

THE FEARLESS AND UNDAUNTED TRAVELLER: IBTISAM AL HABSI

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Abstract

Travel writing generally evokes the idea of an intrepid, autonomous person braving all odds in the wilds. We generally have the idea that the West discovered the East whereas the truth remains that long before the Europeans started 'discovering' the world, many 'colonised' countries, like India, some countries of Africa etc. had trade relations with many other countries (including some European countries). We should not forget that they had also discovered the silk route. Nonetheless, the movements of other (non-European) peoples were effectively subdued and frozen under the narrative gaze of the colonial subject. Though in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there was a proliferation of travel books by Indians, penned in various regional languages but these were written under the influence of European travel writings and hence were modelled upon them. This paper aims at dismantling the borders and horizons of our perceptions. This article traces the journey of a non-European traveller, Ibtisam al Habsi.

Key Words: travel writing, Eurocentric discourses

With the rise of European colonization, travel and travel writing came to be informed by the presence of or desire for (colonial) power. There arose the trope of European "discovery" and with the growth of large-scale factory production and changes in methods of communication, Europe actually created a market for travel writing. These travel writings generally described the adventure of an intrepid, autonomous white man or woman braving all odds in the wilds. They generally focussed on exotic locations and the inhuman nature of both the human beings and their customs. All throughout, however, the focus was actually on the strength and enduring power of the Whites (thereby imposing their 'superior' status). These texts are read from the point of view of the historical context and the relations of power that the traveller was bound up with. These texts often deal with the formation of the colonial subject and imperialism. Nonetheless, the movements of other (non-European)

peoples were effectively subdued and frozen under the narrative gaze of the colonial subject:¹

In spite of African and Asian travellers who actually left behind accounts of their experiences and thoughts, today erudite scholars who might know of medieval Japanese travellers are often unaware of equivalent Arabic ones and vice versa. The kind of “general knowledge” that enfolds the travels of Columbus or Cook or Marco Polo never extends to Asian or African travel narratives (Khair 7)

The nature and extent of this erasure conditioned not only European but also non-European perceptions. Though in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there was a proliferation of travel books by Indians, penned in various regional languages, these were written under the influence of European travel writings and hence modelled upon them. It is because we also, like the erudite scholar Clark, feel that “to a certain extent, however, travel writing is inevitably one-way traffic, because the Europeans mapped the world rather than the world mapping them”(Clark 3). In this paper the attention of the reader is to be drawn to a non-European traveller, Ibtisam al Habsi. However this was not her real name. In the book *Ibtisam al Habsi and Her Zanzibar Court*— where the narrator is Maryam Al Habsi, Ibtisam’s daughter, the narrator declares in the Foreword: “Ibtisam Al Habsi is not the real name of the author of these unusual sayings. Most other names used are also pseudonyms, including my own. Because of the unconventional nature of some of the things she said and did, I still feel it necessary to conceal my mother’s true identity” (Greenslade 7). This paper aims at dismantling the borders and horizons of our perceptions. It would be difficult to straitjacket this non-European traveller into Eurocentric discourses – neither is that intended– but, nonetheless, it would help us to have an “other” perspective of travel writing and thus, would help us, to a certain extent, to decolonize our minds.

Ibtisam Al Habsi was born soon after the First World War in 1919 or 1920 in Zanzibar. She belonged to the Al Habsi tribe of Arabs in Zanzibar. The principal Arabs in Zanzibar were those who had emigrated from, or descended from parents who emigrated from,

Muscat. Quite likely, her father was a successful Oman trader along the East African Coast and her mother was the child of a Comorian woman and a Belgian man. However, the Arabs in Zanzibar had adopted the customs of the natives to a large extent and vice versa. Before we proceed further with the journey of Ibtisam's life, it would be better if we have an idea regarding the society, culture, customs and history of Zanzibar. Soon after the visit of Vasco da Gama in 1498, Zanzibar became part of the Portuguese Empire and remained so for almost two centuries till 1631, when the Sultan of Mombasa massacred the European inhabitants. Later on the Portuguese appointed European Governors who were distasteful to the natives. With the help of the Arabs of Oman, they drove the foreigners out. In 1698, Zanzibar fell under the control of the Sultanate of Oman. The contribution of Seyyid Said should be mentioned here. He converted the fishing town of Zanzibar into a town and started trading with the Europeans. He encouraged them to open their business centres on the island. In 1833, he signed a Treaty with America to commence trade in his kingdom. In 1841 Britain opened a merchant house and subsequently a consulate. Later on, Seyyid Barghash brought Zanzibar in closer contact with the rest of the world. He was instrumental in abolishing the Slave Trade by signing an agreement with Britain in 1870. Later on when Seyyid Ali bin Hamoud repeatedly complained to the Foreign Office about the lack of educational facilities for his Moslem subjects, only Government Boys' Schools were established, and that too in 1908. Introduction of female education was still not possible as the Arab women lived a life of seclusion.

Arab women seldom left their houses in the daytime, and their occasional visits to friends were made after dark, when their faces were closely veiled, and they were accompanied by female attendants. In her book *Memoirs of an Arabian Princess*, Emily Ruete writes about the importance of a man in an Arab woman's life:

A woman without male connections is indeed to be pitied. Shut off entirely from the stronger sex by religion and custom, and therefore lacking advice and protection, she may get into sore straits; she is apt to be fleeced by her Steward, and otherwise cheated. Indeed, several of my acquaintances married to escape from being constantly tricked. (Ruete 115)

Polygamy was prevalent in the society. A Moslem was allowed to have four wives by law; if in any case a wife died or obtained divorce then he was allowed to take a fifth. Apart from these, he could also keep secondary wives, as many as he cared to. The secondary wives were actually the purchased slaves of the man but motherhood insured them emancipation. However if the child/children died, then the man could sell his slave-wives. Thus we can understand the kind of restricted life led by the Arab women. It is only when compared against this background that the heroism of Ibtisam's life and actions can be understood.

Ibtisam was raped and became pregnant at the age of fifteen. When this news became public she was sentenced to be stoned to death. Though her father knew who the perpetrator was, he preferred to move to Al Mukallah (today the Republic of Yemen). The mention of this incident is important for several reasons. Firstly, it changed the course of Ibtisam's life. And secondly, it reveals the character of Ibtisam – that of a fearless woman who dares to give birth to the child and rejects the idea of considering the child 'unworthy' (the narrator tells us so). In order to avoid the scandal of Ibtisam being an unmarried mother, the family invented a story according to which Ibtisam's husband was killed on a sea voyage. This is one of the first incidents where a fiction is created in order to survive. It helped Ibtisam create fictions and tell them as if they were factually true. Credit should be given to Ibtisam's mother because it was she who had

dared to find teachers for her children during a time when girls were not allowed to read and write. Ibtisam and her siblings were taught to read, write, play music, recite scripture and also to recite the historic epics of Zanzibari and Tanzanian kingdoms. Ibtisam gave birth to twins: Maryam (the narrator of the book) and Youssif. When they were less than a year old Ibtisam's father took them up to live independently in a great house. They had to earn their living. Ibtisam along with her sister Khulood at first used to sing at weddings and public gatherings but later on they were introduced to the Sultan and recited at the Qathiri court. They came to be known as 'Zanzibari Princesses'. They even sang for the Europeans who, quite astonishingly, thought that the two were

'real' princesses and had connections with the Royal Court of Zanzibar. On one occasion - when Ibtisam and Khulood were kidnapped and the British *intelligence officers* became desperate to save the 'kidnapped Zanzibari princesses' - Ibtisam made use of this false idea. When they were rescued they were asked about the Royal Court of Zanzibar and Ibtisam created story after story about the Royal Court. So much so that "her skill at identifying the number of wives, children, ministers and visitors won her admirers" (Greenslade 17). At Mukallah, Ibtisam's father had another family. Though Ibtisam's father and her uncle, Basim were away most of the time and though Ibtisam lived independently still her relatives were there to look after them. When Ibtisam's brothers decided to join the Hadhrami and Omani diaspora in south India to become soldiers in the state of Hyderabad, Ibtisam also decided to leave Mukallah for Hyderabad.

On and from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries there was a large scale migration from Hadhramaut mostly due to demographic pressures, bad climate, famines, floods, or political upheavals. Hyderabad became a favoured destination because before Indian independence the Nizams of Hyderabad were surrounded by hostile rulers in the Deccan, and they chose to ally themselves with the local Arabs, who formed the bulk of the Nizams' personal army. Hence the Arab population increased during this period. Taking advantage of the confusion surrounding the identity of his daughters, Ibtisam's father secured documents that became useful to them when they came to India. Those false documents enabled them to be received at the palace of the new Bashir Nawab in Hyderabad. Solely on the strength of these documents Ibtisam's father became a naval officer. He was simply trying to secure his position in government circles. All the time they had the fear of getting caught. So much so that in her day-to-day life Ibtisam did not believe even her own relatives without checking their identity papers. To hide their true identity they had to adapt themselves to the Hyderabad customs and culture which was a bit difficult for Ibtisam. But nonetheless she became liberal in her dressing, allowed her children to wear whatever they liked and whenever they liked and irrespective of the warnings of the Maulvi - who warned her that she would be

thrown out of her rooms if she did not send her children to Islamic school- she sent them to schools where other children used to go. They even learnt English. Ibtisam used to meet fakirs and distribute food at festivals and host evenings where men used to dress up as women and vice-versa. Sometimes she used to host 'women-only' evenings where women and children sang and danced together. Things became worse when riots started. "Royal property, schools and mosques came under attack from enthusiastic Nationalists" (Greenslade24). The Nawab was forced to concede his property to the New India. When returning from Madras with his grandfather and Uncle Basim, Youssif was killed by a mob. There was no time to shed tears and though initially Ibtisam fainted hearing the news of the death of her son, soon she gathered courage to face the new situation. India became hostile for the Muslims and so now they had to change their looks to hide their Muslim identities. The women cut their long hair and the men shaved their beards. Each of them was given a pistol by Ibtisam's father for protection. Compared to the fanatical Nationalists, the Britishers proved to be more helpful to these people as they helped them to leave Hyderabad for Singapore.

By this time, may be because of such incidents, the women became bold enough to speak their minds without fear. Thus, while going to Singapore when some kind of militia came on board and were talking to Ibtisam and her father, Khulood quite frankly told Maryam, a twelve-year-old child: "Everybody wants money, either money or something else" (Greenslade 29) and Maryam tells us, "The way she said 'something else' disturbed me because suddenly I knew what she meant" (Greenslade 29). In Singapore, they lived in shacks and the women were given the responsibility to run a business selling tools and materials and "provide an environment for grandfather to entertain his contacts" (Greenslade 31). Riots broke out in 1956 and the issues were citizenship and nationality. Again the Arabs were marginalised. According to Maryam, "Holidays were a perfect opportunity for mobs, fanatics and extremists to attack each other" (Greenslade 32). On such a holiday, Ibtisam's father was killed and "Uncle Basim got hit on the head, a blow from which he never really recovered" (Greenslade32). These incidents along with other insecurities made Ibtisam furious and she vented

it out on her staff who then left her. Definitely, their business was not functioning. Singapore became unsafe for them. They sold everything, loaded their ship with goods and their possessions, took guns and left Singapore for Brunei.

They lived on the ship, hired a pontoon and started selling and trading goods. Memories of the kind of patronage they had enjoyed in Hyderabad made Ibtisam take a drastic step. In fact they had lived in Hyderabad thinking it to be their home forever. There was a kind of tussle between pragmatism and nostalgia. She took the drastic step of giving away the ship to the Sultan, Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin. The ship “was our one secure means of making a substantial living in the world...” (Greenslade 38). Once, they travelled past a club where some dancers were being caned by some men; Ibtisam saved them and with their help they became blackmailers because the girls knew much about Bandar Brunei. They had to earn their living. Ibtisam bought a Hammond organ, made Maryam and the other girls who accompanied them from Singapore dress differently and learn American songs. “She formed a ‘party’ and managed to sing at festivals and weddings” (Greenslade 40). She even wanted to play western music at one such club - from where she had rescued those girls. Soon Ibtisam and her ‘party’ started performing in the early evenings at a hotel club in Bandar. After Maryam got married, Ibtisam married a middle ranking member of the Royal Government. She no longer sang in hotel clubs but indulged herself in “entertainments and gatherings with the wives of an elite society” (Greenslade 46). It was at such gatherings that she also indulged herself in word games and verse-making.

Quite accidentally when one of Maryam’s uncle called her from Dubai and then came to Brunei to meet them, all of them decided to sail to Muscat, Oman. They talked with officials and administrators who wanted to know about their journey after they had left Oman. Ibtisam and Khulood told and re-told their journeys after which they were given letters saying they were entitled to plots of land. Oman then had not developed so much. For many years they lived in tents and later on Maryam rented a villa till their house was completed. Using this as an excuse, Ibtisam used to

drive through the desert, wander from town to town, district to district being received by locals with extreme generosity and courtesy, sometimes dancing, sometimes reciting short verses. Now of course they had to become a bit conventional. They had to get back to their conventional dressing style; they also had to wear the veil. These changes were welcomed as the whole family was together and more importantly, they were secure. Khulood died. Having faced so many things till now, Ibtisam had learnt to accept things as they were. But she did not give up her passion for story-making or story-telling. Whenever she returned from her voyages, she used to tell tales of robberies etc. Ibtisam died in her sleep in May 2004.

Ibtisam's descriptions of her travels are completely different from the descriptions we generally come across in travel writings or rather the Eurocentric idea of travel writing. According to that idea, the traveller undertakes a journey which in most of the cases is a perilous one. It is simply because he cannot rest from travel; travelling to various places is his passion. He has wanderlust. Whether it is Crusoe or Gulliver - it is this idea that is reinforced. The idea is steeped in European culture especially because the European Renaissance was characterised by discovery of lands. When the women started travelling and when they started writing travel accounts, they definitely followed the pattern of their male predecessors and counterparts. It should be admitted that the women travellers seldom used to travel due to their wanderlust. Most of the time they travelled in order to accompany their husbands on their mission or as a representative of the Monarch (mostly as a spy) or to spread religion and education (again for a particular mission). They generally described the picturesque landscape, the innocence, stupidity and superstitions of the natives, the poor and miserable conditions in which the natives lived etc. all the time keeping the spotlight on themselves, their superior culture, their kindness, their finer feelings, their adaptability etc. Hardly do we come across a traveller who has to use his/her wits to survive. Most of the time they merely impose their culture, religion and language. They seldom have to use these for their survival. Though they are outsiders they belong to the colonizers' group; hence they are powerful. They are not marginalised. They are not insecure. Neither do they have any

fear of being 'found out' even though they are not imposters. In most of the cases the person who returns is the same one who had ventured into a different land. Hardly do we come across longing to go back to the life in the strange land. For Ibtisam and her crew the journey is for existence, for survival. For them the means do not matter. Sometimes conventional, sometimes going against the conventions, sometimes saviour, sometimes a victimiser, sometimes protecting others while sometimes being insecure – that's the journey of Ibtisam Al Habsi.

SOME SAYINGS (POEMS) OF IBTISAM AL HABSI

...on an early fig

My breasts when they were small
shocked me and I ran to my brother.
Mother took me to the garden –
She held my hand, tears in her eyes.

...on a door stud

Strong doors, veils and scripture –
My mother spared us the flower knife
Now we know what it's like not-to-belong.

...on distance

The further into exile I go
The more I get to see you completely.
I have to find a way back
Before the thread between us breaks.

...in the dust

As I picked up the stone that killed her
I was jostled by the man who ruined her.

...on a kebab of good meat

His gifts, always so practical,
At least I'll never starve;

but I'd lose *all* my shame
For a pair of ruby earrings.

(From David Greenslade's *Ibtisamal Habsi and Her Zanzibar Court*)

NOTES :

¹The 'discovery' of Angkor Wat by the French or the 'discovery' of India by the Portuguese are some of the other stories which were created and circulated in order to subdue the narrative of the non-Europeans. Whereas in reality, the history of Angkor Wat tells us about the persistent resistance of a group of Buddhist monks due to whom a pagoda could be built out of the temple's interior which was taken over by the archaeologists following the 'discovery' by the French. Similarly, prior to the coming of the Europeans, even during the BC era, India had trade relations with other countries. For example, in the ancient times, South India, especially the coastal places where we now have Tamil Nadu and Kerala, was famous for pearl fisheries. Pearl was exported to far off countries; one such country was Rome. However, these myths of 'discovery' are still maintained because these are saleable.

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