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**An Imagological Study of Freya Stark's  
*The Southern Gates of Arabia***

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in Anglo-Saxon Literature and Civilization**

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## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to my beloved parents,  
who have brought me up to be the man I am today.

Thank you for everything.

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## **Abstract**

British travel writers were driven by an urge to find an elsewhere still unexplored, a place where a traveller could still become a pioneer, a heroic adventurer. The Orientalists who actually visited Arabia were struck by what they saw, by the exotic natural geography and the strange aspects of its inhabitants. And almost always they were attracted to the former and repelled by the latter. By using imagology as an approach of study, this dissertation addresses the question of how Arabia was portrayed in Freya Stark's *The Southern Gates of Arabia*, through the extraction of the literary images of the people and the place and the analysis of the different strategies used in depicting them.

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## General Introduction

The Orient had a considerable influence on English literature in general and on Victorian travel writing in particular. Scores of British diplomats, traders and scholars visited the Middle East eager to explore the mysterious Orient. They visited the region and resided there among its people. When they went back to Britain, they brought back their accounts of the Eastern way of Life. The travellers reported on customs nearly unknown to Europeans until then, they were amazed by what they discovered.

British travellers wrote a huge amount of books on their journeys during the second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, including on Arabia. Many of these accounts were contradictory despite reporting on the same people and places. This variation of perspectives was influenced by the authors themselves, according to their personalities and gender. Therefore travelogues often give more information on the writers than on the places written about. Travellers find it far easier to describe the houses, boats, food, dresses, weapons of the natives than to understand their thoughts and feelings. Most writings were intended to purely inform, and stuck to descriptions, with measures and numbers rather than human particularities.

Western female travellers provided a rich and detailed description of the Orient. Unlike male travellers, they were able to participate in the women's daily life, social gatherings and religious celebrations. During her sojourn in Yemen, Freya Stark composed one of her most successful works; a book entitled *The Southern Gates of Arabia*. A classic of English travel literature, it is a chronicle of Stark's journey in the Hadhramaut region between 1934 and 1935. Stark wrote about all the aspects of her journey in a detailed manner. She provides insightful and rich portraits of the landscape and the people she encounters. Freya Stark acted as a reporter trying to be as faithful and truthful as possible.

This dissertation examines her travel book, attempting to answer the following research questions:

- How does Freya Stark's *The Southern Gates of Arabia* describe the local population and the environment they live in?
- To what extent Stark's travelogue rests on her imagination, was she able to bring back objective reports of Arabia?

To answer these research questions, this study resorts to imagology as a research methodology. *The Southern Gates of Arabia* is a voluminous book, it can be fruitfully searched for countless literary images. This dissertation takes a critical interest in registering and describing textual evidence of cultural imagery, ethnic stereotyping and national identity, adding further theoretical frameworks and resulting in a whole array of insights.

This work is divided into two chapters, the first one is theoretical and the second is practical, together pairing in a complementary way to tackle the main interests of this paper.

The first chapter will describe the context of the research, the methodology used, an overview of Victorian Britain and Arabia, the biography of Freya Stark, her voyages and writings, as well as previous travelogues on Arabia done by other travellers. It will also introduce the concepts of Orientalism, Imperialism and colonialism, demonstrating how they relate to travel writing.

The second chapter will extract the images used to portray the people and the place, as well as other aspects such as religion, education and economy. Furthermore this chapter will analyse the different descriptive approaches used by Freya Stark in constructing such images.



# **CHAPTER ONE**

# **TRAVEL WRITING**

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# Chapter One: Travel Writing

## 1.1. Introduction

Travel books are writings that record the impressions and information gathered by travellers visiting a particular geographical location in a specific historical period. The purpose of this chapter is to elucidate what imagology is, what travel writing is, how it interconnects with other concepts, as well as mentioning some notable early travelogues and travellers. Furthermore this chapter will also investigate Freya Stark's life, works and voyages.

## 1.2. Imagology

The habit of assigning certain features to different communities, cultures, nations, races and civilizations, is a very widespread and a very old practice. Whenever there is a contact between two human groups of different cultures, the involvement of "Othering" is inevitable. Anything that deviates from the standard local way of life is automatically and immediately "Othered" as an oddity, an anomaly, a singularity. When accumulated, these cultural differences tend to form an ethnocentric label, giving nations their own character and set of peculiarities.

The branch of Comparative Literature that deals with cross-cultural assessment in terms of perception of other nations and races, came first to be in the mid-twentieth century under the name of Imagology. It was developed during the 1950's within the French literature as a branch of comparative literary studies that investigates, evaluate and interpret literary images of other cultures (Bhabha 132).

Imagology is not to be mixed up with imagery which is a literary device. Imagology analyses the features of other nations and ethnic groups as presented in works of literature such as travel books, poems and plays. In their book

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entitled *Imagology: The Cultural Construction and Literary Representation of National Characters, a Critical Survey* (2007), Beller and Leerssen define imagology as “the critical analysis of national stereotypes in literature and in other forms of cultural representation” (83)

So in a broad sense, Imagology also called Image Studies can be defined as the branch of study that takes interest on how national, ethnic, racial, cultural images and stereotypes are displayed in literary texts.

Imagology tackles the issue of how the reciprocal perception among cultures is manifested in literary works. These images are formulated in order to define the anonymous other. The core purpose of Imagology is the study of the literary depiction of this other in a methodical fashion.

In order to explore the images of various ethnic groups as represented in literature, Imagologists are compelled to illustrate the point of origin of these images and explain the factors that lead to their emergence through in-depth and attentive study of the texts that incorporate such images.

Imagology does not only study the literary images of other groups, known as hetero-images, but the images of one’s own cultural group as well, known as auto-images. One is not possible without the other.

One of the ideal cases where Imagology can be applied is for instance, the image created by orientalist authors about the Middle East. In order to dominate the mysterious Orient, it had to be defined first. While doing so, westerners created a distorted stereotypical cliché; a barbaric, exotic and erotic Orient. With enough time that cliché was absorbed by the local populace and reflected back in the way they think and act. What started as an abstract image in the mind of the West became the reality of the Orient.

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## 1.3. Said's Orientalism

Edward Said conceives Orientalism as a cultural discourse whose function has been, and continues to be, framing the Orient in a position of subordination in relation to the West. Said asserts that Orientalism serves two purposes: firstly, it represents a body of knowledge about the East and, secondly, this body of knowledge provides the basis upon which to regulate and govern the East. According to Said Orientalism is:

The corporate institution for dealing with the Orient by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient (3)

For Said, English Victorian travel writing served as an agency of Orientalist discourse through a dual process of acquiring knowledge about the East and perpetuating what was already known about the East. He argues that the Victorian traveller already knew the East prior to his/her arrival and was therefore able to filter out the contradictory elements of the reality of the land and the people. The traveller therefore accumulated knowledge that substantiated what was already known.

## 1.4. Travel Writing

Travel writing is a genre of writing in which the authors describes places they have visited and their experiences while travelling. The connection between travel and writing is intimate and longstanding. However, the consideration of travel writing as a legitimate area of academic study is something that has gained acceptance just recently. At the beginning, travel writing was not considered a literary form worthy of analysis and criticism. It was the evolution of colonial discourse as an area of academic research in the 1970s that facilitated the study of travel writing. The last twenty years have seen travel writing gaining

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credibility as an accepted academic topic. Moreover, its interdisciplinary nature has facilitated the current widespread academic interest in travel writing.

In examining the descriptive approaches in *The Southern Gates of Arabia*, this dissertation draws on the theoretical work of Edward Said; *Orientalism*. Within this context, it is possible to question the assumptions on which the text is based on and to observe the relationship between the travel writing and the institution of colonialism and imperialism.

### 1.4.1. Travel Writing and Imperialism

Since the earliest accounts, trade, exploration, adventure and intelligence have been part of the socio-political context of travel. However, as far as European travel writing in the modern era (from the 16th century onwards) is concerned, this context of writing was largely attached to the project of colonialism. As the processes of colonization began to gather momentum, travel writing relayed the culture of 'out there' to the home audience, thus becoming a space in which the history of the conquest and administration of the colonies could be recorded. As a result, travel writing, as Hulme and Youngs note, became the battleground on which European colonial powers competed: "Rivalry between European nation-states meant that publication of travel accounts was often a semi-official business in which the beginnings of imperial histories were constructed" (3).

Furthermore, Pratt states, "travel and exploration writing produced the rest of the world for European readerships', throughout the duration of colonial expansion" (5).

The ideological impact of imperialism was particularly apparent in English travel writing, as Dorothy Carrington observes:

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If English travel literature tells how Englishmen have looked on the world, inevitably, it tells how they have acted in it. That is the story of the empire. The motive that caused Englishmen to venture out of their small cloudy island was always the same: it was their desire for wealth, for luxury...in short, for a higher standard of civilization...Their object was trade, and if necessary, conquest (266).

Studies of the relationship between travel and cultural imperialism have focused on the dynamics of power. The analysis of cross-cultural encounters between Europeans and 'others' has, as Clark states, "made the question of travel inseparable from that of power" (2).

However, even though this topic of study is now well developed, the relation of imperialism and travel literature has not always been the subject of such wide critical scrutiny. In 1976, Edward Said expressed his concern that "the literary-cultural establishment as a whole has declared the serious study of imperialism off limits" (38).

Said examines the modes of representation of the Orient which European, and later, Westerners established and perpetuated. He argues that this resulted in the construction of an "Orientalist" form of knowledge. Robert Young notes: "Orientalism effectively redefined the boundaries of literary and cultural analysis, and effectively founded post-colonial studies as an academic discipline" (383).

Said's *Orientalism* systematically examines the discipline by which European culture was able to manage and even produce the Orient through politics, military intelligence, science, academia, arts and literature.

Mary Bain Campbell notes: "many of these late eighteenth and nineteenth century Orientalist texts were composed in the field, or as a result of intensive foreign travel, and are what we now call travel writing" (266).

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Melman has stated that, as well as being a fundamental model of analysis in the study of colonial and postcolonial cross-cultural exchanges, Orientalism “has become the single most influential paradigm in studies of travel writing” (107).

### 1.4.2. Writing about Arabia

The context in which European travel writing was produced during the 1800s and the beginning of the 1900s was one of rapid expansion in terms of industrial capitalism and colonial commercial interest. This period witnessed greater diversity in terms of the focus of European travel writing; the Near East (the Ottoman Empire), the Far East (China, Japan) as well as the Americas and even the Arctic/ Antarctic Polar regions, were areas well-travelled. Similarly, the period also produced a considerable amount of travel writing on the Middle East. In particular, this period saw the emergence of a large body of literature on Arabia.

Early writings on Arabia include Sir John Mandeville's *Mandeville Tales*. (A fifteenth century compilation of various travellers' tales), D'Arvieux's *Voyage en Palestine*, (originally published in 1718) and Thorkild Hansen's *Arabia Felix: The Danish Expedition of 1761-1767*. Though epic in their undertaking, early works such as these differed considerably in their experience of Arabia, and were, as Kathryn Tidrick notes, too disparate in style and form to constitute a distinct body of writing on the Middle East. However, Anne Noel King Blunt's *A Pilgrimage to Nejd, the Cradle of the Arab Race* (1879), as well as Richard Burton's *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al-Madinah and Meccah* (1856), and Charles Montagu Doughty's *Arabia Deserta* (first published 1888) led, as Melman notes, to the emergence of “a tradition, a distinct body of travel writing, and indeed a genealogy of Arabists” (31).



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Arabia took hold of the Western, and particularly British, imagination. There was an idealization of Arabia; travelling there would involve encountering a people whose existence had remained unchanged for millennia, preserved from outside cultural influences. Arabia offered the opportunity of escape from the industrialization and commercialization of Western culture. Indeed, as Melman notes, Arabia was:

Imagined as an iconic place, the locus of a pristine and authentic Arab way of life, a land of utopian dreams and, for some of its most renowned explorers, an asylum from an ailing and degenerate modern Western civilization (133)

Writing about Arabia flourished throughout the end of 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, becoming a significant trend of travel writing.

The Middle East is one of Europe's oldest destinations for travel, pilgrimage, trade, and colonization producing a steady stream of travel accounts about Jordan, Iraq, Egypt, Syria and Palestine. The representational strategies of early travel writing on Arabia and the Middle East emerged in three phases.

The First Phase extends from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The few accounts of the Middle East and its peoples in circulation prior to the seventeenth century assigned to the region of Arabia were written in a mysterious manner. Nonetheless it provided the basis for the myth of a savage, yet noble people occupying barren, yet spiritually cleansing desert land.

Throughout their travels, many authors came into contact with nomadic tribes such as the Bedouin. Descriptions of these people began to feature in English travel writing of this period. However, the lands of Arabia held little military or colonial interest for European nations and consequently remained largely unexplored. Early travellers wrote about theft, deception, physical assault or abandonment at the hands of their Bedouin guides (Brent 95).

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One of the earliest accounts of the Bedouin appeared in *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*. First published in the mid fourteenth century, the account refers to the Bedouin as “right foul folk and cruel and of evil kind” (7). *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* provided the basis for many early representations of the Bedouin. Many of the European travel accounts on the Middle East that emerged over the following century were broadly consistent in their portrayal of the Arabs with the Bedouin’s depiction in *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*.

Within the Second Phase (17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> century), travel accounts of the Middle East featuring the Bedouin began to emerge in the early seventeenth century and Arabia and its people gradually became more known. The distinction between the settled Arab and the nomadic Bedouin is a feature of later orientalist travel writing, having, by the Victorian era, evolved into a literary and representational strategy. Early travellers to the Middle East tended to focus on two features of the landscape; its biblical significance and its harsh geography and climate (Raban 108). In contrast to later travellers who saw the extreme environment of Arabia as a place spiritual purity, many early accounts described the physical struggle of desert travel. Unlike for the Victorian traveller, the desert is not a place for wonder but a dangerous, barren wasteland.

The third phase of the representational strategies of early travel writing on the Middle East (18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century) is the use of biblical references. Writers such as Lithgow, d'Arvieux and Niebuhr knew of the Arabia of antiquity through the Bible and this often served to contextualize their representational strategies. The hardness of the Bedouin, the epic nature of desert travel and by implication, the heroic endeavours of the traveller/author became an established representational strategy (Raban 110).

In the eighteenth century the Middle East had become a centre of gravity for European travel writing with the establishment of representational strategies

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by which it was portrayed and the emergence of a body of knowledge by which it was known. However, the inaccessibility of the interior of the Arabian Peninsula made its emergence relatively late as a major focus for English and European travel.

The Bedouin were represented as a people whose impenetrable habitat of the desert had enabled them to preserve their old customs and had kept them safe from the destructive influences of civilization and modernity.

The representational strategies of this period of travel writing on Arabia emerged out of the interaction of earlier accounts with the European imagined notion of a far off, mystical land. Nobility, honour, the barren emptiness of the desert, inspiring purity, simplicity and freedom were recurring themes in many later accounts. This mode of representation was widespread in Victorian travel writing about Arabia. Lawrence's description of Arabia illustrates such notions of spiritual purity and freedom from the shackles of modernity: "The Arab desert made the nakedness of the mind as sensuous as the nakedness of the body" (338-339).

### 1.4.3. Victorian Britain and Arabia

There were a large number of travel accounts about the interior of Arabia which focused on the exploration of the desert and the study of its people. The most abundant period of this production was from the 1860s to the First World War.

Victorian travellers to Arabia found themselves writing in a much more clearly defined context, since by the mid-nineteenth century, Arabia was a much more widely known entity; politically, commercially, militarily and academically. The acquisition of knowledge about Arabia, and the Middle East more generally, was available. As Kabbani notes "nineteenth-century Britain

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produced a growing mass of travel literature, in a frenzied attempt to know the world it was in the process of conquering” (6).

In contrast to Arabia's earlier minor significance to European military and political interests, by the nineteenth century the situation had changed significantly. For the British and French, in particular, Arabia had become considerably more important. By the nineteenth century, European colonial interest in the Peninsula had increased greatly. France was particularly active, most notably with the invasion of Egypt in 1798. The maintenance of military and trading dominance at sea led to Britain evolving a series of political residencies and commercial agencies across the Peninsula. The primary function of these was to help facilitate and protect Britain's shipping interests rather than to become directly involved in the administration and government of the native peoples. A network of treaties offered Sheikdoms protection from rivals in exchange for accepting Britain as the region's dominant international power (Melman 201).

Moreover, the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 certainly helped considerably to make the Peninsula accessible to travellers. The presence of the British Navy ensured that the Victorian traveller could travel in considerably more safety than earlier travellers who were in constant fear of attack. The combination of these factors, along with the perception of the noble Bedouin and the spiritual qualities of the desert, a legacy of earlier travellers' accounts, no doubt contributed to the popularity of travel in Arabia during this period. The Victorian era witnessed a great increase in the development of travel writing on this region, Arabia was seen as a land whose deserts preserve an ancient and authentic way of life and an environment free from the machines of modernity and Western civilization (Melman 202).

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It is possible to find representations of the noble Bedouin and the harsh but spiritual environment of the desert present across much of the English travel writing produced during the Victorian era. It is significant to note that in travel accounts as diverse as those of Gertrude Bell and T. E. Lawrence, the motifs of the noble Bedouin and the ancient and pure desert are the basic representational technique through which Arabia and its people are portrayed. As Kabbani observes, "In the European narration of the Orient, there was a deliberate stress on those qualities that made the East different from the West, exiled it into an irretrievable state of otherness". (7)

In the mid-1930s, Freya Stark travelled throughout the Middle East. Her accounts of these voyages brought about the publication of two of her best-selling books: *The Valleys of The Assassins* (1934) and *The Southern Gates of Arabia* (1936). Stark is commonly seen as one of the last great adventurers. The rapid progress of modernity and a changing political climate brought to an end, journeys of the type undertaken by Stark in Arabia.

### 1.5. Freya Stark

Freya Stark spent her early childhood in Asolo, a small medieval village some hundred kilometres northwest of Venice, Italy. Family members, at least on her father's side, were relatively wealthy. Her father, Robert Stark, had ambitions to be an artist. In 1878, while on a study trip to Italy, he met and married his eldest cousin, Flora, who had been brought up in Florence (Izzard 67).

The newly-married Starks moved back to Devon. However, while Robert enjoyed the Devonshire countryside, his young wife found the contrast with Italy, both in terms of the weather and the conservatism of society unbearable. Although both were artists, it was not enough to sustain them in Devon. Flora Stark implored her husband to move abroad, arguing that France or Italy would

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make a much more suitable place for a home. When Robert Stark was asked to teach at Kensington Art School, they moved to London. This brought the Starks into contact with many artists and intellectuals. It was a social environment in which Flora Stark thrived. However, Robert missed the Devonshire countryside and wanted to go back (Izzard 90).

In 1887, nine years into their marriage, the Starks decided to leave London for Paris in order to pursue their careers as artists. They worked in the Delacluse Studio on the Left Bank, and, as they had in London, made many friendships. For both Robert and Flora Stark this was a period of some happiness and in 1893, Freya, their first daughter, was born (Izzard 121).

The pattern of moves between Italy and England continued until 1903 when the Starks got divorced. Some months after her mother's departure, Freya and her sister Vera were sent out to join her in Dronero. From this point on, the sisters' childhoods were characterized by long periods of loneliness; they were largely ignored, for their mother was consumed by her business ventures and their father's visits were infrequent (Moorehead 143). A family friend, Herbert Young, seems to have been an influential figure for Freya and Vera during this period. Living in Asolo, Young would visit the girls, reading to them, playing with them and generally taking an interest in them in a way that their parents seemed unable to do. Young introduced Stark to Edward Fitzgerald's *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, as well as Kipling, Keats, Wordsworth, Shelley, and Byron; these authors gave Stark her first Orientalist glamorization of the East (Moorehead 159).

Having been educated by a succession of governesses and inspired by a steady supply of books from Herbert Young, Stark was finally given the opportunity to study formally when her father paid for her to attend Bedford College (Geniesse 44). Stark initially embarked on an English degree but

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changed to history. As a fluent speaker of English, French, Italian and German, Freya decided that she should take up the study of a non-European language. She opted for Arabic (Geniesse 49). The contemporary news coverage of political tensions in the Middle East awakened her interest and influenced Stark's decision to study Arabic. Having studied Arabic, Stark's future gravitated towards the Middle East. However, it was only after the death of her sister, Vera, in 1926, that she actively pursued plans to travel, and, at the age of 34, and free from familial ties, she resolved to fulfil her ambitions to travel to the Middle East (Izzard 98).

### 1.5.1. Stark's Works and Voyages

It is interesting to note that the writers acknowledged to be the most prominent travel writers on Arabia are all male, even though there were three major female explorers of Arabia: Anne Blunt, Gertrude Bell and Freya Stark.

Born in Paris in 1893, Stark spent most of her childhood in Asolo, northern Italy. Her childhood was marked by a number of illnesses. Nonetheless, in adulthood, Stark was extremely active: a keen walker, climber and skier. During a period of medical recovery in 1921, Stark decided to learn Arabic because according to her “the most interesting things in the world were likely to happen in the neighbourhood of oil” (276).

Stark travelled to the Middle East for the first time in 1927 and over the next few years undertook a series of journeys in Persia, Iraq and Southern Arabia. She continued to travel in the Middle East as well as in Cyprus, Greece and Turkey throughout her life, producing seventeen travel texts in all (Izzard 173). A keen photographer and cartographer, all of her travel texts are illustrated with maps and photographs of the people and places she visited. Stark also produced a number of autobiographies narrating different phases of her life. She

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also published eight volumes of letters, providing a detailed insight in the events and circumstances of her life (Izzard 175).

On 18th November 1927, Freya Stark embarked on her first journey to the Middle East. She travelled to Beirut and, by the middle of December she was settled in the village of Brummana in the Lebanon. Her first impressions of its people, culture, and the surrounding landscape far exceeded anything she had imagined. For her, the difference of the Middle East was intoxicating and enhanced her desire to travel and explore further (Geniesse 32).

In 1935, Stark embarked on the journey that was to become the basis of her second book, *The Southern Gates of Arabia*, which accounts her journeys undertaken in the Hadhramaut region of Arabia. The book was highly welcomed and led to her receiving the Royal Scottish Geographical Society award; the Mungo Park medal, for her contribution to travel literature (Geniesse 102).

The success of *The Southern Gates of Arabia* led to an extended social circle and contacts that gave rise to Stark's next journey; an expedition in the Hadhramaut. The expedition proved highly successful. Stark, with the help of six tribesmen and an African slave, uncovered a moon temple dedicated to the pagan god Sin, the first such discovery of its kind to be made in Southern Arabia (Geniesse 139). Despite the difficulties, this expedition to the Hadhramaut was to provide the basis for Stark's third book; *A Winter in Arabia* which was well received by critics and public alike.

Due to rapid political change and modernization, accounts of travels such as Stark's were not possible even a few years after they were written. They were produced at a point of transition and change.



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### 1.5.2. *The Southern Gates of Arabia*

Stark remains best known for her travel account *The Southern Gates of Arabia*, a 328 pages travelogue organized in 27 chapters. Praise for this book and her contribution to travel literature led to her receiving the Royal Scottish Geographical Society award. The admiration accorded to *The Southern Gates of Arabia* established Stark's reputation as the leading female travel writer of her generation.

*The Southern Gates of Arabia* describes Stark's journey through the Hadhramaut region of Southern Arabia. Her voyage started at the port of Makalla from where she continued travelling further into the interior of Arabia following ancient trade routes with the goal of becoming the first European to reach Shabwa (Geniesse 198). Unfortunately, illness prevented her from achieving this and she called upon the Royal Air Force to airlift her to safety. The narrative structure of the text mirrors the progression of Stark's journey and is accompanied by a series of black and white photographs of the people and places she encountered.

For Stark, Lawrence's travel literature and wartime activities acted as a motivation for her own ambitions of travel. The way in which Lawrence imaged the desert kingdoms and romanced the hardships of the sands influenced Stark's desire to explore. The recognition and praise that Lawrence had received for the *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* greatly appealed to Stark. Lawrence had promoted the public's interest in the Middle East and Stark saw this as an opportunity to establish herself as a travel writer.

Burton's way of interacting with the people of Arabia and his adoption of native dress and language in particular also had an impact on later travellers to the Middle East including Stark.

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Interestingly, Stark's journey covered much the same ground as the one described by Bell in *The Desert and the Sown*. Comparisons between Bell and Stark are not, however, limited to the routes they undertook as travellers. Stark's involvement in military intelligence activities during the Second World War mirrors Bell's involvement in similar activities during the First World War.

### **1.6. Conclusion**

Western Travellers experienced differences in landscape, society, politics and culture. They documented their reactions to these differences in their published travel books for the readers back at home. The Western travellers' description of the differences encountered was deeply asymmetrical due to the power relation between the colonizer and the colonized, resulting in a dichotomy of self/other in a way that justifies and legitimizes the aggressive imperialist, exploitive attitude of the West towards the Orient.

**CHAPTER TWO**  
**THE IMAGE OF**  
**ARABIA**

## Outline of Chapter Two

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## **Chapter Two: The Image of Arabia**

### **2.1. Introduction**

During the 19th Century, the world was transformed and the Victorian era became known as the Imperial Century. The discoveries of new lands were accompanied by those of unknown customs and people. These were often defined through stereotyped conceptions and prejudices of the British people, who considered themselves superior to the rest of the world. The concept of Orientalism, popularized by Said, refers to this general superior Western attitude towards Middle Eastern societies, where greedy Europeans soon felt it their responsibility to intervene. The central issue addressed in this chapter is to put forward how Freya Stark used different descriptive approaches to portray the image of Arabia and the Arabs.

### **2.2. Encountering the People**

Freya Stark was a remarkable writer and photographer who visited many parts of the Middle East in the 1930's. She spoke Arabic fluently and was proficient in the history of Arabia. She wrote several widespread travelogues at a time when unaccompanied women travellers were a rare sight.

*The Southern Gates of Arabia* is still considered a classic in travel literature. The title of Stark's travel book points towards the region of Hadhramaut, the heart of Arabia Felix, in what is now Yemen, one of the most remote parts of Arabia; bordered by the Empty Quarter to the North, the Arabian Sea to the South and with a history that stretches back to the dawn of human civilisation.

In her journey through the towns and encampments of the Hadhramaut, Freya Stark sought to document her encounters with the natives, she hired members of local Bedouin tribes to guide her to historical regions, old villages, and along the ancient spice routes, meeting with the rich and the poor, the lowly

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and the mighty, with men and women, the young and the old, with nomads and settlers, those who live on the coast and those who live deep inland, those who are free and those who are under the bondage of servitude.

### 2.2.1. The Men's Image

Stark presented herself as able to mix with male company in a way that was not accessible to the women of the Hadhramaut:

Before we had gone any distance, a charming stranger appeared from nowhere and welcomed us: he had been a clerk in Aden: the sight of a European delighted him: he came to show me all I wanted on my way. He led me to the chief mosque -a quiet place of columns and lesser mosques built more like private chapels by pious householder (Stark 128)

While portraying the Bedouins, Stark seems careful but intrigued by them at the same time. She considers them dangerous yet handsome. She reports every aspect no matter how minor it may be, their way of dressing, their manners and even their facial expressions:

They themselves looked dangerous, if put to it, but handsome. Three or four of the chief among them came from their group to shake hands with grave unsmiling courtesy. Only a few wore turbans ; but most wore loin-cloths and a cartridge belt, well filled an amulet round the neck, a greasy fillet to hold back the hair in the latest debutante fashion, and a twist of silver bracelet above the right elbow. They had old guns inlaid with silver, and one or two of the fine Hadhramaut daggers, with sheath turned up almost in the shape of a U, embossed with rough cornelians, and stuck into the loincloth at an angle so as to be ready to their hand. Their beauty was in the bare torso, the muscles rippling in freedom under a skin to which a perpetual treatment of indigo, sun and oil gives a bloom neither brown nor blue, but something like a dark plum (Stark 16).

Stark refutes previous reports from other travellers about how dangerous Aden can be. Instead, she compliments the kindness of Aden's residents and thanks them for the help they provided her during her staying there: "Aden had

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been kind. Her evil report among early Hadhramaut travellers is not endorsed by me. I found friendliness and help on every hand” (Stark 13).

One thing Stark also noticed about the Arabs is that contrary to the typical cliché of their laziness, they are hardworking people. Not only they endure hard labour in hellish heat but they do it while smiling and singing.

In one of the passages when Stark comes in contact with a tribe called “The Wahidis”, they are portrayed as extremely primitive, fascinated by the simplest vestiges of Western modernity. She even uses the word “creature” to refer to one of the Wahidis. The reader can sense in her words not disdain but pity:

Three or four of the Wahidis had come on board and strolled gingerly about the decks, touching the white paint with suspicious wonder, as if it might come alive under their hands. One of them stepped through the open door of my cabin and, squatting down with the natural Arab freedom, let his eyes wander in silence round the strange appointments, electric fans, washstand and mirror, light and curtains, of the room: finally they rested with relief on the comparatively comprehensible white counterpane of my bunk; he began to stroke it with admiring fingers. He was a tall creature, nearly black, with some mixture of Africa in him (Stark 18)

Even though there is some kind of patronization in Stark’s account of her encounter with the natives, she cannot help it but to admire them for their charm and simplicity: “The charm of the Bedouin is his grasp of realities, his genuine aloofness from the trappings of existence” (Stark 18).

As the narrative progresses, *The Southern Gates of Arabia* chapters depict the people in a way that suggests warmth, companionship and inclusion. Stark's textual and photographic accounts of her journey increasingly illustrate her interaction with the people she travels amongst. In the chapter: ‘The Jol’, Stark travels with two Bedouin companions; Sa’id and Salim. Stark's account of

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travelling across the desert reveals a reverence for the Bedouin, representing them as a simple, honourable and loyal people:

Travellers who go among them with servants of their own are apt to find them quarrelsome, rapacious and difficult; but nearly all those who have been alone with them have a different tale to tell. One is then accepted into a rough but cordial brotherhood; its duties are made light and its comforts are enlarged for the weaker stranger: one sits in the best place available after a comparatively easy day, through which you have ridden and they have walked, and watches them in their cheerful labour; and realizes how the society of the wilderness has its social disciplines and restraints, its rules of decent living, just like any other society (Stark 96).

The huge amount of English travelogues produced on the Orient offers a wide range of descriptions of the Arabs. While some despise and criticize them, others praise their qualities. However, all the authors seem to agree on one aspect; the hospitality of the Arabs. Among the many testimonials none complain about the way they were received. Stark felt sincerely welcomed wherever she has gone. The act of giving and sharing is a universal quality in Arabia.

### 2.2.2. The Women's Image

As a female writer, Stark seems to have been able to write with greater objectivity about Arab women than about Arab men. Arab women were previously categorized as ugly or beautiful, smart or not, their clothes were described in details for the readers to try and picture them.

Positive wording is chosen to describe the indigenous Women. For instance, Stark describes a widowed woman from Makalla:

A woman singularly beautiful swathed in thin veils of flowered cloth, a smiling mouth, and brown eyes, brilliant, large and dark, a long neck and a necklace of gold beads. She welcomed my presence as that of a sister in this wild and unpleasant world of water (Stark 13).



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She even recognizes a common sisterhood that is rarely found in previous travel books. Other travellers, including female ones, never shared their solidarity with the women of the Orient and did not treat them on an equal footing. However, Freya Stark looked passed such arrogant and snobbish attitudes. She saw them simply as sisters, as her fellow women. Stark laments that whether in the Orient or in the West, women are always victims to the confines of their patriarchal societies:

I walked about reflecting on this extraordinary female ideal of travel in shut boxes through the world, to see and be seen by as little of it as possible. It seems to be an almost universal prejudice, only differing here and there in degree: Mrs X, afraid to step for one moment out of her own circle, which comprises less than the tenth of a millionth part of the fascinating population of our globe, really acts on the very same principle as the Arabian aunt, alone in her dark and stuffy cabin (Stark 14).

One would think that Stark will feel more at ease among other women but surprisingly that was not the case. While attending a local traditional wedding she felt extremely uncomfortable. She was overwhelmed with all kinds of noise, colours and scents. As a Westerner, she was not accustomed to such exotic environment. She was amazed how much jewellery the native women wore, how they painted their faces and hands, how they danced and chanted:

The ladies came in with a yellow kerchief tied over their head, but this was soon taken off, and then they showed the elaborate works of art their face and hands and hair. They wore about a hundred tiny plaits tight to the head... Their eyebrows were painted brown and a curling brown pattern darted from each temple. Some were very pretty, with pointed faces and long small chins; but they were inhuman, hieratic and sacrificial; not women, but a terrifying, uncompromising embodiment of Woman... I slipped out as quietly as I could, oppressed with a mystery so ancient and fundamental (Stark 49).

It was difficult to meet local women because they tended to run away from strangers out of shyness and fear but Stark manages to offer lengthy descriptions

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of the make-up, the veils of Arab women and other dresses, detailing colours and fabrics. She describes their tattoos, their use of henna and the ways they arrange their hair.

For Stark, the Bedouin concept of marriage is different from the Western one, in which affection is a primordial element among other factors such as the social and financial status of both parties. For the Arabs, marriage is less complicated. The woman is like a piece of furniture, bought and changed whenever the husband wanted. The woman's role is to solely satisfy the needs of the man. The Bedouin's right to have more than one wife appeared as a shocking way of living to Freya Stark. The man can divorce his wives whenever he wanted to and leave them with nothing. Stark makes it clear that she does not approve of such practices (Lewis 47).

Stark's gender necessitated her staying in the Governor's harem. Being a woman granted her a greater degree of access. Stark's interaction with the women of the harem provides insights in terms of the status of women in Arabia. In the following passage, Stark is conversant with gossip on the latest fashions amongst the women of the harems, in this case on the occasion of a funeral:

She bestirred herself to pull her satin dresses out of the chest in my room. At intervals she remembered to sigh deeply: but then she forgot, for she still like her fine gowns and was pleased to show them. She ripped off a silver and blue front, and sewed a purple and gold one on instead, more suitable, she explained, for a house of mourning. (Stark 141)

The reader can notice how Stark gained the trust of the local women, forging an intimate friendship with them. They confided in her their secrets and feelings and showed her their dearest possessions of jewellery and outfits. This would have never been possible if the traveller was a man. Stark also mingled with many of the Sheikhs' concubines, who were more of sex slaves than actual wives.

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### 2.2.3. The Slaves

One cannot talk about a journey in Arabia without mentioning slaves. Stark did so as well, she praised them for their devotion and forbearance. But unlike her predecessors she did not portray the relationship between the slave and the master as one of abuse and maltreatment. On the contrary, she depicts it as a cordial attachment:

European women who live in the East and often complain of Arab servants would be surprised to hear of the devoted lifetimes given by these people to their native masters. They enter a household and become part of it, and think of no private life beyond. I have never heard an Arab speak roughly to his servant, even under severe trials of patience. The Queen of Iraq, when I was there, had a particularly bad cook, so much so that King Faisal offered to send her his own excellent one instead; but the queen, a gentle and charming woman, was attached to the cook's wife and used to go with her to the cinema now and then, and refused the exchange. In the Hadhramaut, a small slave or servant is given to every infant member of any well-to-do family, and they grow up devotedly together (Stark 34)

Stark did not approve the practice of slavery but she considered that the slaves' situation was not as bad as she thought. She admired their resilience and their ability to survive.

### 2.3. Depicting the Environment

The desert has long existed as a place of forgetting in Orientalist travel literature. The vastness of the landscape where time is always in suspension exercised a pull on western travellers' hearts. *The Southern Fates of Arabia* echoes Said's cross-cultural cosmopolitanism welcoming the Orient as an opportunity to expand the humanist understanding of man. It also reflects Stark's romantic views of Arabia as the site of psychic regeneration.

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Stark's use of different representational strategies makes it difficult to contextualize her work. She was writing at a point when European modernity was affecting the Orient. The variations in the representational registers she deploys to present Arabia may be the result of writing within the context of colonialism and a conflicted political climate.

The geography of Arabia is a central piece of Stark's book. She writes about all the aspects of her journey in a detailed manner. Her book is a gold mine for geographers. Stark documents the glorious landscape of Arabia as it was.

### 2.3.1 The Topography

*The Southern Gates of Arabia* portrays the landscape of Arabia as something to overcome and conquer. This is particularly apparent in Stark's chapters, 'The way to the Jol', 'The Jol' and 'Nights on the Jol' which focus on her crossing of a high plateau, known as the Jol. Stark travelled inland from Makalla in the direction of Shibam the Wadi Do'an, representing an important shift in the nature of her travels. The crossing of the Jol meant leaving the gates of Makalla behind and venturing into little known territory in which, like the Empty Quarter, very few Europeans had travelled. In this section of her journey she moves away from the familiarity of the Arabian coast towards the little known valleys and plateau of the Jol. Stark notes that she was "the third European woman to visit the interior, and the first to go there alone" (Stark 56)

The first full description of the Jol's landscape appears in the ninth chapter:

The Jol has the fascination and the terror of vastness not only in space, but in time. As one rises to its sunbathed level, the human world is lost; Nature alone is at work, carving geography in her millennial periods, her temporal abysses made visible in stone. On that upland we tread the ancient floors of seas. It has been lifted, sunken and re-lifted perhaps, how often? Its shells are those which, before the beginning of man (Stark 87)

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This representation of the landscape which is painted for the home audience is characteristic of the way in which orientalism has represented Arabia. Stark uses the conventional orientalist representational strategy; conquering the landscape through densely semantic description. The Jol is represented as bleak and desolate, but wondrous. The Jol's vastness is fascinating, but also threatens to overwhelm Stark. It is an obstacle to be overcome. Stark describes the Jol in rich, aesthetic prose. Every aspect of it is described and framed:

The Wadi is about a thousand yards wide and drops a thousand feet or so with sheer walls. On the rubble sides which hold the cliffs, little towns are clustered, built of earth like swallows' nests, so that only the sunlight shows them against the earth behind. The Wadi bottom is filled with palms. Their tops glitter there darkly, like a snake or a river with scales or ripples shining in the sun (Stark 112).

The names of the major cities and the description of the landscape and the water bodies are rather authentic, giving the reader the ability to visualize the region of Arabia. Stark pairs the desert with death. Depicting it as hostile and hellish but also protective, preserving the uniqueness of Arabia from outside contact (Stark 199).

While describing the region, the topographical space tends to be idealized by Stark through an emphasis on how rich and beautiful the land is. Stark speaks about arid hills, great emptiness and long stretches of picturesque desert. The terminology chosen to describe the scenery is rather positive and authentic.

Stark's depiction of the region is so detailed and meticulous that she describes the climate, the winds and even the currents of the Indian Ocean:

In the Indian Ocean this phenomenon should be more noticeable than elsewhere, for here the monsoon adds to the general reliability of things by blowing steadily in the same direction for the same number of months in every year (Stark 9).

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Although the bigger part of landscape's description varies from neutral to positive, there are some paragraphs which give a rather grim picture of the region. For instance:

No grimmer coast can be imagined. The mountains are sharp naked apparently as when they hissed in black coils from the darkness of earth, lonely and hard as death, and with a derelict and twisted beauty (Stark 24).

But in overall the geography of Arabia is beautifully portrayed by Freya Stark. This can be exemplified by the following passage:

The Indian Ocean in front of me, the inland deserts behind: within these titanic barriers I was the only European at that moment. A dim little feeling came curling up through my sleepy senses; I wondered for a second what it might be before I recognized it: it was Happiness, pure and immaterial; independent of affections and emotions, the aetherial essence of happiness, a delight so rare and so impersonal that it seems scarcely terrestrial when it comes (Stark 36).

Stark's feeling of ecstasy can be ascribed to the fact that she achieved the goal of her challenging voyage, reaching a place so remote that no orientalist, traveller or imperialist had reached before her. Indeed, she opened the gates of Southern Arabia to the academicians of the West; sociologists, anthropologists, archaeologists and even biologists who do not take interest in the realms of men but in the kingdoms of animals and plants.

### 2.3.2 Fauna and Flora

The local fauna had also its fair share of Stark's account of Arabia. She described various creatures, birds, fish, camels, reptiles and even insects did not escape her acute ability of observation. In the following passages, she describes a brief encounter with a desert fox:

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We were distracted from this rather sad review of the student's lot by the sight of a fine bushy fox under a rock ; he did not move, but waited, and watched us as we passed, ready to run, his body alert and intelligent, a lucky creature (Stark 43).

It is not clear why Stark referred to the fox as lucky, it could be simply because she envied him for living in such beautiful environment or because she was amazed by its resilience in surviving in such hot and dry climate. In the next passage she describes another encounter, this time with Gulls:

On the white sands they look like white pearls, and like grey pearls on the brown, and they swim strung out like pearls upon the waves. Now, as their barrage rose and fell, they made a canopy of shadow with their wings (Stark 44).

Stark pays also attention to the plants that grow in Arabia. In the following passages she talks about gum trees:

The trees from which this ancient harvest is collected are varieties of the Burseraceae family, *Bosivellia Carteri* and *Boswellia Bhuactajiana*, and the Arabs divide them into four kinds, of which Hoja'i, produces the best gum, and Shehri, Samhali and Rastni the inferior qualities (Stark 10)

She shows great familiarity with local aspects of Arabian life.

### 2.4. Other Aspects

Given the fact that religion is an important aspect of the Arab culture, Stark had to mention some of the religious practices she witnessed. In the third chapter, she admires a local man performing “Wuḏū” and “Salat”:

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One man particularly I remember. After squatting on the sand beside his camels to wash his arms and legs and head and mouth, he stood to pray. He stood there with a pose graceful and sure, his beard and hair and lean unhampered limbs outlined against the sand and sea. Just a man, with an indescribable dignity of mere manhood about him. And when he had stooped to place his forehead on the ground, he came upright again with one spring of his body, as if it were made of steel (Stark 33).

Even though short, the passage above contains two competing approaches in describing the praying man. The first one is an admiration for the tranquillity and serenity of performing the Islamic prayer. This is because such spirituality is quasi inexistent in the industrialized West. The second approach is a persistent focus on the erotic aspect of the male body. Such fascination can be attributed to Stark's attraction as a woman to raw and natural virility of the bedouin man.

When confronted by one of the Bedouins that she is a Christian and thus destined to burn in hellfire, she responded wittily, showing a great deal of apprehension and grasp of the Islamic Eschatology:

'But you are a Nasrani', said one of them a lighter complexioned man with the luxury of a yellow cashmere turban on his head. 'You are going to burn in hell'. The gathering, it was evident, could not but agree with the accuracy of this statement, but deplored so brutal a way of putting it. I was not ready to agree, and remarked that the Nasara are people of the Book. 'Before the day of Judgment,' I said, 'they will be gathered together by their Prophet, the Presence Jesus ; and the Jews will be gathered by Moses : and the Messenger of God, God bless and save him, will gather the Believers, and all will go to Paradise. It is true that your traditions say that our prophet will enter a little later than the Messenger of God but Eternity is very long, I see no great objection if my enjoyment of it begins a little later than yours' (Stark 19).

Stark paid much attention to the state of education in the region. She visited many schools during her journey. According to her, she found the education system in a deplorable state. What the locals call schools are mere huts



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made of mud with few books and no benches. The parents rarely allow their children to attend because they do not see any material gain from it. Stark describes the pupils to be ragged, unhygienic and look unintelligent. They are taught mainly how to recite the Quran while other modern subjects are almost non-existent.

Concerning the economic activities of the locals, Stark speaks of the manufacturing of curved daggers, the drying of sea-slugs and sharks' fins and producing sesame oil. The harbours along the coast enable these products to be shipped through the Indian Ocean to reach nation as far as China. As for farming, Stark described gardens of Eggplant, Okra, pepper, pomegranate, vines and bananas. She is amazed of how much the gardeners accomplished in the dry climate of Arabia with tools that are crude and obsolete.

### **2.5. Stark's Descriptive Approaches**

Stark's book *The Southern Gates of Arabia* reveals a progression from a position of relative detachment in the first chapters towards greater assimilation in the latter stages of the narrative. Her progression from relative detachment to that of greater integration is reflected in five principal descriptive approaches.

#### **2.5.1. Detachment**

The first descriptive approach is that which places Stark in a position of relative detachment. This can be seen in the chapter, 'Life in the City', in which Stark visits the city of Makalla. Stark undertook a tour of the seaport by car. The sight of a European woman being driven around the city in a car was such that:

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By the end of my stay in the town, the mixed people of the High Street, Bedouin, Arab and Negro, had begun to grow accustomed to the sight of me, but even then their excitement was great enough to gather a crowd whenever I left the defences of the car: they were friendly, but I am only five foot two, and a way had to be cleared whenever I wished to see anything beyond their hot tumultuous faces. Only once did I make for the town on foot and then gave it up as a bad job and turned to the cliff in search of solitude; about fifty children pursued, calling "Nasrani" in a monotonous but insulting way, till the climb took their breath (Stark 40).

Here the car acts both as the site of engagement and as a barrier against it. The people are drawn to the extraordinary sight of the motor car and its white female passenger but the enclosure and mobility of this vehicle ensured that any social engagement was excluded. For Stark the enclosure of the car signified safety, security and the familiar. In her description of the encounter, there is a sense of anxiety and even fear. Stark chooses the comfort and safety of the car in order to avoid confronting the 'otherness' of the people of Makalla. This strategy is only deployed by Stark in the context of her tour of Makalla and does not appear elsewhere in the text.

### 2.5.2. Patronization

Stark's Bedouin travelling companions are presented as the only people tough enough to survive the hardships of the desert. While making references to the characteristics of hardiness, simplicity and antiquity of the Bedouin, Stark also mocks and patronizes them. In referring to the high plateau of the Jol, Stark represents the Bedouin as being not only hardy enough to survive its conditions, but also savage and simple enough not to live elsewhere:

Only the Bedouin, who have little to lose or fear, walk over it [the Jol] with an unburdened spirit, naked and careless, butterflies under the arch of Titus, and know its scanty pastures, and love its inhuman freedom (Stark 88).

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Even though there is a passionate interest in the Bedouin way of life, a marvelling in their resourcefulness and loyalty, Stark's empathy with the Bedouin is presented somehow in a condescending fashion.

The Bedouin's simplistic and savage ways remain a source of wonder and amusement throughout the crossing of the desert. This manifests itself in detailed and patronizing accounts of her travelling companions. For example, her description of her Bedouin guide breaking into song whilst crossing the high plateaus of the Jol:

The Bedouin and the soldier behind me were joining in a war song. They trotted lightly with grasped weapons, two of them sang half a line and the other two completed it with a fierce guttural ending; they repeated this over and over again, answering each other, running all the while; I began to count, after a time, and there were 130 repetitions between them before they stopped with a yell (Stark 93).

The representation of the Bedouin as simple and childlike is apparent in *The Southern Gates of Arabia*. The representation of Sa'id depicts him standing on a narrow rocky track, dressed in a loin cloth which holds his dagger. His hands hang at his side. His open-mouthed expression is suggestive of a simple, unintelligible nature.

### 2.5.3. Engagement

Despite representing the Bedouin as a sturdy, yet child-like people, Stark's travels with them across the desert demonstrate a shift from the way she engages with the town's people of Makalla. Stark travels on a donkey and eats the food her Bedouin guides hunt and prepare for her, and sleeps around the camp fire with them though, it should be noted, at a respectful distance, minding the privacy of each other.

The isolation and exclusion established in the representation of touring Makalla by car gives way in the crossing of the Jol to a much closer, more

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intimate level of engagement between Stark and her Bedouin travelling companions. However, this is not presented as a desire to assimilate into the Bedouin way of life. Instead, there is a stress in making a differentiation between the two. On one occasion, around the evening camp fire, one of the Bedouin travelling with Stark tells of how he had travelled with Westerners before and found their desire to eat and sleep apart arrogant and distasteful. Stark notes:

I did what I could to soften these wounds, and felt, as I have often felt before, that to sit over the fire with one's fellows in the evening, when the work is over and the talking begins, is the only sure way of keeping harmony and friendship. I never had any difficulties with my bedouin and found nothing but friendliness and an anxiety to serve in every way (Stark 75).

Stark's account of her Bedouin travelling companions consistently refers to them as: 'my Bedouin', which suggests a traditional colonial relationship between paid guides and the adventurer/administrator, in contradiction with the traditional orientalist practice of integrating and assimilating with the Bedouins' ways of life. However, her reference to "harmony and friendship" intimates a further relationship.

### 2.5.4. Integration

The chapters 'Life in Doan' and 'Sickness in the Fortress of Masna'a' of *The Southern Gates of Arabia* indicate a shift towards a more inclusive and integrative relationship between Stark and the people with whom she travels. Stark's more integrative relations with people she encounters are more clearly illustrated through the text. Stark includes an account of her stay with the Governor of Masna'a and his brother. In contrast to the earlier chapters, such as 'Life in the City', where Stark's representation of the people of Makalla indicates a degree of detachment, this chapter presents Stark as being a welcomed and accepted guest of the Governor's household:

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We came to the Governor's castle of Masna'a, built high and square of mud on the Wadi side, and with roofs and terraces crowded to see us. A welcoming shot was fired...where the Governor and his brother, Muhammad and Ahmad Ba Surra, stood to welcome me...I was to spend twelve days with the Ba Surra, and got to know them well, and it would be hard to find a more charming family anywhere (Stark 114).

Here, Stark's account of staying with the Ba Surra family appears to cross over the earlier defined cultural divides. The grandeur of Stark's welcome by the Ba Surra family is similar to the concept of medieval nobility which some oriental travel writing, such as Lawrence and Bell, projected on the Arabs

### 2.5.5. Eroticization

There is, however, another representational strategy in play in Stark's portrayal of the Bedouins, and that is their eroticization. Stark's obsession in describing the physique of the Arab male is evident in numerous passages and chapters. This suggests that the Arab's vigour and virility exerted a force of attractiveness for Freya Stark, and that in itself is something unusual to say the least, given the fact that the majority of previous travellers have not shown an erotic interest in the locals, on the contrary, many of them were repulsed by the physical appearance of the Bedouins but that does not seem to be the case with Freya Stark: "They are fine-looking men, as muscular as snakes" (Stark 50). Yet, the biased Orientalist image suggested by snakes seems to undermine the appreciative attraction expressed through reference to their fineness and muscles.

## **2.6. Conclusion**

The Orient has always fascinated the Europeans, stimulated their curiosity and raised their appetite for exploration and writing. It had been considered mysterious, mystic and magnificent, a land that needs to be discovered, unveiled and defined through an imperial eye. The representation of the Orient by Freya Stark in her travel book is based on the binary opposition of “us versus them”, resulting in a supremacist and Eurocentric dichotomy of self-glorification and the belittling of the other, paving the way for more imperial expansion.

## General Conclusion

Travel accounts about the Orient became very popular in the late nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. Many European travellers and writers went to this geographical space in order to see the degree to which that location was different from their own culture and civilization. They made the cultural otherness of the Orient a target of their investigations. They left Europe looking for a new haven and horizon. But unfortunately their travel narratives had a major contribution in paving the way for imperial expansion through describing non-western territories and assuming the cultural boundaries between the “civilized” westerner and the “uncivilized” oriental.

As academic interest in travel writing increased, its interdisciplinary potential was opened up to diverse possibilities of enquiry and criticism. Themes of representation in travel writing were characterized by geographical location and shaped by socio-political circumstances.

This study brought into focus Freya Stark’s account of her 1934–1935 journey into what is now modern Yemen, and identified her views on the Bedouin way of life. In the light of all of the above, this research paper concludes that Freya Stark’s views on Arabia did not demonize and dehumanize the native as many texts did before her, but at the same time her accounts cannot be described to be entirely and completely positive and authentic since there are shades of paternalistic tone here and there, as well as a number of exaggerations. The topographical space tended to be idealized whereas the human component has been constantly patronized.

*The Southern Gates of Arabia* is rich and loaded with a substantial amount of images. It is the ideal text to apply an imagological study. Freya Stark was immersed in a culture so different and so strange to her, that there was always something to report on to the readers, everything was a potential imagological

material; the weather, the climate, the people, their traditions and customs, their food and cloths, how they walk, how they talk, and even animals and plants. All of these images constitute a larger portrait, a mosaic of Arabia.

Freya Stark's approach in describing the images of Arabia and the Arabs was neither constant nor monolithic. In fact, multiple descriptive approaches were utilized by Stark in different chapters. This research paper identifies at least five of them; detachment, patronization, engagement, integration and eroticization.

In the first chapters of travelogue, Stark is somehow detached from her surroundings. She does indeed provide some insightful images but she did so from afar, from a safe distance. In those early chapters, she rarely mingled or conversed with the locals.

After a period of adjustment and adaptation with the new environment, Freya Stark started to interact with the natives, but at the same time she did not get off her high horse so to speak. The locals were looked down upon in a patronizing manner as a backward people.

The third approach used by Freya Stark to portray Arabia was characterized by a significant effort to engage and connect with the inhabitants by sharing their food and spending the night with them.

The next descriptive approach was even more engaging to the point that Stark's status among the native can be considered as a successful integration, she adhered to the bedouin way of life to the fullest extent.

The last descriptive approach is the eroticization of the Bedouins. The focus on the physicality of the male Bedouin form suggests a degree of eroticization. Many signifiers dwell upon the physical beauty of the subject and share an erotic fascination.



One cannot dismiss Stark's deep admiration of the Arabic culture and the Arabs as a people but her travel account presented Arabia as a negative other, an antipode of civilized Europe thus promoting Western influence and imperialism.

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