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## Sympathetic Portrayal of Turkmen in Blocqueville's Travelogue: War and Captivity in Merv

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Masoud Ahmadi Mosaabad

Department of English, Faculty of Humanities and Physical Education  
Gonbad Kavous University, Golestan Province  
Iran

### ABSTRACT

Travel writing has been an effective instrument at the hands of Western travel writers to portray non-Western people and cultures especially Oriental ones due to their stark difference with those of the West. They dramatized their travelees/ observees and cultures in two ways: first, sympathetically through adopting an insider's perspective as well as through striving to be impartial when they describe their customs and mores; second condescendingly through clinging to their Western cultural baggage resulting in the misrepresentation and misinterpretation of their visited people and cultures. In this regards, Invoking Lisle's 'cosmopolitan vision' as its methodological framework, the present argues that Henry Blocqueville is a cosmopolitan traveler since he in travel book does not denigrate his observees/travelees (here Turkmen), instead he sympathetically portrays them and honors their socio-cultural alterity. His positive response towards his travelees manifests itself when he concentrates his cultural focus on jewelry, music, and women in his traversed terrain. Contrary to Blocqueville's celebratory attitude towards his travelees, other Victorian travel writers fail to transcend their Eurocentrism.

**Keywords:** *Cosmopolitan Traveler, Sympathy, Music, Jewelry, Depiction, Turkmen*

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### 1. Introduction

Tim Youngs defines travel writing as "a first person nonfictional prose about a journey undertaken by identifiable author-narrator" (Clarke, 2018). Travel writing in the West in particular England as a literary genre goes through different stages. In the Middle Ages, the main focus of travel writing is on narrating journeys to holy places, and in these travel books, travelers neither their inner world nor the customs and mores of their travelees (Bale, 2016). The best representative work for this period is *Peregrinatio* by Egeria (ibid.). During Renaissance, travel literature concentrates on "reporting information about the external world" (Day, 2016, p.170) yet it is replete with "condescending attitudes to indigenous populations" (ibid.). In the eighteenth century travel books concern Grand Tour; it is designed not only to complete the education of affluent students but also to refine them culturally by traveling cultural centers in the Continent (Goring, 2008). James Boswell' *On Ground Tour* represents travel writing in this era. Travel literature in the Romantic period is very popular and

deals with England and outside world. When it deals with England, picturesqueness and sublimity of landscapes are its main priority, and the best example for this type of travel books is William Gilpin's *Observation on the Wye Valley* (Gilroy, 2010). When it is about non-Western world, it is informed by orientalist assumptions and is "salacious and filled with the depravity of the native people" (Ruston, 2007, p.55); Mungo Park's travel books falls into this category. In Victorian period, English travelers exploit this genre to promote and justify British Empire by painting alien cultures as primitive, and thus in the need of British civilizing mission, like Arminius Vambery's travel to Central Asia (Gholi & Ahmadi, 2016). In the twentieth century, travel writing embraces the possibilities offered by modernist literature. Consequently, it abandons its former plot-based structure, and introduces stream of consciousness and prioritizes inner journey rather than external one, for example Annemarie Schwarzenbach' *Death in Persia* is good example of this kind of travel book (Farley, 2016). In addition, in this period



postmodernist travel books emerge. In these travel books, the travel writers consciously blur the border between fiction and non-fiction blurs to “explore the competing claims of imagination, reason, and moral responsibility in the engagement with the world” (Thompson, 2011, p.30).

## **2. Review of Literature**

There are a few articles, dealing with the subject of image and representation of Turkmen in western travel literature, and these articles use Edward Said's theory as their methodology to expose the orientalist assumption of travel writers and their participation in promoting British colonist interests. For instance, Gholi and Ahmadi (b. 2017) in their article entitled, *Image of Oriental Female Travelers in the Nineteenth Century Western Travel Writing*, catalogue the negative features the Western traveler ascribe to them. From their perspective, Turkmen are idle, primitive, superstitious, unhealthy, nemesis of civilization, enigmatic, and inscrutable. Similarly Gholi (2016) in article: *Representation of Central Asia and Traveling Self in Vambery's Travels in Central Asia* demonstrates that Vambery's negative and jaundiced attitude towards Turkmen. According to Vambery, Turkmen are superstitious people who believe in the power of talismans. They are infamous stealers of innocent people living in their vicinity, rapacious caravan robbers, and brutal slave owners who enjoy inflicting physical and psychological pain on them. Moreover, he maintains that they are frozen in time and they inhabit like their medieval ancestors. Besides two aforementioned, Gholi and Ahmad (a 2017) in their article: *Domestication and Mistranslation of Oriental Jewels and Music in Edmund O'Donovan's The Merv Oasis* by drawing on Susan Bassnett's theory demonstrate how Edmund O'Donovan mistranslates and domesticate two cultural signs of Turkmen culture: music and jewelry. They show that the traveler cannot foreignize these two cultural signs. Indeed his failure from Gholi and Ahmadi's perspective stems from his clinging to his Western cultural baggage. Contrary to the discussed articles, the present article attempts to analyze the positive stand point of Blocqueville which challenges Said's perspective. By doing so, it aims to fill this research gap.

### **2.1 Travel writer and his Travel Book**

A French military officer-cum-photographer, Henry Blocqueville set out for Iran, hoping to get a job in Qajar's court in 1860. An admirer of Western's science and

technology down to core, Naser od-Din Shah (1831-1896) fulfilled his request and appointed him to accompany Persian Army. It was heading towards Merv to suppress Turkmen who defied the sovereignty of Qājār current ruler. Since Blocqueville was as the professional photographer, the Persian king thought that the foreign photographer would graphically capture his army's glorious victory in a battlefield, and therefore, he will flaunt his military prowess later. Contrary to all expectations, Qajar army suffered an ignominious defeat at the hand of the Turkmen warriors who employed guerrilla tactics in their fight against their fully equipped foes. In addition, they held Blocqueville hostage in the battle and stipulated that they would release him if the central government, that is Persia, paid their demanded ransom. To Blocqueville's chagrin, it took fourteen months for the central government to intervene on his behalf and release him by paying his ransom. During his fourteen-month captivity, due to his high economic value he was given enough freedom to roam freely among Turkmen, observe their life, talk to them, and even ask questions when he was curious about strange things which he observed. In fact, he did not waste his time by remaining idle and bemoaning his lot, instead he wrote about Turkmen's customs, beliefs, crafts, lifestyle, diseases, yurts [tent like structure], carpet weaving, music, foods, marriage, etc. His documentation and firsthand knowledge about the Turkmen took place in the second half of the nineteenth century when the Turkmen like other Central Asians forbade any type of taking notes by Western believing that it would facilitate the mapping of their regions and their domination eventually. Notwithstanding, Blocqueville's notes and drawings were tolerated by his prisoners since he was under their constant surveillance, and thus they could examine his notes and drawings lest he mapped their territory. After fourteen months of living among the Turkmen and delving into the deep layers of this excluded and highly guarded community, he published his memoirs as a travelogue.

### **3. Methodological Framework & Analysis**

Travelogues written by Western travelers have been analyzed through different critical approaches; one of the common methods is Edward Said's perspective. This approach rejects the objectivity of Western travel books and finds a link between colonialism and travel

books; it also fulminates them for being informed by Eurocentrism and strengthening the division between Orient and West (Said, 1979). From the viewpoint of Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* (1979) travel writers like Chateaubriand, Nerval, Burton, and T.E. Lawrence belong to this type of travel writers. However, this approach cannot be applied to some Western travelogues like that of Blocqueville since it does not conform to Said's paradigm. In this travel book, the travel writer himself is in the inferior position while his observees are in a superior one. In this regard, the best mythological framework to approach Blocqueville's travel book is to invoke Debbie Lisle's theory. According to Lisle (2006), there are two types of travelers/travel writers: colonial and cosmopolitan. The former travel writers are arrogant and reproduce the logic of Empire. In addition, they pass judgment, categorize, critique, and exoticize alien peoples and culture. In fact, they operate with binary logic of superior West and inferior West and they in line with interests of Western colonial hegemonic power. The latter travelers and travel writers celebrate cultural differences and demonstrate sympathy and uphold values like equality, tolerance, and respect. She notes that the travel with cosmopolitan vision is the byproduct of globalized and multicultural world of the twentieth century. But the current article extends her theory into the second half of nineteenth century and views Blocqueville as a traveler who exhibits the ideals of cosmopolitanism because unlike other arrogant Victorian travelers, he evinces sympathy toward his observees, shapes his encounter with his travelees in positive manner, tries to be objective and respects his observees' culture and customs, he is the best embodiment of a traveler with cosmopolitan vision. Blocqueville demonstrates his cosmopolitan vision when he in his travel book dwells on jewelry, music, and women. In addition, the present article to elucidate his cosmopolitan vision, compare his views on the jewelry, music, and his female travelees with those of other travelers like Vambery and O'Donovan who travelled to the same region in the same period and failed to accommodate Oriental cultural alterity and be sympathetic and receptive.

### 3.1 Jewelry

Silver jewelries are the prominent element of Turkmen culture. They reflect the height of their artistic talent as well as the

vitality and maturity their culture and their thirst and restless for creating beauty and admiring it. The emphasis on jewelries in Turkmen amply demonstrates how nomadic Turkmen revere their wives and daughters. The high value of jewelries among Turkmen mirrors this fact Turkmen men could not envision their womenfolk aesthetically appealing if they behold them without any jewelries. They include silver headdress, headband, necklet, cuffs, bracelets, and earring, to name a few (b. Gholi & Ahmadi, 2017). Turkmen women do not use them just to enhance their beauty and make them elegant and graceful. They put on them for other purposes as well. They point to the marital status of those who wear it; that is, whether the female wearer is single or married. In addition, they reveal the social status of the wearer if she is from a poor or rich background. Since each tribe has their own unique designs and prefers a particular gem or precious stone in the decoration of their jewelries, they are the best indicator of the tribal identity. Moreover, due to their containing curative power which some gems and precious stones, Turkmens have used these jewelries to cure some diseases like sore eyes. Furthermore, they have put on them to protect against wandering evil eyes (Diba, 2011). Besides evil eyes, these jewelries prevent the occurrence of some tribal wars when the triumphant party accepts them instead of shedding blood. Finally Turkmens have viewed them as portable money which they can sell anytime they encounter any financial difficulty (ibid.). However, in the nineteenth century the Western traveler writers were not perceptive to register and appreciate the aesthetic and practical dimension of jewelries worn by their female travelees. They instead dwelt on them to ridicule their wearers. To give an example, Edmond O'Donovan (1883) condescends attitude through establishing resemblance between Turkmen jewelries with the collar of dogs and the helmet of soldiers. Moreover, the travel writer likens the female wearer to the goddess of war due to using those jewelries (b. Gholi & Ahmadi, 2017). Gholi and Ahmadi (a. 2017) believe that the travel writer by comparing her jewelries with the dog's collar and the soldiers' helmet domesticates these cultural signs and this is tantamount to mistranslating these Oriental cultural signs. By contrast, as a cosmopolitan traveler Blocqueville subverts Orientalist temptation, and this is evident when he writes about Turkmen female



jewelries. He sincerely attempts to decipher intricacy and artistic dimension of the jewelries. This arises from his natural human curiosity-

[Turkmen women wear] big silver earrings which are in the shape of triangle; upon them there are gold and silver arabesque in the center of which carnelians are visible. To the base of the triangle five centimeters chains are attached and from which small silver sheets in the form of diamond are hanging. At the apex of the triangle there is a hook that passes through ear hole. In addition from the earrings a silver chain is attached to the top of the head so that the earrings will not be heavy (Blocqueville, 2015, p.80).

[A Turkmen] bracelet is oval and is made of one piece and its width varies. In one point, the oval bracelet is open. One can put it into the wrist by wetting it with mouth water or exerting pressure. The weight of the bracelet varies from two hundred and fifty grams up to three hundred grams. Like all [Turkmen] jewelries, it is made of silver and designed with gold and silver arabesque motifs inserted with cornelians in center (p.81).

[The Turkmen women] hang from their necks a round sheet similar to the sun weighs almost two hundred grams. Old Turkmen women in occasions also put on hats like crowns whose height reaches to the forty centimeters... and it is covered with red cloth from gold and silver chains which end in diamond plaques. Upon the hat there are beads and a row of dentation which make the hat resemble to the crown (pp.82-83).

In the above fragments, the travel writer strives to supply his Western audience with objective and detailed information about Turkmen jewelries: earrings, bracelets, crown-like hats. His information includes the gems and precious stones applied in them, motifs, size, shape, structure, and weight of the jewelries. He does so without deploying binary logic, insulting, criticizing, and passing judgment. This renders him a travel with cosmopolitan vision. Here one perceives that for the travel writer these jewelries are not worthless, inelegant, depthless objects which Oriental Turkmen women foolishly and exotically are using as some Western travelers supposed. Instead, they for him are cultural and aesthetic codes, and therefore he desires to acquaint himself with them. And thus it will not be exaggeration to maintain that he is implicitly attracted with them and for him they are emblem of the uniqueness of Oriental art and taste. His perceptiveness and curiosity point to his openness to the target culture. Looking from another angle,

the travel writer implicitly invites them to pause and reflect the intricacy, beauty, design, and components of their jewelries. By doing so, he wants to educate his readership abandon their cultural arrogance and narcissism and accepts the alterity as their equals not beneath them.

### 3.2 Music

Music is one of subjects which frequently appear in travelogues written about Turkmen culture in the nineteenth century. Given its role in the simple and nomadic culture of the Turkmen, music has alleviated the monotonous rhythm of their life through enlivening their wedding and birthday ceremonies. It has been utilized as a therapy for healing some skin diseases. In addition, music for the Turkmen has been a strong cultural medium for preserving the memories of their war heroes, their oral literature including didactic, epical, and romantic. It has been used to instill heroism and patriotism to defend their independence in the face of their foes. Even though the number of their musical instruments is limited, this is compensated by the vitality and artistic capability of 'Bakshi'. He is "a professional singer and bard who devotes his entire life to memorizing and reciting traditional Turkmen epics... [In fact he is the] guardian of Turkmen" (Abazov, 2005, p.23). Nonetheless, Western travel writers/travelers are blind to the beauties and cultural functions of music among Turkmen culture. So narrow-minded and inflexible in their cultural stance that they fail to hail and honor the music of an alien terrain. Thus it is not accidental to witness that they present the superficial analysis of Oriental Turkmen music. Vambery, for instance, in his travel book offers shallow and exotic image of Turkmen music and a Turkmen Bakshi. The following passage is testimony of his Orientalist outlook towards Turkmen culture-

When I was in Atrek, one of these troubadours [Bakshi] had his tent close to our own; and as he paid us a visit of an evening, bringing his instrument with him, there flocked around him the young men of vicinity, whom he was constrained to treat with some of his heroic lays [songs]. His singing consisted of certain forced guttural sounds, which we might rather take for *rattle* than a song, and which he accompanied at first with gentle touches of the strings, but afterwards, as he became more excited, with wilder strokes upon the instrument. The hotter the battle, the fiercer grow the ardor of singers and the enthusiasm of his youthful singers; and really they assumed the

appearance of a romance” (as cited in Mervin, 1881, p.116).

In the above fragment, one can see that the travel writer is reluctant to perceive the aesthetic and artistic dimension of Turkmen music as the nomadic people feel and appreciate. He instead reduces it to the unpleasant and discordant sound by calling it rattle rather than a song. Here in addition he brings to the fore his Orientalism by drawing a rigid cultural line between the European whose music he implies is pleasant and harmonious while that of Turkmen music is wild and inharmonious index of their primitiveness.

In alignment with Vambery, Edmund O'Donovan cannot appreciate Turkmen music and song. He manifests a myopic understanding of it when he equates them with wild chants; “it [Dutar] is usually played to accompany some of the *Wild recitation chants which pass for singing in this part of the world*” (emphasis added, O'Donovan, 1883, p.30). Here the travel writer moreover indirectly demarcates the line between two worlds: Orient and Western when he assumes that it is odd that supposedly wild chants of Turkmen are considered as music while he implies Turkmen music and song are not artistic by Western musical standards (a. Gholi & Ahmadi, 2017).

In contrast to both Vambery and Edmund O' Donovan, Henry Blocqueville shatters binary logic common in Orientalist discourse and treats Turkmen music and the bakhshi sympathetically. He also strives to offer adequate information about their musical instrument without being critical about it-

Dutar is the only musical instrument of the Turkmen know, and it is similar to mandolin, yet the neck of the Dutar is longer. Its head resembles to an egg and is made from a mulberry tree. On its fingerboard, there are small holes on which frets are placed. Upon the frets, silk strings are drawn. The Dutar player himself makes the strings when he wants to play the instrument...tones are marked with knots of silk on the neck of the Dutar. *The melody of it is mild and sweet...*the Dutar players [who are singers at the same time] are called Bakhshi, and they are more privileged than others. They are freer and their appearance is cleaner and their beards are trimmed and their clothes are cleaner. They wear new hats and high quality boots; wherever they go, people treat them well and offer them tea and hookah earlier (Blocqueville, 2015, pp.112-113).

In the above extract, the travel writer does not debase Turkmen music by utilizing negative appellations as used by other travel writers. He isolates himself from other travel writers by virtue of demonstrating his respectful stance towards Turkmen music. This happens as he presents detailed information about the anatomy of ‘dutar’ the most popular instrument among Turkmen. This curiosity and interest in the Oriental musical instrument is the proof of his cosmopolitan vision because in it he observes intricacy and something which deserve to pay to pay close attention to it. As cosmopolitan traveler he likes to share his new observation with his home readership, so that they renew their perception about the Oriental music. Blocqueville also observes beauty, and thus implicitly celebrates it by testifying to the sweetness and mildness of melodies produced with the dutar. In fact his ability to feel the music of alterity amply illustrates that he discards the interfering and debilitating sense of superiority commonly observed among the nineteenth century travel writing. He furthermore portrays the Turkmen Bakhshies as human beings not as an exotic singer with wild chants. In addition, he correctly he reveals that how they enjoy respect in their society. By doing so, he intends to remind his readers that his travelers manifest their love of music by venerating the bakhshies in their culture through offering him unique social position.

### 3.3 Women

One of common Orientalist topoi which frequently emerge in Western travel writing is elaborating on Oriental women. In their travel books, these travel writers portrayed them as lascivious, oppressed, secluded, and veiled, among others (b. Gholi and Ahmadi). From the vantage point of these travel writers, Oriental men are the cause of their miserable state. The following passage will illustrate the stereotypical image of the Oriental women in Western travel book-

I am far from insisting on the absence in Muslim women of many good intentions and feelings; but they are oppressed, crushed, scattered in disorder, in the middle of the repugnant atmosphere of trickery, and have nothing in common with feminine charm, which blossoms only in the noble soil of mutual life (Gamazov as cited in Andreeva, 2007, p.158).

In contrast to the prevailing Orientalist attitude anent the Oriental women in Western travel writing, Blocqueville as



cosmopolitan travel writer presents unorientalist image of his female travelers. The following fragment will illuminate his outlook-

Turkmen girls marry at the age of sixteen or seventeen; up to that age their parents do not set them to hard chores so that their daughters maintain their beauty and freshness... since these nomadic women do not veil themselves, it is easier for lads to choose their prospective brides" (Blocqueville, 2015, pp.105-106).

Here the travel writer shows that the Turkmen men hold their girl in respect and do not force them to marry early before their emotional, intellectual maturity. In addition, he observes that his maiden- travelers are not forced to do labor-intensive work which is common in the context of nomadic life style, so that they will not lose their natural beauty. Their parents' sensitivity towards their daughters' look indicates their daughters in their estimation are not worthless beings to be exploited and ignored. In fact, observing the Turkmen respectful treatment of their daughters, he states that "the Turkmen men are soft in their dealing with women and take into account their views" (p.103). He also dislodges another Orientalist topos by bringing to the fore the unveiledness of Turkmen maidens. From the perspective of Orientalists, Oriental women's veil is the emblematic of their subjugation (b. Gholi & Ahmadi, 2017) accordingly, the unveiledness of Turkmen maidens is the sign of the respect they enjoy and is a cultural medium for them to practice mutual love with the lads in their community. The travel writer also challenges Oriental female travelers' seclusion when he narrates that "a Turkmen woman can walk a long distance to reach another tribe without worrying about annoyed en route" (ibid.). In the above sentence, the travel writer exhibits that the Turkmen do not jealously confine their womenfolk at their houses to protect their honor from being spoiled. Instead, it reveals that they trust wives, thereby granting them enough latitude.

#### 4. Sum Up

As a travel with cosmopolitan vision, Blocqueville in his travel book departs from common orientalist tropes of Western travel books in particular those written by Arminius Vambery and Edmund O'Donovan in the nineteenth century when Western world at the peak of their Imperial and colonial power and he demonstrates his sympathy in three cultural arenas: jewelry,

music, and women. When he focuses on the jewelries worn by his female travelers, he shrinks from despising them instead he pays close attention to them and tries to convey their intricacy and cultural meaning to his home readership. With regard to Turkmen music, he provides objective information about his travelers' musical instrument and verifies its sweet melody. Finally, with respect to Oriental Turkmen women he avers that his female travelers not only do not veil themselves but also enjoy enough freedom in choosing their future husband and moving from one village to another without being molested by any stranger. Being a cosmopolitan travel, Blocqueville through his travel books wants his Western readers to look out of box and alter their entrenched attitude to the oriental zone. What makes his travel book admirable and differential from travelers with colonial vision is his sincere respect, openness, sympathy towards his travelers and their culture even though his freedom has been curtailed, even though he has been under constant surveillance and even though his travelers have treated severely this captive-travel writer.

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