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The Female Voice: The *'exotic'* and the *'other'* in Lesley Kitchen Lababidi's *Paddle Your Own canoe: An American Woman Passage Into Nigeria*

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Abstract

Female travel writing, a relatively new phenomenon compared to the male travel writing, rejects masculinist tendencies often associated with the male accounts. As against male traveloques, major female travel accounts from Victorian period onwards have rejected the mapping of women by male writers to only domesticity and the home. The female travel writer shows that the woman can also travel, experience, contribute to society, and mapped alien places and exotic people. It is against this backdrop that this paper examines the perspective of a female travel writer on and about her alien encounters: Lesley Kitchen Lababidi's Paddle Your Own Canoe: An American Woman's passage into Nigeria. The study employs feminist literary theory in the analysis of the text. It also explores the elements that come to shape the relationship, behaviour and interaction of structures – between the alien and familiar encounters of the writer. The study resolves that Lababidi, through her alien encounters and as a feminist presents her commitments to the emancipation of women and the general wellbeing of all.

KEYWORDS : EXOTIC, OTHER, FEMINISM, ALIEN.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Literature, of all the disciplines promoting the cause of feminism namely; Sociology, Psychology, Linguistics and Theology; literature contributes more to the promotion of the feminist cause. The field of literary studies and Literature contributes to the advancement of feminism in the way women's writing addresses the condition of women in the world. Women's writing is thus a reaction against society's conventional beliefs or attitudes regarding women; and against the way women are portrayed in male writing. As such, women's writing is a re-writing of their own lives and history, from their own perspectives. Just as the world of literature is an extension of the writer's experience and outlook; this paper is about how aspects of a life, in this case travel encounters are presented in Lesley Kitchen Lababidi's *Paddle Your Own Canoe: An American Woman's Passage into Nigeria* (1997).

Lababidi, inspired by the new vision of women which feminism has provoked, seek to project her experiences from the woman's point of view. This is with a view to offer "exploration of strictly feminine reality" (firestone, 1996:167), and a fresh perspective on women as "self–actualizing" and not necessarily "dependent on men' (Martins, 1971:33). This however varies, with respect to the writer's ideological inclinations, values and world-views, socio-cultural and religious backgrounds which influence their visions. These life narratives of women's travails and alien encounters present worlds that are "exotic", compared to the writers' native encounters.

Exploring the complex structures that make up the conditions of women in foreign land, Lababidi present her encounters and relationships with the people she met (friends and neighbours). As female travel writer, she explains both the favourable and unfavourable conditions of her 'exotic' encounters with the 'Other'. For Lababidi, Middle East and Africa particularly Nigeria, are what James Clifford (1997) called "field sites" that open onto complex histories of dwelling, travelling and cosmopolitan experiences. Thus, this study through the application of feminism, intends to show how Lababidi depicts the exotic in her travel encounters in a new environment (as woman) against the backdrop of the cultural and religious differences back home. This she was able to present through her gendered/feminist ideology and the mapping of the self and the other.

1.2 Travel Writing

Travel, according to Clifford (1997:66), "is an inclusive term embracing a range of more or less voluntary practices of leaving *home* to go to some other places". Lababidi is one example of female travel writers who travel to other places far from home for the taste of something different and away from the constraint of the family. Generally, for centuries travelling takes place often for the purpose of gaining material, spiritual, scientific benefits, or a taste of something different and serves as a means of escape (for women) from the conditions they are accustomed to in their cultures. It involves obtaining knowledge or having "encounters" that are exciting, edifying, pleasurable, estranging and broadening. Thus, according to Mary Louise Pratt (1997), Western travellers, male or female (consciously or unconsciously) write in order to depict an assumed superiority, whether in culture or values, between them and what they encounter during their journeys. For that, both male and female travellers come face to face with worldly encounters different from home.

The complex interplay between self and the world and between the empirical and the sentimental, signals the beginning of the richest period of women travel writing, the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In the past, the list of established writers was dominated by male writers. By nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, there arose interest in women's travel accounts creating opportunity for women travel writers. Whereas male travellers are mostly interested in the presentation of adventures and the mapping of colonisation, imperialism and masculinity in travel, while women travel writers were interested in those experiences and encounters that affect them as individuals, and not as colonisers or imperialists. This way, what women map in their travel accounts differ in many ways with that of men.

Samuel Hynes, in Blonton (2002), argues that travel writing by women emphasises on the theme of self-discovery, thereby producing what is called a "dual plane work with a strong realistic surface…" (2002:21): although the point should be made that travel writers, both male and female undertake the journey in search of fresh experiences, self-understanding and identity. Espey (2005:67) maintains that women, unlike men, usually travel in search of something different from home – "self-realization and fulfilment that has to do with certain reasons such as family breakdown, spiritual emptiness in their lives, and a thirst for the unusual". On this view, Shirley Foster states that women travel writers were inspired perhaps by the sense of escape; that is escape from the norms of their societies. In their account, these writers inevitably compare their home countries to those they visit in order to differentiate and understand the new encounters and individuals in the light of those at home. They negotiate the role of male and female in their travel narratives, and by so doing concentrate and focus "more on the relationship between the individual and the societies through which she travels" (Hulme and Young, 2002:237).

Travel writing whether by a female or male are filled with comparisons between the home and away (alien). In documenting their new homes, travel writers include their gaze, ideology and chunks of historical data to show the effects of their presence in a foreign land, and by this, they expose "the arbitrariness of truth and the absence of norms" in their new environment (Blonton, 2002:27). Such a formulation implies that Lababidi position herself as informed outsider, reporting her encounters to readers and maintaining an air of difference by offering excessively direct or idiosyncratic translation. This way, the accounts of women

travellers of the twentieth century mirror the struggle of modern women trying to find a way of adapting and realizing themselves in a changing world (from being inferior to participant).

The construction of the narratives of Lababidi's travel account is necessarily a product of a particular time, place and culture of Nigeria in the 50's – 90's. She did not construct her writing by the monuments and landmarks that guidebooks mark, as with other female writers of the past, thus exposing the uniqueness of the writer, the region and its religious and traditional beliefs. Rather, she describes the everyday life of Nigerians and how she adapts in order to fit in with it as an exotic and alien way of life. On this view, this study negotiates the similarities and differences between the self and the other, between the society at home and the new and exotic one encountered by a woman travel account.

1.3 About the Authors

Born in Denver, Colorado in the early nineteen fifties, Lesley Kitchen Lababidi has lived over twentyfive years in Africa with her husband, Maan and their children Omar, Saadiah and Zane. Lababidi a writer, photographer, philanthropist, wife and mother, lover of Africa has stay flexible and open to distant roads whether trail or paved road. She has written five books and numerous articles about Nigeria, Egypt and Syria about a variety of subjects including culture, travel and traditional crafts. She is also a marathon cyclist and desert explorer. Paddle Your Own Canoe: An American Woman's Passage into Nigeria (1997) is her first book. Others include Cairo Streets Stories: Exploring the City's Status, Squares, Bridges, Gardens and Sidewalk Cafés (2008), Cairo the Family Guide (2006), Cairo Practical Guide (7th Ed, 2011) and Silent No more: Special Needs People in Egypt (2002). She loves quilting, reading poetry, studying Egypt and Nigeria while stuttering through Arabic and Hausa.

1.4 Feminist literary theory

The choice of feminist literary theory for this study is informed by the belief that female works are necessarily presentations in feminine nature; and by that is meant that texts written by women are basically 'subjectified objects'- embodying the heart and mind of a female writer. This way, female writers, whether of fictional or non-fictional works, pass across their encounters as women in a largely patriarchal society – one where their roles and expectations are determined by the state institution, which itself is man's fraudulent construction. Feminism (in general) is a theory that is obsessed with the politics of gender equity; with the

need to fight for women's right in the society. However, it has a history of female political struggle, emancipation and equality (Mannir I. 2013).

Feminism is an ideology that is gender based; and although different scholars view it from different ideological planes, the emphasis on the feminine gender is predominant. It is a theory that advocates for political, economic and social equality between sexes, even as it is not single and unified due to variations in class, geographical and social bearing. Toril moi (1986) attempts to offer the distinction between the cognate terms which are central to feminist literary theory, thus stating that "feminism is a political position, femaleness a matter of biology, and feminity is a set of culturally defined characteristics" (1986:204). Elaine Showalter in "Towards a Feminist Poetics" (2000) introduced the term "gynocritics" to describe the kind of criticism feminists should be doing. Thus, "gynotext", for her, should be the focus of a feminist's attention – that is, narratives which deal particularly with women's experience in a patriarchal society.

There are today, however, many shades of feminist theory, as many scholars and theorists look at the theory from different point of view. Even with that, its central emphasis on the female remains its core tenet. Any reading of a female work, therefore, must involve recognition of the subjectified narrator – one whose thoughts and experiences are seminal in any interpretation. It is for this reason that Lababidi as a female travel writer must be understood as a woman trying to express her encounters in societies that are male dominated. Considering that it is through them that the experiences in the texts under study are seen.

The presence and importance of the writer is felt more in life narratives, as it is through them that writers communicate their assumed "real experiences". Unlike in fictional works, where the reader is tasked with the duty of creating a link between the characters presented and the life of the author, in travelogues, for example, it is the writer that is the subject of narration (subject-writer). What is then left is the analysis of how the writer's psyche and character inform the account of events and characters presented. Life narrators, are often conscious of their presence in their stories, and only have to call upon the reader to recognise what they present/narrate as their own personal experiences.

1.5 Self and Other

The terms "self" and "other" are essential to the understanding of identity. Identity is a construct that is deployed to differentiate oneself from another, particularly the attempt to

demonstrate an element of superiority. The travel literature, variously called exploration or travel writing, traveller's tales, narrative of discovery and literature of travel, is also a literature of "contact", in which the European explorers travellers, produced the non-Euro-America as a representational other, by presenting alien landscape and life in ways different from their own. Bello-Kano (1999: 98) states that

> It was in the early European account of other lands, people and way of life that a sense of cultural difference was mediated, codified, constructed, and as we might say today 'fabricated', as a particular linguistically-based, discursively unified, naturally-given, historically fortified narrativisation of (other) history, difference, and being (a matter of fact distinction, in other words between European and non-European, the familiar and the alien, the superior and inferior) (1999:98).

On this view Fabian (1983) argues that the creation of travel and ethnographic discourse, of the non-European as the other, involves homogenizing and reifying them. This is the process which allows narrators to claim the status of authoritative factual observers and thus "mark the other outside the dialogue (in which the other is) posited (predicted), as that which contrasts with the personas of the participant in the dialogue" (1983:85). In understanding oneself, therefore, the self needs to be with the other.

The German Philosopher, George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, in his work *In Phenomenology of Spirit (1931;1997)*, views the other as a component of self-consciousness. He uses a story about how two people meet to demonstrate his position, where he states that when two "self-consciousness" meet, they can choose to ignore each other or become enchanted each by the other. When the "I" sees another "I" and finds its own power compromised, it ignores the other or sees it as a threat, thereby resulting to a clash of identity between the self and the other. The other, according to this formulation, is one distinct, or rather different from oneself.

In the same vein, the "other" in racial relationship, mutuality may be possible between the "self" and the "other", in some cases. In relations between countries of the west and the orient (non-Europeans), the concept of the other can be a problem of "orientalism" or of silencing the subaltern. Here, the west is seen as "rational, peaceful, liberal, logical, capable of holding values, without natural suspicion", while the orient has "none" (Igbe 2009:49). It is based on this assumption that the self is to endow the world with all of its value and meaning; and it is the enormity of the task imposed upon it that accounts for the various modernist evasions and failures (Blonton, 2002).

No wonder the other holds sway in European writings on non-Europeans. As European, Lababidi present her encounters in relation to what constitutes the near images of the sovereign "self" and that of the "other". As member of a superior race and culture, she tends to see chaos, crime and illiteracy with the other. The self the travellers write about, is also turned into "other" as the narration unfolds. Thus, who they think they are when writing a text is already another self, as they can only know and write about themselves from a limited perspective, as members of a particular society (Igbe: 2009). It is pertinent, therefore, to note that the concept of the self and other depends on how and who uses the term, as the self can be the other, and vice versa.

1.6The Exotic Encounters in Paddle

Lababidi's travelogue, like any other modern travel account, records her cultural encounters in alien environments. The text reveals a contrast between the narrator's alien environment and that of home, thereby showing how encounters are appreciated and accepted by foreigners, or otherwise. With differing practices, she assumes a transparency of representation and reliability of information as provided in the text, while frequently revealing her own derivative and self-reflexive attributes. A reading of *Paddle* shows that the subject-writer is constantly in a conflict, between that of her ideas of home and what she had come across in new and distant places. The story in *Paddle* is the writer's attempt to understand herself (as a woman) and identity through her new and exotic neighbours and environment.

To achieve this, Lababidi creates her own reality by giving account of her voyage of discovery as a "self" and a "woman" from one event to another with/of the "other". As a Syrian merchant's wife, Lababidi presents her observations of the new/exotic environment, beginning with that of Beirut, where she first settles. As she observes:

> Each day presenting another adventure, sometimes of significance and grandeur; at other times of a slow, steady learning process…the streets of Beirut introduced me to a beautiful and ugly city (36).

The above introduces Lababidi to a different world with different language, culture, religion and dressing. Her first encounter is with the apartment, toilet and surrounding, which are small compared to her own back in Houston. Her encounters are also through her demonstration of many indicators of real social, economic, political, environmental and legal activities. One of the indicators is her acceptance of being part of the Lababidi's family, to fit

in with the unusual, she takes charge of the family house when Um-Walid (her mother in-law) is away. Her quest for the unusual however makes her defy all warnings from her relatives. She feels it is something she can handle, even though she does not understand the complexities involved and the encounters awaiting her. She reports her confusion on the difference between theory and practical experience when she wrote:

> I wonder what I would have done if questions were raised such as: what do Muslims believe? Must Christian women convert to Islam? If there are children, what religion would they be thought? What right do women have in the Middle East? Does the Lababidi family speak English or should I learn to deal with the expectations of his family on a daily basis?... I would not have listened. I had to go (8)

Lababidi's concern and confusion foretells what she is about to face in the later part of the story. The questions she raises above is answered when she reaches Beirut and the loud sound of the call to Fajr prayer (an early morning prayer) disrupts her early morning sleep. Further answers come to her when she meets the Sheikh, the man who marries her off to Maan, who, according to her, is an oil rich Gulf Arab that spends large sums of money on wine and women outside his country, but maintain strict fundamental Islamic behaviour while at home. The answer to what will become of her faith when she marries a Muslim hits her in the face when she is asked to repeat certain Arabic verses; to her (in a very confused state) it is an experience she will never forget.

Her greatest fear, must she convert to Islam before she can get married to Maan? She expresses her deep concern when she keeps saying "I don't want to be a Muslim" (30-31). Maan explains to her that saying the words does not make her renounce her faith, solves the problem. In this she finds comfort and is willing to repeat the verses after the Shiekh so as to complete the marriage ritual. One condition however is that she has to change her name, but does not have to practice Islam, and this she finds acceptable. Changing her name thus shows her first sacrifice in marriage, as she is even willing to sacrifice more. Her next experience is the right of women in Beirut and their role as devoted housewives who perform all the domestic activities at home. One thing that strike her more is how women must depend on men for everything.

Another challenging encounter is that of communication in a society where most people speak Arabic. As an outsider, she at first finds it difficult to communicate, even with her husband's parents and immediate relatives. To cover the communication gap, she resorts to learning little Arabic and in situations when she does not know what to say in Arabic she

communicates using sign language. This she has to do in order to respond to the demands of her in-laws and her new society.

In Nigeria, the Nigerian experience is entirely different; at least, she is in a society where most people can speak some English, though most of them are poor. The communication problem, in Nigeria, is therefore no longer a major problem. Unlike other Euro-American travellers, who claim that participating or belonging to African culture is impossible, Lababidi breached that idea and enjoyed her exotic world and experiences. Being in a new culture, Lababidi embraces this view out of love and loyalty to her husband who she has to support in every way possible in a culture alien to both of them. To succeed and conquer her new environment, lababidi embraces the theory that self-advancement only occurs when there is self-negation. That is, to gain passage into the world of others, one must become one of them; even though what we can see in the text is the presentation of encounters by an alien, an expatriate and an observer, and not a member of the Nigerian society who accepts and shares the same culture and practice:

> I was an expatriate. I was an observer. I was a permanent resident in Nigeria because my husband, civil engineer-cum-businessman, had the work permit. I was an American but firmly ensconced in a cross-culture marriage. Nigeria's problems were mine, but not really. Focused on acceptance as the comfort of affirmation and as a basic human need … Movement of people presents changes, sometimes harsh, other time evolutional, but always there is a need for acceptance (73-74).

Lababidi's priority while in Nigeria is always about how as a woman she can adapt and accept her encounters, to a certain degree. She tries to search for things familiar to what she left back home, and in the way she accepts many of her alien encounters and surroundings. For her, there is need to cross the barrier from being labelled an "outsider" to "belonging" in the society (74). This way, she accepts living with Nigerian problems in Lagos, there learning to live with the presence of mosquitoes, and adapting to lack of water and electricity. It is in Nigeria that she learns the habit of saving water in tanks for daily usage, as well as boiling drinking water and sometimes waiting for the tap to start running again. This scene is captured succinctly in the text when lababidi narrates how her servants report lack of water: "no watah, Mam. De watah no come. I did not want to believe him. The only course of action we had was to wait, an exercise I had practise well in the past years" (118). She further laments on the lack of constant electricity:

> When the electricity was jerked from our use, it was like a slap in the face. A roar of anguished and disappointed voices blurted through the heavy air. 'NEPA' don quench, we bellowed in educated frustration…At night and after the unified outcry and in my mind's eye, I could see the fortunate people hurry with flashlight to their generators to turn the key while we, the lightless, scurried in unison to find our candles so

> conveniently placed in daytime. In domino effect one loud roar preceded the next until the night was a rumble of clamouring generators (117-120).

Moving forward, Lababidi reports how she has to adapt to the noise coming from the streets. She complains of how her silence is always disrupted by the noise of young children who strolled lazily on the streets shouting the names of the stuffs they are selling. These children are either selling oranges or banana from a tray perfectly balanced on their heads. This to her is an experience worth recounting. Another source of noise comes from cars and old trucks on the streets, as she states:

> I had watched an entire street culture developed in less than a year. It had started with one successfully parked truck and containers …. Then another and another, some abandoned and some full of goods. The early morning's silence was broken with the turn of the ignition key screeching alive the heavy truck engine. With pedals pumping the roar brought to life these poorly maintained giants intruding upon the silent shadows of dawn (88).

The evenings also present a new experience to Lababidi, as she recounts how the sound of barefooted children song keeps her company. She at first considered these children songs as noise, but later accepted them because of the message they carry. She, thus, become a participant and always loved listening to the children as they voice out their wishes and fears. These songs convey how the children wish their skin colour could change to white, like that of the foreigners. Lababidi enjoys and appreciates the children songs and even repeats after them out of fun: "Oyinbo Peppeh, If you eat Peppeh you go yellow Mamma" a catchy tune (76). She finds herself clapping along with them and smiling when they giggled at the end of each refrain

While in Nigeria, she also faces the dilemma of a communication medium due to the fact that the country is so diverse and blessed with over 300 languages. She tries as much as possible to learn pidgin as a form of Nigerian English and Hausa in order to communicate with the indigenous people. Her interaction with Alh Audu and his people makes her understand the importance of the structure of Hausa greetings, which is different from the meaningless "Hi" and "Hello" in the English language. Unlike "Hi" and "Hello", "Ranka ya dade" means may your life be prolonged, which is more of a prayer. She also learns some words in pidgin not only to communicating with her servants, but also for use in the market place.

The street of Kofo Abayomi in Lagos is not left out, an important street where she spends her time learning and observing exotic and new ways of life, ways entirely different from hers.

As a foreigner, the tree which grew in her compound symbolises the woman struggles to compliment/being equal and her husband's struggle in the flour mill, as the tree survives different types of cruelty. It symbolises the cruelty of the Europeans to Nigerians, how Nigerians survive the cruelty of Europeans and are haunted and adored by the Europeans for their talent and economic abundance; it is also a symbol of how women survive the cruelty meted out to them by men.

Lababidi leaves Nigeria with unforgettable memories, though she conforms to some, others remain alien. Such are her encounters in world so exotic/different and around people and cultures so strange. She did not for once forget that she is a woman, as she understands her encounters from a woman's perspective. She finds herself battling with a new race and culture entirely different from her own. The text presents how the subject-writer adapts and enjoy exotic experiences. Issues such as customs, rituals, language, history and religion are what Lababidi has to deal with in societies far away from home. The understanding of the new encounters depends on the old ones, since it is the coming together of the two encounters that will give the reader an idea of how an encounter can qualify as new and *exotic*.

1.7 Conclusion

Reading Lesley Kitchen Lababidi's *Paddle Your Own Canoe; An American Woman Passage into Nigeria* allows the reader to assess how women in patriarchal societies especially of mixed marriage are represented. The understanding of exotic encounters is seminal with how travel writers whether men or women map up another space. The intention is almost always about presenting a differentiated perspective of home and away. The study examined how the writer presents her *exotic* encounters vis-à-vis the *self* and the *other*. As with all female writers, Lababidi seems shy, reserved and awkward in her new setting. As a foreigner she describes herself in such a way that conveys to the reader that she is aware of her unusual appearance in a new country.

Lababidi seem more aware of the 'gaze' as she evaluates and observe the natives, culture, environment and societal norms. Her overall encounter between the *self* and the *other* suggest, the *self* to be (herself) the role and place of Euro-Americans and superiority in the African society. While the *other* (Africans and Asians/Arab) as inferior beings. The self contributes to the wellbeing and furtherance of the other and his nation. The travel writer uses simple English, pidgin and a little Hausa language to bridge the cultural divide, which is also an essential reason that creates the relationship between them and the natives.

However, this female writer and the focus of travel writing on minute instance of humour and anecdotal accounts are evidence of a shared quality of humanness. The narrative consist of a collection of memories, encounters and future hopes. The presentation by the writer of public disturbance (noise) is another instance of exotic encounter with the other in a world full of illiteracy and lack of organisation; Lababidi could hear the mixture of horns, footsteps, greetings, a haphazard beat and vibration of the city that make her dance to the exotic sound of the *other*. Moreso, Paddle symbolises a quest for survival and adventure by an American woman, through her careful observation of natives and their environment. Thus, this study occupies a central position in revealing through the perspective of Paddle, how women can actually facilitate not only their quests for self-fulfilments, but their contribution as well, to nation-building. Lababidi being a travel writer, present how her gender is affected in all aspect of life in the world especially in an exotic/alien/new world, also as a woman in a mixed-marriage.

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