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**Analyzing the Counter Orientalist depiction of Arabic culture in
Muhammad Asad's "The Road to Mecca"**



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Abstract

This paper aims to analyze how Arabic culture and its values are presented in counter orientalist way in *The Road to Mecca* by Muhammad Asad. This paper focuses on answer the questions like how Asad presents Arabs and how it is different from how west present. Post-colonial lenses is used in this paper and it is found that Muhammad Asad has not describes east especially Arabs with orientalist perspective but he shows the positive aspects of their culture like their social ethics, norms, strong religious bonding and sense of easiness towards life. On the other hand, West is presented as place of hypocrite people who lack all those values which East has.

Keywords: Cultural values, Counter orientalism, presentation, East, West

Introduction

"Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet." (Rudyard Kipling *The Ballad of East and West* 1889)

In the post-colonial theories orientalism is the most important concept given by Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* in 1978. This was the heart of all the postcolonial theories. It is the tendency of western authors, poets and writers to depict east as a place void of civilization and filled with barbarous people who has no knowledge of living. As Edward said writers in *Orientalism*:

"The Orient was almost a European invention."

Western writers had played a central role in making east a business for their benefits. Many famous novelists, such as Jane Austen, Rudyard Kipling, EM Forster, and Joseph Conrad, are on the list. These authors have depicted east as world of other people or as a world of slaves and uncivilized people and their writing had created mindset of western as well as Eastern people of being uncivilized and barbarous. Orientalism is a the tendency of western authors depicting East as a negative and place of others or brown which need to be governed so that they can learn how to live. In short Western writings also contributed much in the process of colonization.

In this paper, it is discovered how Muhammad Asad presents the lifestyle, culture, and manners of Easterners, especially those from Saudi Arabia, in his autobiographical work, *The Road to Mecca*. The journey of Muhammad Asad to Mecca is a transformational journey. We can say that he was looking for spiritual renewal in his life and this journey became the source of this renewal. He observed the nomadic life of Arabs very closely and gives us detailed descriptions of Nufud desert and his meeting with Arabic Kings like Ibn Saud. Hardships during the journey like thirst are also described in a way of inner transformation.

If we look closely we can clearly under that the way Asad has depicted the Arabic culture and their manners is totally counter orientalist because he is describing the orients more civilized and filled with spirituality than the western culture. He forgets his own past and started to feel Arab like a homeland. It is a counter orientalist because he is depicting west as orient and a place void of spiritual depth. In the whole of text he sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly compares the civilizations of East and West and he all the times he finds his place in the charms of Eastern lifestyle. Firstly we will discuss the historical context of the age when Muhammad Asad was

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writing his work to get deeper view of its context. Then we will analyze in the light of text how he has presented East especially Arab life in a counter orientalist way.

Literature Review

Muhammad Asad's life has been a transformative journey. He was initially a rabbinic Jew born On 12 July, 1900 in the town of Lvov in Galicia. His mother Malka, was the daughter of a rich banker Menahem Medal Fiegenbaum and his father was a barrister. So he lived comfortably in the early days of life. His struggle was not about finance or poverty but of quest and inquiry about religion. According to his family traditions, he spends long hours to study religious knowledge and books of Hebrew Bible, Talmud, Targam, Minsha, and Gemara. He has himself remarked that he was reading so widely "as if I had been destined for a rabbinical career."

He has the ability to read as well as speak Hebrew when he was just thirteen. But all the religious knowledge and study resulted quiet opposite. He became skeptical and departed from the Jewish believes rather than being consolidated. Judaism was nothing for him but a 'wooden ritual of those who clung by habit ___ and only by habit ___ to their religious heritage.' He was unable to find the spiritual depth and most importantly rationality in the religious practices of Jewish religion. His main objection to Jewish was God's nature which concerned "strangely preoccupied with the destinies of one particular nation Hebrews" rather than being a divine feeder and caretaker of whole humanity. Besides he had inherited this revolutionary nature from his father. The face is that Asad's grandfather Benjamin Weiss was a strict orthodox rabbi in Czernovitz in Bukovina. He admired other field of study like mathematic, astronomy even game chess but he thought rabbinic studies more superior than all. So he wanted his son to study rabbinic. Akiva Weiss Asad's father studied Talmud by day but at night he gave his time to study the curriculum of Humanistic Gymnasium. He was also interested in the studies of physics but life conditions made him to practice law in Lvov then in Vienna where Weiss family lived after the First World War.

Asad's conversion to Islam is not a sudden process but a long quest and it was affected by many personalities. His main point to turn towards Islam was in 1922 when his parental uncle Dorian Feigenbaum invited him to visit Jerusalem. There living inside the old city he made two discoveries. First he read about Islam and his realities. Secondly the cruel nature of Zionism was revealed to him. There he discovered the conditions of Arabs and the colonial overtake of Zionists. He realized that Arabs were not the intruders but the real immigrants of land. Another personality influencing Asad was Dutch poet and socialist Jacob Israel De Haan who was pure anti-zionist. Although he was later assassinated by Haganah yet he created long lasting impact on Asad's mind. This thing made him more aligned with Arabs interest. His initial articles and even his book in 1924 was about the Arabs nationalism, anti-Zionism with anti-British bias. His book remained successful and Frankfurter Zeitung gave him expanses to travel into more areas.

Lawrence commented about Asad as a "forensic rationalist".

Methodology and Research Questions

This paper aims to focus and answer the following question

How does Muhammad Asad present the cultural values of Arabs in The Road to Mecca?

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How there is a counter orientalist approach in the text ?

This paper is qualitative in nature and it is analyzed by post-colonial lenses by comparing it with Edward Said Orientalism. Data is collected by close reading of text and subjective view. The arguments would be supported by textual evidences.

Discussion

Muhammad Asad has depicted Arabic life and its culture in very positive way. This text, *The Road to Mecca* is a result of immersive observation of author and it can be treated auto ethnographic study. He not only observes the Arabic culture but also lives and feels it. The detailed description of Arabic culture clearly reflects the subjective and personal view of Muhammad Asad. Instead of describing East as exotic and wild like orientalists, his text makes Arabia a land of lively people contented with life. Even the Nufud desert and its obstacle are transformative and adventurous. Desert, which is often referred to barrenness and rigidity, is filled with life and open hearted people. According to Asad, it is a thing of surprise and discovery because everything comes so sudden that makes you think from where it came from. As author describes: "Life in its majesty... you always feel in the desert. Because it is so difficult to keep and so hard, it is always like a gift, a treasure and a surprise."

Desert life is not a futile but filled with a lot of fun and chatting. The herdsmen are chanting while fetching water for their sheep and herd of camels are also marching to homeward. Although people are divided into tribes yet they are very conscious of their pride and honor. When you are sitting in campfire of random caravan, their discussion do not have trivial topic but of respect and bravery. As author describes: "They talk of simple, great things of life and death, of hunger and satiety, of pride and love and hatred...."

Another description is:

"You never hear idle babbling: for one cannot babble in the desert"

According to Muhammad Asad the life in desert is a life of high adventure and discovery and it has its own beauty in dryness which is purely a counter orientalist description. Trackless paths, sand storms, straying and thirst are the main obstacles in the desert but it seems Asad actually wanted this adventure and he was eager to face difficulties.

"I grew uneasy and began to yearn for action and movement for the dry, brisk air of the desert...."

Strong faith and bond with religious value is another feature of Arabic culture which is praised by Muhammad Asad. Actually this is the main thing that motivated Asad to convert to Islam. Each and every factor of nomadic culture like hospitality, openheartedness, respect and friendliness of Arabs fascinated him so much that he no longer feels himself as a traveler but an inhabitant of same culture. In the setting of a new culture he is in between two cultural identities. There is a liminal theory by Victor Turner which is a liminal space where an individual is neither belongs to old identity nor to new. The same situation is faced Asad. He is discovering new identity here and the reason is appealing values of Arabic culture. He himself describes in following way:

"I am no longer a stranger: Arabia has become my home. My west part is like a distant dream--- not real enough to be forgotten and not real enough to be a part of my present"

Asad was amazed to see the religious durability and belief in the heart of Arabic

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people and ironically he describes West as an exotic and place of hopeless people. While observing the Arabic culture, the conditions of West were running in his mind in the form of flashback. In the beginning of 20 century there was a great decline in religion, art, intellect and politics in Europe. As Europe made a sudden break from the past, they were finding new way and methods to prove their existence. They looked for new solution for contemporary problems. One of the main problem was the God and religion and they had lost belief in it. The phrase, God is dead, became very famous due to evasive destruction of World War I.

He came out of West life which was totally unsatisfying and suffocating for him. As he writes:

“Certainly no the intellectual interests of Europe. I do not miss them. I have left them behind”

He describes east as full of faith and religious fervor and it is evident:

“They are poor, they know nothing and are nothing but their hearts are full of faith”

This is not Arab which has become wild but west. Asad compares west to a dark void which absorbs everything but there is nothing to come out from that void. This is a counter orientalist presentation of Arabic culture. Again Asad shows his dissatisfaction in Christian ideology of soul’s freedom from flesh. It is quite evident in his discussion with Father Felix. According him, it is Christian belief that true freedom comes from spirit is free from flesh. Separation between two is true source of freedom. But Asad wants unity between spirit and flesh and he is looking for this unity.

Openness and light hearted attitude is another cultural value which is praised by Muhammad Asad. This cultural value was lacking in the western society. There is no rigidity in the behavior of Kings like Ibn Saud as well as in beduins. They are all ready to welcome you with open heart. According to Asad Arabian are people who “live close to their instincts”. They have no hypocrisy and less power structures. Asad and Zaid were passing from village and they sat aside to take rest for some time. This was the house of village amir. Although they had one stray mat behing the heart, yet they served us qahwa. They never intended hospitality but it is the Arabic culture to give respect and value to humans beings. Hardly they had sat over the mat, brown dates were served and the aroma of coffee beans spread in the house. Host who was poor and wearing tunic clothes appeared and said:

“May God give you life; this house is your house, eat in the name of God. This is all we have.”

Although nomadic people have less facilities and comforts in life yet they are contented with their condition. They are kind hearted and their happiness is based on each other’s company. Their unity is their power. According to Asad:

“They were poor ragged men, those camel and donkey drivers but they behaved like great lords”

Asad had not only praised the cultural values of Arabic people but also condemned the behavior of Jews who had seized the place and called Palestine their homeland. Palestine was a part of Ottoman Empire and it was populated by Muslims and Christians with a few Jews. But Muslims and Christians were in majority. World War I played a pivotal role in the process of overtaking the territory and Balfour Declarations were made by British government on 2 November, 1917. It officially declared that Palestine as a “national home for the Jewish people”. It was not the decision of majority and military took charge of this area when Turkey faced defeat in

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the war.

When Muhammad Asad observed the behavior and demeanor of both Arabs and Jews, he clearly understood the whole scenario. He realized that Arabs had a deep connection with forefathers and Arabian roots. It reminded him “David and David’s time like Abrahams and Abraham’s time.” He was unable to feel the spiritual connection of Jews with Palestine. It seemed to him a forced claim and it was quiet obvious from their suppression of native Arabs. For Asad, Arabians

“Were closer their Arabian roots – and so the beduins of to-day – than the Jews of today who claims to be their descendant....”

Asad praised another value of Arabs culture which is their harmony with their lands. They are aware from their origins and religious value of their land. He soon realized Arabs were in majority in Palestine but it was in his mind that he would only find them in deserts or in the form of nomads. But here he describes:

“I had not realized that towns are full of Arabs – that in fact in 1922 there lived in Palestine nearly five Arabs to each Jew”

He further describes that Jews were fully unaware from Arabs. They know nothing about their lifestyle, culture and nature. Even they himself feel like stranger and in a third space. Both Arabs and Jew had opposite cultural traits. If Arabs are open hearted, spiritual, helpful and good receptionists, on the other hand Jews are cruel, strangers, oppressive and away from their roots. They had struck no roots. He describes them in following way:

“who seemed to carry with them the so much the smallness and narrowness of their past lives in Europe---”

Again Asad writes:

“European Jew were so obviously out of all harmony with the picture that surrounded them”

After observing oppressive behavior and lack of understanding in Zionist, he became the supporter of Arabs and began to think Arabs as real inhabitants of land. He thought it as a colonial rule like other colonies and Jews came here with the help of external powers and took charge of area. British had promised with Sharif Hussain, the ruler of Mecca, to give Arabs an independent state including Palestine. It is because he helped British in World War I and it would be his reward. But they had broken their promise as well and didn’t give any independent state to Arabs. Asad had a long discussion on the topic of rightful inhabitants of Palestine with Zionist leader Dr. Weizmann and he proved with full confident. Asad describes with historical allusions that Hebrews also had intention of conquering Palestine. During the times of Israel and Judah, it was a collection of many sematic and anti-sematic tribes. The Arabs residing in Syria and Palestine after the conquest in seventh century were a in minority. Syrian and Palestinian Arabs are the actual inhabitants of Palestine and they are real Arbanian people. These arguments clearly depict the anti-Zionist attitude of Muhammad Asad.

Arabic people reflect the true of essence of their religion and the most unique aspect is the integration of mind and soul which was lacking in the 20 century Europe. According to Asad, Arabs had a very pure and light hearted approach and they have a great harmony of thoughts and actions which are free from hidden intentions. He describes in following way:

“I recognized them that organic coherence of the mind and the senses which we European had lost”

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Europeans were fragmented and lost the coherence in their mind and actions. They had lost their free soul and it became a place where people had lost purity and religious beliefs. They had become straw headed. As given below:

“Those phantoms of fear, greed and inhibition that made European life so ugly and of so little premise”

Europe who claimed to be civilized is the ditch of confusion and lack of cultural unity. It is devoid of the true sense of religious affiliation and social contacts. They have burdened under their own intellectual theories and facts which are no leading towards anywhere. The real thing that attracts Asad is not the religious bonding of Arabs Muslims but, in the words of Asad, “an emotional lightness of approach to all questions of life--- a supreme common sense of feelings, if one might call it so.”

The easy attitude of Arabic people and their humble approach towards people is the thing which was lacking in Europe. Asad had presented what was not in Europe and it was in abundance in Arabs.

Conclusion

It is clearly evident from the above arguments that Asad has presented Arabic cultural values in positive and counter orientalist way because he no longer shows how wild and uncivilized eastern people are. But the glimpse of wildness and faithlessness can be seen when he criticized European religion, their lost in interest in tradition and strangeness in their behaviors. West was a ditch which was engulfing everything and East is used as a parameter to criticize the West. Asad praises many aspects of Arabic culture like their hospitality, strong bond in community, no hypocrisy and light hearted approach towards the affair of life. All these things say that Asad has presented these values to show east is not as West say but it is their own colonial way of saying other cultures. In reality they possess all those things which are required for a civilized and strong nation and civilization.

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