

## Representation of the Personality and Character of the Kurds by Orientalists: A Study on Rich's 'Narrative of a Residence in Kurdistan'

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**Abstract:** One of the important ways of studying of the personality and character of ethnics, nations and cultures is mainly accomplished via the opinions others formed about them. Since the onset of modernity, the West has been always a major other that explored every corner of the world. Along with colonial domination, the West has always tried to study and fathom other cultures in order to establish its domination and hegemony in every respect. Hence, the Kurds, like other Eastern cultures and important cultural groups in the Middle East, have always been the focus of the oriental studies. Accordingly, the present study attempts to investigate this issue and reveal the way the Kurds have been represented by orientalist. To achieve this goal, one of the earliest major texts i.e. "Narrative of a Residence in Kurdistan" has been studied. The result of this study indicates that in his travelogue Claudius James Rich applied a number of strategies including idealization, rituals of degradation, misrecognizing difference and exoticism. The Kurds were represented as a part of the Eastern culture compared to the Western culture and basically in stereotyped manners.

**Keywords:** orientalism, personality and character, Kurdistan, Rich's travelogue, Kurds.

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### Introduction

The character and manner of the Kurds can be viewed from two perspectives: insider's look and outsider's look. In this regard, recognizing the personality and the origin of the Kurd from an outsider's perspective and analysis is revealing and constructive. To know itself better, a great civilization needs to be represented by another civilization and the Western civilizations are no exception. To this end, they founded colonial and oriental discourse. Orientalism studies refer to texts that represent the East through works such as novels, news reports, travelogues, historical and ethnic writings, etc. These studies have always pursued two goals: justifying and legitimizing the Western expansion of land and the colonization, and the other convincing the native people that Western culture is a global civilization and accepting it has many merits and benefits (Bertens, 2004). This discourse has been challenged by post-colonial scholars and through the discourse of orientalism critique and analysis. In the analysis and critique of orientalism, the East is not considered as a static and uniform reality, but as a phenomenon that has been created by thinkers, writers, artists, etc. (Gandhi, 2009; Ashcroft et al., 1998). According to Said, the European have hegemonic and dominant ideas on the East and a collection of desires, suppressions, investments, and plans are prevalent in orientalism. At the same time, orientalism has a kind of archive and file reservoir, a kind of "mentality" and a kind of genealogy to the orient and thus orientalism promotes the difference between "us" and "them". In this second sense, orientalist critique invites critics to examine the texts and the discourse system and demonstrates how such discourse fascinates the readers in order to inculcate the subtle and latent views of colonialism.

The land and the community of Kurds, like other parts of the Middle East, are not out of power and are subject to the effects of colonial interventions. Therefore, especially after the 19th century, we are

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witnessing the presence of travelers, orientalists, scholars, anthropologists, missionaries, and Western political representatives among the Kurds, who have published their travel observations, discoveries and trips. Which have become the source of the Western world's perception of Kurds (O'Shea 2004, 95 quoted by Kosari and Ahmadzadeh, 2014: 11). This kind of representation is one of the most important factors in dealing with and interacting colonial powers with Kurds and policy making and decision about them. But, as the Orientalist view points out, Kurdistan does not have the meaning that the West talks about, and this is more of a product of a kind of discursive construction, according to which a stereotypical view of the Kurds is presented that provides for subjection and inequality. Therefore, the significance of the present study is that by studying the way in which one of these texts is represented, it is looking for the most important strategies on which the Kurds are depicted from the Western perspective.

### **Research Background**

In recent years, with the rise of Kurdish graduates in social sciences, one of the issues that has been considered is the question of representing of Kurds in others texts i.e., Persians, Western, and etc. have written about the Kurds. The most important of these studies are as follows:

Kowsari and Ahmadzadeh (2014), in an article titled " Aestheticization of Other: A Rhetoric Analysis of the Kurds' Representation in Western Travelogues," explain how to represent the Kurds in Western Travelogues. The theoretical framework of this work is Edward Saied's, David Spurr's, Mary Pratt's, and Stewart Hall's opinions, and in the analyses of texts, travelogues from two colonial and modern periods have been also analyzed. This study has shown that both aesthetic strategies have been used abundantly and in various forms. Karimi (2017), in his book "Post-colonial Theory and Kurdology ", critically analyzed the orientalist historiography discourse in relation to the Kurds. Using the theoretical and methodological insights of Edward Said, he studied the orientalist texts of Kurds and concluded that these texts through certain strategies, such as essentialize, exoticism and so on, talked about the Kurds. Karimi et al. (2016), in a part of their article entitled "The Critical Rereading of History: Discourse-Analyzing Historiography of Kurdistan", explored Kurdish historiography in Western texts. This study, by borrowing the theoretical arrangements of post-colonial studies, analyzes the discourse of some of the historical texts of Europeans and acknowledges that Orientalist texts have a European narrative, while attempting to attach Kurdistan's history to the story of world history and get its uniqueness. The main feature of this is the lack of attention to the descendant and their voice. Mohammadi and Mahmoudi (2016), in a paper titled "Other in Iran's Neorealist Cinema (a Case study: Blackboard and the Wind Will Take Us with Themselves), have tried based on the sympathetic reading to analyze how Kurds represented in Iran's' cinemas in late-twenties. The results of this research have shown that these two works have provided the same stereotypes and images that exist in the universe about Kurds, and in this picture being Kurd is entitled with "pristine nature", "old traditions", " Simplicity " and "resistance to change". Mahmoudi (2017), in a part of his thesis titled " The Historical Reconstruction of the Subalterns in Kurdish Novel: A Deconstruction ", using the method and insight of post-colonial studies, examines the dominant historical narratives about Kurds i.e., Iranian Orientalism (Europeanism) and Nationalism and has come to the conclusion that the above discourses, based on the ambiguous stance and mediation of the written policy of a particular narrative of Kurd, have resulted in the removal of voice and their subaltern positions.

All of these studies are important in terms of both insight and method, and are used in the present study, but the closest to this study is Kowsari and Ahmadzadeh (2014). The paper, however, shows that, despite the study of various travelogues by these two researchers, Rich's famous travelogue has not been referred, and this research vacuum is important for the present study. In addition, in the mentioned paper, David Spurr's rhetorical analysis technique is used to identify the strategies and focuses solely on the aestheticization strategy, while in the present study, Stewart Hall's analysis method is used. Moreover, the emphasized strategies are also different. Therefore, the present study focuses specifically on the Rich Travelogue to Kurdistan, and in some way, is considered to be complementary to Kowsari and Ahmadzadeh study (2014).

### **Edward Said and Orientalism**

Orientalism theory was first proposed by Edward Said who is presented his theory as the most prominent figure of orientalism postulates his ideas in the books *Orientalism* (2007) and *Culture and Imperialism* (2003). In these books, said argues that the analysis of Western ethnocentric politics must begin with a question of representation as Foucault formulated. Knowledge is based on a discourse which creates a kind of representation of the object of knowledge, its organization, and constraints (Yang, 2011: 338). As a result, applying Foucault's views, said identifies all the writings of orientalists as a discourse based on which the East has been established (Gandhi, 2009). According to Edward Said, the essence of orientalism is an indescribable distinction between the western superiority and the eastern inferiority (Hall, 2007). In this type of study, the West is centralized and the East is marginalized. The West is the origin of identity, power, magnitude, and enlightenment and acts as a male pole. Whereas, the East is a female pole that indicates unknown, mysterious, insignificant, and obscure concepts (Bahri, 2000). After Said, other thinkers such as Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, Stuart Hall, etc., continued the tradition, especially in the post-colonial period and many texts were produced in the orientalism paradigm.

In his studies, Edward Said relied on discourse analysis, but he did not elaborate on his methodological details. In his book "Orientalism", he distinguishes between latent and manifest orientalism. By latent orientalism Said means the time when author apparently shows sympathy and consultation in support of another voice and, therefore, exclude himself from one-dimensional bias. Said holds that this type of tendency is more touching and effective because it does not seem hostile at first sight. This methodological ambiguity in our analysis leads to those who have been methodologically more elaborate on how Orientalism is done. One of these thinkers is Stewart Hall. In his book "the West and the Rest: discourse and power", he (2007) considers discourse to be a system of representation or a Regime of Truth, which coalesces on the basis of a kind of binary opposition and also a kind of logic of derivation production. Hall's main claim in this book is that the perception of the West of itself and its identity is shaped by the European understanding of its difference with other worlds, so that this discourse of the world is based on a simple dichotomy, the West / the rest and based on certain strategies such as utopianism, appearing strange, misunderstanding of differences, and degenerate religions. These narrative tools are the most important strategies that the West has built on a long-term whole process called the East in order to put in opposition to the West.

### **The Significance of Travelogues in Orientalism**

One of the most important means of the representation is writing travelogues. Travelogues are the richest source of information and their descriptions gradually turn into legends. (Hall, 2007: 75). Through these very travelogues the West was able to differentiate itself from the rest of the world and establish its superiority. In "Orientalism", Edward Said notes that from 1800 to 1900, many western tourists traveled to the East (Said, 2007). In fact, from the very beginning of modernity, travelers, missionaries, businessmen, etc., wrote their memoirs when visiting other regions and these writings were the underlying data for the theorizing about the East. Many of the first-generation theorists of the anthropology in England and France known as the "Library Generation", such as Tyler, Frazer, McLennan, Marcel Mousse and even Durkheim, have drawn on the information from missionaries, tourists, and so on to develop their ideas and they did not conduct any field study themselves (Fakouhi, 2014).

### **Methodology**

As Jorgensen and Phillips (2010) believe that in the analysis of the discourse of theory and method, they are linked to one another, and it is impossible to use the analysis of discourse as a separate analytic method from theoretical foundations. Therefore, in this research, according to theoretical foundations, discourse analysis method has been used. Discourse analysis is a way to reveal the patterns of understanding, belief, value, and structures used in a particular discourse (Fazeli, 2004: 83). At the analytical level, among the various travelogues, James Claudius Rich's travel to Kurdistan has been used as one of the earliest texts written by Westerners about Kurdistan. Here, this text has been analyzed not as a historical or sociological source but more as a discursive and narrative construct. In the field of technology, although many post-colonialist scholars have used different strategies for analyzing texts,

this analysis, however, uses the approach of Stewart Hall (2007) and the rhetorical strategies that he has presented for textual analysis, namely, the Idealization, Misrecognizing difference, Rituals of degradation, and Exoticism are used as analysis techniques.

### **A case Study: Narrative of a Residence in Kurdistan 1820**

#### **About the book**

The visit of James Claudius Rich to Kurdistan was in the month of Nisan (May) of 1820 due to Mahmoud Pasha Baban's invitation. Rich has spent almost seven months in Kurdistan with his wife and companions (nearly 60 people). This travelogue gained importance since Rich is the first European who has thoroughly explored Kurdistan. Moreover, this travelogue has become the source of information for many orientalists who have referred to Rich's travelogue in their studies. For example, in *Sociology of the Kurds* (Agha, Sheikh and the government), considerable sociological information has been extracted and used by Martin van Bruinessen. Finally, Rich's travelogue consist of daily notes and this makes it different from many other travelogues that have discussed Kurdistan cursorily and generally.

#### **Orientalism's Strategies**

The book has been praised by the translator (Kurdish translator's introduction to the book) and some of the later writers (Deschner, 2012), however, going beyond the surface of the text and paying attention to the symbolic and profound aspects of this text and applying the orientalism's view reveals that this text, like other texts, has an orientalism's view and there are strategies which have served to the colonial purposes of the time. Further, the most important of these strategies are disclosed.

#### **Idealization**

This strategy illustrates the admiration of nature, primitivism of non-western communities and demonstrates the sincere simplicity and the affinity of non-western communities with nature (Hall, 2007).

In his book, Rich has frequently used this strategy and from the beginning of the book, he points to the fact that the reasons for accepting Mir Baban's invitation was to take advantage of climate to improve his health. On page 73, Rich describes the nature of Kurdistan as follows:

*"At half past seven we descended into a valley formed by a little stream, which rushes down between the hills to join the Leilan water, when a scene presented itself which called forth a unanimous exclamation of rapture from whole party. By the brook which turned a little mill was a small assemblage of cottages, completely embosomed in a wood of poplars, willows, fig, plum, and rose-trees, the latter all in full bloom. This grove was completely tenanted by nightingales, who joined their mellow voices to the murmuring of the rill."*

The idealization of nature from Rich's point of view goes to the minimalistic extent that he considers the nature of the Kurdistan as the most important factor the Kurds do not support their leaders during the crises; because they hate to be exiled to Baghdad and suffer from the warm weather (p. 107). In addition, when Rich describes the beauty of Kurdish nature, by adopting a Euro-centric approach, he always compares it to various parts of Europe (p. 89) and sets European nature as a scale to measure the nature of Kurdistan. This European orientation is seen more when throughout the text introduces Kurds as a lover of seeing the Europeans.

As noted above, the second aspect of the idealization strategy is through the demonstration of immaculacy, pure simplicity and the affinity with nature of the communities. This aspect of the idealization strategy has been used throughout the Rich's book .As Edward Said has mentioned, this type usually does not have a hostile face due to being latent. Consequently, the rate of resistance against it is low and evaluated positively by the ordinary audience and is not associated with conflicts. Throughout the book, Rich has described the Kurds as being generous, modest, agile, healthy, emotional, delightful and energetic. All of these descriptions are superficial and physical qualities. In this regard, when leaving Kurdistan Rich writes:

*“I, most unexpectedly, found in it the best people that I have ever met with in the East. I have formed Friendships, and been uniformly treated with a degree of sincerity, kindness, and unbounded hospitality, which I fear I must not again look for in the course of my weary pilgrimage.” (p.327).*

But at the same time, in this section, there is also a contradiction in the judgment of Rich, so that throughout the text there is a kind of dispraise of the apparent appearance (dress, face, and makeup) of different groups such as Goorans, Avramis, Sanandajs and in general, the Kurds (p. 251).

### **Rituals of Degradation**

This strategy seeks to attribute traits such as harshness and brutality, immortality, barbarism, and, in the extreme mode, cannibalism to non-western communities (Hall, 2007). The strategy is complementary to the previous strategy and stems from it. In fact, life in nature conveys lack of a developed and civilized culture. Therefore, living in the midst of nature is the basis for possessing qualities which are closer to nature than to civilization and culture. As expected, Rich has repeatedly used the above-mentioned strategy. For example, at the beginning of the book and before writing about the Kurdish region he writes: Throughout history, the Kurds have harassed their neighbors (p.59), and the communities living in boundaries with the Kurds are always subject to attacks by Kurdish bandits (p.60). On page 69, he described the Kurdish attack to the village of Leilan. “Last year, the Kurds raided the village and plundered everything they had and they burned and destroyed what they could not take.”

Here we can notice the wrong representation and distorted image of the Kurds by Rich. The characteristics he outlines for the Kurds are not valid since when discussing the components of this whole image, he attributes other traits as well. He introduces the Rich Rewendizis and the Khoshnavtis to be mountain-dwelling, unwise, and belligerent people with voracious willing to kill (p.164). As per the Avramis he points to greed, cruelty, coward ness, revengefulness, and trickery. He depicts the people of Baneh to be thieves, and the Sulaymaniyah to be vengeful (p.96). The schematic negative representation of the Kurds is more conspicuous when Rich describes the Jof Kurds.

*“[The Jofs] are described to be in the last state of barbarism . . . they cultivate nothing, and are reported to live wholly on acorns and fruit . . . like all savages, these people are extremely irritable and vindictive, and count the life of a man for nothing.” (p.125)*

Rich uses the strategy of rituals of degradation to the extent that Kurds are **avenger**, armed and always engaged in conflict, and says somewhere in the book: whenever Kurds are united against each other, like enemies, are brutal (P. 117). Rich also called the Kurds as uncivilized people who did not learn much in many areas and do things very nasty and beginner. For example, he says that although Kurds are very fond of sports and are interested in learning, they are very abnormal wrestlers (p. 145) and do not learn horseback riding properly (183). At the same time, he compared the Kurdish architecture with western architecture and introduced the Kurdish houses dirty, irregular and lack of mapping (104).

### **Misrecognizing Difference**

The above-mentioned strategy refers to the inability and failure to recognize and respect the differences (Hall, 2007) and falling into the trap of what is called ethnocentrism in sociology (Giddens, 2007). In Rich’s account of Kurdistan, misrecognizing difference has been rampant and he misinterpreted the phenomena instead of understanding them sympathetically and neutrally. He kept foregrounding the phenomena that were different from the western culture. For example, when he sees a person who speaks with a person sitting next to him between the two counts of prayers, he categorically forms the general idea that the Kurdish Muslim speaks to one another while praying (pp.144-5) or elsewhere he is surprised by the Kurdish breakfast and described it as something which looks like dinner (p.135). Moreover, according to Rich, it is strange that Kurds usually eat slowly and talk to each other while eating (p.144). In addition, he criticizes the Kurdish and Turkish cultures which do not allow women and men to be together while traveling, and thus the person has to travel apart from his or her spouse (p.39). He is also surprised that the Kurds are very fond of Halvah (a kind of sweet made of sesame flour

and honey) (p.214) and their "wired" drink (Doogh) (246). He also wonders at the fact that the Kurds go to bed late and wake up late (122) and they took up hobbies like the partridge war (110) and the dog war (121).

As for the two latter cases, we can mention the famous Clifford Geertz study titled "Deep Play: notes on the Balinese cockfight". In his study, Geertz has adopted a hermeneutical approach and penetrated into the depth of the phenomena. Instead of drawing on ethnocentrism or misrecognizing difference and proving a brief description of such hobbies and recreational activities, Geertz has provided a rich description of the observed phenomenon and heeded the deep meaning and underlying symbols of this phenomenon (Sherratt, 2008). In contrast, Rich, in many cases while discussing historical events, the origin of some phenomena, etc., take a technocratic approach and considers his stance to be valid and more reliable than empathic understanding of the native people. On page 276, he concludes that it is not possible to trust the awareness of the oriental people, not even to those of them who are knowledgeable and clever.

### **Exoticism**

This strategy involves depicting the non-Western communities and cultures as supernatural, mythical, mysterious, and full of fantasies (Said, 2007). Representation of Western myths from the Middle East as a land of wonders has greatly contributed to this schema. Like other orientalists, Rich used this strategy to make his travelogue more appealing and on page 273 he explicitly refers to the fact that he is interested in seeing and hearing strange things. Legendary and mystical creatures such as jinn and themes such as Fatalism and astrology are the most important tools used by Rich to achieve this goal. For example, on page 98 Rich points out to the importance of astrologers and their role in determining the time to visit Mahmud Pasha. Moreover, somewhere else, he refers to the superstitious beliefs of the Kurds that they believe that hunting near Kidder Elias's place of pilgrimage is taboo and prohibited (p.75). On page 353, he refers to the healing power of a spring from people's point of view and writes: "People believe that the water of this spring can heal some diseases and this is not because of its medical properties, but because of their legendary beliefs about the spring and the people believe in the existence of the jinn in the spring."

### **Conclusion**

All in all, analyzing the book "Narrative of a Residence in Kurdistan" shows that this text follows the same principles as other texts written in the colonial period. The author draws on manifest and latent orientalism and its various strategies to represent the Kurds as a non-Western community before the Western culture. Throughout this book, the Kurds are depicted to be as objects that are interesting, attractive and weird and are like the past of Western civilized societies. The author of the book has not historicized the causes and reasons of the present situation and also marginalized such issues and moves to a kind of essentialism. He goes to extreme generalizations in some cases has generalized his observations to the entire Kurdish community. In addition, throughout the book we see a kind of dual generalization. On the one hand, the author intends to build a community whole called the East which includes the Turks, Iranians, Kurds, Arabs and Hindus that is weighed in contrast with the West including Britain, Ireland, Scotland and Italy. This leads us to polarization that places one community in superior poles and the other in the peripheral pole. Thorough the book, the author represents the West to be superior to the East.

The present paper is theoretically reaffirming the efficiency and significance of Edward Said's theoretical and conceptual model and shows that it can be used to go beyond the superficial meaning of the texts. This model can be used to discover the invisible mechanisms of domination and understand the relation of the text with power, authority, and historical, social and cultural conditions. The findings of the present study are empirically consistent with other studies on the way Kurds represent in the works of Orientalists. Although using different strategies and analytical techniques, agreeing with Karimi (2017), the study concludes that one of the strategies used to represent the Kurds is exoticism in which Kurds are considered as superstitious, mythical, full of mystery and full of imagination. At the same time, the findings of this study are similar to those of Kowsari and Ahmadzadeh (2014), which

has shown that the Kurds also featured a kind of Aestheticization of Landscape in Rich's book, especially we are dealing with Kurds' natural scenery of the land, the rivers, mountains, forests and so on. . . . Furthermore, the findings of this study, consistent with the findings of Karimi et al. (2016), and Mohammadi and Mahmoudi (2016), have shown the European narrative of Orientalist readings. The tradition in which Europe is centered and everything that is outside of Europe and the West has been marginalized and removed. Overall, the findings of the present study show that this source, like other Orientalist texts, is not intended to represent the objectivist reality, but rather to make myths, and depicting the image of Kurd is not a real one, but a different kind of artifact and degraded.

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