that there is nothing in the whole of Damascus worth seeing like the cellars of the sanctuary where the great wine of Syria is stored. Later he describes meeting with the monks of Palestine in Virgin Mary's covenant in Nazareth. Wine becomes an important element in the narrative. With each episode, the drinking of wine turns into a ritual of revival for feelings of affiliation between him and the Christians of the holy land and at the same time a validation of difference with the 'water-drinking infidel' Muslims.

It is useful to mention here that Kinglake came to the city between 1834 and 1835; two years after the Egyptian reign was established yet in *Eothen*, his portrayal of the Damascene Christians is more akin to the era before Ibrahim Basha's rule. There is no mention of Ibrahim Basha's reforms though they were too obvious to be overlooked. This discrepancy could mean that when our writer visited Syria in 1834, these reforms were not implemented yet or that he purposefully neglected them because they were a positive step forward for a country sinking in turmoil and depression and this did not suit the overall dystopic mood of the narrative.

Discrimination and injustice become the emblems of the geography of Ottoman Syria, a landscape of death where the plague spreads coming from Egypt. In fact, the fear of infection accompanies our traveller from the very beginning of his journey. Once he sets foot in Ottoman territory, he is faced with the plague threat and cautioned to be careful. During the 18th and 19th centuries, the plague had become a frequent visitor to the Ottoman lands while it became less frequent and less wide-spread in Europe. This along with the natural tendency in the West to attribute what is good to itself and what is bad to foreign sources, the Ottoman landscape became the origin of diseases and infestations. (Jones, 117,118) In *Eothen*, the episode on Cairo takes the plague as its main theme and is loaded with images of dying people and funerals to the point that the writer imagines those alive are one with the dead. The disease is no longer separate from the people or the geography. They are all unified in an orgy of suffering and demise.

Kinglake not only focused on what is negative in Greater Syria's social life. He also attempted to marginalize its culture as well. This strategy of negation appears again in the chapter on Lebanon. For instance, his account of Beirut is void of any description of the nature of Lebanon or its people and focuses exclusively on the life and adventures of Lady Hester Stanhope; an English woman who had been residing in the country for a long time and whose interactions with the Arab tribes seems to have endowed her with an exaggerated fame back in England. She had been even named 'The Queen of the Desert'. The chapter, which is supposed to be on Kinglake's experience of Lebanon is titled after Lady Stanhope. It is hard to believe that the only worth-mentioning events which our traveller witnessed there were his meetings with the old English lady and that in the whole of Lebanon, there was nothing worth describing! For Lebanon has been always appreciated for the beauty of its landscape and the metropolitan lifestyle of its inhabitants. He starts the chapter saying, "I received a hospitable welcome at Beyrout, from Europeans as well as the Syrian Christians, and I soon discovered that in all society the standing topic of interest was an English woman (Lady Hester Stanhope) who lived in an old covenant on the Lebanon range," (Kinglake, 78). Here, the narrative shifts towards the English lady and her achievements becoming a dialogue with

one's self not an exploration of another culture. The woman occupies the central position on which the events revolve at this point.

To conclude, although the circumstances portrayed by Kinglake concerning Syria are true and happened in actuality, they do not sum up the country's character, for in normal conditions in every society there is the good and the bad, let alone a society under occupation. And to pass an absolute judgement on a people and their culture without taking the time or effort to live among them in a genuine experience is no good. Saturated with a racist bigoted ideology, Kinglake chose to create a bleak image of the country by focusing on peculiar transient events using narrative techniques like magnification, reduction and negation. As a result, the book failed to reflect the totality of social life of the place and left an impression of it as a doomed environ where only what is evil and corrupt thrives ultimately emphasizing the common Victorian ideological assumption that England is a better society and that its culture is superior.

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