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### **Abstract**

This essay was written as my final research paper for my capstone course, English Literature seminar (ENGL450) class in November 2019. The capstone course's topic at that time was focused on Travel Literature. The essay is a reflection on Sir Wilfred Thesiger's travel writing book *Arabian Sands*; the paper talks about Thesiger's observations on the antagonistic views of the Bedu of the Middle – East, and the reasons behind their animosity towards him in the 1940's.

My thesis in this paper demystifies the reasons the Bedu in *Arabian Sands* showed hostility from the sides of History and Cultural backgrounds, where there will be mentions of both Political and Islamic terminology that relates to Thesiger's book aesthetic; furthermore, the essay also utilizes the lenses of Post-Colonialist and Cultural Studies theories to determine the settings of the novel alongside my analysis of the story.

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### ***Arabian Sands: Cultural Racism in 19<sup>th</sup> century Arabia***

The West's approach to the East is a double-edged sword, exaggerating its positive traits and vice-versa with its negatives. It is common knowledge that Great Britain colonized many civilizations, and before that, there was a major influence of both Islam and Arabia on Europe during the medieval era. Sir Wilfred Thesiger's *Arabian Sands* is an important piece of Travel Literature before the age of internet, where the only evidence travel writers could provide were letters, photographs, maps, and diaries; furthermore, his books shows some eye-opening interactions with Arabs from various nationalities and tribes, both positive and negative. The book from the lens of schools of Cultural Studies and Post-Colonialism shows racism from the Arabs towards Theisger for being both a Christian and an outsider, and it stems from historical

and cultural interactions between Europe and the Middle East in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and most importantly, viewing racism from the lens of Post-colonialism.

First, we need to be aware that the Middle East is known for its tribal way of living, all of them held together as a collective community where every member knows each other. This is evidenced from the book according to Thesiger: “Everyone belongs to a tribe and all members of the same tribe are in some degree kinsmen, since they are descended from a common ancestor” (94). Moreover, the author shows us a negative interaction he had with the Bait Khawar tribe, where he had problems passing into new territories with his companions, commenting:

A party of Bait Khawar were refusing passage to our camels, saying that the Christian might not through their valley...A large, vociferous, but badly-armed crowd of Baith Khawar had collected and they insisted that I could not pass down the valley unless I paid them money. I refused, saying that I had a *rabia* and was entitled to pass, but they went on shouting that I must give them money if I wished to see their valley (196).

In order to clarify the meaning behind this interaction, before Thesiger’s time, the historical interlinkage of Europe and the Middle East late 11<sup>th</sup> century and early 12<sup>th</sup> century are based on religious zealotry and territorial expansion from both parties thanks to the crusades led by Richard the Lion heart and other Christian authority figures such as the Pope Urban II. According to the pope, he “makes perhaps the most influential speech of the Middle Ages, giving rise to the Crusades by calling all Christians in Europe to war against Muslims in order to reclaim the Holy Land, with a cry of “Deus vult!” or “God wills it!” (History.com). Also in that time, Muslims who successfully invaded foreign countries had the rulers of said foreign

countries either enter Islam as a religion or pay a tax known as *Jizyah*. The *Jizyah* was first established during Prophet Muhammad's time, and it is "a tax that is imposed on a certain erring faction from among the People of the Book (Ahl al-Kitāb; non-Muslim groups such as Christians and Jews recognized in the Qur'ān as possessing a divine scripture) who violate their own religious and ethical principles (9:29)" (Afsaruddin). Moreover, I would say that it was justified by the Arabs in the story since Great Britain was responsible for colonizing most of the world, and not all Arabs would be as welcoming as Bait Khawar. In order to conclude this argument, I do not blame Bait Khawar for having defensive measures because of past crusades, and in Thesiger's time, colonialism was still active. Moving on further into historical depth, Islam as a religion had so many interactions with Ahl al-Kitāb aka Christians and Jews, and the possible theory on why some Bedu tribes in the book were racist towards Thesiger stems from the iconic Muslim figure Salahudin Al-Ayubi, better known in the West as Saladin. Muslims praise Salahudin Al-Ayubi for fighting against the European Crusades and Conquest of taking over Jerusalem, and it is possible that these Bedu tribes take Salahudin Al-Ayubi as a model figure to rise against the West. Indian Scholar and Professor Nazir Ahmad explains the reason behind this animosity towards Thesiger as a Christian stems from this interaction between Saladin and Latin Chief Renaud de Chatellon, saying:

Renaud was the king of the coastal cities in Palestine and Lebanon. To quote the well-known historian Bahauddin: "This accursed Renaud was a great infidel and a very strong man. On one occasion, when there was a truce between the Muslims and the Franks, he treacherously attacked and carried off a caravan from Egypt that passed through his territory. He seized these people, put them to torture, threw them into pits and imprisoned some in dungeons. When the

prisoners objected and pointed out that there was a truce between the two peoples, he remonstrated: "Ask your Muhammed to deliver you". Salahuddin, when he heard these words, vowed to slay the infidel with his own hands" (historyofislam.com).

So in order to conclude this argument, it is possible that the Imam and his tribe were not so trusting of Thesiger because of this historical interaction between Saladin and Renaud de Chattellon. Also, looking back at the historical background of a situation could definitely explain why said situation started in the first place, and Arabian Sands is a great source of both Travel Literature and History.

Cultural studies aim to study the Hegemonic attitudes of one society dominating the other, but also we can utilize this school of thought to study the behavior of various societies, and how to it reflects towards the world as a whole. Thesiger's novel reflects on Middle Eastern culture, shifting from Oman, Yemmen, and Saudi Arabia in terms of traditions and way or living. The author talks of how he dislikes materialistic pleasures of the west, like fast traveling using aeroplanes, western medicines, and even stable weather. The term hegemony means from the perspective of cultural studies is "the social, cultural, ideological, or economic influence exerted by a dominant group" (Merriam-Webster); and we some exerted cultural dominance of the Arabs on Thesiger being a Christian man amongst them. One example of cultural differences between Muslims and Christians is privacy, and we see from the novel how the Bedu as a community do not hide anything, acting as a hive-mind, and it did surprise Thesiger, commenting: "I had been used to privacy, and here I had none. If I wanted to talk privately to someone it was difficult. Even if we went a little apart, others would be intrigued and come to find out what we were talking about and join in the conversation" (63). Westerners are known to be individualistic and

prefer privacy in contrast to the Arabs/Bedu, and because Thesiger was new to this, it served as a form of cultural shock to him. Despite the fact it made him feel uncomfortable, it did seem a little hegemonic when the Bedu were all gathered at the conversation that Thesiger was trying to have with one of his companions; furthermore, Thesiger gives a valid reason to this, saying “A craving for privacy is something Bedu will never understand; something they will always instinctively mistrust” (120). No one can blame the Bedu for this if someone amongst them is a foreigner.

Much later in the book, we get to see racism from one of the infamous characters in the story, the Imam, and the term Imam means “in a general sense, one who leads Muslim worshippers in prayer. In a global sense, imam is used to refer to the head of the Muslim community (ummah). The title is found in the Qur’ān several times to refer to leaders and to Abraham” (Zeidan). The Imam in the story is viewed as an antagonistic viewer, described as “the xenophobic Imam of Oman” (5), also shows animosity towards foreigners and Christians alike. One instance is when Thesiger described the Imam’s claim to his people, saying: “Suspecting that I intended to visit Oman he sent messengers to the Al bu Shams, the Duru, and even to the Imam, warning them that I intended to travel in their lands and attributing many motives to my journey, all evil” (295). Thesiger observes and mentions facts about the relationship between culture and Behavior of Arabs in the story, and when he and his companions visited Saudi Arabia, they encountered the Muslim leaders known as ‘the Akhwan’, or in English, meaning ‘the brothers of Islam’. Thesiger describes the ‘Akhwan’ as “a militant, religious brotherhood dedicated to the purification and the unification of Islam...which in their eyes entailed the scrupulous observance of fasts, prayers, and ablutions” (248 – 249). Arabic culture tends to listen to religious leaders and imams more because they are responsible for guiding the public in

learning good morale, manners, and unity amongst others; however, even in the present day, there are still controversial militant groups similar to the 'Akhwan' that shaped the events of the world, such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda. In Thesiger's time however, the Akhwan focused on removing the Western influence from the Middle East, and Thesiger commented his thoughts on the matter, saying: "The hatred which I encountered was a disturbing experience...but I wonder if it were not preferable to the new hatred based on distinctions of colour, nationality." (249); in addition, he expresses his disgust with the racism the Arabs display towards him, adding "the Arabs were remarkably tolerant about religion. But to the people of Laila I was an intruder from an alien civilization, which they identified with Christianity" (249).

Lastly, the aftermath of Post-Colonialism in the Middle East has shaped history for both the better and the worst. Looking through Thesiger's eyes, he suggests the reason behind Arabs' racism against Westerners is because "[t]hey knew that the Christian had subjugated most of the Muslim world, and that contact with their civilization had everywhere destroyed or profoundly modified the beliefs, institutions, and culture they cherished" (249). As aforementioned, many of the Arabs and Bedu in the story are tolerant of Thesiger being a Christian and an outsider, yet there is an enormous historical context this xenophobic behavior against Christians. One particular scene of the book highlights racism in the lens of Post-Colonialism when Thesiger and his companions had a guest, only to refuse Thesiger's offer of a coffee cup. The reason being: "When he learnt that I was a Christian he refused to drink the coffee we offered him, saying that I was an infidel and that my companions, as Muslims who had sold themselves into the service of an infidel for gold, were even worse" (238). I do not blame the guest's reaction towards Thesiger for several reasons; imagine watching your country being colonized by an empire that existed for centuries longer than your motherland, killed, pillaged the natives of your

motherland, and you would pass this knowledge to your descendants. Furthermore, Travel writer Michael Mewshaw supports this statement on why the Arabs are racist towards Thesiger from the lens of Post-Colonialism:

some of his most celebrated journeys in Somalia and Abyssinia would never have succeeded if he hadn't requisitioned - i.e., stolen - supplies from local villages, demanded shelter at gunpoint, and press-ganged hundreds of natives into serving as bearers, scouts, and bodyguards. That that type of travel is no longer possible is, in my opinion, not to be regretted, but rather celebrated along with the end of other manifestations of blatant racism and colonialism (6).

Looking back at Mewshaw's statement, it makes a lot more sense because colonialism was heavy during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the British empire was expanding its horizons in the Middle-East. It is understandable that many tribes in the book would be very defensive of their own lands, and seeing that a foreigner is roaming with other Arabs would definitely raise the alarm. However, Thesiger defends himself by stating: "I went there with a belief in my own racial superiority, but in their tents I felt like an uncouth, inarticulate barbarian, an intruder from a shoddy and materialistic world" (38), acknowledging the fact that he feels like an intruder amongst the Arabs.

Another reason behind the racist behavior from the Arabs is the unavailability of proper education; the Bedu in Thesiger's time were mostly illiterate, with the exception of modernized Arabs who live in cities, and because illiteracy is associated with ignorance, it is the most plausible theory. Through the Post-Colonial lens, Arabs and Westerners view each other as "[m]any in the West see Muslims as fanatical, violent, and as lacking tolerance. Meanwhile,

Muslims in the Middle East and Asia generally see Westerners as selfish, immoral and greedy – as well as violent and fanatical” (pewresearch.org), because of these stereotypes, it became planted on both cultures through time, and it somehow there are people from both parties who view each other based on these stereotypes. Theisger evidences how the illiteracy of the Arabs, saying that “[t]hey had no intelligible history, the nomads who inhabited them had no known past” (38).

In conclusion, we can now understand why the Arabs in Arabian Sands are racist from the lens of Post-Colonialism, and the reason being that they were under colonist rule by the British empire for decades, prompting animosity towards them as a result. Also, the book is viewed from the lens of schools of Cultural Studies and Post-Colonialism shows the racist behavior from the Arabs towards Theisger as both as a Christian and an outsider, and it stems from historical and cultural interactions between Europe and the Middle East in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and most importantly, viewing racism from the lens of Post-colonialism.



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