

European ‘Self’ and the ‘Otherness’ of Kashmir: A Critical Appraisal of Victor Jacquemont’s Travel Accounts

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Abstract: *Regarding the ‘constructive’ nature of travel literature, the notions expressed by Edward Said in his seminal work *orientalism* to a greater extent seems authentic and unchallengeable. One classical example that confirms the soundness of his argument overwhelmingly has been the travel accounts of Victor Jacquemont. He, while travelling in Kashmir valley as an imperial agent and presumably affected by his prejudiced ‘cultural affiliations’ and the ‘milieu’ he lived in, there seems very less, to say, ‘representative’ in his travel narratives. What he had furnished is holistically a ‘bleak picture’ of almost all the aspects of Kashmir valley. Speaking contemptuously of East and biased arguments constitutes the zenith of his itinerary reports. Consequently his borrowed descriptions sound bizarre in each breath. And the hegemonic manner of his travel narrations too underlines the presence of elements of ‘subjectivity’ in the encounter between the identities ‘self’ and ‘other.’ The purpose of this paper is to, therefore, to demonstrate the constructive nature of Victor Jacquemont’s travel reports and to lay bare the factors that affected him in encountering the things orient.*

Keywords: *Black picture, Constructive, Cultural affiliations, Milieu, Subjectivity, Self and Other*

I. Introduction

The first half of the nineteenth century, quite pugnaciously, witnessed the climax of British imperialism in India. And in the subsequent period, the prospects of safety and security along with the desires of extensive commercial gains allocated, further impetus to the colonial policies of expansion. The dire need to administer, consolidate and conquer the other portions of the prosperous British Indian Empire through a mechanism of safe, sound scientific borders like mountains, seas, and deserts etc., resulted in an era of establishment of political domination in the peripheral zones. It was all essentially in this backdrop that colonial perceptions and pressures, emerging partly from Russo phobia, added a worth to the emergence of Kashmir as a vital frontier region for the British Indian Empire. Though by that time the fame of its scenic beauty and rich cultural heritage had already spread to distant corners of the world, but with the rapid advance of the British Indian empire to the North, the amazing growth of power and expansion of Czarist Russia in Asia, and the extension of the Chinese borders to Sinkiang, Kashmir acquired a unique importance where three empires meet. Under such circumstances the British imperial policy, therefore, was primarily guided by the fear of Russian advance towards India through the Pamir Mountains as well as by the events in the expanse of land north of the Hind-Kash and Himalayas, known as Turkestan, the Eastern part of which was under the nominal rule of China. In addition, the British were continually troubled by the independent policy adopted by the Amir of Afghanistan, whose lands also extended as far as the north-Western frontier of the subcontinent. On account of its strategic location, the state of Jammu and Kashmir appeared to be an ideal buffer state, against potential incursions from Russia, Afghanistan and China into the subcontinent.

Instantly, as a result, the valley of Kashmir acquired a great significance. Within the years to come, the entire region of Kashmir valley turned into a Centre of bustle of various far-off agents affianced in gathering information on its geo-strategic position, administrative set up, and other indispensable aspects. The British longing to set up a natural frontier in the north so as to make safe her Indian empire fetch her in the territory, controlled by Ranjeet Singh. To amass the necessary information of the relief features and inhabitants of frontier regions like Kashmir, a good number of Europeans visited Kashmir valley in the semblance of travelers. For, any direct attempt to secure knowledge of Kashmir valley at this particular time was highly impossible, because British had already signed a peaceful treaty with Maharaja Ranjeet Singh of Lahore in A.D.1809, by which they had agreed to abstain from any influence with the territories of the Maharaja North of the Sutlej, while he agreed to respect the territories and subjects of the Chiefs, South of the river Sutlej. The lone feasible means available to the British was henceforth, to send Europeans in the guise of curious travelers to obtain necessary information, which they utilized systematically in extending their colonizing efforts. From here onwards, a good number of Europeans affiliated to, or in the service of the English East India Company travelled throughout the Kashmir valley, which significantly resulted into a formidable body of travel literature.

II. Jacquemont travel as a colonial strategy

The long list of European travelers, who visited Kashmir valley in the first half of the nineteenth century, includes the name of Victor Jacquemont as well. Victor Jacquemont (born in 1801 and died in 1832), a French by nationality, visited the valley at this crucial hour [1828-1832], and created an immense volume of his travel narrations. All essentially through a set of letters he dispatched to his father, friends and relatives, whilst travelling the valley. An anthology of these letters was later on published under the title, *Letters from India*, and constitutes a remarkable position in the colonial discourses on the Indian subcontinent. Victor Jacquemont's visit of many parts of north India including Kashmir (from 1828-32) was closely associated with the imperial objects of English East India Company and more particularly directed by the travel agencies developed recently in England. In true sense it seems what facilitated his ease journey of north India including valley of Kashmir was ostensibly the colonial imagination of the officials of English East Company, then functioning in India. Chiefly they would have observed it that being a European with non-British nationality, he could hardly come under the severe scanner of Ranjeet Singh, who hardly permitted any dubious Englishmen to enter his domains.

Influences that make Jacquemont to sound acrimonious

Victor Jacquemont's travelogue supplements ferociously to the marvelous ideas and imaginations of the East, without deviating even for a moment from asserting Western superiority. In his encounter with the Asiatic things, his European background has been a great obstacle. Likewise the climax of imperialism in the Eastern societies and the powerful power based notions which the imperial West held in contradiction to the Orient from time to time have affected his observatory faculties. From the very surface of all the important letters, which Jacquemont dispatches a disappointed picture of decadent East confronts every reader. Even on analyzing with a less critical eye, it appears manifestly that Jacquemont in his encounter with the inhabitants of India in general and of Kashmir particular, had been reasonably a true European both in pen and practice. His close ties with the colonizing powers like English East India Company and the notable belongingness to a different cultural background have made his travel account highly biased, not less than a manifest body of prejudice. Moreover, a meticulous study of his account brings out that he was profoundly prejudiced by Mill's concept of 'Utilitarianism.' Above all the 'civilizational critique of India' which James Mill had developed was by no means unknown to him. Additionally the sense of French loss in India too, had its due share in his projections of the Orientals. Consequently, all such influences limited his attitude towards the societies of East, and as a man full of prejudices he envisaged the people and societies of the East as politically, culturally and religiously no way match to the Europe, if not just simply inferior.

Jacquemont as a colonial emissary with expansive pen to project

The travels of Victor Jacquemont in the northern India was not an expression of high aesthetic values that override and enforced him to travel on the path of globe trotters. It was commissioned by the recently developed geographical and travel based organizations of the England. From the study of his letters relating the Kashmir valley, it is obvious that one of the basic underlying objectives of his visit to Kashmir valley was to discover about the occurrence of any possible political alliance between Maharaja Ranjeet Singh, the lord of northern India, including Punjab, Lahore, Ladakh and Kashmir, and the Amirs of Afghanistan, a perpetual source of trouble for British interests in India. Once he reaches there, he denounces all such fears in an unusual manner. Whatever the apprehension at that time colonial government of India had, regarding the emergence of any political relationships between the two powers, received a thorough rebuff from his hand. All thinking that goes along these lines, Jacquemont declares an outrageous act and a sensationally ridiculous theme. By way of professing faith in the recently emerged mighty Europe, especially England, he rejected scrupulously such apprehensions by maintaining the very idea is a comical one.

Throughout his account, while commenting on the enemies of the English East India Company, he sounds to a greater extent acrimonious. In his travel narrations, most of the times he assigns more importance and novel attributes to the British rulers of India. Very close to his heart, he holds the tendency to denigrate the very essence of the native states. As for the Afghans are concerned, he goes on to say, 'that bellicose nation' which has often invaded India is now no stronger, and the days of Mahmud Ghazni and Timur are gone by. Such haughty language, full with a set of prejudices is remarkably a great lacuna of his travel narrations. Further Jacquemont, as it appears, is almost everywhere, expressing a firm belief in the enormous powers of English East India company in general, and that of Europe in explicit terms. Outstandingly, he advocates a strong policy to be adopted against these enemies of the empire. All this reveals that Jacquemont was not only one of the important players of forward policy, but rather a precursor, which was later instrumentally adopted as a foreign policy against Afghanistan.

Jacquemont: encountering East as a European

One peculiar aspect of the travel reports supplied by Victor Jacquemont has been that they echo voices of difference. In clear terms the valuable matters and the opinions that run as central trope to his account locate the fact Europe has always been distinguish from the wretched East. This presumption comes to surface more

than one occasion. Especially when Jacquemont writes, with great pride and confidence in his European 'self', and projects Kashmir valley in shamble colours. Instead of showing any sensibility and honesty, Jacquemont disrespectfully tries to render image of Kashmir valley to figure less attractive; a deliberate act which has ostensibly much in consonance with what Occident is famous for. A black picture of the valley, which is largely a construction of his own psychological set up, constitutes a central theme of his travel narrations, all along with expressing the superiority of 'imperial West'. While orientalizing the Asiatic realities, he maintains in a robust manner and much in tone with flourishing European imperialism in Asia, that the 'European civilization deserves to spread through the universe; and in default of civilizations of the West, its mere domination remains benefit to the peoples in other parts of the world; it is probably the only one which the religious institutions of the East permitted us to confer upon it.' Besides all these belligerent annotations Jacquemont has focused in the same univocal voice the otherness of different aspects of Kashmiri society, culture, family norms and political behavior, which consequently had left enough reasons to make his narrative as an utterly visible body of colonial construction which consequently have left enough reasons to presume his travel narrative as an utterly visible body of colonial construction. All this and subsequently, in almost all his perceptions regarding the thing Kashmirian, his travel narrations seized to be a representative of realities in any dynamic way either.

Painstakingly the particular kind of image of Kashmir valley, which develops from the Jacquemont's travel narrative, is by and large a degraded one. Much in contrast to the picture that runs central to the travel accounts furnished by his predecessor travelers like Francois Bernier, who visited the valley much before him. The popular notion of Kashmir as paradise on the earth or earthly paradise among the Asiatic territories is unacceptable to him. Owing to his own criterion of judging things, not just Kashmiri's alone; for this matter even all Asiatics as whole, appears to his point of vision, are miserable wretches, who would perjure for an ecu' (sic), the inferior contrasts of Christian gentleman. Here, it becomes obvious that he had been less enthusiastically prepared to concede that something termed as 'good' also belongs to East.

Jacquemont and his observations of Sikh administration of Kashmir

Very disconsolately, while commenting on the Sikh administration of Kashmir, Jacquemont reproduces a picture of Asiatic despotism. According to his observations the whole state was suffering under a crushing taxation. Everyone in the valley appeared to him, leading a life of distrust and full of discomfort. The Sikh army seems to him full of discontent and declared Sikhs are no less than Turks. Likewise in projecting the Lahore Durbar essentially in despotic colours his sole objective was not to be representative, rather he attempted to justify the British rule in India by proclaiming, though the government of India is despotic in theory [and necessarily so], in reality it is as free as in Europe. The style of his narrative powers shows that he was highly disturbed with the kind of administration he found prevalent in Kashmir.

Just akin to the other things that received a focus through his hands, Jacquemont calls Sikhs as rapacious masters, running a sort of "segmentary" state wherein feudalistic tendencies, extreme chaos, confusion and problems of law and order dominates the socio-political landscape. He recognized the essential features of a welfare state are inherently absent in regions under control of the indigenous rulers, like Ranjeet Singh. By referring to an episode narrates:

I told you of one man who was hanged at kotli, there were dozen hanging the trees close to my camp on the bank of the river; While the governor was calling upon me, he told in a perfectly unconcerned manner that he had two hundred hanged during his first year of his office; but that by this time it sufficed to hang one here and there to keep the country in good order. For my part if I had to govern it [the region in question], I should start by placing the governor and his three hundred soldiers in irons as the worst robbers of all; and set them to work at making a good road. At present they live in idleness on the labour of the poor peasants. They would still live on the same rice; but they have earned it.

By projecting almost everything in contrast to the Western imaginations that came under his vision in the regions he visited Jacquemont, serves none other than the British colonial interests. Praising British authoritative rule as the only remedy to remove the existing odd things from the Kashmir politics has been an essential trope of his narrative.

Presenting Ranjeet Singh as an Asiatic warlord with despotic outlook

Even in his travel account whereas referring to the things and traditions associated with Ranjeet Singh as a person or oriental king, Jacquemont retains an ambivalent position:

This model of Asiatic king is no saint, far from it; he cares nothing for law or good faith, unless it is to his interest to be just or faithful, but he is not cruel. He orders very great criminals to have their noses and ears cut off, or hand, but he never takes life. He has a passion for horses which mounts almost to a mania; he has waged the most costly and bloody wars for the purpose of seizing a horse in some neighboring state which they had refused to give or sell to him. He is extremely brave, a quality rather real among Eastern principles, and though he has always been successful in his military campaigns, it has been by treaties and cunning negotiations, that has made him absolute king of the whole Punjab, Kashmir, etc. and is better obeyed by his subjects than the

Mughal emperors were at the height of their power. A professing Sikh, though in reality a sceptic, he goes to Amritsar every year to perform his devotions and oddly enough visits the tombs of various Moslem saints as well. Yet these pilgrimages do not upset any of his more straight-laced co-religionists. He is a shameless rogue who flaunts his vices with as little embarrassment as Henri iii used to do in our country.

Ranjeet Singh, to him, is both a despotic ruler and at the same time enjoying virtually a ritual kind of sovereignty. He portrays him as a Napoleon Bonaparte in miniature. Quite paradoxically he portrays Gulab Singh, one of Ranjeet's feudatories in Jammu provinces, as the greatest lord in the Punjab after Ranjeet. Gulab Singh, he mentions, is a soldier of fortune, he is a sort of usurper and more importantly soldiers are obedient more to him than Ranjeet. He is a lion in the war; but anything but a rose water-dandy. He is a man of forty remarkably handsome and with the simplest most gentle and elegant manners. From such projections one can assume with great ease that the treaty of Amritsar [1846] concluded between British government of India and Gulab Singh, which entrusted in the latter powers to administer the state of Jammu and Kashmir in place of Lahore durbar, therefore, owes undeniably a lot to his suggestive cum prescribed travel descriptions.

While some of his descriptions of Sikh administration are significantly [partially] to some extent authentic, his postulations and presumptions of several other aspects of Kashmir valley are not so satisfactory. In fact, his travel account is more or less a measured and deliberate attempt to "orientalize", the East both on macro as well as on micro levels. After describing almost everything in deep dark colors, Jacquemont does not spare even the ordinary inhabitants. For whom mesmerizingly he says, 'the people of Kashmir are living no more honest and perfectly pious lives. They are mere imposters. Their knowledge and value systems are less important. Arrogantly enough, he mentions,

Kashmir is a land of knaves; scoundrels; bandits; but I am prudent... Nothing is commoner than to kill a man for the sake of stealing an old pair of breeches worth twenty or twenty four sous, half a rupee; the whole population goes about armed with sabres, which they wield, I am told, with great skill and the figures one meets on the road all carry long matchlocks on their shoulders though in my opinion these are not very alarming.

Kashmir an abode of ignorant races, traditional family set up and other oriental miseries

Kashmiris' who were celebrated for many inherent talents and innate properties seem to Jacquemont very belittle. To whom Bernier described as the most ingenious race, the same Kashmiris have been precisely represented by Jacquemont as an ignorant race. Next to nothing, not only the common masses but also the elite Brahmans who were well acquainted with literary traditions since times immemorial have not received any respect in his descriptions. For instance Jacquemont writes,

As for the Pandiths are concerned, who are all Brahmans by caste; they are grossly ignorant and there is not one of my Hindu servants who does not regard himself as better caste than they are... they eat everything except beef and drink arrack [local medicine in liquid form], though nobody does so in India, but mean of the lowest castes.

In the same fashion, on another occasion he argues, "I expose their ignorance of the Shastra's and their slackness of their discipline; any man here a little ignorant than the rest and less overtly a knave is a saint; and the estimable public of Kashmir takes me for a most saintly Christian."

While constructing the image of the society the people of Kashmir lived in, Jacquemont is talking in a broader perspective and is treating everything Eastern in shamble colours. He upholds the view that, society in East is vitiated from its very foundations. Its chief elements, the family are almost nonexistent. Among the upper classes which set the example for the rest, polygamy makes Indian fathers' indifferent to their children, owing to their great number, and strives up horrible jealousies and hatred between brothers. A woman is an impure creature, regarded by the husband as scarcely belonging to the same species as himself. As the children grow up, they soon acquire his abominable idea of contempt for their mother. Here, it remains no more a hidden secret that while perceiving the Asiatic realities, he is more bounded by the European perceptions rather than the law of observation. Instead of observing and narrating the things in a linear or simple manner, he is constructing the reality based on European experience rather than observation. He is no way ready to compromise with his self-identity or to expose the drawbacks of his own culture and society, which as a result has made his travel narrations highly biased and which structurally and more systematically upholds the superior claims of the West.

Next to nothing, Jacquemont proceeds ahead by proclaiming, 'there is nothing straight or simple about the people of the country. "They resort to craft in everything." Further he claims it is idiocy for a European to play same game with them. He depicted Kashmir as a barbarous country. About the beautiful gardens and the aesthetic values of Kashmiri people he remarks, the inhabitants of Kashmir spend their lives gazing upon gardens, for it consoles them for their wretched state, and confessed he is still too European to find any charm in them. The figures one sees in the East are picturesque by reason of their costume, but the whole system of manners is most prosaic.

Jacquemont: with male gaze and utilitarian perspective

Designed to disgust, Jacquemont's travel account also refers to the woman of the valley. She has been depicted by him also in accordance with oriental colours. Without any hesitation, he portrays her as a 'Nauch girl' and claims that there was nothing in the eyes of these Kashmir's beauties to compensate for the monotony of their dancing and singing ... they were dusker—that is to say blacker than the choruses and ballets at Lahore, Amritsar, Ludhiana and Delhi. Further, in the same breath while writing about the Kashmiri women, he has not overcome his European self any way. He called them hideous wretches, extraordinarily ugly and sexually promiscuous; but as a European he manages and preserves what he calls integrity of European character in both morals and costume.

As an ideal protagonist of imperialism and a best champion of British colonialism in India with close ties with Mill's Utilitarianism, he looked upon Indian things not so differently, but inferiorly and advocated the cause of British imperialism in Indian subcontinent. In these vast regions of Kashmir valley, the condition of human kind does not seem to him capable of any improvement of change so long as religious ideas in them remain the same, and Hinduism seems to him immovable. He is the bitter critique of the oriental things and more particularly the oriental religion and religious based education system. Convinced of this fact, he goes on to say, how deplorable is the condition of mankind in this vast orient; the English government in India, though it still calls for reforms, nonetheless merits much praise and its administration is an immense benefit to the provinces subject to it; he had not appreciated it as its full value, till he had travelled through this country, which has remained independent, that is, the scene of hideous acts of violence and continual brigandage and murder. More favorably, he took the cause of the British colonial state and advocated a phase of full expansion and extension of direct paramountcy of British over as much regions as possible, so that the Orientals could realize the benefits of British rule.

Likewise the domestic morality of India in general and Kashmir valley in particular, the greatest source of misery to Jacquemont, seems of no improvement, so long it retains its existing religious institutions. He is highly critical of existing religious beliefs. As a man of European outlook with complete faith in Mill's Utilitarianism, and the reforms carried out by William Bentinck, the then governor general of India, he declared the propagation of modern education as essential as the essence and existence of colonial rule in India. He is in fact the better representative of the needs of his times than realities and is sharing the same beliefs and presumptions of the power with which he was intensely connected. In a celebrated manner he opines, if there is any hope of civilizing the East, it is by this means alone. As a true and enthusiastic advocate of Mill's ideas about India, he is completely in support of utilitarian reforms in India. He emphasized the need of dissemination of Enlightenment of Europe in this land, and therefore qualifies it to govern itself one day. His speculations about the valley of Kashmir in particular and India or Asia as a whole in general, reflects him as a true supportive and advocate of British imperialism. His travel narrations are in much resemblance with what the then colonial powers claimed about the Orientals, and his whole agency seemed to a borrowed one rather than to be an intellectual one, or based on observation.

III. Conclusion

In conclusion from the meticulous study of Jacquemont's travel account it is apparent that he comes up against East firstly as a European first and secondly as an individual observer, a necessary argument runs central to Edward Said's *Orientalism*. His travel account remarkably directs the reader to acknowledge, what Said would like to say, Orient is "*essentially* an idea or creation with no corresponding reality. He is a vociferous imperialist; in tone. There are innumerable evidences which suggest enough to doubt the veracity of his travel account. The nature of his travel narrative reveals the fact that, to be a European in orient, and to be one knowledgeable, one must see and know the orient as a domain ruled over by Europe. At one instance he even acknowledges, I am not English but an intimate friend of the Company. All such affiliations and influences limited his attitude towards the people of East in general and Kashmir in particular. One can therefore assume the picture of the various aspects of Kashmir valley [as a part of 'East'] produced by Victor Jacquemont, is no way different from the picture of India developed by colonial historians like Mill. Despite his belongingness to a rival country of Great Britain [in view of the Anglo-French rivalry of that time], he has promoted the imperial cause of Great Britain, at the cost of the Orientals. As a product of his milieu, his intelligence and ideological framework was somehow a derivative one, highly conditioned by the imperial claims of his times which consciously or unconsciously had left his work now in stigma. Further, one can deduce from his writings the fact that even the travel literature was to some extent, partially or thoroughly supportive and justifying the phenomena like imperialism.

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- [7] Jacquemont, p 206-207
- [8] Jacquemont,p.201
- [9] Jacquemont, p.102
- [10] Jacquemont,p.98
- [11] Jacquemont,p.104
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- [13] Jacquemont,p.173
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