

Postcolonial Reading of Edmond O'Donovan's *The Merv Oasis*

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Abstract

In the context of the Great Game and in throes of Geok-Tepe War in Akhal region located in Turkomania, The *Daily Mail* sends off Edmond O'Donovan to make the reportage of the Russians' colonial advancement and their clash with Turkmens, but the Russians' ban on foreign reporters disrupts his initial plan. As a result, he redirects his way to Merv where the Turkmens capture him. His captors ironically receive him both as prisoner and a ruling member for five months. Meanwhile, he registers his observations and experiences there which later appears in his bestseller travelogue entitled, *The Merv Oasis*. Despite his involvement with British Imperialism, O'Donovan's travel book has not received any critical attention from scholars of travel studies. In this regard, this article seeks to address their critical negligence by studying it in the spirit of postcolonial approach. This method is invaluable in two ways. Firstly, it discloses the travel writer's hidden imperial assumptions through focusing on his surveillance and his description of his travelees' diseases and their medical treatment. Secondly through clarifying the role of travel writer on Othering his travelees when he deals with their food culture and their supposedly exotic bazaar. On the whole, this reading challenges the innocent façade of O'Donovan's travelogue and points to his imperial assumptions and cultural baggage which tarnish its impartiality and authenticity.

Key Words: Travel writing, Othering, Empirical Assumption, Surveillance, Food, Medicine, Bazaar, Jewelry.

قراءة ما بعد الاستعمار لكتاب "واحة ميرف" لإدموند أودونوفان

خلاصة

في سياق Great Game ومخاض Geok-Tepe Ware في منطقة Akhal الواقعة في تركمانيا ، ترسل جريدة The Daily Mail إدموند أودونوفان لعمل ريبورتاج عن التقدم الاستعماري للروس وصدامهم مع التركمان ، لكن الروس 'حظروا المراسلين الأجانب وعطل خطته الأولية. نتيجة لذلك ، قام بإعادة توجيه طريقه إلى ميرف حيث أسره التركمان. ومن المفارقات أن أسريه يستقبلونه كسجين وعضو حاكم لمدة خمسة أشهر. في هذه الأثناء ، يسجل ملاحظاته وتجاربه هناك والتي ظهرت لاحقاً في كتابه الأكثر مبيعاً بعنوان The Merv Oasis. على الرغم من انخراطه مع الإمبريالية البريطانية ، لم يحظ كتاب سفر أودونوفان بأي اهتمام نقدي من علماء دراسات السفر. في هذا الصدد ، يسعى هذا البحث إلى معالجة إهمالهم النقدي من خلال دراسته بروح نهج ما بعد الاستعمار. هذه الطريقة لا تقدر بثمن من ناحيتين. أولاً ، يكشف عن الافتراضات الإمبراطورية الخفية لكاتب السفر من خلال التركيز على مراقبته ووصفه لأمراض رحلته وعلاجهم الطبي. ثانياً ، من خلال توضيح دور كاتب الرحلات في كتابات أخرى للمسافرين عندما يتعامل مع ثقافة طعامهم وبيئتهم الغريب المفترض. بشكل عام، تتحدى هذه القراءة الواجهة البريئة لرحلة أودونوفان وتشير إلى افتراضاته الإمبريالية وأمتعته الثقافية التي تلوث حيادها وأصالتها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: كتابة السفر ، الافتراض التجريبي ، المراقبة ، الغذاء ، الطب ، البازار ، المجوهرات.

1. Introduction

1.1. Concise History of Travel Writing

As a literary genre, travel writing refers to a nonfictional narrative in prose in which travel writer (as a self) through first person perspective chronicles not only his/her encounters with travelees (as Others) but also his/her observation of their customs and mores (mostly) in remote regions for her home readership (Fussell, 1980). Like other literary genres, it has been subject to paradigmatic changes since its inception. In the Middle Ages period, the main focus of travel writing is chronicling pilgrimages to sacred spaces, but it is marred with forgery and fantasy, and *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* is a case in the point (Youngs, 2013). In the Renaissance, Western exploration of the New World dominates travel writing. Thanks to positivist and empirical theories developed by Bacon and John Lock, travel writers avoid falsifying their observations; for instance, Raleigh's travel book, *The Discovery of Large and Beautiful Empire of Guiana* is the best representative of this era (Whitfield, 2011). In the eighteenth century, the narratives of Grand Tour fill the pages of travel books. This type of travel has been executed by the sons of wealthy families to complete their education via learning new languages as well as visiting courts and monuments of classical antiquity in countries like Italy, France, and Germany and James Boswell's *Boswell on the Grand Tour* is a good example of this type of travelogue (Korte, 2000). In the Romantic period, the main feature of travel writing is capturing sublime in nature and the description of picturesque scenery, and Gilpin's *Observations on the River Wye* exemplifies it (Casaliggi & Fermanis, 2016). In Victorian era, travel writing is the handmaiden of Western imperialism since Victorian travel writers in their travel books highlight the desperate need of their travelees to embrace Western culture, commerce, and civilization to be liberated them from their supposed paganism and savagery (Moran. 2006). Like novels in this period, travelogues are lengthy and packed with different sort of information, and Vambéry's *Travels in Central Asia* is a good example of Victorian travel writing. Travel writing in the twentieth century adopts modernist and postmodernist sensibilities. The former is characterized by fragmentation, stream of consciousness, and fractured point of view like Annemarie Schwarzenbach' *Death in Persia*, 2016) while the latter travelogue is marked with instability, parody, and playfulness like Bruce Chatwin's *In Patagonia* (Thompson, 2011). In the twenty first century, despite the acceleration of globalization, travel writing in lieu of dying out is still vital, and its vigor is indicated by two branches of travel writing: footsteps genre and nature writing. In the former, a travel writer follows the itinerary of past travelers; in the latter the main concerns of travel writer are global warming, the loss of habitats and species, as well as the fate of the planet earth (Young, 2013).

1.2. Concise History of Merv

Since the focal point of O'Donovan's travel book is Merv, it necessitates having an acquaintance with its history. According to legend, it was Zoroaster who founded this city (Hopkirk, 1993). Importance of this oasis lies in two things. Firstly, in being located in the course of the Murghab River; secondly, in connecting Persia, Khiva, Bokhara, and Afghanistan. Therefore, fertility of its land along with its commercial and political position rendered it as one of highly desired regions both for foreigners as well as neighboring countries. This city has been known by different names in history: 'Margiana' in Latin, 'Alexandria' in Greek, 'Margush' during the reign of Sassanid kings of Persia, 'Mouru' in ancient Persian text, 'Margu' in cuneiform inscription, as well as 'Marv-Shahijan' and 'Sultan-kala' when the Muslim had dominion over it (Tharoor, 2016, Abazov, 2005; Hopkirk, 1993, & "Merv"). Like other cities, this legendary city has been subject to many political vicissitudes. In the fourth century B.C. Alexander the Great conquers and renames it to Alexandria (Abazov, 2005). During Achaemenid period in seventh century B.C., it is the seat of a Persian satrapy (ibid.).

In addition, long before the arrival of Islam in Central Asia, the city has been the hub of Nestorian Christianity (Hopkirk, 1993). When Muslim Arabs gain the control of the city in the seventh century, it enjoys its heydays. New Muslim rulers transform it into one of the most important political epicenters of Islamic world. In this regard, it is not surprising to know that Caliph Al-Mamun resides there from 809 until 818 in order to discharge his responsibilities from there (Cooperson, 2005). The city reaches its pinnacle of political and cultural glory during Seljuk Empire in the twelfth century as Alp Arslan and his grandson, Sultan Sanjar, choose it as their capital, and erect "numerous monumental mosques and medreses [Islamic schools], magnificent palaces, kerwen-sarays [a resting place or inn for caravans and weary travelers], and administrative buildings" (Abazov, 2005, p.108), but in the thirteenth century, Mongolian Golden Horde led by Tuluy Khan, Genghis' youngest and most brutal son, sack this imperial city and put an end to its splendor and grandeur (Hopkirk, 1993). In the fifteenth century, Merv is under control of Timurid kings, yet in 1507 Muhammad Shaybani, an Uzbek ruler, wrests its control from them; nevertheless, his victory proves transient because Shah Ismail, a Safavid ruler, defeats him in 1510 and annexed it to the Persian territory (Dani & Masson, 1992). In the seventeenth century, Shah Abbas, another Safavid king, rules it, but in the eighteenth century his kingdom comes to an end by Nadir Shah, and Merv automatically falls under Nadir's authority. (Ibid.). It is in the latter part of eighteenth century which Merv once more witnesses the spell of peace and prosperity thanks to the efforts of Bairam Ali Khan who repairs its dam on the Murghab River and builds a strong fortress around it; nevertheless, Uzbek Amir Masum from Bokhara just as the Mongolians razes it once more (Hopkirk, 1993), thus up to the end of the first half of nineteenth century Khivan Uzbeks have hegemony over Merv. In the second half of the nineteenth century, tables are turned in favor of Turkmens, and they gained the control of Merv and announced it as their legitimate territory.

The Turkmens' success is the fruit of a joint collaboration between two Turkmen Tekke leaders: Kushid-Khan and Nur Verdi Khan who unite Turkmen tribes and defeat their two arch enemies: Khivans and Persians who always claimed the sovereignty over Merv and Turkmens (Saray, 1989). However, the euphoria of the Turkmens over obtaining

the suzerainty of Merv and their new independence evaporates in 1884 when they agree to be the subjects of Tsar albeit under an ultimatum issued by Russia: “either to accept Russian authority or to meet Russian guns” (p.247). Indeed, the Turkmens are forced to accept the submission to Russia owing to two main factors. In the first place, for losing their confidence when they suffer a crushing defeat in Geok-Tepe war despite their heroic defense. In the second place, for not receiving any military and political succor from Persia, Afghanistan, and Britain whom they persistently request (ibid.).

1.3. Brief History of Turkmens and their Territory

Turkmens who in Western travel books are known as *Turcomen*, *Toorcumun*, *Turkemen*, *Turcomani*, *Turcoman*, *Turcomaun*, and *Turkoman* inhabit the steppes between Khiva, the Oxus River, and the eastern shores of the Caspian Sea along with the northern frontier of Khorasan in Persia. Etymologically, the word ‘Turkmen’ means ‘pure Turk’, ‘like Turk’, and ‘Turk of faith’ (Saray, 1989) and this word appears in the thirteenth century when it takes the place of ‘Oguz’ (Curtis, 1997). Historically the Turkmens belong to the Turkic Oghuz tribes, “who originate in Inner Asia and establish vast nomadic empires beginning in the third century B.C.” (Diba, 2011, p. 6). In the eighth century, these pastoral-nomadic people migrate to Central Asia (Curtis, 1997) where they choose as their permanent place. With regard to their political influences, it is not overstatement to claim that they played a chief part in the history of Central Asia, Persia, and the Middle East (Abazov 2005). They demonstrated this crucial role in five ways; firstly, through founding the Seljuk dynasty in the eleventh century; secondly, via establishing their own principality in Anatolia in the fourteenth; thirdly, by creating new bipolar states: Qara Qyunlu (the black sheep) and Aq Qyunlu (the white sheep) in the mid-fourteenth century (Diba, 2011); fourthly, by challenging the sovereignty of Persian central governments and fighting against them when they attempt to shatter their autonomy and bring them under their exclusive sphere of control (Khazeni, 2007), and finally by resisting against the Russian’s encroachment on their territory especially in Gok-Tepe war in the second part of the nineteenth century even though they eventually succumb to their well-armed animus (Hopkirk, 2013 & Abazov, 2007).

1.4. Travel Writer’s Life and the Synopsis of His Travel Book

Edmond O’Donovan is born into an educative and large family in Dublin in 1844. John O’ Donovan, his father, is a famous antiquarian, archeologist, and topographer, as well as a noted scholar of Irish folklore, language, and literature (Foley, 2012). Despite his financial constraints, his father sends him to prestigious Jesuit College so that he will study medicine, yet he cannot live up to his father’s dream and obtain his degree (ibid.). Later, for some time, he works as an assistant librarian in Trinity College where he joins Fenian, Irish revolutionary organization, endeavoring hard to liberate Ireland from the yoke of British colonialism. He is very active in the organization, thereby participating eagerly in every uprising staged by it. His full involvement in these rebellions is led to his imprisonment for six months in 1866 (ibid.). When free from the prison, he enters into national politics and tries hard to win Irish nationalist Westminster seat, yet he loses this political competition. Disappointed with his failure, he leaves his country to France and America. When he returns from his voyage in 1870, France enters into a war with Germany. Being pro-French, he joins French army and fights against Germans; however, he is captured in the war and incarcerated in Germany. After being discharged from the prison, he resumes and intensifies his political activities in the

Fenian and even becomes the head of it, albeit in the North of England. Meanwhile, he seriously pursues his journalism as well, and makes a valuable contribution both to Irish and English newspapers in particular *Freeman Journal*, *The Times*, *Standard*, and *Daily News*. Moreover, as a journalist, he covers Carlist unrest in Spain, the war between Turkey and Russia, and the uprising of Bosnian people against the Ottoman Empire (ibid.). The coverage of these events establishes him as an intrepid and international war correspondent in England. When Russian troops under leadership of Mikhail Skobelev advance towards Goek-Tepe fortress located in Akhal region to subdue fiercely resisting Teke Turkmen, the *Daily News* chooses him to embark on a journey to Merv so as to report the clash between Turkmen and their mighty nemesis even though the *Daily News* is well aware that the Russians are intolerant of any journalist connected with British government (ibid.).

According to Foley (2012) the reason which prompts the newspaper to select him as its representative is his ability to speak three languages: Jagatai (a lingua franca in Central Asia) Arabic and Persian as well as his good knowledge of topography, botany, engineering, the arts and sciences. O'Donovan sets off for Central Asia in 1879. In this regard, firstly he goes to Georgia where "the semi-Asiatic, semi-European aspect of the place ... [and people in] Tartar headdresses and fur-lined coats" (O' Donovan, 1884, p.10) strike his eyes. Then from there he makes a journey to Baku. There he meets Russians generals and become aware of their decision to suppress and annex Turkomania in particular Merv. He also dwells on the abundance of petroleum and its refining there, "at times naphtha rises to the surface, even flows over abundantly" (p.20). In the next step, from Baku he departs to Persia and he visited different cities there: Asterabad, Rasht, Tehran, Semnan, Shahrood, Bojnorod, Kuchan, Sabzavar, Mashhad [capital of Khorasan Province], and Dereguez. Generally, the image he paints of Persia in his book is rife with hookahs, dervishes, diseases, snakes, insects, and insecure roads, highwaymen forays, and chaotic caravanserais as well as allegedly exotic bazaars (reminding him of Arabian nights). His penetration into Turkomania materializes when he secured a formal passport from the prince governor of Mashhad. Initially he heads towards Akhal region to see the Russians' invasion firsthand in Goek-Tepe, but on the account of the Russians' prohibition against any war reportage, he is forced to retreat and move towards Merv with his escorts. When he reaches Merv, he arouses the suspicion of Mervlies [people of Merv] thinking that he has to be a Russian spy, coming there to survey its roads and map drinkable water wells in the desert so as to facilitate the conquest of their region.

Accordingly, they detain him in a tent and keep a vigilant watch on him. Meanwhile the Turkmen receive letters and messages from Persian authorities in Mashhad and Tehran confirming his affiliation with British government. Thus, they grant him relative liberty and even appoint him as one of three chief ruling leaders of Merv [triumvirate] to make a decision as to whether resist or submit if the Russian army advance towards them. This explains why they pitch him a new tent with a British flag atop. People of Merv assume that it is his presence that halts the nefarious Russian troops from assaulting them. They also interpret his presence as the sign of British implicit support against the encroaching Russians. Unable to adapt with Oriental life, many a times he endeavors to leave Merv in vain, yet his chance to leave Merv arises when Turkmen leaders select him as their representative to travel Tehran in order to convey their anxieties over the Russians' design to occupy their territory to English authorities in Tehran. But as soon

as he leaves Merv to Persia laden with presents from the Turkmens, he forgets what his mission is about because “he had least affection for his captors [the Turkmens]” (Foley, 2012, p.7). During his five-month residence or his honorable captivity in Merv, he does not act like an idle prisoner bemoaning his fate, rather he maps the region, writes about Jewish community, and records the Turkmens’ customs and mores, history, food, music, clothing, medicine, market, sporadic raids in neighboring regions, and political system, as well as their love of horses, along with the flora and fauna of the region with the intention of writing a bestseller. When he returns to London in 1882, the *Daily News* in acknowledgment of his perilous journey and adventures awards him a thousand pounds. He donates his monetary reward to the Fenian movement. To satisfy exotic-seeking minds of his home readership about an inaccessible region like Merv, he publishes his travelogue in two volumes: *The Merv Oasis: Travels and Adventures East of the Caspian during the Years of 1879-80-81: Five Month’s Residence among the Tekkes of Merv*. Later he also publishes its epitomized version entitled, *A Story of Adventures and Captivity*. Much to his delight, his dream comes true and his travel book becomes an instant bestseller and made Merv a popular word among Victorian families (Foley, 2012). In the same year, like Vambéry and other Victorian explorers he delivers a speech about his observations and experiences in Merv before the Royal Geographical Society, presenting the fresh picture of Russian expansionist activities in Turkomania and the reaction of people in Merv towards it. His adventurous war journalism is not without any cost since it is resulted in his early death in 1883 when he accompanies Anglo- Egyptian army to dismantle the newly establish religious empire of Al- Mahdi in Sudan (Foley, 2012).

2. Review of Literature

Despite being a bestseller in the Victorian era, its active involvement in British imperialism in the context of the Great Game, and its top-down approach towards Oriental Merv and its inhabitants, O’Donovan’s travelogue has received few attentions from scholars of travel writing so far. This lack of interest can be attributed to the obscurity and remoteness of Merv, early death of the travel writer in Sudan, as well as to the belated popularity of travel studies in academia. Nonetheless, there are some writers utilize this travelogue as their historical document to illustrate the rivalry between Tsarist Russian and Britain in the context of the Great Game. For instance, Maclean’s *A Person from England* (2012), Hopkirk’s *Central Asia through Western Eyes* (1993), and Mehmet Saray’s *The Turkmens in the Age of Imperialism* (1989) are best cases in point. In addition, a museum curator like Diba in her book, *Turkmen Jewelry* builds on this travel book to demonstrate the art of jewelry making among the Turkmens living in Merv, albeit in passing. Unlike previous writers, Michael Foley (2012) besides providing biographical information about the travel writer, points to some features of his travelogue in his article entitled, *The Reporting of Edmond O’Donovan: Literary Journalism and the Great Game*. He contends that the travel writer cum journalist is fair in his representation of his travelees. Nevertheless, there are many passages demonstrates that he demeans and demonizes them. The following extract clearly indicates his jaundiced perspective,

Their cravings after smallest sums of money and their general greed surpass my worst experience in other parts of the world. I would rather live in a remote Chinese province, or among the dwarf of savages of the Malay Archipelago,

than at Merv. Their power to inflict annoyance, and their obtuseness to any sense of delicacy, make them a most undesirable race to live among (Donovan, 1883, p.393).

Moreover, Foley remarks that his style is “witty, ironic, and understated” (p.6), but close perusal of his travel book indicates that his style is mostly straightforward, unrestrained, and its wittiness is tinged with disrespect which is evident in the following comment of the travel writer,

This was extremely ludicrous, as none of the enthusiasts had the smallest notion as to who the dead people were, or what they had done to the Sultan Sanjar. It helped to show me how blindly these illiterate Orientals are led by anything in the shape of religious (O’ Donovan, 1883, p.252).

He makes this comment when he accompanied some Turkmens in vicinity of Merv. During their meandering, he sees that his fellow travelers while standing on their horses start throwing stones and shooting their muskets at graves of people whom the Turkmens consider as the enemies of Sultan Sanjar who dies tragically and lonely, and this is highly respected among Turkmens.

Foley also observes that some of descriptions in O’Donovan’s travel book has sociological value. Even though the comments are right, yet he does not mention that his sociological observations are colored by his Eurocentric assumptions. For example, the travel writer is surprised to find that seven Jewish families in Merv live among the Turkmens without being harassed, but he thinks their tolerance is motivated by their cupidity rather than their liberality: “[religious tolerance is] due to [their] complete indifference to ... [religion rather] than to any greater liberality of mind on their part. In Merv, as a rule, but little is paid to anyone’s religious belief, provided he be possessed by money” (p.130). In the conspicuous absence of any serious scholarly article about O’Donovan’s travelogue, the current article aims to redress this research gap by focusing on its imperialistic assumptions and Othering.

3. Travel Writer’s Imperialistic Assumptions

3.1. Surveillance

Kabbani (2008) in her *Imperial Fictions: Europe’s Myth of Orient* argues that idea of travel to distant terrains is observed in communities that exercise a great deal of political power. One of the vital evidences of this political power is surveillance since

It implies a viewer with an elevated vantage point, it suggests the power to process and understand that which is seen, and it objectifies and interpolates the colonized subjects [by extension travelers] in a way that fixes its identity in relation to the surveyor [travel writer] (Ashcraft, et al., 2000, p.207).

Taking his cue from Foucault’s panopticon considers, Spurr (1993) considers the surveillance as one of rhetoric of Empire. Like Greenblatt (1991), he holds that the exercise of surveillance/witnessing by the Western travelers and explorers is their initial step taken either to possess or acquire mastery over the traversed/explored zones. For him, the surveillance is not cold scientific endeavor, but an act accompanied by aesthetic pleasure. He then delineates three common focal points of surveillance/

commanding view in travel accounts in particular those written in the nineteenth century: landscapes, interiors, and bodies.

Edmond O' Donovan in his voyage to Merv practices it, yet he directs his commanding gaze mostly in two areas: landscape and interiors, thereby revealing his involvement in imperialist discourse.

His first surveillance of landscape in Merv oasis takes place when he

Mounted a small sepulchral earth mound which stood hard by. From its summit I caught my first glimpse of the old cities of the plain-the ancient capital of Margiana [Merv in Latin]. A long of walls, turrets, dominated by some towering domes [which] broke the line of horizon...Halfway between me and the ruins lay a large, shallow sheet of water, where unused irrigation trenches expand their supplies upon an uncultivated plain. Black ibises, wild swans, storks, cranes, and a hundred other varieties of aquatic birds waded in or swam upon the silent marsh (1883, p.202).

The above passage is the clear example of what Marry Louise Pratt (2008) calls it "monarch of all I survey" (p.197) in which the travel writer climbs an elevated place "to survey the scene below in such a way as to combine spatial arrangement with strategic, aesthetic, or economic valorization of the landscape" (Spurr, 1993, p.17). In the above fragmentation, the eye of the travel writer systematically travels to the plain, afterwards to the ruins of ancient city, then to a pond near to unexploited trenches and unemployed agricultural lands, and finally to the quiet marsh accommodating different type of birds. By so doing, he brings spatial order to the scene. This arrangement of pictorial pieces is called parataxis, through which "the process of knowing world became largely a matter of establishing natural objects as visually possible" (p.18). However, this special arrangement is not done without any ulterior motive since the travel writer economically valorizes the sight. In this way, he highlights the existence of 'unused irrigation trenches' and 'uncultivated plain'. Here the travel writer implies two contradictory ideas: on the one hand he alludes that this Oriental region is naturally abundant, that is, the region is blessed with enough water and arable plain; on the other hand, he suggests that the inhabitants of the region are mired in indolence and lethargy. Therefore, he insinuates that his Oriental travelers need to be aroused from their slumber so that they can transform this scene of stasis and indifference into the site of industry and dynamism, yet stimulus to this prospective change, the travel writer believes, cannot be achieved from within, but it should come from without: West. Moreover, the travel writer gives an aesthetic touch to the economic aspect of the arranged space in two ways. Firstly, similar to a poet, the travel writer in his description of the scene draws a vivid verbal painting of the Oriental scene by the effective combination of visual imagery (the ruined fortresses, domed structures, horizon, the pond, trenches, the vast plain and the marsh full of birds) with that of kinesthetic (indicated by wading and swimming of the birds in the marsh) and an auditory imagery (signified by the silence of the marsh). By so doing, he "invests the scene with aesthetic value" (ibid.). Secondly, like Romantic poets who bestow aesthetic aura to ruined ancient loci (Leask, 2009) the travel writers confer aesthetic ambience to his observed setting as he directs the attention of his readers to the remnants of the ruined city of Merv such as the castles and masques and mausoleums which are referred in the text as domed structures. Here the

travel writer's surveillance is the expression of Western desire to occupy the Oriental space.

Another area of interest for colonizers/travel writers to concentrate their surveillance is the interiors or dwelling places of the colonized/travelees. Spurr (1993) notes that penetrating non-Western spaces has been the established tradition of Western literature (including travel writing) from colonial American captive narratives to the novels of Forster. He also adds that in these interiors a cultural confrontation between the observer and the observees and their space takes place, and there, he observes, Western gaze has its most powerful impact. In congruent with other Western travel writers, Edmond O'Donovan in his voyage to Oriental Merv penetrates into his travelees' 'ev' or their traditional felt tent and reports its interior in detail,

Furniture of the 'ev' is simple. The fire occupies the middle of the 'ev', immediately under the central opening in the dome. The half of floor remote from the entrance is covered with a 'ketché', of felt carpet...on this is laid, here and there, Turcomans...on which the inhabitants sit by day and sleep by night. A special bed is unknown to a Turcoman. The semi-circle next the door is of bare earth, and on it chopping of wood, cooking and other rough operations are conducted. Round the walls hang large flat camel-bags, six feet by four, one side being entirely composed of rich carpet-work in which Turkmen. Ordinarily, all the household goods are packed in these bags... I have seen a kind of rude bed, supported upon four legs...a kind of rude support upon which boxes, quilts, and bolsters are stored, so as to be removed from damp earth. Besides the primitive horizontal hand-mill, or quern of our Celtic forefather and the samovar... Hang on one side are the saddle and other horse trappings of the master of establishment, along with his sabre and musket. Within roof near and near its top hang a couple of lamb and goat-skins...the skins are probably remnants of some old pre-Mussulman [Muslim] worship, such as that which was common among the Scythian forefathers of this people. Near the doorway, against the felt wall-lining, is sewn a piece of linen or calico...forming pocket for the reception of the wondering spirits...These are the principle superstitious usages of the Turcomans (emphasis added, 1883, pp.140-41).

In the above extract, one can perceive that the eye of the travel writer systematically captures whatever are inside the felt tent, including the bed, carpets, bags, the wooden support, the hand mill, samovar, the horse trapping, and the sword and gun of the owner of the 'ev' along with dried lamb skin, calico bag, and horse shoe. Spurr (1993) maintains that shedding light on the private zone of the travelees affords the travel writer an opportunity to drum up the attention of his audience, and by so doing he invests "perception itself with the mediating power of cultural difference" (p.21). In this passage, the travel writer underlines this cultural difference by means of the trope which Fowler (2007) calls it 'medievalization'. It permits the travel writer to catapult the travelees and their private world into "a supposedly pre-civilized stage of social and cultural development" (Fowler, 2007, p.61). The travel writer exhibits this trope in four ways. Firstly, through detecting resemblance between supposedly horizontal primitive hand-mill used with his travelees and that of his Irish ancestors: Celtic people, who were early inhabitants of Britain in the Anglo-Saxon period. Secondly, by pointing to the tradition of hanging the dried skin of the lamb and goat which, he assumes, is

remained untouched from the time of his travelers' pagan Scythian progenitors, and even the arrival Islam failed to obliterate it from their culture. Thirdly, via referring to their allegedly superstitious belief: the calico pocket containing food which his travelers used to feed to wandering spirits. Here the travel writers want to remind his readers that his travelers have preserved age-old cult of ancestor worshipping up to this time. Finally, by labeling the furniture of his travelers as 'rude' and 'primitive' to specify the fact that the Turkmens are frozen time. Here the travel writer's penetration into his traveler's felt tent is not done purely out of his curiosity since it implicitly suggests that his travelers are in demand of Westerners' presence and their modernizing and reviving energy.

3.2. Disease and Medicine

Pity, this busy monster, Man unkind,
Not. Progress is a ... disease

E.E. Cummings

Bear welcome in your eye,
Your hand, your tongue: look like the innocent flower,
But be the serpent under't.

Shakespeare

In the context of Western imperial expansion in the nineteenth century, it would be simplistic and hasty to view indigenous diseases only as medical conditions accompanied with pathological symptoms and Western medicine merely as remedies prescribed by Western doctors with philanthropic ends to treat the native people. On the contrary, highlighting the prevalence of diseases among the colonized (and by extension travelers) and eulogizing the efficacy of Occidental medicine are informed by imperialistic overtones which tarnish the innocent and benevolent façade of Western discourse of health and medicine.

From viewpoint of Western travelers and colonial agents, disease in non-Western contact zones was regarded as "one of great [cultural and racial] dividers" (Arnold, 1988, p.7) since they interpreted it as the sign of the indigenous populace's backwardness, filthiness and indolence (Spurr, 1993). In this way, the natives' ailments provided strong justificatory grounds for the colonial Westerners to ideologically construct them as hygienic 'others' who are vulnerable and in the sore need of their sanitary enterprises. Not surprisingly, in sync with other Victorian travel writers, Edmund O' Donovan (1988) could not resist the temptation of expatiating upon the prevalence of diseases among his Turkmen travelers,

I have already mentioned the great prevalence of diseases of the eye, particularly keratitis...But at the very lowest computation, fifty percent of the population, male and female, had badly diseased livers, scrofulitic and scorbutic ailments...fever too was to be met [among Turkmens] (pp. 378-388).

In the above fragment, in the first glance it may seem that the travel writer is just objectively enumerating the widespread diseases in Merv without being judgmental. Nevertheless, lurked beneath this apparent truth is an implicit Orientalist attitude which problematizes the validity of his description. Arnold (1988) refutes this type of medical objectivity and views it as is subjective response and the embodiment of Westerners'

“social and cultural prejudices of the age” (p.7). Accordingly, it will not be erroneous to claim that the travel writer deliberately highlights these diseases for his home readership to expose the so-called “insalubrious living conditions and habits of native populations” (Peckham, 2016, p.7). By so doing, not only does he forge a link between Oriental Mervlies with dirt and degradation, but also, he implies that only “through the superior knowledge and skill of the European medicine ... [one can] bring [these diseases] under effective control” (p.3). For Spurr, the textual depiction of these diseases is politically motivated and he contends this strategy is essential for the discourse of Orientalism and colonialism since they constantly demand “reproduction of these [abject images like disease] both as a justification for European intervention and as the necessary iteration of a fundamental difference between the colonizer [/self /travel writer] and colonized [Other/travelees]” (p.78). In this regard, the pseudo factual account of the diseases is fueled by imperialist agenda.

Given medicine, before 1800 European colonizers and travelers did not hold Non-Western medicine in contempt, instead they sought the aid of local physicians and their indigenous remedies assuming that the native doctors were well acquainted with effective remedies to treat their illnesses (Arnold, 1988). Nevertheless, in the course of the nineteenth century due to their medical breakthroughs and establishment of modern medical schools, the Westerners hailed “unique rationality and superior efficacy of [their] medicine” (p.10), yet dismissed non-Western medicine as a type of “fatalism, superstition, barbarity, indigenous responses to disease” (p.7). Even though Western medicine seemed like an innocent flower, yet it was appropriated by imperial agents as an apparatus to “facilitate [their]... penetration and domination of the non-Europeans” (p.10) via winning their trust and eradicating their resistance. Trapped in Western medical hubris, Edmond O’Donovan reiterates the same attitude of Victorian travelers towards non- Western medicine in two ways. Firstly, by boasting about introducing a medicine like croton oil among his travelees, “the medicine which, above all others, was in high repute with the Mervli, was croton oil. They had no knowledge whatever of this drug until I brought it among them” (O’ Donovan, 1888, p.339) as well as by accentuating his travelees’ supposedly limited and primitive understanding of medicine via claiming that for his travelees medical treatment is equal to “the administration of a strong aperient [laxative]” (1888, p.399).

Secondly by underscoring superstitiousness and inefficiency of the medicine practiced among his Turkmen travelees through relating an anecdote tainted with binary logic as the following extract illustrates,

A woman, too, whose daughter was suffering from fever, brought me a handful of camel’s hair, and asked me to manufacture from it a charm for the cure of her daughter illness. As I had not the slightest notion of what the nature of the charm might be, I addressed myself to Aman Niaz [an influential Turkmen man], who immediately undertook to instruct me. By means of a spindle the camel hair was spun to a stout thread, the khan all the time droning some verses from the Koran, or some *necromantic* chant. When the thread was finished it was of considerable length, and, folding it three times upon itself, he responds it. Then he proceeded to tie seven knots upon string. Before drawing each knot hard, he blew upon it. This tied into form of a bracelet, was to be worn on the wrist of the patient. Each day one of the knots was to be untied and blown upon, and when the seventh

knot undone the whole of the thread was to be made into a ball and thrown into the river, carrying, as was supposed the illness with it. I had some *quinine* with me which I unluckily gave her, the result being that I was nearly torn in pieces by a crowd of excited matron who desired to procure some of the drug for their children who ill of the fever (emphasis added, p.320).

On the surface, the above extract seems like an ethnographic text in which travel writer is reproducing an eye-witness account of how his travelees treat the fever without displaying any disdain. But on the closer inspection, here the travel implicitly relegates his travelee's way of fever treatment to the realm of irrationality, superstition, and sorcery through highlighting his travelee's necromantic chants and the recitation of Koranic verses on camel's hair bracelet which he implies that this approach flies in the face of Western biomedicine, and thus it is ineffective and useless to cure fever. Indeed, it is this disbelieving mindset that prompts him to give his female patient some quinine to relieve her pain. In contrast to the camel hair bracelet, the quinine instantly reveals its therapeutic effects for the female travelees, and as result generates their excitement and becomes their object of desire. In fact, in this context, the travel writer utilizes this Western medicine not only to disclose irrationality and the inferiority and inefficacy of Oriental medicine but also promulgate the desirability Western medicine and hence their presence.

4. Othering

4.1. Food

Disgusting brutes! The very hyena would have filled its belly and gone to sleep. Nothing but absolute incapacity to push their food beyond the top of the throat could check gourmandizing of these specimen.

Clarke Ross

One of the recurrent and core topoi that appears in travel narratives is germane to the subject of food. Western travel writers before and after colonial age have not been uniform in their treatment of Oriental food and their culinary habits in their travel books. Given their responses in precolonial period, travel writers' engagements have been contradictory (Phillip, 2014). On the one hand, traveler writers like Marco polo and Odoric demonstrate their wonder and admiration for Oriental food in loci like India and Cathay owing to the existence of abundant and succulent foods as well as delicious fruits and exotic spices. This Oriental cornucopia is in stark contrast with food scarcity in the West because of recurrent famines, poor agricultural yields, and cold winters. On the other hand, some of them expressed their disgust through devaluing Oriental foodstuffs and eating manners as loathsome and vile. For instance, Carpini and Rubruck belong to the latter group; they recount how their Tartar travelees practice anthropophagy and how they filthily eat horseflesh, dogs, and rodents (ibid). By contrast in postcolonial context from the sixteenth century onward when the West begins its colonizing projects in the Orient, the Western travel writers in tandem display their mistrust towards Oriental food and eating ways (ibid). This culinary suspicion reached its highest pitch during the Victorian period. In this period, they demonstrate their Orientalist attitude in three ways: firstly, by associating it with sense of oddness and disgust (Nyman, 2007); secondly, by linking the Orientals' alleged overeating manner with their culture, and thirdly by ascribing the cause of diseases to their food

(Kostova, 2003). These travelers in fact exploit food as a cultural device to for ‘Othering’ travelers to illuminate their travelers’ inferiority.

Edmond O’Donovan is not different from other Victorian travel writers in this regard. He exhibits these three pitfalls. In the first place, he assumes that there is something odd with the taste and smell of their food that renders it intolerable for his Western nostrils and palates,

[Then] came the piece de resistance ... consisted of mutton fat... This dish was placed...each person dipped in the morsel of bread and proceeded to eat. The first mouthful was enough for me. The *nauseous taste* of the unsalted fat, combined with its *abominable odor*, made it impossible for me to repeat the dose (emphasis added, O’Donovan, 1883, pp.190-191).

In the above fragment, to provoke his Western readers’ visceral dislike of Oriental food, the travel writer plays on their olfactory sense. Synnott (1993) holds that odor is interlocked with power (and by extension to Western imperialism) since it has been appropriated by the Westerners for Othering. In this regard, smell “becomes a method or a tool of self-glorification and other-deprecation” (p.192). By the same token, O’Donovan draws on the so-called rank-smelling of his travelers’ food to debase their food culture and construct them as culinary pariahs.

In the second place, for othering through food, the travel writer censures his travelers’ gluttony,

It was hateful to eat with these people. Each raced with the others...in eating to obtain the greatest possible supply of food for himself. It was quite sufficient to prevent one [referring to himself] from enjoying his food to witness the rapacity and eagerness with which they devoured what has laid before them, lest they might be outstripped by any of their companions (p.344).

In his arrogant comment, one can observe the trace of Williams Wadd’s treatise in which he attaches the blame squarely on Oriental cultures for encouraging overeating (Kostova 2003). The following will passage will illustrate the point,

For Turkmen good behavior requires that when food is before a guest he should stimulate, even if he do not possess, *a voracious appetite*. *Turcomans*, as a rule, need no dissimulation in this regard, for I have *seldom* met one who at any given moment was not capable of swallowing food of any kind to an extent which would *surprise dwellers in Western towns* (emphasis added, p.179).

In the above fragment, the travel writer implicitly locates the genesis of Oriental Turkmen’s supposedly gargantuan appetite in their indigenous culture, which he thinks, fosters overindulging via bestowing cultural value on it as an emblem of a good conduct. His statement conjures up the travelogue of Vambéry, Hungarian anglophile travel writer in the nineteenth century. In his very work Vambéry contends that in the context of Central Asia uttering ‘to be able no more to eat’ is the sign of low breeding (Gholi & Ahmadi, 2015). Moreover, by placing emphasis on Turkmen’s “phenomenal appetite” (O’Donovan, 1883, p. 263), the travel writer draws a cultural, racial line between his travelers and the residents of Western cities.

In the third place, the travel writer to other his travellee in terms of their food, he connects his travellee's food to the discourse of diseases. From his view point, the oily food and fat that they greatly enjoy and consume in particular in the height of heat is accountable for their supposed universal liver problems which thinks that is has aggravated by their overeating,

As a rule, the Turcomans are extravagantly fond of fat and oily matters; and the almost universal derangement of their digestive organs is probably owing to the consumption of so much fatty matter during extreme heats. It is a rare thing to meet a Turcoman whose liver is not out of order, and who does not suffer to a very great extent from biliousness. But whatever ill [from which] he suffers in this regard, he would bear them all sooner than abandon his beloved grease-pot (1883, p.341).

Moreover, the travel writer's medical seemingly factual information is untenable because Blocqueville (2015) who has been a sharp observer of Turkmen life and participant in their daily affairs for the fourteenth months in 1860 before O' Donovan' arrival, does not mention the liver problem as a rampant disease among the Turkmen people. Rather he registers scrofula, rheumatism, and leprosy as widespread diseases among them.

4.2. Merv as the Locus of Exoticism

Another strategy for constructing travellee as 'Others' is through exoticism. *Webster New World Dictionary* defines it as "strange or different in a way that is striking or fascinating". Holland and Huggan (2000) view exoticism as a mechanism through which a foreign world is assimilated and its threatening aspect purged. Moreover, they associate exoticism with commodifying indigenous people and their culture by Westerners so that the Western writers would arouse and indulge exotic-seeking taste of their readers to earn a profit out of it. Savigliano (1994) considers it as an exploitive and disrespectful gesture on the part of Westerners and an instrument at their disposal to express their will to power over the alien. Todorov (1993) equates it with cultural voyeurism which is accompanied with ethnocentric judgments. Commenting on the importance of exoticism, Fussell (1980) remarks that it is the main ingredient of travel writing and observes that travel writing is a covert quest for finding anomalies in traversed region. Since antiquity the Orient has been one of the popular destinations for Western travel writers to discover and relish these anomalies (Said, 1979) and Merv oasis in Central Asia in the nineteenth century is no exception. Edmond O' Donovan also in his travelogue builds on this tendency since he confesses that "I had come to Merv, I would willingly have prolonged my stay, in order to make myself thoroughly acquainted in the *peculiarities* of the Turcomans" (emphasis added, 1888, p. 356). To draw the attention of his readers to exoticism of his traversed zone, the travel writer recounts his observations in the Merv market, as Felicity Rotte (2015) points out that it is common for West travel writers to dwell on the Oriental market. To demonstrate alleged abnormalities of this Oriental space, the travel writer mentions supposedly outlandish manner of shopping and weighing wares there.

With regard to the former, the travel writer relates his experience of seeing some of his travellee who are vociferously announcing the articles they desire to buy while walking through it,

In a European mart [market] one would expect the sellers to cry out their wares, but at Merv it is contrary. A man goes along the row of booth shouting, 'I want six eggs,' or 'I want two fowls'. Should the stall-keeper be sufficiently emancipated from his habitual reverie, or from quarrelling with his neighbors, perhaps he will reply, but no dealer ever takes the troubles to put his goods en evidence (1883, p.334).

In the above passage, one can perceive that the source of cultural marvel, curiosity, and exoticism for the travel writer lies in two things. Firstly, the fact that the customers themselves declare which wares they desire to purchase rather than stall keepers encourage them to buy their goods as it is common in the Europe. Secondly in the lackadaisical approach of stall keepers in selling their wares signaled by their constant absorption in their daydreaming, their argument with their neighboring stall keepers, as well as by not putting their goods on display. Here the travel writer describes this Oriental bazaar, which he thinks suffers from commercial inertia, in terms of its difference to the Western market which, he implies, is vibrant, lucrative, and normal. By shedding light on extreme cultural difference, O'Donovan carves out from this place 'a living tableau of queerness' to borrow Edward Said, so that his readers would derive pleasure out of this culturally and economically bizarre scene. Interestingly, Abdallah Khan Qaragazlu, an Iranian travel writer, in his travelogue entitled *Safarnama-yi Marv* in 1878 presents a lively and normal image from the Merv market which contradicts the sluggish and exotic image which Edmund O'Donovan portrays,

Twice weekly a makeshift bazaar was assembled in Merv near the near the fortress of Qushid Khan Qal 'a... All the tribes gathered there to trade their goods and merchandise from dawn until dusk. The tribes gathered to barter, trade, buy, and sell in the market, where one could find fruits and grains, cloths and textiles, flocks and herds of animals, wool, and dairy products, among other goods (as cited in Amanat & Khazeni, 2014, p.119).

In addition, to manifest another exotic feature of Merv marketplace, the travel writer touches on manner of weighing article,

Merchants were selling salt and meat by the weight of the shrapnel [artillery shell] and broken shell...there were no regular weights. In serving tea and sugar, the merchant placed his dagger, or perhaps his slippers, in the opposite scale, and many were alternations as to whether the counterpoise in question were of sufficient weight or not (1883, pp. 233-234).

Here to regale and elicit cultural surprise from his sedentary audience, the travel writer concentrates his cultural voyeurism on a diametrically different Oriental methods of measuring weight. To amplify these exotica, he documents how the merchants utilize weighing devices such as daggers, shells, and slippers to set up a balance in their scale as their weigh articles like tea and sugar. In this extract, pointing to this alleged odd weight measurement paves the way for travel writer to divulge the alleged inferiority of his travelees, as both McLeod (2000) and Todorov (1993) maintain that the Western travel writer's appropriate exoticism as a cultural medium to unveil the their travelees' cultural and intellectually inferiority.

Conclusion

When the mighty Tsarist Russian army engages in war with Turkmen in 1879, The British *Daily Mail* sends Edmond O'Donovan to report the war. Due to the Russians' ban on war reportage in an attempt to conceal their carnage, he fails to penetrate there. Instead of being disappointed and going back to Persia, he moves directly to Merv where he is not only a well-treated prisoner, but also one of three ruling leaders appointed by his Turkmen captors to decide whether to preserve their independence through fighting with the Russians or to accept submission through peaceful surrendering to their opponents. His honorable captivity in Merv Oasis takes five months during which he recorded his observations and experiences which later published in the form a travel book entitled, *The Merv Oasis* which becomes an instant bestseller at that time. On the surface, it seems that O' Donovan's travel book is an innocent and impartial piece of journalism, but the closer scrutiny of it in the light of postcolonial approach attests to his affiliation to British Imperialism. The travel writer demonstrates his imperial ties through his imperial assumptions and Othering. With regard to the former, the travel writer exhibits them in two ways. Firstly, when he uses his voyage as a strategy to survey his traversed region. Secondly as he dwells on the prevalence of diseases among his travelees and their inferior medical treatment. In both cases, he tacitly espouses the desirability of Western presence in Merv. From his perspective, the Westerners not only can arouse their supposedly lethargic travelees to engage in farming in an Oasis blessed with fertile land and enough water, but also, they can modernize their supposedly primitive life. In addition, he suggests the Westerners can cure their diseases with their efficient medicine. With respect to his othering, he reveals it in two ways. Firstly, when he blames his travelee' allegedly repulsive food for causing diseases as well as when he chastises his travelees' Oriental culture for encouraging overeating. Secondly, when the travel writer portrays Merv bazar as an exotic locus where the customer themselves announce what they desire to purchase as well as where shop keepers use their daggers and slippers for weighing in their scales. On the whole, the world he constructs from Merv and its people is dark and biased, he does not see any beauty, vitality, and normalcy, thus his travel book is impartial and unreliable.

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