

Native Mis/Rule and ‘Oriental Despotism’ in Alexandre Dumas’s *Adventures in Algeria* (1846) and Rudyard Kipling’s *From Sea to Sea, Letters of Travel* (1889)

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ABSTRACT

Borrowing concepts from Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), this article argues that Rudyard Kipling holds the same views on native rule in India as Alexandre Dumas does on Algerian structures of government. Both regard native rule as a paradigm of ‘Oriental despotism,’ which Orientalist scholars attribute to Oriental structures of power. Dumas asserts that Algerians owe their ‘misgovernment’ to the political influence of their late Turkish conqueror. Kipling contrasts native ‘misrule’ with enlightened British rule in order to legitimate British encroachment in India. Besides, both agree that native misgovernment fosters the spread of corruption and violence among their subjects.

Key words: Oriental despotism, Kipling, Dumas, Anglo-India, French-Algeria

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INTRODUCTION

As mainly an Anglo-French tradition, Orientalist discourse emerged in the nineteenth century to study the Orient and the Oriental wo/man. The realm of politics constitutes one of its focal points, and Oriental regimes are analyzed in relation to Western ones. The Orientalist attributed a bunch of stereotypes to Oriental regimes. Tyranny, corruption, instability are among the most recurrent attributes to the Orient in Orientalist literature. Alexandre Dumas’s *Adventures in Algeria* (1846) and Rudyard Kipling’s *From Sea to Sea; Letters of Travel* (1899) sketch out the authors’ views on the Orient in their Oriental visits, Dumas in (French-)Algeria in 1846 and Kipling in his globe-trotting tour in (Anglo-)India in 1888. One major theme in their texts is the Orientalist approach to native structures of power that are associated with misrule and despotism.

In *Orientalism*, Said speaks of “Oriental despotism” (1995: 4) as a typical feature that the Orientalist attributed to Oriental political regimes, and this idea took “firm hold in European discourse” (Ibid. 204) about the Orient. It manifests itself in different forms that might or might not be restricted to the ruler. Even people with little responsibility indulge in tyranny to affirm their power. For French-Algerians, Oriental despotism rooted mainly

in Turkish rule in Algeria. Therefore, when the French conquered Algeria in 1830, they immediately justified their presence on the grounds of the triumph of French democracy over Turkish despotism. "Oriental despotism forms an important element of the Ottoman Turk's otherness to the French Self, as the political and intellectual elites as well as the nobility shared this specific image of political monstrosity" (Tekin, 2010: 41). For Anglo-Indian scholars, the focus was on the marked difference between native-ruled states and English ruled ones, and they celebrated English rule by emphasizing its advantages in contrast to the suffering of Indians under their proper rulers. Besides, according to Thomas Metcalf, because the British viewed India as a land "forged by despotism" (Ibid. 66), they were to "sustain a system of colonial authority" (1994: 113).

This article compares Dumas's and Kipling's attitudes towards Algerian and Indian structures of power. Both emphasize the misrule and tyranny that characterize them. Dumas argues that Algerian political regime is characterized by tyranny, injustice, corruption and other flaws, but he insists on the extent to which Arab rulers inherited these flaws from their late Turkish conqueror. Before the French conquest, Algeria was under Turkish influence, and Algiers constituted regency with Turkish rulers who indulged with every sort of attack against the sovereignty of Algerians. In his travelogue, Dumas portrays such rulers as deeply engaged with ruling the people autocratically. Their corrupt rule extends to the class of people who have responsibility of some sort, which they overturn to their personal advantage on the detriment of the governed majority. Such practices were prevailing under Turkish rule. Dumas argues that they continue to prevail even after the French conquest in areas which the French have not yet penetrated. Similarly, Kipling elaborates the idea that native states in India are ruled in a despotic manner. Kipling's sole desire in developing the idea of misgovernment in native-ruled states is to justify possible British territorial encroachment in these states and legitimate British rule over others.

Both authors have experienced the empire personally. Dumas was appointed the imperial mission of making Algeria known for the French public through his writings. He was thus appointed the "mission littéraire" (Palliser: 2) by the Minister of Public Instruction to "make Algeria better known for the general public" (Ibid. 1). He accepted enthusiastically this mission and sailed to Algeria with a ship named *Le Vélode*. Based on his experiences in the Northern parts of Algeria and his mission, he constructs Orientalist attitudes on Algeria and Algerians. He, therefore, achieves the literary mission with the publication of *Adventures in Algeria* in 1846. The literary mission was also imperial since it aimed at disseminating knowledge about Algeria and supporting ideology. Kipling, on his part, was born in India, and he worked as a journalist for the *Civil and Military Gazette* which had imperialist objectives. The imperialist/ Orientalist objectives of the *Gazette* pushed him to publish lengthy articles on his experiences throughout India. These articles are compiled in this volume *From Sea to Sea; Letters of Travel*, where Kipling disseminates knowledge about India and reproduces imperial ideology. Dumas's and Kipling's texts provide "fresh new repository to Oriental experience" (Said, 1995: 169) in France and Britain, respectively.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This article argues that Kipling holds the same views on native rule in India as Dumas does on Algerian political regimes. Both regard native rule as a paradigm of 'Oriental despotism,' which Orientalist scholars attribute to the Orient. Dumas asserts that Algerians owe their

'misgovernment' to the political influence of their Turkish conqueror. Kipling contrasts native 'misrule' with enlightened British rule in order to legitimate British encroachment in India. Besides, both agree that native misgovernment fosters the spread of corruption and violence among their subjects and engenders an insecure environment.

In "Philippeville, Constantine," Dumas provides an historical analysis of Arab political regimes both under Turkish rule and after French conquest. He comes to the conclusion that Arab rule cultivates despotism and injustice. Under the Turks, Constantine just like the remaining provinces of the regency of Algiers was ruled by a succession of Beys. The first was a tyrant, "a madman with a lust for blood" (1959: 160). He "used to behead with his own hands all criminals condemned to death" (Ibid.). However, what this quote does not say is that the pretended criminals were those people who did not obey the Bey's dictates or satisfy his greed for money. The people rose against his "stupid cruelty," but he "took refuge in Algiers" (Ibid. 160-1). This quote implies that the Regency of Algiers encouraged cruelty since its rulers were always disposed to offer custody for deposed tyrants. This implies that under the Turks, the Regency of Algiers cultivated violence against the people. Blanchard et. al. claim that French colonial culture borrowed this preconception of the Oriental "living under the yoke of despotism" from "the readings of the Crusades made by" Orientalist historians and popularized by travel writers like Chateaubriand, Gérard de Nerval and Pierre Loti. (2013: 459) Dumas joins this culture by representing Algerian rulers as despots and their people as subservient subjects.

Besides, Dumas states that democracy can never co-exist with tyranny in Oriental societies. When a Bey gets closer to his people by applying democratic principles, they love him and never overthrow him. However, the Turks become unsatisfied with this because the Bey's decision does not correspond to their despotic principles. Dumas tells us that the third Bey to rule over Constantine was Brahim-Bey-Gritti. He "was so beloved by his people that the Turks deposed him lest he should become too influential" (1959: 161). When a Bey is more just towards his people, the Turks also depose him. This is what they did for Achmed-Bey who had been "assassinated at Medea in 1834" because he was fair. His successor, Mohammed-Bey-Mohamany, was also deposed because "he did not collect taxes fast enough" (Ibid.). This quote evinces the idea that the Turks used taxation as one of their ways of satisfying their greed and assaulting the people they ruled. The overall implication is that they did never indulge in democracy and the rule "by the people, for the people." Indeed, the Bey who did not answer to the needs of his subjects finds himself chased out of Constantine only to find shelter in Algiers. The other two who grew attached to the interests of their subjects experience their destitution because instead of applying the Dey's despotic rule they apply democratic principles. Therefore, Dumas claims that democracy is at stake in Turkish Algeria.

Dumas concludes this part of his travels in Algeria by making a commentary on the state of justice in Constantine. The rulers get used to judges that are not partial in their judicial dealings. Instead of siding with the lawful and just, they satisfy the interests of the powerful. One of the sheikhs of Constantine was surprised by learning that "the Cadi of one of his tribes was becoming famed for the wisdom of his judgment in matters of civil dispute" (Ibid. 163). Therefore, he decides to pay a visit of inspection, disguising himself as a merchant. He tells the Cadi: "I am not a merchant, but your ruler, Bou-Akas, Sheikh of Ferj-Ouah, and I traveled here to find out for myself whether your reputation as a just judge was well-deserved" (Ibid. 166). Indeed, the sheikh confirms that his reputation as a progressive judge was well deserved. Yet, this implies that his progressivism was perceived as an anomaly.

Kipling is similar to Dumas in this consideration of progressive rulers as anomaly. Speaking about the Prime Minister of Udaipur, Kipling says: "His Highness is a racial anomaly, judged by strictest European standards, he is a man of temperate life, the husband of one wife whom he married before he was chosen to the throne [...] in 1884" (1899: 77). For him, the native is innately incapable of political and social progress. In other words, he believes that it is an anomaly for an Oriental to be progressive. His statement carries political undertones because he speaks about a native prime minister in the same manner as Dumas speaks about a native judge. Both judge and prime minister represent native authority whose progressive move is interpreted as anomaly.

Kipling claims that native rulers misgoverned their people because of their incompetence and tyranny. For example, rulers like Udai Sing came "to the throne of Chitor through blood and misrule" (Ibid. 84). Such misrule as that which prevails in Chitor expands over other native-ruled states like Udaipur. The consequence of this misgovernment is the overexploitation of the country's wealth by the ruling few and the spread of misery among the ruled majority. The English believed that they were conquering people who "inherited a tendency to anarchy, or despotism, lack of restraint and inability to adhere to democratic principles." (Street, 1975: 129) Kipling wonders whether "any black man who had been in Guv'ment service go away without hundreds an' hundreds put by, and never touched? You mark that. Money? The place stinks o'money – just kept out o' sight" (1899: 220). This implies that the people imitate their corrupt rulers. Nevertheless, corruption and grab are only stopped when English agents intervened. Kipling affirms that with English influence native administration improved from the misgovernment of the past. He writes:

There is nothing exactly wrong in the methods of government that are overlaid with English terms and forms. They are vigorous, in certain points; and where they are not vigorous, there is a cheery happy-go-luckiness about the arrangement that must be seen to be understood [...] In the good old days the Durbar raised everything it could from the people, and the King spent as much as ever he could on his personal pleasures. Now the institution of the Political agent has stopped the grabbing, for which, by the way, some of the monarchs are not in the least grateful – and smoothed the outward face of things. But there is still a difference between our ways and the ways of the other places. A year spent among native States ought to send a man back to the Decencies and the Law Courts and the Rights of the Subject with a supreme contempt for those who rave about the oppressions of our brutal bureaucracy. One month nearly taught an average Englishman that it was the proper thing to smite anybody of mean aspect and obstructive tendencies on the mouth with a shoe. (Ibid. 219-220)

Clearly, Kipling calls for the general replacement of native 'misgovernment' by enlightened British rule. Zastoupil states that "India [was] dominated by cruel despots" (1994: 173), so the British had to impose their own rule directly as in some states or indirectly as in some others.

In "The Rescue of Certain French Prisoners", Dumas proclaims the idea that European civilians are not secure in Algeria because Algerians continued to indulge in their capture in order to satisfy their greed for money. A group of French civilians were captured as prisoners of war by Emir Abd-el-Kader's soldiers. According to Dumas, because Algerians are greedy and corrupt like their rulers, their freedom could be purchased. M. de Gognord, one of the prisoners, informs the Governor of Melilla that he "had just succeeded in coming to terms with his Arab guards, who had agreed to assist him and the other prisoners to escape, for a reward of 6000 doros" (1959: 62). The implication is that the Arab guards like their superiors are corrupt. Dumas states that the guards' corrupt and treacherous nature go hand in hand, so the prisoners had to be "cautious" and on their "guard against treachery" (Ibid.). For Dumas, the affair "had the atmosphere of mystery and

tragic uncertainty that characterizes all dealings with men of the Arab race, whose hearts are full of trickery, whose moods change in a flash" (Ibid. 67). If they change their mind after receiving the money, the French will have to bargain directly with Abd-el-Kader, who is depicted as a "tyrant" who "would release twelve heads for 32000 francs" (Ibid.). While Emir Abd-el-Kader was mostly viewed as a hero in Algerian society, the French regarded him as a "tyrant" because he led a mutiny against them. Another stereotype that is attributed to the Algerian rule is violence. Dumas states that the rule of tyranny cultivates violence always against the foreign enemy but too often against one another. Dumas attributes Abd-el-Kader's rule the feature of tyranny which cultivates such violence against the Europeans. He states that "massacring all the other French prisoners" would be premeditated on the pretext that "they were caught trying to escape" (Ibid.).

For Kipling, too, India is not safe unless placed under British supervision. Like Dumas's statements on piracy and robbery, robbery becomes a problem that calls for the attention of British agents who need to fight against "high way robbery" (1899: 122) and other such flaws. It was usual that outlaws plundered people in the roads. An example of this kind of plunder was taking place in Ajmir, where "there was a high way robbery" (Ibid.). An "English judge" (Ibid.) had to intervene for the salvation of the problem to set it as an example to prevent others' larceny. Kipling continues his thought on Ajmir's insecurity by stating:

From a criminal point of view, Ajmir is not a pleasant place. The Native States lie all round and about it, and portions of the district are ten miles off, Native State-locked on every side. Thus the criminal, who may be a burglarious Meena lusting for the money-bags of the Setts, or a Peshawari down south on a cold-weather tour, has his plan of campaign much simplified. (Ibid. 49)

The unsaid in the authors' interest in insecurity under Indian and Algerian regimes is that Kipling and Dumas believe that native rulers cultivated insecurity to foster their own overexploitation of their people's resources. As Orientalist authors, they also consolidated the intervention of their imperial nations on this ground.

CONCLUSION

As a conclusion, both Dumas and Kipling participated in the imperial games of their nations. They reproduced its colonial ideology regarding the colonised people's incapacity for self-government and self-determination. They argue that the colonized cannot rule themselves correctly and need to be incorporated into the more enlightened European ruler. The latter are said to be better equipped with the principles of democracy and justice that need to be implemented in overseas territories. What comes out of this interest in native structures of power is that they legitimate any action that would ensue from the French and British colonisers in Algeria and India. The two authors differ in their own experiences of the colony. Dumas was assigned the responsibility of rendering Algeria public and attractive for possible French settlers. Kipling, on the other hand, was Anglo-Indian and as such he wanted to consolidate the colony by celebrating British power. Yet, they could not do otherwise than sharing the imperialist enthusiasm of their countries since French and British colonizers defined themselves as forerunners in imperial hegemony and the definitions of imperial frontiers. They draw to the idea of 'Oriental despotism' to legitimate their imperialist undertaking. This interest in Oriental rule as 'misrule' and 'despotism' is deeply rooted in Western imagination, and it becomes timeless. Thus, contemporary Westerners draw to this nineteenth-century ideology to explain East/ West neo-colonial relations.

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