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“In Search of Eldorado”: Elements of Travel Fiction in Tahir Shah’s Books on Morocco

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Introduction

Travel narratives or travel fiction constitute a considerable part of contemporary popular fiction. As a field of scholarly research, the critical attention to travel writing is relatively young; however, due to the processes of globalization, travel writing has strengthened its position in recent years and has become an international literary field, drawing the attention of many readers. Globalization of the world has inspired certain new developments in British literature. Nick Bentley notices the importance of “blurring of the boundaries between fiction and reality” in contemporary literature. This may explain the increased amount of popular literature, which is often grounded in reality. Among all the writing tendencies since the 1990s in European fiction, travel literature has appeared a significant phenomenon. Much contemporary British fiction has been concerned with the imaginative or realistic “construction of contemporary spaces and with the relationship between, history, geography and identity”. Migration of people has resulted in different representations of cultural environment. Physical environment has appeared in many postmodern novels and added a considerable touch of reality. According to Bentley, “countercultural narratives” have become a popular branch of fiction, the subpart of which

is travel literature, a genre that has always interested readers. As Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs state, travel has become “a key theme for the humanities and social sciences, and the amount of scholarly work on travel writing has reached unprecedented levels.” Different social factors directly influence the spread of travel literature and, especially, travel fiction – a situation which, according to Mary Baine Campbell, accounts for the strengthened positions of this sub-genre, earlier indiscreetly labelled “subliterary.” Although this new literary trend has been widely discussed and analysed only since the end of the twentieth century, travel narratives had existed even before the Odyssey that “describes an epic journey which offers a blueprint for the romance, indirection and danger of travel as well as the joy (and danger) of homecoming.” Travel always brings new experiences, knowledge and the understanding of other cultures; thus, due to contemporary processes this type of literature has definitely strengthened its position.

During many years of existence, travel literature has changed in its quality as travels have become more common and popular. Also, the traveller has always been concerned with more than the places s/he has visited, and in the past, tended to be an adventurer, a starting writer or a well-known writer, a scientist or a biologist. However, nowadays travel literature is more often associated to the feelings of the traveller and his/her gained experience and knowledge than to the descriptions of sightseeing that had impressed the writer. As philosopher Alain de Botton observes, starting from different impressions the writer’s experience gradually turns into “a compact and well-defined narrative.” Contrary to earlier travel narratives, the contemporary ones contain a surprisingly large amount of personal experience. Thus, personalization of contemporary travel narratives is one of the most distinct features of travel fiction nowadays. Moreover, the purpose of travelling itself has become different: for example, earlier travel narratives included much geographical and scientific information, while the present-day travel writing includes the attitude of the author/traveller to places, customs and people.

“Cultural significance of place” and the contrastive aspect of different settings have

5 Ibid., 14.
8 Hulme and Youngs, “Introduction,” 2.
become important features of travel fiction nowadays. According to William W. Stowe, “most nineteenth century American travellers used Europe for both social and personal purposes, a large minority also exploited it for professional ends, using their tours as occasions and subjects of writing.” It was a good way of getting new knowledge and inspiration: more and more travellers and readers interested in this travel literature appeared. In addition to this, the cause of such popularity was “its attractiveness as an established, respectable, and relatively undemanding literary genre.” The readers liked it because of the lack of possibilities to travel themselves or because it was not too difficult to read and it did not require specific knowledge.

Development of Travel Fiction: Genre and Authorship

Travel narratives have always been ascribed to popular literature. As William H. Sherman states, in the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries “literacy rates were still relatively low and many of the texts spoke to very limited audiences with very specific purposes.” Later, when the reading audience grew bigger in number, more publishers appeared who favoured travel writing. Travel narratives got popular and influenced other genres of literature. Michael Carhart claims that “travel literature was the second-bestselling genre in the early modern era, behind only history.” Numerous exotic descriptions of different places and countries that characterized the target country in detail appeared. This made the readers imagine all the adventures and surroundings of events taking place in the novels or stories. As William H. Sherman explains, “travelers made contact with new regions and peoples […] there was a significant audience for travel writing, eager to hear the news of the wider world.” Thus, travel literature is one of the genres that have always raised great interest all over the world. Readers wanted to receive more information about different countries, their cultures, society and customs. Certain issues were exceptionally tempting to the readers: varieties of people, strange

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11 Steve Hardy, Relations of Place. Aspects of Late 20th Century Fiction and Theory. (Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 2008), 7.
13 Stowe, Going Abroad: European Travel in Nineteenth-century American Culture, 11.
surroundings and customs, exotic places and different habits. Readers were excited by described experiences and adventures of the people who dared to leave their country and go where their mind would take them. During the ages, the concept of travel literature has changed; although it still tells about all the particularities of other countries and societies, now it has less geographical or factual information and is rather focused on the experience of the travellers and their point of view.

Travel literature, a wide genre, includes travel writing by famous authors, geographical explorations by travellers who recorded their travels, accidental writers who, under the spell of different surroundings, would record their feelings. The origins of travel writing lie in pilgrimage: William H. Sherman claims that “pilgrimage was the dominant medieval framework for long-distance, non-utilitarian travel,” while Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs explain that pilgrims “were ancestors of modern tourists.” Later travellers were able to use their routes being aware of the experience and the curiosity of pilgrims. Another type of travel writers were errant knights. Chivalric literature “was the other major paradigm inherited from medieval travel writers, and it sometimes overlapped the spiritual quest of the pilgrims.” Merchants also used to participate in the process of writing travel narratives. As William M. Sherman claims, merchants used to do that “whether in the author’s and printer’s desire to make money or in the sponsorship of specific ventures.” Historically, these works of travel literature were quite serious and important ones because of the documentation as they were responsible for keeping careful records of their movements. These records aided the forthcoming travellers and provided them with additional geographical knowledge. Moreover, there were explorers who “were not always interested in writing, and alongside the famous names we associate with early travels are the often obscure names of those who described them.” Thus, all the explorers used to travel for their personal reasons or in order to explore different parts of the world. Others, for example, colonizers, mostly wrote texts that described and debated England’s colonial ambitions in the early modern period. Such travel narratives provided more information related to colonizers and historical facts than the narratives by usual travellers, as people used to record their experiences and descriptions of their life, different places and culture.

17 Ibid., 24.
18 Hulme and Youngs, “Introduction,” 2.
19 Ibid., 24.
20 Ibid., 25.
21 Ibid., 17.
22 Ibid., 25.
23 Ibid., 26.
Political relationship among countries have made a considerable influence on travel narratives: politicians and, especially, ambassadors also form a part of the list of the authors of travel literature. As William Sherman states, “no community was in a better position to report on foreign lands than ambassadors.”24 They were always closer to the new things happening in the other parts of the world, so they could inform people in their native countries of the peculiarities of the host ones. Furthermore, there were scientists and explorers who, participating in expeditions, contributed to travel literature; however, they did not concentrate on travels as the main subject of their writing and used to include additional information (often historical or cultural) that would suit the expectations of the reading audience.

The authorship of travel literature is of diverse character. Many famous authors were also travel writers: for example, Thomas Jefferson (Travel Journals (1784-1789), James Fenimore Cooper (Gleanings in Europe (1836-1837), Charles Dickens (Pictures from Italy (1844-1845), Mark Twain (The Innocents Abroad (1869), Henry James (A Little Tour in France (1884), D. H. Lawrence (Sea and Sardinia (1921), William Somerset Maugham (On a Chinese Screen (1922), John Steinbeck (Travels with Charley: In Search of America (1962), Paul Theroux (The Great Railway Bazaar (1975), Bill Bryson (Neither Here Nor There: Travels in Europe (1992) and many others. Probably, each country can boast of outstanding travel writers. All of them played a significant role in the history of travel literature in terms of new geographical, historical or personal information included in their narratives. Thus, travel writers can be classified into several groups: (1) writers whose aim is to describe people, their customs and traditions (long-term travels); (2) writers who have settled in a particular place for a longer period of time; (3) famous writers, inspired by the exotic of adventures; (4) writers of Diaspora, who, although first challenged by different surroundings, later may opt for adaptation of different customs. The attitude of travel writers towards the target location can also be of great importance: for example, an outsider or stranger may encounter antagonistic local people or, on the contrary, the outsider meets friendly people, so that a curious person builds close relationship with the locals; a writer/traveller may be an adventurous optimistic person or a person emerged into sophisticated contemplations about the influence of the place on the individual. If the writer gets closer to a particular society or people, his/her travel account may appear more reliable. Travel writers produce narratives that differ in purposes and functions, writing style and formality. The only thing that is common to various types of travel narratives is the travelling information given in all of the accounts. Thus, contemporary travel narratives try to answer questions about identities, stereotypes, different values and cultural aspects.

24 Ibid., 27.
Types of Travel Narratives: Different Purposes and Expectations

As Hulme and Youngs state, “travel writing is best considered as a broad and ever-shifting genre” because it presents various other issues apart from travelling. The genre consists of purely fictional travel narratives, imaginary travel narratives, fantastic travel stories, realistic travel narratives that contain some fictional elements, essays or journalistic accounts. To the latter type of travel narratives, guidebooks, travel chronicles and other travel accounts can be ascribed. According to William W. Stowe, they “set the planner dreaming of foreign scenes, great works of art, moving, scenery, and unaccustomed luxury.” Guidebooks give the main information for a traveller, such as the basic information about the country, the best places to stay and see. They also “tell tourist what kind of behavior is appropriate to each site and indicate what kind of fulfilment to expect from him.” Different cultures and customs exist and it is always useful to know them in order to respect them during the visit. As Stowe asserts, “guidebooks promulgate more specific, historically determined relations between travel, knowledge, and satisfaction.” In other words, guidebooks help to plan travels, get people aware of a lot of useful and interesting information, and give the pleasure of reading. However, often travel guides are impersonal and merely contain tourist information.

Another type of travel narratives is travel chronicles. According to Stowe, the writers of this type of travel narratives have “the opportunity to testify to what were often transformative, always extraordinary, passages in their lives and to court the prestige of authorship by contributing to an established literary genre.” There are two subtypes of travel chronicles: newspaper travel accounts and book-length travel chronicle. Stowe explains that newspaper travel accounts instruct and amuse their readers and “entice the potential travel writer with the prospect of authorship.” The book-length travel chronicle is “often compiled from newspaper dispatches and private letters, with a clear reportorial purpose and an overall shape dictated by the outline of the author’s actual travels.” These narratives are based on his/her real experiences and adventures of travelling. Travel journalism or travel writing for newspapers and magazines, is another popular type of a

26 Stowe, Going Abroad: European Travel in Nineteenth-century American Culture, 29.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid., 44.
29 Ibid., 55.
30 Ibid., 57.
31 Ibid.
narrative, which can be analytical and descriptive and has recently spread widely in the form of web sites and blogs.

Travel narratives can be distinguished by certain purposes and features. Travel narratives are usually detailed or more explicit so that the readers could get specific information and imagine all the adventures and visualize the particular location. In addition to this, writers have different purposes of travelling. Some of them travel and take down their adventures out of their own interest, others write in order to inform and/or educate the readers or simply share their fascination with the country with the readers. The type of the traveller-writer, relationship between reality and fiction, the paradigm of time, the purpose of writing and the type of the narrative determine the structure of travel narratives.

Another system of classifying travel literature is according to its nature. Peter Hulme states that “travel writing of the last twenty five years can be detected as the comic, the analytical, the wilderness, the spiritual, and the experimental.” The first sub-category contains comic elements and parody. Analytical type travel narratives usually analyze different cultures, politic systems or other differences between distinct societies. The wilderness usually refers to the wild nature described in travel narratives. The spiritual type of travel literature concentrates not only on a certain journey but also on the feelings of a person who is in the process of gaining new experience and knowledge. Experimental narratives usually present innovative method of travelling, new routes or directions, and the changed role of the traveller.

Moreover, travel literature has many features based on ethnographical issues. From the ethnographic point of view, travel narratives include the description of people, their nature, customs, religion, forms of government and language. Travellers and the readers of travel literature always concentrate on cultural, social, and political aspects of different places and countries. The ethnographic features found in travel literature are related to languages and oral rhetoric, political order, national or racial temperaments, economic activities, religion (rituals, festivals, idols and temples, religion), different points of view (to marriage, sexuality, nudity, etc.), habits, different ideologies or arts. These categories vary a lot depending on the attitude of the traveller to different cultures.

Representation of social stereotypes and cultural issues is a significant feature of travel narratives. Joan Pau Rubíés asserts that its reason is “intense curiosity towards the

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34 Rubiés, “Travel Writing and Ethnography,” 251.
variety of human customs, religions and systems of government.”\textsuperscript{35} Travel writers share their knowledge and experience with their readers: they may include realistic account of their travels, present some ironic or critical comments or simply exaggerate different issues with a great degree of fantasy. The descriptions of people, who belong to a different location, include comments on their behaviour, philosophical issues and explanation of universal human traits.\textsuperscript{36} These descriptions are related to cultural aspects and analysis of different customs. Reading about curious differences between countries readers get information and learn to tolerate and respect other cultures and different customs.

Another significant and easily distinguishable feature of travel literature is geography. As Joan Pau Rubiés explains, “learning geography, or cosmography, acted as encyclopaedic synthesis for the description of the world.”\textsuperscript{37} Maps only give the basic geographical information, while travel narratives add more details and additional information related to a certain place and making it easier to imagine. The writer’s relationship to the location and his/her functions in it become important features in “writings about ‘foreign’ and especially ‘exotic’ places in which they have travelled and lived.”\textsuperscript{38} Readers would always like the idea of knowing more about some exotic and interesting places. In addition to this, the real experience and adventures of others contain an important aspect of truth. Travel narratives make readers aware of the people of certain region, country, or culture. The writer observes them and gives his/her point of view. The particularities of this characterization depend on the possible intimacy of conversation the writer can have with the local people.\textsuperscript{39} If contacts with a particular society or people become close, then the description and analysis of the place and the local people become more reliable.

At present additional features of travel narratives have appeared. Hulme and Youngs explain that ‘since the late 1970s travel texts have often reflected on contemporary issues.’\textsuperscript{40} Most of travel narratives get the readers acknowledged with the most important things of a certain century. Nowadays travel narratives include discussion of contemporary problems of globalization, Diaspora and “nomadism.”\textsuperscript{41} Such narratives describe the problems of residents of certain countries living in other countries and adapting to different cultures due to the reasons of immigration. In other words, travel

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{35} Ibid., 250.
\bibitem{36} Ibid., 243.
\bibitem{37} Ibid., 242.
\bibitem{38} Campbell, “Travel Writing and Its Theory,” 261.
\bibitem{39} Rubiés, “Travel Writing and Ethnography,” 254.
\bibitem{40} Hulme and Youngs, “Introduction,” 9.
\bibitem{41} Campbell, “Travel Writing and Its Theory,” 262.
\end{thebibliography}
narratives not only introduce other cultures or societies but also present current problems and certain cultural or historical changes. Mary Baine Campbell observes that nowadays travel writing “provokes certain kinds of essentially literary questions of formulations.” 42 Finally, they demonstrate the authorial perspective of the writer. 43 The author may choose to include some biographical information or include the reader in structuring the narrative. The autobiographical dimension, according to Jerome Bruner, contains accounts of the authors’ themselves and may transform the travel narrative into “cultural geography” 44 or, sometimes, even into geographical autobiography. For this reason, books by travel writers are often classified as “Travel/Autobiography” by publishers and librarians – a situation which explains a strong emphasis on facts in travel narratives. However, the questions of the fictionalized amount of the text in the travel narrative still exist: (1) To what extent does the author use (or is allowed to use) his/her imaginative powers? (2) Who remains responsible for the TRUTH? and (3) How can the reader distinguish true facts from the fictionalized ones?

Concerning the style of the language, Mary Baine Campbell asserts that the writers of travel narratives may “go primitive.” 45 Thus, the phrases and information given in the narratives are not too complicated, which, probably, explains the reason why readers choose this genre of literature. Despite possible fictional elements that may be present in a travel narrative, Alain De Botton labels it “a kind of essayistic writing” 46 and discloses different stages of a journey as represented in the travel narrative: motives, timing, departure and return, the role of landscape and other issues. Travel narratives depend on the authors’ choices about the location and time and degree of personal experience, which is “allowed” to enter the narrative. The motives or purpose of travelling is a significant feature of the narrative, which may influence its structure. Campbell states that travel writing “has had to do with imperial periods of the later eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries, in which the geographical surveying of the globe […] produced so much knowledge in the service of so much desire for power and wealth.” 47 There were authors who were simultaneously travelling and producing narratives in order to gain something: conquer some lands, gain wealth. The situation and the motivation of producing narratives of this genre changed a lot in the twentieth century. As Peter Hulme

42 Ibid., 263.
43 Ibid.
45 Campbell, “Travel Writing and Its Theory,” 268.
46 De Botton, The Art of Travel, 137.
47 Campbell, “Travel Writing and Its Theory,” 269.
explains, “travel writing was not usually seen as the basis of literary career before.”

Travel writers wrote for pleasure or other reasons not directly related to it as an occupation. During the second half of the twentieth century, more travel writers appeared who started writing travel narratives under the contracts with famous publishing houses for commercial reasons meeting the needs of the market. Thus, as Fiona J. Doloughan rightly notices, the motives and the journey itself provide a “temporal framework for a text.”

The authors of travel literature often directly address the reader and develop their narrative in the first person, creating very close relationship with the reader. As William H. Sherman asserts, “the narrative voice could be either strongly first-person or strongly third-person, depending on whether the author wanted to emphasize the travels or what they encountered.”

The first-person narrator usually appears when the author is telling about his/her own experience, concentrating on his/her own point of view. The third-person narrator is often present in descriptive narratives.

Some travel narratives make a considerable use of maps or pictures – a contribution to the realistic paradigm of travel narratives. William H. Sherman asserts that this aspect has been inherited from earlier travel narratives: “readers would have expected to see illustrations (of increasingly high quality), not just of harbors and important cities but of native costumes and exotic flora and fauna.” Readers were interested in pictures as it was an opportunity to understand cultural and geographical aspects of other countries such as local people, their native costumes, or the exotic nature surrounding them.

“In Search of Eldorado” or in Search for the Answers to Cross-cultural Puzzles

As it has been mentioned above, travel literature records the experiences of the author and may be cross-cultural or transnational in focus. The theme of travel can be found in numerous works of fiction and poetry. The stanza from Edgar Allan Poe’s poem “Eldorado” chosen as an epigraph of this article, proves the tempting nature of travel or search – a search for new horizons, adventures, exotic places, and even a search for oneself.

48 Hulme, “Travelling to Write”, 89.
49 Fiona J. Doloughan, “Narratives of Travel and the Travelling Concept of Narrative: Genre Blending and the Art of Transformation,” in COLLeGIUM Studies across Disciplines in the Humanities and Social Sciences 1. (Helsinki: Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, 2006), 137.
50 Sherman, “Stirrings and Searchings (1500-1720),” 30.
51 Ibid., 31.
However, nowadays most travel authors choose the mode of explaining cultural differences and similarities. Mainly, these cross-cultural issues become important aspects of contemporary literature, which often discusses the problems of people migration. An example of such type of cross-cultural travel narrative may be Tahir Shah’s texts. Tahir Shah (b. 1966) is a contemporary British author, who is widely-known for his travel books, especially the ones set in Morocco: The Caliph’s House: A Year in Casablanca (2006) and In Arabian Nights: In search of Morocco, through its stories and storytellers (2008). These books contain many features of travel fiction; thus, they seem to open more space for countercultural or cross-cultural narratives in contemporary British fiction.

Tahir Shah’s family background (Anglo-Afghan Indian) stands for cultural diversity, which may be found in his books. Born and brought up in Great Britain, he has travelled extensively, and in 2003, he moved to Morocco with his family. The author of fourteen books, Tahir Shah is often associated with travel writers. The most significant themes in his works are stepping across cultural boundaries, searching for positive dialogue, description of cultural heritage of East and West, and discussion of political and cultural situation in Muslim countries. With the help of humour and self-irony he tries to educate his readers and encourage them to search for new horizons and boldly take up challenges.

The Caliph’s House: A Year in Casablanca is written in the form of the first-person narrative: the author describes his first experiences and adventures in Morocco. The humoristic and mildly ironic first-person narrative brings two cultures, British and Moroccan, together. As French influence is rather expressed in Morocco, often the third culture, French, is being referred to in Shah’s books on Morocco. In The Caliph’s House, each chapter (of the twenty-one) starts with a Moroccan proverb, which serves as a leitmotif for a particular event. The author uses many Arab and French words throughout the novel to describe local people and places. At the end of the book, to aid the reader, a glossary of most often used Arab words and phrases is included. Alongside useful suggestions for a traveller, the text provides information on social and ethnic identity and cultures, balancing on the thin boundary between reality and fiction. In addition, the text is loaded with tourist information; however, this information is personalized, so that the attitude of the author remains distinct:

Our starting point was Fès, undoubtedly Morocco’s greatest jewel. It is the only medieval Arab city that remains entirely intact. Walking through the labyrinth of streets that make up the vast medina is like stepping into A Thousand and One Nights. The smells, sights and sounds bombard the senses. A stroll of a
few feet can be an overwhelming experience. For centuries, Fès was a place of impressive wealth, a centre of scholarship and trade. Its houses reflect a confidence in Arab architecture almost never seen elsewhere, their decor profiting from a line of apprentices unbroken for a thousand years.53

Detailed descriptions of the surroundings and people help the reader visualize the place and may encourage them to find the place. Mainly, this feature is one of the most popular ones in travel narratives: the author’s admiration or, sometimes, critical opinion may set the readers on searching out that place.

Tahir Shah belongs to a group of travel writers, who, after a long search for a particular place and having settled in it, describe their feelings, emotions, attitude to local people and customs, give a detailed account of the location and events and reveal their personal attitude to the surroundings. Shah involves his readers in understanding and accepting the place. Unlike his other book on Morocco, In Arabian Nights: In search of Morocco, through its stories and storytellers, where the map of the country is included, in The Caliph’s House detailed descriptions of the places help the readers form their own perception of the locations. The idea of buying a house in a foreign country and settling there has been a tempting topic for many writers. A slightly earlier representation of this theme could be another British author’s, Peter Mayle’s, travel narratives on Provence, especially his first one on the topic – A Year in Provence (1989), which starts the trilogy on Provence (Toujours Provence (1992), Encore Provence (2000)). In the first book on Provence, Peter Mayle describes his adventures of buying a house, settling in it and doing renovations54. This one and similar examples only prove the point that some writers choose sharing of newly acquired information with their readers and involving them in their personal experiences and adventures in a foreign country.

However, the house in Tahir Shah’s book – Dar Khalifa, the Caliph’s house – turns into a major character, full of mysteries, “jinns” and secrets. Thus, the starting Moroccan proverb at the beginning of the book (“Look into the eyes of a jinn and stare into the depths of your own soul”) sets a special mood of the book. A search for jinns or rather their expulsion from the house might symbolize getting rid of any prejudices against “The Other.” Moreover, Tahir Shah is set on describing and explaining differences between the Eastern and Western way of life.

The ethnographic dimension becomes another distinct aspect of this book: the text is full of useful for the tourists descriptions on the Moroccan way of life, customs,

traditions, architecture of the cities, folklore and other issues. Tahir Shah describes his first experiences, settling in Morocco; thus, it is not surprising that exploration of the country starts from Casablanca, a city in which he has settled:

Built by the French after they annexed Morocco in the first decade of the last century, the buildings have the sweeping lines of classic art deco and art nouveau. I spent hours strolling there, staring up, picking out the details – the floral façades and gilded domes, the orderly wrought-iron balconies, the mullion windows and stone balustrades, and the sleek rounded walls of a robust age. Casablanca was the first city in the world to be planned from the air. Looking at it, one thing was astonishingly clear – that the French regarded it as a jewel in their Imperial crown.\(^{55}\)

Vivid description of the place tempts the reader to travel there and search out the same sights. Often similar descriptions of the places are combined with historical facts, thus, turning the narrative into a reliable source of information.

As it is often the mode of travel narratives or travel fiction, Tahir Shah’s books include elements of gourmet fiction, incorporated with those of travel fiction. Elements of gourmet fiction consist of detailed description of food, processes of meals, various dishes, habits of eating, special table traditions, etc. Travel authors often take up the representation of the five human senses in describing peculiarities of the country’s traditional meals; the use of special names of meals that are both informative and exotic adds to the credibility level of the narrative:

The meal reintroduced me to the sensory marvels of real Moroccan cuisine. We ordered a selection of dishes. There was chicken *tagine*, flavoured with turmeric, honey and apricots; a pair of sea bream marinated in a saffron sauce and served on a bed of couscous. After that came *bistiya*, a vast platter of sweet pastry, beneath which lay wafer-thin layers of pigeon, almonds and egg.\(^{56}\)


\(^{56}\) Ibid., 60, italic in the original.
Moroccan food and eating habits are seen as self-expression of the local people or part of their identity; however, in Shah’s texts, there is more emphasis on places and people than on gourmet details:

Moroccan food tends to be as inferior in restaurants as it is superior in the home. To achieve the subtle flavours takes an astonishing amount of care and time. The ambience is as important as the food itself, as is the attention lavished on the guest. As you gorge yourself with the delicacies, with your hosts whispering flattery, it’s very hard not to give in to delusion.  

In Shah’s text, food creates positive associations, describes feelings and emotions or represents close relationship among people, who enjoy this moment of sharing food.

Learning and trying to educate his readers or wishing to share his first impressions of the country with them, Tahir Shah sets on describing all the aspects of cross-cultural relationship. To an ignorant reader, he presents detailed analysis of Muslim holidays and discusses their meaning (“For Muslims, observing Ramadan is one of the central pillars of faith.”); “Across the Arab world, Friday prayers are followed by the heaviest lunch of the week.”), and even provides comparative analysis of the religious holidays, aiming to find elements of affinity between East and West:

In the West, we try to work out a logical cause when an accident occurs. The vase breaks because it’s knocked by a careless hand. The car crashes because the road is wet. The dog bites a child because it’s savage and a danger to honest society. But I found in Morocco that these everyday mishaps were treated in a very different way. They were frequently put down to the work of supernatural forces, with the jinns at the centre of the belief system.

57 Shah, The Caliph’s House, 60.
58 Ibid., 118.
59 Ibid., 181.
60 Ibid., 60.
The author’s personal experience is prominent throughout the book; however, the subjective point of view does not hinder the reader’s understanding of factual information. Thus, Shah’s description of the places make the readers wish to search out these places; his adventures in Morocco set an example and invite the readers to experience the same events; vivid descriptions of local people tempt the readers to meet these people; descriptions of Moroccan food provide much factual information about the country’s cuisine.

Tahir Shah’s second book on Morocco, *In Arabian Nights: In search of Morocco, through its stories and storytellers* (2008), although slightly different in character in comparison to the first one, presents a more detailed analysis of Moroccan folklore. As Shah states at the beginning of the book, “For my father there was no sharper way to understand a country than by listening to its stories.”

Thus, the aim of the book becomes clear – to share the understanding of Moroccan tales and stories:

‘The Berbers believe that when people are born, they are born with a story inside them, locked in their heart. It looks after them, protects them.’ Dr Mehdi flicked the hood of his jelaba down on to his neck and sipped his coffee. ‘Their task is to search for their story,’ he said, ‘to look for it in everything they do.’

It seems that under the guidance of the author the reader is invited to this eternal search for his/her own stories. As it is mentioned in the book, “Some people find their story right away”; others “search their entire lives and never find it” – “it depends on ‘perception.’”

In this way, Tahir Shah sends a message to his readers or wants to pose a question for them: Have they already found their stories? This aspect starts a special dialogue between the author and the reader and points to the two directions of this perception: in order to understand the stories of other countries, people have to search for the stories of their own. Thus, it is not surprising that the structure of this second book on Morocco includes the central journey symbol – the author’s quest for finding a ten-volume edition of “*Alf Layla wa Layla*, ‘A Thousand Nights and A Night’”, a notorious collection of the *Arabian Nights*.

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62 Ibid., 47, italic in the original.
63 Ibid., 48.
64 Ibid., 162-163, italic in the original.
Explaining the origin of tales and stories, Tahir Shah discusses their cosmopolitan nature: “stories are a communal currency of humanity. They follow the same patterns irrespective of where they are found.”

Although similar in the narrative form, the two books (The Caliph’s House and In Arabian Nights) contain a different central focus: in the first one, the house (Dar Khalifa) is the central character, around which most of the action rotates; while, in the second one, the journey in search for a story or stories is the central issue:

‘In the south of Morocco people believe that there are streams running under the ground.’ [...] ‘The streams don’t run with water.’ [They run] ‘With words’. [...] ‘The streams irrigate Morocco,’ he said, ‘like water on farmland, they have allowed the civilization to grow, to thrive. Why is Morocco what it is? Why does it mesmerize everyone who comes here, with its colours, with its atmosphere?’ [...] ‘It’s because of the streams,’ he said.

The readers are encouraged to turn to their roots and to look for these streams in their own culture. The author makes everyone question the importance of stories, which are “a kind of key, a catalyst, a device to help humanity think in a certain way.” The author’s role is clear – he tries to awaken the reader from a sleep, stating that “until their minds are stirred with stories, people are asleep.”

In Arabian Nights is full of the cases of intertextuality: there are references to Shah’s first book on Morocco, The Caliph’s House, and to the stories from the collection A Thousand and One Nights. Gérard Genette (1992 and 1997) listed the following five subtypes of inter/transtextuality: 1) intertextuality (quotation, plagiarism, allusion when citing another text is an explicit intertextual relation); 2) paratextuality (the relation between a text and its ‘paratext’ – that which surrounds the main body of the text, such as titles, headings, prefaces, epigraphs, dedications, acknowledgements, footnotes, illustrations, etc.); 3) architextuality (designation of a text as part of a genre or genres or framing by readers, which spans from critical texts (comments, reviews)); 4)
metatextuality (explicit or implicit critical commentary of one text on another text); 5) hypertextuality or hypotextuality (the relation between a text and a preceding “hypotext” - a text or genre on which it is based but which it transforms, modifies, elaborates or extends (including parody, spoof, sequel, translation). Following this theoretical framework, it is possible to state that Tahir Shah’s books on Morocco contain a great amount of intertextual relationship of different types; however, the book *In Arabian Nights* is a text where these cases are most obvious.

**Conclusion**

To sum up, travel literature is a wide genre sub-divided according to its purpose, type and nature. Firstly, travel narratives include geographical information, sometimes illustrated with pictures and maps, describe the exotic of travels, analyze cultural aspects, and comment on different psychological and cross-cultural problems which may arise in a foreign country. Travel narratives usually describe ethnographical issues such as different customs, traditions, and society and may provide information related to religion and political system of the target country. Furthermore, travel narratives introduce certain racial and cultural stereotypes, nuances of languages, contrasting values or the writer’s point of view on many issues. Often travel narratives provide information about the culture of the target country. Being either a record of an escape from reality or an informative source for readers, contrasting the values and self-concept and presenting ethnographic dimension, first of all, contemporary travel narratives demonstrate the author’s point of view, which is in accordance with the purpose of travelling, the author’s experience and style.

During many centuries travel literature has become a broad and important genre, attracting many readers. Alongside the cross-cultural aspect of this type of writing, it can appear in many forms, which represent the literary tendencies of the period. The analysis of the features of travel literature has demonstrated the main trends and types of travel literature. Many new forms and types have appeared, such as travel newspapers and magazines, or travel web sites. In addition, travel narratives have gained new features and discuss different contemporary issues. However, the tendency to personalize travel narratives becomes the most significant feature nowadays.

The analysis of the features of travel narratives in Tahir Shah’s books *The Caliph’s House: A Year in Casablanca* (2006) and *In Arabian Nights: In search of Morocco, through its stories and storytellers* (2008) has proved the importance of geographical information, exotic
of travels, ethnographic, linguistic aspects and the author’s role. In the contemporary travel narrative, the author’s voice becomes distinct: biographical elements, “self-making and world-making,” the author’s point of view on different issues, the purpose of travelling, and the intimacy of conversation with the local people (and with himself) are the features in Tahir Shah’s texts that present the cross-cultural perspective on the social systems in Morocco and Great Britain or France. Tahir Shah’s insight into Moroccan customs can be an outstanding source for cross-cultural investigations. Moreover, national temperaments and habits of the British, French and Moroccan, different psychological features, a different point of view, and the description of the social system of the country help to solve cross-cultural puzzles that a contemporary reader or traveller may face when tempted to explore the exotic route offered by the author.

References


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