Title of Paper: **Explorations in George Eliot’s Perception of Islam: George Eliot & British Colonialism in Muslim Countries**

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Abstract:

The present article, which is the third of a series entitled “Explorations in George Eliot’s Perception of Islam”, proposes to explore George Eliot’s attitude towards colonialism in Muslim countries at a time when Victorian Britain ruled over an Empire on which the sun never set. Using as my primary sources Eliot’s notebooks, letters, journals, book reviews, and essays I will demonstrate that Eliot’s various and dispersed comments on the matter barely hide an unthinking acceptance of colonialism. Finally, I shall assess Eliot’s degree of involvement in and (dis)approval of the expansion of the British Empire in colonized countries many of which were Arab and Muslim.

Keywords: George Eliot, Islam, Arabs, British Colonialism, Emigration.

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1. With Reverend Davis in Tunisia, North Africa

Among Eliot’s book reviews, the following appears to be significantly revelatory in the current discussion. In 1854 Eliot reviewed in the Leader Reverend N. Davis’ *Evenings in My Tent; or, Wanderings in Balad Ejjareed, Illustrating the Moral, Religious, Social and Political Conditions of Various Arab Tribes of the African Sahara*, and wrote in the introduction, talking about the first English adventurers in Africa who may also be considered as being involved (one way or another) in scouting these virgin lands for colonizing prospects: “Sad indeed is the catalogue of brave men, who have fallen victims to the climate, the hardships of the traveler’s life, or the ferocity of the natives” (330). She then revealed to the reader her own, personal impression of the Arabs that she had mentally constructed mainly from her readings from the time she was a child till she grew up and became an adult. And that picture of the Arab was positively fascinating and “magical” — but only at first

How little do we still know of Africa. In our childhood, its name exerted a mysterious power over our imaginations, dating from that terrible ‘African Magician’ of the Arabian Nights ... In riper years, poetry and romance peopled this grand stage with fitting actors, — with the lofty, generous Arab, dwelling like a patriarch of old, in his goat-skin tent; scouring the sands on his matchless horse, yielding but to numbers, incapable of deceit or treachery. It must be owned that either the spell of the African magician still somewhat blinds our eyes, or these simple and noble sons of the Desert have degenerated strangely (330).

Modern travelers, she then tells us, draw a picture of the Arab that is totally different than that of her childhood and her more mature readings: “singularly cunning, rapacious, and cowardly, apparently incapable of truth, and sunk in abject superstition; in fact, as exhibiting all the vices of an oppressed race” (330). Although Eliot did not clearly decide whether the picture of the lofty, generous and noble Arab from her “riper years” should be updated in the light of fresh information by modern travelers, she nevertheless admitted that his vices were those of an oppressed race. She chooses, however, to say nothing about the real identity of the oppressor.

Summarizing Davis’ aim in writing this book about the Arabs of Africa, Eliot writes: “the main object of Mr. Davis’s book is to enforce his conviction that

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1 The reader might be interested in Nancy Henry’s comments on the same review in *GE and the British Empire* page 18.
Africa can only be successfully explored, and its wild hordes civilized, by a well-organized system of missionaries” (330) (My italics) — this “ill-organized” missionary system that had caused “evil” and “irreparable injury to progress and to real civilisation” and “to the cause of the faith they profess to serve, which has resulted from their narrow bigotry and intolerance” (330).

Here, Eliot seems to protest against the ill-conducted imperialistic mission of the Church, accusing bigot and intolerant missionaries of causing great damage to “progress and to real civilisation”. In fact, she seems not only to share the reverend Davis’ opinion about this question, but also to fuel his argument with her personal point of view. However, she does not question — in any way, whatsoever — colonialism or imperialism as such although she appears to acknowledge the fact that this is an “oppressed [Arab] race”. In other words she seems to believe that were the missionary system well-organized, progress and real civilization would have prevailed in these backward Arab and African countries inhabited by “wild hordes”. And more than that, progress and civilization, achieved by these missionaries among these ignorant indigenous populations, would have been then proudly and honorably ascribable to “the cause of the faith they [missionaries] profess to serve”. For Eliot, the question whether colonialism or imperialism is morally or ethically justified or acceptable does not arise at all. Like the reverend Davis (and many others), all she questions is the deficiency of the imperialistic machinery, i.e. the colonial or imperialistic mission which is badly conducted by an ill-organized missionary system. The core of the matter here is how to organize an apparently deficient colonial missionary system so that it efficiently contributes to the welfare of the Empire — not, and never, why such missionaries (or armies or settlers) were there in the first place.

2. With Richard Burton in East Africa & the Arabian Peninsula

In another review of Richard Burton’s First Footsteps in East Africa², Eliot gave us her appreciation of the grandeur of the renowned English traveler, explorer, spy, diplomat, and officer of her Majesty: “His expedition to Mecca [in 1853] was an exploit without parallel for skill and daring” (310). In fact, he started preparing for

² The reader might be interested in Nancy Henry’s comments on the same review in GE and the British Empire pp 18-19.
this exploit as early as 1848 “not only by learning the Koran and practicing rites and ceremonies, but by ‘a sympathetic study of Sufi-ism, the Gnosticism of El Islam, which would raise [him] high above the rank of a mere Muslim.’ Lady Burton writes: ‘This stuck to him off and on all his life’” (Burton, *The Jew* xiv). It is worth mentioning at this point that the publication of his book *The Jew, The Gypsy and El Islam* whose manuscript was ready as early as 1875 and from which the above passage has been quoted, was deliberately delayed until Burton retired from the civil service (1898) “owing to the anti-Semitic tendency” of its content (viii).

A few lines further in her review, Eliot resumed an even more insistent praising of Burton’s colonial exploit: “While complaining of the book, we must express, at the same time, our admiration of the exploit which it relates. The writer only is to blame — the man is all which a man ought to be” (310). Eliot, here, did not express any protest against Burton’s violation of a city that is sacred to the Muslims although she kept insisting on her respect of other races of fellow-men. We plainly notice that Eliot never questions colonial presence in lands and places that belong to other people; she rather seems to express concerns about trivial issues like Burton’s lack of aesthetic narrative skills. When she summarizes his book in her review “First Footsteps in East Africa” about discovering East Africa for the first time, Eliot innocently presents the reader with arguments which obviously justified the British imperial move from Aden to an equally strategic naval base in East Africa — an old commercial route historically known as the monopoly of Arab sailors and traders: “It seems that Aden is an unhealthy station, and that on the opposite coast of Africa, to the south of the Straits of Babel Mandeb, there lies a district equally convenient for the purpose of a naval station, where the troops, instead of being cooped up in a fever-stricken peninsula, may have free command of an open, airy, and cheerful country” (310).

Likewise, the negatively marked picture Eliot presented in this review of what are referred to by Burton as the “half-barbarous tribes of bastard Bedouins, called Somals” (310) (My italics) is used to justify the colonial presence in a land so far away: “They have given us trouble by murdering the crews of vessels which have been wrecked on their shores; and it has become at length desirable that we should by some means attempt to reclaim these tribes, perhaps gain a settlement among them, with *other possible consequences in the distance*” (310) (My italics).
After having approved of the occupation of this African land, Eliot takes us back to the imperialistic British hero to express her admiration again:

The man ... who had ventured into Mecca would venture anywhere. Burton offered to carry letters in the disguise of an Arab: he would spy out the country and report upon it. In the winter of 1854-5 he set out on his adventure, and with careless audacity duly accomplished his task — accomplished it, also, we observe, in the character of an Englishman — for in the course of his journey he threw off his disguise, and travelled in his proper person as an officer from Aden (310).

3. Colonial investments, emigration & imperial expansion

Like Lewes, her companion, and Dickens or the Brontës, Eliot actively participated in the colonial project by investing her money in the colonial overseas companies. One person who is thought to have encouraged her to invest her publishing royalties in colonial business was Barbara Bodichon, her closest friend who was married to a French doctor. The couple used to spend winter in Algiers, a French colony then. Mrs. Bodichon was known as one of the earliest women’s rights advocates and activists. Referring to her devotion to the feminist cause and gathering of any writings relating to it, Matilda Betham-Edwards, the famous Victorian Francophile writer and traveler, recalls telling her lifelong friend Mrs Bodichon in her Reminiscences: “You remind me of the Arabs … who pick up any scrap of paper bearing the name of Allah” (276). However, the amazing thing about this woman was the connection she managed to create between the financial status of the mid-Victorian middle class spinster and the importance of investing and placing money into overseas colonial businesses to share in the political control of the imperialistic machine (Henry, GE & TBE 96-7). In her pamphlet Laws Concerning Women, Eliot’s closest female friend wrote: “a woman can take part in the government of a great empire by buying East India Stock” (4). To have a clear idea of the amount of money invested by Eliot in the economic activities of the British Empire in the 1860s and 1870s, let’s quote Nancy Henry even if extensively:

In addition to the Great Indian Peninsular and Madras Railways, Eliot owned stocks and bonds in Australia, Africa, Canada, and South America. These include: New South Wales, Victoria, Cape Town Rail, Colonial Bank, Oriental Bank, Melbourne and Hobson’s Bay, Great Western of Canada, Scottish-Australian Investment Co., Buenos Ayres Great Southern Railroad, and Egyptian Bonds. At the time of her death, the colonial stocks made up just under half her
total holdings. Other stocks directly connected to colonial trade (East and West India Docks, London Docks), domestic stocks (the Consols, Regents Canal), and foreign investments (Sambre and Meuse, Continental Gas, Pittsburgh, and Ft. Wayne) complete the portfolio (GE & TBE 97).

Not only was Mrs. Bodichon interested in unmarried women’s investments in the colonies, but she was also actively involved in emigration. We have already mentioned the fact that she herself would winter every year in Algiers, a French colony at the time. She believed that British spinsters would find better opportunities for employment overseas in the colonies and, therefore, would live in a more independent way than at home (Henry, GE & TBE 97). Eliot did not, of course, ever think of emigrating but when her sister Chrissey lost her husband, she seriously thought of accompanying her and her children to Australia and stay with them till they got accustomed to colonial life (Henry, GE & TBE 15-6). She was also convinced that her stepsons, Lewes’ two sons, would find a much better life in the colonies (Henry, GE & TBE 42). She even thought of sending them to Algeria, but finally they opted for South Africa (Ashton 219).

In relation with the issue of colonization, Eliot appears like a pragmatic Englishwoman who never questions the occupation of other people’s lands by force, but rather investigates the potential economic opportunities offered by the colonies for herself or her family. We can see her sense of pragmatism and adoption of typical colonial attitudes through the investment of her money in colonial economy, and also in the way that she believed in a better future for Lewes’ sons in the colonies — among which Algeria, India, Australia and South Africa were seriously considered by both parents, Eliot and Lewes. Thanks to Mrs. Bodichon’s helpful connections, Thornie was sent to Natal as a colonial farmer while his elder brother Bertie was almost on the point of traveling to Algeria to learn farming — probably following again Mrs. Bodichon’s counsel — but eventually was sent to Glasgow for the same purpose (Ashton 219).

Paradoxically though, this same youngest of the Lewes sons Thornie found a hero in the person of the emir Abdelkader when he read the poem written by Viscount Maidstone Abd-el-Kader. A Poem in Six Cantos. In a letter to Eliot on February 3, 1861 Thornie admitted that Abdelkader was a hero he admired (Henry, GE & TBE 54). The Algerian nationalist and freedom fighter emir was imprisoned in France and
“became a celebrated cause among English radicals … or anti-Catholic Tories” (54). Henry made an interesting remark when she relevantly wrote: “Thornie’s heroes are anti-imperialist nationalists to whom he is connected by his belief, as an Englishman living outside England, in the ideals of freedom and national self-determination” (54). This ideological contradiction is further explained by Henry who put it in a somewhat ironical way: “To the extent that he showed any desire to direct his own future, he imagined himself participating in a national liberation movement, not a colonizing project” (54).

It is surprising how the last statement in the above quote could, once slightly reformulated, safely and fairly apply to Eliot’s attitude toward colonialism. From all the examples I have already mentioned, either her reviews of colonial literature or her pragmatic involvement in colonial investments, we find evidence of her belief — like that of her stepson Thornie — in participating in an effort of “progress” and “real civilization”, “not a colonizing project”. In that she did not really differ from the common lot of her fellow citizens who considered these overseas lands as an opportunity for a better life that England could not offer them. Eliot believed in the 1850s that “emigration would enhance the development of the English race” (Henry, GE & TBE 17). She never considered emigration as illegitimate occupation or illegal expropriation of the native populations’ land and, when she did, her mea culpa (made public only a year before her death) seems to have unfortunately come a bit late. On the one hand, Eliot publicly dared at long last condemn British colonialism towards the end of her life when she wrote in “The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!”: “we are a small number of an alien race, profiting by the territory and produce of these prejudiced people” (188); on the other, however, she continued to profit by “the produce of these prejudiced people” till her last breath via the profits she made from her transcontinental investments in colonial economy in Africa, Egypt, India, Australia, Canada and even South America. As a colonial shareholder, mainly in colonial railways, Eliot was in fact sharing both in the expansion and the continuity of the British Empire — not in the independence or self-determination of those prejudiced people as she chose to call them. Nancy Henry did not miss this crucial point when she commented on a pro-colonial Westminster Review article from 1860: “Far from encouraging the cooperation and independence of the Indian people, railroads and
British investment in them developed into a justification for continued British rule” (GE & TBE 101).

It is clear from this discussion that, like the common lot of her fellow citizens, Eliot adopted a pragmatic attitude in dealing with the reality of colonialism. Like the colonial missionaries and explorers of the time, she viewed the British Empire as a humanizing, civilizing project to which she totally adhered, naively believing it would bring progress and emancipation to barbarous, backward and ignorant indigenous populations. Much more important than that, she actively shared in the economic exploitation of the far fruitful overseas colonies — among which Arab and Muslim countries — by profiting from the financial outcomes of the money she had invested there. To the last day of her life she, knowingly, kept placing her money in colonial projects worldwide although she did denounce at long last British colonial policy in Theophrastus — only a year before she died. Apparently, her mea culpa came too late, lacking the moral credibility any reader is rightly to expect from such a great writer.
Works cited


