ORIENTALISM IN AGATHA CHRISTIE’S APPOINTMENT WITH DEATH

Abstract

Appointment with Death (1938) is one of thirty-three Poirot novels and seven oriental novels written by Agatha Christie. It is known that Christie wrote her novels with oriental settings under the impressions of her own experiences in the Middle East gained through the archeological expeditions due to the explorations of her archeologist husband, Max Mallowan. Yet Appointment with Death offers a postcolonial analysis owing to its orientalist attitude to Eastern world and people – an approach that seems to have been adopted by Christie not only by the real impressions but the prejudiced ideas and clichés about the Orient and oriental. The essential aim of this paper is to detect the portrayal of the Orient and oriental people, things, values and so on in Appointment with Death. Edward W. Said’s critique of Orientalism as defined and explained in his groundbreaking work, Orientalism constitutes the theoretical base of this study. Orientalism has been defined by Said as a Eurocentric belief and an academic field dividing the world into two as the Occident and the Orient, which is artificial. For Said, Orientalism has also constructed the Orient as a discursive formation defending the supremacy of the West in the world and the legitimizing the dominance of the West over the East. In this study, some of the assaults which were directed to orientalists by Said in his 1978 book will be attempted to be explored in Christie’s novel. The study concludes with the idea that Appointment with Death is a western orientalist discourse including generalized and stereotypical information about and a negative portrayal and disapprobation of the Orient and oriental people and taking the western values as normative in the evaluation of the non-western world and people.

Keywords: Appointment with Death, Agatha Christie, Orientalism, Edward Said, Disapprobation of the Orient
AGATHA CHRISTIE’NİN ÖLÜMLE RANDEVU ADLI ROMANINDA ORYANTALİZM

Öz

Anahtar kelimeler: Ölümle Randevu, Agatha Christie, Orientalism, Edward Said, Doğunun Tenkidi

ORIENTALISM IN AGATHA CHRISTIE’S APPOINTMENT WITH DEATH

Published in 1938 Appointment with Death¹ is one of seven oriental novels of Agatha Christie. It is known that Christie wrote her novels with oriental settings under the impressions of her own experiences in the Middle East gained through the archeological expeditions due to the explorations of her archeologist husband, Max Mallowan. Appointment with Death is one of her novels, during the writing of which Christie was inspired by the oriental places, people and culture. So it does not only offer an orientalist setting but also is known to be written in The Middle East – in the Balikh Valley in Mesopotamia (Osborne, 1999, p. 160). The setting in the novel is Israel and 1922. By means of the examination of Christie’s delineation of the Orient and the oriental in Appointment with Death, this paper searches for whether Christie adopted an orientalist attitude toward the East and easterner in the novel. The study attempts to analyze the

¹ Christie, Agatha. Appointment with Death. (London: HarperCollins, 1960). (All the subsequent references to the novel will be to this edition of the novel and only page numbers will be given in parentheses following the quotations in the main text.)
representation of the Orient and oriental people, values, concepts and so on from the perspective of Edward W. Said’s critique of Orientalism.

Orientalism as defined by Edward W. Said (1979) in his groundbreaking work *Orientalism* (1978) is firstly, a body of academic studies concerning the Orient and oriental peoples, cultures, languages, values and etc. by means of teaching, writing about and researching them, secondly, a way of thought based mainly upon the idea of the diversity between the Orient and the Occident, and thirdly, “[t]he corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (pp. 2-3). Furthermore, it is

A *distribution* of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical and philosophical texts; it is [...] it is a whole series of “interests” which, by such means as scholarly discovery, philological reconstruction, psychological analysis, landscape and sociological description, it not only creates but also maintains; it is, rather than expresses, a certain will or intention to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world (Said, 1979, p.12).

Said’s book is thus a critique of the prejudiced deep-seated unfavorable and sometimes antagonistic, in brief, orientalist approach of the occidental travelers, authors, intellectuals and academics to the East and easterners. It documents and decries European portrayals of peoples of non-western cultures. What lies in the essence of Said’s criticism of the orientalist discourses is not only westerners’ dividing the world as the Orient and Occident but also westerners’ always seeing, judging and evaluating easterners taking their western values as criteria and stable norms. For Said or the other critics of Orientalism, this has resulted in the radical division between the East and West, between the easterner and westerner and with the superiority of the West and the westerner over the East and the easterner, which has been recognized throughout years as an absolute reality. In the essence of Said’s assaults of the orientalist perspective lies the westerners’ taking their western values, codes, images, categories and mindset as normative in the evaluation and judging the East instead of recognizing the differences as cultural values and developing a mutual understanding in the globe. Said furthered these and similar notions arguing that racial characterizations formed by the Eurocentric vision helped to legitimize the colonial missions, which was an important function of Orientalism, for Said. Said’s *Orientalism* not only analyzed and criticized western discourses about the non-western peoples and places for their inclusion of Eurocentric beliefs while evaluating the East and easterner but also stimulated the interest in Orientalism and exploration of the orientalist attitudes, motivation and tendencies in these discourses. Thus it initiated a new field in literary theory and criticism which has been called *Postcolonial Criticism*/ *Postcolonial Studies*.

On the whole it was Edward Said who commenced the resurgence of the analysis of the colonial and orientalist discourses written by westerners about both the oriental world and the colonized countries. Said’s recognition of Orientalism as a long-established western deed relied on both the artificial diversity between the East and West and the standardization of the western
values i.e. the delineation of western values as normative all constituted the point of departure for the whole critique of Orientalism. Said directed his assaults on the orientalist works as they systematically constructed the East as the ‘Other’ of the West; that’s why he sees the Orient as a discursive formation through the western gaze. After Said there are some notable theoreticians inspired by his work. Among them are, as Mills explains “Mary Louise Pratt, Peter Hulme, Homi Bhabha, Rana Kabbani and Gayatri Spivak” (p. 2). They supported in their works Said’s basic thesis that “western writers, especially since the eighteenth century, have constructed the Orient as the Other, and have, in doing so, attempted to contain and make powerless the inhabitants of colonized countries by fixing them in an object position, and hence retaining the subject, powerful position for westerners” (Mills, p. 48). Said’s emphasis is on the textual representation of the Orient and oriental. This means that according to Said, the Orient was constructed by texts rather than the factual truths about the Orient and oriental. Orientalism therefore may be recognized as a collection of systematic attempts to manufacture and portray the Orient by means of the western gaze. Said also emphasizes that no oriental writer and text are innocent. This point is forcefully made by Said (1979):

Everyone who writes about the Orient must locate himself vis-à-vis the Orient, translated into his text, this location includes the kind of narrative voice he adopts, the type of structure he builds, the kind of images, themes, motifs that circulate in his text—all of which adds up to deliberate ways of addressing the reader, containing the Orient and finally representing it or speaking in its behalf. [...] Every writer on the Orient (and this is true even of Homer) assumes some Oriental precedent, some previous knowledge of the Orient, to which he refers and on which he relies (p. 20).

Orientalism claims that “there is a radical and absolute separation between East and West” and that “oriental studies must draw their ideas and conclusions from the absolute historical and intellectual specificities of the East, devising for that purpose a series of terms and concepts” (Dabbagh, 2010, p. 2). Some of them are, as Abdulla Al-Dabbagh (2010) listed: “the oriental or the Asiatic mode of production (i.e. the inability of the East to accomplish an industrial revolution), oriental despotism (i.e. the inability of the East to achieve democracy), the essential spirituality of the East and the absence of a Renaissance or an Enlightenment movement or a rationalist philosophy in the East (i.e. the inability of the oriental to think logically). Thus this resulted in the belief that the works of the orientalists “provide the only basis for understanding the East” (pp. 2-3) because the easterner cannot understand and express himself.

Agatha Christie’s Appointment with Death is proof positive Said’s argument that the Orient-Occident dichotomy is central in orientalist discourses. Christie’s portrayal of the Orient and oriental in the novel seems to have emanated from both the polarization of the world into the East and West and the prevailing ideas about and depiction of the East and easterners in the

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2 Christie’s employment of the oriental people as background characters who do not bulk large in the main plot of the novel and the immediate purpose of this study – the representation of merely the oriental people in the novel – limit the study with references to only the scenes in which oriental people appear. This makes disconnections among events and makes the reader who is unfamiliar with the novel unable to understand the whole action in the plot. For this reason a summary is needed; but, because of the limited space of the study, the text does not include an account of the sequence of events; instead, a detailed summary is given in the Appendix.
discourses, whereby these ideas had already been normalized and internalized by their western writers. In many oriental discourses/texts there seem to be numberless references to oriental people who are regarded by western people as uncivilized, dishonest, degenerate, stupid, lazy, and so forth. Christie is no exception. There is enough evidence to suggest that Agatha Christie in her *Appointment with Death* attributed negative/unfavourable qualities to the eastern people. She is noticed to have adopted an orientalist attitude in the projection of her eastern characters due to their stereotypical representation. She projects them as stupid, indolent, lax, dishonest and heathen. She has her western characters think of, call, recognize the easterners or identify them with these unfavourable qualities. This gives the reader the idea that Christie’s definition of non-western characters is based on the dichotomy between the easterner and westerner as the definitions of the eastern people by oriental authors are. It is certainly the case that negative constituents of the binary oppositions created by the western world were used to define the easterner and the positive ones to define the westerner. Kabbani (1986) comments on this characteristic of Orientalism: “Since Europe was seen as a foil to the Orient, and endowed with all conceivable positive attributes, the East was judged on its similarity to or difference from the West. To be less like it was to remain in a state of otherness, of inferiority, to become more like Europe was to progress” (p. 88). In *Appointment with Death*, it can be observed that the East is represented as the ‘Other’ of the West and the easterner as the ‘Other’ of the westerner. In the novel, eastern people’s reflection as a means of entertainment for westerners attests the acts of othering and marginalization of the easterner by the westerner. As an instance to this othering and marginalizing the non-western people in the novel, the young doctor Sarah King’s ridicule of the oriental people can be given. She remembers her chat with Raymond Boynton:

They had compared notes on Egypt, had laughed at the ridiculous language of the donkey boys and street touts. Sarah had described how a camel man when he had started hopefully and impudently “You English lady or American?” had received the answer: “No, Chinese”. And her pleasure in seeing the man’s complete bewilderment as he stared at her (p. 12).

As the foregoing excerpt portrays, eastern people become a means of amusement for western people in the novel, and hence they are objectified and made the Other. The scene is also remarkable in the sense that it puts western characters in the centre and eastern characters in the periphery and it shows when the Other becomes the object, the Self becomes the subject. Here the westerner is the amused and the easterner is the amusing, which gives them the subject and the object positions respectively.

One of the common attitudes to non-westerners in the orientalist discourses is westerners’ projection of the eastern people as lazy and lax; and this is related with the ideas above. In *Appointment with Death*, as the writer adopted this stereotypical depiction of the oriental people, there are notable instances of the rendering and description of the oriental people through many of the traditional western-manufactured epithets. The narrator implies the idea that Orientals are indolent and they tend to sneak away from work whenever they have a chance. The scene in which the dragoman becomes very happy when the tourists do not require his services, which means that he can continue his laziness is the proof of the stereotypical representation of the oriental people in the novel. The dragoman says: “no one there. They all gone walking. For me, that is very well-better than usual. I can go back to sleep” (p. 116).
Christie also portrays easterners as babbling people in the character of the dragoman. The scene in which Hercule Poirot wants to ask some questions to the guide, Mahmoud in order to detect the criminal(s) presents this stereotypical image:

[Poirot] ordered Mahmoud to be brought to him. The stout dragoman was voluble. Words dripped from him in a rising flood.
‘Always, always, I am blamed. When anything happens, say always, my fault. Always my fault. When Lady Ellen Hunt sprain her ankle coming down from Place of Sacrifice it my fault, though she would go high-heeled shoes and she sixty at least - perhaps seventy. My life all on misery! Ah! What with miseries and iniquities, Jews do to us’.
At last Poirot succeeded in stemming the flood and in getting in his question (p. 116).

What Christie does with this kind of depiction of the oriental is to highlight the oriental people’s deficiencies. With her method of projection of them, she endorses the polar opposition between the easterner and westerner once again in the novel as she implies through the reflection of Poirot’s behavior that no westerner speaks to say nothing.

Non-western people have been projected to be unreliable people and as liars in the orientalist writings. Sara Mills (2001) points out this aspect of the orientalist works: “the ‘native’ […] is frequently constructed as an inveterate liar in texts” (p. 113). In Christie’s novel, there is a scene illustrating this attitude. Poirot remarks that the dragoman helped him, but Lady Westholme does not take it seriously:

‘I have here a plan,’ said Poirot, ‘concocted with the help of the dragoman, Mahmoud’.
Lady Westholme remarked that in that case it was probably wrong!
‘That man is grossly inaccurate. I have checked his statements from my Baedeker. Several times his information was definitely misleading’ (p. 91).

In the novel, another stereotypical representation of the oriental people is provided by the reflection of the servants’ protecting each other by acting stupidly:

‘No, my good gentlemen, that would be impossible. None of the boys admit it for a moment. Old lady angry, you say? Then naturally boys would not tell. Abdul say it Mohammed, and Mohammed say it Aziz and Aziz say it Aissa, and so on. They are all very stupid Bedouin – understand nothing’ (p. 116).

One of the ways of discounting the non-western people in the texts written with an orientalist consciousness and in an orientalist style by western authors is the description of non-westerners as dirty. In Christie’s novel people from the Orient are considered to be ones showing no care for their neatness and cleanliness in their clothing. Everything they wear is described as dirty, shabby and ragged:

Finally she followed one of the native servants. He wore khaki breeches much patched and untidy puttees and a ragged coat very much the worse for wear. On his head the native headdress, the cheffiyah, its long folds protecting the neck.
and secured in place with a black silk twist fitting tightly to the crown of his head (p. 58).

Concisely, Christie upheld many of the traditional western clichés and epithets about the easterner in her novel. It is apparent that all these stereotypical revelations of oriental people serve to endorse the superior status of the westerner and the subordinate status of the oriental. As mentioned earlier the superior and subordinate positions have been maintained through the popular binarism between East and West, some examples to which are civilized/backward, honest/dishonest, industrious/lazy, moral/immoral or degenerate, sexually restrained/lecherous or perverse, rational/irrational, intelligent/stupid and sophisticated/unrefined. Similar binary oppositions are “innovation versus backwardness, new versus old, efficiency versus corruption, powerful versus weak, superior versus inferior” (Bayrak Akyıldız and Saia, 2015, p. 164). Christie relied on binary oppositions analogous to those given above in the depiction of eastern people in her novel and thus categorized them.

As can be observed from the extracts taken from Appointment with Death, the westerners’ prejudiced ideas about the East are conveyed through not only the narrator but also the western characters. The western perception of the East can also be recognized by the reader by means of these characters. For instance, Sarah is intolerant with the religion of the people in Jerusalem. She sees their religion as “very odd” and their worship buildings as “awful things”. In addition to this, Dr. Theodore Gerard ridicules their religion saying “Every imaginable sect squabbling and fighting!” Likewise Sarah finds it ridiculous that she has been prohibited to enter the synagogue or a mosque (because it is not clear enough in the novel) and tells the doctor: “They turned me out of one place today because I had on a sleeveless dress,” […] “Apparently the Almighty doesn't like my arms in spite of having made them” (p. 8). This attitude of both of them clearly shows that westerners see the oriental people as heathens and they lack tolerance toward the differences; instead of accepting differences as they are because there are different cultures in the globe, they criticize the cultural aspects just because they do not conform to the western norms. In the scene Sarah complains that the oriental people are narrow-minded when it comes to religion. This must be the result of Christie’s own preference to equip her characters with orientalist manners and opinions. The scene is also the indication of Christianity’s being taken as the standard in the western world. It is taken as norm and thus the eastern people are portrayed as heathens.

Besides, throughout the novel, Mrs. Boynton is referred to as the Indian holy man, Buddha. She is described as “the grotesque Buddha-like figure” (p. 12), “a monstrous swollen female Buddha” (p. 57), “a motionless Buddha in the door of her cave” (p. 65). As it is known, the Buddha is “the Indian holy man (563- 483 BC) on whose life and teachings Buddhism is based” and Buddhism is “a religion that originally comes from India, and teaches that personal spiritual improvement will lead to escape from human suffering” (Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, 2008, p. 179). What Christie actually does in defining Mrs. Boynton by loading down Buddha with negative qualities is to devalue one of the oriental religions. According to the critics of orientalism, belittling an oriental value is a very common orientalist attitude. Moreover, Buddhism is not a religion in Israel, which is the setting in the novel. Christie’s referring to Buddhism in this context in an insulting way indicates that she makes generalization while defining oriental religion.
Orientalism is a cliché-ridden approach to non-western world and people. One of these clichés is generalization, which means categorization of the East and easterner. It is generally known that generalization instead of individuation is a very common way of defining the oriental by the non-eastern researchers. Peter Barry (1995) points out this fact as in the following:

[The East] tends to be seen as homogenous, the people there being anonymous masses, rather than individuals, their actions determined by instinctive emotions (lust, terror, fury, etc.) rather than by conscious choices or decisions. Their emotions and reactions are always determined by racial considerations (they are like this because they are asiatics or blacks or orientals) rather than by aspects of individual status or circumstance” (p. 128).

Said (1979), in Orientalism, complains that the western world has become normative in the evaluation of the East and easterner in the orientalist discourses; and because the eastern world fails to conform to the standards of western world, the East and easterner become the Other. Before Said, Albert Memmi in the colonial context, took the issue of generalization of the natives as one of the truths about the colonial situation in his work, The Colonizer and the Colonized (1957) introduced by Jean-Paul Sartre and dealing with the psychological effects of colonialism on both the colonizer and the colonized. While giving the portrayal of the colonized, Memmi (2003) views generalization as a way of depersonalization, through which the colonizer does not accept the non-European’s individuation:

Another sign of the colonized’s depersonalization is what one might call the mark of the plural. The colonized is never characterized in an individual manner; he is entitled only to drown in an anonymous collectivity (“They are this.” “They are all the same.”) […]

Finally, the colonizer denies the colonized the most precious right granted to most men: liberty. Living conditions imposed on the colonized by colonization make no provision for it; indeed, they ignore it. The colonized has no way out of his state of woe—neither a legal outlet (naturalization) nor a religious outlet (conversion). The colonized is not free to choose between being colonized or not being colonized.

What is left of the colonized at the end of this stubborn effort to dehumanize him? He is surely no longer an alter ego of the colonizer. He is hardly a human being. He tends rapidly toward becoming an object. As an end, in the colonizer’s supreme ambition, he should exist only as a function of the needs of the colonizer, i.e. be transformed into a pure colonized (pp. 129-130).

Briefly, the colonized cannot exist as individual, which strengthens the object position of the colonized and which, in turn, strengthens the subject position of the colonizer. In Appointment with Death this attitude of westerners is observed in the scene where Poirot is in the inquiry about the murderer of Mrs. Boynton. In this scene the westerners’ seeing the people from the Orient as a homogeneous mass is related with the oriental people’s wearing damaged and dirty clothes, which makes it difficult for western people to distinguish between them. It is because of this reason that Miss Pierce complains that “[a]ll these Arabs look alike” to her and it is confirmed by Mrs. Westholme, the female politician: “really these Arabs look all alike” (p. 93). However, later on Mrs. Westholme gives a very detailed description of the non-existing
Arab servant, which makes Poirot able to understand that Mrs. Westholme is the murderer. In other words, the detective actually knew the general attitude of the westerners toward the eastern people – their generalization of the oriental people; although Mrs. Westholme has such an attitude toward the oriental people, she gives a thorough description of the servant, whom she and Mrs. Pierce claim to see. She describes him as “a man of more than average height,” and says he “wore the usual native head-dress. He had on a pair of very torn and patched breeches – really disgraceful they were – and his puttees were wound most untidily – all anyhow! These men need discipline!” (p. 93). Mrs. Westholme’s conflicting speeches – on one side she generalizes Arabs and on the other side she describes the so-called Arab servant in detail – arouse suspicion in the detective and become a preliminary hint for him to resolve the case and finally to reveal the fact that she has committed the murder.

Before killing Mrs. Boynton Mrs. Westholme dresses herself up as an Arab servant so that everyone in the camp will assume that the person near Mrs. Boynton is really a servant. Disguising herself wearing an Arab servant’s costume she thinks that she could get rid of the suspicions. She says that there happened a verbally fight between Mrs. Boynton and the servant; she even makes a comment on why they discussed. Mrs. Westholme’s prejudices about the oriental people are also included in her lies:

‘Oh! Yes, I remember, she [Mrs. Boynton] did seem extraordinarily annoyed with him! Of course, ’ went on Lady Westholme, ‘to have servants about who cannot understand a word of English is very trying, but what I say is that when one is travelling one must make allowances.’

‘What servant was this?’ asked Poirot.

‘One of the Bedouin servants attached to the camp. He went up to her - I think she must have sent him to fetch her something, and I suppose he brought the wrong thing’ (p. 92).

At first there seems to be no abnormality in the incident told by Mrs. Westholme because it is known that the westerners in such oriental spaces treat the oriental people especially servants in a humiliating way. When the incident is referred to by Poirot, who tries to connect the events with one another to detect the murderer, this clichéd attitude is confirmed once again. Poirot says: “An Arab, one of the servants, approaches Mrs. Boynton, angers her in some way and retires hastily” (p. 156).

Mrs. Westholme disguising herself as an Arab may be considered to be a motif taken from the acts of English travellers of the Victorian period. It was also a real way of penetrating into the East used by the western travellers in order to unravel the mysteries of the East. This view is put forward by Kabbani (1986): “shedding European clothes for Oriental garb became a pleasant pastime for the traveller” (p. 89). She also points out that:

The idea of penetrating into the East preoccupied the British travellers of the Victorian period. Many thought that living as similar a life as possible to that lived by Easterners was the best way to unravel mysteries. Lane, for example, stressed the fact that he had chosen to live in an Arab section of Cairo, in order to observe Muslim life more closely […] Lane wished to disguise all aspects of
his Englishness in all the ways open to him, by adopting new dress, new opinions, and a new name (1986, pp. 88-89).

Though the aim of Mrs. Westholme as a murderer is not to uncover the mysteries but to conceal herself, her act of disguising herself is very analogous to that of the English travellers mentioned by Kabbani. Mrs. Westholme pretends to be an easterner by means of dressing herself like an easterner. For this reason, it would not be wrong to say while creating such a scene in the novel, which constitutes the key incident in the plot, Christie shared the same idea with those travelers having had orientalist attitudes toward the non-western people.

One of the common representations of the oriental people in western discourses is achieved through othering the non-western people. Said (1979) argues that the othering of the non-western people is based on the diversity between the oriental and occidental, which is based on the binary oppositions: “The Oriental is irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, “different”; thus the European is rational, virtuous, mature, “normal” (p. 40). Othering the oriental people is dealt with almost all the critics of Orientalism. As instances Kabbani and Pennycock may be given: For Kabbani (1986), “[i]n the European narration of the Orient, there was a deliberate stress on those qualities that made the East different from the West, exiled it into an irretrievable state of’ otherness”; the themes used for othering “had their significance in medieval thought, and would continue to be voiced with varying degrees of forcefulness up to the present time (pp. 5-6)." Pennycook (1998) in the context of the colonial discourses points out the positions of the westerner and the non-westener in the othering process: “the ground on which European/Western images of the Self and Other have been constructed” was “the place where constructions of Superiority and Inferiority were produced” (p. 19). Therefore when a negative quality is attributed to the non-westerner, the westerner automatically is attached to the positive quality. In Appointment with Death Poirot and Mrs. Westholme’s considering themselves clean and non-westerners dirty can be recognized as a way of making the Oriental people the ‘Other’. While othering the oriental people by representing them with unfavourable adjectives, they actually define themselves as the ‘Self’. The dialogue between Mrs. Westholme and Poirot is worth quoting in the sense that it shows how Christie fortifies the western identity:

“They are very trying to the patience sometimes,” said Lady Westholme. ‘One of them took my shoes away, though I had expressly told him by pantomime too that I preferred to clean my shoes myself.’

‘Always I do that, too,” said Poirot, diverted for a moment from his interrogation. ‘I take everywhere my little shoe-cleaning outfit. Also, I take a duster.’

‘So do I.’ Lady Westholme sounded quite human.

‘Because these Arabs they do not remove the dust from one’s belongings’

‘Never! Of course one has to dust one’s things three or four times a day’

‘But it is well worth it.’

‘Yes, indeed. I cannot STAND dirt!’

Lady Westholme looked positively militant.

She added with feeling:

‘The flies - in the bazaars - terrible’ (p. 93)!

It is because of this quality of the oriental texts, for Kabbani, that the European had self-esteem; he was convinced that “he was the culmination of excellence in the human species. Other races
were his inferiors, lower down on the great scale of being (how low depending on how dark they were)” (1986, p. 8). The above extract also indicates that the act of othering the oriental people is accompanied by the act of racism. Both Poirot and Mrs. Westholme have the idea that because they come from Europe and America respectively, they are clean; and because those people are oriental, they are dirty.

Another instance to westerners’ making easterners the Other is Christie’s attachment of savagery, barbarity and cannibalism with the oriental people. Sarah connects savagery with the Orient. This is a description depending upon the racial stereotyping of oriental people and it is the novel’s confirmation of the notion of savagery in opposition to eastern people. When the tourist group travels through the desert, and arrives at Ma’an, the reader is told that “strange wild-faced men crowded round the car” (p. 56), which is an indication of the natives’ being regarded as annoying by the western people. Sarah thinks that the “female tyrant” (Rowland, 2001, p. 164) Mrs. Boynton could have been eaten by the cannibals if she had lived in a savage society (p. 58). While looking at an Arab man, Sarah sees the incongruity in his way of clothing. According to Sarah, “[o]nly the European part of his costume seemed tawdry and wrong” (Rowland, 2001, p. 164). The reader is aware of the fact that to whom Sarah attributes civilization and what she means when she refers to “savage tribes”. Yet Sarah as a sympathetic European “feels tempted to consider expedient death as a sacrifice for the good of the community” (Rowland, pp. 144-145). She thinks that only by the death of Mrs. Boynton, the family would get rid of the tyranny of Mrs. Boynton and would gain their freedom. Moreover, she becomes happy for the other members of the family when she learns that Mrs. Boynton has died; she feels no sorry for her even she learns that Mrs. Boynton has been killed rather than she died of natural causes.

One way of orientalist authors’orientalizing eastern people has been to base their definitions of the easterner and westerner on the racial differences. Christie puts forward the racial diversities in Appointment with Death. Susan Rowland (2001) claims that “the golden age writers lived and wrote in a racist society” and with Christie racism is “ambiguously depicted”; yet “self-conscious deployment of Orientalism in the construction of psychic Englishness” is seen as a major characteristic of these writers (with the exception of post-colonial Ngaio Marsh) (pp. 66-67). This may be exemplified in the novel by the English woman doctor Sarah King’s reflection by Christie as someone who has potential to explore a murder in an alien desert landscape. Another instance is the detective Hercule Poirot, who, in Christie’s almost all Poirot novels, is reflected as the embodiment of wisdom and sharp intelligence. Poirot in Appointment with Death is again proud of his being a European and of his distinct intelligence. Though he understands who the murderer is and how the murderer has committed the crime, only after he makes all the people in the camp gathered, he reveals the murderer’s identity. As in all Poirot novels, in Appointment with Death he is reflected as overly boastful but Christie also reflects him as someone deserving being proud of himself especially during a series of almost ceremonial meetings in which he explains the identities of the criminals along with his methods in investigations and the specific ways of solving the cases. We all know that Appointment with Death is a detective and crime novel so it is natural that Christie constructed her plot in this way; however the case in point is that she created her detective as a boastful man because of his racial qualities. This way of defining the westerner is actually related with what orientalists did in the construction of their western characters. They attributed unfavourable
epithets to easterners and thus favourable ones remained for the definition of westerners. Said (1979) indicates in Orientalism that in the western world western identities have been formed by projecting onto the “dark” or eastern “Other” the negative qualities such as irrationality, laziness, promiscuity, unconsciousness, primitivism and criminal tendencies and so forth. The negative stereotypical images embodying all the vices have traditionally been associated with the easterner. This means that the positive constituents of the binary oppositions have been exploited for the identification of the westerner.

Related with racial alterity, the oriental or colonial people have been reflected as “particular races to fill the specific occupations such as agricultural workers, soldiers, miners, domestic servants […] Thus they became associated with the dirtiest, most physically exacting and lowliest paid kinds of labour” as Ania Loomba points out (2005, p. 85). This may be thought to have found a way in Christie’s novels with oriental settings by the representation of oriental people as servants, beggars, donkey boys, porters, boatmen, waiters, stewards and dragomans. Appointment with Death has a method of representation of the oriental people only to project them as lower class people. They were all employed either as servants, workers or dragomans who are in the service of European and American characters as if the eastern people have an inborn affinity to perform such jobs. Though the main setting of the novel is the Orient, Christie employed the oriental people as background characters. This indicates that they do not correspond to even other minor characters, let alone the major characters; and so they are reflected in terms of their little function in the main plot and some sub-plots in the novel. The omission of the oriental people in the main action is indicative of their reflection as an object. Little attention is directed to them so they function as the oriental elements to color the novel and create a decorative background in the novel.

In Appointment with Death, Christie seems to have adopted an orientalist attitude by means of the standardization of the western values. Almost all orientalist discourses, as the critics argue, take western mindset and worldview normative to define and evaluate the non-western people. This aspect appears in the definition and judgment of the eastern characters by the western characters in the novel. A striking example can be given from a scene which has been referred earlier in the study. In the scene in Chapter 17, Mrs. Westholme has predictions about why Mrs. Boynton and (non-existent) Arab servant quarrelled; and she claims that Mrs. Boynton got angry with him because he could not understand a word of English. She tells Poirot: “[Mrs. Boynton] did seem extraordinarily annoyed with him! Of course, […] ‘to have servants about who [sic] cannot understand a word of English is very trying’ ” (p. 92). Here it is seen that Mrs. Westholme as an American takes English as standard and she is in the expectation that everyone should speak English. This is actually an anticipation of westerners even if they are in the oriental world, even if they are tourists, travelers, explorers or researchers and so on in those parts of the world, in which English is not the native language. This expectancy is so internalized in the novel that nobody questions it; even Poirot thinks that this may be the reason of the discussion between Mrs. Boynton and the servant.

Consequently, though Agatha Christie’s Appointment with Death does not occupy a prominent place among the works of literary orientalism, it seems to have contributed to the realm of orientalism with its prejudiced, generalized and unfavourable portrayal of the oriental people. Because the oriental characters were employed as background characters and because they do not bulk large in the plot in Appointment with Death, Christie’s disapprobation of the
East and easterners is not noticed easily. However, this very quality itself (the oriental characters’ not bulking large in the novel) demonstrates the fact that the novel takes eastern people as either servants or workers in the exotic space of the orient, where the European and American people enjoy touristic sightseeing. Yet through a close analysis this study has attempted to make, Appointment with Death can be seen within the realms of possibility of being an orientalist discourse.

Throughout this study it has been demonstrated that Christie based her novel on the dichotomy between the East and the West, between the ‘Other’ and the ‘Self’; thus she accentuated the diversity. In the depiction of the oriental people, Christie used the negative/unfavourable constituents of the binary oppositions, the positive constituents of which were used to reflect westerners. She has been observed to portray the non-western people as unrefined, uncivilized, dirty, shabby, lazy, lax, babbling and dishonest. Besides, they are reflected as savage, barbaric and cannibalistic, at least in the thoughts of the western characters. Christie seems to have used these features as evidence that Oriental people are less developed than Europeans and Americans. It is apparent that this causes the degradation of the non-western people in the novel. The degradation and marginalization of the oriental people are provided by not only Christie’s portrayal of them with the unfavourable adjectives and defining them through stereotypical beliefs, – which strengthens the negative view about the oriental people, – but also her stressing upon the standardization of western values. Whenever Christie reflects, describes, defines and judges the eastern people in the novel, as this study argues, she makes use of the western mindset and worldview as criteria. Therefore Appointment with Death may be claimed to be a text that endorses the dichotomy between the East and West, the easterner and westerner. Christie’s style of the depiction of oriental people is one of disapprobation. She seems to be a supporter of Orientalism. One of the significant qualities of the orientalist discourses is their reflection of people from the Orient as a homogeneous mass instead of as individuals – an approach which makes the oriental people the Other of the western Self and creates degradation with respect to the oriental. And this obviously results in the marginalization of the oriental people and the centralization of the European. The westerner has always a central situation and the easterner has a peripheral position. This study has put forth that Christie in her novel made use of all these Eurocentric clichéd approaches toward the easterners, which are, in effect, connected with each other. Christie’s novel may be recognized as an orientalist discourse dichotomizing people as the westerner and easterner, as the ‘Other’ and ‘Self’, as the superior and inferior, as the central and marginal. With all these attitudes complicating the mutual understanding between the oriental and occidental people the novel can be claimed to be a text which strengthens the westerners’ orientalist gaze upon the oriental.

REFERENCES


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A Synopsis of Appointment with Death

Appointment with Death includes two main parts, each of which has subsections. There are twelve chapters in the first part and thirty-one chapters in the second part. The first chapters of the novel serve as the exposition part, which both introduces the characters and gives the background information as far as it is concerned with the main action.

The action in the novel is set in Jerusalem, where Poirot stays in a hotel. He hears a voice from the adjacent hotel window declaring that someone has got to be killed. “You do see, don’t you, that she’s got to be killed?” The voice would linger on in Poirot’s memory. Sarah King, a newly graduated doctor and Theodore Gerard, a psychologist meet in the lobby of the hotel in which they stay and they chat for a while; they are both on a tour of the Middle East. During their chat their attention is riveted by an American family of six, the Boyntons. The family members are Emily Boynton, the mother, Lennox, Carol and Raymond, who are Mrs. Boynton’s three stepchildren, Nadine, the stepdaughter-in-law and Ginevra, Emily’s own daughter. All the members of the family are adult and they seem to be in the control of “the cruel and tyrannizing” “Buddha-like” matriarch. Surrounded by the grown up children of the family, old Mrs. Boynton, who is a harridan, has a profound manipulative power over her family. They never dare to move away from her side; everybody obeys her at any time. The reader will later get the idea that Mrs. Boynton’s sadistic and domineering characteristic might have inculcated from her former profession, prison wardress. Sarah becomes interested in the youngest son of the family, Raymond Boynton because she is attracted to him and thinks of how she can rescue him from his mother’s dominion. The evil malignancy of their mother and its disruptive effects on the family members are eye-catching for the French doctor Dr. Gerard. He learns something more about the family from an American lawyer, Jefferson Cope. He is the family’s lawyer. He tells Gerard that the father of the family died and the members of the family have to live depending on her due to the financial reasons. Mrs. Boynton destroyed the second will left by the children’s late father and put the first one in practice so that she could have a domineering power on them making them financially dependent on her. Mrs. Boynton
blackmails him into destroying the second will of her late husband which would have freed the children from her dominating influence. The family is taken on a holiday to Europe and The Holy Land by wish of Mrs. Boynton after the death of their father. Jefferson Cope is actually following the Boyntons with the desire to take Nadine, who is Cope’s ex-lover away from her husband, Lennox, and thus the influence of her stepmother-in-law. Cope is still in love with Nadine secretly.

Sarah manages to speak Carol Boynton despite Mrs. Boynton’s surveillance and learns that their mother is formerly a wardress in prison and stepmother to all but Ginevra, the youngest child of the family. Sarah persuades Carol to meet her later to talk again. Carol keeps the appointment and reveals the oddities about her family. Both agree to meet the following day but this time she cannot keep her promise because her mother noticed Carol speaks to an outsider. This time Sarah achieves to speak to Nadine, Mrs. Boynton’s daughter-in-law, Lennox’s wife. Sarah is informed by her that her stepmother-in-law has forbidden them to speak with Sarah and any other stranger. Sarah attempts to speak with them once again when the whole family leaves the tour but she fails in this. The tourist party is about to set for an excursion to Petra. There are Mrs. Westholme, a female politician, Miss Amabel Pierce, a former governess, Dr. Gerard and Sarah in the party. Though Sarah tries to get rid of the memories of the Boynton family, she cannot help thinking because she has fallen in love with Raymond to Emily’s disapproval. When Sarah meets them in Petra she gets surprised. In Jerusalem Sarah and Raymond met but then Raymond seemed to ignore her friendly gestures, he gave no response to her, which made her upset. Now Sarah understands why Raymond behaved in such a way: Mrs. Boynton did not want them to be close to each other. The reader is also given the fact that why Mrs. Boynton approved of Lennox and Nadine’s marriage in the past. One night Lennox spent the whole night out of the house, Mrs. Boynton got angry with him. Nadine, who was a distant relative of their father, was invited to stay in Boyntons’ because she was a poor student then. Nadine and Lennox fell in love with each other and Mrs. Boynton permitted them to marry on condition that Nadine would stay with the family.

After a two-day exploration together and when they reach in Petra, Mrs. Boynton sends the family away from her for a period of time. This is uncharacteristic for Mrs. Boynton. Having an excursion unaccompanied by their mother surprises the family members as well as the others in the party. The family obeys this commandment happily and Raymond has an opportunity to tell Sarah that he loves her. Although it seems impossible for them to unite because of Mrs. Boynton, Raymond vows that he will break free of his stepmother’s control. By nightfall, Mrs. Boynton is found dead among the towering red cliffs and the ancient ruins of Petra. The corpse is found sitting at an archeological dig, in front of the cave they have been staying during the excursion. A tiny needle puncture in her wrist is the only sign of the fatal injection that has killed her. Mrs. Boynton was sitting on a stool at the mouth of the cave, watching the party’s every move and doling out her demands.

The second part of the novel begins with Poirot and Colonel Carbury’s meeting in Amman. The Colonel is the man who is in charge of law enforcement in that region. When their conversation turns to crime, Colonel Carbury tells Poirot of a recent event, i.e. Mrs. Boynton’s death; and he says that he believes it is a murder although the official decision is death by natural reasons. Upon hearing this and that the victim is Mrs. Boynton, the renowned Belgian detective Hercule Poirot becomes interested in the case. Travelling with the group for several days and already knowing a good deal of them, Poirot accepts the request of Colonel Carbury to assist the authorities in their investigation.

He remembers the voice that he heard earlier through the hotel window. Later on, Dr. Gerard is called so that they could take advantage of his expertise. Poirot promises Colonel Carbury that he will solve the case after a twenty-four hour investigation. During the investigation Poirot queries all the members of the travelling group. He especially tries to detect what they were doing around the time of the murder; to this end, Sarah King, Lady Westholme, Miss Pierce, Lennox Boynton, Mrs. Lennox (Nadine) Boynton, Carol Boynton, Raymond Boynton are questioned one by one. Important data are all listed by Poirot at the request of Colonel Carbury. Interviewing the suspects, Poirot establishes a timeline that seems impossible. Sarah King places the time of death considerably before the times, which are claimed by various family members as the last times they saw the victim alive. Poirot focuses his attention on a
hypodermic syringe that has seemed to have been stolen from Dr. Gerard’s doctor’s kit in his tent and later replaced. The poison administered to the victim turns out to be digitoxin, a drug which Mrs. Boynton already took for her illness. This, of course, directs the suspicions on Nadine, who is a nurse and is responsible for Mrs. Boynton’s taking her drugs on time and in sufficient amount. Yet, Poirot keeps on seeing everyone as suspect. Poirot also consults the two doctors to draw the psychological profile of Mrs. Boynton as the victim. He tries to understand especially why she gave permission to her family to join the expedition without accompanying them. While they are exchanging their ideas, Ginevra Boynton is wandering near; Dr. Gerard feels an attraction to her. In the meantime, Nadine and Lennox discuss their new freedom and plan to live happily and freely with the other members of the family. Before Mrs. Boynton’s death, Nadine threatened Lennox to depart from him and be together with her former lover, who actually followed them; but now she reconciles with Lennox because she loves him and they have an opportunity to live without the dominion of Mrs. Boynton. Poirot is almost accidentally informed by Miss Pierce that a syringe was thrown out the morning after the murder by one character, and retrieved by another. Later on, realizing the truth, Poirot calls together all the members of the family and other travelers. He places the facts of the case before them and forces the murderer to admit guilt. Thus through the end of the novel, the murderer is revealed to be Lady Westholme, who was formerly incarcerated in prison, where Mrs. Boynton was then a prison ward. Disguised as an Arab servant, Mrs. Westholme committed the murder. The hostility between Mrs. Boynton and Lady Westholme turns out to be based on an earlier enmity. It also becomes clear that she has relied on the suggestibility of Miss Pierce to misdirect her and thus to conceal her role in the murder. Eavesdropping on Poirot’s speeches in an adjoining room, lest her criminal history would be revealed, Lady Westholme commits suicide. In the last scene of the novel, all the members of the family, once tortured by their detestable mother, appear as happier than before. The family, free at last, takes up happy lives: Nadine and Lennox are happy together, Sarah is married to Raymond, Carol and Jefferson are married and Ginevra, who, now, takes up a successful career as an actress, is married to Dr. Gerard.