

DISCUSSIONS

PLACES IN BETWEEN RORY STEWART'S JOURNEY THROUGH AFGHANISTAN

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When you hear of a white Western man having walked through the Afghan desert just after the attacks of 9/11 you cannot help but think that he must have either gotten kidnapped or killed on the way. But neither of those things happened to Rory Stewart. He walked out of the desert alive and wrote an international best-seller about his journey, *The Places in Between*.¹

Stewart's timing was fortuitous. When he started his walk in Afghanistan in January 2002, the relations in the country between Westerners and locals had not yet become as tense as they would have been only a few months later. However, from his story, the reader can understand how Stewart also possesses a certain degree of power, based on his privileged position as a former diplomat, that protects him and enables him to finish the journey without getting into too much trouble. Although only a lonesome traveler, he had his plans backed up with his local personal contacts and could move relatively safely from one village to another.

Connections function as a gatekeeper and give the traveler access and power to the inside that is not in every traveler's hands. Power and privilege have accompanied travel writing as a genre for centuries. The question that these concepts raise are manifold; who has the freedom of mobility and the privilege to gain insight when it comes to writing about faraway lands? Edward Said² and Ziauddin Sardar³ have pointed to the connection between travel writing and the practice of orientalism in Europe's past by criticizing the consequences of this literary genre. Debbie Lisle again poses the question of whether contemporary travel writing like Stewart's is still embedded in its historical heritage of a colonial vision.⁴ Indeed, Stewart's positionality and his professional background allows him to arrive and depart, perfectly according to a vision of a globalized world. However, a critical reader must recognize, that

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1 Rory Stewart. *The Places in Between* (London: Picador, 2004).

2 Said, Edward (1979). *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books

3 Ziauddin Sardar. *Orientalism* (Buckingham & Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1999).

4 Debbie Lisle. *The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

Afghanistan is not a destination open for all. There is a difference between a travel writer like Stewart being backed up by his publisher travelling for a purpose and a mere tourist. Ticking the box "Afghanistan" for previous travel destinations on the security questions section in the visa application to Germany "could have consequences with regard to the visa application process and/or the curtailment of a future stay in Germany."

In this brief discussion, I will introduce my personal critical examination of *Places in Between* and deliberate the way it reflects the power relations that the Occidental man still can exercise in the Orient.

I. BORN TO BE WILD

Why would someone want to go on such a journey, through landscapes of sand and gravel under the burning sun, surrounded by bare mountains that not even the locals would want to cross in the harsh winter days? For such extraordinary conditions, you need an extraordinary traveler; the critics of Stewart's book thus promise "Travelling at its hardest and travel-writing at its best". Rory Stewart has indeed an extraordinary profile. A Scott, a son of a civil servant father, born in Hong Kong, enjoyed the privilege of education in Malaysia and in England in the best colleges such as Oxford and Eton, served then as a diplomat in Indonesia and became a Member of the English Parliament after *Places in Between* was published. In an interview at the University of California⁵, Stewart is portrayed accordingly as a cosmopolitan with an open mind and curiosity for the world. His own narrative explains how he was bored with his work in the army, disappointed for not having found the excitement he was looking for but ended up instead stuck with office work. The same, he says, goes for his jobs at the Harvard University and the Parliament, which – it is worthy to mention – he has gained after having published the book. Thus, after his service in Indonesia in the year 2000, he takes a leave and decides to walk 6000 miles through Asia.

Stewart's walk in Afghanistan was a continuation of his other walks through Iran, India, Pakistan and Nepal. It was "the missing section, the place between the deserts and the Himalayas, between Persian, Hellenic and Hindu culture, between Islam and Buddhism,

between mystical and militant Islam."⁶ Moreover, walking is one of the most primitive ways of human behavior and for Stewart, it has an emotional connection to his roots. In the Berkeley interview, he notes how it is a great Scottish tradition of his "Highland clan" to walk and not to take the horse like other clans would do.

Although for Stewart the walk might have been for the sake of his interest in the country and his goal to write a book, it seems that his feet are restless and that what he could not find in the study halls of Oxford, Harvard or Eaton nor the diplomat service, he would find on his walk. Answering a journalist's question about the dangers of his plans, he gives an account of a journey that could describe the ultimate religious pilgrimage; "The Prussian blue sky – this air. It feels like a gift. Everything,' I said warming to my theme, 'suddenly makes sense. I feel I have been preparing for this all my life'."⁷

II. I DID IT MY WAY

Stewart starts his walk to Kabul from Herat which is the third largest city in Afghanistan. For the start, he must negotiate with Security Service officers, who might be suspicious of his intentions. His subject position is multifaceted as a travel writer, former diplomat and historian, but most importantly he is very clear about not being a tourist.⁸ When the officer tells him that, "there are three meters of snow on the high passes, there are wolves, and this is war. You will die, do you want to die?" Stewart, thanking for the advice, insists that he "must do this journey".⁹ Although Stewart is following the footsteps of an ancient Mughal Emperor, Babur, he is a modern traveler free to make up his own mind. He will not accept any restrictions that the locals might impose upon him.

It is one thing going on a journey through Afghanistan and another wanting to do it alone. Stewart is not only reluctant at following the advice of the locals on refraining from the journey, but he also dislikes the idea of being escorted by armed guards, which is manifested in his rebellious behavior on many occasions. Very different from other travel accounts from the past like that of Gertrude Bell's in *The Desert and the Sown*, who became close friends with her travel companions, Stewart's understanding of getting to know the country is somewhat

⁶ Stewart, *The Places in Between*, 29.

⁷ Ibid, 30.

⁸ Stewart, *op. cit.*, 6.

⁹ Ibid, 6.

⁵ "The Places in between with Rory Stewart. Conversations with History." URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Qg9WqAyOCM>

particular. As he tells a commandant offering him assistance, he “needs to travel alone for the book”¹⁰ instead of having a group of armed men to safeguard him. At the end, he cannot risk of being not allowed to get on the journey and thus accepts two soldiers as walking companions, Abdul Haqq and Qasim.

It is not really clear, why Stewart would want to dive head first into the dangers he might encounter along the way. But, he does mention how he is disturbed by the way his armed escorts, former *mujahideen*, dominated his vision of the landscape by telling him endless stories of battles on the riverbanks and mountains. Nevertheless, when he is finally escorted only by a civilian, doctor Habibullah, of whom he considers “local” and thus a more fitting companion for the walk, doctor Habibullah will tell him just the same stories, only from another angle. It is the war that the people of Afghanistan know, and it is the defeats and victories that connect them to the landscape.¹¹ And as another war is on its way, Stewart fails to reflect on these aspects of Afghan topography. Yet he does not forget to tell us every time he goes to the “loo” taking advantage of the profitable hiding places in the terrain.

When Stewart cannot escape the company of his escorts, he very clearly demonstrates his power of command over the local guides. Despite the dangerous circumstances such as the weather or non-walkable passages, he is always against whatever advice he is given. However, it seems that Stewart is picking and choosing when to avoid the possible rush of adrenaline and when not. Near Dideros, as Stewart and his companions are by sunset few hours walk away from the village he rebels against Qasim; “If this road is as dangerous as you say, we cannot walk in the dark. We must sleep here. (...) There is a village there.’ ‘We don’t know anyone from that village. It would be too dangerous just to walk in.’ It was even more dangerous to walk at night. I said so and turned off. They followed me.”¹² In the village of Obey, Qasim advises Stewart to discontinue his walk in the dark and the rain as there were roadblocks by bandits; “I was going to walk regardless (...) that was five hours of walk and there were only four hours till dark”.¹³ It is on that road then that Stewart and his companion Abdul Haqq, first get attacked by a man in the dark and Stewart finally falls down from a cliff on a river bank. If Stewart was looking for a compensation for his boredom in the office, this must have been his moment.

The whole enterprise of Stewart’s journey reflects both current and past power relations

10 Ibid, 133.

11 Ibid, 135-136.

12 Ibid, 79.

13 Ibid, 108.

that relate to freedom of mobility at the national and international level. Stewart’s pass into the villages he stays overnight is secured by letters of introductions – analogous to passports – which he, as a man of diplomacy and good connections, has either pre-arranged from important personalities such as the Minister of Social Welfare or gathers along the way from tribal leaders and village headmen. That such a piece of paper is a valuable instrument to ensure one’s safety in guaranteeing the visiting person’s background, is known to many other traveler writers such as Gertrude Bell, who in the beginning of the 20th century during her journey through the lands of Sham used a forced written permission to cross the areas guarded by Ottoman military. By accounting his own coming and going Stewart conveys to the reader how the relationships between the tribes and villages are arranged in the country, how important personal connections are, but he does not however in any sense address the legacy of this colonial power, or even the general white privilege of mobility.

However, the reader might become suspicious of the legitimization of Stewart’s mobility when Qasim introduces Stewart to the village headmen on several occasions not as a history professor or a travel-writer as such but for example as someone giving international financial assistance to villages in Afghanistan¹⁴ (which might be true for his later enterprise as the CE of the Turquoise Mountain Foundation) or as a Ukrainian doctor working for the United Nations.¹⁵ Although Stewart becomes wary about how the lies might be for his disadvantage if he gets caught for lying, Qasim accounts that there is no need to worry because like himself, the villagers in would not even know where Ukraine is, which raise the question; what is the importance of having his walk secured by his dear letters of introductions, if hospitality that he enjoys in Afghanistan, transcends nationalities?

III. RORY WAS HERE

Stewart himself believes that there are many young men who would be happy to do things like walk across Afghanistan like he did.¹⁶ But how possible it is for those many young men to obtain similar kind of letters of introduction through connections, they as plebeian citizens would not have? Whereas Stewart, *can* what he *wants*, it would not be the same for his Afghan

14 Ibid, 80.

15 Ibid, 49.

16 “*The Places in Between* with Rory Stewart: Conversations with History”.

companions. For the country is not only in conflict with the world but it is also riven by many internal conflicts that restrict the Afghans' mobility in their own land. Not to mention the difference between the mobilized men and women who are hidden in their homes, so that not even Stewart seems to be able to describe the towns and villages he passes being filled with "womenless streets". Thus, as Stewart reaches the compound of the Commandant Haji Mohsin Khan, a former commander for Taliban, he will learn that his previous escorts Qasim and Abdul Haqq, being the supporters of the then Governor of Herat Ismail Khan, would not have been welcomed with him. Luckily, Stewart was at this point traveling only with a rather unpolitical companion, a toothless big mastiff, the war dog Babur.

Stewart's power over his own mobility in a country that is not his and his decisions over the rhythm and the route he and his companions are to take have more to do with the questions of when to LEAVE than whether to STAY. Stewart has not come to Afghanistan to spend time with Afghans. He has come to "touch as much as possible of the country with my feet".¹⁷ His story telling does not, unfortunately, give the reader much to take with. Stewart stays in one village only one night, and even on these occasions, he sits with men, listening to the same narration of war stories and heroes and politics each night. Stewart's book does not tell us of the everyday life in Afghanistan. He even reproduces same gender stereotypes the reader most probably already is aware about Afghanistan; about the patriarchal culture and oppressed women, who like his war dog Babur, "have not left their villages for more than a three hour walk away."¹⁸

Stewart might have crossed Afghanistan, saw its life from a perspective the reader would not even dream of and had experiences that seem to have satisfied his longing for an escape from his boring bureaucratic life. But unfortunately, *The Places in Between* only makes it clear, how even in this globalized world, that world is not open to everyone. However, being in a privileged position is not necessary a bad thing to be ashamed of. The question is only, how that privilege functions as an instrument to construct narratives. This is the critical view related to colonial past and its recognition, I wish readers of Stewart's book and other travelogues will take.

17 Stewart, *The Places in Between*, 32.

18 Ibid, 146.