

# “HAMSUN’S LIMINALITY:” *IN WONDERLAND* AS COUNTER-DISCOURSE

Soha El Samad

## Abstract

*This study seeks to establish the extent to which In Wonderland is a cultural hybridity discourse and a writing-back to Euro-American travelogues. In this ‘different’ travelogue, Hamsun’s voice cuts through the borderlands of the Russian colonized Caucasus region to reveal contempt for acquired culture and a rejection of global uniform identities in a manner that accords with Homi Bhabha’s concept of ‘hybridity.’ While keeping in mind Hamsun’s undisputed parodic style, this postcolonial reading claims that mimicry, as applied by Hamsun, is a practical demonstration of Bhabha’s theory that reflects his propensity to destabilize the West’s monolithic stance as regards the Orient. It therefore reveals the manner in which his supposedly colonial discourse exposes the discriminatory nature of colonial dominance. Within this context, Hamsun has become a cultural hybrid who refuses to imitate conventional European travel narratives or follow in their differentiating paths. On the whole, the basic argument is that Hamsun’s travelogue which invariably asserts, subverts and removes boundaries, does not endorse Orientalism neither in its romantic nor in its subservient form.*

## Keywords

*Counter-discourse, travel literature, ambivalence, hybridity, mimicry*

As a neutral observer, neither a colonial nor a postcolonial subject at the time *In Wonderland* was published, Hamsun’s account of his journey across the Russian colonized Caucasus region is essentially a cultural hybridity discourse. According to Homi K. Bhabha, cultural hybridity emerges from the “interstitial passage between fixed identifications ... [and] entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (Bhabha, 1994, 4). It occurs in that in-between space where cultural differences and hierarchies are contested and from which the hybrid as “always the split screen of the self and its doubling” (Bhabha 1994, 114) is produced. In the context of *In Wonderland*, which Elisabeth Oxfeldt has accordingly described as “one long mockery of Orientalism (scientific and poetic) as well as a harsh critique of capitalism” (Oxfeldt 2005, 218) hybridity functions as resistance, a tool to subvert political and cultural domination<sup>1</sup>. Hamsun’s middle space clearly makes him a hybrid whose attempts to emulate colonial discourse is dominated by ambivalence since “the discourse of mimicry [is] constructed around an *ambivalence*” (Bhabha 1984, 126). *In Wonderland* demonstrates how mimicry and its accompanying strategies of resistance were introduced by Hamsun even before Bhabha presented his theoretical concepts. Moreover, it can be claimed that even before Edward Said established his theory of Orientalism as a myth and a “system of truths” (Said 1979, 204) highly dependent on colonial travel books for the systematic development and sustainability of those ‘truths,’

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<sup>1</sup> As explained in the chapter ‘commitment to theory’ from Bhabha’s *Location of Culture*.

Hamsun had already challenged this colonial/imperial pattern by introducing an unconventional dimension to the travel writing genre – the parodic.

Representing a nation “with no direct colonizing involvement in the Orient” (Oxfeldt 2010, 59) and coming from “a borderland, a marginal space where dangerous, miraculous, and erotic things can happen” (Žagar 2009, 166) to a cultural space that lies on the periphery of Eastern Europe and Western Asia, Hamsun aesthetically blends his travel experience with his world-views and pre-conceptions to create a portrait of self and other cloaked in similarities rather than differences. It is an experience which, according to Edward Said, allows the traveler to “assess [himself] and alien cultures with the same combination of intimacy and distance” (Said 1979, 259). As a transitional being, Hamsun gives vent to a discourse that “seems to wink at travelogues of an earlier era” (Storskog 2011, 20), to subvert the East and West binaries and to question the authenticity of imperial travel narratives bent on maintaining these dichotomies. Interestingly, it is a practical demonstration of Bhabha’s ‘third-space’ of enunciation – that in-between space which is,

the space of the *entre* that Derrida has opened up in writing itself—that carries the burden of the meaning of culture. It makes it possible to begin envisaging national, antinationalist, histories of the ‘people’. It is in this space that we will find those words with which we can speak of Ourselves and Others. And by exploring this hybridity, this ‘Third Space’, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves. (Bhabha 2006, 157)

This study argues that Hamsun’s travelogue is a counter-discourse whose highly ambivalent atmosphere ruptures the biased principles of Orientalist travel literature to provide an authentic picture of Otherness. It is in line with Elisabeth Oxfeldt’s belief that “Hamsun’s playful and ironic prose assumes a position of eternal paradox” (Oxfeldt 2005, 219) and has to a certain extent, taken into consideration her suggestion that “Hamsun’s race theories ...may be better analyzed through the postcolonial theories of Frantz Fanon and Homi Bhabha” (Oxfeldt 2010, 75). However, since Bhabha asserts that mimicry “is not the familiar exercise of dependent colonial relations through narcissistic identification...as Fanon has observed” (Bhabha 1984, 129), the following reading finds further support in Said and Foucault’s theories which are more aligned in their rejection of what Bhabha refers to as the construction of “some brave new cultural totality” (Bhabha 1991, 82). Essentially, Hamsun’s ‘written’ account of his trip is marked by outright intolerance for those who easily adopt and adapt to other cultures, and by an overwhelming ambivalence intended to disrupt colonial strategies that seek to undermine other cultures while they encourage them to conform to theirs. The basic question therefore is how, as an in-between, does Hamsun’s discourse expose and defy the biased strategies of colonial discourse? Strictly speaking, as an authentic subjective account of his travel experience, to what extent has he challenged imperial authority or those powers that strive to preserve binary oppositions through the systematic transformation of Other cultural systems?

### **Authorial agency and mimicry**

Hamsun’s preference for travel literature is expressed in his 1895 letter to Bolette and Ole Johan Larsen in which he requests a history book “... about far-off things and

times. Or a travel book about distant countries”<sup>2</sup> (Wærp 2006, 57). Later, when he set out to pen his own travelogue, *In Wonderland*, he initially included the subtitle “Experienced and dreamt in the Caucasus” as an unreserved description of his adventure. Indeed, the travelogue does not need the subtitle for readers to ultimately realize that it is not typical of the genre. In this vein Oxfeldt has affirmed that readers ultimately realize they “are given a highly ambivalent travel account – the truth value of which we can never be certain” (Oxfeldt 2010, 69) while Camilla Storskog effectively remarked that “The phrasing of title and subtitle quite evidently reflects the possibility in the hands of any travel writer of stretching the narration between the genre’s two opposite poles: the factual ... and the fictional” (Storskog 2011, 20). On his part, Henning Howlid Wærp highlights how “The journey into new territory also becomes a journey backwards in his own life, to places of the mind” (Wærp 2006, 61), Tom Conner describes it as a “fanciful travel genre” (Conner 2016, 196) while Sverre Lyngstad considers that its “amusing air of parody and playacting” make it a “hybrid piece or literature” (Lyngstad 2004, 12-15). It is therefore generally acknowledged that *In Wonderland* strays from the accepted conventions of travel writing to reveal an experimental spirit that will later become the defining feature of modernist writers. As Oxfeldt appropriately affirms, he “ends up prefiguring a postmodern, parodic mode fully realized a century later” (Oxfeldt 2010, 59).

At this point, it is relevant to locate Hamsun within his cultural context since according to Said, “no production of knowledge in the human sciences can ever ignore or disclaim its author’s involvement as a human subject in his own circumstances” (Said 1979, 11). Coming from a predominantly farm culture, his relatively short residence in a materialistically inclined America served to re-awaken and strengthen his individualistic and nationalist disposition – a disposition reinforced upon his return by the culturally thriving atmosphere of his homeland. In this respect, Žagar draws attention to the increased interest and research in eugenics and the fact that “John Alfred Mjøen ... an early popularizer of eugenic principles [was] an acquaintance of Knut Hamsun” (Žagar 2009, 22). Such a discriminatory atmosphere which was supported by the ratified circulation of discriminatory knowledge illustrates Michel Foucault’s belief that power, in each particular time and place, operates on the basis of repression, censorship, and prohibition (Foucault 1978, 12). He elaborates that these numerous institutions or regulatory bodies “cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation, and functioning of a discourse” (Foucault 1980, 93). Consequently, Hamsun’s anti-Semitic and prejudiced comments were not deemed serious transgressions in the European context of the time and it was against such a background that Hamsun had initially enjoyed institutional validity. In support of this, Andrei Markovits perceptively explains that before the Second World War anti-Semitic prejudice had accompanied European anti-Americanism in a systematic and regular manner [and that] “It was the fear and critique of capitalist modernity that brought these two *ressentiments* together” (Markovitz 2011, 153).

Therefore, during those times, Hamsun’s “prejudiced and reactionary attitudes” (Lyngstad 2004, 9) result from his anti-colonial sentiments and antipathy for “imperialist democracy,” especially for “the American-born idea of globalization, where everything ought to be identical everywhere” (Sheen 2009, 97-98) until the war and its

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted and translated by Wærp, p. 57.

aftermath changed everything. With respect to *In Wonderland*, Darren C. Zook’s claim that “in spite of being well travelled, Hamsun professed to be unimpressed with just about every place he went, save for Norway” (Zook 2005, 229) appears to be an overgeneralization. Monica Zagar has also in a few words expressed what this study aims to establish, that Hamsun’s “fantasies about the Orient ... represented a powerful tool to critique Western modernity and one that suited him temperamentally” (Zagar 2009, 158).

With Hamsun’s authorial agency firmly located within this Oriental geographical location, it becomes relevant to illustrate how successful his mimicry is in opening a space from which the discriminatory practices typical of colonial discourse are exposed. Like Said, Bhabha maintains that “the objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction” (Bhabha 1994, 70). This objective is what colonial travel narratives have strived to uphold and what postcolonial writers answer back to in their defensive narrative styles. Hamsun however, is in no direct position to be defensive and so does not answer back; he questions back. That is, his imitation of the discriminating strategies of colonial travel discourse renders questionable their “mode of representation of otherness” (Bhabha 1994, 68). Practically speaking, the different hybrid forms of imitation, mimicry, parody, and mockery are closely connected by the fact that they reflect the image of a colonizing ‘other’. However, there is a slight difference in the effect their respective mirror-images have on this ‘other’. Mockery for instance, has a direct insulting effect. As regards mimicry, Bhabha explains that it “represents an ironic compromise” between identity and difference and “colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite*” (Bhabha 1984, 126). As for parody, it displays a more general and widely encompassing picture of otherness. In simple terms, all these forms can only function on the liminal space and their relentless unpredictable associations account for the ambivalence produced. Thus, the fundamental consequence of the play of similarities and differences initiated by the travelogue’s parody and mimicry is an overall atmosphere of ambivalence which is the basic defining feature of a counter-discourse.

### **The artfulness of colonial travelogues**

All this considered, Hamsun’s hybrid or liminal space justifies his mimicry or parody of late European and American nineteenth century travel writing. From here, it would be reasonable to assert that his critique is generally directed toward American travel narratives, specifically Mark Twain’s with which he was quite familiar. To elucidate, the period following British and French imperialism saw America emerge as a new imperially ambitious nation; one that Rudyard Kipling deemed would benefit from advice on dealing with colonized natives in his controversial poem, “The White Man’s Burden” which he had addressed to the U.S. and published at about the same time as *In Wonderland*. Consequently, in their new central position, American travelogues mimicked those of Europe and followed their trajectory of colonial discourse to prove how imperially efficient they are in maintaining and strengthening racial and cultural divisions. Furthermore, the more burlesque and exaggerated the account of otherness is, the more attractive it becomes to a credulous Western and American public. It is in this discursive manner that Twain contributed to the stock of epistemic distortions and

falsities, and here lies the essence of Hamsun's criticism of Twain's *Innocents Abroad* which he deemed an exaggerated imitation by one who "knows the people he is writing for, and most of them only want to be amused"<sup>3</sup> (Conner 2016, 192). Hence, what Said refers to as the major "disparity between texts and reality" (Said 1979, 109) in western travel writing had not been lost on Hamsun who according to Tom Connor, "blasts Twain's gross ignorance and sharply rebukes him for writing his naive and misinformed travelogue *Innocents Abroad*" (Conner 2016, 185). Thus, Hamsun could neither accept nor believe the assumed reality behind Twain's image of the "three-legged woman," the "dwarf with seven fingers on each hand," and the "man with his eye in his cheek" (Twain 1984, 29). At this point one cannot but refer to Victor Hugo's *Les Orientals* which had served as a reference to Orientalist scholars when the fact is that he had never travelled to the Orient.

One thought-provoking issue is the benevolent reception of Twain's racist descriptions and stereotyping of "degraded Turks and Arabs" (Ibid., p.42) compared to criticisms Hamsun faced for stereotypical statements and impressions that are no worse. Among the fantastical, discriminatory and undisputed claims that Twain's travelogue fabricates is one in which he declares that "if you would see the very heart and home of cripples and human monsters, both, go straight to Constantinople" (Ibid., p. 29).

Another important point to be made is that related to the scientific justification for writing travel books. The establishment of European schools of Oriental studies as early as the eighteenth century was the major means through which extensive knowledge of the East is accumulated and circulated<sup>4</sup>. They encouraged projects based on "a scientific and rational basis" in order to "create not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe" (Said 1979, 94). Hamsun's acquaintance, Bede Kristensen the "professor of Egyptology in Leyden" (Hamsun 2004, 23) mentioned in the text is one such specialist and researcher among many. It is therefore against this grave and adventurous atmosphere that Twain begins his account by declaring the gravity of his "solemn scientific expedition" which aims,

... to suggest to the reader how *he* would be likely to see Europe and the East if he looked at them with his own eyes instead of the eyes of those who traveled in those countries before him. I make small pretense of showing anyone how he *ought* to look at objects of interest beyond the sea -- other books do that, and therefore, even if I were competent to do it, there is no need. (Twain 1984, 1).

In effect, his travel book does exactly what he claims it will not do. Hence, Twain's hyperbolic denial of exerting influence on readers only serves to attract their penchant for the exotic and the strange, and prompts the endorsement of most of his implausible descriptions. On the other hand, Hamsun does the opposite. According to Storskog, he 'plays' with the genre thereby displaying a "talent for challenging the norms" (Storskog 2011, 19). Notice how he anxiously and repeatedly emphasizes his determination to present "a scientific report of his travels," insists that he "wanted to do something for

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted by Tom Conner from *Knut Hamsun Remembers America*.

<sup>4</sup> See Said's *Orientalism* p. 99 for a list of diffuse learned societies who studied the Orient as a scientific project, not forgetting "the great contribution of imaginative and travel literature" in strengthening "the divisions established by Orientalists between the various geographical, temporal, and racial departments of the Orient."

science” (Hamsun 2004, 72) and yet strays from this scientific purpose to the extent that readers suspect the credibility of his assertions. He even goes so far as to stress his alleged orientalist attitude that aims “to invent an entirely new theory of the great migrations” (Ibid., p. 73) and develop “Occidental theories” (Ibid., p. 154) when this is uncalled for; according to Conner, the fellowship he obtained to travel “came without any expectation to write any kind of report” (Conner 2016, 193/194). Thus, unlike Twain’s matter-of-fact representation of a distorted reality, Hamsun’s discourse is overwhelmingly ambivalent – ambivalence being that “unwelcome aspect of colonial discourse ... [in which] “**mimicry** is never very far from mockery” (Ashcroft et al., 2001, 13).

### **Mimicry’s ambivalence and revelation**

Indeed, Hamsun’s repeated affirmation of the scientific nature of his trip heightens the ironical and mocking quality of his discourse and allows the continued play of reality and fantasy. Note that as a “true explorer” (Hamsun 2004, 132) he cynically admits to including more than one unreal event: “it wouldn’t hurt if I had *another*<sup>5</sup> little gallant adventure in my diary” (Ibid., p. 89). Even more so, in exercising his authorial authority he goes so far as to deliberately include the incident in which his wife doubts the authenticity of his adventures. Since it is his story, and a subjective one at that, he could have opted not to mention his wife’s doubts concerning the police officer who had earlier volunteered to accompany them the rest of the way after making a brief detour. As such, Hamsun deliberately allows the officer, his supposed antihero whose presence and absence is the connecting thread of his trip, to be thus debunked. His inclusion of this inappropriate situation concerning one who is portrayed as a menace from the outset is intended to ensure travelogues’ “strategic failure,” question his mastery as husband and narrator, and render his mimic text “at once resemblance and menace” (Bhabha 1984, 127) in both a real and a fictional sense.

What further enhances the narrative’s ambiguity is Hamsun’s satirical and comic rendition of his desperate and frustrated efforts to immediately document his experiences for fear of forgetting the details later. The difficulty of penning a fully authentic and objective travel account is sensitive as it is, and Hamsun further complicates matters by including another inconvenient situation where he tries to immediately document his observations while on a bumpy ride. Later, while trying to organize his notes, he frustratingly declares, “Let me confess that I believe there is something wrong with my notes” (Hamsun 2004, 156) and ridiculously details the trouble he goes through to decipher his distorted handwriting. His efforts are made more comical when “the indigo dye” gets “into the wrong line” (Ibid., p. 156-157). In a sense, he is a hybrid who interrupts the space of colonial discourse with implied distrust and confusion. What Hamsun has realistically exhibited is Bhabha’s claim that “the English book,” in this case a colonial travel book, is a signifier of authority that,

...acquires its meaning *after* the traumatic scenario of colonial difference, cultural or racial, returns the eye of power to some prior, archaic image or identity. Paradoxically, however, such an image can neither be 'original'- by

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<sup>5</sup> My italics.

virtue of the act of repetition that constructs it - nor 'identical' - by virtue of the difference that defines it." (Bhabha 1994, 107)

### Spectral interventions

Essentially, Hamsun's alternatively imperial and subaltern gaze distorts orientalist discourse and stereotypes in a writing space which in Bhabha's words, "interrogates the third dimension that gives profundity to the representation of Self and Other" (Bhabha 1994, 48). This written interrogation is characterized by ambivalence – one of the "most significant discursive and psychical strategies of discriminatory power" (Bhabha 1994, 66). His discourse is thus never straightforward on account of strategies of intervention such as ellipsis and repetition. To begin with, ellipsis harbors an elusiveness that decentres dualisms and heightens the shifting relationship between presence and absence. According to Bhabha, "It is through the emptiness of ellipsis that the difference of colonial culture is articulated as a *hybridity* acknowledging that all cultural specificity is belated, *different· unto itself*" (Bhabha 1994, 58). Derrida describes it as an "exterior addition" whose "place is assigned in the structure by the mark of an emptiness" (Derrida 1997b, 145) – a gap, a space, in which the freeplay of signifiers provokes deferral and excess, closure and opening and results in ambivalence. In a like manner, *In Wonderland*, allows readers to make unlimited associations by virtue of Hamsun's abundant use of ellipsis.

On one occasion, he introduces a "neoromantic mode" (Oxfeldt 2010, 61) only to subvert it by an ellipsis. Stimulated by a penchant for the exotic upon seeing a "princely residence" in Caucasia, Hamsun instinctively remembers the Norwegian fairy tale castle, "Soria Moria ..." (Hamsun 2004, 47). Here, the accompanying ellipsis with its absent signifier or signifiers, the missing supplement, introduces a strange and admirable similarity between two different cultures. This supposedly unacceptable analogical relation remains hanging, never final, but it is there; the specter of a signifier, a presence, that unities his thoughts, his identity, to a different place. Basically, ambivalence is heightened by the realization that the exotic and romantic are not restricted to this particular or a specific Oriental space.

Another instance is found in a flashback which connects Hamsun's impressions of the Caucasus with his Norwegian background – an attraction Lyngstad believes to point to a "disguised yearning for the simplicities of childhood" (Lyngstad 2004, 7). While traveling in what he deems a familiar and peculiar world "like no other world," a place where he "could wish to remain ... for life" (Hamsun 2004, 110), Hamsun is lost in admiration for the grandeur of the Caucasian mountains and recalls a childhood memory where he encounters a seal in the Nordland lake. At this point, the discursive manner in which he presents the image "as point of identification –marks the site of an ambivalence" (Bhabha 1994, 51). What Hamsun does is present an unusual image, a 'doubleness' in his comparison of the Caucasus mountains to the Nordland lake; the former are elevated to the status of beings "from another world" with a godly countenance while the latter is compared to the seal whose expression appeared "like that of a human being ..." (Hamsun 2004, 69-70). This style of presenting doubleness as "the uncanny sameness-in- difference" is what Bhabha believes to constitute postmodernist discourse. To heighten ambiguity, the image ends with an ellipsis that trails off to leave an obvious and yet discreet elimination of boundaries. It is typical of colonial discourse to adopt a romantic orientalist stance, and what is revealed here is an

elevation of the Other to a status higher than that of his homeland when he adorns the Caucasian mountains with a godly status.

In yet another significant instance, the subaltern emerges in “the elliptical *in-between*<sup>6</sup>, where the shadow of the other falls upon the self” (Bhabha 1994, 60). On the occasion when Hamsun’s gaze falls upon peasants insisting on following and gathering round a young Circassian officer until he orders them to stop, his consciousness goes back the past, to reminisce on previous masters and declare, “One obeys a man who *knows*<sup>7</sup> how to command. People were delighted to obey Napoleon” (Hamsun 2004, 49). He goes on to demonstrate what Bhabha has only theoretically explained by providing a detailed description of “a historical event...in a discourse that is somehow beyond control” (Bhabha 1994, 12) in his vivid description of a gruesome 18<sup>th</sup> century execution in Moscow in which the condemned, in spite of their pain and misery, remain faithfully obedient until the very end. Hamsun goes on to generalize on the conditions for hegemonic control stating, “With such people one can go far” (Hamsun, 49) after which the Tsar’s single word “stop,” halts the bloody execution and interrupts his memory. It is at this point that he includes the noun phrase, “The knout,” signifying torture, and sets it off from the other sentences, with no verb or complement preceding or following. It is thus a word, a sign, with no signification in the face of a figure of authority whose physical presence, even prior to the single word he utters, is enough to elicit an immediate reaction: “And the Muzhiks stopped...” (Hamsun 2004, 49). The last minute mercy leaves both master and slave in the shadow of death, and time and space overlap in the elliptical space allowing the silenced, tortured subaltern to emerge. According to Bhabha, this “complex doubling of time and space, [is] the site of enunciation, and the temporal conditionality of social discourse,[it] is both the thrill and the threat of the poststructuralist and postmodernist discourses” (Bhabha 1994, 55). What is highlighted here is the continuity of history; the Tsar does not go so far as to end the slaves’ lives such that both oppressor and oppressed seem eternally bound. However, with the ellipsis comes the “subaltern instance” (Bhabha 1994, 55) that disrupts the boundaries of master/slave to introduce a supplement and “the possibility of a new understanding” (Bhabha 1994, 55). At this point in time, the supplement is a mere possibility as the future of the subaltern is suspended in time. As Bhabha elucidates, “It is in this hybrid gap, which produces no relief, that the colonial subject *takes place*, its subaltern position inscribed in that space of iteration” (Bhabha 1994, 58/59). Incidentally, Hamsun’s allusion to Napoleon in this evocative image of the inseparability of power and knowledge is a precursor to Said’s in his *Orientalism* where he also refers to the French Emperor in a similar context (Said 1979, 81).

Moreover, consider the episode in which he follows and observes the Persian dervish. His conclusion and opinion is expressed in a provocative mock-serious tone: “Poor Orient, we Prussians and Americans should feel sorry for you, shouldn’t we...” (Hamsun 2004, 181). The missing question mark and the three-dots are disorienting double supplements that stir mental associations of presence and absence, and similarity and difference. The first collective plural ‘we’ initially indicates his assimilation into the prestigious, privileged Western and American identity but this is immediately cut off; as a cultural hybrid, he can imitate but cannot identify, and even his imitation falls short.

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<sup>6</sup> Bhabha’s italics.

<sup>7</sup> Hamsun’s italics.



As such, he experiences “the moment of self-consciousness at once refracted and transparent; the question of identity always poised uncertainly, tenebrously, between shadow and substance” (Bhabha 1994, 49). Added to the ellipsis is a tag question that lacks a finalizing question mark as a further indication of his dissociation with ‘we’ and association with the subaltern. The latter is thus given a space, or an extended opportunity, to answer back. For, according to Oxfeldt, he “does not go so far as to give the Oriental his own voice but he opens up for the possibility of and interest for such an utterance (Oxfeldt 2010, 74)). In fact, readers are tempted to mentally refract the question back toward those ‘we’ (Prussians and Americans) such that it reads ‘should they?’ thereby filling the absence with a disruptive ambivalent questioning of the subjects of inquiry. In all cases, Hamsun’s demonstration is theoretically clarified by Bhabha’s assertion that, “The supplementary strategy suggests that adding ‘to’ need not ‘add·up’ but may disturb the calculation” (Bhabha 1994, 155) and this is what Hamsun effectively exhibits.

It turns out therefore that as the travelogue repeats the discursive practices of colonial narratives, Hamsun’s mimic voice takes on the attributes typical of a hybrid who finds comfort in a mimicry or a repetition that opens a space for further uncertainty. Interestingly, on certain occasions, Hamsun repeats expressions in an attempt to bring his narrative back to its normal path; that abiding path in which the travel writer is expected to maintain binary oppositions by “separating the foreign environment, normally experienced as...dramatic, exciting and exotic, from a familiar reality most often felt as tame, insipid and mediocre. This act of comparison points to the creation of a symmetrical antagonism between “home” and ‘away’” (Storskog 2011, 23). The repetition however falls short in achieving its purpose. Consider how his repetitive phrase “Enough of that” interrupts the flow of his narrative when he is carried away by his familiarity with the wonder and romantic promises of this foreign environment. He performs this interruption at particular integral moments to create the appearance of self-reprobatation. He intentionally repeats that particular order to force his consciousness to take up the colonial endeavor which involves the repetition of stereotypes, but it is too late; he has already allowed the image and presence of the Other to intervene. Once again, the order, “Enough of that,” is what Bhabha refers to as a “supplementary movement of writing” (Bhabha 1994, 154). It brings to an abrupt end the connection between the Norwegian sunset and lake to the Caucasian mountains (Hamsun 2004, 83) by adding what Bhabha calls a,

...‘supplementary’ to the metropolitan centre; it stands in a subaltern, adjunct relation that doesn’t aggrandize the *presence* of the West but redraws its frontiers in the menacing, agonistic boundary of cultural difference that never quite adds up, always less than one nation and double. (Bhabha 1994, 168)

This ‘supplementary’ phrase is repeated twice during the incident with the herdsman in whose house he recalls personal memories such as a “certain fire station back home” (Hamsun 2004, 87-88). However, the fact is that his writing *follows* the event that had already fascinated him and is generally a ‘supplementary’ act itself. He attempts to retain mastery over a memory and a place he could not dominate, not even when he imagines himself running away with the herdsman’s favorite wife. He consequently finds difficulty mastering his imagination, fails to convince the herdsman to sell

according to his own terms, and even his brief romantic ‘supplementary’ reverie with his wife is fruitless. When at the end of this episode, he interestingly states, “With a composure and confidence I hadn’t felt so far in this whole expedition, I went up to my horse and patted it and was its master” (Ibid., 93). He knows, as much as we do, that it was not *his* horse and his mastery over it is temporary and illusory. This dreamy adventure, ruptured by a strange day-dream and an anxious reflexive order, leaves both a trace and a supplement – a nostalgia for his homeland and a space for an authentic subaltern presence.

### **Enchanting digressions**

As a discourse concerned with decentering, Hamsun includes “too many trifles” (Ibid., 132) in the form of digressions, anecdotes, and adventures that fall within the scope of magical realism in their tendency “to display a preoccupation with images of both borders and centres, and to work toward destabilizing their fixity” (Slemon 1988, 13). These side-stories and reflections so subtly imbued with personal frustrations and opinions reflect Hamsun’s inability to conform to the monolithic differentiating strategies of traditional travel narratives. In fact, his inclusion of romantic episodes does not indicate “the turn to the romantic” (Storskog 2011, 21) advocated by colonial discourse, but is in effect told in “the *spirit*<sup>8</sup> of neoromanticism...[as] a depiction of human nature, revealed through an individual’s fantasies” (Oxfeldt 2010, 69). For one, the delicate and enchanting story of the princess and her lover on the train reflects Hamsun’s rapture with the wonder and magic of the place, projects the status of his marriage, and the fate of marriages in general. Following their fairy-tale like introduction, the couple disappear briefly and when Hamsun again graces readers with their presence it is only to highlight the sadness of their separation. What is embedded in this exotic romantic image described from a “painterly distance” (Bhabha 1994, 14) is not so much the exotic difference of the Other as a lack, but also the absence of such passion in what seems to be his own ‘loveless’ relationship; “it is a metaphoric substitution, an illusion of presence, and by the same token a metonym, a sign of absence and loss” (Bhabha 1994, 51). As the couple embrace farewell, Hamsun almost enviously remarks “their relationship couldn’t be better. You could tell they were newlyweds.” He was a newlywed at the time too. Yet, we find out later that the couple were in fact lovers. Secondly, his second story involves an unsuccessful attempt to elope with the herdsman’s wife. Interestingly, both romantic scenes indicate his marital lack and shrewdly hint at the inevitable intervention of a traveler’s psychological state into the narratorial perspective. As Oxfeldt has also observed, “psychological conflicts play themselves out against each other in nerve-racking, self-exposing episodes” (69). Hence, the implication is that the erotic as experienced in the Orient is but a reflection of repressed longing and desire.

Of course, what cannot be ignored is the fact that Hamsun’s digressions occur in tandem with his fever and throw the reader temporarily off track into visions that mirror his subjective encounter with otherness. A fever is a common undesirable affliction among travelers unaccustomed to foreign lands, and while unfortunate delirious illnesses are generally underestimated in travel narratives nevertheless, Hamsun insists on reminding readers of such a real discomfort. This enhances the text’s ambivalence,

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<sup>8</sup> My italics

and as is typical of a cultural hybrid, Hamsun's discourse fails to completely abide by the dictates of colonial travel writing traditions. The result of his encounter with otherness is enlightening and made from the perspective of one who, in Bhabha's words,

...creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation. Such art does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent 'in-between' space, that innovates and attempts the performance of the present. (Bhabha 1994, 7).

One instance indicative of the above is the striking magical realist moment in which he witnesses the frightful, primitive manner in which a dead horse is ravaged and eaten. This takes place when his fever is at its worst and is rendered thus:

They behave more and more strangely, handling the meat with unnecessary gestures. Pressing the pieces of meat against their cheeks, they slide them over to their mouths, as if caressing them blissfully in advance, all the while closing their eyes and laughing. Some cram the meat against their nostrils, holding it there to get the full fragrance of it. (Hamsun 2004, 82)

In spite of the surrealist quality of this moment, he "couldn't help recalling Håkon I during the sacrificial feast at Lade" (Ibid., 79). He connects the Other's present to his native historical past and goes on to conclude the analogy by helping himself to some of the cooked horsemeat. This is a strange cultural performance and exchange in which Hamsun and the men undergo a mutual recognition of cultural similarity rather than difference. From his 'liminal' space, Hamsun is the medium through which the past and the present of two geographical places interact to reveal humanity at its most primitive. The present time is interrupted by a mirror-image from the past; in this interstitial space cultural hybrid identity emerges as a negotiation rather than an assertion of differences. For Derrida too, "History means, rather, to set sail without a course, on the prow for something "new" (Derrida 1997a, 116) and is what Hamsun effectively does when he "take[s] advantage of [his] legal right to go astray" (Hamsun 2004, 30).

Furthermore, prior to narrating the episode in which he imagines himself eloping with the herdsman's young wife and inciting a woman's movement, Hamsun merges reality and fantasy when he remembers a historical event that foreshadows this reverie and attempted romantic escapade. While describing the beautiful, languid, pastoral impression of the felicitous wilderness and favoring it over European comfort, his mind wanders to a strange analogy: "When a barbarian emperor was Europeanized, he began to use the Caucasus for – a place of exile. And preferably he exiled poets" (Hamsun 2004, 56). This rather vague historical allusion refers to the exiled poet Alexander Pushkin who wrote *The Prisoner of the Caucasus* in this uncultivated region<sup>9</sup>. With this in mind, it becomes apparent that the plot of Hamsun's anecdote, the herdsman episode, includes incidents reminiscent of those in Pushkin's poem which the latter had also composed and dedicated to a woman. Furthermore, this realization renders his short,

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<sup>9</sup> Tsar Alexander I exiled Pushkin for his Ode on Liberty. Stephan Talty's (2009) *The Illustrious Dead*. New York: Crown Publishers. pp. 18-19, provides in-depth information of Napoleon's intended war with Russia and his reference to Tsar Alexander as a barbarian emperor.

strange ‘feminist freedom’ poem nothing more than a parody of Pushkin’s “Ode to Liberty.” Such profuse intertextual hints rupture the smooth flow of the narrative, and it is only through a second reading that one can unravel the implications of Hamsun’s riddle-like allusions. However, even if their significance is not immediately clear, the uncertainty they stir is enough. Hamsun succeeds in splitting and disrupting the stereotypical romantic image of the Orient by revealing the advantageous position of the other, and his fantasy of inciting a woman’s movement loses its significance in that location. Interestingly, these anecdotal references presented in a ‘nested’ manner, or through interlocking allusions, erase the binaries of time and place, past and present, reality and fiction, and further establish the author’s “wit and originality” (Storskog 2011, 25).

The past and the present meet again in another poignant magical realist moment which uncannily harbors a future revelation. On the occasion when Hamsun is overcome by fear over his fate and is deeply concerned over “What would happen to [his] scientific notes for the Geographical Society” (Ibid., p. 12), he opportunely goes back in time to a distant past and place where he illusively *becomes*<sup>10</sup> Galileo – the victim of a scientific fact that disagreed with the Catholic Church’s generally acknowledged notion of truth. Galileo’s name is never mentioned, yet the sensational circumstances and utterances are enough to reveal the identity of the man with whom Hamsun strangely comes to relate in body and spirit. As Storskog also states, “what [Hamsun] looks for are elements offering the possibility of establishing similies between what is known and what is unknown” (Storskog 2011, 23-24). Hamsun uses the present tense to assimilate this fatal historical experience into his own present narratorial time. He then switches to the future tense to describe an event that, strangely enough, is not so different from the one he will experience later in his own life. Apart from the fact that Hamsun is engaging with “institutional power and ideological Eurocentricity” (Bhabha 1994, 31), he merges the past and the present in a single image and in so doing uncovers an uncanny vision of his future not too different from Galileo’s; like him, Hamsun’s writings “will be burned by the executioner ... in the stony backyard of the fortress and soldiers would stand around with fixed bayonets, and the sentence will be read and I would mount the fire and repeat until the end: And yet the earth is round!” after which his sentence is “commuted to incarceration for life...” (Hamsun 2004, 121-122). It is uncanny how the past meets the present in Hamsun’s psychic Third Space and conjures a vision of his future. This is the charm of what Bhabha describes “a form of cultural reinscription that moves *back to the future*. I shall call it a ‘projective’ past, a form of the future anterior” (Hamsun 1994, 252). Similarly, Storskog has drawn attention to how the paths of the Russian forest point to the opening lines of his Nobel winning novel, *Growth of the Soil* (Storskog 2011, 24). Strange as it may seem, this wonderland has proven to be true to its magical depiction.

Moreover, among Hamsun’s borderless detours is a typical digression- one with a well-defined border through which readers experience a meditative contemplation. In a set-off little room “without even a window opening to the street” he ruptures the narrative’s main course of action to repeatedly affirm that he is “framing a humble opinion” (Hamsun 2004, 134) about Russian literature which in fact turns out to be not so humble. What he effectively does is open a window into his mind, his secret

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<sup>10</sup> My italics

thoughts. When he notices he is being carried away by sarcasm, he confidentially states, “I must check once more whether the windows are well shut before I elaborate on this” (Ibid., p. 138) to further strengthen the image of closure. As befitting the narrative’s intended exaggeration and ambiguity, Hamsun’s attempts at secrecy are a mere illusion since the information he presents neither remain within the borders of his thoughts nor in the little room. In this enclosed space, it is his beliefs and his authentic subjective identity that dominate the narrative’s realism. He relishes in this mental freedom to boldly express and highlight, among other things, what he had hitherto vaguely hinted at – hegemony as the institutional manipulation of truths by “individuals who exercise an overwhelming influence on the intellectual life of the time: they set the nations brooding” (Hamsun 2004, 139) and which for Bhabha “is itself the process of iteration and differentiation” (Bhabha 1994, 29) carried out in the systematic repetition of the same.

### **An aesthetic performative counter-discourse**

Finally, in a highly ambivalent travel narrative Hamsun reveals how hybridity “*keep[s] alive the making of the past*” (Bhabha 1994, 254) and is the appropriate condition for encouraging social transformation and cultural interaction. His borderline experience has allowed him ample room, not only to express his cultural hybridity, but also to demonstrate the efficiency of counter-discourse strategies that articulate the play of similarities and differences, presence and absence, and connect past and present, even leaving some space for the future to be uncannily envisioned or predicted. In the process of following the trajectory of colonial discourse where fixed notions of difference are laid down and strengthened by dominant cultures, Hamsun expresses his appreciation of non-uniform, colorful, diverse identities and relationships. As he imitates colonial travel writers in his wish to return from the Orient with scientific material and tales of the exotic and the primitive, the result is a strikingly different tale. As Bhabha elucidates,

It is from between them, where the letter of the law **will** not be assigned as a sign, that culture's double returns uncannily - neither the one nor the other, but the imposter - to mock and mimic, to lose the sense of the masterful self and its social sovereignty. (Bhabha 1994, 137)

Hence, what Hamsun experiences is a “recreation of the self in the world of travel, the resettlement of the borderline community of migration” (Bhabha 1994, 9) which he aesthetically demonstrates in a highly ambivalent travelogue that uncovers the discriminatory policies of colonial discourse. Moreover, his in-between position, his subjectivity, makes him immune to conformity. He repeatedly returns to his roots and connects personal memories with his impressions of another culture while expressing appreciation of the latter’s authenticity and adamant resistance to drastic imperial, material attractions. Thus, Hamsun regards the “modern tartar” with a critical eye as he does individuals and buildings who willingly forgo their culture to embrace the spirit of materialism and relinquish their basic cultural features. In Tiflis, he disfavors those who are Japanese but looked “non-Japanese” (Ibid., p. 179) and even criticizes hybrid houses whose structure spoil the archaic impression of the landscape (Ibid., p. 192). However, in the middle of this chaotic, industrial setting, surrounded by American modernism,

lies the Asiatic quarter as an authentic unaffected, different cultural space, “a good quiet place in the world” (Ibid., p. 147).

To conclude, Hamsun’s ‘interstitial space,’ allows him to debunk the ‘truths’ of colonial travel travelogues in a polyphony of colorful voices and vibrant opinions and statements. Unfortunately, a detailed presentation of such dialogic instances is beyond the scope of this study. What is important is that Hamsun’s abundant visual and verbal images are at par with those of postcolonial critics and theorists, especially those of Said and of Bhabha whose criticism of “a new Anglo-American nationalism which increasingly articulates its economic and military power in political acts that express a neo-imperialist disregard for the independence and autonomy of peoples and places in the Third World” (Bhabha 1994, 20) is successfully performed or demonstrated in this digressive, episodic narrative. Writing from the threshold of geography, history and memory, Hamsun’s borderline experience leaves him “in a position to translate the differences between them into a kind of solidarity” (Bhabha 1994, 170). On the whole, his intriguing and aesthetic portrayal of otherness leaves readers “brooding” over the reality behind representations of difference.

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### **Forfatterbiografi**

Soha El Samad is a Professor of Postcolonial Literature at the Department of English Language and Literature at the Lebanese University in Northern Lebanon. Having been immersed in both West African and Middle Eastern Cultures, her main focus is literary theory and cultural studies. She has done research in Anglophone and English Literature, and her latest publications are: “A Cultural Median: *One Thousand Nights and a Night* before 1700,” / ““On Illusion and Timelessness:’ Flux and Absolute Immanence in D.H. Lawrence’s Fiction” / “Beyond the Cataclysm: Cultural Nationalism in McCarthy’s *The Road* and Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*.”  
Contact: soha.elsamad@ul.edu.lb