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NEGOCIEREA GENULUI ȘI A PUTERII: GERTRUDE BELL ÎN SOCIETĂȚI PATRIARHALE

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NEGOTIATING GENDER AND POWER: GERTRUDE BELL IN PATRIARCHAL SOCIETIES

Abstract

This paper aims to analyse the gender codes, discourses, rhetoric, stereotypes, and the misogynistic and discriminatory attitudes of three patriarchal and phallocentric communities of the late 19th and early 20th centuries through the biography of Gertrude Bell (1868-1926), a woman who defied the social norms and expectations of her time. The first one was the Victorian English society in which Bell grew up, a socio-cultural space marked by a whole network of norms, established codes of behaviour and specific labels assigned according to religion, race, gender and social status. The second group, with whom Bell interacted between 1888 and 1914, consisted of Bedouin tribes of the Arabian deserts, in which deeply rooted traditions clearly delineated gender roles. The third consisted of the military, scholars, linguists, archaeologists and politicians active within British power structures in the Middle East in the first decades of the 20th century, an Orientalist milieu marked by overt misogyny.

Keywords: Gertrude Bell, patriarchal societies, phallocentrism, gender codes, misogynist rhetoric, desert, orientalism

Rezumat

Scopul acestui articol este de a analiza codurile de gen, discursurile, retorica, stereotipurile și atitudinile misogine și discriminatoare a trei comunități patriarhale și falocentrice de la sfârșitul secolului al XIX-lea, începutul secolului al XX-lea, prin intermediul biografiei unei femei care a sfidat normele și așteptările sociale ale epocii sale: Gertrude Bell (1868-1926). Prima este societatea engleză a epocii victoriene în care Bell a crescut, un spațiu socio-cultural marcat de o întreagă rețea de norme, rigori comportamentale bine stabilite și etichete specifice atribuite în funcție de religie, rasă, gen și statut social. Cea de-a doua, cu care Bell a interacționat în perioada 1888-1914, e alcătuită din triburile de beduini din deșerturile arabe, unde rolurile bărbaților și femeilor erau net distincte și bine

ierarhizate ca urmare a unei tradiții milenare. Cea de-a treia e alcătuită din militarii, savanții, lingviști, arheologii și oamenii politici care activau în structurile de putere britanice din Orientul Apropiat în primele decade ale secolului al XX-lea, o comunitate orientalistă cu o înclinație misogină evidentă.

Cuvinte-cheie: Gertrude Bell, societăți patriarhale, falocentrism, coduri de gen, retorică misogină, deșert, orientalism

The history of Western man's journeys into the desert is an eminently phallogocentric one. A similar observation can be made about the Orientalist tradition, in which judgments were made and opinions authorised about these arid lands, with the purpose of describing, explaining, teaching, making statements about, and ultimately dominating and exercising authority over these territories alien to European civilisation (Said 2003, p. 3). Within this context, the major rupture in the relationship between the West and the desert only occurs at the beginning of the 20th century, when the narrative about the desert landscape of the Middle East is articulated by the voice of a woman¹: Gertrude Bell (1868-1926) – writer, linguist, translator, adventurer, mountaineer, archaeologist, but also a spy, and political officer –, nicknamed by the Arabs “Queen of the Desert” or “the Uncrowned Queen of Iraq”, and described by scholars as the most influential woman in the British Empire in the years following the First World War (Wallach 2005, p. xxiii).

The exceptional biography of this woman can be divided into three stages, depending on the patriarchal society or community she interacted with. The first period, up to 1888, unfolds in Victorian England – a sociocultural space defined by a network of norms, strict behavioural codes and labels based on religion, race, gender, social status and financial position. This initial phase is then followed by a series of increasingly systematic journeys to the Middle East, from 1888 to 1914, during which Gertrude Bell integrates into the Bedouin tribes of the Arab deserts, where gender roles are sharply distinct and strictly hierarchical within an ancient tradition. The final twelve years of her life are spent mainly within British power structures, populated by military men, scholars, linguists, archaeologists and politicians working in the Middle East, permeated by a more or less overt air of misogyny. This study examines the attitudes and reactions of these three patriarchal and phallogocentric communities towards Gertrude Bell's status as a woman.

The methodology employed is qualitative and interpretive, rooted in an interdisciplinary framework that combines cultural studies, gender theory and

¹ The only antecedent of note to Gertrude Bell in terms of female exploration of the deserts of the Middle East is Anne Blunt (1870-1880). However, it is important to note that, in contrast to Bell, Blunt did not undertake her desert expeditions alone, nor did she initiate any of her desert journeys. Rather, she followed her peripatetic husband, Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, whom she reverently referred to as «The Master» in her memoirs. See: Billie Melman. *Women's Orients: English Women and the Middle East, 1718-1918: Sexuality, religion and work*. London: Macmillan, 1992, p. 35.

historical-biographical analysis. The study draws on biographical data, primary texts written by Bell and secondary scholarly sources to analyse the discursive practices and social norms that shaped, challenged or marginalised female identity within these male-dominated contexts. It uses tools from feminist and postcolonial theory, particularly critiques of phallogocentric structures and Orientalist discourse, to show how Bell's presence and agency disrupted conventional gender roles and to develop a nuanced understanding of how identity, power and gender intersect in different socio-cultural settings.

Gertrude Bell was born in 1868 into a family of industrial magnates who held a monopoly in the iron and coal industries, making them the sixth wealthiest family in the British Empire. Seeing that she was a precocious child, "born too gifted" (Howell 2006, pp. XVIII-XIX), as Thomas Edward Lawrence put it, her parents – Hugh and Florence Bell, progressive thinkers themselves – made a radical decision that was in stark contrast to the conservative norms of the English society in which they lived: instead of allowing their daughter to continue her education at home, as most girls of her age did at the time, they sent her to study at a public institution in London, Queen's College. The school, which was exclusively for girls and focused more on refining manners and preparing young women for marriage, was no match for Gertrude's intellect. She rapidly distinguished herself by impressing her teachers with her encyclopaedic knowledge (particularly of history), and in her final semester, she was invited to continue her studies at Oxford.

In May 1886, when Gertrude began her studies at the famous university, the halls still echoed with the discouraging words of Dean John Burgon, who had recently addressed female students in the following terms: "Inferior to us God made you and inferior to the end of time you will remain." (Wagner 2004, p. 20). Despite the fact that Oxford University had granted women admission in 1879, the majority of professors exhibited a strong sense of animosity towards their presence. This hostility manifested itself in the use of various discriminatory tactics, often bordering on the absurd: placing girls at the back of classrooms, away from the boys, or even making them sit with their backs to the professor (*Ibidem*). Prevailing beliefs were still shaped by the claim made by the philosopher Herbert Spencer in 1859 that intellectual exertion was dangerous for women because it was thought to damage their ability to reproduce (Assiter 2005, p. 115). As literary historian Jens Hougaard observes, 19th-century representations of women highlighted a presumed natural concord between body and soul – a harmony that would be disturbed by intellect or reflection. In other words, this perspective on women promoted a socially acceptable form of ignorance, often referred to as innocence (Hougaard apud Bowns Poulsen 2016, p. 89). Nevertheless, the atmosphere at Oxford was more relaxed than at Queen's College, where Victorian customs were strictly enforced. Oxford was a man's world and its rules were more lenient. Gertrude adapted quickly, adopting a 'masculine' way of thinking and behaving.

Following a two-year period of study, she was awarded the highest distinction available from Oxford University, namely a First-Class Degree in Modern History. This achievement made her the first woman to receive such an honour from the university. The event made headlines in major newspapers and brought her instant fame (Wagner 2004, p. 22). However, this accomplishment also earned her a reputation for being haughty, sarcastic, and self-assured, with a distinct “attitude” and airs. Despite her newfound fame, she had not passed the most crucial test of Victorian society: unlike her contemporaries, at twenty years of age, she remained unmarried and lacked a suitor who could match her intelligence without being daunted by it (Wallach 2005, p. 25).

In order to rectify her adherence to what her parents perceived as “Oxfordy manners” (*Ibidem*) and to inculcate a more conventional set of social skills, as well as to prepare her for the prospect of matrimony, her parents decided, in late 1888, to send her on a trip to Bucharest, a cosmopolitan city where the British plenipotentiary minister was a family friend. Notwithstanding the failure of the marriage plans, the experience was seminal. Her return journey passed through Constantinople and Paris, inspiring in Gertrude a yearning for adventure, novel experiences and even danger. The comfortable and rigid life at home began to seem dull and monotonous, prompting her to embark on several journeys around the world over the next few years. Initially accompanied by relatives and later by herself, she visited the most significant destinations in Europe, crossed the Atlantic to the USA, Jamaica, Guatemala, Mexico, Hawaii and then travelled to the Far East: Japan, China, Myanmar (then Burma), and Singapore.

The most significant of these journeys was her 1892 trip to Tehran, Persia, marking her first extended encounter with the desert – a place she found magical, fascinating and erotically charged. This allure stemmed not only from its contrast with British social constraints, but also because it was where Gertrude fell in love for the first time, with Henry Cadogan (Howell 2015, p. 11). Although of noble birth, Henry Cadogan was a British civil servant with no inheritance and a gambling habit, which led Hugh Bell to strongly oppose the marriage. To cope with her depression, Gertrude immersed herself in the study of Oriental languages, Persian, Arabic, and Turkish (she was already fluent in French, German, and Italian), took up mountaineering, studied archaeology, translated Hafiz’s *Divan* into English, and published a travel book, *Persian Pictures*. This period of romantic and cultural exploration lasted for twelve years, from 1888 to 1900, and shaped her personality, inner constitution and physical appearance. By the time she returned to England at the age of 31, society considered her a “spinster”, a “wreck” by Victorian standards – brilliant but unmarriageable.

The turning point came in February 1900, when Gertrude resolved to undertake her first solo expedition into the Arabian deserts. She later revealed that the motivation for this audacious decision stemmed from a yearning to evade the confines of British society. As she states in her travelogue *Syria: The Desert and the Sown*: “To those, bred under an elaborate social order few such moments of exhilaration

can come as that which stands at the threshold of wild travel. The gates of the enclosed garden are thrown open, the chain at the entrance of the sanctuary is lowered; with a wary glance to right and left you step forth, and behold! the immeasurable world. The world of adventure and of enterprise, dark with hurrying storms, glittering in raw sunlight, an unanswered question and an unanswerable doubt hidden in the fold of every hill. Into it you must go alone, separated from the troops of friends that walk the rose alleys, stripped of the purple and fine linen that impede the fighting arm, roofless, defenceless, without possessions.” (Bell 1919, p. 1). As time passed, her attitude towards the territories she explored underwent a shift. Her initiation into archaeology, her linguistic training and the encyclopaedic knowledge of the Middle East that she had acquired in the meantime would facilitate this change of perspective, while keeping intact her sensitivity to the Arab world, to which she would remain attached until the end of her life.

Between 1900 and 1914, Gertrude Bell undertook seven expeditions into the deserts of the Middle East. She traversed modern-day Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, Mesopotamia and parts of present-day Saudi Arabia on foot, horseback, or camel, reaching as far as Hayil in the Nefud desert. Each journey was meticulously prepared: she bought caravans, paid guides and hired representatives from each tribe she would pass through, since an unwritten law of the desert forbade attacking a stranger accompanied by a tribal member. The equipment and supplies she brought included water, food, medicine, cigarettes, comfortable clothing, a folding chair, an extendable table, crystal glasses, books, and a substantial amount of money (Wagner 2004, pp. 4, 50; Howell 2015, p. 67; Wallach 2005, pp. 85, 99).

Over time, Gertrude Bell learned that the Bedouin tribes would judge her by her possessions and the gifts she brought, and treat her accordingly (Howell 2015, p. 67). She began to use her status as a white woman to her advantage, carrying trunks filled with lace dresses and corsets, with hidden compartments for cameras, maps, weapons, binoculars and gifts for influential sheikhs (Wagner 2004, p. 4). Even when she adopted male attire for the purpose of safeguarding herself from the desert sun, she refrained from entering a tribe dressed as a man. Instead, she would establish a temporary camp at a respectful distance, send an emissary to the sheikh, and await an invitation. Only then would she don her finest attire, release her red tresses, and enter the tribal leader’s tent bearing lavish gifts. There, over a meal, she and the sheikh would smoke cigarettes, pipes, or hookahs (sometimes with opium or marijuana), discuss tribal politics, horse and camel trading, or recent raids, and recite classic Arabic poetry (Howell 2015, pp. 67-68).

Rather than being met with scepticism or denied access, Gertrude Bell’s regal presence bolstered by confidence caused a sensation in the desert. News of her arrival travelled faster than her caravan. Sheikhs sought her out, like the Druze chief Yahya Beg, who asked locals if they had seen a queen passing through (*Ibidem*, p. 67). Some sought to kiss her hand or cheek, while others greeted her with great ceremony. The majority received her with the respect due to someone

of apparent importance. The only negative reactions to her arrival were expressed much later, in 1916, by Ibn Saud, the leader of the radical Wahhabi movement in central Arabia who would go on to become the founder and first king of Saudi Arabia, and after the war, by certain Shiite clerics in Mesopotamia who refused to speak to a woman with an uncovered head – a concession Gertrude never agreed to make (Wagner 2004, p. 71).

In the years leading up to the war, Britain frequently relied on such unofficial agents – archaeologists, researchers, writers, businessmen, adventurers – to collect intelligence on the activities of rival powers in remote regions, while reserving professional espionage for the European sphere (Korda, 2010, pp. 182-183). By contrast, her final expedition, which carried clear geopolitical implications, involved an attempted illegal crossing of the desert.

The last of the seven journeys, which lasted from November 1913 to February 1914, proved to be both the most significant and the most perilous. For her earlier trips to the Middle East, she obtained official permission from the Ottoman government via the British Embassy to travel to these regions, regardless of whether the justification for these explorations had a real or fictitious basis. In the years leading up to the war, Britain frequently relied on such unofficial agents – archaeologists, researchers, writers, businessmen, adventurers – to collect intelligence on the activities of rival powers in remote regions, while reserving professional espionage for the European sphere (Korda, 2010, pp. 182-183). By contrast, her final expedition, which carried clear geopolitical implications, involved an attempted illegal crossing of the desert.

Her objective was to meet with the preeminent military leaders of the Arabian Peninsula: Ibn Rashid, who was in Hayil, and Ibn Saud, who had recently conquered the city of Riyadh – two sworn enemies (whose families had been locked in conflict for nearly a century), from whom she sought to obtain as much information as possible.

However, her attempt to travel incognito failed just a few weeks after departing Damascus, when an Ottoman patrol discovered and halted her caravan. Furthermore, although she had been informed that the desert was experiencing a period of calm, this proved to be inaccurate. In fact, Ibn Saud was preparing an offensive against Rashid's stronghold at that very moment (Wagner 2004, p. 9). Consequently, even her contacts at the British Embassy in Constantinople declined to assume responsibility for Bell's actions, warning her that if she insisted on continuing her travels, she would do so at her own risk (Howell 2015, p. 87). However, she determined that the potential benefits of exploring the uncharted desert region in northern and central Arabia, a region that was sparsely documented in terms of topography and politics, outweighed the risks involved. Because of the imminent threat of Ibn Saud's approaching forces, Gertrude was not allowed to travel further south. Nevertheless, the eleven days she spent in Hayil (albeit as a quasi-prisoner) – a city where no European man had set foot for twenty years, and no woman for 30 years since Anne Blunt (Hogarth 1927, pp. 1-17) – proved

crucial to the British government in the war that was to begin a few months later. Gertrude Bell received news of the outbreak of the First World War while she was in Britain. Her immediate reaction was to request permission from the authorities to return to the Middle East to help encourage the Arabs to revolt and ally with the British Empire. For over a year, her request was categorically denied. The reasoning was blunt: a woman had no place in such a dangerous war zone. However, after the Entente's evident failures on the European continent, when it became imperative to neutralize Germany's ally on the Eastern Front, the Ottoman Empire, Gertrude Bell was hastily summoned by David Hogarth, a Lieutenant Commander in the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve in Cairo, to work in the newly established Arab Bureau in Egypt in late 1915. She was the only person with up-to-date information on many of the desert territories in the Middle East (which, until then, appeared as vast blank spaces on maps) and the only one capable of charting them (Howell 2015, pp. 147-148).

From that moment onward, Gertrude Bell embarked on her professional endeavours within a milieu characterised by intense Orientalist ideology. This constituted the third phallogocentric environment, following her experiences in Victorian England and with the Bedouin tribes of the Arabian deserts. The Arab Bureau was characterised by geopolitical machinations, violent military confrontations and intricate power structures, all of which were defined by a conspicuous absence of official roles for women. During her time at the prestigious Arab Bureau in Egypt, she cultivated friendships with a select group of individuals who challenged the prevailing misogyny, albeit couched in scholarly discourse. Among these acquaintances were archaeologists and scholars David George Hogarth (1862-1927), who brought her to Egypt, and Thomas Edward Lawrence (1888-1935), another desert enthusiast who played a significant role in the Middle East during the First World War and who would subsequently gain renown as "Lawrence of Arabia"². However, in Mesopotamia, where her presence became even more imperative than in Cairo and where she was soon to be dispatched, she had yet to establish friendships and demonstrate her value. In a recommendation letter to her new superior in Basra, Sir Percy Cox, Lord Charles Hardinge advised him to take Gertrude Bell seriously, emphasising that "she is a remarkably clever woman... with the brains of a man" (Howell 2015, p. 157).

In Mesopotamia discrimination was overt and even more severe. Military and political leaders categorically rejected the idea that a woman, who had merely "travelled a bit", should interfere in their serious affairs or be regarded as an equal. Nevertheless, she refused to return to Britain – a place she considered too far removed from the theatre of war, where her contribution would be negligible.

² For the legend that has been created around the figure of Thomas Edward Lawrence, see the chapter entitled "Mythical effervescences in the desert space" ["Efervescențe mitice în spațiul deșertic"], in Constantin Tonu, *The Desert in Literature [Deșertul în literatură]*. Cluj-Napoca: Limes, Cluj-Napoca, 2019, pp. 62-92.

Instead, she chose to remain in the Middle East, a region characterised by turmoil and conflict, where she could engage in meaningful challenges and engage with tangible realities. This propensity for action and risk-taking distinguished Gertrude Bell from the conventional expectations imposed on women. She herself acknowledged this when voicing her discontent regarding the desk-bound tasks she was assigned: “One can’t do much more than sit and record if one is of my sex, devil take it” (Wagner 2004, p. 72).

It was not until the end of 1916, following a period of nearly a year during which Gertrude worked without the benefit of an official position or salary, that her circumstances began to improve. This shift coincided with the point at which her exceptional intelligence served to counterbalance the “disadvantage of being a woman”. Concurrently, the military came to the realisation that only Gertrude could provide the necessary maps to navigate the still-unexplored terrain of the Middle Eastern deserts, and that she alone could persuade the Bedouins (who were accustomed to rebelling against any form of foreign domination) to ally with the British forces. Finally, in 1916, Sir Percy Cox “acknowledged Bell’s hard work – and the value of the information she provided – by making her an official member of his staff. She was given the title Liaison Officer, Correspondent to Cairo, and a fixed salary, making her the only female political officer in Great Britain’s forces” (*Ibidem*, p. 69).

From 1917 until almost her death, Gertrude Bell’s influence, decision-making power, and popularity continued to grow. She contributed to the success of the Arab Revolt, participated in the Paris Peace Conference, “played a major role in crafting the division of the Middle East into the countries we know today” (*Ibidem*, p. XIII), and facilitated Faisal’s accession to the throne of Iraq – a state whose borders she also helped delineate and in which she founded the first national museum (Gregg 2022, p. 1 et passim).

She died in Baghdad in 1926, at the age of 57, unmarried and without children, and remains in the collective memory as a person of extremes: a conservative and rather traditionalist spirit while in Britain (an extremely intelligent woman who even joined the anti-feminist movement), yet a strong, emancipated, even rebellious personality when in the desert lands of the Middle East. Celebrated by Muslims precisely because she was an exceptional woman – or because gender was irrelevant when it came to wealth, prestige or power –, she was often scorned by Westerners for reasons of honour, dignity, principle, tradition, and power politics. She was accepted only when, and to the extent that, she was assimilated into the male gender through the attribution of qualities, attitudes, manners, thought patterns and codes of behaviour traditionally considered the domain of men.

In conclusion, Gertrude Bell’s extraordinary life offers a compelling lens through which to examine the gender codes, norms, and power dynamics that defined three distinct patriarchal societies at the turn of the 20th century. Her ability to navigate and, at times, subvert the constraints imposed by Victorian England, the Bedouin tribal world, and British colonial structures reveals the

complex interplay between gender, identity, and authority. Bell's story challenges the traditional binaries of male and female roles, demonstrating that agency and influence can be achieved in spite of – and sometimes because of – those very limitations. Through her intellect, adaptability, and strategic use of cultural codes, Bell carved out a space for herself in male-dominated arenas where women were systematically excluded. Her legacy not only reshaped Western perceptions of the Middle East but also underscored the capacity of individual resilience to question, disrupt, and redefine the social order.

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