Unpacking the Bags:

Cultural Literacy and Cosmopolitanism in Women’s Travel Writings about the Islamic Republic 1979-2002

By

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I hereby declare that the work embodied in this thesis is the result of original research and has not been submitted for a higher degree in any other University or Institution

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Patricia Johnson
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Elise Buhler Dunn
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Synopsis

The genre of travel writing is widely recognised as providing useful insights into the ways that discourse is used to frame the interplay between self, place and Other. Recently, it has been suggested that these writings inform the development of global citizenry literacy because, as cultural texts, they recount an engagement in, and with, cosmopolitanism while informing readerships about the foreign. However, it is important to remember that these writings appear in context and the authors of such texts craft discourse to construct sociocultural imaginings of the self and Other – of a journey told from a particular viewpoint, in a particular time, to a particular audience.

Through an analysis of the travel writings of four Western women who travelled to Iran in a particular historical moment – after the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and until Iran was positioned as part of the ‘Axis of Evil’ in 2002 – this thesis examines the ways in which these authors script their gaze through discourse. The author/narrator is an aesthetic cosmopolitan figure, who casts her gaze from a particular ‘viewing platform’ informed by Western discourse and accumulated cultural capital. Attention is paid in this thesis to the ways in which these writers discursively frame their narratives according to the ‘I’ of the gendered experiencing self who focuses the ‘eye’ (or gaze) through a lens oriented by their cosmopolitical imagination or worldview. Notions of authenticity, fear, danger and threat appeared as recurring themes in each of the selected texts and operate to construct place as political, self as heroic and the journey as quest. The authors engaged aesthetic dimensions of time and space to position the liminal in their narratives and, in so doing mobilised discourses of gender and power. Notions of the liminal were employed to describe Iran’s physical and social scapes to position discursive spaces in the texts that were used to affirm traveller identity, build cultural capital and, in the process, make political comments.

The texts revealed that while the authors commonly used metaphor and trope drawn from inherited Western discourses such as Orientalism, postcolonialism and imperialism to provide authority, they also drew from the currently circulating discourses of gender equity, human rights and liberal democracy; all of which
foreground notions of freedom. However, these currently circulating discourses, when combined with dimensions of heroism, were found to work in the tradition of inherited Western discourse – to authorise the narrator voice and legitimise the ways that self and Other are constructed. The central argument this thesis makes is that Western travel writing is restricted in its contribution to global literacy because these texts reveal more about Western ways of seeing the world and about the author as cosmopolitan than they do about the foreign.
One January morning, then, I set out; not on a very adventurous journey, perhaps, but on one that should take me to an unexploited country whose very name, printed on my luggage labels, seemed to distil a faint, far aroma in the chill air of Victoria Station: PERSIA. It was quite unnecessary for me to have those labels printed. They did not help the railway authorities or the porters in the least. But I enjoyed seeing my fellow passengers squint at the address, fellow-passengers whose destination was Müren or Cannes, and if I put my bag in the rack myself I always managed to let the label dangle, a little orange flag of ostentation.

Vita Sackville-West

Passenger to Teheran