

**Destabilizing Said's Notion of Orientalism: A Critical Study of *The Travels of Mirza Abu Taleb Khan***

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**Abstract**

During the colonial period, many literary works helped the empire create a narrative about the Orient. However, few works describe the West from the perspective of the East. *The Travels of Mirza Abu Taleb Khan* is one such travelogue, offering a unique view of Europe through the eyes of an Eastern traveler. This paper examines Taleb Khan's observations and opinions about Europeans and their culture. Using Edward Said's concept of Orientalism as a framework, the paper argues that Taleb's travelogue presents an Eastern discourse that challenges Said's idea of Orientalism. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of cross-cultural perspectives and challenges traditional narratives about East-West relations. It highlights the importance of diverse viewpoints in shaping historical and literary discourses.

**Keywords:** Orientalism, orient, discourse, Othering, Postcolonialism,

**Introduction**

Abu Taleb Khan is a significant public intellectual who writes and critiques a global public sphere through his travel narrative, *The Travels of Mirza Abu Taleb Khan* (Dabashi, 2020). This work, written in Persian by Taleb Khan, a Persian-speaking Indian poet and scholar, was later translated into English by Charles Stewart, a professor of Oriental languages. Taleb started his journey in 1799, traveling for four years across

Asia, Africa, and Europe, and upon returning to India, he documented his experiences in this book. As noted by Leask (2006), Taleb was a colonial subject of Great Britain.

The central problem this study addresses is the limited representation of Eastern perspectives in Western narratives about the Orient. The research questions guiding this study are: What are Taleb Khan's views on Europeans and their culture? How do these views challenge Edward Said's notion of Orientalism? The objectives of this study are to analyze Taleb's observations and to explore how his travelogue presents an Eastern discourse that contrasts with dominant Western narratives. The main claim of this article is that Taleb's travelogue not only offers a unique perspective on Europe but also destabilizes traditional Orientalist views, contributing to a deeper understanding of East-West relations. This was the first book ever published in Britain written by an orient about the Europe and Britain in particular.

The paper used a qualitative research method for the textual analysis of the primary text, *The Travels of Mirza Abu Taleb Khan*. For secondary data, it relied on various research journals, published books, research articles, and reviews. For the research purpose, works by renowned writers, scholars, and professors were thoroughly analyzed and used as needed.

### **Literature Review**

The mentioned book has received critical attention by diverse critics from the outset of its publication. According to Leask (2006), the book has captured the beauty of the places he visited and at the same time he has rightly explained the culture and the people of the places he visited. Taleb's Travels casts a foreign and often critical light on Georgian Britain during the era of its 'imperial meridian'. In these three volumes, Taleb seems to be praising European culture, people, way of living, knowledge, rationality, and many more things about the Europe. However, at the same time he is very critical about

all these things. Amrit Sen, a scholar of Viswa Vharti University analyzes the book as an ethnography and concludes that:

Abu Taleb's travelogue records his keen awareness of the dynamics of the cultural negotiation in an early period of colonization. It locates the ambiguity of his response engaging in a simultaneous admiration and critique of Western practices, a critique that is made possible by his identity as the "Persian Prince." Yet in its history of print, circulation and reception it becomes a tool in the propagation of colonial power. Abu Taleb "Londony," the "Persian Prince," thus raises vital questions about identity, cultural interfaces, the politics of travel writing and the politics of its reception. (p. 68)

Amrit Sen finds Taleb's admiration and critique of Europe as the result of ambiguity prevalent in an orient of that time. And this ambiguity gives rise to uncertainty. However, this very ambiguity was presented as a tool to establish British authority over the East. Throughout the book we can see his enthrallment and fascination towards the English culture and life. But, he also uncovers the vices and follies of their culture and life. This precise observation of European culture and life comes from the knowledge of his culture and way of life. In the same vein Amrit Sen says "The desire to identify and participate in the imperial process is manifested in Abu Taleb's admiration of British customs. Abu Taleb is enthralled by the British system" (p. 61). The British custom and system in then India was taken as the superior and better than their own, which in turn make him appreciate and admire the British way of life. Taleb khan describes the journey through Europe with inquisitiveness and astonishment, and he is of the view that his countrymen should imitate the European system of governance, lifestyle, and make use of scientific inventions of Europe. Taleb's gaze was not a naïve gaze at the European culture but a critical gaze (Chatterje, 2020). His fascination for London can be understood better from the ode he writes on London:

Henceforward we will devote our lives to London,

And its heart-alluring Damsels:

Our hearts are satiated with viewing fields, garden, Rivers, and palaces

We have no longing for the Toba, Sudreh, or other

Trees of paradise

We are content to rest under the shade of these

Terrestrial Cypresses.

If the Shaikh of Mecca is displeased at our conversion, who cares?

May the Temple which has conferred such blessings on us, and its Priests,  
flourish!

Fill the goblet with wine! If by this I am prevented from returning  
To my old religion, I care not; nay, I am the better pleased. (p.70)

The above lines give the readers feeling that he is very much swayed by the Europeans culture and lifestyle. He says that he does not mind it even if he has to give up his old religion. He enjoys the material and luxurious life of the English to the extent that he is not concerned about who is bothered by what even if he is the Shaikh of Mecca. Here, we need to analyze this poem very closely, to find the real intentions of Taleb. The man who is very religious cannot say this for his religion and god. This thing can be proved with his comment of his on English people. He says, "The first and the greatest defect I observed in the English, is their want of faith in religion, and their great inclination to philosophy (atheism) (Said, 1810). In fact the poem has a sarcastic tone and Taleb is of the opinion that English people are very much materialist and have forgotten the moral values getting indulged in drinking and other bodily pleasure. Another motif behind

writing ode to London can be understood better by analyzing the historical context of the time when he wrote this book.

His journey to Europe was sponsored by his British friend captain David Richardson. He was working for the British men and it was his compulsion to give positive view of England and other places of Europe moreover, after returning back to India he had to work under British rule. Yes it is true that he liked some aspect of European life and inventions like pumps, the pipes of cold and boiled hot water, the system of taps, the hot-house, bridge, and education system. He wanted to take this idea back home but he was not at all appreciating European culture and development wholeheartedly. As a person working for British Empire, he wrote all the good things and showed his fascination towards this but his colonized self—orient self finds follies within the European culture and lifestyle. In other words, Taleb, in his narratives integrates the follies and frailties of British customs and culture, looking at it from the eyes of a Persian prince. This can be taken as the discourse of orientals about occident which in return undercuts the Said's opinion that Europeans have only created such discourse about the orient to make them superior and rule over orientals.

### **Rethinking the Discourse of Orientalism**

Postcolonial theory is at the very cutting edge of present scholarship because of its insightful critical strategies, its wide applications in culture and society, its growth, its close textual analysis, and its search for answers to key questions about culture, representation, and identity (Bruney, 2012). It is, in fact, considered a very significant intellectual tool for research and critique. Postcolonial theory came into practice in the 1960s but gained popularity with the publication of Edward Said's monumental work, *Orientalism*, in 1978. Following Said, many other postcolonial theorists, such as Gayatri Spivak and Homi K. Bhabha, contributed to this theory with major concepts such as Orient and Occident, mimicry, diaspora, subaltern, othering, and ambivalence.

This paper primarily uses Said's Orientalism as a discursive tool to analyze the primary texts mentioned above. However, it also employs other concepts such as othering, mimicry, and ambivalence as references to justify the research objectives. In a sense, it can be seen as an attempt to define European culture through an Indian-Muslim lens. My aim in this paper is to show how this travel narrative subverts Said's notion of Orientalism. Edward Said's work, *Orientalism*, published in 1978, changed the focus of academic attention from the dominant, logocentric, and mainstream Western narrative to the emerging intercultural discourse of the Other.

Edward Said defines orientalism as a “Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (Said 1978). Said believes that representation of eastern people and place in western world is the part discourse to dominate east and this discourse gives them power. Said is of the opinion that “The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences”(Said, 1978). Taleb in his travel narrative reverses this and presents Europe in somehow similar way. He enjoys the landscape of the Europe and finds the people very much different from the people back home. Said rightly said that Europeans used the knowledge about the east as the tool to rule over them. He writes:

The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the ‘other’. In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience. (p.1-2)

West presented the east as the other; they found colonized people's civilization, language and culture very much contrasting to their own. Thus, they defined their culture in relation to the culture of orient. While claiming so, Said forgot that it was not only for the

sake of ruling. It is natural for anyone to define oneself in comparison to others. We define our culture in terms of other's culture. And the difference in culture strikes us more. Same thing happened with Europeans too. Not only culture even new places strike us immediately and we make perceptions. As McLeod said oriental lands are places described as strange, odd, peculiar and even Bizarre (McLeod, 2010) by the west. Another thing that Said does not include in his writing is that it was not only west that created discourse about the east rather the eastern people those who visited the west also created the discourse about the west. And they regarded them as the 'other'. Othering is in post-colonial theory a reference to the colonized other who are marginalized by imperial discourse, identified by their difference from the centre and perhaps crucially become the focus of anticipated mastery by the imperial ego (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 1999)

Taleb's observation of Dutch people is interesting. He calls the Dutchmen low minded and unfriendly. Further he says that they have no fear of losing their reputation and are very cruel to the slaves (Khan, 1810). This observation of Dutch people is similar to Europeans' observation of colonized subject. Similarly, Taleb makes comments on English Justice System. In fact he finds the system full of flaws. He writes, "I was disgusted to observe, that, in these courts, law very often overruled equity, and that a well-meaning honest man was frequently made the dupe of an artful knave nor could the most righteous judge alter the decision, without transgressing the law (Khan, 1810). Colonizers claimed that they were just people and they were wise. However, Taleb found their claim very much ironic and feels disgusted to know about such justice system which couldn't dispense justice. So, this discourse becomes the reverse discourse by an orient about the Europeans. According to Said Europeans created the discourse that eastern people were irrational and savage but here Taleb has ironically found the same in the Europeans.

English people found it very unusual to see Hindustani people wearing gold and silver ornaments and they call Hindustani's act a crazy act. But, Taleb in his narrative

ridicules the English attitude towards orient. He says, “It is really astonishing that people possessing so much knowledge and good sense, and who reproach the nobility of Hindoostan with wearing gold and silver ornaments like women should be thus tempted by Satan to throw away their money upon useless blocks (Khan, 1810). He calls their act of spending huge amount of money on statues an irrational act.

Looking at oriental people, colonizers called the orient lazy, uncivilized, irrational, emotional and unskilled, and they tried to prove oriental culture inferior and barbaric. This observation was the product of European cultural gaze. It was the difference of the cultures that produced the different discourses. European discourse about the orient was not only the product of imagination; it was established by every institution of empire. Said argues:

The Orient is an integral part of European material civilization and culture. Orientalism expresses and represents that part culturally and even ideologically as a mode of discourse with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles. (Said, 1978)

As Said argues the discourse of the European about orient helped them to rule over the orient but the discourse was not one sided. Even orientals have their own discourse about the Europeans and they used this discourse to protect their culture from others’ culture. Said claim that westerners discourse helped them to rule over the orient is under cut by Taleb’s observation of English people. He finds them equally indolent, arrogant and even morally degraded. He calls them selfish, materialistic and greedy.

### **Conclusion**

Taleb Khan’s travel narrative is a discourse produced by an orient about the Europeans and unlike Said notion of orientalism, there was reverse orientalism produced

by the orient scholars like Abu Taleb Khan. Hence, it de-establishes Said's notion of orientalism which claims that Europeans produced discourse about the East to make them feel that their culture, civilization and knowledge is inferior. However, Taleb's account of European people, culture and custom subverts Said's claim that Indian and Arab people treated their culture, and custom as inferior to European's culture and custom. This also proves that discourse about the East is not only to rule rather it was the product of cultural differences between the east and the west. It was not only the West who created discourse about the East, the East also created their own discourse about the West and thus made their culture, religion and custom superior to the others.

To cut the entire matter short, *The Travels of Mirza Abu Taleb Khan* offers a sharp critique of the English attitude towards Indian customs, particularly their negative view of Indian men wearing gold and silver ornaments. The English people considered this practice strange and associated it with women, seeing it as inappropriate for men. However, Taleb cleverly counters this criticism back on the English people by highlighting their own irrational behavior such as spending large sums of money on lifeless statues and decorative objects. He questions their claim to reason and knowledge by exposing the hypocrisy in their judgments. Taleb also draws attention to the intense curiosity with which the English viewed his noble appearance, attire and aristocratic formalities. This also reflects the fascination Indians felt toward Europeans when they arrived in India, revealing the idea that sense of cultural curiosity flows both ways. Through these observations, Taleb challenges the Western perception of the East as inferior by showing that both cultures have their own peculiarities and irrationalities. His travelogue comes as a counter-narrative to the dominant Orientalist perspective sensibizing the readers to approach cultural differences with understanding rather than judgment. By doing so, Taleb emphasizes that no single culture has a monopoly on rationality or superiority. However, both East and West have much to learn from each other.

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