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Narrating the Republic: Al-Saffar's *Rihla*, Early Colonial Encounters and Shifting Power Structures in the Nineteenth-Century Mediterranean

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Abstract: This article examines *Rihlat al-Saffar ila Faranca* (1845–1846), the travel account of a nineteenth-century Moroccan envoy Muhammad al-Saffar, as a foundational text within the historically marginalized body of non-European travel literature. The article argues that al-Saffar's narrative reverses the gaze through which Europe appears as a space subjected to observation, comparison, and evaluation from a non-European perspective. Conceptually, the article examines the recurrent politics of reception that I term the “subaltern dilemma,” whereby North African travel texts are denied epistemic agency, frequently read as information hauntings within travel literature studies. The article also interrogates the discursive dynamics that shaped Morocco's relations with European powers. Situating the *rihla* within a broader framework of travel literature studies and postcolonial theory, this article challenges the longstanding academic bias that privileges Orientalist narratives, while offering scant consideration—if any—to Occidentalist texts. In doing so, the study underscores

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the intellectual and political significance of Moroccan travel writing as a critical site of negotiation—balancing between strong admiration for European progress and modernity, and the constraints imposed by socio-political and religious structures in Morocco. Offering a close reading of his engagements with European progress in science, technology, military affairs, education, governance, and gendered public life, the article demonstrates how al-Saffar's *rihla* maps the geopolitical asymmetries of the nineteenth-century Mediterranean and articulates a reformist-pedagogical mode of travel literature addressed to Moroccan readership. Ultimately, this paper reconsiders North African textual interactivity with Europe through positioning Moroccan travel narratives as essential contributions to the nineteenth-century *rihla* literature.

Keywords: Moroccan *rihla* literature; France; Muhammad al-Saffar; nineteenth century Mediterranean; subaltern studies; Occidentalism

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Introduction

Evidently, the concept Occidentalism offers a prolific framework for approaching non-European representations of Europe; yet, an exclusive dependence on binary oppositions may risk re-generating the very epistemological structures it seeks to dismantle. Occidentalism, particularly as it relates to Arab–Islamic perceptions of the West, has triggered a variety of interpretations. One of the most controversial interpretations circulates in Western academia where it argues that Muslims exhibited little intellectual interest in the world of Christendom. This discursive presumption has played a major role in the enduring belief that early modern travel, exploration, and

knowledge production are exclusively Euro-Christian. In his introduction to *In the Land of the Christian*, Matar (2003) challenges this historiographical interpretation, noting that “Western historians, cultural analysts, and literary critics have viewed the record of early modern travel and exploration as exclusively Euro-Christian” (p. 1). For Matar, this exclusivity is not the result of an empirical absence, but of a deliberate scholarly neglect, sustained through the marginalization of a rich tradition of Islamic travel and intellectual exchange. Similarly, in *Journeys to the Other Shore: Muslim and Western Travelers in Search of Knowledge*, Euben (2006) stresses that “the connection between travel and knowledge is not confined to any particular culture or epoch” (p. 34). Euben demonstrates that travel has long functioned as a key epistemological practice within the Arab and Muslim world.

Central to contemporary travel-literature studies is Chakrabarty’s influential call to “provincialize Europe.” In his influential essay, “Provincializing Europe: Postcoloniality and the Critique of History”, Chakrabarty (1992) directs a powerful critique towards the Eurocentric framework that governs academic historiography. He argues that within the academic discourse of history, “Europe remains the sovereign, theoretical subject of all histories, including the ones we call ‘Indian’, ‘Chinese’, ‘Kenyan’, etc” (p. 337). He critiques how Western epistemic hegemony in historiography sustains Eurocentric frameworks that universalize Europe. Furthermore, in *Provincializing Europe*, Chakrabarty (2000) extends this argument by calling for decentering Europe from the universal narrative of world history, insisting that European history can no longer be treated as synonymous with “universal human history” (p. 1). At the core of Chakrabarty’s scholarly project is his provocative question, “Why cannot we, once again, return the Gaze?” (2000, p. 1). This question carries tremendous significance for travel writing studies, a field in which Europe has discursively framed itself as being the ‘observer’ rather than the ‘observed’. Hence, returning the gaze helps reclaiming epistemic agency through narrating, theorizing, and evaluating Europe from those historically marginalized peripheries. Furthermore, Wendy Bracewell’s concept of the traveller’s eye is particularly insightful for reading Muhammad al-Saffar’s *rihla*. Although the term “traveller”—borrowed from Mary

Louise Pratt—may appear to imply a rigid self/other binary, Bracewell’s approach explicitly moves beyond such oppositional binaries (Bracewell, 2015). She urges scholars to recognize that those historically positioned as objects of the traveler are also capable of observing and interpreting the worlds they encounter. Al-Saffar’s *rihla* demonstrates this dynamic in which Europe appears neither as an unquestioned model of progress nor as an exotic ‘Other’, but as a fertile space open to observation and analytical evaluation from a non-European periphery.

Within such a broader Eurocentric framework, North African travelers in general, and Moroccan ones in particular, have been relegated to a subaltern position—not in the Marxist sense of economic subjugation, but rather in terms of their exclusion from dominant scholarly narratives. In Guha’s (1988) terms, the concept subaltern stands as “a name for the general attribute of subordination ... whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way” (p. 35). Drawing on this framework, which encompasses all forms of subordination, Moroccan travelers can be viewed as subaltern figures due to their exclusion from modern scholarship, despite their analytical depth and historical significance. On the other hand, Spivak’s seminal essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” provides a further extension in this regard. Spivak argues that the subaltern’s voicelessness is not an intellectual incapacity but rather an imposed silencing by dominant discourses. The oppressed, Spivak (1988) notes, “can speak and know their conditions,” yet their voices are deemed inaudible within Eurocentric regimes of representation that regulate the terms of recognition and legitimacy (p. 283). Spivak’s argument extends beyond the literal inability to speak and instead interrogates power structures that determine audibility, visibility, and hence academic recognition. Drawing on this theoretical background, Muhammad al-Saffar can be considered a subaltern figure whose narrative has been subordinated to European travel accounts. Moroccan ambassadorial *rihla* to Europe disrupts this hierarchy by reversing the direction of observation towards the ‘center.’ This article treats Muhammad al-Saffar’s *Rihlat al-Saffar ila Faransa* (1845–1846) as a critical travel narrative situated at the intersection of defeat, diplomacy, colonial pressure, and intellectual inquiry. So, rather than reading the *rihla* as a passive account of European superiority or as a simple response to Orientalist discourse, this study positions it as an active site of knowledge transmission within the nineteenth-century travel writing. By

foregrounding al-Saffar's diplomatic mission to France, the article also interrogates the nineteenth-century power structures between North Africa and Europe at a moment of profound geopolitical transformation that continue to shape the Mediterranean world.

Context Matters: Colonial Beginnings

The nineteenth century can be best described in terms of revolution and rapid technological and industrial change, along with persistent structures of oppression and resistance. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, North Africa was so vulnerable to European power and expansion. The region's political and military weaknesses rendered it incapable of resisting the colonial ambitions of European powers. The French conquest of Algeria in 1830 was a pivotal event, reshaping both North African geopolitics and the discursive relationships between Europe and the region. The fall of a neighboring country meant a direct threat to the Moroccan sovereignty, intensifying anxieties over European encroachment.

In a religious-political response to the growing imperial threats, Sultan Moulay Slimane (1792–1822) adopted an isolationist policy towards Europe, reversing the policy of his predecessor, Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdallah (1757–1790). He prevented Moroccans from trading with the West (Manouni, 1973). Additionally, he dismantled Morocco's corsairing operations in the Mediterranean, donating his fleet to Algeria and Tripoli in 1817 and giving the last two Moroccan warships to the Dey of Algiers in 1820. His retreat from piracy was not voluntary, but it was largely imposed by European pressures, particularly following the Aix-la-Chapelle Conference in 1818, when European powers imposed the complete cessation of North African piracy (Manouni, 1973). Furthermore, Moulay Slimane's policy towards the West was not only political, but also religious. Being a Wahhabi, he and *ulama* believed that trading with Christians is forbidden by the *shari'a* (Miller, 2013).

Successively, Sultan Moulay Abderrahman (1822–1859), Slimane's successor, sought to resume trade with Europe. His reign witnessed the signing of commercial treaties with Portugal in 1823, Britain in 1824, France and Sardinia in 1825, reflecting a pragmatic approach to Morocco's economic survival (Pennell, 2000). However, Abderrahman defied European maritime restrictions imposed at Aix-la-Chapelle Conference through reviving the Moroccan corsairing fleet in 1827. Crossing the

Moroccan waters illegally, the Moroccan fleet captured some Austrian ships. In retaliation, Austria launched a naval attack on the port of Larache in 1829, burning Moroccan ships and re-affirming the beginning of European hegemony over North African waters. According to the Moroccan historian Ahmad ibn Khalid al-Nasiri, the Austrian attack was among the reasons behind the retreat of the Sultan about piracy on the sea (al-Nasiri, as cited in Manouni, 1973). This event exposes the dual forces of European pressure and military aggression which accelerated the decline of Morocco's naval power, formerly recognized as a dominant power in global waters.

The French conquest of Algeria in 1830 was among the most significant geopolitical events of the nineteenth century, altering the Moroccan-European relationship. Being deeply connected to their neighbors by territorial, political and particularly religious ties, Morocco found itself directly involved in the Algerian cause. Immediately after the fall of Algeria in 1830, Sultan Moulay Abderrahman expressed strong opposition and anger to the French colonial expansion, as evidenced in a letter to the governor of Tetouan. In the letter, Sultan Abderrahman emphasized Morocco's moral and religious duty to support Algerian refugees:

We have received your letter informing us of the arrival [at Tetouan] of two ships carrying the people of Algiers, might God return it to *Dar Islam*, and what they said about the other inhabitants and those of Oran as well about what the Infidel enemy actually did may God thwart his hope. [Know] that you should welcome warmly everyone seeking refuge, assist them, show them hospitality and moral support. Helping their broken heart to recover is an imperative duty, driven out by the enemy who took their country and their properties. (Abderrahman, as cited in Kenbib, 2016, p. 36)

Besides, while some Algerians sought refuge in Morocco, others remained to resist the French colonial forces, in which a sort of *jihad* was disseminated all over the country. Going beyond the humanitarian aid, Morocco went further to provide armed support to the Algerian freedom fighters, particularly to Emir Abd al-Qadir, a key leader of anti-colonial struggles in Algeria. However, the Moroccan involvement stimulated diplomatic warnings from France and Britain. A French delegation was sent to Meknes

to dissuade the sultan from any further engagement in the Algerian cause (Kenbib, 2016). The Sultan's continued involvement was largely driven by pressure from the *ulama*, merchants, and the broader population of Fez, who identified themselves as part of *umma*. While merchants maintained economic and political ties with Algeria, *ulama* played a crucial role in shaping public opinion and legitimizing military engagement through religious discourse, thereby reinforcing Morocco's involvement in the conflict (Laroui, 1977). Additionally, Britain, which sought stability in the Mediterranean for its own strategic interests, urged the sultan to act wisely. The British Minister in Tangier, acting on behalf of Lord Aberdeen, advised Sultan Abderrahman: "[It] appears to Her Majesty's Government, that the Emperor would act wisely if he were to endeavour as much as possible to restrain from taking part in the contest between 'Abd al-Qadir and the French'" (Aberdeen, 1842, as cited in Kenbib, 2016, p. 39). Despite such pressures, backing the Algerian resistance continued, resulting in French military retaliation. Consequently, Thomas Bugeaud, a French General, halted to respect the inviolability of the Moroccan borderlands. These hostilities culminated in the Battle of Isly (1844), where a well-equipped French army decisively defeated a badly trained Moroccan army. One of the major reasons behind such a humiliating defeat, Miller (2013) believes, is its ignorance of modern methods of combat, in which it employed ancestral warfare techniques. Al-Nasiri described the battle as "a huge calamity and a great misfortune, the like of which the Moroccan state had never previously experienced" (Al-Nasiri, as cited in Miller, 2013, pp. 18–19).

Circumstances worsened after the Moroccan defeat. This defeat drew a humiliating end to the Moroccan military reputation that was veiled by a victorious history. Following Morocco's defeat, France imposed two controversial treaties. The Moroccan Sultan was forced to sign the treaty of Tangier (September 10, 1844) and the treaty of Lalla Marnia (March 18, 1845). While, the first treaty imposed on the sultan to expel Amir Abd al-Qadir and cease all military support for the Algerian resistance, the second treaty deliberately left the Algerian-Moroccan borders vaguely defined for claiming more Moroccan territorial lands (Kenbib, 2016). The latter resulted in the border dispute between Morocco and Algeria after independence, culminating in the Sand War 1963.

Meanwhile, Morocco's independence was preserved not by its military strength,

but by the British intervention. Abdallah Laroui notes that “sultan’s independence and the integrity of his territory were safeguarded not by the Moroccan army, which was disorganized and poorly equipped, but by the protection of the English” (Laroui, 1977, p. 317). Thus, European rivalries, mainly between Britain, France and Spain, benefited Morocco in sustaining its sovereignty until the early twentieth century.

The nineteenth century marks a growing rivalry among European powers. Throughout this century, Britain played a vital role in Moroccan affairs, leveraging its influence through diplomacy and trade rather than military power. Britain sought to keep France and Spain away from establishing a foothold in Morocco, given its strategic significance through which it could take the shortest route to India, supply its garrison at Gibraltar and for its global trading policy. Britain forced Morocco to take economic reforms, in which a Treaty of Friendship, Navigation, and Commerce was signed in 1856. This agreement, brokered by British diplomat John Drummond Hay, dismantled Morocco’s trade monopolies, opening its markets to European competition and benefiting Britain in particular (Miller, 2013).

Further, tensions between Morocco and Spain escalated, especially when the governor of Ceuta decided to expand his territory at the expense of the Moroccan lands (Sghir, 1997). As a result, Moroccan Anjra Tribesmen attacked a Spanish garrison, leading to the Battle of Tetouan in 1860. Reinforcing their feebleness for the second time in the same century to confront a modern power, the poorly equipped Moroccan troops that were camped near Ceuta tasted a bitter defeat and pushed back towards Tetouan. Al-Nasiri characterized the battle as a turning point in Moroccan-European relations. He states: “The Tetouan war removed the mantle of respect (*hijab al-hayba*) from Morocco, allowing the Christians to run roughshod over it, and the Muslims were broken as never before” (Cited in Miller, 2013, pp. 25–26). Once again, Britain interfered and saved Morocco from the consequences of the defeat. Britain intervened diplomatically, mediating a peace settlement. However, Morocco was forced to pay Spain a huge indemnity—a sum greater than what the Moroccan treasury could afford. Yet, Britain secured a loan for Morocco (Miller, 2013), marking the beginning of its enduring economic dependence on the West—a dependency that continues today as reflected in the significant loans Morocco has obtained from the World, IMF, and other international financial institutions.

Shortly, the nineteenth century Moroccan relationships with Europe took two major shapes. Austrian (1829), France (1844) and Spain (1860) opted for the use of power through armed confrontations whereas Britain employed diplomatic agendas. These dynamics foreshadowed the increasing entanglement of European powers in Moroccan affairs, resulting in Morocco's eventual colonization in the twentieth century.

Reflections on the Moroccan Ambassadorial *Rihla* to Europe

Travel literature has long served as a privileged site for the production and circulation of knowledge, particularly within contexts of war, captivity, diplomacy, trade, imperial expansion, and mobility. As a genre, it does not merely record geographical movement but it actively negotiates relations between Self and Other, here and there, center and periphery, observer and observed. As a matter of fact, travel writing has always been an epistemological instrument through which power relations are articulated, negotiated, and sometimes contested, rather than neutral records of cultural encounter.

Travel accounts written by Moroccan travelers, merchants and ambassadors provide much accurate historical data; yet, this extensive literature about Moroccan mobility and cultural interaction has not yet received due attention in modern scholarship. Starting particularly from the last quarters of the sixteenth century, Morocco has developed a diplomatic tradition of dispatching ambassadors, envoys and representatives to European countries, such as Malta, Spain, France, and England. Those travelers-cum-envoys journeyed to European countries at different periods of time to primarily negotiate "commercial and peace treaties, ransom captives, seek restitution or demand compensation for losses incurred at sea" (Aammari, 2018, p. 1). Initially, Moroccan diplomatic travel to Europe was motivated by both humanitarian and cultural motives, mainly the release of Muslim captives and the retrieval of Islamic manuscripts lost following the decline of Al-Andalus. For instance, on his visit to Spain, the ambassador al-Wazir al-Ghassani in 1690-1691 was tasked by Sultan Moulay Ismail with the mission of releasing Muslim captives and bringing back Moroccan manuscripts that had survived. Upon his travel, al-Ghassani (1690-1691) wrote a travel account entitled *Rihlat al-Wazir fi iftikak al-asir 1690-1691 (The travel of al-Wazir for the redemption of the captive)*. Equally interesting, the Moroccan Sultan Sidi Muhammad bin Abdallah sent an ambassadorial delegation to Spain to ransom

Ottoman-Algerian captives in 1779. The delegation was led by Muḥammad bin ‘Uthman al Miknāsī (1779), who left an accurate account of this mission entitled *Al-Iksīr fī fikāk al-asīr* (*The Elixir That Will Liberate the Prisoner*).

While early Moroccan diplomatic travel was predominantly humanitarian and cultural, the nature and motivations of Moroccan travel to Europe evolved over time, particularly in the nineteenth century, as power dynamics dramatically shifted in favour of Europe. Mubarak (1989) sees that, following Morocco’s humiliating defeat by Spain in 1860, Moroccan rulers had started recognizing the noticeable danger of European colonial powers. This realization forced Morocco to reverse Moulay Soulaymane’s isolationist policy and adopt an outward and more open policy through sending many embassies to European powers, mainly France, England and Spain, for the sake of consolidating the Moroccan-European relationships (Mubarak, 1989).

Moroccan envoys not only traveled to Europe, but they also documented their journeys with remarkable precision and intellectual depth. In this respect, the Moroccan scholar Mohamed el-Fassi emphasizes that Moroccans excelled in travel literature, producing some of the most detailed accounts on Europe (El-Fassi, 1967). Unlike Orientalist travel writers, who often projected fantasized representations of the East, Moroccan envoys approached Europe with empirical curiosity and most objective analysis. Matar argues that Muslims “travelled with an open mind and a clean state” (Matar, 2003, p. xxxii). For him, Arab-Muslim writers recorded and described just what they saw carefully, avoiding unfounded fantasies.

Similarly, Bernard Lewis acknowledges the superior quality of Moroccan travel accounts compared to Ottoman travel narratives of the same period. He notes that Moroccan envoys demonstrated an acute awareness of European political, religious, military, and commercial affairs. Their narratives, Lewis adds, extended beyond surface-level descriptions, often incorporating historical context and comparative analysis of European institutions. Reading Moroccan travel narratives, such as al-Ghassani’s narrative, Lewis observes:

Moroccan envoys show an interest in European affairs extending beyond the surface movements of personalities and events. They seek and obtain often good information about political and religious as well as commercial and military affairs,

not only in the countries to which they are sent but in other European countries too; not only of immediate and current events, but sometimes extending back into the history of the previous century. (2001, p. 118)

The intellectual depth of Moroccan travel narratives can only be attributed to the mindful selection of ambassadors by *al-Makhzen* regime. Envoys were chosen not merely for their diplomatic skills but also for their intellectual insight. Being well-versed in history, politics, religion, and culture, these individuals succeeded in engaging meaningfully with their European counterparts and documenting their experiences with scholarly precision (Aammari, 2018). Yet, can their close study and interest in European institutions be arbitrary and with no vision?

One of the most striking aspects of Moroccan travel literature is the detailed attention given to European education, military and political institutions. El-Fassi (1967) noticed that since the seventeenth century, Moroccan travelers have placed significant emphasis on European military structures, highlighting the significance of the military in securing national security. In actuality, these travel accounts played a crucial role in shaping the Moroccan political thought at the time, particularly in influencing the reformist movements initiated by Sidi Muhammad bin Abderrahman and continued by Moulay Hassan I. A tangible outcome of such diplomatic observations was Moulay Hassan I's initiative to reform Moroccan institutions through sending fifteen Moroccan students to study in Europe in 1876 (Bekkaoui, 2016)—31 years after al-Saffar highlighted the Egyptian students sent by Muhammad 'Ali to France to "acquire scientific and technical knowledge" (al-Saffar, as cited in Miller, 1992, pp. 179–180). However, despite these early efforts, the Moroccan reformist agenda ultimately had been doomed to failure, due to the growing imperial ambitions of European powers.

The intellectual engagement of Moroccan travelers with European progress in science, technology, military affairs, education, and governance opens up a fertile ground for scholarly inquiry. Their detailed accounts on European progress were not merely records of observation but rather an implicit call for a political reform. Moroccan envoys sought to transmit knowledge back home, stressing the urgency of modernization in response to European imperial threats and aggression experienced in the nineteenth century. Thus, Moroccan ambassadorial travel texts should not be

understood only as historical archives but as intellectual and political texts that submissively interacted with colonial modernity and influenced Moroccan reformist movements. Recognizing such texts as part of Moroccan intellectual history allows for a deep understanding of cross-cultural interactions between Morocco and Europe in the pre-colonial era.

The Nineteenth-Century Moroccan Travel to Europe: Al-Saffar's *Rihla* to France

After the humiliating defeat at the Battle of Isly on August 14, 1844, coupled with intensifying French pressure, the Moroccan Sultan dispatched an embassy to France in an effort to defuse the heating border tensions. The Moroccan delegation, led by Abd al-Qadir 'Ash'ash, departed for France on December 13, 1845. Among its members was Muhammad al-Saffar, who participated in the mission both as an *alim* (scholar), responsible for addressing religious matters, and as a scribe, documenting the diplomatic proceedings (Miller, 1992). However, while Morocco viewed this mission as a means of negotiating territorial disputes, the embassy served a far more strategic and colonial purpose for France.

It is essential to know that the dispatch of this embassy was primarily a response to the mounting French colonial pressure during the negotiations of the Treaty of Lalla Maghnia. France had vested political and colonial interests in the success of this delegation, seeing it as an opportunity to extend its influence over Morocco. Rather than merely seeking a diplomatic resolution to the border conflict, France aimed to fuel its control over the Mediterranean region through diplomacy after war. This was particularly evident in a letter written by Léon Roches, the French Secretary, to Moroccan First Minister Muhammad Ibn Idriss, in which he states: "[T]he Emperor of Morocco must give our King a powerful weapon to withstand the opinion of his subjects. That weapon is the ambassador" (Roches, as cited in Miller, 1992, p. 10). For France, this embassy was not only a diplomatic tool but also a means of quietening its public opinion. By showcasing Morocco's participation in diplomatic negotiations, the French government endeavored to deceive the people by projecting an image of imperial success overseas while simultaneously taming a key country in North Africa.

The French colonial ambition in the Moroccan embassy is further reflected in the extensive study of its members. Upon learning that Abd al-Qadir 'Ash'ash had been

selected as the Sultan's emissary, Roches immediately compiled a detailed report on his social status and sent it to the French Foreign Minister François Guizot. In this report, Roches describes Ash'ash as follows:

His ancestors were among the Moors chased out of Spain in the Fifteenth century who settled where the city of Tetuan is now; that is to say, they were its founders. Since that time, the position of Pasha [governor] has fallen to the eldest of the family. This hereditary *pashalik* [governorship] ... is without parallel in Morocco. Ash 'ash is thus among the men of good breeding and distinction. Barely thirty-five years old, he is learned and has much worldly experience. He possesses all the confidence and friendship of the Emperor, has a considerable fortune, and has been to Mecca ... It would be quite impossible to find in Morocco a man more suitable than he. (Roches, as cited in Miller, 1992, p. 13)

This meticulously detailed report shows the French colonial interest in this Moroccan delegation. The French attempted to influence the Moroccan political leadership, ensuring that the negotiations would proceed in ways that is subservient to their colonial ambitions. Furthermore, when the moment of departure approached, France's colonial ambitions became increasingly transparent. Roches, in another statement, openly admitted France's long-term strategic goal: "A revolution is taking place at the court. This revolution is entirely in our favor, and we are at the point of establishing the influence of France over that of all other nations, if we know how to profit from it" (Roches, as cited in Miller, 1992, p. 17). This statement is a direct confession of the French imperial interests in Morocco, revealing that, as early as the first half of the nineteenth century, the French colonial ambitions were not limited to Algeria but were already extending towards Morocco.

Re-thinking Orientalist Assumptions on al-Saffar's *Rihla* to Europe

Wendy Bracewell opens her well-grounded essay "The Travellee's Eye: Reading European Travel Writing 1750–1850" with a very interesting question: "How did Europeans read and respond to foreign travel writing about their societies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries?" (Bracewell, 2015, p. 215). By highlighting the

politics of reception, her question not only opens space for considering non-European modes of observation, but also problematize the assumption that travel writing is the exclusive preserve of European travelers. In this regard, readings of Muhammad as-Saffar's travel text have produced a range of interpretations that reflect a Eurocentric approach towards North African travel narratives within modern academia. A significant aspect of such reading revolves around the motives that pushed al-Saffar to document his journey to France. Despite the absence of any conclusive archival evidence, a considerable body of scholarship has tended to assume that al-Saffar, among other Moroccan travelers, wrote primarily in response to the Sultan's desire to understand the causes of Morocco's military defeat and the sources of European technological and political superiority.

Within travel-writing studies, however, the reception of North African travel narratives reflects a broader critical problem which can be termed the '*Subaltern Dilemma*'. Subaltern denotes the fact that non-European travel narratives do not resonate in modern academia for lacking power structures, while dilemma refers to the contradictory politics of reception and reading that frame such texts through Eurocentric-metropolitan lenses as merely informational or mimetic. Caught within this dilemma, al-Saffar is repeatedly positioned as a mere informant rather than as an intellectual figure capable of observation, interpretation, and critique.

In *Disorienting Encounters: Travels of a Moroccan Scholar in France in 1845-1846*, Miller (1992) argues that al-Saffar's journey was "part of a broader effort to correct the imbalance between Morocco and Europe and to analyse the sources of European strength" (p. 4). Indeed, Miller provides little attention to the fact that the embassy of Abd al-Qadir 'Ash'ash was not initiated by Morocco but strongly proposed by France. This embassy was first suggested by the French during the negotiations of the Treaty of Lalla Maghniya and the Moroccan Sultan initially resisted sending any delegation. Only under French pressure Morocco finally agreed (Miller, 1992, pp. 9–13). Despite this context, Miller considers that al-Saffar's travel narrative was written in the light of the Sultan's request, implying that the primary motive behind his writing was to investigate the sources of French power.

A close reading of al-Saffar's own words disproves such arguments that his narrative was written solely to fulfill a royal request. At the very beginning of his text,

following the traditional praise of Allah, the Prophet, and the Sultan, al-Saffar articulates his motives for documenting his journey: He writes:

It is wise for those who go far from home to record everything they see and hear, since they may find some knowledge and value in it. [...] Therefore, I decided with the help of God to blacken these pages with what I saw and heard during this voyage, be it clear or obscure. [...] You should not judge me too harshly, for I am doing it as a reminder to myself, and to inform others who may ask me from my fellow countrymen. (al-Saffar, as cited in Miller, 1992, pp. 77–78)

This passage explicitly reveals al-Saffar's primary motive which is to document his experiences for both personal purposes and to satisfy the curiosity of his fellow Moroccans, particularly those who were unable to travel to Europe at the time. So, rather than composing an official report for the Sultan, al-Saffar positions his work as a cultural and intellectual record, meant for a broader readership that included his friends and compatriots.

Yet, while al-Saffar's explicit motive was to share his experiences with his social circle, his writing also reflects an underlying reformist agenda. His emphasis on the significance of documenting overseas knowledge suggests a deep awareness of the practical value of travel. In other words, al-Saffar offers an implicit advice to his readers in his prologue. He stresses that travelers should carefully document what they observe and experience, as such records may yield valuable knowledge and insight. His emphasis not only encourages Moroccan travelers to record their experiences but also suggests that the author's own observations can offer critical insights worthy of scholarly attention, thereby stimulating the reader's curiosity about his content. Moreover, al-Saffar mentions the Egyptian students sent by Muhammad 'Ali to France to "acquire scientific and technical knowledge found only there" (al-Saffar, as cited in Miller, 1992, pp. 179–180). By highlighting Muhammad 'Ali's educational reforms, is not al-Saffar ingeniously suggesting that *al-Makhzen* should adopt a similar approach—which is sending Moroccan students to Europe to acquire essential scientific, technological, and military expertise? Further, his assertion that such knowledge is 'only found in there' underscores his belief that European advancements were

unparalleled and Morocco needs to seriously take them into account.

Thus, rather than interpreting al-Saffar's *rihla* as a passive observation of European power, it should be understood as an active intellectual engagement with both European developments and Morocco's socio-political challenges and vulnerabilities. This perspective challenges Orientalist assumptions regarding Moroccan travel literature by highlighting its analytical depth and critical engagement with the socio-political realities of both Morocco and France in nineteenth century.

The Republic Observed: Al-Saffar's *Rihla* and Intellectual Engagement with Modernity

Coming from a traditional Moroccan society to nineteenth-century France, a nation undergoing rapid scientific and technological revolution, Muhammad al-Saffar found himself immersed in a vastly unfamiliar world. The modernity he encountered—manifested in technological innovations, social structures, and political institutions—was both astonishing and unsettling. His travel account captures the unfamiliarity and excitement of this experience, offering a meticulous record of French society, governance, economy, and military power.

Since the moment he arrived in France, al-Saffar encountered new and unfamiliar aspects of modern life, particularly in transportation and communication. In Marseille, he experienced railway travel for the first time, an innovation that left a profound impression on him. The speed of the train, something completely unknown to Moroccan society at the time, was particularly striking. He describes his journey as follows:

When we were about to depart, the chief (*ra'is*) started the engine, and it carried along whatever was joined to it at a speed we had never experienced, almost like a bird flying through the air. [...] When we looked at the sides of the road, we could not see what was there; it looked like an endless ribbon moving along with us, and we could not distinguish the rocks or anything. (as-Saffar, as cited in Miller, 1992, p. 115)

His description of speed conveys both amazement as well as the perception of Europe as a space undergoing rapid progress. The experience of speed—a defining feature of European modernity—was entirely new to al-Saffar.

Al-Saffar also reflected on new technologies and institutions, including the telegraph, the two chambers, printing press, newspapers, theatre, and public libraries. Recognizing their precious value, al-Saffar adopted a pedagogical tone, instructing these innovations to his Moroccan readers. In his epilogue, he explicitly stepped into the instructor's shoes: "An explanation of their revenues and means of taxation, and of their expenses, including an explanation of some of their rules and regulations" (al-Saffar, as cited in Miller, 1992, p. 213). Accordingly, he does his utmost to explain and elucidate these new aspects of modern life to his readers. His detailed description of French institutions suggests a conscious effort to educate Moroccan readers about the advancements that had propelled Europe forward.

Although much of his text is devoted to documenting the wonders of European modernity, al-Saffar's narrative is subtly shaped by the memory of defeat at the Battle of Isly (1844). This loss not only played a painful reminder of the French military superiority, but rather lingered in the background of his observations. When invited by King Louis-Philippe to attend a military parade, he provided a vivid account of French military discipline, training, and organization. Al-Saffar writes: "So it went until all had passed, leaving our hearts consumed with fire from what we had seen of their overwhelming power and mastery, their preparations and good training, their putting everything in its proper place" (al-Saffar, as cited in Miller, 1992, p. 193). His voice reveals a reluctant acknowledgment of French military power, emphasizing that *al-Makhzen*'s military inferiority emanated not from a lack of individual bravery, but from organization, discipline and technological backwardness.

Besides, one of the most remarkable aspects of al-Saffar's narrative is his detailed engagement with the role of women in the French society. Unlike Orientalist travelers to the East, who often exoticized and sexualized Muslim women, Moroccan travelers to Europe adopted a more objective and analytical approach. As Matar (2009) notes:

The *Magharibi* did not initially know what to make of such situations, but they wrote about the meetings in an accurate and careful manner, revealing an attitude

toward European women that was very different from the European attitude toward Muslim women. (p. 106)

Al-Saffar's description of French women is characterized by admiration, curiosity, and precision. Far beyond expressing his interest in French women, al-Saffar acknowledges their active participation in the public sphere, stating that "women are skilled in commerce just like the men, or even more so. The majority of people running the shops are women" (al-Saffar, as cited in Miller, 1992, p. 157). He shed light on the question of women's emancipation. Although he did not explicitly associate women's emancipation with development, his recognition of the French women's skills and competencies is striking—if not revolutionary—given the context of nineteenth-century Morocco where women were largely excluded from the public space. Being aware of the profound importance of such information, al-Saffar positioned himself as a thoughtful intellectual, engaging critically with the socio-political realities he observed in the French society at the time. This examination reflects a deliberate effort to engage with and critically assess the dynamics of gender roles and societal structures in the Moroccan context.

Nevertheless, the transition from a traditional society governed by customary law to a modern nineteenth-century society reflects not only a physical displacement—from a familiar environment to an unfamiliar one—but, more significantly, a profound ideological shift in the perspective of al-Saffar. In his travel accounts, al-Saffar exhibits a keen interest in the manifestations of modern life, particularly its social, cultural, and political structures. However, al-Saffar's awareness of his readership—primarily jurists and elites who wielded a huge influence over Moroccan socio-political structures—introduces a noticeable sense of 'anxiety' in his writings. This anxiety emerges from an underlying ideological dichotomy or a state of ambivalence, arising from the tension between two conflicting desires. On one hand, there is a liberal discourse advocating for renovation and reform, which dominates the majority of his travel narrative. The liberal discourse in al-Saffar's travel text is heavily focused on the progress evident in nineteenth-century France, particularly in its political, technological, economic, military, and social structures. This discourse serves to justify and meticulously explain the French advancements, presenting them as a model for a comprehensive reform

within the *al-Makhzen* regime. For instance, al-Saffar observes that the French:

[A]re not content with knowing things by tradition, but study the roots of a matter [before] drawing conclusions. Only then do they decide whether to accept or reject it. All of them know how to read and write, and they write down everything in books. [...] They have schools and libraries for the sciences of cooking, planting, building, farming, caring for plants, and producing livestock. Whatever they hear, see, invent, or learn from others they record in registers and keep forever. (al-Saffar, as cited in Miller, 1992, p. 157)

This extract from al-Saffar's travelogue mirrors a clear critique to the traditionalist approaches employed in Morocco, positioning the French rationalism and education as models to consider. This liberal discourse actively promotes scientific inquiry and education, emphasizing the importance of rational thought, empirical observation, and institutional progress as key factors in development and innovation. His deep engagement with European modernity echoes an intellectual labour to re-examine Morocco's socio-political structures, positioning knowledge acquisition and institutional development as the key pillars of growth and development. Equally significant to mention, al-Saffar acknowledged the French superiority over the Islamic world. He observes:

In comparison with the weakness of Islam, the dissipation of its strength, and the disrupted condition of its people, how confident they are, how impressive their state of readiness, how competent they are in matters of state, how firm their laws, how capable in war and successful in vanquishing their enemies—not because of their courage, bravery, or religious zeal, but because of their marvellous organization, their uncanny mastery over affairs, and their strict adherence to the law. [...] If you could see their conduct and their laws [at work], you would be profoundly impressed with them, despite their infidelity (*kufruhum*) and the extinction of the light of religion from their hearts. (al-Saffar, as cited in Miller, 1992, pp. 193–194)

In this passage, al-Saffar explicitly contrasts the perceived decline of the Islamic world with the strength of French modernity, attributing French success to their organisational efficiency, administrative expertise, and discipline rather than religious conviction. By highlighting these secular foundations, he implicitly detaches their achievements from religiosity, suggesting that progress is contingent upon effective governance and institutional organization rather than spiritual devotion.

On the other hand, there is a religious discourse that reflects his adherence to traditional values. While al-Saffar celebrates all these innovations; nevertheless, he also remains critical of what he perceives as France's religious ignorance. Towards the conclusion of his account, he could not but affirm his commitment to Islam, expressing concern over the spiritual emptiness of the French society. Seeking divine forgiveness for all he has witnessed, heard, and experienced, he closes his narrative with a Quranic verse, declaring that the French "know well what is apparent in the life of this world, but are completely ignorant about the hereafter" (al-Saffar, as cited in Miller, 1992, p. 220). This tension, as Matar (2009) explains, reflects a broader pattern among Muslim travelers of the time, who knew that unfiltered praise of European societies would not be easily tolerated by their rulers. As a result, al-Saffar, like his contemporaries, felt compelled to balance his admiration with critique. Thus, after presenting an account filled with detailed descriptions, explanations, and praise for French innovations, he concludes with a deliberate religious discourse.

This narrative shift epitomizes the ideological anxiety that underpins al-Saffar's text—a dialectical struggle arising from his simultaneous admiration for the modern aspects of the French society and his commitment to his cultural identity. Ultimately, his *rihla* incarnates this complex interplay, reflecting both his intellectual engagement with modernity and the constraints imposed by his socio-political and religious milieu.

Conclusion

This paper has analyzed Muhammad al-Saffar's nineteenth-century travel narrative, arguing that Moroccan portrayals of Europe warrant the same academic attention as Orientalist depictions of Morocco. By focusing on the nineteenth century—a period of significant scientific, technological, and political transformation in Europe—this research has highlighted the profound impact of this era on Moroccan-European

relations. It has further investigated the cultural and discursive dimensions of Moroccan encounters with Europe, particularly within the intersecting frameworks of warfare, colonialism, politics, diplomacy, and commerce.

Crucially, al-Saffar's *rihla* has re-directed the gaze toward the metropolitan milieu, rendering France an object of scrutiny, comparison, and interpretation—an epistemic practice too often eclipsed by Eurocentric modes of reading. By terming this reading pattern the 'subaltern dilemma,' the article demonstrates how non-European travel texts are frequently silenced within modern scholarship. Al-Saffar's *rihla* challenges this Eurocentric mode of reading. It documents modern institutions, technology and social life while implicitly suggesting reform through debating discipline, education, organization, gender roles and most significantly Islam. Situating the *rihla* within the post-Isly conflict reveals that the knowledge it disseminates is produced within the nineteenth century shifting power structures that continue to shape the Mediterranean world.

This study shows that travel writings are not merely descriptive records but critical interactions in the Moroccan intellectual, cultural and political thought. Ultimately, their works constitute valuable contributions to Moroccan-European intellectual history, providing unique insights into cross-cultural encounters, knowledge transmission, and the geo-political transformations of nineteenth-century Mediterranean. Thus, considering Moroccan travel writing not only enriches travel-literature studies but also broadens the archive of nineteenth-century Mediterranean thought and critique.

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Glossary

Alim (عالم): A learned Islamic scholar, especially one knowledgeable in Arabic language, religious law and theology.

Al-Makhzen (المخزن): Literally, *al-Makhzen* means a “storehouse”. Historically, it referred to the place where the Sultan’s goods, taxes, provisions, and administrative archives were kept. Over time, however, the concept evolved to signify the governing institution of Morocco, encompassing the monarchy, its administrative institutions, and the networks through which power circulate.

Jihad (جهاد): Refers to resistance, struggle, or striving in all forms. In Islam, the highest or most virtuous form of jihad is speaking a word of truth in the face of injustice or against a tyrant, emphasizing moral courage and ethical resistance above physical combat.

Rihla (رحلة): Journey

Shari’a (شريعة): Islamic jurisprudence.

Ulama (علماء): The body of Islamic scholars recognized as authorities in religious knowledge.

Umma (أمة): The global Muslim community or collective body of believers.

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