

UDC: 7:111.852]:061

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International Conference: Exoticism / The Exotic, Faculty of Arts, Beni Mellal, Morocco, April 21–22, 2010.

When Dr. Khalid Chaouch, as co-organiser, showed me his proposal for the conference poster, I immediately reacted by suggesting that we delete the white cloud on the left-hand corner of the poster where the sky blue predominated in the background. Exoticism and the Exotic – the topic of our 2010 international conference – was printed in yellow in the foreground. Superstition may have some sort of connection with exoticism, especially if it is related to mystery, strangeness and the uncanny. I may also be exotic, but superstition is not my glass of mint tea! However, the cloud, the ash cloud, became a central and decisive element for the conference ... to be maintained or postponed, as most of the airports in Europe were closing because of the ashes emanating from the erupting volcano in Iceland. As the date of the conference (21–22 April) approached, messages from participants across the world flooded our e-mail boxes, announcing flight cancellations, expressing regret and apologising for the impossibility of finding a plane travelling to Morocco.

A number of participants managed to find last-minute travel solutions; others were finally harried into their scheduled-cancelled-and-rescheduled flights. While some were stuck in London, Paris or Manchester, others miraculously arrived at the airports of Casablanca and Marrakech through Cairo, Rome, Bordeaux and Toulouse.

The hectic transfer arrangements turned out to be fun, and as we sat having dinner at the conference hotel, waiting for more participants to arrive, we, (Mohamed Syad, the official conference coordinator and myself) started looking at the initial schedule while considering the number of those who had managed to travel against all the odds and ashes. We started working on the new conference programme at 23:30, and, in the morning, at breakfast, we had to add two more participants who had arrived from Turkey during the night.

Instead of having parallel sessions, as initially scheduled, we ended up squeezing the 26 participants in the same lecture hall where plenary sessions usually take place. During the two-day conference, the place was packed with participants, including students, who, as always, left their classes and came to attend paper presentations,

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asking questions during discussions, and making the conference even more interesting for our foreign guests.

The opening ceremony was chaired by the faculty vice dean Prof. Mohamed Taki who has since been promoted to the position of vice rector. The first panel was devoted to theory, dealing with the exotic in the absence of a serious conceptual framework, highlighting the undertheorization of Exoticism. The Exotic was approached by Asma Agzenay (University of Agadir, Morocco) in the light of Edward Said's critique of Orientalism; it was also discussed as a platform for interrogating Said's criticism of the Exoticist project of Orientalism. In another paper, Victor Segalen's notion of the Exot was also raised and debated, within the theoretical framework of his treatment of exoticism as aesthetics of diversity. This session, which was chaired by Mly Mustapha Mamaoui (a member of the organising committee) witnessed the remarkable presentation by the Russian-American lecturer Slava Yastremski (Buknell University, Lewisburg, PA, USA) who had embraced the clear skies of Marrakech just in time, before the rise of the ash cloud. Slava who was the first to launch the debate about Segalen's theory of exoticism, was not actually the only one to travel all the way from America; Thangam Ravindranathan from Brown University, Rhode Island, and Sayumi Takahashi Harb from Connecticut College, also flew high above the clouds to participate in a conference which turned out to be pleasantly exotic.

During the afternoon session, which was chaired by Mirjana Danicic from Belgrade University, interesting papers tackled issues related to exoticism in a number of fictional works. The presentations and the discussion that ensued brought up questions related to the problematic of exoticism as an aesthetic perception, as well as an exploration of cross-cultural understanding. At sunset, our visitors were taken to admire the splendid panoramic view of the city from Laksar, the monument that stands upon the hill. The promenade was all the more enjoyable as no clouds appeared above in the sky!

The papers presented the following day were rich, dealing with exoticism in works evoking diverse geographical places ranging from the Balkans (Sandra Josipovic and Mirjana Danicic, Belgrade University), to India (Ingrid Sankey, Lille University, France), through Palestine (Sally Michael, 6th October University, Egypt), the Carribean islands (Nadia Yassine Diab, Toulouse University, France), Japan (Sayumi Takahashi Harb, Connecticut College, USA), and Morocco.

After two days of intense intellectual interaction, the participants gathered for a typically Moroccan farewell dinner which took place in a traditional restaurant in Beni Mellal. The atmosphere was warm and convivial as the participants casually made friends, evoking a number of future academic projects, such as exchange visits and joint organisations of conferences and study days.

A call for articles on exoticism was launched immediately after the conference; the selected articles will be published in the fourth issue of *Middle Ground: International Journal of Literary and Cultural Encounters*, the official journal of our Research Laboratory on Culture and Communication.