

## EXOTICISM IN GERTRUDE BELL'S *PERSIAN PICTURES*

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Are we the same people I wonder when all our surroundings, association, acquaintances are changed? Here that which is me, which womanlike is an empty jar that the passerby fills at pleasure, is filled with such wine as in England I had never heard of, now the wine is more important than the jar when one is thirsty, therefore I conclude, cousin mine, that it is not the person who danced with you at Mansfield St. that writes to you to-day from Persia. – Yet there are dregs, English sediments at the bottom of my sherbet, and perhaps they flavour it more than I think.

—Gertrude Bell, letter to Horace Marshall, Tehran, 18 June 1892<sup>1</sup>

VICTORIAN TRAVELERS IN COLONIAL CONTEXTS encountered differences in landscape, mores and manners, society, politics and culture, among other things, and registered their responses to the places visited in their published travel books for the home audience. Postcolonial critics contend that exoticism, i.e., a Western traveler's response to and description of the differences encountered in the context of travel, was deeply informed by the asymmetrical power relation between the representer/colonizer and the represented/colonized. As a result, these critics argue, exoticism in colonial travel writing was appropriative since it tended to construct the dichotomy of self/other in such a way as to justify imperial interventions in other countries (Forsdick, "Sa(L)Vaging Exoticism" 30–34; Said 1–28). As Graham Huggan rightly argues, difference of the colonial other in its various aspects was denigrated and dismissed as exotic when "translated into the master code of empire," since it superimposed "a dominant way of seeing, speaking and thinking onto marginalised peoples" (24).

Although Gertrude Bell was "a daughter of the Victorian Age," a world in which both men and women contributed to aggrandizing the British Empire (Wallach 82), her response to and representations of the cultural other in her travel book *Persian Pictures* are too multi-layered to be reduced to a mere assertion of the political dominance of Britain over Persia.<sup>2</sup> Rather, her high consciousness of the complexity of intercultural encounters and the dynamic nature of the contact zone,<sup>3</sup> as articulated in the above-quoted letter to Horace Marshall, informs *Persian Pictures*. Even though Bell emphasizes her desire for and responsiveness to the Persians as an effect of her gender, which renders her a jar ready to

be filled up with the other, she is well aware of the framing power exerted by “the English sediments at the bottom of [her] sherbet” in the colonial context of Persia.<sup>4</sup> Bell’s letter implies that her perception and figurations of the cultural other encountered in Persia were shaped by a conflation of Victorian discourses on race and gender.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, a study of exoticism in her work requires extending the lens beyond the limited focus of postcolonial theory to other variables informing the contact zone.

Travel books are, in fact, enmeshed in the political, cultural, and ideological contexts of their time and, as such, any engagement with women’s travel writing must be meticulously contextualized to account for the various factors informing representations of intercultural encounters, not the least of which is gender (Holland and Huggan 111–32; Mills, *Discourses of Difference* 47–63). Feminist postcolonial critics have highlighted the ambivalent position of Victorian women travelers in the colonial context as both subordinated/othered, based on Victorian gender ideology, and superior/self, because of the Victorian discourse on race and its hierarchical categorization.<sup>6</sup> Indira Ghose, for one, describes these women as “colonized by gender, but colonizers by race” (5). Yet, although these studies have made a worthy contribution by exposing the counter-discourses and fissures in colonial writing, they have concentrated mainly on women’s subversion of and/or compliance with their imperial country’s political agendas in the colonized countries. While taking into account the important findings of that research, we aim to look more closely at the issue of intercultural encounters by addressing another overlooked implication of women’s ambiguous position. We seek to indicate that Bell’s uncertain status in Persia, bringing about a dual affiliation with both the British self and the Persian other, was positive and enabling in the sense that it provided her with a relativistic outlook. This outlook enabled her to develop alternative perspectives, other than typical colonial views of Persia, which allow for a more nuanced treatment of difference, adding more layering, texture, and complexity to exoticism in *Persian Pictures*.

Addressing the politics of gender in studies on exoticism is overdue, given that existing scholarship has skirted its weight and generally focused on male-authored texts.<sup>7</sup> Writing gender into this study also contributes to the newly arising interest in exoticism by problematizing its monolithic conceptualization in postcolonial theory, in which it has been reduced to “a specifically colonizing, assimilative, one-way form” of engaging with otherness and, as such, dismissed as unworthy of further research (Forsdick, “Revisiting Exoticism” 50).<sup>8</sup> Employing the concept of the exote developed by French scholar Victor Segalen to refer to a traveler with a relativistic approach to cultural difference,<sup>9</sup> this article endeavors to trace a plurality of exoticisms in Bell’s *Persian Pictures*.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, it seeks to unravel exoticism by rethinking its meaning/s through highlighting its versatility and reciprocity in Bell’s travel writing on Persia.

#### *Contextualizing Persian Pictures*

GERTRUDE MARGARET LOWTHIAN BELL (1868–1926) was a distinguished Victorian woman with unique achievements in many areas: an experienced traveler, mountaineer, and translator, as well as an adept politician and scholar, she was fluent in Persian, Arabic, French, and German, and had a number of publications on archaeology, art, and her travels (Bassnett 236; Monroe 4–9). In her early years, she got to know many famous writers and intellectuals of her time, such as Henry James and Lord Arthur Russell, among others, through her stepmother, Florence Olliffe, who was a playwright (Monroe 5). Unlike most girls of her time, she was

sent to school in London, at Queen's College at the age of 16, and later to Oxford to continue her studies at a time when society mostly rejected the value of women's higher education (Goodman 8–11). Bell found the place to be strongly male dominated. Before her arrival Dean John Burger had discouraged female students at Oxford, stating in a sermon: "Inferior to us God made you, and inferior to the end of time you will remain" (qtd. in Wagner 20), and in a history class they were asked to sit with their backs to the professor (Wallach 21). Still more frustrating were the Victorian codes for her gender, which would not even let Bell visit a museum without being chaperoned (Wallach 17).<sup>11</sup> In spite of the patriarchal atmosphere of Oxford, she graduated with a first-class degree in modern history. The *Times* reported the news as she was the first woman ever to achieve such a distinction (Wagner 19–22).

As a member of a rich, upper-middle-class family, Bell was in close contact with politicians and thus took up Middle Eastern affairs as her life's interest (Laisram 172–74). She was a frequent visitor to the Orient, starting in 1892 and travelling to Persia, Mesopotamia, and Syria, among others. Bell was received with respect wherever she went due to her "impressive entourage . . . [and] the confidence of the British upper middle class" (Amoia and Knapp 151). She went to Jerusalem in 1899 to study Arabic and to the Syrian Desert in 1905, the account of which was published as *The Desert and the Sown* in 1907. It was this book that brought her recognition, not only as an experienced traveler but as a scholar (Wagner 47). Bell's publications on archaeology, *The Thousand and One Churches* (1909) and *Amurath to Amurath* (1911), though making a serious contribution to the field, did not enjoy the same reputation as *The Desert and the Sown*.

Bell is best known for her active role in and substantial contribution to British political imperatives in the Middle East. She is referred to as an "arch-imperialist" (Melman 5), "the uncrowned Queen of Iraq" (Wallach 324), and a "spy" (Wallach 145). Her Middle Eastern trips from 1900 to 1914 are considered to have assisted British dominance in that region by obtaining strategic information for the policymakers (Amoia and Knapp 153). Bell's invaluable information about the Arabs made her an "expert on Oriental affairs" and she became what she herself termed "a 'Person,' an identity unavailable to her as a woman in Britain" (Amoia and Knapp 154). She was "the only female Political Officer in the British forces" (Wallach 180), and was later appointed to the important position of "Oriental Secretary" by Sir Percy Cox, High Commissioner of Iraq at the time (Monroe 19). From 1916 until her death in 1926, Bell mostly resided in Baghdad and Basrah.<sup>12</sup>

In April 1892, Bell, twenty-four years old, accompanied her aunt Mary on a journey to Persia where the latter's husband Sir Frank Lascelles was a British Minister (Goodman 14). It was in Persia that Bell was introduced to the East and was "enthralled by the country, its language, culture, and above all the beauty of the desert" (Amoia and Knapp 148). Her experiences of a seven-month stay in and journey through Persia were published anonymously as *Safar Nameh, Persian Pictures: A Book of Travel* in 1894 in London.<sup>13</sup> *Persian Pictures* presents images of the country which are mostly limited to Tehran and its surroundings. It is a short book, consisting of twenty chapters, which includes the portrayal of subjects as diverse as the King's treasure, religious ceremonies, gardens, palaces, and her Persian teacher, among others.<sup>14</sup>

Not only has Bell's *Persian Pictures* been generally overlooked in recent studies,<sup>15</sup> but the scant critical response has dismissed it as the expression of a romantic writer articulating her infatuation with the East and its mysterious nature.<sup>16</sup> In his preface to the second edition (1928) of Bell's *Persian Pictures*, Denison Ross highlights the romantic nature of the book

and attributes this feature to the influence of the *Arabian Nights*, stating that these tales throw a romantic aura over the Islamic Orient for Western travelers (11). Similarly, Denis Wright sees the work as “convey[ing] some of the youthful excitement of [Bell’s] first encounter with the Middle East which was to become her second home” (13). Echoing previous critics, Pallavi Pandit Laisram’s study finds Bell’s Persian travel writing a “romanticization of the East as an escape world” (178), in which Persia is depicted as a “type which conforms to her personal, psychological, and cultural needs” (179).<sup>17</sup>

Although Bell articulates her desire for the Orient by calling herself and her companions “pilgrims of a more distant land than holy Mecca” (118), and writes elsewhere in the text of being “athirst for unknown conditions” (190), her *Persian Pictures* is neither monolithic praise of nor a romantic infatuation with the country of her desires.<sup>18</sup> Rather, it is a conscious endeavor by a sensitive traveler who is aware of the complexity of intercultural representations and of the various factors informing the contact zone.<sup>19</sup> As a guest of the British Minister in Persia during her travel, Bell was well aware of the “Great Game” running between the two imperial powers of Russia and Britain and of their vying for supremacy in that country (Andreeva 5–6). The strategic position of Persia as a buffer to British India necessitated the British intervention and presence in the country which needed to be justified as a civilizing mission and “selfless support of a freedom-loving country” (Katouzian, *State and Society* 88). Ignoring Bell’s ambiguous position as a Victorian woman traveler in a colonial setting and the key role of Persia for British imperial projects, studies of *Persian Pictures* have resulted in a reductive treatment that overlooks its complexity and multivocal nature. In what follows, we intend to show that Bell’s *Persian Pictures* defies easy classification into any one category because, in her nuanced representations of Persia, the boundaries demarcating the British self and the Persian other are shifting – eroded, erected, and sometimes totally shattered.

#### *A Victorian Exote: A True Traveler*

BELL SEES HER TRAVEL AS A serious endeavor, affording her the opportunity for “study in character and national characteristics” (171) as well as “a delightful field for observation” (195). Accordingly, she tries to differentiate herself from a group of travelers whom she implicitly dubs not genuine:

Some have an eye fixed on the peculiarities of foreign modes of life, that they may gratify their patriotic hearts by condemning them when they differ (as they not infrequently do) from the English customs which they have left, and to which their thoughts turn regretfully; . . .

All these, and more also, are not travellers in the true sense of the word; they might as well have stayed at home and read a geography-book, or turned over a volume of photographs, and engaged a succession of cooks of different nationalities.

(Bell 187–88)

In the above passage, Bell criticizes British travelers for their ethnocentrism and touristic approach through which they interpret the differences of other people and “the peculiarities of foreign modes of life” as exotic and inferior measured against “the English customs.” Not being “travellers in the true sense of the word,” as Bell contends, they fail to go beyond their ethnocentric outlook, even though they have crossed over geographical borders. Bell highlights how these seemingly mobile travelers are in fact “static” and, as Roger Célestin

would say, remain “at Home while traveling, consolidating the Center” by exoticizing the other (63, 67). Such a reductive representation of cultural difference is termed colonial exoticism and is mostly practiced by imperial apologists. They leave no room for accepting colonial difference as diversity and the alternative expression of another nation in an attempt to exert imperial hegemony and to achieve its political and economic imperatives (Bongie 16–18).

Such exoticist custom-and-manners representations of the colonial world by Victorian travelers were mediated through a post-Enlightenment Western classificatory paradigm and the emerging science of anthropology (Pratt 24–34; Rubiés 244–57). The lopsided relation of power between the West and the colonial world allowed the first travelers to fabricate a new version of “Europe’s ‘planetary consciousness,’” a hegemonic vision which established Europe as the center of the universe (Pratt 15). In time, the idea of the West as civilized and superior was thus partly constructed and backed up through depicting other worlds based on Western codes as way down on the scale of progress and civilization.<sup>20</sup> In this all-consuming Western codification, “nothing is seen on its own terms, nothing is ever just different, but arranged on a scale of value formulated by a culture that defines itself as superior and its values as universally applicable” (Egerer 26). Thus colonial exoticism denies the ontological autonomy of non-Western values and standards and denigrates them reductively to “mere variations or aberrations of a given, authentic, all-powerful *original*” (Célestin 40) and puts them in a hierarchy, in “a self-oriented relation that inevitably favors Me” (Célestin 14).

Far from a true engagement with other people encountered in the contact zone, the response of Bell’s static travelers is superficial or, to borrow Ali Behdad’s terms, a “touristic vision,” “an ‘inauthentic’ experience of *déjà vu*” channeled by the dominating view towards other colonials perpetuated through Orientalism (64). Simply put, travelers’ immediate intercultural encounters will be mediated through imperial tropes and codes regarding the colonial world which tend to be ethnocentric and exploitative.

Through her anti-touristic rhetoric, Bell implicitly casts herself, in contrast to British ethnocentric travelers, as a true, or sincere, traveler who is willing to engage with and is appreciative of the cultural other encountered in Persia. We draw from French theorist Victor Segalen’s *Essay on Exoticism: An Aesthetics of Diversity* to explicate Bell’s multilayered and ambivalent figurations of the Persians and their culture in *Persian Pictures*. Segalen’s conceptualization of exoticism as an “*aesthetic of diversity*” (67) seeks to present an alternative way of engaging with cultural difference – free from the realm of colonial power relations and their rigid ethnocentric binaries.<sup>21</sup> Although his theorization tends to ignore the historical and political contexts of the time, his emphasis on the autonomous worth of difference and the flexible relation between the self and the other allows for a plurality of exoticisms with versatile uses. It also helps strip exoticism of its monolithic and negative definition in postcolonial theory. Bell’s response to and articulations of the other in *Persian Pictures* exemplify what is needed if a traveler is to be dubbed an “exote” by Segalen, in his words “a born traveler, someone who senses all the flavor of diversity in worlds filled with wondrous diversities” (25). Bell demonstrates this exote perspective in the following passage from her letter to Horace Marshall:

How big the world is, how big and how wonderful. It comes to me as ridiculously presumptuous that I should dare to carry my little personality half across it, and boldly attempt to measure with it things for which it has no table of measurements that can possibly apply. (25)

Segalen argues that exotes have “the ability to conceive otherwise” when facing difference, by which he means they show a tendency towards positive engagement with the other, a new figuration of the self and the other in a non-hierarchical framework which is not governed by Western prescriptive codes of evaluation and imperial imperatives (19).<sup>22</sup> The above passage depicts Bell as an exote whose relativistic outlook seeks to refrain from making presumptuous ethnocentric remarks in an attempt to acknowledge and respect encountered difference on its own terms, as diversity, rather than to assimilate it in accordance with a British table of measurements. Bell, instead, highlights the uneasy situation of representing her experience in the contact zone as she was fully conscious of how her viewing position of cultural difference was channeled by her personality – a complex confluence of various factors such as race and gender, among others, and their ideologies in the Victorian world. This intricate situation is best described by James Clifford, as “a state of being in [the self’s] culture while looking at [the other’s] culture” (93).

*Undecided Rhetoric: The Inassimilable Nature of the Cultural Other*

FAR FROM CONDEMNING PERSIAN DIFFERENCE encountered in the contact zone as a lack in the other, Bell acknowledges its autonomous worth and respects its cultural opacity. She remarks: “The East is full of secrets – no one understands their value better than the Oriental” (34). By letting Persian difference be shrouded in mystery, rather than assimilated based on Western norms and presented as knowable and thus controllable, like its usual treatment in colonial exoticism, Bell’s response is similar to an exote who recognizes the “incomprehensibility” and “impenetrability” of the Orientals and their culture (Segalen 21). Though Bell is aware of the surface attractions, “brilliance of colour, splendour of light, solemn loneliness, clamorous activity” (34), she finds Persia’s “essential charm . . . of more subtle quality” as

it flashes upon you through the open doorway of some blank, windowless house you pass in the street, from under the lifted veil of the beggar woman who lays her hand on your bridle, from the dark, contemptuous eyes of a child; then the East sweeps aside her curtains, flashes a facet of her jewels into your dazzled eyes, and disappears again with a mocking little laugh at your bewilderment; then for a moment it seems to you that you are looking her in the face, but while you are wondering *whether she be angel or devil*, she is gone.<sup>23</sup> (35; emphases added)

Describing the religious ritual commemorating the death of Imam Hossein,<sup>24</sup> Bell echoes the hegemonic Orientalist view of her time by calling the mourning procession “a wild and savage band” (52) and dehumanizing the mourners as “a compact mass of bobbing heads and naked shoulders” (53). However, she changes her positionality as she proceeds with her description and adopts an uncertain viewing position which avoids fixating difference as a stereotypical characteristic of colonial exoticism. Rather, Bell highlights the complexity of interpreting intercultural encounters: “There is nothing more difficult to measure than the value of visible emotion” (55), and points out that different laws rule Western and Eastern ways of showing feelings (56). Accordingly, rather than taking an authoritative stance, Bell engages in a flexible negotiation between the already established way of seeing this religious ritual and her own experience:

At first it seemed to us that we were looking upon people plunged into the blackest depths of grief, but presently it dawned upon us that we were grossly exaggerating the value of their tears and groans. The Oriental spectators in the boxes were scarcely moved by an emotion which they were supposed to be sharing; . . . we watched men whose faces were all wet with tears, whose breasts were red and sore with blows, stepping aside and entering into brisk conversation with their neighbours, sharing an amicable cup of tea, or bargaining for a handful of salted nuts, as though the very name of Hussein were unknown to them. Seeing this, we were tempted to swing back to the opposite extreme, and to conclude that this show of grief was a mere formality, signifying nothing – *a view which was probably as erroneous as the other*. (56–57; emphases added)

The uncertain rhetoric either in or of Bell's response to the Persians in the mourning procession – “people plunged into the blackest depths of grief” or “this show of grief was a mere formality, signifying nothing” – ends in a surrender to its inassimilable nature, neither in nor of “a view which was probably as erroneous as the other.” Instead of treating Persian difference as fetish and assigning it a fixed meaning like colonial exoticism, Bell approaches it as a sign. This view, as Deborah Shapple Spillman argues in her work on Victorian travelers, “highlight[s] the importance of signification as a process that takes place between cultures” (306). To give another example, Bell's response to the different life situation of a Persian princess's two young daughters at the end of a visit is left undecided, not assigned a specific signification: “The girls accompanied us into the outer court, and watched us through the half-open doors till we drove away, wishing, perhaps, that they too might drive out into the world with such unfettered liberty, or perhaps wondering at our unveiled shamelessness” (82). This non-assertive rhetoric indicates that Bell is an exote who seeks to avoid reducing the different Persian customs to an inferior otherness in line with British imperial agendas.

#### *Dialogue with the Self: “Exoticism in Reverse”*

BELL'S FIGURATIONS OF PERSIAN CULTURAL differences reveal her active critical engagement with the other, her recognition of the other's autonomous worth, and her interest in and receptiveness to diversity. Unlike practitioners of colonial exoticism and the imperial scribes who overlook intercultural experience and implications of the contact zone (Forsdick, “Travelling Concepts” 13; Behdad 21), Bell perceptively engages in self-ethnography, comparing and contrasting her country's codes of value and ideologies with those of Persia. After pointing out the impossibility and difficulty “for the uninitiated to judge how far the inward grace tallies with the outward form,” Bell remarks that “he can at least bear witness that the forms of the Mohammedan religion are stricter, and that they appear to be more accurately obeyed, than those of the Christian” (144). This pronouncement was very daring and rare for her time when the hegemonic view was exoticizing Islam pejoratively and portraying Muslims as hypocritical in their religious observances (Laisram 3–8). Moreover, juxtaposing Muslim mosques with Christian churches, Bell's comparative outlook praises the other at the expense of the self. In her view, Muslim mosques

wear a friendly and a homelike air which is absent from Western churches; even those frequented shrines in some small chapel of one of our cathedrals, hung about with pictures and votive offerings, and lighted with wax tapers by pious fingers, do not suggest a more constant devotion than is to be found in the stern and beautiful simplicity of Mohammedan places of worship. (144)

Thus exoticism in Bell's text incorporates self-reflexivity, a dialogue with the self to affect a change or at least throw doubts on British practices and their regimes of value. This destabilizes critical responses to *Persian Pictures* as romantic infatuation with the other and/or of Bell's going native. As Célestin implies, self-consciousness and self-reflexivity dismantles exoticism as romantic musings (185–87) as we can see in this passage from Bell:

[W]hen you are brought face to face with tiny towns and remote fishing villages, for whose birth there seems to be no reason but caprice, for whose continuance even caprice can scarcely be alleged, and which may yet boast two thousand years of life, you will stand aghast at such hoar conservative antiquity. Where is progress? Where is the march of civilization? Where the evolution of the race? . . . You have passed beyond the little patch of the globe where these laws bear sway; they are not eternal, still less are they universal, the great mass of mankind is untouched by them, and if you must generalize you will come nearer the truth in saying that man is stationary than that he is progressive. (179)

Contemplating her experience of the contact zone, Bell finds the Eastern view of the stationary nature of man more plausible than Western claims to universality. Her contention that Western laws about evolution and civilization are not only limited to “the little patch of the globe” but are also “not eternal, still less . . . universal” displaces the Western claim to natural superiority and undermines the colonialist view that Western norms are original and must be conformed to by other cultures which otherwise would be denigrated and codified as exotic. As Célestin points out, this hegemonic view has presented the West as “the Universal,” based on its hierarchical classification, and has promoted an image of itself as a “legitimate and even *natural* focus of reference, an ultimate standard of measurement for all other cultures” (14). Bell's relativistic approach to the differences between the East and the West in *Persian Pictures* allows for what Segalen has dubbed “exoticism in reverse” (41). As indicated, it is the West which is found by Bell to be an exception to the general rule, and hence exotic.

Moreover, adopting a critical outlook and re-evaluating Western assumptions, Bell gives the lie to the ideology underlying the British civilizing mission in her recognition of Persian difference in its own terms, in a non-hierarchical way, and in her remarks that there is no need for Britain and her presumably civilizing tutelage:

Tehran, which from the west looked almost like a city of the dead, cut from all intercourse with the outer world, is alive after all and in eager relationship with a world of its own. Here in the dust and the sunshine is an epitome of the living East. . . . The East looks to itself; it knows nothing of the greater world of which you are a citizen, asks nothing of you and of your civilization. (27)

Bell's interest in the Persians and their culture is evident in her dialogic engagement with Sheikh Hassan, her Persian teacher with whom she studied Persian poetry and language during her stay in Persia. In stark contrast to the Orientalist view of her time, which portrayed the East as being in need of Western civilization, Bell subscribes to her teacher's opinion that Western ways cannot cure the ills of Persian life. In addition, her desire to salvage Eastern ways of life by rejecting Western imposition implies her recognition of and respect for a different, Persian, worldview:

But his [Sheikh Hassan's] disbelief in the efficacy of European civilization was equally profound, and his pessimism struck me as being further sighted than the careless optimism of those who seek to



pile one edifice upon another, a Western upon an Eastern world, and never pause to consider whether, if it stands at all, the newer will only stand by crushing the older out of all existence. (Bell 98)

Bell's dialogic involvement with her teacher exemplifies that of an exote, whose relativistic stance of difference allows for a bi-polar exoticism. In Segalenian theorization, exoticism is viewed as a "reciprocal process involving the generation of mutual knowledge and associated with processes of intercultural contact alternative to those of colonialism" (Forsdick, "Revisiting Exoticism" 51). In similar vein, Bell's flexible response to the other moves away from the monolithic colonial exoticism when she imagines how the West will be exoticized in the eyes of her Persian teacher in his later trip to Britain: "[I]t would be interesting to find what peculiarities in us and in our ways would attract the notice of his bright, observant eyes" (104). The versatility of exoticism in *Persian Pictures* and its reciprocal nature help to rethink the pejorative connotations of exoticism in postcolonial theory, in which it has been reduced to a medium for the political assertion of the colonizers over the colonized, and thus considered to operate in a single direction. *Persian Pictures*, however, demonstrates the flexibility of exoticism and its positive uses, as Bell allows subject (self) /object (other) relation changes in such a way that the British see themselves as the others of their others.<sup>25</sup>

Whereas in the previously cited passages, the demarcating lines between the British and the Persians were growing blurred and shifting, they are totally broken in the following excerpt which emphasizes the homogeneity of the self and the other in spite of differences. Bell exposes Western supremacy as a fabrication based on Orientalist tropes in an affirmation of the affinity and equality of the self/West and the other/East, both linked by bonds of humanity:<sup>26</sup>

Ah, simple pleasures, so familiar in a land so far removed! Not in great towns, not in palaces, had we felt the tie of humanity which binds East and West, but in that distant roadside village, lying on the floor of the Shah's farrash [servant], we claimed kinship with the toilers of an alien soil. For one night we, too, were taking our share in their lives, with one flash of insight the common link of joy and sorrow was revealed to us—to us of a different civilization and a different world. (119)

Writing about nineteenth-century Western travelers to Persia, M. H. Braaksma contends that they were mostly fascinated by the surface differences and were content to merely "look at" rather than to "look into Persian humanity and its concerns" (Braaksma 72). As indicated, Bell's response to the Persians, however, differs markedly from her contemporary counterparts. Her desire to engage with the Persians and to look into their lives, in which she finds Persia's true charm, is noticeable in her pursuit of the individual stories behind the articles brought to her for sale by merchants: "There is a personal note about these charming materials which lends them an interest other than that which could be claimed by bright colours and soft textures alone. They speak of individual labour and individual taste" (Bell 175).

#### *An Imperial Scribe: A Static Traveler*

EVEN THOUGH BELL'S RECEPTIVE APPROACH to the cultural other in Persia, resulting from her ambiguous status as a Victorian woman in a colonial context, questioned and disrupted many established myths about the Orient, there are still instances in *Persian Pictures* where

she succumbs to the dominant Orientalist view of her time. While the responsive nature of her gender keeps Bell from labeling the cultural other in British Hierarchical classification as aberration and exotic, her “English sediments,” to quote the epigraph to this essay, mold her articulations of Persia in accordance with the Western interpretive system. Thus Bell’s *Persian Pictures*, as a small part of Victorian travel writing, can perhaps be seen as having contributed to British imperialist agendas by partly propagating, as Carl Thompson would argue, the “notions of cultural and racial superiority” to the home audience (53). This, however, is understandable when one contextualizes her travel and considers the political rivalry between Russia and Britain to win control of Persia. Celebrating the Western scientific outlook on life and promoting an image of the West as the harbinger of world safety, at the expense of an Oriental world view, Bell adopts an ethnocentric lens, in line with the British imperatives in Persia. It is in the Westerners’ fatherly protection and benevolent civilizing missions that Bell sees Persians’ only hope for the betterment of their lives:

Oriental fatalism . . . bids men bear the inevitable evil without complaint, but we of the West are not content until we have discovered how far the coil is inevitable, and how far it may be modified by forethought and by a more complete knowledge of its antecedents. It may be that we turn the channel of immediate fate but little, but with every effort we help forward the future safety of the world. But fatalism can seldom be carried through to its logical conclusions – the attitude of mind which prevented the Persians from laying in medical stores [for cholera] did not save them a fortnight later from headlong flight. (61–62)

Similarly, Bell’s representations of Persian women and the *andarun*, the women’s quarter, echo nineteenth-century Orientalist tropes. In the chapter “Three Noble Ladies” in *Persian Pictures*, Bell provides a lengthy description of her encounter with a Persian princess and her two daughters. However, Bell does not generalize her experience since it was an exception to general practice in Persia, given that the princess’s husband’s “residence abroad had made him more liberal-minded than most of his countrymen” (78). And his daughters were educated and the wife was “too civilized a woman to have recourse to the cosmetics which are customary in the East” (Bell 80). Apart from this single engagement with Persian women, other descriptions are presented as passing remarks which are molded by, and conjure up, nineteenth-century Orientalist tropes. Refusing to see the *andarun* as an alternative norm for a family structure different to that of established monogamous British practice, Bell exoticizes it as an aberration. This naturally results in a picture which is far from objective, in that difference is evaluated based on a home-made classificatory paradigm which generates dichotomies leading to, to borrow Hallam and Street’s terms, a “hierarchical ordering of representations” in which the Western norm is privileged while Eastern style is discredited (7). In her passing references to Persian women, Bell calls them “dark-eyed beauties” (146) and portrays their lives in the *andarun* as “knock[ing] at the heart with a weary sense of discontent, of purposeless, vapid lives – a wailing, endless minor” (41). The images of Persian women as “thinly-clad and shrouded forms” (46) jailed in the solitude of the *andarun* located “at the further end of the garden beyond the reach of flowers” (41), along with their sad negro attendants (75), can be interpreted as Bell’s deft echoing of the *Arabian Nights* and Montesquieu’s *Persian Letters*, among other Oriental tales. These tropes were drawn upon by imperial apologists to voice the need for Western intervention on behalf of hapless Oriental women (Grewal 44–45; DelPlato 20).<sup>27</sup> Such exoticist negative portrayals

were made possible and plausible through the lopsided power relations between the Western self/colonizer/traveler and the Eastern other/colonized/travelee (Wan Yahya, Ghaderi, and Jusoff 782–83).

### Conclusion

OUR EXPLORATION OF INTERCULTURAL REPRESENTATIONS in *Persian Pictures* suggests that Bell's response to Persian people and their culture is more nuanced than has hitherto been acknowledged by critics. Rather than being reduced to an imperial apologist or a colonizer going native, Bell appears as an exote with a relativistic outlook who engages in a dialogical relation with the cultural other encountered in Persia. As discussed, Bell's ambiguous status as a Victorian woman in a colonial context and her dual affiliation with the British self and the Persian other were positive and productive, in that they offered her an outsider-insider perspective on intercultural encounters, hence the multi-layered picture of Persia in *Persian Pictures*.

Our findings reveal that exoticism in the hands of Bell becomes a self-empowering strategy, a malleable medium to erect, erode, and shift the demarcation lines between the self and the other. With the relativistic approach of an exote to cultural difference, Bell mostly refrains from making stereotypical remarks but allows rather for various significations to appear. Whereas there are some cases in *Persian Pictures* where Bell falls back on the dominant Orientalist tropes, her work unravels many Western myths regarding the Orient by providing an alternative response to her experience of the contact zone. Bell's recognition and appreciation of cultural difference in *Persian Pictures* was a daring approach, for her time, given that ethnocentrism and imperialism were at their height. This suggests that as a Victorian traveler she was very much ahead of her time in recognizing and respecting the ontological and autonomous worth of cultural difference, rather than relegating it like static travelers to the status of inferiority when found to be at variance with Western norms. Taking into account the versatility and plurality of exoticisms in Bell's travel text and its positive uses, one could infer that exoticism is not exclusively directed at promoting and/or disrupting British political projects in Persia. This, in turn, questions and disrupts the pejorative and monolithic understanding of exoticism in postcolonial theory.

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### NOTES

1. Horace Marshall was Bell's cousin. The letter was addressed to him after two months or so of Bell's travel in Persia, from the British Residence in Gholhak, northern Tehran, where she was staying as a guest to the then British ambassador. See *The Letters of Gertrude Bell* edited by Bell's stepmother, Lady Florence Bell (25).
2. Persia refers to present-day Iran. It was in 1935 that Reza Shah insisted that the country should officially be called Iran by all countries (Katouzian, *The Persians* 3). The terms "Persia" and "Persians" have been employed for the purposes of this paper since they were known as such to the European countries

- at the time of Bell's travel. "Cultural other" in the context of our article is used neutrally, and refers to the Persians and their mores and manners, which were different from those of the British.
3. The term "contact zone" is a coinage by Pratt in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, by which she means "the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict" (6). We use this term for the purposes of this study because it entails the asymmetrical power relations that exist between the Western travel writer as the observer and the traversed milieu as the observed and represented.
  4. Persia was never formally colonized. However, Anglo-Russian rivalry to achieve supremacy in the region heightened, especially in the last decades of the nineteenth century, and led to British informal colonial interventions in Persia. This competition finally ended in the Anglo-Russian Agreement of 1907, which dissected Persia into three zones for the colonial and commercial ends of these two imperial powers (Nash 15). We use the term "colonial context" for our purposes to refer to the political situation of Persia at the time of Bell's travel.
  5. In the context of this paper, we are referring to the Victorian usage of "race" and its discourses on the hierarchical classification of "races," which put the English race at the top of the hierarchy, embodying the zenith of human development and civilization, with other races further down the scale of progress. See Darwin (1859) and Edward Beasley (2010). It should also be noted that "nation" and "race" were used interchangeably in nineteenth century Britain (Young 68).
  6. For more on the ambivalent status of Victorian women writers in colonial contexts, see articles by Blake; Jenkins; and Reviron. Also see Mills, *Gender and Colonial Space* (2005).
  7. A quick glance at the content of recent studies on exoticism reveals the glaring absence of female-authored texts as well as the relatively minor coverage of Anglophone work in comparison with the broad focus on Francophone work. Célestin's *From Cannibals to Radicals: Figures and Limits of Exoticism* (1996) exclusively covers male writers, who are all French apart from Naipaul. Similarly, Forsdick's two studies on exoticism, *Victor Segalen and the Aesthetics of Diversity* (2000) and *Travel in Twentieth-Century French and Francophone Cultures: The Persistence of Diversity* (2005), deal with texts written by French male writers with only a few pages devoted to two contemporary francophone female writers. Although Bongie's *Exotic Memories: Literature, Colonialism, and the Fin de Siècle* (1991) covers Joseph Conrad's work among that of other French writers, it is devoted only to male writers. And finally, even though Santaolalla's recent compilation, "*New*" *Exoticisms: Changing Patterns in the Construction of Otherness* (2000), addresses a few women writers, they are native informants who are exoticizing their own native cultures and land to attract readers. For more information on this aspect of exoticism see Huggan's *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (2001).
  8. Forsdick, in his prolific writing on exoticism, sees the reason for the pejorative connotations of this concept in Anglophone scholarship as being due to the predominant influence of Said's work (*Travel in Twentieth-Century* 28; "Travelling Concepts" 15). Similarly, Shapiro maintains that postcolonial theory has subjected this term to "a merciless grinding down to a single ideological edge," to a single meaning in the service of political interests, thus its flexibility in different contexts and its potential positive meanings are suppressed (43); see also Egerer 17.
  9. Segalen (1878–1919) was a French writer, critic, ethnographer, and doctor. His conceptualization of exoticism in his unfinished fragmentary work, *Essay on Exoticism: An Aesthetics of Diversity*, was published posthumously in 1955 in French and its English translation by Yaël Rachel Schlick followed half a century or so later. Although *Essay on Exoticism* was first published in 1955, the dates registered by Segalen for different entries in this work are from 1904 to 1918. See notes 21 and 22 below for his theorization of exoticism.
  10. Rather than providing a corrective to and/or an authentic version of the Persian milieu at the time of Bell's travel, if there is any at all, this paper probes the social, cultural, and religious articulations of Persia and the Persians. We concur with Hulme's view that the study of colonial writing produces no

- authentic picture of the past: “no smooth history emerges, but rather a series of fragments, which read speculatively, hint at a story that can never be fully recovered” (12).
11. Although she found Victorian codes regarding gender frustrating and constraining, Bell respected the conventional attitudes of her time. Explaining the reason behind Bell's becoming a member of the Anti-Suffrage League, Wallach observes that as “a daughter of the Victorian Age,” Bell was “raised in an era graced by women considered to be no less than the bearers and guardians of the English race. As boldly as she behaved in the East, at home she remained within the boundaries of tradition” (82). Echoing Wallach's view, Goodman contends that Bell “was an exceptional woman but she was not a rebel” (51).
  12. Bell was also appointed as “a political advisor in Mesopotamia” by the British Government, in consideration of her professional knowledge about local tribes, as well as Byzantine architecture and archaeological locations (Bassnett 236). In addition, she enjoyed a very prestigious position in the court of King Faisal I (1921–1933) of Iraq, as his advisor, not only on political subjects but also on managing his harem (Wagner 86–95). Furthermore, she is remembered for founding Baghdad's Archaeological Museum, opened in 1926, to house its rich heritage and artifacts.
  13. *Safar Nameh* is the Persian term for a travel book. Bell did not like to publish her writing on Persia, stating that it was for her own amusement and that she “loathe[s] people who rush into print and fill the world with their cheap and nasty work” (qtd. in Ross 5). However, due to her parents' insistence on the publication of her travel notes, she finally agreed to let them be published, but only anonymously (Ross 5–6). The second edition of the book was published after her death, under her name, simply as *Persian Pictures* in 1928. Bell's second publication on Persia was *Poems from the Divan of Hafiz* (1897), which presents her translation of the poems of Hafiz Shirazi, the famous fourteenth-century Persian poet.
  14. The first fourteen chapters deal with Persia and were written during her travel, while the remaining six chapters were authored at the request of her publisher in London (Ross 6).
  15. Although Banuazizi provides insightful criticism into Western male travel writers on Iran, he totally overlooks women's travel texts, except for a passing reference to Gertrude Bell grouped among male travelers noted for their sympathetic representation of the Persian milieu (216).
  16. For a similar response to *Persian Pictures* see Braaksma, who maintains that Bell presents Persia in *Persian Pictures* as “a dream-land of Oriental romance and magic splendour” (78).
  17. Liasram's study mentions Bell's attempt to break away from the hegemonic Orientalist view of her time towards Persia. This contention, however, is not elaborated upon in the short space allotted to *Persian Pictures* in her chapter on Gertrude Bell.
  18. In the preface to the second edition of *Persian Pictures*, Ross writes that Bell's “great ambition of . . . life was to visit Persia” (5).
  19. Far from being a youthful infatuation, Bell's appreciation for and awareness of the difference of the Orient also informs *Syria: The Desert and the Sown*, published seventeen years after *Persian*. In the preface to this work, Bell rearticulates her criticism of Western travelers' ethnocentric and appropriative attitude towards cultural difference. Bell praises Orientals' “wider tolerance born of greater diversity” (x). She notices that, far from criticizing the difference of a European, Orientals listen to his opinion with attention, “but he will not be thought odd or mad, nor even mistaken, because his practices and the ways of his thought are at variance with those of the people among whom he finds himself” (x).
  20. On the link between the Western classificatory paradigm and exoticism reflected in travel writing, and its contribution to imperialist agendas, see Spurr and Todorov.
  21. In *Essay on Exoticism*, Segalen defines exoticism as “an Aesthetics of Diversity,” in which “Diverse” refers to “everything that until now was called foreign, strange, unexpected, surprising, mysterious, amorous, superhuman, heroic, and even divine, everything that is *Other*” (67). For an insightful study of Segalen's conceptualization of exoticism, see Forsdick's *Victor Segalen*.
  22. In *Essay on Exoticism*, Segalen criticizes Europeans' customary reaction to the differences encountered in colonial settings, i.e., “assimilating the customs, races, nations, and others who differ from [them]”

- (21) for imperialistic ends, or to use his words for “bad uses” (46). In an attempt to strip exoticism of its dominant pejorative colonial overtones, Segalen contends it “signif[ies] nothing but the feeling of experiencing the purity and intensity of Diversity” (52). His theorization of exoticism as the aesthetics of diversity celebrates the other’s difference and recognizes its autonomous worth. Exoticism, Segalen maintains, “is not the perfect comprehension of something outside one’s self that one has managed to embrace fully, but the keen and immediate perception of an eternal incomprehensibility” (21). Admitting that one cannot employ the self’s systems of value for measuring the other’s irreducible difference, the exote not only does not “deplore ‘incomprehensibilities,’ but on the contrary, praise[s] them to the utmost” (Segalen 56). Thus, Forsdick is right in his observation that the exote’s “sensitivity to the nuances of otherness” (*Victor Segalen* 27) works against “the systematic decoding or absorption of [the other’s] difference” (*Victor Segalen* 123) and also leads to “a positive search for different means of engaging with otherness” (*Victor Segalen* 27).
23. Bell’s contention that the Orient’s true charm lies in the mysteries of individual life rather than in its shining and fabulous surface resembles Segalen’s view in *Essay on Exoticism*, as he declares that his conceptualization of exoticism may disappoint many readers since it does not address what is commonly considered exotic for its superficial difference (46).
  24. He was the Prophet Muhammad’s grandson who was martyred at the battle of Karbala. His death is commemorated annually in Iran by Shia Muslims.
  25. Our argument here draws on Porter’s “Orientalism and Its Problems,” where she asks for studies of a dialogical nature on West/East relations (150–61).
  26. For more examples see *Persian Pictures* (154, 85). Bell reaffirms her admiration for the common humanity of mankind in *Syria: The Desert and the Sown* many years later, where she asserts that the Arab “is as we are; human nature does not undergo a complete change east of Suez, nor is it impossible to be on terms of friendship and sympathy with the dwellers in those regions” (x).
  27. For more on Bell’s deployment of common Orientalist tropes in *Persian Pictures*, see her representation of dehumanization (72, 160), superstition (128), religious fanaticism (55, 99), and the despotic Oriental ruler (62–68).

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