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## **The Paradox of the European Discourse about the Moors: A Reading of George Peele's *The Battle of Alcazar***

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### **Introduction**

For almost the last three decades, much ink has been spilt upon the issue of the presence of the Moorish villains in the European literary canon. In this regard, many post-colonial writers and critics have endeavored to delve into this canonical river so as to underscore the misrepresentation of the Moors in such texts. Their attempts have always been based on a discursive strategy. The laudable aim of this strategy has purportedly been to dismantle the European discourse on race. This discourse has indubitably been believed to be based on Eurocentrism.

To understand this Eurocentrism, many critics, such as Aimie Cesaire, Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Chinua Achebe, Bill Ashcroft, Ania Lomba, Rana Kabbani and Leela Ghandi among many others have brought many European literary texts into question. The framework they all seem to share has been meant to recover the non-European Self from the text. This framework has been marked by its operation from within the dominant literary discourse. The target of this discursive strategy has seemingly been not only to shake the racial conceptions or the orthodoxies upon which European history is usually told, but also to re-write this history.

Re-writing European history on the ground of literary canon has then been a fundamental post-colonial concern. In dealing with this literary canon, a legitimate question comes immediately to mind: To what extent can all the European canonized texts be taken for granted as a haven of European cultural discourse as a whole? In another form of question, is it not plausible to find out an overlooked history? If yes, does it not entail a short step to argue that what European literary enterprise has done is no more than a transformation of a part of European history into literary documents, so that these documents would form with the other historical documents a

set of totalities? To be more explicit about the idea here, while there has been a host of European texts which found no way to the literary canon, it follows then that these texts certainly have something to convey. Additionally, while they have been kept in the margin of the European literary canon, there should be an overlooked history.

Exploring this overlooked history may form a fundamental and even a discursive form for any operation from within a dominant discourse. Bringing up these marginalized literary texts to the fore will certainly lead to an exploration of certain ignored aspects within European history. This strategic reading, additionally, serves as a reconstitution of European discourse on race from within European history. Thus, the current paper seeks to spotlight these ignored aspects through an examination of George Peele's play, *The Battle of Alcazar*. The central argument around which this paper will be revolving is that the historical plays, such as *The Battle of Alcazar* and its likes may provide a satisfactory ground for reconstituting European historical discourse on race from within textual means. The following questions may be helpful in understanding the way in which the play under study presides over the historical dismantling of the European racial discourse:

- Is the historical play not a special kind of history or is history a drama in itself?
- Is art in general, and drama in particular, a historicizing process in images?

With these questions in mind, the discussion will proceed at two main levels. At the first level, the focus will be placed upon an examination of the relationship between drama and history. On the one hand, this examination will shine light on the ways in which drama can serve as an artistic technique for the making of history. Building on this examination, the focus will be shifted to be on studying *The Battle of Alcazar* as an imagistic history. While the first level will be a kind of theoretical preliminary, the second level of this study will be devoted to analyzing *The Battle of Alcazar* as a reconstitution of a usual overlooked history. In so doing, this analysis will be featured in two ways. The first will be concerned with highlighting the way in which *The Battle of Alcazar* tends to unhide the hidden. The second will be devoted to the examination of an ambiguity that has always marked

the representation of non-Europeans, basically the Moors.

### I- Post-Colonialism and the Reading of *The battle of Alcazar*

Despite the fact that *The Battle of Alcazar* stops through its delineation at one of the critical moments not only in Moroccan history, but also in Moroccan relationship with the sixteenth century Europe, the play stands at one of the crossroads that chain different post-colonial critics into one direction. It is a direction that seems to deviate, to some extent, from the project initiated by critics, such as Aimie Cesaire, Frantz Fanon, and Achebe, following the works of Edward Said directly to Homi Bhabha, Spivak, and Ashcroft among many others. This deviation lies in its shift from recovering the Self from the colonial text through a critical operation from within the colonial discourse to a rather different project. The commendable aim of this project, as it appears in the edition of a number of literary texts, is to make one's history known by bringing up once non-canonized texts into analysis. Here, mention can be made of a set of Elizabethan and Jacobean plays, such as *The Battle of Alcazar* by George Peele, *The English Moor* by Richard Brome, *The Fair Maid of the West* by Thomas Heywood among other plays.

In the process, Khalid BEKKAOUI, a Moroccan scholar, has recently launched an academic project based on the edition and publication of a number of English plays treating Morocco and the Moors. The reason behind engaging in such a project remains significant for the current study. Its significance is espoused in the following lines by Bekkaoui:

Reading such literature is, I believe, culturally edifying and pedagogically useful in that it leads us to add a cross-cultural perspective to the study of literature, urges us to shift critical focus from the purely aesthetic image to the cultural image, and encourages the investigation of the complex relationship between literature, ideology, history, colonialism, culture and national identity.<sup>1</sup>

The shift from the purely aesthetic image to the cultural image is to be of capital importance. Its importance lies in the fact that the cultural image conspicuously provides a fundamental ground for understanding the complex relationship between literature, ideology and history. But, before proceeding much further in approaching this relationship, it seems

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<sup>1</sup> Bekkaoui, Khalid (ed.). *Lust Dominion or the Lascivious Queen*. (Fez: Sidi Med. University Press, 1999), p. X.

important to start the reflections on this issue by delving into the way in which drama serves as a technique to record historical events. In other words, the focus here will be placed upon how significant it is to conceive of the historical drama as a haven of history. This discussion will be a kind of theoretical preliminary to understand *The Battle of Alcazar* as an imagistic history.

### **A- Art and History: Remaking History through Art**

In dealing with historical plays, the usual question that comes immediately to mind is: What kind of relationship does Art have with history? The simple answer to this question one can give is that Art, basically historical drama, has always been there as a mirror to historical reality. Besides, it has always been acknowledged that the historical dramatist can be regarded as a historian. Drama, as Shakespeare once put it, is there to “hold up mirror to nature.” In trying to understand this relationship, it seems helpful to base this discussion upon a major affinity between drama and history. In doing so, light will be shed on the ways in which drama serves as an imagistic history.

Nowhere is the dramatization of history more apparent than in the historical plays written during the Elizabethan and Jacobean times. This dramatization of history can conspicuously unmask the way in which historical drama is by definition a historical document. Art, it can generally be said, has often been a haven of history. Moreover, art is, as Potebnya put it once, is “thinking in images.”<sup>2</sup> It follows then that one can argue that historical drama is a historicizing process in images. Drama as a historicizing process in images can be seen in different artistic pieces. An example of this can be clearly seen in the following well-known rhyme by the American poetess, Winifred Sackville Stonier Jr.:

In fourteenth-hundred and ninety two

Columbus sailed the ocean blue<sup>3</sup>

Here, a dated historical event when Columbus sailed to America has been clearly transformed into an artistic piece. Another example can be taken

<sup>2</sup> Qtd in Victor Shklovsky. “Art as a Technique” in *Modern Criticism and Theory: a Reader*. (ed.) Lodge David. (UK: LongmanGroup, 1988), p. 16

<sup>3</sup> Qtd in Dennis Walder. *Post-colonial Literatures in English: History, Language and Theory*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 23.

from Peele's *The Battle of Alcazar* as CALSEPIUS BASSA, a Turkish officer sent by Amurath to help Abdelmelec, addresses the latter with these words:

We are not come, at Amurath's command,  
As mercenary men, to serve for pay,  
But as sure friends, by our great master sent  
To gratify and to remunerate  
Thy love, thy loyalty, and forwardness  
Thy service in his father's dangerous war <sup>4</sup>

Behind these lines lies an important historical event. Clarifying this, Bekkaoui writes in a footnote to page 46 that, "Abdelmelec fought with Turks in the Battle of Lepanto in 1571 against the Christian forces led by Don John of Austria."<sup>5</sup> The two examples given above imply one end – that is the ways in which Art can be seen as a historicizing process in images.

After these two examples, a legitimate question comes to the fore: In what way does this implication serve the reading of *The Battle of Alcazar* within a post-colonial framework? The answer to this question may detain us for a while to discuss the importance of the once marginalized European texts to the reconstitution of the European history from within the dominant discourse. As noted earlier, the colonial discourse in its historical and cultural forms has, as for Edward Said among many others, built itself upon a host of canonized texts. Foucault's analysis of European traditional view of History and the historical documents has sufficient ground for clarifying this. In this regards, he states that

In the past, history deciphered the traces left by men, it now deploys a mass of elements that have to be grouped, made relevant, and placed in relation to one another to form totalities.<sup>6</sup>

In deciphering these totalities, many post-colonial critics and writers have, for the three last decades, concentrated on dismantling the colonial discourse from within basing on the literary canon. Now, what is striking and curious is not merely the abrogation of European historical and cultural discourse on the ground of dismantling its totality, but rather it is the attempt to bring up texts from the margin to highlight an overlooked history. In other words, the endeavor to uncover the other view – that is the

<sup>4</sup> George Peele. *The Battle of Alcazar*. (ed.) Khalid Bekkaoui. (Fez: MCSC, 2001), p.47.

<sup>5</sup> George Peele. *The Battle of Alcazar*. (ed.) Khalid Bekkaoui. (Fez: MCSC, 2001), p.47.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Foucault. *The Archeology of Knowledge*. (Trans.) Sheridan Smith. (GB: Tavistock Publications Ltd, 1972), p. 07.

conception of non-European in Renaissance drama – may serve as a way out or an added perspective to decipher those totalities which marked European history. A simple comparison can be made here between the image of the Moors in the works of George Peele and those of his predecessors. The common images of the Moors in the works preceding George Peele's had been always connected with hellish, black-complexioned, heathen, lustful creatures and above all with a perilous moral, cultural, political, religious and sexual threat to the white Christendom. By contrast, as it shall be discussed, Peele's *The Battle of Alcazar* seems not to pour in the same river, so to speak.

In short, texts, such as *The Battle of Alcazar*, may well serve as a satisfactory basis not only to account for the importance of drama as a historicizing technique in images, but also they become a fundamental tool to quake the foundations over which the totality of European historical and cultural discourse had been built. But, before extending our discussion of *The Battle of Alcazar* as a reconstitution of an overlooked history, it seems a must to stop for a while at the way in which this play can be construed as an imagistic history.

### **B- *The Battle of Alcazar* as an imagistic history:**

The title of the play is a good beginning for one to comprehend *The Battle of Alcazar* as an imagistic history. Why is it so? The only satisfactory answer one can give is that the title can bear only one reference. This reference is indisputably made to the historical battle between Morocco and Portugal. Unlike in the imagined stories, most of the characters in *The Battle of Alcazar* are authentic historical figures, such as Abdelmele, Muly Mahamet, and Sebastian among others.

As well, what makes this play an imagistic history is its depiction of a real historical event. The action in the play keeps following the same historical thrust of the battle. For this, Bekkaoui notes that

In accordance with history, the two armies meet on the plains of Alcazar on 4 August 1578, amid “dreadful clamours, noise and trumpets’ sound” (...) with the exception of a few details in the action and the invention of a few characters, the plot is perfectly faithful to recorded history<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> George Peele. *The Battle of Alcazar*. (ed.) Khalid Bekkaoui. (Fez: MCSC, 2001), p.21.

Though imagery makes a work of Art as an art, *The Battle of Alcazar* remains an historical play *par excellence*. This can also be corroborated by the Presenter's warning from the onset when he declares: "Say not these things are feign'd, for true they are."<sup>8</sup> Before saying some words about the importance of image in this play which makes it an imagistic history, it must be noted that conceiving of *The Battle of Alcazar* as imagistic history does not, in either case, mean that the play represents history as such.

Now, this conception can secure the path before us to concentrate on the significance of imagery in this play. The importance of imagery lies mainly in the fact that the battle of Alcazar as a historical occurrence was transformed into a play. This transformation can only be plausible and effective through the use of Art as a technique. Accordingly, the dramatization of this battle can only be made through evoking images. The use of images in the play can be said to be a technique with which readers are reminded by approximation of those historical events for which these images stand.

In short, Peele's *The Battle of Alcazar* is one of those marginalized imagistic histories in Europe. Its marginalization can be accounted for as a result of the images Peele uses in the play to transform an historical event into an imagistic history. Inquisitive then it becomes to examine those images with regard to their role of reconstitution of an overlooked history.

## **II- *The Battle of Alcazar*: Reconstituting an Overlooked History**

As noted earlier, *The Battle of Alcazar* can be read as a reconstitution of an overlooked history. What makes it so is its depiction of Morocco and the Moors in a way quite different from the biased conceptions. The reason why this depiction is a reconstitution from within the European cultural and literary discourse is that the play presents the ways in which an English playwright introduces a rather culturally different image of Morocco and the Moors to his countrymen. This depiction, however, rests upon a fluctuation between endowing some of the Moorish characters with heroic status and stripping others of any individuality. These two features will be as two points to be discussed below.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p : 45.



### A- The Battle of Alcazar: Unhiding the Hidden

Though the image of the Moors *The Battle of Alcazar* offers can only be understood within its historical moments, it remains significant to point out that the picture given to the Moors in the play serves as a way out to unhide the hidden. Unlike the conventional role of Morocco and Moors in Peele's predecessors' works, *The Battle of Alcazar* appears to be taking a quite different direction. This direction can be touched upon through an examination of the image of both the Moors and their lands.

Starting with the Moors, *The Battle of Alcazar* conspicuously "breaks away from the traditional of exoticizing and denigrating the Moroccans."<sup>9</sup> Noted earlier, most of the characters amongst the Moors are not fictionalized. Instead, Peele keeps the same names and figures of the participants in the battle. Here, we find Abdelmelec and Muly Mahamet Seth. In the play, they do not only appear as simply historical figures, but also they are endowed with a heroic status. Abdelmelec, for instance, is branded as "the god of kings" who was "the people's pride."<sup>10</sup> The Presenter himself introduces him as "brave Barbarian lord."<sup>11</sup>

Related to this positive image of Abdelmelec is Muly Mahamet Seth's. In the play, Muly Mahamet Seth is pictured as a loyal brother and prince. His loyalty to his brother, Abdelmelec, is entrenched in a solid ground. Muly Mahamet Seth with his strong personality signifies a Moor who is free from the moral flaws which characterizes his nephew and European characters. Also, Muly Mahamet Seth imaged as a doughty, generous and tolerant prince. When he succeeds to the throne of Morocco, Mahamet Seth's generosity and tolerance become more evident as he orders that

So let it [Sebastian's corpse] rest, and on this earth bestow  
This princely corse,  
Till further for his funerals we provide<sup>12</sup>

And as he sets the two Portugal prisoners free upon their bringing the corpse of Sebastian, Mahamet Seth says,

There let him lie, and you for this be free

<sup>9</sup> George Peele. *The Battle of Alcazar*. (ed.) Khalid Bekkaoui. (Fez: MCSC, 2001), p.26.

<sup>10</sup> George Peele. *The Battle of Alcazar*. (ed.) Khalid Bekkaoui. (Fez: MCSC, 2001), p.106.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p : 143.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p : 106.

To make return from hence to Christendom<sup>13</sup>

Coupled with the images of these two Moroccan kings, Peele invented three Moorish females: Rubin ARCHES, widow of the murdered Abdelmunen; Abdil RAYES, wife to Abdelmelec; and CALIPOLIS, the Moor's wife. Though the entire image of those Moorish females is insufficient to draw satisfactory explanations for their presence in the play, it remains that Peele's portrayal of these women breaks away from the traditional way in which Moorish women were frequently presented on the Elizabethan stage. In Peele's play, Calipolis's personality becomes more strong and supportive to her husband. She does not leave her husband with sorrows conquering him. She keeps showing compassion for him. On the whole, unlike in *The Life and Death of Captain Stuckeley* (1605) - a play which depicts Calipolis in an exotic way, Calipolis in *The Battle of Alcazar* appears to be a self-sacrificing wife, an affectionate and sensible mother, and a realistic woman. The following lines tell some aspects of the realistic personality of Calipolis:

But more dishonour hangs on such misdeeds  
Than all the profit judgements have the heavens imposed  
Upon the drooping state of Barbary,  
As public merits in such lewd attempts  
Have drawn with violence upon her heads<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, the action in the play takes place on an authentic geographical space. Unlike his predecessors' fictitious and legendary lands, Peele employs rather authentic Moroccan places. Mention can be made of places, such as: Fez, the Atlas Mountains, Tangier, the plains of Alcazar, Marrakech or Morocco, Arzila (Arzil), Laarach or Tarissa, and Massagan or Messegan. The employment of these places which are compatible with history signifies a turning point in dealing with Morocco in Renaissance Drama. Despite the fact that this employment of these places reveal a certain historical moment in which England was seeking to have Morocco as an ally by virtue of its power, this employment quakes the pre-conception of the English playwrights about Morocco. This can be justified by the fact that prior to Peele's works, the authentic image of the Moroccan lands had always been hidden for certain purposes.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p : 107.

<sup>14</sup> George Peele. *The Battle of Alcazar*. (ed.) Khalid Bekkaoui. (Fez: MCSC, 2001), p.68.

All in all, the authentic images of both Morocco and the Moors had always been masked until the works of George Peele and other Renaissance playwrights. Dealing with Morocco and the Moors in their authentic manners can only be read as an unmasking of the masked. However, this does not mean that every Moor in *The Battle of Alcazar* is endowed with the same heroic status. In other words, the Moorish character does not follow the same thread of delineation. Rather, the image of the Moor occupies a contradictory odd position.

### **B- The Paradox of the Moorish Image:**

Noted earlier, the depiction of the Moorish character seems not to be linear. The paradoxically ambiguity that marks the depiction of the Moorish character in *The Battle of Alcazar* can be traced to different reasons. This ambiguity can, however, be discussed on the basis of two features which characterize the ambivalence of European attitudes towards the Moorish character.

The first feature can be associated with an inherent pre-conception which has marked the European discourse on race. This pre-conception can be clearly seen in the Presenter's introduction of the Moor, Muly Mahamet. The conventionalized idea of the Moor voiced by the Presenter is found in many instances. Muly Mahamet, the Moor is represented as "Black in his look, and bloody in his deeds."<sup>15</sup> When he is overthrown by his uncle – Abdelmelec, the Moor flees and "seek[s] to save his life by shameful flight." At the end of the play, he is found drowned. His death is described by the Presenter as "too good for such a damned wretch."<sup>16</sup> Additionally, in many instances, the Presenter voices most of the adverse epithets against Muly Mahamet; the latter is branded as: "this tyrant king", "this traitor-king," "this unbelieving Moor," "this accursed Moor," "this Negro Moor," "this usurper to his progeny," "Traitor to keen and kind, to gods and men." In general, the Presenter's intolerance has made of the term "Moor" equivalent with evil.

The second feature of the Moorish image in the play redefines and problematizes the first aspect discussed above. Entering the stage, Muly

<sup>15</sup> George Peele. *The Battle of Alcazar*. (ed.) Khalid Bekkaoui. (Fez: MCSC, 2001), p.44.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p.29.

Mahamet appears in his lavish chariot and accompanied by his train. Equally important, Muly Mahamet is branded by Moroccans in a less host way. For Abdelmelec, the Moor is “a traitor and bloody tyrant.” Furthermore, Abdelmelec, does not deny his kinship with Muly Mahamet as he calls him “our brother’s son,” and “our nephew Muly Mahamet.” In either case, the image of Muly Mahamet as a stereotypical allegory of evil is problematized by his loyalty and affection towards both his wife and son. For instance, he exposes himself to danger in attempt to provide his wife with food, he tells her: “Feed, then, faint not fair Calipolis.”<sup>17</sup> His attitude towards his son is clearly espoused in his words thus: “This son of mine, the honor of my house,/ But I perform religiously to thee.”<sup>18</sup> Not only does this reflect the loyalty of Muly Mahamet to his son, but also it implies the basis on which Christian-Muslim relationship is presented. Contrast with this relationship is that between Moroccans and Turks in the play. While Sebastian seeks to have Muly Mahamet’s son as a hostage for the help he offers to restore the crown, Amurath sends his soldiers to assist Abdelmelec with no prior condition. Calsepius BASSA announces to Abdelmelec that: “for thine honour, safety, and crown, our lives and honours frankly to expose to all the dangers that our war attends as freely and resolutely all.”<sup>19</sup> This loyalty is not meant to take anything in turn, for the Turkish soldiers “come not to serve for pay, but as sure friends, by our great master sent to gratify and to remunerate thy love, thy loyalty, and forwardness.”<sup>20</sup>

### Conclusion

The representation of the Moors in *The Battle of Alcazar* rests upon a fluctuation between a positive and a negative definition. Both features of the Moorish character, including the Turks are rendered to serve different purposes. While the appraisal of the Moors is understood in the general context when Morocco formed a real threat to England, the negative feature, mainly voiced by the Presenter, has its roots in the European pre-conception of the Moors.

Yet, both features lead to one conclusion or end. The paradox of the image

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p : 85.

<sup>19</sup> George Peele. *The Battle of Alcazar*. (ed.) Khalid Bekkaoui. (Fez: MCSC, 2001), p.50.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p.47.

of the Moors in the play serves as a signifier for a shaken foundation over which European discourse on race has built itself. It follows then that what clearly makes *The Battle of Alcazar* as a reconstitution of an overlooked history is its delineation of the Moors as virtuous, noble and courageous creatures. In sum, the play eventually forms a challenge to the Eurocentric discourse on race.

Having discussed *The Battle of Alcazar* from different angles, it follows then that what clearly makes it as a reconstitution of an overlooked history is its delineation of the Moors as virtuous, noble and courageous creatures. In sum, the play eventually forms a challenge to the Eurocentric discourse on race.

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