Chapter 11
Freya Stark’s Tales of Travel on the Coast of Incense

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Abstract This chapter offers a postcolonial feminist reading of the works of the British-Italian travel writer and adventuress Freya Stark (1893–1993), who travelled extensively throughout the Middle East and North African region. Her impact on travel writing as an unmarried European woman traveler, at the beginning of the twentieth century, without income, local connections or colonial rank is notable. This chapter provides close reading, through a postcolonial feminist lens, of two first edition volumes of Stark’s autobiographical travel books written during 1928–1939. The analysis explores the commercial nexus of Orientalism, which is the term that refers to Western depictions of the ‘Eastern’ world (Said E, Orientalism. Pantheon, New York, 1998). It discusses Stark’s work in relation to conceived reader expectations, as well as her distinctly ambivalent attitude to British colonialism and colonials. I suggest that Stark’s ambiguous role, as insider-outsider both within and between the Arab region and British Empire, poses provocative questions about the interrelationships of gender, self and ‘Other’ within commercialized Orientalist discourse (Ballaster R, Fabulous orients. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005). Stark makes specific discursive moves, not only as a traveler across continents, but in literary, ethnographic and gender terms. These moves manage to disrupt fixed framings, images and descriptions of Arab people, places and gender practices. This chapter therefore makes a unique contribution to theorizing Stark’s work and, also, travel writing more generally, locating it as an import discursive genre that is always underpinned by moving practices of gender, politics and power.

Keywords Postcolonial · Feminism · Gender · Travel writing · Cultural studies · Ethnography · Orientalism · Middle East
11.1 Introduction

Travel writing has been dismissed as sub-literary despite its geographical, literal and discursive moves to describe people, places, fashions and ideas (Ghaderi & Habibzadeh, 2019). Yet, the travel writing genre offers an important ethnographic record of the discursive back and forth between the Orient, the broad imperialist term applied to Asia and the Middle East and North Africa region, with the Occident, or so-called West. The historical development of the genre, reaching back to the ancient Greeks, was a crucial aspect of the British imperialist imagination and contributed to Orientalist narratives which include the denigration, exoticism and othering of the Middle East and Asia (Ballaster, 2005). The personal travel narrative was coming into its own during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Aune, 2005). Western narratives of ‘othering,’ to describe and exoticize other peoples and places, developed significantly throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and travel narratives continue to have specific implications for the perception and representation of Middle Eastern people and places by contemporary Western political regimes and media (Said, 1998). But women travel writers have been largely ignored and overlooked due to the historical associations with travel as masculine (Mills, 1991). The study explores the relationship between the commercialization of Occidental travel and proliferation of Orientalist narratives to satisfy Western readers. The chapter explores the autobiographical travel writing of Freya Stark (1893–1993), the British-Italian writer and adventuress, as an example. It considers how the travel genre provides an important ethnographic record of literary, political, historical, religious and geographical relationships, shifting subjectivities and gendered identities. Stark’s writing is of interest, from a postcolonial feminist perspective, because it offers alternative and ambiguous representations of the Middle East, Orientalism and gender at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The central question of the chapter asks to what extent were the discursive moves that Stark made a result of a commercialized gendered subjectivity? To address this question and to explore some of the discursive moves of travel writing, this chapter provides a brief discussion of Stark’s writing. Stark first visited the Middle East in 1927 and travelled extensively throughout the 1930s, at a time when independent women travelers were uncommon. She was also one of the first non-Arabs to travel the Southern Arabian desert covering an area of 2,330,000 km (Olsen, 2020). Stark produced over 12 travel books, three books of essays, a four-volume autobiography, eight volumes of letters as well as six thousand black and white photographic prints and taking 50,000 odd more negatives, that are held in the Middle East Centre at St Antony’s College, Oxford (Ruthven, 2006). While Stark was by no means the first Western female traveler to the Middle East, she is interesting because her autobiographical writing is marked by a distinctly ambivalent attitude to the encountered differences of the region, gender, self and Other. Also, despite Stark’s prolific works, her travel writing has received relatively little critical recognition. She was dismissed as a poor writer and thinker by the American cultural and literary historian Paul Fussell (1924–2012) (Ruthven, 2006). She has also been considered an
Orientalist, for example by the journalist and Arabic scholar Brian Whitaker (2008). She is not commonly considered as a feminist (Pierpont, 2011). Conversely, this chapter contests and critically revises the backgrounding and reduction of Stark’s writing, Orientalism and feminism. To address these issues, the methodology involved a postcolonial feminist close reading of first edition copies of Stark’s autobiographical works, ‘Beyond Euphrates. Autobiography 1928 – 1933’ published in 1951 and ‘The Coast of Incense. Autobiography 1933 – 1939’ published in 1953. These original but dusty copies, illustrated throughout by Stark’s photographs, letters and autobiography, provided me, as a postcolonial feminist scholar based in the Middle East, with a tactile and visceral encounter with Stark’s work that would not have been communicated, in the same way, via a new paperback version or online reading. The study makes a unique contribution to postcolonial feminist scholarship considering Stark’s autobiographical travel writing in terms of audience reception (McRobbie, 2020). It also goes beyond the binary framework of early postcolonial criticism of the European self versus the Oriental Other as an ultimately self-defeating thesis. This is arguably an important theoretical move that helps to indicate the extent to which subjectivity has always been gendered and far less stable than colonial literature or early Orientalist scholarship presumes while establishing the commercialized modes of travel writing in relation to readers’ search for the self and the gendering of Other and self. In the next section of the chapter I discuss the analytical approach of the study for exploring the travel writing genre.

11.2 Travel Writing

The travel writing genre is considered from a postcolonial and sociomaterial feminist perspective in this study. It is therefore understood as a cultural artefact, much like a magazine, soap opera or reality television series (McRobbie, 2020). This sociomaterial approach to genre indicates the extent to which cultural artefacts, like a travel writing book, are not merely the product of an individual writer, occur within the commercial infrastructure of publishing, marketing and distribution. The meaning of a genre or product also operates within a commercialized nexus of knowledge, power and ideology. Travel narratives involve not only the travel of authors, but a series of discursive moves of publisher, writer and reader. Travel writing is viewed, therefore, as involving the commercialization of the journeys of travel writers and readers who frequent ‘foreign’ lands in search of the supposed ‘Other,’ the self, and the connection that self could have with Other. Ethnocentrism, and stereotyping of non-Western people and Arab women in particular, occurs to epitomize the Other in ways that are still prevalent in the twenty-first century (Hurley, 2019). The role that travel writing has played in colonial meaning making, imperialist discourse, ideological and gendered constructions of the self and Other, should therefore be critically scrutinized and decolonialized (Ghaderi & Habibzadeh, 2019). Revisiting Western travel writing from the last centuries plays an important
role in examining these discursive journeys and in particular addresses the gaps in scholarship surrounding the commercialized, gendered and Orientalist aspects of subjectivity as encapsulated within the travel genre. Some of the discursive moves that Stark made throughout her writing should therefore be understood in relation to commercialism, gendered subjectivity and Orientalism. These moves will be further illustrated through reference to extracts from Stark’s travel writing in the next section of the chapter.

### 11.3 Discursive Moves

By the nineteenth century, travel writing, as a pioneering, colonial and masculine pursuit, was entrenched within the travel publications, journals and writings popular in Britain and Europe (Youngs, 2006). Stark travelled during the late 1920s and throughout the 1930s, through Syria, Iraq, Iran and Southern Arabia, in an age before oil, aviation or even air conditioning. She was also an unmarried woman, without income, local protectors or connections. Her travels are therefore a controversial yet remarkable achievement, in many respects and, in particular because of her gender. However, Stark is also of interest from an ethnographic perspective because her travel writing was concerned with the day-to-day rituals and mundane occurrences. This is important since Gulf-studies scholars, Kanna, Le Renard and Vora (2020) argue that the focus on exceptional people, places and events in the Middle East is a further proliferation of Orientalism. To go beyond Orientalism involves “de-exceptionalizing” while not flattening the complexity of the everyday (Kanna et al., 2020: 11). Stark was undoubtedly proud of the unconventional moves she made but her writing also implies concern with Orientalism’s distorted picture of the region. For example, when visiting Syria, she tells readers that “this is the country I was told a woman could not possibly be alone in. My Muhammadan friend here says one can go practically anywhere. I do believe however that a little language is necessary” (1951: 14).

This statement indicates that although Stark was defying convention, as a lone woman travelling in a country considered inhospitable, she simultaneously conveys that the landscape and its inhabitants are accessible, contrary to colonial perspectives. She does this through mediating ‘foreign’ scenes in terms decipherable to Western readers. For example, the ‘Muhammadan,’ is not a stranger but her ‘friend.’ This is a discursive move to de-exceptionalism, rendering the unfamiliar familiar, while advocating the need for greater understanding of Arab people. Through documenting day-to-day routines across the Persian Gulf, Stark renders them in terms that her Western readers could recognize. Yet she is sensitive to the hybridity of the Arab region while managing a discursive interplay between Occidental and Orientalist discourses. This would have been necessary to get her works published since Stark would have had to balance her empirical experiences of travel with making her work marketable. Examining the first edition copies of Stark’s autobiography enables some theorizing of reader reception which I will discuss next.
The dust covers of my copies of ‘Beyond Euphrates’ and ‘The Coast of Incense’ are tattered and torn and the pages are yellowed and rough. On the hardbound cover, Freya Stark’s signature is etched in gold. A review on the inside cover of Beyond Euphrates, from The Observer, informs the reader, “There is hardly a page without an anecdote or a sketch or a reflection on life which shows the exquisite balance of humor and wisdom.” These first editions, printed by Wyman and Sons, and published by John Murray in the United Kingdom, both begin with a double page map of the Persian Gulf that spreads beyond the Euphrates river marking Stark’s incredible journey. The photographs throughout both texts are a mix of intimate family snaps, self-portraits and close-ups of young Arab girls; Transjordanian women; Kurds; Bedouin; armed tribal members; bare foot, topless boys; women opium harvesters; colorfully dressed leaders; goat herders; sheep; horses; mosques; turrets; mountains; wadis, and deserts. Stark’s subjects’ relaxed and friendly expressions indicate her evident skill at putting people at ease. The photographs of Stark show her in fashionable European dresses, elegant broad brimmed hats but also cross-dressing as a traditional Persian-Gulf man, in a ghatra headdress and dishdasha robe (Stark, 1951: 9). One reason given for her love of hats and headaddresses is that she lost an ear due to an accident when she was thirteen (Pierpont, 2011). But the captions of Stark’s photographs are brief, factual and give little away. Yet, the images illustrate the diversity of the people and places Stark visited as well as her own expansive, ambiguous gender and multicultural identity. Stark (1951) also tells readers that she follows the view of Rudolph Steiner, philosopher and alternative thinker, that perception depends on that of the perceiver. Having the opportunity to consider Stark’s writing, through study of these first edition copies, provides particular material insights into the cultural reception of her (female) readers in the 1950s, many of whom would not have had the opportunity to travel to these locales. These hardbacked books’ exquisite printing, binding, maps and photographs indicates that the reading experience would have been very different to that of reading a work of fiction while her autobiography is more than a personal journey. Stark’s volumes of autobiography are both a scrapbook and guide for readers’ vicarious journeying. Considering Starks’ work in terms of this materiality helps to also imagine the varying interpretations by her readers as an important aspect of feminist theorizing of travel writing and reading.

Travel writing, in the past, has been viewed as a male genre. Travel has also been considered a distinctly masculine activity (Mills, 1991). Yet, this is a misconception since women, from around the globe have always travelled, written and recorded their journeys. Arab women have, nevertheless, been commonly positioned and perceived as occupying the role of object, rather than subject, of eighteenth and nineteenth Western travel writing, art and literature. Since the early eighteenth century, the Middle East became an ‘exotic’ destination that fascinated European travel writers as well as readers in their home countries. Postcolonial feminist historians, including Sara Mills (1991), also suggest early Orientalist criticism backgrounds gender issues. Images of Arab women as harem slave girls, conveyed through literature, art and travel writing, became a central part not only of an imperialist male narrative but also an emerging liberal feminist discourse. Writing about Arab
women, for Western women writers, enabled discussions about the condition of women not only in the East but also in the West (Zonanna, 1993). Western feminist writing, from Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelly, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Margaret Fuller and Charlotte Bronte, arguably occurs within this tradition of Orientalism (Said, 1998). Writing about Arab women contributed to the discursive role that the Orient served as a rhetorical trope for critiquing the unpleasant aspects of life in the West as ‘Eastern.’ Furthermore, a body of feminist Oriental writing attempted to neutralize the inherent threat of feminist demands and champion notions of Western freedom and the liberated female subject. As far back as the eighteenth-century, readers in the West came to draw their mental maps of Oriental territories and distinctions between them from their experience of reading tales ‘from’ the Orient (Ballaster, 2005). In the next section of the chapter, I will discuss the influence of Oriental tales upon the Western reader and Stark herself.

11.4 More Arabian Nights

Oriental tales, such as the Arabian Nights, made sensationalist narrative moves for the Western female reader but also the Arab female object as Other. The Arabian Nights is the English title for the collection of Middle Eastern folk tales compiled in Arabic and translated into English during 1706–1721. The stories were collected over a number of centuries by various authors, translators and scholars across West, Central and South Asia and North Africa. Some tales trace their roots to ancient and medieval Arabic, Persian, Indian, Greek, Jewish and Turkish folklore and literature. These stories move over multiple locales, including the great empires of China, India, Turkey, and Persia. They also make substantial Orientalist moves while routinely categorizing and exoticizing the subjects it finds there and differentiates them for the Western reader. What is common to all the editions of the Nights is the interesting gender moves that the tales make surrounding the story of women’s sexual vulnerability, education and learning. I will briefly discuss some of these moves in the next section and then in relation to Stark’s own writing.

In the numerous versions and translations of Arabian Nights, the initial framing of the stories are always told by the young female Scheherazade, who tells her sister stories from her bed chamber while captivating the despotic King Shahray to prevent him from killing her, as he has done to 1001 other virgins (Mazolph, 2007). This is an erotic setting, as the reader pictures two young sisters in their bedchamber and nightclothes, where 1001 virgins prior have lost their lives and no doubt, as it would have been imagined, their virginities. Arabian Nights in English was translated by Sir Richard Francis Burton (1885), the geographer, writer, soldier, ethnographer, cartographer and Orientalist. Burton’s version gives the tales a further gendered twist since the teller of the tales, Scheherazade, is an accomplished scholar who has perused as many books as the King has slain virgins. Scheherazade recites the works of poets by heart and is fully conversant with philosophy, science, arts and accomplishments. Moreover, she is not only pleasant, polite, witty, wise but, also,
definitely well read. Ultimately, it is her bold move to learning than saves her from the fate of the 1001 virgins before and also her very clever strategy of never-ending stories by sunrise, so that Shahray must keep her alive for another day to continue the story the following night. At the end of 1001 nights, and 1000 stories, Scheherazade tells the king that she has no more tales to tell. But during these fabulous nights of fantasy, the king has fallen in love with Scheherazade’s learning and so spares her life to make her his queen. This retelling of Arabian Nights here is relevant in this chapter because Stark was apparently given a copy of Arabian Nights for her ninth birthday (Pierpont, 2011). Like other Western readers of her day, she would have been moved by the exciting tales prior to her travels to the Middle East. She would also have been acutely aware that the readers of her travel stories, in Europe, while not necessarily knowing much more about the region, would certainly be familiar with the exotic tales. Stark therefore, not surprisingly, begins the autobiography Beyond Euphrates, spanning her travels in Syria, Jerusalem, Baghdad and Persia during 1928–1933 with a reference to Arabian Nights:

It was like the prince’s story in the Arabian tale, who shot his arrow farther than he knew and then went out to find it. I had prepared for this journey during many years. I walked for hundreds of miles along the Ventimiglia highroad and sat in many dusty trains to learn Arabic (Stark, 1951: 2).

This reference to ‘the Arabian tale’ arguably signposts Arabian Nights for the European reader. It sets the scene for the exoticism of Stark’s story and casts her as the central protagonist in the adventure, shooting out her own arrow. Stark, subsequently, has been pigeon-holed, for a number of reasons, as another Orientalist since such examples serve as examples of her Orientalist attitudes and references of the Middle East. However, in this chapter, I propose that while Stark casts herself in a male role she is ultimately also a Scheherazade figure, who is very much a feminine survivor, desperate to carve out a livelihood, through her own learning and travel writing and therefore requires a more mobile narrative role on par with the prince. Stark (1951) tells her readers that she initially moved to Damascus, Syria, in 1928 after an unhappy relationship with a married man. It is highly unlikely then that she was a virgin herself or that, like Scheherazade, she was expecting to become someone’s queen. Yet, while relishing her independence she discusses the burden of financial insecurity on a number of occasions. Stark, throughout her autobiographical writing conveys to the reader details of her money struggles which, during her earlier years of travel, place her in continual economic uncertainty. She writes in 1928, “At the back of all this, pervading it and making a general atmosphere with which I was only too familiar, was the perpetual absence, rather than shortage of cash. But enough had been collected for the voyage to Beirut.” (Stark, 1951: 4). Stark, in a number of respects like Scheherazade, is compelled by necessity to make a number of discursive and literary moves to keep her audience enticed by her exotic tales of travel. Stark (1951: 4–5) tells her readers:

The life I left behind me had given, without my knowing it, some of the necessary ingredients for travel. In the first place, I had learnt to rely on myself; not in matters of ordinary efficiency such as the reading of time-tables (which I have never been able to master) and catching of trains, but in a more subtle way…we had nothing but our own intrinsic qualities
of other people. Perhaps, this is the most important of all assets a traveller can possess, for it minimizes barriers, whether of nationality, race or caste; and in fact I have never been able to feel that human beings differ except in things far more deeply rooted than their manners, habits or outward appearances or colours.

This extract indicates that Stark is aware that travel involves not only planning and vehicles but a particular mindset. Neither does she express an imperialist or colonial distain for the other races and ethnicities, unlike some of her British contemporaries, for example in the travel tales of Robert Byron (1937) The Road to Oxiana (Ghaderi & Habibzadeh, 2019). Stark, in contrast to Byron, and in her earlier works especially, refers to Orientalist myths and constructions of the Other only to deconstruct them through her vivid ethnographic descriptions. She clearly conveys an affinity for the people, customs, landscapes and other species she is delighted to encounter yet serves them up theatrically for her Western readers. Stark (1951), when traveling in Damascus writes:

There is so much; such a jostle, and variety of types; fair blue-eyed hill people, every degree of black, and the beduin in their rags and big strides swinging their rough cloaks, their dingy little tattooed women behind them, donkeys with panniers jostling among the people (sometimes with skins of oil, not at all pleasant to be near), camels in long strings: occasionally a horse with handsome red and yellow tassels and blue beads: and all in the half lights, for the bazaars are roofed over, and the little shops open on to them about two feet off the ground, like the rooms of dolls’ houses or a row of boxes at a theatre which the merchants can enjoy all day long.

Stark’s Orientalist gaze in the above is evident. The scene is a theatrical tableau of players and spectacle presented for the European spectator. Yet it does not exoticize the “dingy little tattooed women” as exceptional objects for Western male desire. But, in view of Stark’s precarious economic circumstances, the othering of the Arab people she provides does relate to her orchestration of securing the financial means, via travel writing, to continue living and traveling in the Middle East. Stark’s uses of Orientalist discursive tropes are tactical gendered moves amongst the limited options available to European women, in the early twentieth century, without secure financial means to support a highly unconventional career of independent travel.

At the same time, while satisfying the Orientalist appetites of European readers, Stark provides nuanced and compassionate responses to the lands, peoples and creatures she meets while providing fresh female insights and perspectives that are ambivalent to the role of the British Empire, masculinist, colonial perspectives and influences in the region. Stark (1951: 7) writes:

In Cairo we lunched with Dr. Shahbender, who was a brother-in-law of my Damascus friends, an honest and wise man, since murdered. His interests on the international politics of Syria stirred in me an interest in the Levant which has never left me – an interest akin to that awakened by Greek drama where the unappeasable powers are too strong for the puny efforts of the stage. At that time the meeting passed without much attention though it made British authorities notice me as possibly ‘subversive,’ and Venetia and I were shadowed through the streets of Cairo by a detective; we embarrassed him by lingering at every purely feminine shop whilst he had to dangle at a corner.
The above description crystallizes the layers of colonial expansionism, Middle Eastern conflict and resistance to insatiable Western rule. Like Scheherazade, in the Arabian Nights, Stark is a teller of tales while resorting to feminine tricks and distractions embedded within the polarization of gendered customs and behavior. The scene of Stark and her friend, enjoying the discomfort of the Cairo detective forced to loiter, at what must have been women’s lingerie stores and perfumeries, is gendered humor. These descriptions are also ‘moves’ between Occidental or Western sensibilities. They operate discursively by drawing analogies between Western history and those of the Oriental cultures while indicating how these scenes, histories and subjectivities become mapped onto one another. By this it is meant that Stark’s sense of self, is not only being defined as dichotomous to the Oriental Other but involves a merging and an intersection as her sense of self, gender and nationality fuses with the lands, peoples and experiences she encounters. Narratives such as the Arabian Nights also moved Western readers from their immediate and embodied realities and localities in Europe. Lovers of Oriental tales speak of being ‘transported’ into other worlds of imagined Arabian mystery and intrigue. They are also ‘taken up’ by stories of flying carpets, vagabonds and adventures. Their emotions are stirred while being prompted to sympathy, desire and/or a horror fascination for Sheikhs, princesses, riches and jewels (Ballaster, 2005). Stark’s writing also demonstrates aspects of this exoticism as her Orientalism, as a European in the Middle East, enables her to distance herself from the limitations of her gender in European high society. In the Coast of Incense (1933–1939), she writes:

Yesterday I went to a little female gathering of every sort—Iraq, Turk, Syrian, American and British at the house of a dear little pretty Welshwoman…They meet once a week to discuss the universe and they asked me whether I feel myself more cut off from other races than my own people— and I can truthfully say no: it is only a very small section of one’s own people with whom one can talk the language, and one may as well make up one’s mind to being essentially alone. I feel very much alone at all these big dinners and gatherings (1953: 143).

11.5 Moving-Up

Travel writing, like fiction, makes distinct narrative moves that are political, social and emotive and which serve to prompt desired responses in the reader, who are transported to the fictional realms of the scenes depicted. This series of political moves or discursive maneuvers are designed to produce some change in the behavior or perspective of the addressee and are underpinned by broader intercultural and gendered practices. Stark, throughout her own travel writing career, makes substantial political moves and by the time of the Second World War uses her skills as an Arabic-speaking propagandist to enlist herself at the service of the British Government in Egypt and Iraq, and was sent to the United States to negotiate British policy in Palestine (Ruthven, 2006). The State of Palestine itself is a highly complex
political and discursive region that has been compromised by centuries of colonial influence and interference in Middle Eastern policy. Postcolonial theorists have suggested that travelers’ tales of the Orient, like many of the tensions and conflicts in the Middle East are symptomatic of the fabricated and fictitious nature of the West’s construction of the Orient (Said, 1998).

Conversely, as Western European states rose to global pre-eminence, these tales also illustrate the interrelatedness of Western and Eastern stories, myths, and traditions. Orientalist writing is also about movement but its ‘movements’ are not necessarily logical, literal and nor do they have to follow in a temporal sequence like the ‘movements’ in a musical piece (Ballaster, 2005). Travel writing can also have fictitious, political and discursive elements, and in place of histories, fuel the Western imagination about otherness in foreign lands. Ruth Bernard Yeazell (2000), in ‘Harems of the mind,’ for example, reminds us not to read Europe’s ‘obsession’ with the harem, featured frequently in fiction, art and travel writing, in purely political terms but to recognize its narrative attractions; she comments that the motif of the ‘harem’ in European writing ‘owed more to the lure of the unknown and the forbidden than to the desire for political conquest. The feminist literary theorist, Rosalind Ballaster (2005), also suggests that the trope of the harem in writing about the Middle East, for example, is one that often tells us more about the geography of European desire than the space it depicts. Stark’s writing about the harem conforms to certain Orientalist stereotypes, yet, as mentioned she tends to introduce common sensationalist Oriental tropes only to deconstruct them. In 1934, Stark visits a Persian bath and experiences the following:

a subterranean catacomb littered with debris and egg-shells, where five or six elderly Maenads with nothing on to hide the repulsiveness of their bodies welcomed me with exclamations of joy. I felt as if I were to be initiated among witches into worlds of darkness. Through two low doorways of stone I saw the water, a torpid brew which looked many weeks old already: the toothless naked ones saw me hesitate, and invited me with shrieks of delight (Stark, 1934: 333).

Stark draws in readers through offering a potentially alluring and exotic depiction of a Persian bath only to shatter their expectations via her own reality. A further discursive move of Stark seems to be her own search for the female self and readers who, denied the exciting moves available within the mobile parameters of male subjectivity, yearn to be transported vicariously, through fiction and travel writing. I suggest that in the travel writing of Western women writers, such as Stark, at the turn of the twentieth century, while Europe and the United States were on the cusp of universal suffrage, the political move is also concerned with a search for the female subject, as being more than a purely sexual object, and an urgent need to locate the self in relation to Other. However, Stark throughout her writing made it clear that she was not an advocate of women’s suffrage (Ruthven, 2006). Yet, in view of her personal liberation as a female traveler and writer, distancing herself from feminist activism could also have been a ruse to sustain her commercial appeal to conservative readers. Stark is aware of the mediated and edited aspects of travel writing and autobiography. In 1937, Stark writes:
It is the most difficult thing in writing an autobiography to determine how much of one’s private feelings one must explain. My practice in these books is that of a painter, who can leave out an accidental smudge or temporary sunburn, but give, however summarily, every feature and even every shadow of a feature, since such structural omission might distort the proportion of the whole.

However, despite this element of self-reflexivity about the writing process, the ‘fourth wall’ of travel writing is predominantly sustained. This means that Stark does not break literary convention, by providing details about her commercialized relationship with publishers, since this might distract from her storytelling. Ballaster (2005), asserts that literary historians should take their lead from economic historians by recognizing the opportunistic, sometimes piecemeal, but none the less discernible, advancement of Europe in the early modern period as the result of its capitalist interaction with the societies of Asia, Africa, and America, rather than a sign of its distance or difference from them. Stark, as the passage above illustrates, is deeply aware of her role as a commercial artisan of travel writing but also the responsibility of travel writers in conveying the places they describe in terms of nuances and undercurrents of social and historical meanings. She also indicates that travel narratives do not only consist of one-way traffic or a simple journey from East for West. Feminist theorizing about travel writing should follow the stance of postcolonial criticism in attempting to challenge Eurocentric teleology that positions Europeans as the prime movers and everyone else responding to them (Ballaster, 2005). I suggest that we therefore require a broader overview of how women travel writers’ discursive moves and political allegiances are also stories that occurred within early twentieth century capitalism’s political and economic circumstances. Yet Stark’s writing, while also reflecting gender ideologies of the time, displays an engagement and intersubjectivity with the Arab subjects she writes about and a degree of departure from Orientalist stereotypes stemming from her own experiences (Ghaderi & Habibzadeh, 2019). In Wadi’ Amd in 1938, Stark writes:

When we had dinner last night various tribal notables came in and sat round and came to the never failing topic of the slave governor in Amd: why do English allow him? Every tribesman hates him, he knows nothing of local customs and takes two dollars from every plaintiff or defendant who comes before him…The women are much freer: they came and sat among the men and did not bother to veil unless a stranger came in: they were very friendly…Luckily I have a little brandy and that supported me through the night (1953: 219).

The early postcolonial theories of Franz Fanon’s (1968) ‘Wretched of the Earth’ and Edward Said’s (1998) ‘Orientalism’ both refer to the imagined geography of the Orient as exotic, pathological and feminine in order to locate it “schematically on a theatrical stage whose audience, managers and actors are for Europe, and only for Europe” (Said, 1977: 71–72). The passage above however runs counter to Orientalist homogenous descriptions of the Arab region and the extensive body of scholarship on ‘othering,’ or denigration of the Middle East. In Stark’s writing the picture is more complex and Europeans often appear far less sophisticated and ethical than their Arab counterparts.
11.6 Under Orientalist Eyes

Contemporary feminist criticism in the Middle East is generally defined by individual researchers and online activists who are not necessarily organized by particular theoretical approaches or systematic waves of feminism. Second wave Western feminism has arguably misunderstood, misrepresented and incorrectly framed Arab women through their analytical and political attempts to ‘unveil’ and secularize (Ahmed, 1999; Eltantawy, 2013). These are additional colonializing practices, that position Arab women as always, the victim, in the harem, veiled, mute, invisible and Other. This brief analysis of Stark’s travel writing suggests that these forms of Western feminist ventriloquism are not something that resonate in her writing. While Stark, as mentioned, was not a suffragist, she would have been aware through her travels that Islamic feminism is arguably the dominant form of feminism indigenous to the Arab context. Recognizing the force of Islamic Sharia law, in shaping gender roles around the family, establishes that it is difficult to secularize debates about women in the region (Andrea, 2009). While feminist studies have also aimed to consider how post-feminist discourses surrounding Arab women are transnational, cosmopolitan, neoliberal, some feminist scholarship retains dichotomous theorizing while trying to be more inclusive. Alternatively, Stark’s travel writing indicates that the Arab women she encountered are far from homogenous. When visiting Nu’Air in 1938, she writes:

Yesterday at lunch a woman called me aside and asked if I had a medicine which would kill her husband. A fierce spoilt little girl was then brought by her father, who evidently adored her; the people here are just as fond of their girls as their boys, unlike North Arabia (1953: 217).

Chandra Mohanty (1988) in the seminal text, ‘Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,’ states that the intellectual and political construction of ‘Third World feminisms’ requires the decolonizing of Western feminist perspectives to go beyond monolithic descriptions of women from the so-called Global South. This is vital in scholarship concerning Arab women since although they are often portrayed as oppressed, their lives are varied, and they do not necessarily view themselves in terms of a deficit. For Mohanty (1988: 18), postcolonial feminist scholarship requires alternative analytic conceptions of the subject and a need to go beyond deficit positions concerning non-Western social actors and implicit assumptions of “the West” as the locus of theory and praxis. Considering the plurality and complexities of Arab women’s experiences there is an evident need to move beyond reductionist accounts of the diverse range of media forms, practices and institutions that depart from Orientalist discourses of the Middle Eastern “Other” (Eltantawy, 2013: 768). However, the extent to which subaltern voices of social actors on the margins of power can be heard was the critical concern of Gayatri Spivak (1988). Feminists writing about the Arab region, including Naawal El Saadawi (1977) and Mona Eltahawy (2015), have
indicated the difficulties facing Arab women in voicing the spectrum of gender oppression, physical and psychological violence. Stark’s writing, while occurring almost a century earlier, also drew upon some of these themes and suggests the extent to which Arab women’s experiences varied. While Stark’s lens is ultimately Western, her perspective differs in a number of respects to male Orientalist interpretations. Notably, Stark also learns a great deal about herself, the gendering and restrictions of the European subject while encountering and learning about the colonized countries she visits. When traveling in Baghdad in 1929, Stark is ostracized by the British community for wishing to engage with locals. She writes:

I have put my foot in it most dreadfully by accepting the mu’allim’s invitation for a visit to the beduin sheikh: I am surrounded by a kind of frost, and Mrs. Drower tells me that all the men disapprove of me. It makes me feel like a kind of pariah from my own kind and awfully disgusted, because, after all I have really done nothing, beyond wishing to talk Arabic as much as I can, and regretting that we can’t be less superior and more polite (1951: 111).

I suggest that we need to reconceive the formulation of Western women’s travel writing, such as Starks, in relation to the centuries of imperial and colonial expansion but also in terms of gender. Yet, gender and being a woman is not a universal subjectivity and Stark’s experiences as a European woman are markedly different from the Arab women she meets as well as the European wives she brushes shoulders with. Stark’s appreciation of gender hybridity could help us to consider that some of the movements of travel writing are not exclusively an inward shoring up of a sovereign self by contrast with the Other (Ballaster, 2005). The ‘novelty’ of Western empire may have occurred in terms of its desire to imagine itself serially in the place of the Other, especially the Eastern Other, not only through circulating fictions, but also through the framing devices of Oriental fictional sequences that dramatize reading as an experience of abandoning rather than reinforcing self (Ballaster, 2005). Therefore, interpreting Stark’s work for its insights into gender hybridity also provides an alternative reading to the one-way Orientalist and Occidental exchanges at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Thus it is important to appreciate ‘Orientalism’ as a discursive process that attempts to transform a changing history into a set of unchanging and repetitive images as Asia and the Middle East came to be understood as a (sometimes the) source of story, a territory of fable and narrative (Ballaster, 2005). The Orient for Stark, and her contemporaries, is indeed a place that they turn into sensationalist story as well as a place where story originates and has political and material effect. This indicates that pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial periods in British history, the English encounter with the Middle East was and is largely mediated not only through government or commercial policy and documents, but rather through the consumption of material goods imported from the East, together with narratives about the region, both imaginary, ethnographic and travel writing. Ballaster (2005) suggests Oriental narratives often claim to be a more ‘moral’ traffic than the commercial traffic in goods such as spices, carpets, silks and jewels. Stark’s writing also has an important moral message about the Oriental-Occidental relationship but in
much of her writing the moral traffic is multidirectional. Her perspective also involves the careful balancing of commercialized Orientalism, as a marketing trope, underwritten by ethnographic de-exceptionalism. Stark (1951: 13) tells her readers about Syria:

I found myself in actual Paradise – flat country all grass of brilliant green corn, all filled with running streams and speckled with shadows of old olives and blossoming fruit trees. It was so delicious. The Moslem peasants were saying their prayers, their spades stuck into the ground, their coats spread out, and their shoes besides them while they knelt with their face to Mecca: it seemed a good and pleasant way of praying, by oneself in the lovely country.

This description has at least three modes of view. Firstly, it provides an overview of the landscape and conveys a scene similar to a rustic impressionist painting. In this instance, rather than sensationalizing, Stark offers de-exceptionalism (Kanna et al., 2020). Secondly, this description locates “Moslem peasants” within the landscape and Islamic rituals that appear in harmony with the earth. Thirdly, Stark’s subjectivity intersects with the figures in the image as she imagines praying with and/or as them. While written for a bourgeois European reader, unfamiliar with the Syrian landscape, Stark’s intersection of subjectivity is notable and evident throughout her writing about the Arab region. The Middle East, through Stark’s eyes, is not merely a setting of sensationalism but also a discursive space that offers an alternative to European patriarchy and tradition. This chapter indicates that colonial writing, like Stark’s, could have a more dialectical intersection with the Other and self than post-colonial criticism recognizes.

While the prose is a reflection of Stark’s European female imaginary, at times it includes examples of de-exceptionalism that run contrary to Orientalism. Stark’s travel writing also has multicultural aspects and indicates how social practices, including feminism, colonialism, imperialism and Orientalism merge and blend. Intersections between Occident and Orient occur in terms of third spaces and at discursive, descriptive and visual levels through Stark’s writing and photographs. As Stark sails out of Huraidha, during the winter of 1938, and on the cusp of World War II, she has managed to transcend the role of Scherherazade in Arabian Nights, and ceases telling sensationalist stories. Stark is now positioned to listen and enjoy the everyday stories of Arabia. She informs her readers:

I am now lying in comfort on the deck of the dhow swinging easily in the sunset and feeling very near the water. The Arab coast, whose mysteries I now feel I know better, is just in sight and the chief mate, a fat old stubble-bearded man from Dis, is standing near calling the sunset prayer…It has been fun to do this all the proper Arab way… (1953: 224).

11.7 Conclusion

This chapter suggests that Orientalist travel writing often reduced its subjects to mere objects and denigrated them to a sub-status. Women are also sub-gender; the Orient is sub-Occident; travel writing is sub-literary. Yet, it is precisely the
discursive moves of Stark’s travel writing, journeying either by dhow or via literary modes, that disrupt stagnant framings, images and descriptions of people, places and gender arrangements that make it such an interesting genre. The central question of the study asked, to what extent are Stark’s discursive moves the result of a commercialized gendered subjectivity? In answer to this question, the study highlights Stark’s specific discursive moves that involved a self-fashioning of subjectivity that while gendered were also a result of the commercialized practices of travel writing, Orientalism and the role of women at that time. Stark, as an unmarried, lower-middle class European women offers a different perspective to her male Orientalist contemporaries. Her writing is thus, at times, conveyed through a mode of de-exceptionalism while offering self-reflexivity of Orientalist narratives desired by the Occidental reader. However, some of Stark’s discursive moves were also a sojourn between self and Other within the commercialization of the Orient for the Occident. Stark’s tender and intimate descriptions, of the people and places she traveled to and obtained in-depth ethnographic, political and linguistic knowledge, are important records of a time and regions that have been sensationalized under Orientalist eyes.

The rhetorical moves of my argument in this chapter have therefore been to refine understandings of Stark’s influence in providing the Occident with important information not only about the Orient but also its own desires for alterity. I do not deny the perception of Stark as an Orientalist but suggest that the Orientalist tropes of her work occurred within the broader commercialized constraints of Occidental travel writing. Stark’s observations are often caste in Orientalist terms, so that they would appeal to a Western reader, yet her sympathetic human insights relate to her belief in the need for a more compassionate empire. Said’s (1998) work on Orientalism has been interpreted as suggesting that no Westerner has the right to scrutinize Middle Eastern and North African societies, since this would be an exercise in “cultural imperialism” (Whitaker, 2008). However, an important aspect of decolonization involves viewing race as a discursive construct and the realization that it is not only the responsibility of the colonized to decolonize and reveal the disjuncture of racial oppression (Hall, 2017). Said (1998) also explained that there are crucial differences in seeking knowledge to control as opposed to knowledge motivated by a desire to understand via compassion, careful study and analysis. I do not view Stark’s work as being motivated by a desire to control and dominate the Arab people but, at worst, it was an exercise in self-affirmation and the necessity of earning a living through publishing her work. I am also not trying claim Stark as a feminist (Pierpont, 2011). However, I would emphasize that much of Stark’s writing is protofeminist. Her travel writing makes an important contribution to feminism through deconstructing stereotypes about gender at the beginning of the twentieth century. Stark is best thought of as a Scheherazade figure, whose stories were ultimately for survival, but would have conveyed a narrative about the gendering of liberation. As well as providing important insights into the gendered aspects of travel writing, this study more generally reminds us that the genre could have a significant influence on shaping Western traveler’s expectations and potentially Orientalist gaze. However, less is known about the effect of Orientalist and colonial
discourses in shaping the perspectives of travelers from Asia and the Middle East North African region and this is an important area for further research. Another important topic for future study would be to consider travel writing’s role in historically, discursively and conceptually informing ‘Western’ tourism research as well as the need to decolonize the field from a postcolonial perspective.

Stark’s descriptions of Arab women’s daily practices provide an important ethnographic record. They also offer protofeminist reflection on the limited choices and customs of Western women who were bound to patriarchy and colonialism. Furthermore, Stark’s travel writing conveys, at times, alternatives to Orientalist exceptionalism and rare insights into the diverse lives of Arab men and women nearly 100 years ago. These are insightful chronicles and this chapter has briefly highlighted some of the discursive moves that Stark makes to transport readers to a region of great beauty, compassion and soul. While engaging in these descriptive journeys and everyday stories, readers may learn much of the imagined geographies of Occident and Orient. They will also encounter Stark’s own search for a more dynamic, hybrid and multicultural subjectivity. Stark, forever the storyteller, muses (1951: 4):

The word ecstasy is always related to some sort of discovery, a novelty to sense of spirit, and it is in search of this word that in love, in religion, in art or in travel, the adventurous are ready to face the unknown.

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