

Gertrude Bell's Persian Pictures through the Lens of Orientalism: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract:

Western literary and academic traditions have long constructed the East through a lens of exoticism and inferiority. Gertrude Bell's Persian Pictures exemplifies this orientalist tradition, aligning with Edward Said's critical framework on how the West imagines the East. While Bell's work has been studied for its historical and political dimensions, there is limited critical engagement with how her travel writing perpetuates orientalist discourse through metaphor and narrative style. This paper aims to analyze Persian Pictures through intertextual and orientalist lenses, highlighting the literary mechanisms that reinforce Western superiority and Eastern otherness. According to the study, Bell's terminology portrays the East as inherently hostile, socially inactive, and spiritually desolate. In line with Said's idea of the Orient as the inferior "Other," her portrayals focus on dehumanizing imagery, likening nomads to animals and characterizing Eastern landscapes as chaotic and sterile. The analysis shows how Bell's story is enmeshed in a larger Western ideological framework that disguising colonial power as cultural observation by fusing Said's orientalist critique with Julia Kristeva's idea of intertextuality. By revealing how trip writing served as an imperial cultural instrument, this work advances postcolonial literature. It highlights the need to eliminate remaining orientalist constructions in scholarly and literary discourse and promotes a reevaluation of the canonical books that influence East-West interactions.

Keywords: Orientalism, Edward Said, Intertextuality, Gertrude Bell, Eastern Studies

Introduction

Scholars have long criticized how Eastern societies are portrayed in Western literature, especially using the orientalism framework. Numerous works of literature about the Islamic world have been

written by European explorers, academics, and colonial agents since the 18th and 19th centuries. These works frequently depict the Islamic world in exoticized, simplified, and clichéd ways. These depictions were linked to imperial goals that aimed to establish Western dominance over the East, thus they did not emerge in a vacuum. Deeply ingrained in colonial history, this cultural discourse has had a long-lasting impact on how people around the world view identity, power, and knowledge production [1].

A central figure in postcolonial critique is Edward Said, whose groundbreaking work *Orientalism* defines orientalism as a structured mode of thought that differentiates and subordinates the “Orient” in contrast to the “Occident.” Said outlines three dimensions of orientalism: academic, ideological, and institutional. According to him, Western writers, historians, and travelers contributed to a collective epistemology that constructed the East as inherently backward, static, and exotic. This article situates Gertrude Bell’s *Persian Pictures* within this tradition, arguing that her narrative exemplifies the orientalist gaze. Despite Bell’s fluency in local languages and deep engagement with the Middle East, her literary depictions often reproduce Eurocentric assumptions, revealing a contradiction between cultural familiarity and imperial worldview [2].

Fewer academics have critically analyzed Bell’s travel writing from a postcolonial perspective, despite the fact that some have discussed her political role in the British Empire. This study fills that gap by fusing Julia Kristeva’s idea of intertextuality with Edward Said’s thesis of orientalism. In order to determine how Bell’s descriptions include preexisting metaphors and tropes that have historically defined the East in Western discourse, the study employs intertextual analysis. Although Baker & Al-Abboos and Chamling have discussed orientalist themes in Bell’s writings, their earlier works lacked a comprehensive methodological framework that connects language, ideology, and literary technique [3].

Methodologically, this article adopts a qualitative approach, focusing on textual excerpts from *Persian Pictures* and analyzing them through a dual lens of orientalism and intertextuality. The goal is to identify how metaphor, imagery, and narrative structure contribute to orientalist representation. This analysis is grounded in Kristeva’s notion that texts are shaped by a mosaic of prior discourses and ideologies, reinforcing the argument that Bell’s writing is not isolated but part of a broader imperial narrative [4].

The results show that, despite certain subtleties, Bell’s travel narrative ultimately maintains exotic and dehumanizing depictions of Eastern people and places. Orientalist discourses of Western superiority and Eastern insufficiency are mirrored in her literary choices, which include calling nomads “wild goats” and Eastern environments “sterile” or “hopeless.” They have two implications: first, they show how cultural works can be used for political purposes; second, they urge a critical reexamination of travel literature as a tool of colonial ideology. Thus, this study advances literary criticism, postcolonial studies, and historical comprehension of East-West power relations [5].

Methods

This study employs intertextual analysis to identify the markers that reinforce dominant narratives and exotic perspectives in Bell’s writing. The concept of intertextuality, introduced by French theorist Julia Kristeva, suggests that “every text is a mosaic of quotations,” influenced by previous texts. Drawing from Mikhail Bakhtin’s dialogism and Ferdinand de Saussure’s semiotics, Kristeva proposed that texts are never original but are shaped by a network of existing discourses [6].

In addition to intertextuality, this study also applies Edward Said’s framework of orientalism, as outlined in his 1978 book. Said argues that orientalism is not merely the study of Eastern customs, but a broader system of thought that depicts the East as backward and inferior, necessitating Western intervention and control [7].

Results and Discussion

Gertrude Bell's **Persian Pictures** aligns closely with the orientalist discourse defined by Edward Said. Her descriptions frequently rely on exotic metaphors and dehumanizing imagery, reinforcing stereotypes of the East as uncivilized and alien [8].

Consider the following passage:

“But here there is nothing-nothing but vast and pathless loneliness, silent and desolate. For the nomads can no more give you a sense of companionship than the wild goats; they are equally unconscious of the desolation which surrounds them. All day long the men lie before the low doors of their tents lazily watching the grazing herds [9].”

This excerpt portrays the East particularly nomadic cultures as spiritually and socially barren. Phrases like “vast and pathless loneliness” and “silent and desolate” paint the landscape as empty and lifeless. The comparison of nomads to “wild goats” strips them of humanity, suggesting they are incapable of meaningful social interaction. Such descriptions exemplify Said's argument that the East is often represented as “the Other,” defined by Western superiority [10].

Furthermore, the line “lazily watching the grazing herds” implies idleness and lack of productivity. The use of “lazily” reduces human behavior to mere animal instinct, supporting the orientalist trope of the East as passive and underdeveloped [11].

Another revealing passage is:

“But the fitfulness of human habitation among them, the absence of any effort to civilize them, to make them shelter man and minister to his wants, gives them an air of stubborn hopeless sterility, very imposing, very repelling [12].”

Here, the East is presented as inherently uninhabitable, lacking the “effort to civilize.” This reflects a patronizing assumption that only the West can bring progress and order. Terms like “stubborn hopeless sterility” reinforce negative connotations, presenting the land and its people as resistant to development and modernization [13].

Bell's metaphors even extend to the natural world:

“Here the hawks hover, the eagle passes with mournful cry, and the prisoned wind dashes madly through the gorge [14].”

These images suggest confinement, sorrow, and chaos. The “prisoned wind” and “mournful cry” of the eagle evoke a sense of despair and entrapment. The natural elements become metaphors for the East's supposed helplessness and lack of agency. These literary devices subtly shape readers' perceptions, fostering a distorted and inferior view of Eastern societies [15].

Conclusion

Gertrude Bell's **Persian Pictures** embodies the orientalist ideology described by Edward Said. Through emotionally charged language, metaphor, and dehumanizing imagery, Bell constructs an image of the East as exotic, stagnant, and inferior. Her travel narrative not only reflects British imperial ideology but also contributes to the broader Western discourse that rationalized colonial dominance. While Bell occasionally demonstrates appreciation for Persian culture, her overall portrayal reinforces the binaries central to orientalist thought: West as civilized, East as primitive.

As Said asserts, orientalism remains a dominant, though contested, framework in understanding East-West relations. By critically analyzing works like **Persian Pictures**, we can uncover the power structures and assumptions embedded in colonial literature—and challenge the legacy they leave behind.

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