

Representation of self and other in *Arabian Sands* by Wilfred Thesiger: A study of travel literature

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Abstract

Arabian Sands tells of a man from England who was born in Ethiopia and then explored the Arabian Desert called Rub Al Khali. This book is a travel writing based on the author's experience. In the book, the writer's sense of superiority and great respect for the Beduin, tribe who has long occupied Rub Al Khali is described. When viewed from the study of travel literature, this matter can be said to self and *other* representations. Therefore, this article will look at how the author describes *self* and *others* in the context of travel literature. The material object in this study is the book, *Arabian Sands*, while the formal object of this research is the representation of self and others in the perspective of Carl Thompson's travel writing. This research uses a descriptive-analytic research method. The results of the analysis of this novel show that there is a distance between the *self* and *others* that the author raises. In other words, even though the writer describes others positively, indirectly the writer has also described his position as self which is different from the place, culture, and people he meets in his travels. Apart from that, the writer also positions himself as other than his culture as Western because of the adaptations made to the eastern regions he visited. Thus, this novel shows the existence of dualism in representing self and other.

Keywords: Arabian Sands; Carl Thompson; self and other; travel literature; travel writing

INTRODUCTION

Literature has been a media of self-expression, or self-escapism for many readers. 'Self-expression' in a way where an author could practice their creativity whilst also relieving their internal thoughts and problems into a story, and 'self-escapism' for readers to expand their knowledge and creativity, or to experience another life other than their own. Literary works are a reflection of the social structure of society at a certain time (Damono 2002). In addition, literary works are also considered as a form of author's voice which is unique in expressing its identity and representing itself and its community (Oldacre 2016). Literary works are divided into two, namely imaginative and non-imaginative literature (Sumardjo and Saini K.M. 1986). In a non-imaginative literature, an author's main motive typically is to share the knowledge they have and in times with hopes of later similar aspirers to possibly correct and/or add the knowledge. In a fictional work of literature, it is crafted out of pure imagination into its own world and reality (Wellek & Warren, 1963) Literature has branched its meaning into a variety of creations, one of which are novels.

The novel as an imaginative literary work is built from two elements, namely extrinsic and intrinsic elements. Extrinsic elements refer to the author's background as well as issues and phenomena that influence the creation of the writing, while intrinsic elements are elements that build stories such as characters, plots, settings, and others that build an imaginative world in the novel (Nurgiyantoro, 2010). As a work of fiction which is the author's small world, novels also often describe social realities, such as the habits and customs of society, social structures, norms, people's perspectives to the relationship between one another (Waluyo, 1994). The social reality that appears in the novel can be described by the author through his experience in traveling. This, according to Fussel (1987), is called travel writing which is based on the author's experience and emphasizes objectivity. It means that travel literature must be based on real (travel) experience, not just fiction or based on books and stories. This is a requirement for writing to be categorized as travel literature (Eder, 1981; Hagglund, 2000; Hulme & Youngs, 2002; Vičič, 2011).

A well-known example of travel writing was a novel published in the 1950s named *Arabian Sands* written by Wilfred Thesiger. He was a former British military officer that had a fiery passion to explore lands that were not conventionally touched by the west before. He was only a writer after much persuasion by his mother and colleague and *Arabian Sands* being his first book. He was quite the photographer as he photographed his travels much earlier before ever having the intention of writing about them. It was when he fled to Denmark where it took him 10 years to complete it. From then on, he went on to continue writing his explorations that mainly

focuses on Africa and the Middle East. Arabian Sands was one that pivoted the Arabian Peninsula between 1945-1950. As a very accomplished man, he has been awarded many honors, one of them was in 1948, he was awarded the Founder's Gold Medal for his contributions to the Geography of Southern Arabia and for his journey of crossing *Rub Al Khali*, or the Empty Quarter. He was also awarded the Lawrence of Arabia Memorial Medal of the Royal Society for Asian Affairs in 1955 and also the Knight Commander of the Order of the Britain Empire in 1995. In his era, travel writing was often pursued by men and most were of areas where there are civilizations that are considered new to the west and/or regions that have already been reached by the west. As an Englishman, he had clear privileges to explore foreign lands where he could also get connections to easily access it and their civilization, but he was never really fond of western lands and customs. He was born in Abyssinia – now known as Ethiopia – and had lived there for 6 years until he moved back to England. He described Abyssinia as a home too different from Britain, one where he was much too comfortably accustomed to. He was accustomed to encountering wild animals so freely that would have been much unlike compared to if he were in England. He disliked the modernity in England and mentioned how he made little friends and how he missed Africa. Even after serving to the British Army, he always had a strong will to explore somewhat harsh and difficult lands. Briefly before his journey to the Empty Quarter, he inspected an area in Sudan where the waters of a river mysteriously never made it up the mountains. The process to even reach there was more than challenging and yet he wanted more of a challenge where he later set his intentions to see Rub Al Khali (Thesiger, 1959).

In the novel, the narrative of the writing is in the perspective of the author (Wilfred) as a British (west) exploring the largest sand desert – Arabian Sands – in the Arabian peninsula (east). He described the desert to be a harsh condition to live in and yet described the tribes residing there, specifically the Bedouin tribe with utmost respect and admiration of their generational way of living and perseverance in this harsh desert. Indirectly creating a distance between the writer and the region he is visiting, thus further implying and highlighting the differences between the West and the East. These two groups are described differently and with the means of a different status or position with one another. As an example of this, in the beginning of his quest to the Empty Quarter, he was traveling around the Hajaz mountains, wandering through Tihama, a hot coastal plain that is situated between the Red Sea and the mountains where villages were present there that reminisced him of Africa, described the people there to be of “uncommon beauty, pleasantly easy and informal in manners.” He was an Englishman where manners were a fundamental indication of higher status; the better the manners, the more luxurious the status. He described them to have informal manners when it was only just differences to what his culture and ethnic teachings considered “formal manners.”

As a travel writer, Thesiger shows sympathy and deep understanding of the Middle East regions he visits, one of which is Oman. Nonetheless, as a westerner, Thesiger was considered an outsider who was spying on the region. However, because of his sympathy and understanding, he was able to gain appreciation and respect from local people (Risse, 2013). Besides that, *Arabian Sands* by Thesiger which is a travel story in the Middle East with a different geography and culture from the West, in this case England, also shows a different dimension of time, space and self. Self in this context means that in his adaptation to the Bedouin lifestyle, Thesiger went as far as to accept it as his preferred mode of life, which made him an outsider or the other in his own world, that is West (Rutkowska, 2010).

According to Edward Said (1979; 2010) in the study of orientalism, west and east are a binary opposition described by westerners where the west is *self* which is synonymous with superior, modern and rational. On the other hand, the east is described as the *other* which is always attached to stereotypes of a lower world, a place of backwardness and irrationality. The term *other* in travel writing is a form of identifying differences between one culture and another, which then creates a form of inferiority. Therefore, this issue is closely related to the study of postcolonialism, especially orientalism (Thompson, 2011). Travel writing is a subgenre that records negotiations between *self* and *other* and is oriented towards describing similarities, similarities, differences (Mashlihatin, 2015). Travel writing records the ‘meeting’ of *self* which is the author or the one doing the travel and *other* which is the civilizations and nature they encounter, as well as the negotiations over disputes and agreements done by both parties. *Other* is often seen as the difference between two cultures (the traveler and the land being traveled), inferiorly assumed by *self* (the traveler). Carl Thompson (2011) believed that all travel writings published in the late 1960s and onwards are considered postcolonialism no matter the cultural or ethnic heritage of the traveler. Pre postcolonialism, most travel writings were written by westerners where they had the privilege to explore lands and possibly colonize. In their retellings, they would describe the surroundings and the residents of this newfound land with a very typical colonialist view and often belittling, underestimating and overall expressed superiority over the differences. Using stereotypical

illustration to describe the *other* often signaling a negative light regarding them. With postcolonialism travel literature, it is an era where 'other' retaliate the stereotypes by the westerns, often correcting and mentioning the effect on colonialism or either affirming those stereotypes. Some embrace the idea of merging or expanding the cultural differences in travel which is a trait that western travel writers tend to ignore and dismiss. In travel narratives, an author is also required to present interesting stories to all readers about the lives of the people he meets, culture and give his personal views (Kurniawati & Atikurrahman, 2021). That is what Thesiger also points out in *Arabian Sands* which can be categorized as travel writing.

Therefore, the topic of revealing the self and representing the other in accordance with the approach of travel writing based on Carl Thompson's theory in "Arabian Sands" will be further discussed, regarding how the writer wants to show/address his representation of self and other.

METHODS

This research uses a methodological and theoretical approach. In the methodological approach, the researcher uses a qualitative approach (Nugrahani, 2014; Ratna, 2013) to find, describe and describe in the form of phrases or sentences social problems. In addition, this research also uses a theoretical approach, that is travel literature based on the concept of travel writing by Carl Thompson. The material object of this research is a travel writing book, titled *Arabian Sands* written by Wilfred Thesiger (1959) and the formal object is the forms of representations of self and other according to the theory of travel writing by Carl Thompson. In his theory, he mentioned that in travel writing, which in simplifications is a book written on a personal account of the author's travels. It consists of internal and external points, self and other. 'Self' being the traveler, the western exploring out into the eastern area; the middle east. The people and overall differences they encounter in this new area being 'other'. With the process of meeting 'other', typically there are personal descriptions including one's feelings and opinions when encountering these differences in this new land, ultimately and automatically leaving some signs or indication of inferiority of the opposite culture.

The researcher used data collection and literature study methods in this qualitative research (Darmalaksana, 2020). Researchers search for, read, and collect literature or scientific sources relevant to the research object. Afterward, the researcher marked and classified the words or sentences in the novel *Arabian Sands* that matched the problem of representation of self and other. This research uses a descriptive-analytic research method for data analysis to look for facts relevant to the research object, and then the results are described in sentences. Furthermore, the researcher analyzed the data by providing further explanations to obtain objective and systematic results.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Self representation as a Western who misses The East

Early on in the book, Thesiger was expressive on his intentions of wanting to continue his travels into the Arabian peninsula and explore the Empty Quarters. He is a British man, thus born with western privileges, ideologies and comfort but physically born into the world in a country that is the complete opposite. He was a privileged man in a struggling, exploited and ill-treated country. With traditions and landscapes much different to his root cultures. He was born and somewhat grew up in a country where wild animals were also in habitat of that land, yet he had privilege to hunt them even for sport. Although the striking difference between two cultures, Thesiger grew very much accustomed to the simple living circumstances in Abyssinia and when at the age of 6, he had to part and immediately adjust his life to the livings of England. He mentioned being able to name all animals correctly in school, yet failing his latin classes and missing Africa.

"It is not surprising that I dreamt of Africa during the years I was at school. I read every book that I could find on African travel and adventure, by Gordon-Cumming, Baldwin, Bruce, Selous, and many others. I pored over Rowland Ward's Records of Big Game and I could easily have passed an examination on African animals, while I was failing repeatedly in Latin." (Thesiger, 27)

With his childhood spent away from the foreign country he was born in and spent the teen hood to adulthood in a country where modernity and industrialization was introduced to him, an understanding of his status and racial superiority could have first been awakened to him. In his adult years, he served in the British Military where he had to be in a country similar to the one he was first introduced to. Far from comfort. The countries that he visited during his time in the military all having similar traits could have been the first sign as to

his ultimate destination to travel which is the setting of the book. At first his need to travel the largest sand desert in the Arabian peninsula was to gain some sort or form of pride as there were very little that had succeeded in doing so or even intended on, he continued on fulfilling his desire to explore farther to the east. He later explains that it's not any particular fascination towards the desert that led him to go to the deserts of the east, but rather the curiosity for what he doesn't know, and the eager to know what is not known or never before known, that attracted him to start.

".. but it was the attraction of the unknown rather than any love of deserts which was luring me back."
(Thesiger, 30)

As someone who was vocal on his dislikes with the modernity and innovations of the west, where "modern" and "developed" meant superior and wherever modernism took place in an industrial-developing country, rules and regulations were bound to appear and renew. Compared to the "traditional" lives of the east – according to western eyes – where it was less structuralized than it is in the cities of England, freedom could be seldomly claimed and felt. Thesiger, a western traveler, expressed that he found freedom in a country so far from the definitions of "proper" based on requirements of his culture. It was complete irony. **Freedom** was found in a place where it was anything but modern, where modern was supposedly believed to better and superior.

"In the desert I had found a freedom unattainable in civilization; a life unhampered by possessions, since everything that was not a necessity was an encumbrance." (Thesiger, 45)

In the beginning of his journey, he seldom mentioned, he carries his status and western privileges with him. Over time, he realizes that in the desert, what once accompanied and aided him on being accepted to start this journey, meant nothing as soon as he began his journey.

"I had been an Englishman travelling in Africa, but now I could revert happily to the desert ways which I had learned at Kutum. **For this was the real desert where differences of race and colour, of wealth and social standing, are almost meaningless; where coverings of pretence are stripped away and basic truths emerge.**" (Thesiger, 44)

It was quickly becoming apparent to him that it was no longer important what advantages he was birth with by the superiority of his racial status, for what are truly necessary to survive are not the materials that are innovated from the country he was from, but through the teachings of a tribe, with knowledge from their own, passed on generation to generation that could never be obtained by western customs.

"Their life is at all times desperately hard, and they are merciless critics of those who fall short in patience, good humor, generosity, loyalty, or courage. They make no allowance for the stranger. Whoever lives with the Bedu must accept Bedu conventions, and conform to Bedu standards. Only those who have journeyed with them can appreciate the strain of such a life. These tribesmen are accustomed since birth to the physical hardships of the desert, to drink the scanty bitter water of the Sands, to eat gritty unleavened bread, to endure the maddening irritation of driven sand, intense cold, heat, and blinding glare in a land without shade or cloud." (Thesiger, 62)

Even though rarely ever mentioning his racial superiority or almost never even protruding his advantages, he was indirectly humbled by not only the desert but also the tribes that accompanied him.

"I went there with a belief in my own racial superiority, but in their tents I felt like an uncouth, inarticulate barbarian, an intruder from a shoddy and materialistic world. Yet from them I learnt how welcoming are the Arabs and how generous is their hospitality." (Thesiger, 45-46)

The more he learned the ways of living in the desert, the more he embraced the Arab characteristics, in some situations seeming that some Arab customs are now part him. More and more, his understanding of the tribesmen that are with him increased. He learned the love and respect Arabs have for camels can be equivalent

to Englishmen with their horses and the ignorance many English writers have typically written about these animals that are uncommon to the West but a specialty to the East.

“To Arabs, camels are beautiful, and they derive as great a pleasure from looking at a good camel as some Englishmen get from looking at a good horse.” (Thesiger, 98)

“Many Englishmen have written about camels. When I open a book and see the familiar disparagement, the well-worn humour, I realize that the author’s knowledge of them is slight, that he has never lived among the Bedu, who know the camel’s worth: ‘Ata Allah’, or ‘God’s gift’, they call her, and it is her patience that wins the Arab’s heart. I have never seen a Bedu strike or ill-treat a camel.” (Thesiger, 97-98)

The more he set aside his western habits and identity, the more he embraced Arab habits and traits, thus embracing the desert. He feared that once he returned to the western world, many more of his kind would visit the same desert but with corrupt intentions. He expressed that even as a westerner, he is aware the typical western notion of coming to a “non modern” region; the desire of westernizing them.

“While I was with the Arabs I wished only to live as they lived and, now that I have left them, I would gladly think that nothing in their lives was altered by my coming. Regretfully, however, I realize that the maps I made helped others, with more material aims, to visit and corrupt a people whose spirit once lit the desert like a flame.” (Thesiger, 95-96)

From the analysis above, it shows that the writer as self indirectly describes the differences in culture, circumstances and environment between England and the Middle East region he visited. However, at the same time the author also shows his love for the places visited in the Middle East which are very different from England. This is as stated by Edward Said (2010:46) that for Europeans, the East is a distant region that has exoticism and real differences from the West.

Other representation as east which is different from west

Centuries prior to the postcolonial era, the East has been a fascinating destination for travelers from the West. Reasons of this could vary from wishes to conquer and expanding colonialist territory, seeking knowledge about the world, or to simply satisfy their desire to explore. Naturally, differences occur when the meeting of ‘self’ and ‘other’. Typically, westerners are characterized with being more modern and less traditional than their opposite cultures. The word of “traditional” used to describe a culture subtly implies that the customs of it are antiquated and outdated. Less modern meaning “way behind” the western thus leaving a stereotype insinuating that the “traditionals” are less intelligent and lack any sense of manner, posh and etiquette according to western standards.

“The people here were of uncommon beauty, and pleasantly easy and informal in their manners.” (Thesiger, 88)

In Arabian Sands, Thesiger has numerally detailed how friendly and otherworldly humble the Bedouins are even when encountering strangers, treating even their slaves as their own.

“Arabs have little if any sense of colour-bar; socially they treat a slave, however black, as one of themselves...”

Amir seated this slave beside him, and during dinner served him with his own hands. Arab rulers raise slaves to positions of great power, often trusting them more than they do their own relations.” (Thesiger, 91)

It is one of many differences shown between the Easterners Thesiger encounters in the Arabian peninsula, than the typical attitude and manner how Westerns act towards slaves in that era, where they make it evident to the slaves of their superior and advantage in status; a treatment and a view to slaves is one like anything but of humans. But in the book, Thesiger makes it clear how the Arab tribes that accompanies him on his trip are friendly, caring and generous even to strangers and slaves; a trait unusual compared to and for westerners.

“I thought how welcoming are Arabs, more so than any race I know.” (Thesiger, 94)

Thesiger again highlights the cultural differences between them two, as for one example are their animal preferences. In the West, normally they treat a horse with love, care and pride. As horses can help elevate one's social status through sport. But, it is not usual even to a horse to treat them so intensely, as does the Bedus, for in their case, are camels. In one example, he mentions how the Bedus put the needs of the camels on top of them,

“Always the camels' needs come first. **It is not only that the Bedu's existence depends upon the welfare of his animals, but that he has a real affection for them.** Often I have watched my companions fondling and kissing them whilst they murmured endearments.” (Thesiger, 97-98)

He learns that it is an affection between the Bedus and the camels, where they are aware – and Thesiger too learns – that they are dependent of the camel more than the camels are to them, especially in the emptiness of the desert.

From the analysis above, it can be seen that the writer provides a distance when describing the places and cultures in the Middle East region he visited. On the one hand, this shows that the Middle East region is the other. On the other hand, because the writer admires and internalizes the culture he finds there, the writer indirectly shows that he becomes other than his own culture, namely the West.

CONCLUSION

Thesiger is a British man, with a desire to travel away from the west, disliking almost every aspect of the British way of living but only then likes his British status when it could benefit him, such as allowing him to explore foreign lands as his passion; thus pleasing his drive and desire to travel colonialistically. Western, (self) travel to the east (other) and note the differences and subtly or pragmatically indicate his superiority as a western. The comfort he has learned and adapted from his teen hood and adulthood, have changed ever since his first visit of the Empty Quarters where his time with the natives, and the desert gave him a new meaning of "comfort". Absolutely contradicting the western standard and the typical western mindset where rich is justified by the possessions you have. It is having nothing in the western eyes, is where we have everything in the desert life (east). Therefore, the writer also positions himself as other than his culture as Western because of the adaptations made to the eastern regions he visited. Thus, this novel shows the existence of dualism in representing self and other.

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