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# 'Being' a Woman, a Traveller and a Writer: Freya Stark

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## Abstract

*This paper offers a discussion of two travel accounts by Freya Stark, The Valleys of the Assassins (1934) and Beyond Euphrates (1951). In the first few decades of the twentieth century, we find a few extraordinary women travellers who were striding the world and especially the Orient and writing back about their adventures. This paper attempts to account for the phenomenon by suggesting that travelling and writing was a way of expressing independence, agency and selfhood. The Orient was a dominion of the European white male. By etching their mark in this male dominion, they were not only turning the tables on their male counterparts but also producing a distinct perspective on the Orient. The paper, thus, also attempts to examine whether her writing reenacts the normative orientalist discourse or tries to provide a distinct perspective.*

**KEYWORDS:** orientalism, travel, women travellers

## INTRODUCTION

Freya Madeline Stark was born in 1893 in Paris, spent her childhood in Asolo, in Italy; it was where her mother resided, as well as a place which remained a home and a favourite destination for her until she died there in 1993. She divided her time between Italy and England for much of her adult life, since her father lived in England. She was a British national, and she studied Arabic and Persian at the University of London, as a preparation of her childhood dream of visiting the Orient. In this paper I shall discuss two books by Freya Stark, *The Valleys of the Assassins* (1934)[1] and *Beyond Euphrates* (1951)[2], which document her travels in Iraq and Iran in the period from 1928 to 1933. As she records in the Preface to *The Valleys of the Assassins* it was a copy of the *Arabian Nights* that stimulated her ambition and propelled her to the Orient:

> An imaginative aunt who, for my ninth birthday, sent a copy of the Arabian Nights, was, I suppose, the original cause of trouble.
> Unfostered and unnoticed, the little flame so kindled fed secretly on dreams. Chance, such as the existence of a Syrian missionary near my home, nourished it; and Fate, with long months of illness and leisure, blew it to a blaze bright enough to light my way through labyrinths of Arabic, and eventually to land me on the coast of Syria at the end of 1927. (7)

Scheherazade, the enterprising storyteller of the *Arabian Nights*, might have been a source of inspiration too, as Stark perhaps wished to tell her own stories of the Orient. Her travel writing is significant not only for its revealing of the imperialistic ambitions and the distrust between the East and the West but also for her sympathetic and distinctive portrayal of the Orient which offers a contrast to the pervasive 'male' vision.

## METHODOLOGY

The paper offers a discussion of two travel books by Freya Stark where she has described the experiences of her travels in parts of Iraq and Iran. Her distinct voice as a woman and a single woman traveller in remote Asian lands is focussed. Her accounts are studied from two different perspectives: the feminist perspective with special reference to Virginia Woolf, and from the point of view of Orientalism with reference to Edward Said. Besides, in order to illustrate the latter perspective, a comparative reading is provided with the travel account of a contemporary male writer, Robert Byron, who was travelling the same region in the same period.

## DISCUSSION

So what does the travel writing of a woman traveller like Freya Stark signify? Stark's accounts illustrate how travel writing became an expression of agency in a period when women were still considered as secondary beings, the weaker gender both by constitution and temperament. The importance of writing as an instrument for establishing agency was being realised by women and roughly the same period when Freya Stark had begun her sojourn of the Orient, Virginia Woolf lectured on and wrote *A Room of One's Own* (1929)[3]. Woolf writes about the contrasting representations of women in literature and society, "A very queer, composite being thus emerges. Imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant" (36). Woolf laments the insignificance dealt to women in European history. The women travellers of the period were, however, becoming significant figures through their own accounts:

> the female travel literature was written primarily by white/Caucasian aristocrats and middle-class women—explorers, humanitarians, pilgrims, volunteers, sensation seekers, adventuresses, settlers, missionaries, professionals, artists, governesses, housewives, superficial sightseers, tourists etc—who ignored all the inconveniences, discomforts and even dangers of travel (malaria, cholera, pirates, corsairs, robbers, quarantines, dangerous storms) to experience the Orient. (Kamberidou, 2014)[4]

Freya Stark is one such historically significant character. Although she does not have a conscious feminist approach in her writings, Stark exhibits a wonderful independence of mind and character in her accounts. Stark saw herself solely as an explorer and

researcher and by her own admission she travelled only for the joy of the experience. But her apparent exuberance and excitement while travelling the Orient may be read as a conscious or subconscious desire to escape the norm oriented European society of her time.

> Most women, however, travelled to escape gender oppression in Europe. One form of gender oppression had manifested in scholarly and scientific writing, in which women scholars were not taken seriously. This was especially clear in attitudes towards women who researched and collected data, so women travelled to create a space for their research. (Ahmed, 1998)[5]

Like the other exemplary women travellers of her age, Freya Stark left the secure confines of home and the sheltered and stable identity offered by European society for the everyday uncertainty, danger and indignity of her foreign locations. She is at times assumed to be a spy and almost always treated as an eccentric. As a woman traveller, travelling alone in the strange and perilous Orient, her identity and vocation is always suspect. The way women are perceived by the British and European residents at the colonies comes as a shock to her, leading her to condemn the "double loss of individuality" that the colonial mindset imposes on women.

The Preface to *The Valleys of the Assassins* also records the embarrassing questions that she faced at every step: "Why are you here alone?" and "What do you intend to do?" (7). The need to have a justification for travelling in the Orient was obviously due to her gender, as the only women were normally expected to visit the Orient were the wives of embassy officials travelling to their husbands. Both questions are vital to an understanding of how White women were perceived in the East. The first question, with the probable emphasis on 'alone', signifies that women should not be travelling alone; possibly because, firstly they are not expected to be alone according to the demands of propriety and respectability, and secondly, because the Orient, and especially the Middle East, could be a dangerous place for White women. In *Beyond Euphrates*, she writes about the fear of the Orient among the women at the British residency at Baghdad: "Englishwomen here – quite as old as I am and some more so – seem to expect to be assaulted if they walk ten yards alone in the evening" (128). Therefore, it is customary that a White woman be always accompanied by a White man. She not only flouts this code in coming to Syria and then Iraq alone, but also goes on journeys to some of the remotest regions of the Middle East like Luristan accompanied solely by native guides. Besides a white European woman travelling alone, visiting unsafe zones like Bedouin tribes becomes a matter of concern for the British imperial authority. Her residing in Baghdad with the family of a shoemaker, was, she says, "a flouting of national prestige" (1951, 86). Her travelling and her mingling with the locals, staying in local households and harems, seem to be disconcerting for the superior, dominating and alienating presence of the British. The

second question, "What do you intend to do?" also reveals the societal assumption that a woman must be valuable and useful in the domestic sphere. In the space outside that sphere, her role is limited, and therefore her presence might be unwanted and unnecessary. Stark herself, however, does not offer any of the implications that we have attempted to find here, and attributes the questions merely to the Western sense of "responsibility and purpose". She answers that she travels to enjoy herself, that her "sense of responsibility was in fact deficient and purpose nonexistent" (1934, 7).

Her identity as a woman traveller, travelling alone in the strange and perilous Orient, is always suspect. In the Middle East, she is at times assumed to be a spy and almost always treated as an eccentric. The way women are perceived by the British and European residents there comes as a shock to her, leading her to condemn the "double loss of individuality" (1951, 84) that the colonial mindset imposes on women. The double loss of individuality implies on the one hand the adoption of a conventional attitude to everyone and everything by the British residents, leading to a lack of originality in views and opinions. Further as far as the British woman was concerned, she was relegated to a position where independence of opinion, belief or perception was not expected, and instead it was expected that she would merely replicate the views of the man in the house. Thus, in *Beyond Euphrates*, she remarks that the much valued European individuality has given way to a norm or a strict code which applies a "a man of the street view" to everything, and further, "the English woman in Iraq was never thought of as in a street at all, but as wife, mother or daughter attached to a 'man in the street' at a distance – in fact safely indoors" (84). She is disappointed by the hopeless lack of curiosity in her compatriots and condemns the "degraded habit of classifying human beings in sets" (86). Therefore, she undertakes to reject the norm, and highlight her individualism and we might add her womanhood in the course of her travels. Quite inevitably, there were consequences; she says: "I was soon considered a rebel, a dangerous eccentric, or a spy" (86).

In the 'Introduction' to *Orientalism*[6], Edward Said says, that to the Europeans the Orient is almost a creation of Europe: "The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity, a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences." (2001, 1). This is the viewpoint that we encounter in the travel accounts of nearly all European travellers to the Orient, both men and women, and here Freya Stark is no exception. In Stark's writing too we find haunting landscapes and memories of remarkable experiences. In fact her mention of *Arabian Nights* as an inspiration in *The Valleys of the Assassins* reveals her outlook on the Orient. However, Said's focus is to understand Orientalism as a discourse which was used by Europe to manage and control the Orient politically, socially, militarily,

and ideologically (3). In this respect, however, a critical reading of Freya Stark is problematic, because there are ways in which her writing is different from the general male point of view. Her remarks, especially on the subject of political domination of Asia are radically different from her male counterparts.

It may be argued that her description of people, places and their practices is itself a female mode of expression, as opposed to a male imperialistic voice of domination. In the travel writing of Robert Byron, who visited the Middle East at about the same time, we find an illustration of the authoritative male gaze. In *The Road to Oxiana* (1937)[7], Byron denounces Iraq in the following words:

> Mesopotamia is a land of mud . . . From this plain rise villages of mud and cities of mud. The rivers flow with liquid mud. The air is composed of mud refined into a gas. The people are mud-coloured; they wear mud coloured clothes, and their national hat is nothing more than a formalised mud pie. Baghdad is the capital one would expect of this divinely favoured land. It lurks in a mud fog (37).

Byron is frequently upset and disappointed at hindrances and obstacles due to political reasons and seems to wish for a perpetuity of English and Russian imperialistic domination of the region: "And it dawned on us, moreover, that the interests of Russia and England in Asia, instead of conflicting as they used to do, have now become virtually the same, particularly with regard to the buffer states between them", and therefore "a conference between the Governor of Tashkhent and the Viceroy on Persia, Afghanistan, Sinkiang, and Tibet, would benefit both sides" (1937, 303). While reading the accounts of Stark we notice the marked difference of perception, judgement and feeling. While Stark's voice is often subjective, Byron's glance is objective. Her exhilaration in travelling is evident in her language: "The genuinely wild is not interested in 'seeing the world'; it is exclusively interested in being; . . . This hunger is insatiable, until the desire itself for being shall pass away" (1951, 63).

Stark's recounting of her days spent in the harem of a Muslim family also demonstrates her willingness to remove the distance between the observer and the observed and to partake of a different lifestyle, not to exoticise but to erase the 'otherness' of the Oriental other: As she gets used to wearing the veil among the Muslim women of the household, she says, "I am getting to feel quite ashamed of my unveiled condition, and turn my back with the rest when we pass a peasant on the road" (1951, 78). Thisaranie Herath notes the obsession with the harem in Orientalist literature and art:

> Ottoman harems, by Islamic law, were impenetrable to all but women and male relatives. The obsession with breaching this particular cultural barrier became one of the defining features of European interaction with the Middle East,

> leading to a rich production of visual art and textual narratives that imagined in vivid yet inaccurate detail, the forbidden mysteries of the harem. (32)[8]

Quoting several commentators, and especially critics of Said's *Orientalism*, Herath also argues how narratives of women travellers have attempted to dispel the sensational myths about the Muslim harem. Stark's experience as highlighted above thus serves as evidence for Herath's argument.

## CONCLUSION

It may be argued that while in *A Room of One's Own* Woolf seeks a private creative space undisturbed and untainted by male presence and male gaze, Freya Stark seeks a similar kind of freedom in exploring unknown foreign lands unencumbered by a dominating, judging and rationalising male presence. It is perhaps the reason why she preferred to travel alone. The remote and vacant desert lands of the Middle East offer her a free and undemanding space for the imagination – free from the obligations and duties expected of a woman, comparable to Virginia Woolf's symbolical Mary. When she speaks about her feelings at the moment of departure she says, it was "the opposite to the tearing up of roots", rather a feeling as if the body pulling itself away, safe but lacerated, from numerous tentacles" (1951, 62). Both Stark's writing and Woolf's essay are autobiographical; an expression of the self: a defiant, demanding, unshackled and imaginative self. The opening pages of *Beyond Euphrates* are evidence of the subject 'I' asserting itself, taking control of her destiny. Therefore, in her travels and writings she exhibits an unfettered individualism and agency. She becomes the speaking and interpreting subject of her own tales. The white European male was the archetypal explorer since the seventeenth century, unravelling the Orient and Africa, mapping its territory, interpreting its culture and language and writing its history. Freya Stark invades the male dominion of exploration becoming a fearless researcher and adventurer who offers a distinctive vision for understanding Oriental history and cuture. Her travel writing is significant not only for its revealing of the imperialistic ambitions and the distrust between the East and the West but also for her sympathetic and distinctive portrayal of the Orient which offers a contrast to the pervasive 'male' vision.

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