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The Anti-Oriental Narrative of Vambéry in *Travels in Central Asia*

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Aijeran Paidar
Behzad Pourqarib
Corresponding Author
Golestan University
Golestan, The Islamic Republic of Iran

ABSTRACT

A reader of *Travels in Central Asia* by Vambéry expects a reliable and authentic picture of the history of orient; however, what he/she receives is nothing but a biased and prejudiced narrative mingled with misguided epistemological understanding on the one hand and a high opinion of the West on the other hand. The application of Edward Said's notions of Orientalism as the theoretical framework in the present study made it possible to identify and highlight such misleading narrations in which the author betrays his reader by imposing anti-orient views in keeping with mere bigotry. Bereft of minimal understanding of the differences between the East and the West, Vambéry openly casts doubt concerning the historically established values of the orient against the occident from a variety of vantage points. Vambéry recruits a Hungarian anti-orient to prioritize the occident against the orient and employs what Edward Said introduces as distorted knowledge, reductive images and disputatious polemics to accomplish his goal. This study concerns itself with presenting an unbiased reading where both the orient and occident are equally respected rather than prioritized.

Keywords: *Orientalism, Narration, Central Asia, Travel Writing, Vambéry*

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1. Introduction

Edward Said, a Palestinian American literary theorist and public intellectual significantly helped found the critical theory field of post-colonialism. He connotes that in *Orientalism*, we cannot fully comprehend or evaluate the ideas, cultures, and histories without taking into consideration the impact of their force and power. As a cultural critic, Said is best known for the 1978 book *Orientalism*. He analyses the cultural representations that are the basis of Orientalism a term he redefined to refer to the condescending approach and disdainful illustration of the North African, Asian and Middle Eastern societies- "the East" practiced by the West. "Orientalism is a term that is used by art historians, literary and intellectuals of cultural studies for the reflection or representation of conditions in Middle Eastern, South Asian, and East Asian cultures (Eastern cultures)" (Said, 2003, p.52).

Arminius Vambéry was a Hungarian traveler born in 1832; he was especially attracted by the literature and culture of the Ottoman Empire including Turkey. After spending about a year in Constantinople, he published a German-Turkish dictionary in

1858. He travelled through the Orient in disguise as a Turkish dervish. "His passage went through Trebizond on the Black Sea to Tehran in Persia, where he accompanied a crowd of pilgrims returning from Mecca, spending several months with them traveling across Central Iran like Tabriz, Zanjan, and Kazvin" (Renan, 2011, p.6) just as it is narrated by Vambéry himself in the first chapter of *Travels in Central Asia*.

As mentioned above, Vambéry was a traveler who began to write. Travel writing is a non-fictional first person prose narrative describing a person's travel(s) and spaces passed through or visited which is ordered in accordance with, and whose plot is determined by the order of narrator's act of travelling.

Edward Said's Orientalism was vastly elaborated by "Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs in 2002 who discussed on the importance of it in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*. In 2005 David Mandler conducted an analysis in the British context by the use of the concept of Self-Made Man and traces his emergence in Great Britain, first, as a Hungarian adventurer recognized as the explorer and later as an ascendancy on Central Asia"

(Thompson, 2011, p.73) yet not much of a thorough investigation of the traveling self and Vambery's work, *Travels in Central Asia* has ever been conducted in previous researches. In tracing the source of orientalism Said argues that "hegemony, or rather the result of cultural hegemony at work that gives Orientalism the durability and the strength" (Said, *Orientalism*, p.29) and later conducts a comparison of Orientalism with the idea of Europe and the collective notion of Europeans compare with Non-Europeans and there is in addition the hegemony of European ideas about the Orient, themselves reiterating European superiority over Oriental backwardness, usually overriding the possibility that a more self-reliant, or more incredulous mind might have had a contrasting outlook on the matter.

Said argues, "Orientalism is way a lot of that over a structure of lies or of myths that were the reality regarding them to be told would merely blow away. And it's not associate degree ethereal European delusion regarding the Orient, however a composed body of assumption and belief during which, for several generations, there has been a substantial material investment..." (Said, *Orientalism*, p.35) in a political categorization of orientalism compares different political hegemonies and their relationship with the orient. And this comparison of the East and the West is the focal point of the current book and for the same reason Edward Said's notion were selected to read the book under the study. A rich discussion of authorial self has been initiated in the field of anthropology. The relationship of the author's mediating approach to the bodies of study has been the origin of the query about ethnography for several decades, giving rise to a subgenre of "auto-ethnography," in which the anthropologist deliberately tries to bring bigotry and perceptual difficulties to the forefront and does not intend to silence his or her own insights behind an authorial, authoritative voice.

2. Methodological Background

Library research as well as internet research was adopted to collect the data by the use of the existing material, books and papers written on the subject and surveying the provided data on the internet. The researcher has gone to the library and searched for the needed materials. Since the method is theoretical, it is related to the

study as well. The study concerned itself with Edward Said's *Orientalism* as its theoretical framework to highlight those parts in the travel book in which the author betrays his objective views towards the Orientals. Edward Said (1978) in describing the structure of Orientalism and the origins of it argues that Orientalism is not a mere political subject matter or field that is represented indifferently by scholarship, culture, or academies; it is also not a large and diffuse collection of texts about the Orient; nor is it representative and expressive of some outrageous "Western" imperialist conspiracy to suppress the "Oriental" world. It is rather a *distribution* of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological content; it is an *elaboration* not only of a basic geographical contrast Orient and Occident but also of a whole series of "interests" which, by such means as scholarly discovery, philological reformation, psychological analysis, landscape and sociological characterization, it not only creates but also maintains; it *is*, rather than expresses, a certain *will* or *intention* to fathom, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to consolidate, what is an officially different world; it is, above all, a discourse that is by no means in direct, nor obvious corresponding relationship with political power, but rather is formed and exists in an unbalanced transaction with assorted kinds of power, constructed to a degree by the exchange with power political, power intellectual, power cultural, power moral. Said (1979) argues, "that Orientalism is-and doesn't merely represent- a wide dimension of contemporary political-intellectual culture, and per se has less to try and do with the Orient than it will with "our" world" (p.34).

Said introduces his methodological devices for studying authority as *strategic location*, which is a way of describing the author's position in a text with regard to the Oriental material he addresses, and *strategic structure*, which is a way of scrutinizing the relationship between texts and the way in which groups of texts, types of texts, even textual genres, acquire mass, density, and referential force among themselves and thenceforth in the culture at large. Said uses the notion of strategy simply to identify the problem every writer on the Orient has faced: how to understand it, how to approach it, how not to be overcome or affected by its sublimity, its scope and its awful dimensions. Everyone who writes



about the Orient must locate himself facing the Orient; translated into his text, this region includes the kind of narrative voice he adopts, the type of structure he builds, the kinds of images, themes, motifs that flow in his text—all of which add up to calculated ways of addressing the reader, containing the Orient, and finally, representing it or speaking in its behalf. None of this takes place in the abstract, however. Every writer on the Orient presumes some Oriental precedent some past knowledge of the Orient, to which he refers and on which he relies. Besides that every work on the Orient associates with other works, with audiences, with institutions, with the Orient itself. The ensemble of relationships between works, audiences, and some particular aspects of the Orient therefore constitutes an analyzable formation.

3. Rabble-Rousing or Travel- Writing

Reading Vambéry's *Travels in Central Asia* is enough to make the reader have second thoughts about the traditionally established heritage of the orient from the very beginning the reader can observe instances of 'self' to a large extent. Vambéry describes every nuance of the Persia and the Persian via the Hungarian accompanying the caravan from one station to the other from Tabriz to Tehran. It seems that orient is being defined by the occident. The occident is not habituated to the constant torment, the slow pace of the march, and other inconveniences the same as the orient. Following a troublesome trip on the back of animals he reaches the Seat of Sovereignty, Tehran without having received any serious wound either by squeeze, blow, or cut. Vambéry introduces the first instance of polarization of east and west on page 34 where the Persian is polarized against Osmanli and the reason presented as the cause of this priority is what Edward Said has discussed a lot (Kerr & Kuehn, 2007).

Vambéry is an example of the superior self-introduced by Edward Said whose rationale is that Semitic languages along with their cultures and communities suffer a wide range of incompleteness compared to that of western languages and communities. In an effort to highlight the ontological inequality of orient and occident and the priority of west to the east different areas have been emphasized. It's worth mentioning that this has not been the sole trend of scholarship in this respect and at the beginning there were some who referred the superiority traits of the east as Edward Said points out :

Many of the earliest Oriental amateurs began by welcoming the Orient as a salutary *derangement* of their European habits of mind and spirit. The Orient was overvalued for its pantheism, its spirituality, its stability, its longevity, its primitivity, and so forth (p.170)

But despite such efforts the east was undervalued against west and indeed the very project of restriction and restructuring associated with Orientalism can be traced directly to the injustice by which the Orient's comparative poverty (or wealth) implored scholarly, scientific treatment of the kind to be found in disciplines like philology, biology, history, anthropology, philosophy, or economics.

Vambéry introduces the next instance of superior self on page 34 where the Hungarian describes his meeting locations as European embassies, another polarized classification that serves to build a tall wall or a deep gap between these two areas east and west and the low and the high. Following that the considerably superior position and status of the English envoys are compared to others including their European counterparts.

I found Count Gobineau, the Imperial ambassador, under a small tent in a garden like a caldron, where the heat was awful. "Mr. Alison was more comfortably quartered in his garden at Gulahek, purchased for him by his government. He was very friendly. I had often the opportunity, at his hospitable table, of studying the question why the English envoys everywhere distinguish themselves among their diplomatic brethren by the comfortableness as well as the splendor of their establishments" (Said, 1994, 24).

Edward Said in an effort to clarify the aforesaid antipathy towards the orient, Islam and also the Arabs. Within the next instance of polarized orient and occident Vambéry barefacedly devalues orient in terms of information which they need no understanding of information and something associated with it. The Oriental doesn't perceive the thirst for information, and doesn't believe a lot of in its existence. it might be the peak of impolicy to shock these fanatic Muslims in their ideas. the need of my position, therefore, duty-bound Maine to resort to a. live of policy, of deception, that I ought to otherwise have scrupled to adopt (Said, 1994).

The aforementioned extract clearly reflects Edward Said's notion in that to be a European in the Orient *always* involves

being a consciousness set apart from, and unequal with, its surroundings.

Vambery introduces the next instance of superior self on page 34 where the Hungarian describes his meeting locations as European embassies, another polarized classification that serves to build a tall wall or a deep gap between these two areas east and west and the low and the high. Following that the considerably superior position and status of the English envoys are compared to others including their European counterparts.

Edward Said focuses on the views put forward by Renan (1891) and explains that he is a supporter of William Muir (1819-1905) and Reinhart Dozy (1820-1883) whose works are in line with this sort of antipathy. In addition to them Muir's *Life of Mahomet* (1858-1861) and his *The Caliphate, Its Rise, Decline and Fall* (1891) are to this day considered solid monuments of scholarship, yet his attitude towards his subject matter was fairly put by him when he claimed that "the sword of Muhammad, and the Kor'an, are the most stubborn enemies of Civilization Liberty and the Truth which the world has yet known" (Muir, 2008, 151). The undervaluing proceeds to the point that Caussin (1884) argues that the Arabs were made a people by Mohammed, Islam being essentially a political instrument, not by any means a spiritual one and other views that reflect nothing but his antipathy and prejudice towards them.

In another ridiculing delineation made by Vambery of orient without any understanding of the knowledge Vambery pictures a scene where the Hungarian sole narrator pretends thinking like an orient by wearing a mask of thinking. It can be highlighted as one of the most significant instances where Vamberly devalues orient against occident, "At the first glance they wanted to tear the mask from my face; in the mean time I was acting the genuine part of an Oriental, sat seemingly buried in thought, with the air of one who heard nothing". (p.51)

In another instance of polarized orient and occident Vambery belittles the orient and in particular Islamists by claiming that they are brought up in lies and treachery and that the Hungarian (in fact the occident) did not dare to oppose them.

The Oriental, and particularly the Islamite, bred up in lies and treachery, always believes the very contrary of what a man shows particular earnestness in convincing him of; and the slightest

protestation on my part would have served to confirm their suspicion (p.55)

This prejudice is repeatedly mentioned in the discussions made by Edward Said about orient and occident. He argues that books and articles are repeatedly published on Islam and the Arabs that speak for absolutely no change over the virulent anti-Islamic polemics of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. In the first explicit reference to orient on page 26 Vambery describes the apprehension of the Hungarian. The apprehension is present both for the orient and occident but this apprehension is far more emphasized in the case of a European. In the next reference to orient Vambery explicitly devalues the orients in terms of their features and their clothing besides a confession to their nobility: "Words so unselfish proceeding from the mouth of ah Oriental much surprised me" (p.30). In the next instance of polarized orient and occident on page 27 Vambery shamelessly devalues orient in terms of knowledge and that they have no understanding of knowledge and anything related to it. The Oriental does not understand the thirst for knowledge...(p.27). This clearly reflects Edward Said's notion in that "to be a European in the Orient *always* involves being a consciousness set apart from, and unequal with, its surroundings. In another ridiculing delineation made by Vambery on page" (p.51) of orient without any understanding of the knowledge Vambery pictures a scene where the Hungarian sole narrator pretends thinking like an orient by wearing a mask of thinking. It can be highlighted as one of the most significant instances where Vambery devalues orient against occident. In another instance of polarized orient and occident Vambery "belittles the orient and in particular Islamists by claiming that they are brought up in lies and treachery and that the Hungarian (in fact the occident) did not dare to oppose them. The Oriental, and particularly the Islamite, bred up in lies and treachery"... (p.55)

Such a biased epistemological understanding is repeatedly observed in the discussions made by Edward Said about orient and occident. He argues that books and articles are repeatedly published on Islam and the Arabs that speak for absolutely no change over the virulent anti-Islamic polemics of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. For no other ethnic or religious group is it true that practically anything can be written or said about it, without challenge



or suspension. In another instance on page 115 Vambery criticizes the belief in fate and assigns it to the orient as if there is no such thing in the occident. Such a view is in contrast with all that we know about the occident and their belief in fate, at least among Christians and Jews. It does not sound reasonable because in the book we observe instances where Vambery expresses contradictory views and at the same time takes a side against another side. For example Vambery argues that The Orientals love to dignify their saints also with the attribute of bodily size. In Persia I have remarked several giant graves; and even in Constantinople, on the Asiatic shore of the Bosphorus, on the so-called Mount of Joshua, exists a long tomb which the Turks venerate as that of the Joshua of the Bible, but the Greeks as that of Hercules. If we consider the Greeks as the occident then we clearly see how controversial are the reasoning put forward by Vambery. In a biased, prejudiced and anti-orient picture delineated by Vambery change of clothes by the orient is resembled and implied to highest ideal of civilization on page 209. Such controversial views serve to reduce the value of the book which has mixed personal biased and prejudiced views with the truth throughout the book. In another ridiculously contradictory statement Vambery in spite of earlier devaluing and humiliating descriptions of the orient and prioritizing the occident in a biased manner expresses regret for not being able to take back a number of books belonging to the orient to the occident in order to (as he claims) to be used in history books.

“The few manuscripts that I brought back with me from Bokhara and Samarcand cost me much trouble to acquire, and my heart bled when I found that I was obliged to leave behind me works that might have filled many an important history in our Oriental studies”. (p.226)

Said maintains that there is a distinction between knowledge of other peoples and other times that is the result of understanding, compassion, careful study and analysis for their own sakes, and on the other hand knowledge if that is what it is that is part of an overall crusade of self-affirmation, belligerency and outright war. Vambery sheds darkness and ambiguity in another instance on page 251 just related to the books and libraries of the past orient and makes it clear that his writing is affected by bias and prejudice to a large extent by devaluing one of the stories of the past

narrated and retold by the occident historians. “He openly criticizes such views and claims that each of these phases and eras produces its own distorted knowledge of the other, each its own reductive images, its own disputatious polemics” (p.14). The other implication is the religious and nationalist orthodoxy behind all these misinterpretations presented by Vambery throughout the book while hidden under the mask of personal views. How could he regret not being able to take back some of the hand written books on one hand (this feature was used by Vambery to belittle and devalue oriental books against printed books of the occident as mentioned in earlier instances) and on the other hand devalue the oriental books, clothing, life style, manners, etc. It seems that in this book Vambery has no mission but to belittle and devalue everyone and everything he sees on his trip to central Asia. In another instance Vambery tries to insist that orient is fake and fabricated and untrustworthy which means the opposite that is occident is free from all these features. Just in line with earlier prejudiced judgments he issues verdicts concerning the orients where he is the only decision maker and speaker!

I had, for the moment, forgotten that the Oriental is never what he seems, and my disappointment was indeed bitter (p.818)

&

The Oriental is born and dies in a mask; candor will never exist in the East (p.884)

In keeping with Edward Said's notion any attempt to force cultures and peoples into detached and distinct lineages or essences unmask not only the distortions and falsifications that come up, but also the way in which understanding is scheming with the power to produce such things as the "Orient" or the "West."

In another instance of polarized orient vs. occident the Hungarian narrator of Vambery boasts the occident civilization copied by the orient in the following extract of the book *Travels in central Asia* I was much astonished to find the ruler of all the countries of Iran watching our approach with an eye-glass, attired in a simple dress, half Oriental and half European. “The under garments retain for the most part the native cut, the over ones alone follow European fashions-a real picture of our civilization in the East” (p.341).

In a biased, prejudiced and anti-orient picture delineated by Vambery change of clothes by the orient is resembled and implied to highest ideal of civilization:

The Oriental, only here to be met with in his original purity and peculiarity, is fond of the tchakhtchukh, or rustling tone of the dress. It was always an object of great delight to me to see the seller parading up and down a few paces in the new tchapan (dress), to ascertain whether it gave out the orthodox tone. All is the produce of home manufacture, and very cheap; consequently it is in the clothes' market of Bokhara that "believers," even from remote parts of Tartary, provide themselves with fashionable attire. Even the Kirghis, Kiptchak, and Kalmuks are in the habit of making excursions hither from the desert; and the wild Tartar, with his eyes oblique and chin prominent, laughs for joy when he exchanges his clothes, made of the undressed horse-skins, for a light yektey (a sort of summer dress), for it is here that he sees his highest ideal of civilization. Bokhara is his Paris or his London (p.209)

Edward Said tries to show the origins of this low opinion of the occident about the orient by referring to the views of Chateaubriand who believed that the Orient was a decrepit canvas awaiting his restorative efforts. The Oriental Arab was "civilized man fallen again into a savage state": no wonder, then, that as he observed Arabs making effort to speak French, Chateaubriand felt like Robinson Crusoe excited to hear his parrot utter words for the first time. Granted, there were areas like Bethlehem (whose etymological definition Chateaubriand got entirely wrong) in which one found again some simulacrum of real that is, European civilization, but those were rare and far between. Everywhere, one came across Orientals, Arabs whose civilization, religion, and manners were so low barbaric, and antithetical as to merit re-conquest. The Crusades, he argued, were not invasion; they were a just Christian counterpart to Omar's arrival in Europe. Besides, he added, even if the Crusades in their modern or original form were aggression, the issue they raised eclipsed such questions of ordinary mortality: The Crusades were not only about the deliverance of the Holy Sepulchre, but more about knowing which would win on the earth, a cult that was an enemy of humanity, systematically favorable to ignorance "[this was Islam, of course], to despotism, to slavery, or a cult that had caused to reawaken in modern people the genius of a sage antiquity, and had abolished base servitude? Quoted from Massignon's essay on Biruni in Waardenburg, *L'Islam dans le miroir de TOccident*", (p. 225).

In a controversial narration Vambery refers to the book market of Bokhara and twenty six book shops and the treasure of books of incalculable value following all those aforementioned devaluing of the orient and that they don't understand knowledge and its value.

I then proceeded to the book bazar, which contains twenty-six shops. A printed book is here a rarity. In this place, and in the houses of the booksellers (for there is the great depot), many are the treasures that I have seen, which would be of incalculable value to our Oriental historians and philologists (p.215)

Such controversial views serve to reduce the value of the book which has mixed personal biased and prejudiced views with the truth throughout the book.

Vambery simple mindedly interprets the exchange of cultural elements as the devaluation criterion in his observation of the orient. In one instance he regrets that he was not able to take back a few hand written books back home and in another instance he contradicts the existence of a large market of book shops in Bokhara. His historical description reminds a childish and jealous justification rather than a well-thought and mature one.

4. Conclusion

Vambery throughout a so-called travel writing book spew forth nothing but hate, disrespect and humiliation of the orient. Under Edward Said's notions of Orientalism Vambery is "nothing but a representation of racial bigotry who claims that distorted knowledge of the other, and reductive images and disputatious polemics" (p.14) are the tools employed by the occident to attack and humiliate the orient. The aforementioned extracts of the novel is highly applicable and in keeping with Saeed's Orientalism theory. It's worth mentioning that the religious and nationalist orthodoxy behind all these misinterpretations presented by Vambery throughout the book while hidden under the mask of personal views of the Hungarian. How could he regret not being able to take back some of the hand written books on one hand (this feature was used by Vambery to belittle and devalue oriental books against printed books of the occident as mentioned in earlier instances) and on the other hand devalue the oriental books, clothing, life style, manners, etc which is in keeping with Edward Said's distorted knowledge because he narrates two contradictory descriptions in the same book with a few pages of interval.



To recap, Vambery set no goal but to disrespect and dishonor the orient against occident in a prejudiced and biased manner by applying distorted knowledge, reductive images and disputatious polemics.

Travel literature has been around for a long time with a wide range of functions and interests. This writing of the 'foreign' and 'exotic' places has experienced considerable changes following the world wars and across the imperialized world. This type of literature which was considered as sub-literary before that began applying new models to launch illuminating readings of such texts. This new academic attention to travel writing had some pioneers such as Hayden White's *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (1984), aimed more at historiography than at travel writing, was a milestone in theorizing and modeling the analysis of both 'discourse' and specific examples of non-fictional representation. As Campbell (1996) argues the main result of this academic attention to travel writing in recent decades has been the wider dissemination among the political divisions of analytical prospects of colonialism and the imperial powers, once of Europe, more recently of the United States, Russia, and China.

Scrutinizing the novel under Saeed's notions in the present study lead to the following findings: The first finding revealed that Vambery's perspective concerning the narration state is not neutral, and the impacts of his vision has contaminated the book from the very beginning to the end and his biased expressions and description are present throughout this so-called historic travel writing.

The second finding of the present study is that Vambery is totally under the influence of his misguided epistemological perceptions of the orient which is reflected Saeed's Orientalism as "a considerable dimension of modern political and intellectual culture that has less to do with the Orient than it does with 'our' world in line with Edward Said" (p.13).

The third major finding is the applicability of Said's Orientalism theory to *Travels in Central Asia* by Vambery where his notions are repeatedly detected throughout the book. The high frequency of the detection of this notion can be interpreted as the epistemological prejudice on the side of the author that originates from his misguided understanding of the orient and oriental issues.

Reading Vambery's *Travels in Central Asia* under Edward Said's notions clarified many issues such as unreliability of the data put forward by the author because of his misguided epistemological understanding of orient and orient-related issues. Future studies might focus on the factors that have misguided the author to take such a negatively affected view of the orient and have high opinion of the west and spewing forth hate and humiliation under the title of travel writing.

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