

A Study of Antinarrative Elements in Alexander Burnes' *Travels into Bokhara*

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DOI: <https://www.doi.org/10.34785/J014.2022.621>

Article Type: Original Article Page Numbers: 1-19

Received: 15 February 2021 Accepted: 18 September 2021

Abstract

Once treated like a pariah in the realm of literary criticism, the genre of travel writing becomes a legitimate object of critical inquiry after Said's *Orientalism* in which he critically examines French and English travel books written in the context of colonialism. Similarly, this article embarks on reading Alexander Burnes' *Travels into Bokhara* in the light of Orientalism. The travelogue recounts Burnes' journey to Afghanistan and Turkistan during the Great Game. Instead of extracting and interpreting orientalist tropes in Burnes' travel book, the present article seeks to study its antinarrative components: those statements and praxis which are inconsistent with Orientalism's policing and regulatory norms. It contends that the travel writer exhibits his disenchantment with orientalist vision in three ways. Firstly, through recoiling from reiterating the trope of the alleged 'Oriental' despotism. Secondly, via unsettling the trope of the 'monarch of all I survey', and finally, by demonstrating cultural receptivity towards indigenous people and their Islamic culture.

Keywords

Orientalism; Antinarrative; Despotism; Monarch of all I Survey; Cultural Receptivity.

1. Introduction

Once at the bottom of the literary pyramid and the reminder of escape and entertainment (Mohanty ix), travel writing becomes the object of critical scrutiny in the second half of the twentieth century due to Edward Said's critical reading of this genre (Kuehn 175). By definition, travel writing refers to the factual first-person narrative in prose (Youngs 3) in which the traveler as the self/identity, mostly from the West, encounters his travelles as others/alterity/difference, primarily from unprivileged non-Western places (Thompson 9-10), in an asymmetrical power relationship (Pratt 8) to document his

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observations and impressions to be consumed by his Western readership. Nevertheless, in the second half of the twentieth century, postcolonial subjects travel to Western metropolises and reverse this imperial paradigm; a case in point is Caryl Phillips' *The European Tribe*, in which he exposes the naked racism and tribalism of his Western travelers (132-133).

For Bassnett, travel accounts, namely those written in the nineteenth century, are not the repository of dispassionate knowledge about visited natives, their social mores, and culture; instead, she views them as the texts mediated by travelers' home culture and inflected by imperial agendas and interests (18). This explains why Clark associates travel narratives with imperialism and colonial expansion (3). Echoing Bassnett and Clark, Pratt posits that travel books in the nineteenth century have stimulated and generated the desire for colonial possession in their Western audience by creating the "sense of ownership, entitlement, and familiarity with respect to the distant parts of the world" (3).

Alexander Burnes' *Travels into Bokhara*, written in the first half of the nineteenth century, is no exception to this rule since it is born out of the British Empire's desire and anxiety. As an officer in the East India Company's service, Burnes (1805-1841) is dispatched to the less explored but imperialistically desired and coveted Afghanistan and Turkistan in 1832 to map, identify consumer markets for British goods, and collect strategic intelligence about Tsarist Russians' presence in Turkistan/Central Asia. For British politicians, Russians are slowly encroaching into Turkistan to wrest India in the context of the Great Game, the fierce competition between the British Empire and the Russian Empire over Afghanistan, India, and neighboring regions. Thus, the British strive to render Afghanistan a buffer zone to harness Russians' potential imperial advances.

Kennedy believes that travel narratives about the East, written in the context of the British Empire in the nineteenth century, are often characterized by racism, otherization, essentialist perceptions, and the myopic understanding of the visited people and places since these texts depict the East as "an exotic, erotic, frightening place [as well as] an inferior and unprogressive zone forever trapped in time" (Laisram 1). However, this does not signify that these texts do not contain antinarrative elements that are incongruent with orientalist rhetoric. To overlook travel books' transgressive facets will obscure their nuances and intricacies resulting in a simplistic interpretation (Sardar 55). This is the case in the critical readings that crudely deploy Edward Said's theoretical frame. They tend to restrict themselves to excavating stereotypes and explicating orientalist tropes. Therefore, Sara Mills discourages researchers from carrying out such an unproductive reading, "It is no longer possible simply to continue to do orientalist readings of particular travel texts" (qtd. in Clarke 11). In a similar vein, Terry Eagleton fiercely

attacks these types of studies; for him, they are intellectually sterile, unstimulating, and thematically thin,

Indeed, once you observed that other is typically portrayed as lazy, dirty, stupid, crafty, womanly, passive, rebellious, sexually rapacious, child-like, enigmatic, and a number of other mutually contradictory epithets. It is hard to know what to do next apart from reaching for yet another textual representation of the fact. The theme is as theoretically thin as it is politically pressing. Nothing is now more stereotyped in literary studies than the critique of stereotypes (2).

The current study thus moves away from the reductionist manipulation of the Saidian model. Instead, it will invoke Said's notion of 'antinarrative' which he briefly mentions in his *Orientalism* (182). Acknowledging anti-orientalist orientations within travel narratives will lead to a nuanced reading that shuns hunting orientalist tropes and equating the travelers with the mouthpieces of the empire. In the words of Youngs, "One of the weakest spots of travel studies has been its often blanket coverage of imperialism (168). Hence, the present study contends that Burnes exhibits his revisionist attitude towards the orientalist narrative in three ways.

Firstly, Burnes poses a challenge to the outworn cliché of supposedly 'Oriental' despot that hinders economic growth, breaks down the civil order, indulges in carnal pleasures, and abandons his subjects. Secondly, the traveler questions the prevailing trope of surveillance known as the 'monarch of all I survey' by shifting his gaze to the scene already marked with Eastern kings' and emperors' power and desire as well as by styling himself as a pilgrim. Finally, Burnes opens himself up to his encountered indigenous people and their Islamic culture when maintaining distance is an accepted norm with Western travelers in the nineteenth century. The presence of these antinarrative components in Burnes' travelogue illustrates that Orientalism is open and intricate not monolithic and closed.

2. Review of Literature

Alexander Burnes has chiefly aroused the interest of historians of the Anglo-Afghan war, Afghanistan, and Central Asia in the context of the Great Game rather than literary critics. In addition, they do not present an in-depth analysis of his travel book. Hopkins in his *The Making of Modern Afghanistan* compares Burnes' travelogue with that of Elphinstone, Burnes' predecessor and mentor. To him, his travelogue is more popular and reader-oriented than Elphinstone's erudite travel book characterized by the values of Enlightenment; he believes that Burnes imitates Elphinstone's travelogue since it is a foundational text about Afghanistan (16). Hopkins, additionally, states that just as

Elphinstone, Burnes collects colonial knowledge for taming “the exotic not necessarily subjugating Afghanistan” (16). Unlike Hopkins, Kao points to the similarity between Burnes and Elphinstone. She observes that these two Scottish travelers have “created stereotypes of the land and people of the region [Afghanistan] outlasting the British Empire itself” (146). In sync with Hopkins, Bayly highlights Burnes’ engagement in gathering imperial information and its translation into political advice (104). In the eyes of Bayly, Burnes operates within Elphinstone’s epistemological framework; nevertheless, he updates it by supplying “the more contemporary, context[bound] information” (100) related to the political domain of Afghanistan and its faultlines (99). Likewise, James Najarian believes that Burnes’ travelogue is a significant text about the British’s fascination with Afghanistan, yet it is punctured by Eurocentric vision. Najarian briefly draws a parallel between Mungo Park and Burnes.

Unlike previous scholars, Keighren, Withers, and Bell in their *Travels into Print* concentrate on the paratextual aspect of Burnes’ travelogue. They note that Murray II, Burnes’ publisher, intentionally adds Burnes’ portrait—displaying him in Bokhara costume—to the book’s frontispiece to advertise the travel book and accentuate his disguise during his journeys in Afghanistan and Central Asia. Burnes, they note, abides by his publisher’s decision even though he knows that his portrait may be interpreted as self-aggrandizement by his readership (145). None of these scholars refer to the moments in his travelogue in which Burnes constitutes a challenge to the discourse of Orientalism. Only Prior in passing states that Burnes in his travelogue displays a “relatively cosmopolitan perspective.” In other words, Prior believes that Burnes’ travel book contains an anti-orientalist perspective. Thus, the antinarrative dimension of Burnes’ travelogue has remained unexplored, thereby demanding to be critically examined.

3. Methodology

This study will build on Orientalism as its methodology. According to Melman, “Orientalism has become the single most influential paradigm in studies of travel writing” (“The Middle East” 107). For Edward Said, Orientalism is “a style of thought based on an ontological and epistemological distinction made between the Orient and Occident” (2) for “dominating, restructuring, and having authority over it” (3). Orientalism, from Said’s perspective, is a closed, static, totalizing, and coherent system that does not accommodate openness and receptivity towards the Orient (222). This stance explains why he is not optimistic about “the possibility that a more independent, more skeptical, thinker might have had different views on the matter” (7) of the Orient, and why he views “every European, in what he could say about the Orient is a racist, an imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric” (204).

Paradoxically, despite his rigid stance on the field of Orientalism, Said passingly acknowledges the presence of ‘antinarrative’ when he analyzes Gérard de Nerval’s travel book in his *Orientalism*: “[Nerval’s] antinarrative [...] is swerving away from discursive finality of the sort envisioned by previous writers on the Orient” (182). Inspired by Said’s unexplored idea of antinarrative, Folwer defines it as “Writing that breaks away from what Said calls ‘discursive finality’ of conventional plot that which tames with narrative conventions or familiar patterns of representation” (139). Confirming Said’s notion of antinarrative, Laisram states that it is fallacious to claim that the nineteenth-century English travel books about the Orient have simply voiced orientalist shibboleths because these travel books have moments in which their authors question orientalist assumptions (2). Likewise, Holland and Huggan maintain that “Travel writing can arguably be seen [in] having transgressive potential [antinarrative]: in allowing the writer to flout conventions” (4). Despite recognizing the antinarrative in his *Orientalism*, Said does not explore and develop it; however, Behdad and Porter explore and develop this notion in their works. For them, the antinarrative components within travel books indicate that Orientalism is not closed and homogenous because it does not completely suppress non-orientalistic perspectives and practices within itself. In other words, it incorporates “resistance, dissent, and ... counter-representation” as well (Lowe 25).

Behdad capitalizes on and develops Said’s notion of antinarrative in his *Belated Travelers*. He posits that the travel narratives of belated travelers such as Nerval, Flaubert, and Isabella Eberhardt are characterized by the antinarrative (54). For Behdad, the antinarrative operates like a simoom since it “blurs [the belated traveler’s] vision and disorients his sense of order, [and with its] dust storm flusters his will to represent” (ibid.). Behdad, then, identifies and illustrates these antinarrative components in their works. Given Nerval, he holds that Nerval’s “desire for the Orient” (34), his abandonment of representational practices, his recognition of silence, and his joy of mingling with his ‘Oriental’ travelers exemplify his antinarrative (24). Unlike Edward Said who does not touch on the role of the antinarrative within the structure of Orientalism, Behdad opines that the antinarrative does not cause a radical fracture within the symbolic field of Orientalism; it only contributes “to the much-needed process of discursive restructuring” (34) within Orientalism.

Just as Said and Behdad, Dennis Porter in his “Orientalism and Its Problems” acknowledges the existence of the antinarrative within the architecture of Orientalism. However, he refers to it as “alternative Orientalism” (155). Porter’s contribution to studies of Orientalism lies in his emphasis on rereading the travel texts affiliated with imperialism to discover counter-hegemonic voices and moments in which the traveler enters into dialogue with ‘Oriental’ culture, transcends the fabricated dichotomy between the traveler as Self and his encountered local people as Oriental Others, and brings into

halt the nexus between knowledge and power (154). In sum, accentuating and interpreting the antinarrative within travelogues that notably concentrate on Eastern contact zones will result in an innovative reading that will eschew generalization, simplification, and demonization.

4. Discussion

4.1. Subverting ‘Oriental’ Despotism

In the orientalist worldview, the Orient is the birthplace of despotism and its societies “have a natural tendency toward despotism” (Thompson 134). This supposed ‘Oriental’ despotism recurs again and again both in pictorial and textual works dealing with the Orient (Kabbani 126). In the realm of English literature, Caliph Vathek with his brutality, insatiable ambition, and addiction to the “women and pleasures of the table” (Beckford 3) is the quintessential example of the alleged ‘Oriental’ despot. The notion of the so-called Eastern despotism is buttressed by eminent philosophers bestowing on it the veneration of authority. They have formed their theory based on travel narratives written by merchants, ambassadors, independent travelers, and military officers, among others (Islam 202).

For Aristotle, the prevalence of despotic systems in the Eastern world results from ‘Oriental’ people’s servile nature (Rubiés 115), but Montesquieu attributes it to “climatic and material factors” (Irwin 125). From the perspective of Marx Weber, its root lies in fatalistic Islam with its warrior ethics (Curtis 307). Unlike Aristotle and Montesquieu, and Weber, Machiavelli does not discuss its origin but highlights its supposedly bitter fruit: the servitude of subjects (Rubiés 117). Like Machiavelli, Karl Marx points to the negative consequences of despotic rule. According to him, it restrains “the human mind [...] making it the unresisting tool of superstition, enslaving it beneath the traditional rules, [and] depriving it of all grandeur and historical energies” (qtd. in Said 153). Similarly, James Mill notes that the despotic state corrupts culture and fosters poverty and superstition (Irwin 160). In orientalist texts, the purportedly ‘Oriental’ despot is portrayed as the agent of cultural, economic, and political stagnation due to indulging in tyranny, disregarding civil and criminal laws, and violating private property ownership. Moreover, the Eastern despot is pictured as a hedonist wallowing in his harem (Curtis 91).

This dominant orientalist belief has not been without its own critics in the West. For instance, Anquetil-Duperron, an Indologist in the 18th century, believes that foregrounding despotism as the essential feature of the Orient by Montesquieu will be exploited to oppress the Orientals by Westerners. Anquetil-Duperron, moreover, refutes the thesis that law is absent in India (Irwin 125). Syed Islam observes that Western travelers have exploited the notion of ‘Oriental’ despotism to stress the inferiority of the

East and later rationalize their imperial undertakings (198). By doing so, they encode the Orient as the embodiment of political exoticism (202). However, Alexander Burnes in his *Travels into Bokhara* presents a new vision of an ‘Oriental’ governor, which is the complete antithesis of the alleged ‘Oriental’ despot. By doing so, he revisits the idea of the Orient as the spectacular locus of despotism. The following passage illustrates his unorthodox view,

He [Dost Mahommed Khan] is unremitting in his attention to business and attends daily at the Court-house with the Cazee and Moollahs to decide every cause according to the law. The Koran and its commentaries may not be the standard of legislative excellence, but this sort of decision is exceedingly popular with the people since it fixes a line and relieves them from the ‘jus vagum aut incognitum’ of a despot. [...] the peasant rejoices at the absence of tyranny, the citizen at the safety of his home, and the strict municipal regulations regarding weights and measures; the merchant at the equity of the decisions and the protection of his property, and the soldiers at the regular manner in which their arrears [wages] are discharged (Burnes 2: 330-333).

Burnes gives the character sketch of Dost Mohammed as an enlightened, pro-trade ruler. In lieu of accelerating the economic and commercial decline, the Afghan chief promotes trade and stimulates commercial ventures by safeguarding merchants’ interests and guaranteeing their caravans’ safe passage through his domain, ideally located at the crossroads to the commercial hubs of Turkistan, Persia, and India (Bayly 97). For Burnes, the reason behind this promotion of trade lies in Islam since Koran “enjoins the most strict protection of merchant in a variety of passage; nor are these [rules] violated or evaded by the ruler of the country” (Burnes 2:442). The Emir, Burnes attests, skilfully manages the vital proceedings from the customs house to run his state efficiently. By so doing, he prevents his state from economic and political stagnation.

Burnes’ stance flatly contradicts the naked orientalist view of W.P. Andrew, the director of East Indian Railway, who claims that “To them [Afghans] trade is degradation and the man who plunges himself into commercial pursuits is despised almost as an outcast” (43). Substantiating Burnes’ perspective, Hopkins remarks that “with the stability brought about by the firm establishment of Dost Mohammed Khan in Kabul by 1826 [...] a commercial revolution, almost unobserved, has gradually changed the channels of commerce” (146).

Burnes does not picture Dost Mohammed as an anti-law chief, but he attests that the judiciary system is successful under his ruling since, as Charles Masson highlights, “He administers justice with impartiality” (1:252). Initially, Burnes is skeptical about the

adequacy of sharia to function like secular laws. Nonetheless, he exercises cultural relativity and testifies to the practicality and popularity of Islamic laws in settling legal disputes in place of disparaging Islam as a contributor to despotism. Indeed, he substantiates the notion that in “the Islamic system, religion and law are bound with each other” (Jeffery 41) and their combination yields good results: “ Whatever may be the opinions entertained of the religion of Mahommed, *it is productive of great advantages in the administration of the kingdom* (Burnes 2: 366 emphasis added). For Burnes, Dost Mohammed’s respect for law and its enforcement deliver him from being a leader above the law. Similarly, Senzil Nawid avers that Dost Mohammed has preserved his legitimacy thanks to following Islamic rules in domestic affairs (“The State” 589). In Peshawar, Burnes meets four teenagers and asks them about the good qualities of Kabul and its residents. “The justice of the ruler” one of them replies (Burnes 1:100). Richardson notes that “Dost Mohammad’s justice was proverbial. Decades later, Afghans were still asking one another: ‘Is Dost Mohammad dead, that there is no justice?’” (104). In other words, Dost Mohammed for his subjects in his lifetime has been the embodiment of justice.

Orientalists assume that ‘Oriental’ rulers are the man of debauchery whereas Burnes portrays Dost Mohammed as the paragon and advocator of sobriety. To maximize his subjects’ efficiency in fulfilling their civic and domestic duties, he forbids them from consuming wine and alcohol manufactured by Armenians and Hindus in Kabul and sold very cheaply. Hence, these beverages are easily accessible (Burnes 1:149). At first glance, his act seems a breach of the law for Burnes but he admits that the Emir’s order is necessary and praiseworthy:

If Dost Mohammed Khan can succeed in suppressing drunkenness by the sacrifice of few foreign inhabitants [Jews and Armenians], he is not to be blamed since forty bottles of wine or ten of brandy can be purchased from them for a single rupee. As the chief in-person shows so good an example to his people, we shall not criticize his motives (Burnes 1:149-50).

Unlike the despotic sovereign accused of being tyrannical and the sole possessor of properties, he seeks to keep his subjects privileged and unprivileged satisfied through obviating oppression and executing justice. It explains why they hold him in esteem. In tune with Burnes, Dr. Gerard offers the positive portrayal of the Emir: “His citizen-like demeanor and resolute simplicity have suited the people’s understanding; he has tried the effects of a new system and the experiment has succeeded” (2). Similarly, Conolly’s description of Dost Mohammed validates Burnes’ favorable comment: “He follows a liberal line of policy, endeavoring to conciliate the nobles and all classes of the people [...] and he is tolerant to many sheahs [Shia] of Kabul” (2:13). Burnes’ second expedition

to Kabul does not alter his view about Dost Mohammed's reverence for the law despite his new position as Emir connoting much power:

Power frequently spoils men but with Dost Mohammed neither increase of it nor his new title of Ameer [Emir] seems to have done him any harm. He seemed even more alert and full of intelligence than when I last saw him (qtd. in "Success in the East-Afghanistan -China"130).

Burnes' antinarrative strikes out when one contrasts his undespotic image of Dost Mohammed Khan with the despotic picture offered by American Josiah Harlan in his memoir. During Burnes' sojourn in Kabul, Harlan has been in the service of Dost Mohammed:

The Emir's fortitude and bravery questionable [...] with whom the principle of avarice was an active motive and gold was his god. [...] He indulges to excess in the lascivious sensualities so fascinating to the Oriental imagination and is consistent with the beatitude of their paradise [...]. He reveled and luxuriated in voluptuous and unrestrained licentiousness (Harlan 134-135).

Contrary to Burnes, Harlan here designates Dost Mohammed as an 'Oriental' despot par excellence. For him, Dost Mohammed is a coward, unjust, and greedy ruler. He implies that the Emir is apathetic about the wellbeing of his subjects. For Harlan, the Emir is the embodiment of pervasive tyranny whose abuses manifest themselves in political, civil, and moral spheres. Furthermore, Harlan suggests that his alleged immorality and debauchery are congruent with his Oriental imagination that inordinately delights in sensuality. To Harlan, the Emir's supposedly perverse imagination is not unrelated to Islam since Islam, he assumes, promises and preaches the pleasures of "luxuriating in paradise" for its followers (Dimmock 30). Accordingly, Harlan succumbs to the temptation of orientalist ideology and fails to liberate himself from its tunnel and monochromatic vision.

4.2. Unsettling the 'Monarch of all I Survey' Trope

According to Pratt, one of recurrent imperial tropes and scenes in travel writing since the eighteenth century is the 'monarch of all I survey'. For her, it is an example of a "verbal painting" crafted by travel writers, especially in the Victorian period, to share their exciting moments of "geographical discoveries" with their home readership (Pratt 197). It takes place when the traveler climbs up an elevated point (like a hill or mountain in the past and a hotel balcony in modern times) to survey and scan the landscape below. She identifies three elements in this trope. Firstly, the traveler estheticizes the scene via

viewing and describing it as a painting (200). By doing so, he imparts “esthetic pleasure” to his readers (ibid.). Secondly, he bestows the “density of meaning” on the landscape by depicting it as “rich in material and semantic substance” (ibid.). Thirdly, the traveler establishes himself as the master of what he gazes by judging, appreciating, and rendering it as a prospect for colonial entrepreneurs (ibid.).

This trope, Pratt holds, evinces the interaction between estheticism and the ideology of imperialism (201). However, she believes that it is open to satire and demystification (204). She argues that “hyphenated white” travelers sometimes employ the trope to “critique” the imperial ambition “from within” (ibid.). As a Scottish-British explorer, Alexander Burnes in his journey to Afghanistan subtly undermines the trope and its ideology in the context of the Orient. The following passage illustrates his challenge,

Newab and I climbed up to it [the hill] and seated ourselves. If my reader can imagine a plain, about twenty miles in circumference, laid out with gardens and fields in pleasing irregularity, intersected by three rivulets, which wind through it by a serpentine course, and wash with innumerable little forts and villages, he will have before him one of the meadows of Cabul. [...] I do not wonder at the hearts of the people being captivated with the landscape and of Babar’s admiration; for in his own words, ‘its verdure and flowers render Cabool in spring heaven’ (Burnes 1:142-143).

On the surface, the above passage is the typical example of the ‘monarch of all I survey’ trope inflected by the imperial ideology because the traveler from a high vantage point on the hill scans the landscape, and the resultant account features three components of the trope. Firstly, Burnes estheticizes the scene by rendering it as a textual painting in which a lush pasture and snow-capped and gloomy mountains are in its background while in its foreground there is a plain dotted by orchards and farms through which three streams snake their ways into grasslands, villages, and forts. As a traveler with a romantic sensibility, Burnes implicitly expresses his esthetic pleasure via imagining the sheer joy that local people derive from beholding this paradise-like scene. Secondly, he portrays landscape as the land of abundance characterized by its fertility, hunting games, fruits, and meadows. Finally, Burnes seems to possess the land imaginatively via gazing at and appreciating its picturesque beauty.

Nevertheless, on closer inspection, it becomes evident that Burnes undercuts the imperialistic undercurrents of the trope. Here, he views the landscape not from the perspective of an explorer keen on discovering an economic prospect to be exploited by the East India Company later but from that of a humble pilgrim desiring to pay tribute to King Baber (1433-1530) to his memory, he has “profound respect” resulting from the “perusal of his most interesting commentaries” (Burnes 2:141). This explains why he

decenters his narrative voice by quoting directly from Babur and gazing at the picturesque scene through his eyes. By referring to Babur, he brings into the light the pre-eighteenth century of Afghanistan which Ghobar- the Afghan historian- believes has been ignored by Western writers in the Imperial era (Nawid “The Discovery” 129). Moreover, the landscape that Burnes concentrates on is mundane. The region has been already cultivated and irrigated by native people as well as has been inscribed and inflected by local kings’ power and pleasure: hunting. Hence, by historicizing the scene, the traveler punctures the euphoric moment of discovery that one can encounter among the explorers of Africa like Burton in the Victorian period. Indeed, he is a belated traveler in a zone rich in culture and history. Also, the idea of imaginative dominance of surveyed territory does not match with his policy of non-intervention in Afghanistan since he is in favor of “the strong and unified Afghan state that can resist against Russians and Persians (Morrison 280). For him, Afghanistan will fare better under an efficient ruler like Dost Mohammed rather than Shah Shuja, a puppet ruler appointed by Britain.

Interestingly, in contrast with Victorian travelers who are silent about their indigenous companions and guides in their narrative (Youngs 160-61; Pettinger 51), Burnes in this excursion mentions Nawab Jabber Khan, his Afghan guide and host, in his account. Like Burnes, Jabbar Khan directs his gaze on the fertile ground. His surveillance bespeaks his interest in agricultural initiatives as well as his political ambition. Jabber Khan, Murray reports, is an ardent supporter of improving agriculture in his country. Mainly for this reason he insists on cultivating potatoes and new crops in Afghanistan (218). He, moreover, envisions an independent and developed Afghanistan in which he imagines himself as a key powerholder and political player. This ambition explains why he has secretly aligned himself with Peshawar sirdars [commanders] to dethrone Dost Mohammad Khan (Richardson 106) though it does not materialize. Furthermore, Jabber Khan’s resistance against British political interference reflects his patriotism. For instance, when Burnes asks him what the Afghan ruling elites demand from the British government, he retorts “Izzat wa Ikram” (Murray 221) - dignity and respect- two crucial qualities that English hawks attempt to wrest from them. Like any Afghan who is “fond of liberty” (Elphinstone 331), Jabbar Khan cannot imagine the idea of being dominated by England. This explains why Eugene Schuyler notes: “If the English were to give Afghanistan the whole revenues of India, the people would not love the English better” (1: 262). Thus, Jabbar Khan strongly opposes the British presence in Kabul and cooperates with Akbar Khan, Dost Mohammed’s son, to expel them from their country (Gupta 206; Dalrymple xvii). In sum, by styling himself as a pilgrim, choosing an ordinary place to gaze, and sharing his experience with a native nationalist and politician, Burnes tears the bond between imperialistic ideology and aestheticism in the trope of ‘monarch of all I survey’.

4.3. Receptivity towards Indigenous People and their Islamic Culture

The scholars of travel writing believe that “travelers follow literally and figuratively in paths laid down by their prior exposure to cultural presentations of a place” (Youngs 152). Similarly, Kennedy observes that there is club-mindedness among travel writers who devote their accounts to the Orient and their constructed orientalist pronouncements ceaselessly circulate within their works. For Kabbani, these borrowings help travel writers to “sustain their [unsavory] communal image of the Orient” (72). The persistence and endurance of Orientalist tropes in travel texts validate Kennedy’s, Kabbani’s, and Youngs’ claim. Nonetheless, the scholars in question present a pessimistic prospect of Orientalism and fail to take into account the resilient nature of Orientalism and its capacity to incorporate antinarrative components. This means that within the field of Orientalism, the travel writers can express their dissent against the established traditions of Orientalism and distinguish their narratives from unimaginative and sterile ones.

The travel writers’ disenchantment and resistance to normalizing and homogenizing tendencies can be due to different reasons; a prominent factor among them is intimate and productive engagement with indigenous people and their culture. Approving the disturbing and enlightening power of the constructive involvement with the encountered people and places, Eugene Schuyler remarks that initially “a traveler sees their [travelees’] worst, but on knowing intimately he cannot help liking and even respecting them” (1:38). In a similar vein, Paul Fussell observes that travelers do not learn just foreign customs and mores. Sometimes they learn humility too; that is, they learn “their provincialism and recognize their ignorance” (14). Thus, this type of personal involvement with the alterity entails openness, tolerance, and fresh insight. Sara Upstone calls this quality rhizome thinking [which reminds the antinarrative] (Ch. 10). One can find this consciousness in Burnes’ travel book when he travels with the caravan as well as when he engages with Afghan people.

Given the caravan, Burnes’ journey in Turkistan affords him an opportunity to travel with the caravan and experience its world intimately. Rather than complaining about his hardships and constructing himself the personae of a suffering hero, as travelers usually do in the context of Turkistan, he responds to it openly and positively. As a result, he experiences an alternative outlook towards the host culture and its people, which is at variance with the denigrative style of orthodox Orientalism. The following passage illuminates the point,

A caravan is a complete republic, but I do not believe that most republics are so orderly. Of our eighty camels every three or four belonged to different individuals, and there were four Cafila-bashees. [...] One does not see in civilized Europe that generous feeling which induces the natives of

Asia, great and small, to share with each other every mouthful that they possess. The khan fares as simply as the peasant, and never offers to raise a morsel to his lips till he has shared it with those near him. I myself frequently have been partaker of this bounty from rich and poor, for nothing is enjoyed without society (Burnes 2: 20).

The caravan is the microcosm of and synecdoche for the Orient because in its ethnic fabric there are merchants and travelers from Persia, India, Central Asia, and Afghanistan. This extract is not informed by the “orientalist desire” but by the “desire for the Orient” because the traveler genuinely demonstrates “involvement, participation [...], and fascination” (Behdad 21) instead of maintaining distance with the cultural space of the caravan. The desire enables him to defamiliarise the caravan and purge its negative orientalist connotations. No longer is it the locus of orientalist traits like lawlessness and confusion and no longer is it haunted by the terror of so-called brutal bandits emerging out of nowhere to loot, plunder, and create pandemonium. Here, Burnes does not equate Turkistan with “the womb of terror” as Thurbon does in his travelogue: *The Lost Heart of Asia* (158). Conversely, the caravan for Burnes is the site of orderliness, unselfishness, mutual respect, consensual obedience, nobility, productive collectivity, and sympathy. Likewise, Burnes elsewhere in his travelogue confirms that the caravan “levels all distinctions between master and servant where both [travelers] share everything, it is impossible to be singular” (Burnes 1:252).

This true engagement with the difference releases him from the bars of official orientalism and generates in him a sense of cultural relativism. Consequently, he “judge[s] them [his travelees] by their own standards” and grafts a charitable picture on ‘the Orient.’ Indeed, here Burnes experiences his destination without being colored with orientalist formula because he “negates [and] severely brackets the values, assumptions, and ideology of his culture” (JanMohamed 65). Burnes, furthermore, reveals a similar antinarrative outlook stemming from productive involvement with the ‘Oriental’ space when he roams in Bala Bagh, a village near Kabul. As he arrives there, it pours with rain; thus, Burnes and his companions take shelter in a mosque. When it ceases, they walk into the village expecting to be disrespected by his travelees. To his astonishment, he does not face any impolite behavior from the Muslim village dwellers,

It rained at Bala-bagh [...] which led us at dusk to seek shelter in the mosque. [...] They do not appear to have the smallest prejudice against a Christian, and I had never heard from their lips the name of dog or infidel which figures so prominently in the works of many travelers. ‘Every country has its customs’ is a proverb among them and the Afghan Mahommedans seem to pay respect to Christians [...]. Us they call ‘people of the book’ (Burnes 1:123-124).

One can infer that before or during his journey to the East Burnes has read travel accounts recording the encounter between Christian travelers in an orientalist fashion. As Melman notes “Travellers do not operate in an informational vacuum” (*Women’s Orient*s 63). These texts appear to designate the Muslims as prejudiced, intolerant, and ill-mannered in dealing with Christian counterparts. One can see such an orientalist gesture in Baillie Fraser’s *Narrative of a Journey into Khorasan* in which the traveler designates his Persian travelees as deeply prejudiced especially when it comes to visiting shrines and mosques by Christians (182-183). Interestingly, Burnes has already read this travel book (Burnes 2:81).

To give another example, one can see such an orientalist gesture in Joseph Wolff’s travel account when he quotes the words of his Muslim travelee: ‘Imagine the boldness of this *infidel* [Wolff] who in the midst of Muhammands [Muslims] [...] declares our religion [Islam] to be a lie” (309). Wolff is the contemporary of Burnes who meets Burnes in Kabul. As a result, Burnes anticipates meeting a similar reaction from the villagers. Contrary to his orientalist expectation, the Afghan villagers treat him with respect and demonstrate religious tolerance reflected in their proverb: “Every country has its customs.” For Burnes, the reason behind this civil encounter lies in Islam. He acknowledges that Islam obliges its followers to hold Christians and Jews in esteem because they believe in the Scriptures. According to Madjid, “The attitude of Muslim believers in relation to other religions is characterized by tolerance, freedom [...], and fairness” (633). By way of illustration, the prophet of Islam states: “If a traveler [including Christians] takes a shelter in a building [like a mosque], I protect them from hostility by the holders of my religion [followers] ” (qtd. in Madjid 638). No doubt, such a constructive cultural encounter with the alterity has made him “respect Islam” (Murray 72), be “partial for Islamic culture” (185), and even criticize the missionary activities and orientalist projects of some idealist British travelers in Central Asia/Turkistan. One can observe his liberal position in his criticism of Arthur Conolly: “He is flighty[...]. He [wants] to regenerate Turkestan [...] and look at our advent as the design of providence to spread Christianity” (qtd. in Sergeev 4). Also, Burnes’ respect for and interest in Islam is evident in the following extract:

At the setting and rising of the sun, the caravan halts to admit the performance of prayers, and the sonorous sound of Ullaho [Allah] Akbar summons all ‘true believers’ to the presence of God. They stroke down their beards and with their eyes turned towards Mecca perform the genuflexions prescribed by their creed [Islam]. We sat and looked at the solemnity, without suffering either taunts or abuse and experienced toleration that would have done credit to the most civilized country of Europe (1:252).

Burnes, like a cultural translator, faithfully translates the Islamic cultural sign of prayer and adopts the perspective of a Muslim. In doing so, he captures the beauty of their devotion via applying affirmative words such as ‘sonorous sound,’ ‘stroking their beard,’ and ‘solemnity.’ In the end, he attests to the positive effect of their prayer: open-mindedness, civility, and toleration towards the foreign travelers including Burnes himself. He assumes that their civility differentiates them from the Western people. By accentuating the virtues of Islamic culture, Burnes enters into a dialogue with his host culture and graces his text with what Bakhtin calls dialogism. His dialogue and openness empower him to evince xenophilia rather than xenophobia and exude Islamophilic sentiments in place of Islamophobic ones. Moreover, his receptivity helps him experience the Orient without the cultural shackles of home culture. Burnes’ anti-narrative and fresh perspective is the fruit of his sincere engagement with his travelees engendering in him the desire to resist a myopic orientalist interpretation.

5. Conclusion

Alexander Burnes in his journey to Turkistan and Afghanistan reveals a resilient nature of Orientalism which is capable of encapsulating antinarrative elements: views and practices that are at odds with its policing, excluding, regulatory norms. He demonstrates these antinarrative components in three ways. Firstly, in opposition to the prevailing perception of ‘Oriental’ Emirs and rulers as despotic overlords, Burnes depicts Dost Mohammed Khan as an enlightened and just ruler who leads an austere life and efficiently governs his dominion by Islamic laws. This charismatic leader, Burnes highlights, promotes trade, protects merchants, and keeps his subjects satisfied. Secondly, if Victorian travelers climb an elevated place to scan, aesthetize, and introduce their gazed vista as the prospective imperial possession, Burnes chooses to gaze at the pastoral place that has been already inscribed with and etched by indigenous imperial powers. Moreover, it has been irrigated and developed by the local farmers. Indeed, he dissociates himself from the trope of the ‘monarch of all I survey,’ when he frames himself as a pilgrim who is desirous to pay a visit to a previous ‘Oriental’ emperor rather than a colonial entrepreneur. In place of Burnes, it is Jabber Khan who is enthusiastic about cultivating and developing the surveyed land. Thus, it is his gaze that bespeaks his political and agricultural ambitions. Finally, Burnes during his journey behaves as a liberal traveler who opens himself up to the caravan, the encountered Islamic culture, and its people. Accordingly, he engages with them productively and intimately, bringing about a fresh frame of mind that appreciates the difference and depicts it without falling into the trap of the orientalist worldview.

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