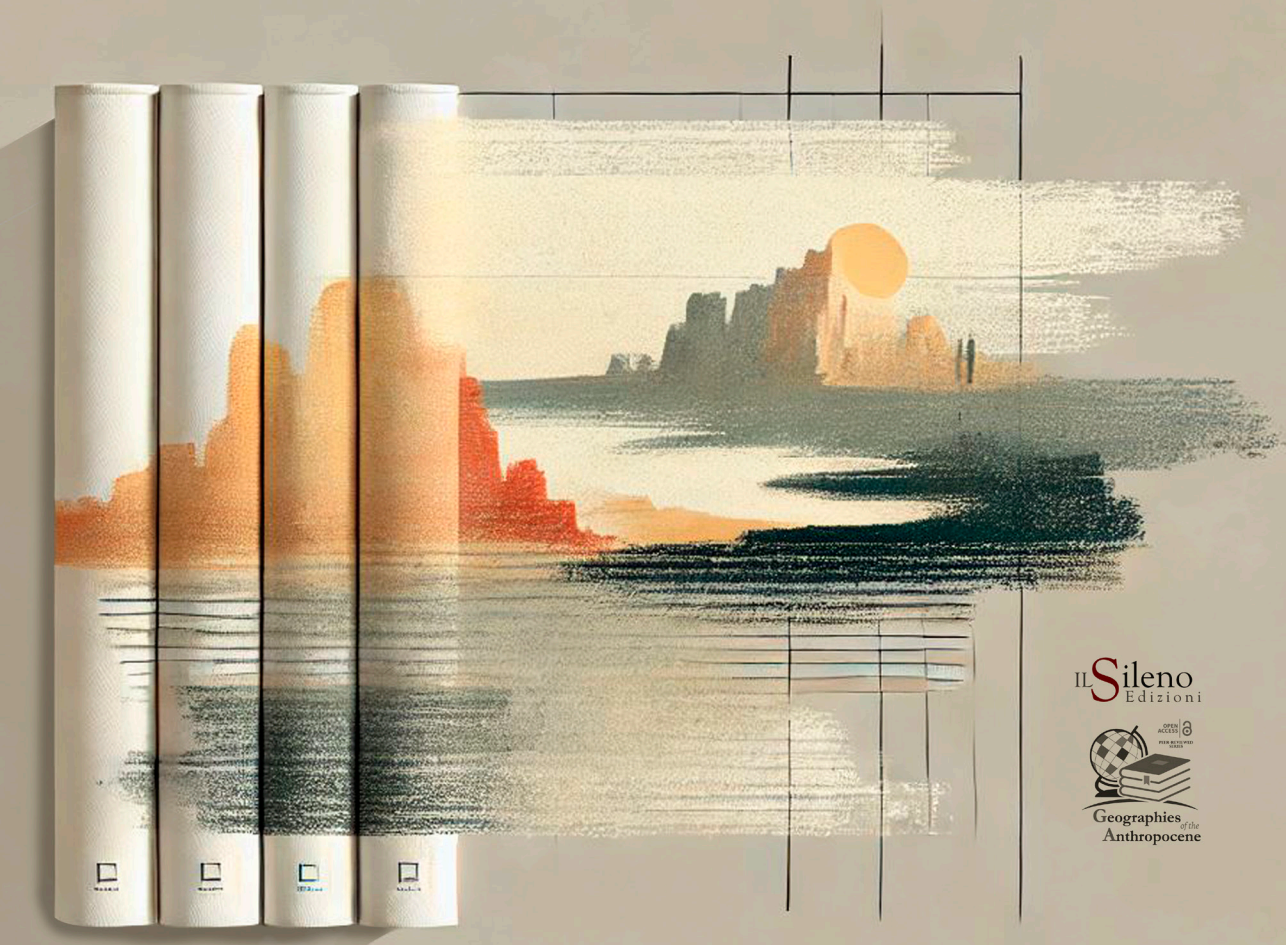
*Sara Ansaloni & Eleonora Gioia (Eds.)*

# Literature, Geography and The Poetics of Space

## *Tracing Historical Narratives Across Literary Landscapes*



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Geographies of the Anthropocene

*Preface by Charles Travis*

*Sara Ansaloni & Eleonora Gioia (Eds.)*

# Literature, Geography and The Poetics of Space

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Geographies of the Anthropocene

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Sara Ansaloni & Eleonora Gioia (Eds.)

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**Geographies of the Anthropocene**

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The book series "Geographies of the Anthropocene" edited by the Scientific International Publisher "Il Sileno" (Il Sileno Edizioni) will discuss the new processes of the Anthropocene epoch through the various worldviews of geoscientists and humanists, intersecting disciplines of Geosciences, Geography, Geoethics, Philosophy, Socio-Anthropology, Sociology of Environment and Territory, Psychology, Economics, Environmental Humanities and cognate disciplines.

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## PART III:

## Ecologies of Imagination: Fictional Geographies in the Anthropocene

# PART I:

## *Imagined Worlds: Travel Narratives and the Role of Memory*

# 1. “Oriental” travel narratives in French 18th-century epistolary novels

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## *Abstract*

In French 18th-century epistolary novels, the “Orient” was the most exploited “exotic” theme. In these novels, characters from different “Oriental” countries travel to France and other European countries to observe other cultures and customs that they later describe through the letters they send to various correspondents. But what is the “Orient”? For the French of that time, the “Orient” was roughly made up of four countries: Turkey, Persia, India, and China.

My work aims to analyze “exotic” narratives in 18th-century epistolary novels. First, I would like to focus on how different “Oriental” countries and populations are portrayed in some of these works, and the influence that said works, along with 17th-century non-fictional travel accounts, had on the readers of the time. Then, I would like to present the different “Oriental” fashions in French literature: the Turkish, the Persian, the Chinese, and the Indian vogues. In order to do so, I would like to analyze one epistolary novel per trend. I would start with the *Mémoires turcs* (1743) by Claude Godard d’Aucour, which portray a Turkish man traveling to France following the example of the Turkish spy of Marana’s *L’esploratore turco* (1684) – known in France as *L’Espion du Grand Seigneur and L’Espion turc* – which is the first epistolary novel with a foreign traveler as its protagonist. To describe the long-lasting fashion for Persia, that was inaugurated by 17th-century Tavernier’s and Chardin’s travel accounts and by Montesquieu’s *Lettres persanes* (1721),

a masterpiece of the epistolary genre and the "exotic" literary field, I would use Abbé de Rochebrune's *L'Espion de Thamas Kouli-Kan dans les cours de l'Europe* (1746), where a Persian traveler is sent by his sultan to Europe to spy on different countries. An epistolary novel that exemplifies Chinese vogue, that lasted throughout the 18th century with a peak in 1760, is Marquis d'Argens's *Lettres chinoises* (1739), where multiple Chinese correspondents exchange letters while traveling around Europe and Asia. For the Indian craze, that reached its peak in 1750s, I would like to analyze Louis-Antoine Caraccioli's *Lettres d'un Indien à Paris* (1789), where an Indian traveler describes his experience in France and in other European countries to his friend, family, and wives. Finally, I would like to show how these fashions and different interests in epistolary travel narratives corresponded to specific historical situations and to the geopolitical relations that France had with these "exotic" territories in the East over the 17th and the 18th century. For example, the French interest for Turkey was not exclusively due to its geographical proximity and the trading exchanges between the two countries, but also to the Ottoman Empire's presence in European affairs. As for Persia, Mehemet-Effendi's embassy to the French court, and the story of the usurper Thamas Kouli Kan helped make Persia popular. Concerning China, it was made know by Jesuit missionary who were sent there to evangelize the country, while the interest in India corresponded to France's presence in the Hindu peninsula through French East India Company.

**Keywords:** ***Orientalism, Epistolary Novels, 18th Century, French Literature, Travel Narratives***

# *1. Introduction*

In many French 18th-century epistolary novels, the "Orient" – at that time corresponding roughly to four countries, *id est* Turkey, Persia, India, and China – was a very common and exploited theme. In these novels, characters from different "Oriental" countries travel to France and other European countries to observe other cultures and customs that they later describe through the letters they send to various correspondents.

My work aims to analyze "Oriental" narratives in 18th-century epistolary novels. Despite the presence of other literary forms that deal with "Oriental" themes in 18th-century France, I chose the epistolary genre for two reasons. On the one hand, I believe that the indisputable success of the genre, especially when it portrays "Oriental" *épistoliers,* proves a fashion for and an interest in "Oriental" stories and elements. On the other hand, since epistolary novels are first-person narratives where authors, hiding behind their *épistoliers,* talk about the present time and express their ideas, opinions and feelings while they are experiencing them, I think this genre can give a better and more precise idea of the image 18th-century French had of the "Orient" and "Orientals".

In the following chapter, I will first focus on how different "Oriental" countries and populations are portrayed in some of these epistolary works. Then, I will present the different "Oriental" fashions in French literature: the Turkish, the Persian, the Chinese, and the Indian vogues. In order to do so, I will analyze one epistolary novel per trend. Finally, I will show how historical situations and the geopolitical relations that France had with these "Oriental" territories over the 17th and the 18th centuries shaped the content of epistolary travel narratives. Additionally, I will argue that the "Oriental" elements that can be found in epistolary novels nuance, if not contradict, Edward Said's thesis, according to which the whole narrative of European literature, starting from Aeschylus and Euripides, is a history of literature's complicity in inferiorization of the "Orient", and that such inferiorization is the result of imperialism and colonialism (Said, 1979).

In the 17th century a taste for the "Orient" started being exploited in French literature, even if this interest did not reach the proportions of the following century. But what was the "Orient", and particularly the literary "Orient"? For 17th- and 18th-century Frenchmen, "Orientals" were, indiscriminately,

"les Arabes et les Persans, mais encore les Turcs et les Tartares et presque tous les peuples de l'Asie jusqu'à la Chine, mahométans ou païens et idolâtres" (Galland, 1694, *Avertissement*) or to use Voltaire's more expansive borders, "les nations orientales" are those countries that extend "depuis les Dardanelles…jusqu'au fond de la Corée" (Voltaire, 1756, p. 284). Because of the authors' inability to distinguish between the various peoples, but also because of the lack of reliable material on which to base a better understanding of these realities, in 17th-century novels featuring Chinese, Persian and Turkish characters, as well as in most tragedies with "Oriental" themes, the only "Oriental" element is the name given to the protagonists, who remain Frenchmen and courtiers in their manners and actions, or the role they play (sultan, eunuch, etc.). Even if they are pseudo-Oriental works, they still testify to a growing interest in another reality and in a new literary taste.

However, it was not until the second half of the 17th century that a real knowledge of the "Orient" began to emerge in France. From a political point of view, Europe and the East already had relations with one another, mainly because of the Ottoman Empire's presence in European affairs that led to its attempts to establish its dominance on the continent. Christine Isom-Verhaaren (2011) explains that the Ottoman Empire became a crucial element in the balance of European powers after the fall of Constantinople (1453), and that a Franco-Ottoman alliance started in the 1530s, as proved by their joint campaign in 1543-1544. But it was during the wars between the Turks and several European states that France's King Louis XIV took a keen interest in the commercial, political, and colonial advantages that a contact with the "Orient" could bring. He therefore did not miss the opportunity to act as an intermediary by sending his ambassadors to Constantinople, which did contribute to spread a taste for *turqueries* and curiosity about the exotic world in France. In fact, according to Clarence Dana Rouillard (1941), ambassadors' accounts, but also those by missionaries, merchants, soldiers and travelers, had a double effect on the French: on the one hand, they created the stereotype of the "Turk" that became a familiar figure of literature; on the other hand, these contacts led to relativism, toleration, the comparative study of law, religion, and custom, and, in the end, to criticize multiple aspects of European society.

Given the presence of the Ottoman Empire in France's reality, it is no coincidence that the first epistolary novel to feature a foreigner traveling to France, whose customs and habits are well-portrayed, concerns Turkey. It is *L'esploratore turco*, an Italian novel published in 1684 by Giovanni Paolo Marana and translated into French first as *L'Espion du Grand Seigneur* and

then as *L'Espion turc*, which served as a model for Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes.*

Furthermore, in the second half of the 17th century, colonization campaigns in America, the evangelization work of missionaries in China and India, and the trade in luxury goods by merchants were fundamental in arousing French curiosity about other distant and mysterious lands.

To these elements must be added others that had an even greater influence on 18th-century literature. First of all, it is important to refer to 17th-century travel reports[1], which were the first sources of information on the "Orient", and which made the encounter with the *Étranger* – both in the sense of "foreigner" and "stranger" – one of their main motives. Michael Harrigan (2008), through his analysis of French travelers' accounts, argues that the image travelers gave of the East, despite being influenced by certain long-held stereotypes, was also rich in first-hand observations and impressions. Such portraits, while revealing the tension between the concept of "Orient" and what travelers observed, do also show that the "Orient" is not simply something "man-made", an "idea", as stated by Said (1979).

In addition to *récits de voyage,* there are also the reports published by missionaries from 1702 onwards where they give interesting information about the territories they visited. Such reports, published as letters, described lands, plants and animals, and painted a portrait of the peoples the missionaries encountered.

In numerous epistolary novels, writers never lost the opportunity to exploit all these images of the Other, identified not only with the "Oriental" man, but also with the inhabitant of the "New World". They also used the theme of the encounter between characters from different cultures and countries to confront their worlds and points of view, and to bring about a reversal of perspective (Chamayou, 1999).

Finally, in 1704, Antoine Galland published his translation of *Les Milles et Une Nuits,* a collection of Oriental tales that enchanted readers by opening the doors to magical worlds and transformed the exotic French novel by feeding the imaginations of writers who had rarely seen the wonders of the "Orient" with their own eyes (Martino, 1906).

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[1] See *Relation d'un voyage fait au Levant* (1664) and its sequel, *Suite du voyage de Levant* (1674) by Jean de Thévenot; *Six Voyages of Jean Baptiste Tavernier* (1676); and *The Travels of Sir John Chardin* (1686).

It is perhaps superfluous to point out that the image of the "Orient" conveyed by all these works, that influenced Orientalist scholars' research, although less simplistic and richer in detail than in the past, did not correspond exactly to reality. Travel writers, and later novelists, portrayed a stereotyped "Orient", where the landscape was barely sketched and "Orientals" were described simply as handsome men, fancifully dressed, intelligent, perhaps a little vain, but polite and welcoming. This way of "dealing with the Orient", that Said attributes to Orientalism and all its forms is, according to him, "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority of the Orient" (1979, p. 3). However, I think Srinivas Aravamudan's argument is much more compelling and nuanced. According to Aravamudan, Orientalism does not deal with the Orient by "making statements about it, authorizing view about it, […], by teaching it, settling, ruling over it" (Said, 1979, p. 3), but "by dreaming with the Orient – dreaming with it by constructing and translating fictions about it, pluralizing views of it, inventing it, by reimagining it, unsettling its meaning, brooding over it", in short: "a Western style for translating, anatomizing, and desiring the Orient" (Aravamudan, 2011, p. 8).

Readers' first impressions were therefore very positive, and their sympathy for "Orientals" will remain mostly unchanged, even if these peoples are sometimes criticized for their deceit, flattery, and laziness, and for not being Christians. As we will see later, in epistolary novels there is nothing that suggests that the authors considered "Orientals" inferior or peoples on whom they sought control, as suggested by Said who argues that the "Occident" has always seen the "Orient" as inhabited by inferior people whom it wanted to dominate (Said, 1979).

In fact, writers showed interest in many aspects of "Oriental" societies: their religion, rich in superstitions and extravagant rites; the concept of love as it was supposedly conceived and practiced in the East and which was associated to voluptuous seraglios full of beautiful women and ridiculous, yet mysterious eunuchs; and the type of despotic government to which all Eastern countries were subjected (Grosrichard, Miller, Miller, 1979).

However, it is important to point out once again that what we call the "Orient" is roughly made up of four countries, namely Turkey, Persia, India and China. In the collective imagination, the inhabitants of each of these countries had unique characteristics that were widely exploited in literature: the Turks were famous for their gallantry, the Persians had the reputation of being spiritual, the Chinese, although they were chosen as

literary scapegoats, were considered philosophers, and the Indians were deemed poor, but virtuous and sensitive. Since these countries were not all known at the same time, it is not surprising that, depending on the period, the French showed more interest in one people rather than another, and that the people *à la mode* at a given time subsequently gave their physiognomy and character to the peoples of the "Orient" in general. (Martino, 1906).

In this chapter, I will argue that the French interest in the "Orient" that is found in epistolary novels can be analyzed through four main exotic "fashions" – the Turkish, the Persian, the Chinese and the Indian ones – has political, historical and geographical roots. While presenting and discussing each *mode,* I will consider a different epistolary novel in order to show, and this is the goal of my contribution, that the French interest in the "Orient" did not originate from a sense of superiority and that Said's argument needs to be nuanced and put in perspective. In fact, I argue that they had a sincere admiration and curiosity about countries that they saw, according to the historical period, as allies, enemies and competitors.

## *2. Turkish and Persian fashions and their political roots*

I argue that one of the main reasons behind France's interest in the "Orient" is political, and by political I refer here mainly to the complex geopolitical relations Europe, and particularly France, had with Eastern countries. In fact, over the 17th and 18th centuries, alliances were made and broken off, wars were declared, and embassies were sent in hopes of alleviating tensions.

It is not surprising that Turkey, as the geographically closest and most "familiar" land of the "Orient", was, so to speak, the first fashionable country. French interest in Turkey, reflected in the many *turqueries* present in the novels, stemmed not only from the long-standing trade between the two countries, but also from the Ottoman Empire's constant presence in European affairs: the Ottoman forces besieged the Venetian-ruled capital city of the Kingdom of Candia (1648-1669); they fought against the Habsburg monarchy (1663-1664); and from 1683 until 1699, the Holy League had to face once again the Ottoman Empire in the Great Turkish War. Furthermore, given the presence of multiple French ambassadors in Constantinople since Francis I's kingdom who sent letters to friends, families and the *Mercure Galant,* the French were constantly up to date about what happened in the *Sublime Porte*. And under Louis XIV's reign they could see firsthand a Turkish man when in 1669 the Turkish ambassador Soliman Muta Ferraca came to France, followed in 1721 by the ambassador Mehmed Efendi and in 1742 by his son, Mehmed Said Pasha (Longino, 2011). As expected, the processions that accompanied the ambassadors were theatrical and exotic enough to feed the imagination of the French onlookers. While Turkish ambassadors were in France, newspapers, almanacs and special editions kept the public informed about where these "Oriental" guests went, to whom they talked, and speculated about these handsome and gallant men's love adventures. There were also commemorative medals and engravings of their portraits that circulated all over the country.

In the 18th century, the Ottoman Empire, already a source of concern because of its military might, fought against Austria and Russia on and off from the 1760s until the end of the century. These conflicts led to the publication of numerous historical accounts and novels with a Turkish theme, which continued to circulate even as readers' tastes began to change. Among these

works, I would like to briefly analyze the *Mémoires turcs*[2] (1743) by Godard d'Aucour.

The *Mémoires turcs* is a "mixed" novel, divided into two formally distinct parts. In the first, written in the form of a memoir, the protagonist, Dely, tells his story; by contrast, the second part (on which I will focus here) is entirely epistolary, consisting of seven letters that Dely included in his memoirs. Four of these letters are part of the correspondence between Achmet and his slave Atalide, who remained in his harem in Turkey, and two form an exchange between Achmet and a French lady, Madame la Marquise de Chambertin. Achmet is a wealthy Turk who travels to Paris following the Ottoman ambassador. In Turkey, he has left a seraglio full of women, including his favorite, a French woman named Atalide, who is also the main recipient of his letters. Although the couple is sincerely in love with each other, Achmet, once in Paris, does not hesitate to have love affairs with numerous French women, the details of which he recounts to Atalide. Among these women, there are countesses, duchesses and marchionesses who fall victim of Achmet's exotic charm. The Turkish man exploits the effect he has on women to reproduce in Paris a sort of temporary harem in which many women participate voluntarily. One of them, Thérèse, falls so in love with him that she accepts to follow him to Constantinople to become part of his original harem. Despite supporting Eastern traditions such as polygamy and despite his reserves for the Christian clergy that he considers corrupt and hypocrite, once back in Turkey, Achmet shows empathy and open-mindedness by accepting Atalide's pleas to be freed so that she can withdraw to a convent in France. Hence, Achmet reveals that he is not the domestic despot "Orientals", such as Usbek, the protagonist of Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes,* are thought to be in much eighteenth-century French writing (De Carolis, 2008).

In fact, Atalide herself shows her readers that the idea one might have of Turkish people and customs does not correspond to reality and is just the fruit of a French stereotype. In the first letter she writes to Achmet she tells him: "je ne m'étois pas attendue, je l'avoue, à trouver de si généreux sentimens dans un Turc, dont je m'étois fait un portrait bizarre. Dès ce jour, Seigneur, je fus votre Esclave à plus d'un titre. Ces idées barbares que je m'étois formées du serrail s'évanouirent dans un instant" (Godard d'Aucour, 1750, p. 91). The same prejudice was at first shared by Thérèse, as Achmet tells Atalide in the second

[2] The full title is: *Mémoires turcs avec l'histoire galante de leur séjour en France. Par un Auteur Turc de toutes les Académies Mahométanes, licencié en droit, & Maîtres-ès-Arts de l'Université de Constantinople.*

letter he sends her: “je tâchais de chasser peu-a-peu de l’esprit de l’aimable Thérèse, les idées barbares que la prévention lui avoit données des Turcs. Je la conduisis moi-même par tout mon petit Palais, qu’elle trouva fort à son gré” (Godard D’Aucour, 1750, p. 158). The following day, Thérèse told him that he was “le plus tendre de tous les hommes” and that “[les] français ne sont pas capables d’une si belle flâme” (Godard d’Aucour, 1750, p. 160). Achmet’s success in convincing her that Turkish men are not as brutal as the French might have depicted them is also proven by the fact that, after joining a sort of orgy he organized, Thérèse begs him to take her with him back to Turkey.

Since the *Mémoires turcs* were published in 1743 and portrays the Parisian loves of a Turkish man belonging to the Turkish embassy in France, I argue that Godard d’Aucour was likely inspired by Effendi’s embassy in 1721, which fascinated the public, especially with rumors about Turkish men’s “aventures galantes”. According to the *Relation du voyage de l’ambassadeur du Grand Seigneur en France, et du sejour qu’il a fait en cette cour,* the Turkish ambassador “se fit concours de tout le Peuple, & principalement des Dames qu’il gracieusa beaucoup, & à qui il fit présenter du Caffé selon la coutume des Orientaux : de sorte que pas une ne sort de son Hôtel sans être également charmée de sa politesse, de la majesté de son visage que de ses manières honnêtes” (Anonymous, 1721, p. 220-221).

In my opinion, the *Mémoires turcs,* whose writing was clearly influenced by the arrival of Turkish ambassadors in France, not only proves the French readers’ interest in the *affaires turques* but it also offers a great example of how the French perceived the Turkish. Despite presenting the Turkish protagonist as “different”, the author uses French characters, what is more women, to deconstruct the stereotype some French readers might have had of Turkish men. Dély, in fact, is presented as a man who is sensitive, passionate, respectful of his lovers’ desires, and far from being despotic and tyrannic. Furthermore, this novel shows that the author is more interested in underlining the flaws of French society than in judging Ottoman customs. In fact, as argued by G. S. Rousseau and Roy Porter, eighteenth-century Europe, and especially France, was self-critical and open-minded enough to confront other cultures at least as alternative versions of living (1989).

The Turkish fad, begun in the 17th century, was not abandoned - the publication in 1800 of *L’Observateur sentimental,* that tells the story of a Turkish man, is a proof of that - but as the Ottoman Empire lost its influence in Europe and began to suffer its first military defeats, it gave way to other

"Oriental" countries such as Persia (Martino, 1906). The fashion for Persia, which became known thanks to the travel reports by Tavernier and Chardin, first published in 1676 and 1686 and subsequently often republished, was less well-known, but lasted quite a long time. At first, French knowledge of the country was only bookish, since in the 17th century there were no major upheavals in Persian story, and the only source of information about Persia was travelers' reports. In fact, because of the limited amount of accurate information available, when novelists wrote a "Persian" history, they portrayed Turks instead, as if Persians and Ottomans were the same population. For that matter, according to travelers who had visited both countries, Turkey and Persia were geographically close, had the same religion and their mores were quite similar. Subsequently, however, the *Lettres persanes* and the story of the usurper Nadir Thamas Kouli Kan helped to popularize Persia and provided more accurate information about the country. Thamas Kouli Kan was the king of Persia about whom the largest number of accounts were written[3]. He was so famous that in 1745 the Abbé de Rochebrune wrote an epistolary novel entitled *L'Espion de Thamas Kouli Kan dans les cours de l'Europe,* and twenty years after his death, a tragedy about his life was published: *Histoire de Nader Chach, traduit du persan* (1770).

In *L'Espion de Thamas Kouli Kan,* the Abbé de Rochebrune tells the story of Pagi-Nassir-Bek, a Persian spy sent by his sultan to Europe to see what is happening in the European courts. To avoid being recognized, the spy pretends to be an Armenian merchant and, after traveling to Russia, Poland, France and finally Holland, recounts what he sees and learns. As suggested by the subtitle of the novel, *L'Espion de Thamas Kouli-Kan* includes "diverses anecdotes politiques pour servir à l'histoire du tems présent". In fact, the author uses the *escamotage* of the exotic epistolary novel to describe and criticize European contemporary events. All the *épistoliers* are Persians and have a specific title[4] that, while proving the abbé's intention to make his readers believe in the authenticity of the letters they read, also shows the deep research the abbé conducted and his interest in the Persian matters. Alongside considerations of Russia's relations with Sweden and Turkey and of the tensions between

[3] See, for example, the *Histoire de Thamas Kouli Kan, Sophi de Perse* (1741) by Jean-Antoine Du Cerceau.

[4] The « Oriental » titles of the *épistoliers* : "Pich–Namas" (director of prayers); "Mouchi El Memalec" (writer of the kingdoms); "Athemadeulet" (prime minister); "Turbedur" (guard of Fathmé's sepulchre); "Courtchi–Bachi" (colonel-general of cavalry); "Alendar–Bachi" (head of sign holders); "Vizir Tchap" (Grand Vizier's second-in-command); "Mehter" (grand chamberlain); "Darogué" (police lieutenant); and "Vaka Nuviez" (prime minister's deputy).

Spain and Portugal, the author presents information about the German Empire and its elective system. However, the real subject of this novel is the War of the Austrian Succession. The author analyses its phases and the role played by Austria, Prussia, France and England. To make the novel even more historic and believable, the spy who travels to Europe is not the spy of an anonymous Persian sultan, but of Thamas Kouli-Kan who, as mentioned above, was such a famous Persian king that he became a literary figure.

Furthermore, the abbé uses Persian, hence Muslim characters, to criticize not Islamism but, as did Montesquieu and many other authors after him, Christianity. In the novel, there is indeed a biting satire against the ecclesiastical world, where the Persian narrator paints an ironic portrait of the Pope. In letter XII, the spy writes to his correspondent that the Pope is so infallible that he can decide, from one day to the next, that virtue is a vice and vice is a virtue, and that he must be believed. In addition, the Pope is the successor of a saint, Saint Peter, whom he honors because:

> N'ayant reçu de lui qu'un pauvre anneau, il l'a si bien su faire valoir, qu'il peut actuellement mettre trente à quarante mille hommes sur pié, et les entretenir assez longtemps. Il possède plusieurs pays en souveraineté. Il marche avec une pompe et un appareil de conquérant. Il a des places, des magazins, des ports, des flottes, une cour, un trésor, des finances, et par-dessus le marché, il ouvre et ferme les portes du Ciel quand il lui plait ; car il en a seul les clés (Abbé de Rochebrune, 1746, p. 154).

*L'Espion de Thamas Kouli-Kan* is a good example of how "Oriental" characters and references are not used to discredit the "Orient" but to use it to better criticize European, and particularly French, culture in a way that is both more believable and safer from repercussions and censorship. In this novel, the abbé wishes to inform his readers about what is happening in their world from a political point of view and the use of "Oriental" features – such as the titles of the *épistoliers* but also by dating certain letters using the Islamic calendar – proves his interest in Persia but also his desire to instruct while entertaining his readers whose curiosity for the "Orient" he clearly exploits. The choice of Persian characters is not hazardous as, I argue, the abbé de Rochebrune is taking advantage of the success of the *Histoire de Thamas*

*Kouli Kan,* published in 1741, that is only four years before the abbe's work was published.

However, what makes this novel interesting is its being at the same time similar to and different from its more famous predecessor, the *Lettres persanes.* On the one hand, exactly as Montesquieu's novel, the "Oriental" protagonist writes to friends in Persia, talks about his encounters with French people whose customs he describes and, sometimes, criticizes, and recounts anecdotes from his life. On the other hand, contrary to Montesquieu, and most epistolary novels set in the East, the Persian protagonist does not share theories and philosophical analyses, but focuses on historical and, what is more, current events. What is even more interesting is that the author uses Persian people's points of view not only to criticize Christian religion, which is a well-known device, but to comment on current events as if the Persian characters' perspectives were deemed more objective and reliable when it comes to analyzing European politics and affairs. Furthermore, while providing the image that the French had of Persians, this novel serves as a historical document to use to know more about both Persia and Europe.

## *3. Chinese spirituality and religion*

Unlike other "Oriental" countries, which were discovered by travelers and explorers, knowledge of China, and more generally of the Far East, must be attributed to the Jesuit missionaries who, at the beginning of the 17th century, under Matteo Ricci's impetus, began their mission to evangelize China (App, 2010).

The missionaries were welcomed with great hospitality by the Chinese emperor, who placed his knowledge and archives at their disposal and enabled the monks to make a very precise study of Chinese religion, society, and customs. It was therefore thanks to the missionaries and, among other things, their *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses*[5] that, in the 1770s, the French, who in the previous century had known almost nothing about China, could boast a more than respectable knowledge of the territory, its language and customs. In general, despite their idolatry, the opinions the Jesuits gave of the Chinese, and of the government that had so kindly welcomed them, were almost all positive. The Chinese were considered an ideal people, polite, civilized, and virtuous, and their government, although all power was concentrated in the hands of the emperor, was characterized by clemency and kindness in the administration of power. The Jesuits also had the merit of introducing the French to Chinese science and religion, having had the opportunity to translate the scientific treatises and sacred books supplied to them by the emperor. The missionaries also circulated translations of Confucius's works, introducing Mandarin philosophy and helping to forge the stereotype of the Chinese philosopher: hence, the Marquis d'Argens's philosophical epistolary novel, *Lettres chinoises*[6] (1739). This novel, that is divided into five parts, presents the exchange of letters among six Chinese men, two of whom stay in China, while the others travel to Europe and to other "Oriental" countries. These characters are: Sioeu-Tcheou, Yn-Che-Chan, Choang, Kieou-Che, Tao, and

[5] The *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses écrites des missions étrangères par quelques missionnaires de la compagnie de Jésus* form a collection of 34 volumes of letters sent to Europe by Jesuit missionaries in China, India, America, and other places. The first collection was published in 1702, but the real collection began in 1703 and continued until 1776. In addition to introducing Europeans to Asian cultures, this collection was intended to promote the churches of the Far East, which needed constant economic resources for their evangelizing mission.

[6] The full title is *Lettres chinoises, ou correspondance philosophique, historique et critique, Entre un Chinois Voyageur à Paris & Correspondans à la Chine, en Moscovie, en Perse & au Japon. Par l'auteur des Lettres Juives & des Lettres Cabalistiques.*

I-Taly. Sioeu-Tcheou is a Chinese from Beijing who, after studying French language and culture, moves to Paris, where he lives for several years. During his stay, he carefully observes French society, which he describes to his friend Yn-Che-Chan, who has remained in China. He does the same when he leaves France to visit other European countries (Switzerland, Germany and Poland). Yn-Che-Chan is also the recipient of letters from Chinese friends who have left Beijing to discover the world whose customs they describe. Among his correspondents are Choang, who lives in Persia; Kieou-Che, who recounts his trip to Japan and Thailand; Tiao, who travels to Russia, then Sweden and Denmark; and I-Taly, who writes from Rome and recounts his past travels and experiences.

The *Lettres chinoises* is a perfect example of French interest in the Far East and particularly in Chinese philosophy. In the novel, the Marquis d'Argens uses his characters to compare the Chinese doctrine of Confucius, that is described as "une Morale […] belle, simple et naturelle" given by "le sage Législateur de l'Empire & le restaurateur de la bonne morale" and Lao Kium's philosophy (d'Argens 1739, p. 65). Lao Kium, who is a "philosophe, ou plutôt un rêveur" propagated a kind of "morale" the author considers dangerous because "il prétend qu'on doit tâcher d'approcher du néant le plus qu'il est possible ; qu'il faut, si l'on peut, s'oublier totalement, & que c'est en cessant de penser, qu'on cesse d'être malheureux" and "si les hommes croient n'être heureux qu'autant qu'ils restent dans une inaction parfaite, dans une molle indolence, enfin dans une espèce de néant, que deviendroient les Républiques & les Etats les plus florissants ?" (d'Argens, 1739, p. 66). Lao Kium's religion is considered as disgraceful as his morals since its dogmas "établissent, comme des vérités évidentes, les extravagances les plus énormes" ; namely, "que le vide, le néant soient les principes de toutes les choses".

Chinese philosophy is only one of the topics covered by the Chinese travelers who also mention Japanese and Siamese religions and philosophies and criticize the tyranny of Thai rulers. As far as Europe is concerned, they criticize the excesses of the Catholic religion and compare it with the Protestant denomination; they make numerous political considerations on German, Swedish, Danish and Polish politics and governments.

The introduction and analysis of different Chinese doctrines show the author's fascination for this country and its inhabitants and the sincere respect they inspired him. The Marquis's criticism of the missionaries and their *récits* and letters prove that he had access to this material and that Jesuits'

accounts circulated and were an object of interest for the French who informed themselves about the Far East, and particularly China, by reading them.

What makes this novel interesting is that, more than other works, the *Lettres chinoises* offers a clear example of the scientific approach proposed by Rousseau: to know the particular(s) through a meticulous and systematic comparison of elements (Todorov, 1989, p. 30). The novelistic Chinese Other steps out of his own space and into the heart of the experience of diversity, as is also the case for the readers of this novel. The polyphonic epistolary form allows what other literary forms do not, that is broaden the horizon of this experience, multiplying comparisons and points of view. While in the Marquis d'Argens' novel China is not always a positive example, through the systematic comparison of mores, the author affirms the fundamental values that should guide people: morality in social mores and tolerance in religion. Jacques Marx goes even further in his assessment of the special place of China and Chinese characters in this work by d'Argens:

> Dans la plupart des relations exotiques inspirées par Montesquieu, l'Occident se dit plus lui-même qu'il ne dit l'Autre. Ce n'est plus tout à fait le cas ici. D'Argens a compris la Chine ; son information va au-delà des simples lieux communs. … Se refusant aux séductions de l'exotisme, l'auteur des *Lettres chinoises* a en réalité donné à l'espace culturel asiatique une présence authentique, et par là, il l'a fait entrer dans une sphère intellectuelle élargie, où pouvait s'appliquer réellement la prétention des Lumières à l'universalité (d'Argens, 162).

I agree with Jacques Marx as I think that, more than other epistolary novels and fictional works in general, the *Lettres chinoises* offers a portrait of the Chinese that tries to contradict the stereotypes of the time and to provide a cultural description that is as objective as possible. In my opinion, d'Argens, while wishing to entertain and interest his readers, seems to care about teaching them about the "Orient" as a reality to discover, respect and, why not, take example from.

## *4. The historical and geographical reasons behind the Indian craze*

In the 17th century, despite their failure, both Henri IV and Richelieu tried to create a *Compagnie des Indes* and later Colbert created and supported different commercial companies: the *Compagnie de la Chine* (1660), *Compagnie des Indes orientales* (1665) and *Compagnie du Levant* (1670).

Until the beginning of the 18th century, the French settled for brief explorations in the interiors of the Indian subcontinent and for some trading centers, such as Chandernagor, where they could purchase agricultural and animal products, minerals and, later, textiles. At the time, the *Compagnie des Indes Orientales* depended on commercial and diplomatic relations with the Mughal emperor and local authorities who used the French as pawns against the Dutch and the British, that also showed an increasing interest in the area (Peabody, 2017).

However, when John Law reorganized the *Compagnie des Indes Orientales* in 1719 by merging it his *Compagnie d'Occident,* France's global network extended: in the 1730s, the French trade of rice and opium in Bengal, organized around Chandernagor and Pondichery, expanded in exchange for products from China, such as silk, porcelain and tea, and from other geographical areas, among which Manila, Burma, Achin, the Maldives and Mocha. The new directors of the *Compagnie,* Lenoir and Dumas, helped extend considerably France's influence in India, by making alliances with Indian princes, forming an army and becoming the protectors and then the *maîtres* of India. In 1740, when Joseph Dupleix took the direction of the company, he could easily dream about a French empire of the Indies that was able to contrast the British one. However, by the 1760s the company's financial position deteriorated and France's attempts to counter British economic hegemony in Asia failed, and because of British dominance French interests in India shrank and eventually ended (Wood, 2020).

In the 1730s, when France established its brief military presence, India started appearing in literary works, and by the 1750s Indian characters populated French theatre and novel. I argue that it was France's colonial attempts and presence in India, albeit brief, that developed French interest for this country and its customs: while the existence of India was already known,

expansionist attempts made the country familiar and aroused the interests of readers but also of scholars; in fact, it is from the studies about India, its religion and philosophy that the science of orientalism originated. Among the most prominent orientalists, Anquetil-Duperron[7] traveled to India and collected manuscripts which allowed the French to gain a deeper understanding of the peninsula's geography, politics, religion, and history. Literature obviously benefited from this new knowledge and, from the 1760s onwards, literature became somewhat "Indian", as authors of novels and plays embraced this new fashion (Martino, 1906).

While it is undeniable that France had colonial aspirations towards India, I argue that the relation France ultimately had with such country was not as Said tends to describe all relations between Western and "Oriental" countries, that is the claim that Western representations of the "Orient" constitute a discourse whose main purpose is the assertion of Western hegemony over Asia, a story whose protagonists are, on one side, winners, oppressors and colonizers, and on the other side losers, oppressed and colonized "surrogates" (Said, 1979). In fact, Beasley (2008) shows that India invaded French people's mental space through, among other things, their exquisite products which the French, especially women, tried to obtain at all costs. Beasley argues that fabrics such as cotton and silk ended up representing India itself and, as they were deemed unique and luxurious, Indian producers and, by extension, India entered the French imaginary "as places of a superior order of life" (Beasley, 2008, p. 229). According to Beasley (2008), the French recognized Indian superiority when it came to their productions of cotton and silk items that were not simply commodities but forms of art they tried in vain to imitate, and hence looked at such country with respect, admiration and even envy.

The admiration for India and Indian products was not limited to their products but can be seen also in literary works, such as epistolary novels. Besides the famous *Lettres d'Amabed* (1772) by Voltaire which talks about an Indian couple, it is interesting to also mention another novel linked to the Indian craze, that is *Lettres d'un Indien à Paris*[8] (1789) by Louis-Antoine Caraccioli. The novel tells the story of Zator, a young Indian who, curious about France, travels

[7] Abraham-Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron (1731-1805) was a member of the *Académie royale des inscriptions et belles lettres*, the King's interpreter for Oriental languages and attached to the King's Library for the collection of Oriental manuscripts. In 1754, he joined the French East India Company as a soldier and sailed to India.

[8] The full title is *Lettres d'un Indien à Paris, à son ami Glazir, Sur les Moeurs Françoises, & sur les Bizarreries du tems. Par l'auteur des Lettres récréatives & morales.*

to Paris. During his stay, in addition to writing letters to his friend Glazir about French manners, customs and habits, he exchanges letters with other friends, family and wives. Despite numerous requests to return, Zator does not want to leave, especially since the Revolution has broken out and he does not want to miss an event he knows is destined to change history. In his work, Caraccioli follows Montesquieu's model and makes his characters discuss themes such as religion, politics and philosophy by using literary devices such as satire and the comparison between cultures. What is interesting, besides the analyses he makes about Louis XV and the governments of most European countries, is the image he provides of India. When Zator arrives in France, he cannot prevent himself from praising French beauties, but he also adds: "Si je ne connoissois pas l'Inde, ce lieu me plairoit infiniment" (Caraccioli, 1789, p. 19). Through his protagonist, and at the beginning of the novel, the author cares to underline that India is as good as France (maybe better?). Caraccioli uses again Zator to address French readers when he makes his protagonist tell his friend Glazir that he hopes that Indian ambassadors made the French understand that "l'Inde n'est point aussi inculte qu'on imagine". He goes on explaining that Indians strive to "combattre des dogmes, ou pour les soutenir à la manière des Européens ; mais [ils] n'exer[cent] pas de critique amère contre ceux qui ne sont pas de [leur] avis, &, en cela, [ils] mérit[ent] d'être loués" (Caraccioli, 1789, p. 170-171). Caraccioli's admiration for India is evident throughout the novel, especially when he describes it through Glazir who reports what a friend said: "que va-t-il (Zator) chercher dans les pays lointains?" – and here we see that Caraccioli did know foreign and distant countries were a relative concept as here "pays lointains" refer to France – "Ignore-t-il donc que la presqu'île de l'Inde que nous habitons, est la plus belle région de l'univers ; que la richesse du sol égale la température, & la douceur du climat […] que notre ciel est unique par sa pureté. Où trouvera-t-il un soleil comparable au nôtre ? Des nuits aussi suaves, des mœurs aussi franches." (Caraccioli, 1789, p. 107).

When Caraccioli writes his novel, the dream of conquering India had already been shuttered but it is clear that the French fascination for this distant land was still alive, and that the general idea the French had was, despite everything, sincerely positive. India is described as a beautiful country, with its own philosophy and religion, and whose people are sweet and wise.

This epistolary novel can be associated to the other ones I previously analyzed since they all witness the sincere interest and the deep fascination France had for the "Orient" that they genuinely praised or used to criticize their own customs and societies in different matters from politics to religion,

and often philosophy. However, I believe that the *Lettres d'un Indien à Paris,* while still comparing many aspects of these two different countries and cultures, tends more than the other novels to draw a parallel between India and France where none of the two is considered better than the other in an absolute sense. Caraccioli criticizes and praises both countries but suggests that, despite being different, they are also similar and equally interesting. In letter XXXII, for example, Zator, who loves India but came to appreciate France too, tells Glazir tha "si les prodigies étoient à [s]a disposition, le premier qu[' il] feroi[t] seroit de joinder l'Inde à la France" (Caraccioli, 1789, p. 154) and that "[il] sai[t] trouver l'Inde au milieu de Paris (Caraccioli, 1789, p. 353).

## *5. Conclusion*

Starting from the Renaissance, the French have seen the "Orient" as a place where imaginary and reality could co-exist, where fantasies and dreams could become true. Orientalism as a science was born in this period, and the so-called orientalists were both those authors who looked at the Other in order to enrich their imagination and satisfy their curiosity towards something and someone that was so different and far from themselves, and those who did want to discover this different world, either for a honest *goût pour l'exotisme* or to provide their country with a better knowledge to conquer these territories (Zerrad, 2020).

In *Orientalism,* Said makes a connection between cultural and literary production and European imperialism and argues that rigorous analyses could not avoid raising the question of the relationship between Orientalism and empire. For Said, Orientalism is a clear expression of the power exercised by one group over the other, it is "all aggression, activity, judgement, will-to-truth and knowledge" as the "Orient" has been "politically, sociologically, military, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively" produced by Occidental powers (Said, 1979, p. 3, 204.).

Although it is not possible to deny that in the 18th-century France had political and economic interests in the East – and expansionist aims towards India – I argue that this does not necessarily result in the fact that Orientalism was an expression of power and imperialism. At least not in the 18th century. I make such an argument not only because literary texts, and in particular epistolary novels, show that French readers' interest in "Oriental" countries was sincere, but also for historical and geopolitical reasons. In fact, as argued by Dobie (2002), it is in the 1870s that France developed for the first time in history a coherent national policy of colonial expansion, and it is also in the nineteenth century that colonialism and its impact on the "Orient" were addressed in cultural products, as Orientalist discourses and colonial history were more closely connected. What we encounter in Orientalist representation in the earlier period, according to Dobie, is not a celebration or a record of conquest and occupation but an aestheticized representation of an "Orient" by which they were fascinated and that they were discovering.

Also Aravamudan, who agrees with Said about the ongoing use of

Orientalism to enhance the imperial management of subject peoples since the turn of the nineteenth century, nuances Said's argument when it comes to the 18th century and the Enlightenment. According to Aravamudan, "the Enlightenment was not just bent on the domination of the other but also aimed at mutual understanding across cultural differences, for Enlightenment the self was under critique as much as any "other" (2011, p. 3). *Contra* Said, who states that French obsession with the Orient during the Enlightenment was just a preliminary step to the expansion into North Africa and the Levant that began with the French invasion of Egypt in 1798, Aravamudan argues that Enlightenment is not a "pre-Orientalist" stage leading to a racist 19th century and cannot be a "corporate institution for dealing with the Orient" as imperial bureaucracies had not been developed yet (2011). Hence, although French authors do not depict the "Orient" in an accurate way and add invented elements to their stories, it would be anachronistic to deem these images ideological, a colonial propaganda that led to the eventual outcome of empire. Additionally, in response to Said who sets the starting point of Western dominion and oppression on the East alternatively in Ancient Greece or in the eighteenth century, I would like to use Aijaz Ahmad's argument. According to him, who denies that there is a line of continuity that connects the Ancient Greeks and the contemporaries when it comes to the way of conceiving Western countries, the "civilization map and geographical imagination of Antiquity were fundamentally different from those that came to be fabricated in post-Renaissance Europe" (Ahmad, 1992, p.183). In the same way, it can be argued that the historical and political context of 18th-century France and 18th-century French readers' ideas of the "Orient" were not the same as those that the French, and other Europeans, developed in the nineteenth century. Despite what stated by Said, belief and valued do not remain essentially the same. What Said says, if it can be true for 19th century and 20th century European countries and people, cannot be attributed automatically to everybody dealing with the "Orient" in all times.

Furthermore, contrary to what stated by Edward Said, 18th-century authors did not show a Manichean vision of an "Orient" in opposition with an "Occident" that deemed itself superior. Also, it is extremely simplistic and not entirely accurate to state that in Oriental-European relations Europe was always "in a position of strength, not to say domination" (Said, 1979, p. 40). As shown by Aravamudan (2011), in the 18th century the East was a source of anxiety for Europeans given the size and power of large empires such as the Persian, the Chinese, the Mughal and the Ottoman. How could

18th-century France – that was far from being an empire - feel superior to and considered itself stronger than an old empire such as the Ottoman one that constantly threatened European borders and was, despite being a commercial ally, a military and geopolitical power? In the 18th century Europe had not yet established its sway over China, Japan, Turkey and India so the relations between Europe and Asia were still finely balanced (Rousseau and Porter, 1989). What is more, how can we talk about colonialism in relation to other empires that France never actually colonized, not even when France itself possessed a colonial empire?

Even in a territory like India, that the French tried so desperately to conquer and colonize, the assiduous study of Indian texts that seemed way older than the Bible and the religious crisis that the discovery of these texts entailed – App says that the French even changed the biblical chronology to make the date of Noah's flood anterior to Indian sacred texts! – shows not only French interest and curiosity towards this culture, but a sense of fear and concern that the convictions they had had for so long might be overturned. How can the French feel really superior to a people whose culture seemed older than theirs, and who were calling into doubts all their certainties?

Furthermore, when we read Chardin and Tavernier's *relations de voyage,* along with critical remarks and stories that betray a certain surprise or perplexity, we cannot help but notice their profound and sincere fascination in front of these magical and mysterious countries. The same can be said when we read what the Jesuits in China wrote about the Chinese. It is impossible not to notice the respect they had for a culture that, while different, was considered extremely advanced in areas that extended from astronomy to mathematics, physics and philosophy. Said argues that, according to European, and particularly British and French authors, "the Oriental is irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, "different"", while "the European in rational, virtuous, mature, "normal""(Said,1979, p. 40). Exotic epistolary novels do contradict this statement. Most often than not, they provide a positive image of "Oriental" characters to whom authors attribute a certain charm, intelligence and good looks. They are not depraved, but passionate. Not childlike, but naif. And the Europeans, and particularly the French, often appear in such novels are corrupt, hypocrite, deceitful, and full of vices and weaknesses. Under the mask of Persian, Turkish and Chinese travelers always hides a French author who uses their naivete and their supposed ignorance of Western culture to criticize French absolutism and Christianity, and the parallels that are systematically made between "Oriental" despots and French kings, and Islamic superstitions

and Catholic credulity seem to suggest that the Other was not so different after all, and that there was not a neat and distinct opposition between the “Orient” and the “Occident”.

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This volume examines the interdisciplinary nexus of literature and geography through a multifaceted lens, blending theories from cultural studies, narratology, and spatial analysis. Beginning with a systemic understanding of literary geography, the chapters explore imaginative, political, and ecological landscapes, emphasizing their relational and dynamic nature. Contributions analyze the production of place and space, highlighting their role in shaping cultural, historical, and environmental narratives.

Key topics include the interplay between memory, identity, and travel in literary geographies, the cultural significance of territorial disputes, and the transformative potential of ecological narratives in the Anthropocene. Methodological frameworks range from geocriticism and literary cartography to ecocritical and geopolitical analyses. Case studies span diverse contexts, such as French 18th-century travel narratives, Etruscan agricultural practices, and Hayao Miyazaki's ethical landscapes. Themes of power, positionality, and environmental responsibility are examined through postcolonial, feminist, and ecological perspectives, illustrating the creative and critical capacities of literature to reshape spatial imaginaries. The volume introduces innovative concepts, including the cultural critique of geopolitics in avant-garde aesthetics, mnemonic geographies in Jewish narratives, and urban-nature dynamics in Romantic fairy tales.

The contributions underscore the ethical and performative dimensions of literary geographies, revealing how storytelling fosters new spatial understandings and responses to global challenges. By reimagining real and fictional spaces this work demonstrates the transformative interplay of literature and geography in shaping our understanding of history, culture, and the environment.

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