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The Study of the Hungarian as the Anti-Orient in Vambery's Travels in Central Asia

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Abstract

Since the presented picture of the Orient in Vambery's *Travels in Central Asia* is neither authentic nor unprejudiced and the writer's progress in describing the facts is maneuvered by the highly biased and prejudiced mind of his ancestors, in an attempt to clarify the ambiguities and unveil the concealed truth wrapped by the monologue narration and description of Vambery the present study applied Edward Said's Orientalism as the theoretical framework to highlight those parts in the travel book in which the author betrays his reader by providing anti-orient views the same as a rabble rouser. Being unable to appreciate the differences between the East and the West Vambery openly looks down on the orient from several vantage points. To this end Vamberly assigns a Hungarien 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. Hopefully this study shed light on the subject and provides an unbiased reading where both the orient and occident are equally revered.

Keywords: Anti-Orient, Edward Said , Orientalism, Travel writing

Introduction

Orientalism is a term used by art historians, literary and cultural studies scholars to imitate or depict aspects in Middle Eastern, South Asian, and East Asian cultures (i.e. Eastern cultures). Such depictions are usually carried out by writers, designers and artists from the West (Tromans, 6). Edward Said argues that in *Orientalism*, ideas, cultures, and histories cannot seriously be understood or studied without their force or more precisely their configurations of power, also being studied. Edward Wadie Said (November 1935 – 25 September 2003) a Palestinian American literary theorist and public intellectual significantly helped found the critical theory field of postcolonialism. 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 West's patronizing perceptions and depictions of Middle Eastern, Asian and North African societies—"the East". Orientalism is a term that is used by art historians, literary and cultural studies scholars for the imitation or depiction of aspects in Middle Eastern, South Asian, and East Asian cultures (Eastern cultures). These depictions are usually done by writers, designers and artists from the West (Tromans 6). Arminius Vambery 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 route lay from Trebizond on the Black Sea to Tehran in Persia, where he joined a band of pilgrims returning from Mecca, spending several months with them traveling across Central Iran (Tabriz, Zanjan, and Kazvin)(Chisholm 1911)just as it is narrated by Vambery himself in the first chapter of *Travels in Central Asia.*

A rich discussion of authorial self has been initiated in the field of anthropology. The relationship of the writer's mediating perception to the objects of study has been at the root of questions about ethnography for several decades, giving rise to a subgenre of "auto-ethnography," in which the anthropologist consciously works to bring biases and perceptual difficulties to the forefront and does not seek to occlude his or her own sensibilities behind an authorial, authoritative voice. (Helmerz and Mazeo 2007)

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.

Method

The adopted methodology for this study was library research as well as internet research, using the existing material, books and papers written on the subject and surveying the provided data on the internet. This study has employed 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. Reliable digital data sources as JSTOR, Project Muse, etc., were used. As Edward Said, one of the most eminent figures of the field says in *Orientalism*, ideas, cultures, and histories cannot seriously be understood or studied without their force or more precisely their configurations of power, also being studied. 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 reflected passively by culture, scholarship, or institutions; nor is it a large and diffuse collection of texts about the Orient; nor is it representative and expressive of some nefarious "Western" imperialist plot to hold down the "Oriental" world. It is rather a *distribution* of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts; it is an *elaboration* not only of a basic geographical distinction Orient and Occident but also of a whole series of "interests" which, by such means as scholarly discovery, philological reconstruction, psychological analysis, landscape and sociological description, it not only creates but also maintains; it *is*, rather than expresses, a certain *will* or *intention* to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different world; it is, above all, a discourse that is by no means in direct, corresponding relationship with political power in the raw, but rather is produced and exists in an uneven exchange with various kinds of power, shaped to a degree by the exchange with power political, power intellectual, power cultural , power moral.

Review of the Related Literature

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 traveler known as The Explorer and later as an authority on Central Asia (Mandler, 2005) yet not much of a thorough investigation of the traveling self and Iranian son Vambery's work has ever been conducted in previous researches. To expand the studies and shed light on the concept of Orientalism Said argues that Orinetalism is more that more than a structure of lies or of myths which were the truth about them to be told would simply blow away. And it is not an airy European fantasy about the Orient, but a created body of theory and practice in which, for many generations, there has been a considerable material investment. 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 (p.29) and later conducts a comparison of Orientalism with the idea of Europe and the a 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 independent, or more skeptical, thinker might have had different views on the matter. Said (1979) 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.

The Hungarian as an Anti-orient

In the first chapter we can observe instances of 'self' to a large extent. Vambery 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. Vambery 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 Sais has discussed a lot.

Vambery represents the superior self-introduced by Edward said whose rational 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 inequality by which the Orient's comparative poverty (or wealth) besought scholarly, scientific treatment of the kind to be found in disciplines like philology, biology, history, anthropology, philosophy, or economics. 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 in an attempt to explain the aforementioned antipathy towards the orient, Islam and the Arabs 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 still considered reliable monuments of scholarship, yet his attitude towards his subject matter was fairly put by him when he said 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" 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 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 Vamberly 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 aforementioned extract clearly reflects Edwar 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 oriental 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)

This prejudice is repeatedly mentioned in the discussions made by Edward Said about orient and occident. He argues that books and articles are regularly published on Islam and the Arabs that represent 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 virtually anything can be written or said about it, without challenge or demurral. 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)

In the 2003 preface to the Western conceptions of the orient Edward Said argues that there is a difference 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 campaign 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

Edward Said 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)

According to Edward Said's notion any attempt to force cultures and peoples into separate and distinct breeds or essences exposes not only the misrepresentations and falsifications that ensue, but also the way in which understanding is complicit 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 (341).

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.

Findings

The concepts of 'self', 'other', 'orient', 'occident' and cultural issues can be traced in many books and essays, and within the perspectives of many scholars and theorists yet the notions of Edward Said's have rarely been applied to the present work. Scrutinizing the novel for features and notions introduced and supported by Said in the present study lead to the following findings:

Regarding the first major finding of this research, the analysis of the work under Said's views revealed that Orientalism is a considerable dimension of modern political and intellectual culture and has less to do with the Orient than it does with 'our' world in line with Edward Said (p.13).

The second major finding is that on the basis of the abovementioned prejudiced and biased instances it can be argued that the title of Hungarian anti-orient occident befits Vambery's narrator as an example of all those who have low opinion of others in particular the Orients.

The third major finding lies in the fact that Said's notion of orientalism is repeatedly detected throughout Vambery's work. The high frequency of the detection of this notion can be interpreted as the prejudice on the side of the author which can be originated from his faulty and misguided understanding of the orient.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that the ideas presented by Vambery throughout the book can be criticized on the basis of Edward Said's notions 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. As mentioned in the aforementioned extracts of the book Vambery openly applies distorted knowledge to attack the knowledge of the orients he meets along with other factors. 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 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 This is an example of Edward Said's distorted knowledge because he narrates two contradictory descriptions in the same book with a few pages of interval. 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 a prejudiced and biased manner by applying distorted knowledge, reductive images and disputatious polemics.

Suggestions for Further Studies

This study was concerned with reading Vambery's *Travels* in *Central Asia* under Edward Sais's notions however there are a lot of other issues to be considered in this work. There can be other comparative studies from other perspectives such as social criticism, psychological trauma of the immigrants, and cultural confusion. Thus besides the application of Said's ideas socio-psychological notions can be applied to the reading of this work as well.

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