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Anti-Orientalist Moments in Edmund O'Donovan's Travelogue: *The Merv Oasis*

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Abstract

Viewed as the defender and legitimizer of Western Imperialism, travel writing has been the object of paranoid reading and examination by postcolonial critics like Edward Said. When the Orient becomes Western travelers' destinations, their travel accounts, Said argues, envision their encountered spaces as the embodiment of a dysfunctional world serving as a perfect foil for the Occident's masculinity, vitality, stability, rationality, and normality. In doing so, they, according to Edward Said, perpetuate and reinforce the fictitious pictures of the Orient. Though Said's critical analysis is persuasive and incontestable, his perspective does not cast light on the moments that some Western travelers eschew the cultural trap of an Oreintalistic frame of thinking. Accordingly, the present study seeks to illustrate this textual divergence from Orientalism in Edmund O'Donovan's *The Merv Oasis* relating his journey to and captivity in Merv when Turkmen in their anti-colonial resistance against the Tsarist regime in the second half of the nineteenth century. The study argues that O'Donovan illustrates anti-Orientalist moments in his travel account in three ways, firstly, when he becomes his travelees' object of incessant gaze rather than the sole gazer, secondly, when he depicts Tsarist travelers as thieves rather than local people, and thirdly when he sketches a humane picture of his travelees by highlighting their tolerance towards Jews, and finally, when he steers clear of bolstering the myth of Oriental indolence.

Keywords: Gaze, Indolence, Non-Orientalist moments, Tolerance, Travel writing

Introduction

Travel writing in the context of Western imperialism in the nineteenth century points to the narratives of journeys in which the European voyagers chronicle their impressions, observations, and encounters with supposedly exotic natives in non-Western distant and picturesque destinations in the first-person perspective. Since these travel books are by-products of the asymmetrical power

relationship, they are saturated with colonial supremacist assumptions. When these travelers' objects of exploration are the Eastern terrains, their narratives explicitly exhibit Orientalist attitudes. In their biased evaluation, the Orient and its residents become the antithesis of the Westerners and their world. In these travel accounts, the Oriental people are not normal humans like their Western counterparts but sensual and idle, fatalist and feminine, backward and stagnant. They imagine Orientals not only as miserable people imprisoned within allegedly despotic regimes that arrest their developments and aspirations but also as barbarians who are locked in their tribal and clannish societies characterized by unceasing internecine warfare. In their views, the notion of civilization and peaceful existence on their soil is unimaginable. They, indeed, deem them unfit for self-governance. For these European travelers, the solution to this essential problem of this feminine domain lies in the capable and masculine hands of Europeans who can civilize them, awaken them from their dormancy and infancy, infuse them with energy, and deliver them from their social, cultural, economic, and political plight and predicament. Edward Said (1979) in his *Orientalism* critiques these travel writers and highlights their cooperation with the imperial machine of Great Britain and France. Said dismisses their claims of objectivity and innocence of their texts. Instead beneath their accounts, he identifies an imperial monster with an insatiable thirst for power and domination. According to Edward Said, these voyagers are not idle travelers who passively report, imbibe, and relish the so-called picturesque and decadent Orient, but the collectors of vital intelligence that will ease imperial establishment and management speeding up the imperial hegemon. Edward Said is deeply suspicious of them and associates them with dishonesty deception, and textually toxic relationships with their Eastern visited universe.

Though Said's large dose of pessimism about travel writers is well grounded and well documented, his critical analysis does not provide a panoramic view of travel writing in the nineteenth century. Contrary to Said's bleak picture, some travel writers in the same period demonstrated anti-Orientalist tendencies. One can attribute their unorthodox leanings to their preconception-shattering encounters and dealings with their travelees. Edmund O'Donovan belongs to this minority class of travelers. O'Donovan (1844-1883) is an Irish journalist-travel writer. He was a fierce critic of British colonialism in Ireland and an active member of Fenian, an Irish revolutionary group known for its rebellions against British colonizers. When Tsarist Russia intensified its imperial invasion of Turkomania, *The Daily Mail* dispatched him to the Goek-Tepe stronghold, in present-day Turkmenistan, to report the war between local Turkmen and the colonial Russians even though the newspaper knew that Russians sought to suppress the news of their imperial butcheries in London and other European centers. When O'Donovan reached Iran in 1879, he moved to Mashad and from there to Merv where the local people arrested him thinking he was affiliated with the British Imperial system, the arch-enemy of Tsarist Russia. The local chiefs hoped to remedy their dire situation through O'Donovan's supposed diplomatic interventions. Thus, they treated him like a diplomat setting up a tent for him. They gave him limited freedom albeit under close surveillance. His captivity, firsthand observations, and living with natives of Merv resulted in *The Merv Oasis,* his best-selling travelogue in the Victorian era.

A close reading of his travel book: *The Merv Oasis* brings to light his anti-Orientalist moments in four ways. First, in O'Donovan's travel narrative, he is not the sole detached and indifferent gazer of his Oriental contact zone. He ironically becomes the object of gaze and scrutiny for the local people. In doing so, they subvert the power relationship between the traveler and

travelees. Second, the main ethnicity that he contacts in his journey is Turkmen who are unfairly notorious for their robbery. Instead of succumbing to this Orientalist lure, he attributes the vice of robbery to Tsarist travelers in Persia. Thirdly, he presents a humane image of his local travelees by portraying them as tolerant towards Jews rather than antisemitic. Lastly, O'Donovan questions the indolence of his visited natives. He shrinks from reinforcing this prevalent Orientalist myth. These non-Orientalist qualities bestow his travel account a note of freshness and the current article attempts to deliver the unorthodoxy of his standpoint. Before delving into discussing his anti-Orientalist gestures, it is wise to get familiar with O'Donovan's life and the political context of his journey to Merv. After being familiar with O'Donovan's biography and journey to Merv, it is better to be familiar with scholars who have written and evaluated his travel book.

Review of Literature

Though a bestseller in the Victorian period and graphically narrated the Russian's colonial advancement in Central Asia in the context of the Great Game, *The Merv Oasis*, has not stimulated enough critical scholarship in the present time. One may attribute this to the travel writer's early death in Sudan, the rapid changes in Central Asia, and the status of travel writing as a lowbrow genre in the eyes of scholars. Only limited essays and scattered historical materials and notes dealt with the travel book.

Michael Foley's essay (2012), "Reporting of Edmund O'Donovan: Literary Journalism and the Great Game" is comprehensive encompassing the travel writer's biography, political activities, journalism, and the travel book. He states that the travel narrative differs from previous travelogues dealing with the region. Unlike his predecessors, O'Donovan does not espouse British imperial presence in Central Asia thanks to his colonial and Fenian background. Also, Foley notes that despite his effort to remain objective, he unfavorably depicts his travelees. Concerning the style of the travel narrative, he remarks that it is witty, ironic, and understated. Also, Foley observes that *The Marv Oasis* is packed with sociological, ecological, and ethnographical information.

Another essay that studies Edmond O'Donovan's travelogue in the light of translation studies is Gholi and Ahmadi's "Domestication and Mistranslation of Oriental Jewelry and Music in Edmond O'Donovan's The Merv Oasis." In this essay, Gholi and Ahmadi (2017) argue that the travel writer as a cultural translator domesticates two Oriental cultural signs: music and jewelry; that is, in description/translation of them, the travel writer cum cultural translator foregrounds the signs of the home culture and pushes into background those of the visited culture. It functions like privileging the self and discrediting the other. For instance, this domestication/mistranslation occurs when the travel writer finds the similarity between the traditional crown worn by women in Merv and the helmet worn by German soldiers. The researchers show that the travel writer fails to foreignize the signs.

Finally, some writers utilize this travelogue as their historical document to illustrate the rivalry between Tsarist Russia and Britain in the context of the Great Game. For instance, Hopkirk's *Central Asia Through Western Eyes* (2013), and Mehmet Saray's *The Turkmen in the Age of Imperialism* (1989) are the best examples. Also, a museum curator like Diba (2011) in her book, *Turkmen Jewelry* builds on this travel book to demonstrate the art of jewelry making among the Turkmen living in Merv, albeit in passing. Given the written articles and essays about Edmund

O'Donovan's travelogue, scholars of travel writing have not paid attention to the counter-orientalist aspect of her travel book. Consequently, the current study seeks to fill this neglected dimension of her travel book in the next section.

Discussion

Being the Object of his Travelees' Gaze

Travel writing without employing eyes is hard to envision even though a blind writer like Helen Keller has recorded her travel accounts (Garnier 2020). Eyes are the instruments of gaze, surveillance, observation, and knowledge production that objectify supposedly exotic others and locales. They reflect the power and privilege of travel writers (Spurr 1993). Also, eyes are the agents of what Mary Louise Pratt calls 'anti-conquest': "The main protagonist of the anti-conquest is a figure I sometimes call the 'seeing-man' […] whose imperial eyes passively look out and possess" (2008: 9). Thus, innocent and objective eyes are myths, especially in the context of imperialism and Orientalism. Likewise, Foucault equates gaze with power: "Each gaze forms a part of the overall functioning of power" (2010: 189). Said in his *Orientalism* touches on the relationship between observation/gaze and objectification when he writes about Edward Lane, the eminent British Orientalist-cum-travel writer in the Victorian era, "He sees them [Orientals] not only as actual people but also as *monumentalized objects* in his account of them" (emphasis added 1979: 233). Along the same lines, Urry and Larsen (2011) associate travelers' gaze with intrusion and performance since it interprets, compares, and evaluates (17). Alloula in his *Colonial Harem* takes one step further by equating the gaze with the violence of colonialism: "Colonialism is, among other things, the perfect expression of the violence of the gaze [..] [since it] imposes upon the colonized society the ever-presence and omnipotence of a gaze to which everything must be transparent" (1986: 131). One cannot dismiss the idea of gaze as the signifier of power, violence, and privilege that most Western travel writers enjoy and practice in the course of their journeys as Edward Said in his *Orientalism* claims: "In all cases, the Orient is for the European observer" (1979: 158). This understanding of the gaze is not comprehensive since it precludes the possibility of travelees' gaze in their contact with these travel writers. Indeed, it is erroneous to assume that the travelees are passive objects who cannot return the gaze of travel writers. Here, the perspective of Darya Maoz (2006) is illuminating even though her field of study is tourism. She contends that gazing is not the monopoly of the tourists because the local people/hosts can manipulate their guests/tourists with their gaze (225). To put it simply, the gaze is mutual. Likewise, Mee states that travelees also visually consume travelers (85).

Edmund O'Donovan in *The Merv Oasis* registers a moment in which his travelees become gazers and spectators and the travel writer becomes their object of the gaze, resulting in counter-orientalist moments. These subversive moments happen on more than one occasion during his journey.

Firstly, in a mountainous region in Khorasan, O'Donovan and his guides encounter a halting caravan in which he observes local Khorasani women and girls who neither conceal their faces nor run away at the sight of a foreigner. Instead, they gaze at him while he is sitting by himself on the stone as the following passage illustrates the point:

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> I have been sitting on a boulder …when a group of half a dozen girls comes up stationing themselves about six feet away. They have commenced looking curiously at me as if I were the same *odd, inanimate object.* One or two to be at perfect ease in making their remarks were reverse of flattering. One of them has been kind enough to say that I have grey eyes, the same color as those of 'Sheitan.' […] my short briar-root evidently being a novelty in these parts (emphasis added, 1883: 26-27).

Interestingly, the gazers in the above passage are local girls who in the Orientalist narratives are usually depicted as imprisoned slaves in their parents' dwellings. Here these maidens direct their gaze on the travel writer and transform him into an exotic object, which is simultaneously 'other' and fascinating. They signal his exoticism by applying 'Freneghi' which in Persian means foreigner; at the same time, it connotes something fascinating and novel. Moreover, his pipe also contributes to his exotic appearance. Indeed, these girls turn the travel writer into their "living tableau of queerness" (Said 1979: 103). The girls' judgment and interpretation accompany their objectification and exoticization. However, the travel writer is silent about their unfavorable comments. He only notes that his eyes for one of them are a reminder of Satan. Indeed, the female travelee vilifies him, albeit in passing and with justification. In doing so, she reverses the power relation between the travel writer, who is usually a detached and gazing commentator, and the travelee, on whom negative comments are heaped in most cases. Here, the word, 'Sheitan' or Satan' merits further explanation. Urry and Larsen believe that humans gaze at the world through a particular filter framed by factors, among others, nationality (2011). Here, by 'Ferenghi', the local girl refers to a Western other. No doubt, besides commenting on her eyes, the local girl symbolically applies this negative epithet to voice her anti-imperialist sentiments since these two Western imperial powers in the nineteenth century acted with political wickedness and deception, not dissimilar Satan to weaken and ruin Iran by imposing humiliating treaties and contracts and securing trade concessions.

The gaze of travelees intensifies when the travel writer reaches Merv where the local authorities accommodate him and his Kurd servant. They treat them with respect providing him with a tent before their cross-examination in a local assembly by local dignitaries. Meanwhile, the travel writer becomes an exotic object of the native people, arousing their curiosity and analytical power:

> They gaze and gaze as though they could never stop looking at the external appearance of the Ferenghi. It is the gaze of an operator while endeavoring to mesmerize his subject. Simultaneously, from without, scores of eyes peep through every nook and cranny of the tent walls; and I can hear remarks upon my personal appearance and costume, winding a statement of the conviction of the observers that I was most unmistakably an 'Oroos' [Russian] (1883: 124-125).

In the above extract, O'Donovan repeats the word gaze three times to accentuate the unceasing and penetrating gaze of his travelees that places them into the position of power while relegating the travel writer to an inferior one. To illustrate his feebleness, the travel writer compares the local gazers to the physicians who seek to mesmerize their alien patient or subject. Then, he elaborates this analogy on the next page: "I afterward fall into a kind of comatic stupor and begin to feel of under mesmeric influences" (1883: 125). In other words, here the gaze of local people exercises

power over the travel writer. This is why later he describes the native gazers as his "passive human tormentors" and their gazing "persecution" (126). Moreover, in this passage, the traveler is well aware that the natives, whom he humorously calls 'sightseers' reduce him to the object of their voyeuristic gaze, albeit without eroticization, due to wearing exotic attire from the perspective of the Merv people: "My short black closely buttoned tunic and cord riding-breeches seem to fill them with amazement" (124). This explains why he applies the word 'peep' in the above passage and later peepshow on the next page: "During my first-month residence at Merv I may be said to have lived in the interior of much-patronized a *peepshow*, in which I am the central and the only object of attention" (1883:126). Hence, here travelees are enthusiastic spectators and the traveler is the object of their inspection and visual amusement. Indeed, the travel writer becomes their "spectacle and "tableau vivant" (Said 1979:158) Nonetheless, their inspection is coupled with interpretation. In the words of Urry and Larsen, "Gazing is not merely seeing, but involves cognitive work of interpreting and evaluating" (2011: 17). Hence, they speculate about his nationality and comment on his routine activities: "One cannot make a move but it is *commented* upon. The manner of washing my face and hands calls forth loud exclamations, and the operation of combing my hair seems to tickle their fancies" (emphasis added 1883:126). Finally, when the natives become certain that he is not a Russian subject, they accord him more freedom during his sojourn in Merv; however, this does mean that he is free from their surveillance: "From the moment of the receipt of this communication, I am placed at comparative liberty, though always subject to a certain amount of surveillance on the part of the Turcoman [his travelees]" (1883:142). Thus, the travelees still maintain their gaze on the traveler. In doing so, they exert their power over him and demonstrate their resistance against the Orientalizing gaze of the travel writer. In doing so, they become the observers and the travel writer as an exotic object of their gaze and massive surveillance, and this gives O'Donovan's travel text an anti-Orientalist moment.

Depicting Tsarist Travelers as Robbers

In the context of the Great Game, many British and Russian travelers traveled to Central Asia, chronicling their impressions and observations in their travelogues. Looking at the contents of their travel books, one immediately notices that they unanimously dwell on Turkmen. They have unanimously portrayed them as savage thieves. In doing so, they have reinforced the image of Turkistan as the land of barbarians and savagery. Refuting this dark image of Turkmen, Mehmet Saray, the prominent historian of Turkistan, in his *Turkmen in the Age of Imperialism* believes Western travelers especially Russian ones deliberately carve out Turkmen as "the 'robbers of the desert' to find an excuse to expand in Central Asia" (1989: 44). Similarly, James Fraser dismisses this allegation and attributes it to the excessive fear of Turkmen's enemies (Staudinger 2012: 121). Given the unfavorable image of Turkmen in British travel literature, Charles Marvin claims that "For centuries the Turcomans [Turkmen] have been accustomed to stealing" (1881:178). With respect to the uncharitable picture of Turkmen in Russian travel writing in the nineteenth century, Baron Fedor Bode contends: "The main passion of a Turcoman is robbery; nothing is sacred for him, nothing would stop him; if it is impossible to use force, he will resort to the ruse to attain the aim of his greed" (qtd. in Andreeva 2010: 181). Indeed, out of their imperial confidence, these travel writers essentialize the Turkmen travelees as innate and inveterate robbers. In doing so, they imply the necessity of civilizing them (Andreeva 2010:11) since it is their burden, to employ Kipling's words. Unlike previous travelers, O'Donovan in his travelogue chooses to tread a different path in his narrative in two ways. Firstly, by depicting the Russian travelers as thieves

rather than Turkmen by applying situational irony. Secondly, he represents his Turkmen travelees as tolerant towards Jews in Merv.

Given Russians, while in Khorasan, the travel writer with his Turkmen guide visits Ferdousi's tomb in Toos. He enters the domed structure and describes its interior in detail: "The top and sides are covered with finely executed inscriptions [that is] the verses of Koran" (1883:16). However, there he encounters the rudely smashed fragments of marble: "In the center of the floor lie two fragments of a stone which has been *rudely smashed* in a longitudinal direction" (emphasis added ibid.). Here, the travel writer anticipates to hear that this act of vandalism and robbery has been committed either by Turkmen or natives, but his Turkmen guide reveals the truth otherwise:

> This coffin has been broken only two years previously by some Russian travelers who have visited the place, and who have carried away with them two inscribed marble tablets which have been inserted, one in the northern, the other, the other in the southern wall. I have seen myself two vacant spaces where these tablets have been (ibid).

In this passage, O'Donovan enables his Turkmen travelee to express his voice even though he does not place his statement in quotation marks. By enlightening the travel writer about the fate of the tablets, the guide brings to light the real face of Russian imperialism. He illustrates that the Russian travelers are not the harbingers of civilization and order, but tomb robbers who in broad daylight vandalize and loot the tomb of Ferdosui, the prominent symbol of Persian literature and civilization. The oppositional position of the guide calls to mind Walter Benjamin's famous statement: "There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (1989: 257). Here, one can sense the touch of bitter situational irony because the native speaker belongs to ethnic Turkmen associated with robbery. Instead of Turkmen ethnics, thieving antagonists are Russians who regard their nation as "a great and civilized empire, equal to the Western European empires especially that of the British" (Andreeva 2010: 34).

Presenting Charitable Picture of his Turkmen Travelees

The travel writer carves out a benign picture of his misrepresented Turkmen travelees when he writes about their tolerance towards Jews in Merv. It is worth noting that many Jews have been residents of Turkistan since olden times and some Jewish families resided in Merv in the nineteenth century. Before encountering and having a conversation with a Jewish merchant in Merv, O'Donovan is under the influence of a fallacious view about Muslims perpetuated by Western travel writers who have portrayed them as anti-Semitic. For instance, Arthur Conolly in his travelogue notes that "Formerly the Jews had money, but now, God help them, they have ceased to hoard it since some extortionate ruler or other is sure to take them from them" (1835: 255). O'Donovan anticipates that his encountered Jew complains about their suffering and hardship inflicted by the Muslims since he has heard that "Jews are not allowed to practice their religion and compelled to attend the mosque on Fridays […] driven there by blows of the stick … [as well as they] are compelled to convert to Mussulman faith" (1883:129-130). On the contrary, the Mervli Jewish contradicts O'Donovan's orientalist expectation when he shares with him his good treatment by Muslim Turkmen: "He is in no way annoyed or incommoded [distressed] on account of his religion. In the shape of imposts [tax], he only pays a very small amount in excess of his brother traders of Mussulman [Muslim] faith for the privilege of selling in the bazaar" (1883: 129).

In his dialogue, the Jew travelee considers the Muslims of Merv as his brothers which reflects the peaceful coexistence between the Muslims and Jews since the Muslims do not force them into compulsory conversion and interfere in their beliefs and religious practices. They only pay an insignificant amount of tax about which the Jewish man does not complain. Hearing these words from the mouth of the Jewish man surprises the travel writer: "I am surprised to find that such religious tolerance exists in Merv" (ibid.). This religious broadmindedness stems from Islamic teachings as Nurcholish Madjid, an eminent Muslim scholar, illustrates the point: "The attitude of Muslim believers in relation to other religions [such as Judaism] is characterized by tolerance, freedom, transparency, justice, fairness, and honesty" (2015: 633). It should be added that the tolerance of the Merv people is not confined only to religion, it is visible in the trade as well since they actively engage in the commercial sector without any hindrance and the travel writer himself witnesses it first-hand: "The Jews who have stalls at the bazaar deal almost in every kind of articles which is to be found for sale, drugs included" (1883: 328). He also notes that Jewish families in Merv are "the busiest and the most flourishing of the Merv communities I have hitherto visited. Bales of merchandise lay in the vicinity of every house, awaiting transport to Bokhara or Meshed" (152). Here what O'Donovan observes differs from this Orientalist picture: "In the eyes of Turkmen, there is no obstacle to enslave and rob the members of Holy tribes [referring jews]" (Staudinger 2012: 153). Instead of robbing and enslaving Jews, the travel writer beholds his Merv travelees' liberality.

Indeed, O'Donovan displays his anti-Orientalist moments not only by shifting by depicting Russians as thieves and uncivilized behavior but also by highlighting tolerance of Turkmen towards Jews.

Challenging the Cliché of Indolent Oriental Travelees

Before departing to their destination, it is customary for travel writers to acquaint themselves with the customs and mores of their destinations via reading travel books. In this regard, Pfister notes that the travel writers' perceptions of the destinations are fashioned by the "one-way traffic of representations, fantasies, and projections" (qtd. in Sandrock 2020: 38). These travel books do not present an objective picture of encountered terrains and peoples. In most cases, these European travel writers deflate them to inflate their home culture and boost their identity as civilized and advanced people. In other words, these texts are hegemonic accounts. Idleness is the outworn cliche that one frequently encounters in these travel books about the Islamic East. For instance, Joseph Racknitz notes "Orientals are for the most part idle and are only inspired to action by the necessity to secure their most essential needs […]. They lack any impetus to prolonged activity" (2019:109). He ascribes their supposed laziness to the good climate: "The favorable climate in which they live means not only that they have an excess of foodstuffs but also that they receive them without any special effort" (ibid.) Similarly, Edward Said in his *Orientalism* maintains for Europeans "Orientals, in particular, Muslims are lazy (1979:178). Assuming this cliche as a true and concrete fact, many new travel writers reinforce and reiterate this orientalist cliche in their works (Thompson 2011: 92). However, some travel writers do not yield to the temptation of this stereotype. As Robert Clarke contends "a close inspection of travel literature shows that there have always been critical and oppositional perspectives circulating within the field of writing." (1999:1) Their residence and mingling with their travelees enable them to shed their prejudice and question the authenticity of the popular cliches about the natives. This mostly takes place for travel writers

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that reside in one place for a long time and O'Donovan belongs to the second group of travel writers. Before his journey to Merv, he has been under the influence of the Orientalist way of thinking. He has assessed and perceived his travelees according to this perspective: "Europeans [including himself] are apt to think that the normal state of existence of an Oriental is one of sleepy calm- a milder opium dream, in which he hopes of things which he cannot achieve" (1883:185). In other words, he has assumed that his travelees are impractical and lazy people who lack energy and exertion. O'Donovan's sojourn and his observations of his travelees in their terms cause him to alter his orientalist outlook. As Wollstonecraft states "Mixing with mankind [travelees], we [travel writers] are obliged to examine our prejudices and often imperceptibly lose, as we analyze them" (qtd. in Youngs 2013: 49). In his tour of Merv with Ichthyar Khan, a native nobleman, he notices how some natives have engaged in repairing the holes of the irrigation dam [or its sluices] and its fascines [a bundle of brushwood for strengthening the dam]. The sight of the native's activity shatters his inherited Orientalist mindset:

> As I have stood on the summit of the earthwork two dozen men, waist-deep are ramming earth behind them. It is a scene of activity refreshing to the European mind … Anyone standing as I do this day besides the roaring sluice of the Murgab [River in Turkistan] and observing the efforts of the sun-browned doing their duty willingly and well will appreciate them (1883: 185).

In this passage, O'Donovan from an elevated place looks at the native and conjures up Pratt's idea of "the monarch of all I survey" (1883:197). However, instead of emptying the scene of indigenous people, he acknowledges the presence of the industrious natives engaged in fixing the irrigation dam. He admits the scene refreshes his European mind; in other words, he confesses that he has attained a new understanding of his travelees. No longer are they, for him, idle people entertaining their pipe dreams, but diligent and committed people whom he should appreciate their sweat and hard work. He also notes his native companion is proud of their dynamism in maintaining the dam: "Baba Khan takes as much pride in showing me the existing structure of [the dam]" (186). In doing so, he challenges not only the cliché of idle Eastern people. Impressed by their hard work, the travel writer once more highlights the value and importance of their energy: "I cannot refrain from again recording the sense of the industry and willingness which mark the exertions of men employed in this public cause [fixing the dam]" (1883:188). At the end of his tour, the traveler reproaches himself for holding this Orientalist opinion about his travelees; that is, doubting their energy and capabilities: "Up to that time I have had a poor idea of Turcoman [Turkmen] energy, but I must say that I come from the dam reproved for my doubts" (ibid.). The travel writer also acknowledges that his travelees' willing industry is not limited to caring for the irrigation dam. He detects this industry in other areas: "The administration of this point [referring to the dam] for the executive ability on the part of Turcomans. The call is well responded to, and I cannot help thinking that other and equally urgent calls will meet with similarly willing and capable responses" (1883:185).

One can value O'Donovan's counter-orientalist perspective if he reads an indolent picture that Charles Marvin carves out for Turkmen in his *Merv: The Queen of the World*:

> The Turcoman [Turkmen] demonstrates to us a picture of the most indolence. In his eyes, it is the greatest shame for him to apply his hand to any occupation. He has nothing to do but tend his horse; that duty is over, he hurries to his neighbor,

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> and joins one of the groups that squat on the ground before the tents, discussing topics connected with politics or horseflesh. He is prone to indulge for hours in conversation on political matters (1881:120).

Conclusion

Edward Said (1979) in his *Orientalism* condemns Western travel writing as an imperial genre that aims to perpetuate and reinforce fiction and myths about their Eastern destinations to legitimize and rationalize Western colonial powers' presence and occupation as a civilizational blessing that will deliver the supposedly Oriental world from its despotism and benightedness. For Said, these travelers are not impartial evaluators of their encountered natives and cultures, but biased foreigners that not only eroticize and exoticize their travelees but also flatten multiplicities and diversities. From Said's perspective, these travel writers depict the Orient as the Occident's dark, suppressed, and undesirable side. Even though Said advances his argument with critical force and subtility, his bitter criticism does not apply to some travelers since their travel accounts accommodate moments in which travelers seek to transcend the reductive and binaric outlook of Orientalism. Edmund O'Donovan belongs to this class of travelers and his *The Merv Oasis* exemplifies his anti-Orientalist sentiments and tendencies in four ways.

In the first place, it is wrong to assume that travelees as passive objects to be assessed, interpreted, and objectified by the gaze of Western travel writers. Sometimes, the travelees return and challenge the gaze of Western travel writers and convert them into their visual objects. O'Donovan's travelogue is the best example. The travel writer registers the moments in which local Khorasani girls and local people of Merv direct their gaze on him. They both objectify and transform him into an exotic object of their amusement since his clothes, gestures, and pipe are radically and amusingly different from theirs. Moreover, their gaze does not take place in a vacuum. They comment about his objects of journey, nationality, and appearance. Indeed, the gaze of travelees places them in a position of power, and the travel writer points to it by comparing them to the hypnotizers and the spectators of a peepshow and pictures himself as their patient and the observed actor in the peepshow. Here the gaze of the travelees creates counter-orientalist moments in the travel narrative by defying and subverting the Orientalizing gaze of O'Donovan. Finally, the local gaze of these oriental people put into question Edward Said's argument in his *Orientalism*:

> The Orient is watched, since its almost (but never quite) offensive behavior issues out of a reservoir of infinite peculiarity; the European, whose sensibility tours the Orient, is a watcher, never involved, always detached, always ready for new examples of what the Description de Egypte called "bizarre jouissance." The Orient becomes a living tableau of queerness (1979: 103).

In other words, no longer is the travel writer the gazer and watcher without being gazed at and watched. He is subject to the interpreting and critical gaze of travelees as well.

In the second place, by giving voice to his Turkmen guide, the travel writer refrains from portraying his Turkmen travelees as notorious robbers as previous Victorian and Russian travelers did in their travel accounts. Ironically, his local guide illustrates that Russian colonists are thieves who rudely vandalize the tomb of Ferdousi, the symbol of Persian high culture, and rob the tables with Koranic inscriptions. Indeed, the guide removes the veneer of civilization from Russians and

demonstrates the border between barbarism and so-called civilization is paper-thin. Here, the travel writer drops the supposed crime of robbery from his local travelees and attributes it to Russian colonizers claiming to be the epitome of civilization creating the uncanny moment of anti-Oreintalistic moment. No longer are Eastern people the embodiment of wicked vileness but the European Russians are.

In third place, O'Donovan presents a charitable image of his local travelees and shrinks from depicting them as uncivilized antisemitic. Thanks to interviewing a local Jewish man, O'Donovan finds and acknowledges the tolerance of the Muslims of Merv towards native Jews in two crucial areas: religion and commerce. These Muslims neither intervene in their religious affairs nor force them into converting to Islam. More importantly, they do not hamper their prosperous trade. Indeed, they enjoy freedom and coexistence without any harassment as the travel writer imagines. By presenting this favorable picture, the Jewish interlocutor questions the cliches of the widespread antisemitism in Central Asia.

In fourth place, O'Donovan does not reiterate the orientalist trope of indolent Orientals in his travelogue. His counter-orientalist outlook stems from his engagement and mingling with his local people. When he accompanies a native nobleman to check the dam under repair, he witnesses the dynamism of his travelees first-hand. This scene alters his Orientalist viewpoint, enabling him to see beyond a reductive lens and even critique himself for perceiving his travelees as people without energy and exertion. His new enlightenment challenges an orientalist cliché about his travelees, "The life of Turkmen [in Western travel writing] is described as one of idleness and inactivity" (Staudinger 2012: 131). Finally, Mark Twain's thesis about the virtues of travel is particularly pertinent to O'Donovan: "Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness" (*The Innocent Abroad* 1911: 444).

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