

Counter-Orientalism in Ella Maillart's *The Cruel Way*<https://doi.org/10.33806/ijaes2000.23.1.13>

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Abstract: Travel writing becomes an object of scholarly scrutiny thanks to Edward Said's Orientalism in which he contends that travel narratives are not the objective portraits of Oriental peoples and loci, but the narratives that collude with Orientalism to justify and foster Western Empires. Nonetheless, scholars such as Behdad and Blanton disagree with Said's view, asserting that travel writers can transcend the rigid norms of Orientalism. Thus, by employing Behdad's and Blanton's views as its theoretical approach, this article will read Ella Maillart's *The Cruel Way* to highlight its counter-orientalism: the moments in which the travel writer challenges the inherited orientalist viewpoints. Accordingly, the article argues that Maillart exhibits her counter-orientalism in three ways: firstly, through fruitful engagement with Afghan food culture, secondly via celebrating the henna bearing testimony to her Islamophilic stance, and finally by interrogating the geography of violence. In doing so, she offers an unstereotypical picture of Afghanistan. To accentuate Maillart's counter-orientalist stance, the present article will juxtapose her benevolent attitude with the orientalist outlook of male travel writers with respect to food, henna, and violence. It concludes that Maillart's counter-orientalist perspective originates from her neutral nationality and gender.

Keywords: Afghanistan; counter-orientalism; food; henna; Islamophilic stance; violence

1. Introduction

As one of the oldest forms of literature (Dalrymple 2010: xxi), travel writing refers to the non-fictional narrative in which the travel writer not only records his/her observations of their destinations but also relates their encounter with indigenous peoples and cultures from the first-person perspective to their home readership (Borm 2004: 17). Prior to Edward Said's *Orientalism*, travel writing in the eyes of literary critics has been an insignificant genre belonging to popular literature and the commercial sphere (Clark 1999: 1). Thereby, they dismiss it as unworthy of their critical scrutinization. Nonetheless, Said's *Orientalism* catapults the genre into the critical limelight (Hannigan 2021:39). In *Orientalism*, Said studies British and French travel writers in the context of Western imperialism in the nineteenth century. For Said, their travelogues are not innocent accounts that faithfully report the realities of the encountered Orient, but the texts that collude with Western imperialism and reinforce its hegemonic ideologies: "To write about [the Orient] as much as traveling in [it] is the matter of touring the realm of political will, political management, and political definition" (1979: 169). Echoing Said, Paul Smethurst states that travel writing plays a crucial role in manufacturing imaginative geography and discursive formation of empires by employing crude binaries (2009:

1). One cannot completely refute Said's thesis, and at the same time, one cannot blindly accept his view as critical torchlight to assess all travel books. Said's pessimism about travel writing has prompted an outcry from an eminent travel writer like Colin Thubron: "To define the genre [of travel writing] as the act of domination rather than understanding is simplistic. If even the attempts to understand [another culture] is seen as aggression or appropriation, then all human contacts decline into paranoia" (qtd. in Dalrymple 2003: 61). Accordingly, this study will refrain from cataloging orientalist platitudes as the Saidian model demands. Instead, it will demonstrate how Ella Maillart transcends the binary distinction between the West and East. To do so, it will get its theoretical nourishment from Ali Behdad and Casey Blanton. Unlike Edward Said, these two scholars acknowledge that travel writers can display counter-Orientalism, that is, they can transcend the reductive and stereotyping gaze of Orientalism. Thus, the current study argues that Maillart displays her counter-orientalism during her journey in Afghanistan in three ways: firstly, via making a fruitful engagement with the food culture of Afghanistan. Secondly, through appreciating the use of henna by her Muslim travellers, bespeaking her Islamophilic stance. Lastly, by debunking the trope of violence attached to Afghanistan since the first Anglo-Afghan war in the nineteenth century. To underscore Maillart's counter-orientalism, this article will compare her non-orientalist response with the orientalist reactions of male travel writers such as Naipaul, Vambery, and Newby in relation to food, henna, and violence. In conclusion, this article contends that Maillart's counter-orientalism is related to her gender and neutral, Swiss nationality.

2. Maillart's life and works

The travel writer, journalist, photographer, Olympian, and actress, Ella Maillart (1903-1997) was born into a middle-class family in Geneva. She spends her childhood skiing and reading adventure books. In her youth, sailing engrosses her. Hence, with her friends, she sails across the Mediterranean Sea in 1923. However, her close friend's marriage forces her to forego their ambitious sailing scheme. In 1930, she travels to Moscow to research into Russian silent movies. The account of her foray into the communist community emerges in her *Parmi la jeunesse* [*About the Russian Youth*]. In 1932, once more she travels to Russia in quest of elemental laws of human existence; she hopes to find them among the nomadic peoples of Turkistan. Her encounter with these simple peoples appears in *Turkestan Solo*. In 1934 as a correspondent for *Le Petit Parisien*, Maillart makes a journey to Manchuria to report its occupation by Japan where she encounters Peter Fleming dispatched by *The Times*. Amid political turmoil, they move through the forbidden regions of Central Asia. This arduous travel ends in the publication of her *Forbidden Journey*. In 1939, Maillart and Annemarie Schwarzenbach set off in Schwarzenbach's Ford car for Afghanistan. By traveling there, they wish to flee from the insanity of an impending war. However, this is not their sole purpose. Maillart seeks to study the customs, crafts, and rituals of Kafiristan natives inhabiting the Hindu Kush valley as well as to attain self-mastery. By accompanying seasoned and sturdy Maillart, Schwarzenbach hopes to overcome

her morphine addiction and exorcise her turbulent past. On their car journey, they go through the following places. From Geneva, they drive to Italy and Yugoslavia. Then, they depart to Sofia and Istanbul. Finally, they reach Persia. Afterward, they depart to Afghanistan. Before reaching their destination, Schwarzenbach hangs a string of blue beads in an 'Oriental' fashion on her car radiator to ward off evil eyes. Herat is the first city that they visit in Afghanistan. Then they make a journey to Bala Murghab and Sheberghan. Their next destinations include Mazar-i Sharif, Puli-Khumri, and Bamiyan. Also, they go through Band-i Amir and Bagram. After six months, they finally reach Kabul where sick and feverish Schwarzenbach leaves Maillart to join her archeologist friends in Kunduz. Their voyage does not yield their desired result. Schwarzenbach fails to beat her addiction and Maillart cannot carry out the ethnographical study of Kafiristan's people due to closed borders. Finally, Schwarzenbach returns to Switzerland whereas Maillart stays in India from 1940 to 1945 to experience inner peace with the help of two Indian sages. Maillart's *The Cruel Way: Switzerland to Afghanistan in Ford* (1947) is the fruit of her journey with Schwarzenbach from Geneva to Afghanistan. By choosing *The Cruel Way* as the title for her travelogue, Ella Maillart accentuates her strained relationship with Schwarzenbach, her traveling companion. Like a stern matriarch, Maillart decides to stop Schwarzenbach from relapsing into morphine addiction during their trip. Nevertheless, Maillart fails in her attempts. Schwarzenbach's addiction prevents Maillart from fully interacting with native people to her heart's content. Hence, she believes that her journey has been cruel. When her travelogue deals with Afghanistan, Maillart dwells on its current political environment, history, religion, eminent historical figures, Sufism, culture, poets (such as Rumi, Jami, and Khaje Abdullah Ansari), architecture, modernization, industrialization, nomads, and Russian colonial ambition in Afghanistan. Moreover, holy sites, shrines, pilgrims, folk beliefs, bazaars, women, education, and the tension between the traditional way of life with that of the emerging modern world do not escape her attention. In composing her travelogues, Maillart copiously quotes from Afghan historical, literary, and religious materials as well as from English sources written about Afghanistan, rendering her travel book intertextual and polyphonic.

It is worth noting that Maillart takes her inspiration from Robert Byron's masterpiece: *The Road to Oxiana*. Many historical places that Byron visits and appreciates emerge in Maillart's travel book as if she desired to repeat his success; however, this does not mean that she does not have her own distinctive perspective and style. Besides *The Cruel Way*, Maillart publishes four books as well: *Gypsy Afloat* (1942) in which she recalls her earlier sailing adventures, *Cruises and Caravans* (1950), which is an autobiographical narrative, *Ti-Puss* in which Maillart thinks deeply about spirituality and the meaning of full life by focusing on her cat: Ti-Puss, and finally, *The Land of Sherpas* in which Maillart writes about her travel in the remote world of Nepal. Nature and climate change become her main concerns in the closing decades of her life. She dies in her cabin at Chandolin in 1997.

3. Review of literature

Despite its popularity, Maillart's *The Cruel Way* has not received enough attention from the scholars of travel writing. In her article: "Rediscovering the Travel Narrative of Ella Maillart", Borella believes that Maillart's *The Cruel Way* represents a turning point in her literary career because she turns her gaze into her inner journey instead of the exterior world (2001: 133). She also adds that Maillart's neutral nationality plays a significant role in circumventing and deflecting the colonial gaze (125;135). Mulligan echoes Borella's perspective. She maintains that Maillart's Swiss nationality has been influential in her adaptability and respect for other cultures (2009:123). Furthermore, Mulligan states that Maillart rejects Western superiority since she wants to "learn from those traveled among them" (126). Maley compares Maillart's travelogue with Schwarzenbach's travel book entitled: *All the Roads are Open*. It is worth noting that Schwarzenbach has been Ella Maillart's travel companion. Maley posits that in contrast to Maillart, Schwarzenbach has been successful "in capturing the individuality of some of those she meets as well as their senses of group identification" (2013: 220) because Maillart's travelogue for Maley is primarily about places like tombs, shrines, and archeological sites when it deals with Afghanistan (217). Hence, Maley does not value Maillart's travelogue. He opines that Maillart has presented "a stereotyped Afghanistan for her readers" (226). By contrast, Borella highlights the similarity between Maillart's travel book and Schwarzenbach's travelogue. She maintains that they formulate new ideas about their visiting cultures (2015: 124). Moreover, Borella states that their travelogues contribute to the "beginning of the humanitarian discourse that would grow out of Switzerland following World War II" (ibid.). Borella also points to the paradox in their travel books. Even though these two travelers criticize Western colonialism, they rely on "the new roads that have come to characterize colonial expansion" (128). Finally, Hannigan passingly holds that Maillart sometimes is critical of her visited peoples and places without insulting and being judgmental (2021:175). The problem with these studies is that they with the exception of Borella, do not closely read her travelogue. Also, they have not demonstrated how Maillart transcends orientalist conventions. Hence, this study attempts to fill this lacuna.

4. Theoretical approach

This study will build on Orientalism as its approach, albeit a nuanced version of Edward Said's model which is revised and refined by Ali Behdad in the field of travel studies. Also, it will draw on the view of Blanton which is consistent with Behdad's perspective. Edward Said defines Orientalism as "a style of thought based on an ontological and epistemological distinction made between the Orient and Occident" (1979: 2) for "dominating, restructuring, and having authority over it" (3). For Said, Orientalism is a closed, static, totalizing, and coherent system that does not accommodate openness and receptivity towards the Orient (222). This stance explains why he is not sanguine about "the possibility that a more

independent, more skeptical, thinker might have had different views on the matter” (7) of the Orient. Generally, travel writers from Said’s perspective, are the handmaidens of Western imperialism who represent the Orient monochromatically, through tunnel vision, and in alignment and dialogue with “previous cultural representations [that] they have encountered” (Youngs 2013: 9). One cannot generalize his theory and employ it as a critical tool to study all travelogues, especially *The Cruel Way* by Ella Maillart who is not affiliated with colonizing countries like Britain and France.

Ali Behdad in his book: *Belated Travelers* adds a corrective to Said’s *Orientalism*. Unlike Said, Behdad holds that Orientalism is a “diffused and fluid” discourse and displays “political resilience and capacity [which] utilizes [...] its voices of dissent and discontent,” as well as incorporates a “plurality of subject and ideological positions” (1999: 17). In other words, he posits that Orientalism is neither binaric nor monologic and closed; instead, it is an open discourse that can incorporate the discordant voices and subversive elements [counter-orientalism] within its architecture. Behdad also introduces the idea of ‘the desire for the Orient’ by which he means that the travel writer is not a detached observer, but a subjectivity whose relationship with his/her travelleses can include “involvement and indulgence, a kind of giving oneself over to the experience of the Oriental journey [as well as participation] in the immediate reality of the Oriental culture” (21).

Casey Blanton does not discuss Orientalism in her studies of travel writing; however, her vantage point commensurates with that of Behdad. In *Travel Writing: The Self and the World*, she states that female travel writers can transcend the myopic world of colonialism and racism through displaying cultural relativism and sympathy for their local travelleses: “Women travel writers may have found a way to subvert the messages of racism, colonialism [by extension Orientalism] through kind of cultural relativism and honest sympathy with native people” (1997:48). Echoing Blanton, Martin opines that understanding an encountered culture within its cultural context can be used as a weapon “against intolerance and assumptions of Western cultural superiority” (2011: 984).

The views of Behdad and Blanton are invaluable for studying Maillart’s travelogue because they acknowledge that travel writers can undermine the denigrative traditions of Orientalism.

5. Discussion

5.1. Fruitful food encounter

Unlike tourists that intake their controlled cuisine in the protected spaces, travel writers do not shun ingesting local food on their journeys. In doing so, they distinguish themselves from their often-despised counterparts. However, the travel writers are divergent in their responses to their encountered food. Some exploit it to forge a boundary between ‘Home/Identity’ and ‘Elsewhere/Difference’ via depicting it in disapproving terms, while others employ it to interrogate the constructed food binary by appreciating it. For instance, Dervla Murphy in her travelogue: *Full Tilt*, whose itinerary resembles that of Maillart and

Schwarzenbach, presents a myopic evaluation of her encounter with Oriental food culture, as the following extract illustrates the point:

As it is, during my two months traveling from Istanbul to Meshed, the roads became daily less road-like the Moslems more Islamic, the sanitary arrangements more alarming, the stenches stronger, and the food dirtier. By the time I arrived at the Afghan frontier, it seemed quite natural, before a meal, to scrape the dried mud off the bread, pick the hairs out of the cheese and remove the bugs from the sugar (1995: 102).

In the above passage, on the surface, Murphy is objectively sharing her first-hand experience and observation. However, if one adopts the hermeneutics of suspicion, the text exposes the travel writer's revulsion, intolerance, and Orientalist cultural baggage since she is subscribing to the notion of impure and unhygienic 'Elsewhere'. Here, she unconsciously or consciously groups Islam, stench, and dirty food into one category and despises them. Elsewhere in her travelogue, Murphy states that "The food is atrocious here [Afghanistan] and even dirtier than usual" (94). By doing so, not only does she cultivate the cult of food exclusion but also she creates a sense of antipathy towards the visited space in her readership.

Similarly, V.S. Naipaul orientalizes her encountered food in India in his travelogue: *An Area of Darkness*. Nowhere in this travelogue does he appreciate Indian food or enjoy its flavor and smell. For him, Eastern food is distinct from Western one: "There is East in the Food" (1964:10). Indeed, he implies that Eastern food is unhealthy, frightening, and dirty. Thus, he assumes that it is essential for him to exercise "colonial prudence (258) in dealing with local food in the course of his journey. Given his inability to cross the culinary border, it is hardly surprising that his encountered foodways for him are horrible: "It still horrifies me that people should put out food for animals on the plates that they themselves use. It horrifies me to see women sipping from laden with which they stir their pots. This is more than the difference. This is uncleanliness that we must guard against it" (33). From Naipaul's perspective, Indian food is equal to filth and dirt. For instance, when he introduces an old town, he illustrates the point: it is the town of "exposed fried food and exposed filth" (123). In the same vein, when he describes Indian villages, he contends that they are nothing more than the jumble of " food and filth" (45). Indeed, Naipaul employs the native food to reinforce the boundary between the East and West and highlight the putative inferiority of the Oriental culture and people.

Commenting on the negative reaction towards the food of alterity, Lupton notes that revulsion for the food of other cultures is a "common expression of discrimination and xenophobia" (1996: 35). Indeed, by disappreciating and denigrating the local food, Murphy and Naipaul promote the prejudiced perspective and lose the opportunity of creating sympathy and a humanistic bond through their food and foodways. The case of Murphy and Naipaul indicates that the cuisine encounter is not a neutral site without any symbolic and hegemonical implication, but a cultural space interconnected to ideology, power, and identity.

Unlike Murphy and V.S. Naipaul, Ella Maillart in her journey to Afghanistan intakes and tastes Afghan food, but she neither denigrates the food practices nor deploys it as a cultural vehicle to bolster the East-West dichotomy. Instead, her

reaction is appreciative, respectful, humanistic, and receptive which mirrors her genuine desire for the Islamic cultures, not the Orientalist desire which has the whiff of repulsive snobbery. For Maillart, local food helps her understand the material culture of her destination sensually and emotionally. As a result, repulsion does not puncture her food encounter as the following extract highlights the point:

At Charshambeh we rested under mulberry trees by the side of a torrent. Three bearded haijis sat near us [...]. They helped us order tea. The flatbread, thick, tasty, and good-smelling, was the best we had ever had. The flesh of the melting peaches was as sweet as white honey. Two kittens gamboled on the carpet. And (welcome change!) The air, too, was good, and I felt keenly alive, curious, courageous--ready to learn the local language even! (2013: 134-135).

The above passage records Maillart's food encounter in a humble teahouse in Bala Murghab, in northwest Afghanistan. Here, she genuinely appreciates the taste and smell of local light meal: tea, bread, and fruit, as well as the civility of the old people. The bread that she describes is fresh and fragrant without any unpleasant smell and mud about which Murphy complains. Forsdick believes that "Food often stands in a metonymic relationship to the culture that produces it" (2019: 245). Indeed, by acknowledging the food of alterity, she appreciates her visited culture. Forsdick also adds that savoring the taste of foreign food facilitates an "intimate relationship in the field of travel" (*ibid.*), and this explains why Maillart desires to learn the local language and immerse herself in the visited culture. Indeed, her warm response is a reminder of Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee's thesis: "Longing is the feminine side of love, the cup that waits to be filled" (*qtd. in Schimmel 2003: 107*).

No doubt, here sipping the fresh tea is conducive to her favorable appreciation because "drinking a cup of tea means satisfaction and well-being" (Frembgen 2017: 94). Moreover, the traveler signals her sense of delight after taking in the local dish by pointing to the cats' frolic. Indeed, these cats function as an objective correlative, to borrow T.S. Elliot's term: "Objects as the formula for conveying emotions" (Abrams & Harpham, 2015: 261). In the above passage, the travel writer by choosing positive adjectives and nouns creates a congenial atmosphere. By doing so, she textually and tacitly orients her sedentary readership to look at Afghan food from a fresh angle.

Maillart's encounter with the indigenous dish is not limited to the simple, staple meal. She dwells on enjoying the Afghan traditional gourmet dish when she and Schwarzenbach are the recipients of their Afghan host's gracious hospitality in Bala Murghab:

We rode saddled horses as far as the white tents that had been rigged for us. After drinking some doukh (buttermilk, the most cooling drink of Asia) flavored with mint, the three of us sat down cross-legged to a great repast eaten with our right hand-succulent kababs, pilau studded with nuts and spices, deep wooden dishes of creamy curds spooned up with a piece of flatbread. And as a finale, bowls of green or red tea at will. Ewer and towels were passed around for washing hands (2013: 136).

In this fragment, Maillart implicitly celebrates the richness and high standard of the Afghan gourmet cuisine testified by her detailed descriptions of entrée and side dishes as well as by employing affirmative adjectives: ‘great’ and ‘succulent’. Here tasting this delicious dish contributes to their sense of leisure and tranquility even though she does not mention it. What makes this food encounter striking is the travel writer’s and her companion’s adoption of local eating habits: sitting cross-legged and taking her food with their right hands. Similarly, elsewhere in her travelogue, she points to their receptivity toward the local eating manners: “By then we knew how to make a bolus of rice and meat with our fingers” (148). Here Borella’s observation about Maillart’s attitude to the Chinese culture equally holds true for Afghanistan culture too: “Rather than bringing her Swiss habits to China, Maillart immerses herself in the customs of the region” (2001:132). When measured against the backdrop of the Western table manners which view touching and taking food with the hand as a repulsive and uncivilized act [since the period of the Renaissance] (Lampton 1996: 20), Maillart’s openness towards the visited food culture distinguishes her from arrogant European travelers. For instance, a Hungarian traveler in Robert Byron’s *The Road to Oxiana* criticizes Afghans for having their food with their hands: “These Afghans, they are not human [...]. Are they not eating with their hands? With their hands! It is frightful” (1994: 125). For Maillart’s engaging with the local food is a cultural tool to leave behind her Western self. In one of her interviews, Maillart clarifies that by traveling to the East she desires to forget her Western perspective and fully feels the impact of every newness that she encounters in the course of her journey (Thomas 2020: 5). As Bouvier notes: “You think you are making a trip, but soon it is making and unmaking you” (2007: xi).

On another occasion, Maillart and Schwarzenbach encounter some nomadic women in a small valley in Band-i Amir while they are squatting near their yurts [tents]. They revive the memory of Maillart’s nomadic friends in Chinese Turkistan whom she has already met in her previous journeys. Hence, she approaches them to initiate a friendly conversation, yet she finds that they are reluctant to open up, and thus their small talk does not progress: “The women were reserved while we exchanged the usual questions. And how many camels did we have at home? Were we Russian? Or English?” (2013: 180). To Maillart’s surprise, the chief nomadic woman invites Maillart and Schwarzenbach to take food with them. Then everything changes. Here, food lubricates the cross-cultural interaction between the travel writer and their travelleses and paves the path for conversation and friendship, albeit transiently: “ ‘Oh, then, please’ said the chief woman smiling ‘you must share food with us!’ Rice was brought in an enameled basin: it might have meant that our new friends were well off” (ibid). Thanks to their new intimacy, their hosts tell Maillart and Schwarzenbach about their tribal identity, life, and upcoming journey: “They were a Mandozai tribe and would soon return, they told us, to the plains near Khanabad: the nights were beginning to be too cold” (181). Enjoying food with the female nomads ends in reciprocal exchange. If the local women warmly receive their new friends with decent food, Maillart gives “a red scarf to a boy and Russian sweets to the other children” (ibid.). Travel writer also textually paints their good

picture: “They were all very good-looking, the women in their black and red attire; [they] moved easily and with commanding gestures” (ibid.). Here Maillart’s encounter with the nomadic women is characterized by reciprocation. According to Mary Louise Pratt, reciprocity between the travel writer and the travelleses makes the travel narrative “human-centered and interactive” and “establishes equilibrium” between them in terms of the power relation (2008:78).

For Maillart during her journey in Afghanistan, the inn is not a mere space for consuming food, but a public sphere in which she displays her sympathy and humanism. For Instance, while waiting for their boiled eggs and tea in an inn in Shikari Valley, Maillart seizes the opportunity to socialize and create a friendly environment by dressing an old man’s wound in the inn: “While waiting I bathed an old man’s abscess in permanganate; he was something of a wit and the whole atmosphere seemed very friendly” (2013:169). However, it should be mentioned that the innkeeper does not prove their tea and eggs due to following a governmental edict (ibid.). This unsuccessful food encounter which is an exception does deter her from loving the food culture of her traveled world.

To sum up, contrary to Murphy and Naipaul displaying naked orientalist vision in relation to their encountered food, Maillart’s food encounter provides an ideal cultural opportunity for her to go beyond the cultural chauvinism of orientalism, form friendship, create a convivial ambiance, demonstrate her sympathy, and act humanistically. In other words, her food encounter permits Maillart to “deflect the colonial [by extension orientalist] gaze” (Borella 2001:135).

5.2. Celebrating the use of henna and revealing her Islamophilia

One of the common tropes in travel literature is despising and critiquing tourists that fail to appreciate their visited terrain. For instance, Robert Byron in his *The Road to Oxiana* accuses and satirizes a selfish and impatient American tourist who repeatedly claims that “I should like to go to Afghanistan. But I could only make a vurry [sic] hurried trip” (1994: 81). In doing so, he differentiates himself from the tourist thereby winning their readership’s trust. Similarly, a sympathetic traveler and a true lover of Eastern cultures, Ella Maillart criticizes Baroness Blixen-Finecke for undertaking a shallow journey and adopting an orientalist attitude. She encounters her in Kabul. However, the baroness’s mode of the journey does not impress her even though she drives her Ford car from Sweden to Kabul alone. From the viewpoint of Maillart, the baroness’ journey yields nothing: she has “seen little, stopped nowhere, and her photographs show nothing but her Ford [the extension of her traveling identity] in the sand, in water, in crowds, and deserts” (2013: 20-21). In other words, Maillart implies that the baroness’s identity remained unchanged and unchallenged like a hard shell. For the baroness, her Eastern destination is nothing more than a spatial object to be conquered by her car in the shortest time (20). For Maillart, the bitter part of the baroness’s voyage is that she cannot establish a meaningful connection with the Eastern people and culture. Instead, the baroness boasts of her arrogant and disrespectful manner. For instance, the baroness claims that she has cocked “a snook at the local gendarmes try[ing] to stop her”

(ibid.). Mainly, for this reason, Maillart turns down her invitation to accompany her (21).

If the baroness is indifferent to the local people and their material culture, then Maillart is genuinely curious about the new world through which travels: “Nor will we allow [the] speed [of our car] to build an invisible us and the life around [in our traveled destinations]” (20). Alterity does not repel her but powerfully attracts her and fuels her desire. This is why Borella states that “Maillart revels in her surroundings and people and cultures that she encounters” (2001: 132). In her journey to Afghanistan, she celebrates the application of henna among indigenous people. Indeed, her receptivity towards them renders her a cosmopolitan voyager. To give an example, like a flaneur, she visits the local market in Bala Murghab, in which she observes some Afghan villagers with henna-dyed beards. The sight of them leaves a good impression upon her as the following passage illustrates the point in the case:

Some of the villagers who waited on us had carrot-colored beards, the result of applying henna to white hair. According to the advice of the Prophet, to "bind" henna, to clean the teeth, to take wife, and to use perfume are four things every believer should do. “The benefits are many that come from the use of henna. It drives out shifting pains through the ears, restores sight when weakened, keeps nose membranes soft, imparts sweet odor to mouth and strength to the roots of teeth, removes body odors as well as a temptation from Satan, gladdens angels, rejoices believers, enrages infidels, is an ornament to the user and diminishes trials in the grave.” Far from enraging, these flaming beards always gladden me when I see them brightening a bazaar crowd (2013:136).

As a cultural translator, Maillart manages to translate the henna’s different shades of meaning and connotations by pinpointing its religious, medicinal, and hygienic significance in the context of Islamic culture for her readership. For the travel writer, the henna is not a mere cosmetic dye to be employed for body adornment but a multifunctional signifier in the context of Islam. Here Maillart indebts her new understanding and cultural translation to the Prophet’s saying which functions as an Islamic intertext in her travelogue. Given the importance of the henna in Islam, the Prophet Mohammed has extolled it as the unique plant: “There is no a dearer plant to Allah than henna” (qtd. in. DeMello 2007: 152). Edward Said in his *Orientalism* admonishes travel writers for perceiving the encountered culture through intertexts (1979: 93) because Said believes that quoted texts/intertexts will occupy a more important position than the visited context (ibid.). Contrary to Said’s opinion, in the above passage, her selected quotation not only enriches her travel book but also reveals her genuine sympathy for the henna usage among her local travellers. By using the Prophet’s saying, the travel writer enters into a dialogue with the Islamic culture and dialogizes her encounter, resulting in mirroring her Islamophilic sentiment and bestowing an Islamic aura and touch to it. In other words, the quotation helps her to celebrate the alterity and transcend the Manichean structure of Orientalism. Here, Maillart illustrates that she is not an indifferent spectator, but an engaged traveler under the positive influence of her encountered

sign. The sight of the henna imparts to her a sense of delight: “These flaming [henna-colored] beards always gladden me.” Furthermore, she believes that the henna-dyed beard animates and brightens the texture of the market. Indeed, her style of cultural translation illustrates her celebration of travelleses and points to her cultural relativism and her sincere desire for the Orient. Indeed, she is a passionate lover that feels delighted in the cultural beauties of her encountered zone.

One can appreciate her counter-orientalism and the celebration of her travelleses when comparing her liberal view about the henna and beard with the dogmatic one upheld by Spanish Christian in the sixteenth century as well as that of Arminius Vambery in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Spanish Christian travelers in the sixteenth century have pointed to the use of henna among Muslims in their travel accounts. They exploit it to set up a distinction between themselves and Muslims (Constable 2018: 57; 59). As a supposedly repulsive Muslim practice, not only have the Spanish Christians condemned it but also classified it as a superstitious Islamic ritual, and thus heretical (2). Given the hostility of these Christians towards the henna, it does not come as a surprise to discover that they ban its application since they interpret its usage among Christians as an expression of their allegiance to Islam (57) and in some cases, its application leads to punishment as well (59). Their antagonistic attitude towards the henna dyed beards of Muslims is crystallized in a medieval Spanish chronicle in which the Spanish historian describes Muslim soldiers whose beards are dyed with henna as cows [with red hair]: “Barbas y cabellos alfeñados, parecian que eran vacas” [With their beards and shaggy hair, they looked as if they were cows] (qtd. in Constable 58). Here Spanish Christians’ outlook towards henna and beard exemplifies what Edward Said calls latent orientalism [essentialized perspective about the Orient] while Maillart’s perspective towards them illustrates counter-orientalism; that is, Maillart’s narrative departs from the reductive and stereotyping gaze of previous Christian travelers.

Likewise, Arminius Vambery in his journey to Turkistan/Central Asia in the second half of the nineteenth century points to the frequent use of henna by his Muslim travelleses. However, he is blind to the cultural significance of the henna in the Islamic culture of Turkistan. He employs it to erect a cultural border between his supposedly ‘elsewhere’ and ‘home’ by equating the henna with dirt and redundant custom that worsens the looks rather than improves it, as the following passage reflects:

The henna painting [in Turkistan] renders every Muslim grandee loathsome despite his outward splendor and rich dress [...]. With henna, they dye their fine black beards and their very eyes red, the color of bricks. Persons of standing also dye with henna their fingernails and hands. The coat of paint hides the dirt. A gentleman or lady having made use of it can afford to do without washing for several days (1884: 81).

As mentioned earlier, Maillart’s favorable response toward henna testifies to her Islamophilic inclination. She subtly demonstrates it by airing her traveler’s voice. For instance, when in Bala Murghab, a town in northwestern Afghanistan. Ella Maillart has the chance to engage in a dialogue with an Afghan driver in which the

driver prophetically predicts that Russians' efforts to convert Muslim Afghans to the Communist ideology will prove futile. He believes that Islam has vaccinated them against the Soviets' godless theories and their profane mantras. In other words, Islam will not permit them to be alienated from their cherished religious beliefs. Moreover, he is of opinion that his compatriots will remain faithful to their cultural roots, and avoid swapping them with the exported, alien Communism:

I chatted with the Afghan chauffeur. He did not think that with his compatriots, Soviet propaganda would have any success. The Afghan is still under the sway of his mother [the symbol of their roots and traditions] and attached to Islam, he is not likely to listen to the godless theories of his northern neighbors (2013:136).

By giving voice to the Afghan chauffeur, Maillart sympathetically aligns herself with the driver and takes sides with Islam. In this fragment, the driver implies that the Afghans' resistance is interconnected to Islamic teachings that do not acknowledge the legitimacy of any belief system that refutes the Oneness of God, not to mention Marxism which revolves around materialism. Also, he suggests that Islam will legitimate its Afghan followers to take action against the velvet hegemony of Communism if it threatens the integrity of their Islamic community. To put it differently, Islam for the Afghans will serve as a bulwark against the foreign ideology of the Soviets. The Afghans' anti-colonial resistance against the Soviets in the 1980s verifies his claim. Jason Elliot in his award-winning travelogue: *An Unexpected Light* which deals with the Soviet-Afghan war foregrounds the Afghans' valor, resistance, and agency in the face of the Russians armed to the teeth: "Pitifully under-equipped in both material and training to cope with a twentieth war, they [Muslim Afghans] faced seemingly odds. Confronted by the enemy's awesome firepower, their almost reckless enthusiasm for resistance was, for those who had the privilege to witness it, unforgettable" (32). Indeed, Maillart through dialogizing subtly celebrates the power of Islam in the face of a foreign ideological creed.

Furthermore, Maillart illustrates her Islamophilic tendency when he visits the shrine of Imam Ali, the fourth Imam of Muslims. It is worth noting that the Afghans believe that Imam Ali is buried in *Mazar Sharif* rather than in Najaf, Iraq: "Hazrat Ali lives in my memory for the peaceful atmosphere of refuge that enveloped me as soon as I passed the limit of the sanctuary" (2013:135). Here, she attests to the lingering and positive impact of the holy space on her soul and memory since its sacred aura covers her and fills her with spiritual security and peace, shielding her from the onslaughts of the secular Western world from which she is escaping.

Maillart's authentic and meaningful encounter with the holy sites in Afghanistan points to the fact that the encountered Oriental zone is not a passive object to "survey and remain unchanged through its travel experiences" (Thompson *Travel Writing* 127). Instead, the spiritual magnetism of the sacred places indicates Islam and Islamic Orient are dynamic and exert influence over Ella Maillart, and can create authentic moments of cultural reciprocation. This explains why she states that visiting the shrine and mosques enchants her (Maillart 2013: 107). However, the traveler should exhibit a sincere desire and enthusiasm for the Orient as Maillart

does, testified by her two statements: “The minarets touch me like the smile of a friend” (109) and “An intimacy has grown between myself and the dome with its Kufic characters” (ibid).

In conclusion, Maillart does not remain uninterested in the indigenous people. Unlike male travel writers who adopt a critical and arrogant approach toward the use of henna among Muslims. Maillart acts differently. She adopts an Islamic perspective and states that far from enraging and repulsing her, the sight of henna gladdens her heart and beautifies the atmosphere of the bazaar. Maillart's benevolent attitude toward the henna testifies to her Islamophilic tendency which she reveals when she sympathetically identifies with an Afghan driver and dialogizes his voice. The driver believes that Islam has immunized Muslim Afghans against Communism and helped them counter it. Moreover, Maillart indicates her attraction toward Islam by her sincere engagement with Islamic sites such as holy shrines and Mosques whose domes are decorated with Islamic calligraphy. These spaces fill her with love, friendship, and peace.

5.3. Interrogating the geography of violence

According to Shah Mahoumed Hanifi, Afghanistan is one of the most misrepresented loci in terms of Orientalism (2018: 50). In Western travelogues, this contact zone is represented as the geography of violence and the frontier of savagery (Fowler 2007: 30; Manchanda 2020: 69). Bayly believes that after the Afghans inflict a humiliating defeat on the British army in the First Anglo-Afghan war, the image of Afghanistan amounts to a violent territory in British imagination (2016: 179). British travelers have played an instrumental role in perpetuating this negative picture since then (Fowler 2007: 34). One can witness this type of orientalist vision in Eric Newby's *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush*:

He [the local Afghan from Nuristan] began to laugh. I looked into his eyes; they were strange and mad. He had about him an air of scarcely controlled *violence* that I had noticed in some of the others inside the hut. An air of being able to commit the *most atrocious crimes* and then sit down to a hearty meal without giving them further thought. The man was a *homicidal maniac*. Perhaps they [were all] *homicidal maniacs* (2013:195 emphases added).

In the above passage, Newby exploits the synecdoche, using a member to mean the whole community, to accentuate the allegedly barbarian nature of his visited travelees in Nuristan (by extension, Afghanistan). Even though his Afghan hosts provide the travel writer and his companion with gracious hospitality and treat them with utmost care and respect, the travel writer cannot extricate himself from the pull of this orientalist trope.

The image of Afghanistan as the geography of violence is not limited to British travelogues, it appears in the realm of cinema and literature as well. With respect to the former, Seddiq Barmak's movie: *Osama* provides the best example. In this movie, the director corroborates the orientalist rhetoric about Afghanistan (Graham: 2010: 103). He represents it as the locus of terror, horror, violence, and misogyny by focusing on the plight of a teenage Afghan girl who disguises herself

as a boy in a supposedly oppressive Islamic regime to help her family survive. To convince his Western viewership of the alleged barbarity in Afghanistan under Islamic rule, the Western-based director employs reductive techniques of Hollywood (94). For the director, Afghanistan is an Oriental dystopia and he interlinks this supposed savagery with Islam. In the realm of literature, Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* equates Afghanistan with essentialized violence, cruelty, and misogyny by highlighting the pains and sufferings of two female characters victimized by their abusive and violent husband. In doing so, the American-based novelist "contributes to the normalization of Islamic World/Afghanistan as violent and irrational [space]" (Fitzpatrick 2015:247).

In contradiction to British male travelers, Barmak, and Khaled Hosseini, Ella Maillart interrogates this orientalist mentality by using humor and irony the following extract illustrates the point,

A modern rectangular building in the middle of nowhere, a long passage, an oil lamp, a sitting room, curtains, plush tablecloth, and chairs: our first night in Afghanistan! Having unrolled our sleeping bags near the window where some coolness might reach us. We fell asleep. But soon to [be] waken uneasy and disturbed. Yes, there was the whisper of a man's voice coming from the window. Should we need a weapon? we had none. But then we had the last laugh of the day and perhaps the best: we grasped that the "bandit" was begging: Khanum, shigret (Lady, cigarette) (2013: 118)!

In the above passage, the travel writer initially creates a tense atmosphere that is vaguely reminiscent of gothic romances since two female travelers visit a mysterious structure in a remote region in Afghanistan to take a rest. In doing so, the travel writer creates a sense of terror in her readership. The fear reaches its climax when Maillart hears the suspicious whisper of a potential brutal bandit who is likely bent on robbing them and taking their lives, as one reads in *The Arabian Nights*. This is why she regrets not carrying a gun to defend their souls. Female travelers are usually advised to be armed with guns and revolvers in their journey to the supposedly non-European dangerous regions. The best case in point is Mary Kingsley who carries her gun on her journey in Africa. By constructing this terrifying moment, Maillart bolsters what Lisle calls "The discourse of modern cartography" which divides the world into the safe home and the violent elsewhere (2006: 137). Then when her readers wait for a violent act from a supposedly Afghan highwayman, she suddenly mocks the inherited and well-established orientalist expectation by revealing the identity of the supposed miscreant. Instead of encountering the bandit and an alleged act of savagery, she confesses that they have encountered an innocent local man demanding an insignificant item of pleasure: a cigarette! This incident gives rise to happy laughter. Indeed, here through appropriating the situational irony, that is, the discrepancy between expectation and fulfillment, the travel writer parodies and punctures the trope of the violent Orient. Her burlesque renders her text humorous. Given humor in travel writing, Carpenter observes that humor is "the mainstay of travel writing" and its occurrence depends on "exaggerations, ironies, and reversals [which] produce laughter" (2019: 123). In the above fragment, Maillart capitalizes on these elements: exaggeration, irony, and

reversal. Hence, Maillart's humor introduces her readership to an alternative vision of Afghanistan: her traversed land is safe and secure.

Moreover, the travel writer's positive remarks about her visited space in her travelogue discredit the alleged spacial savagery about Afghanistan: "Let me say, by the way, that even for unaccompanied women there is no danger nowadays in traveling through Afghanistan, and so my story will disappoint anyone who is looking for adventures" (2013: 20). From Maillart's perspective, it is futile to seek adventure in Afghanistan. Adventure is associated with colonialism, and it is enacted in the supposedly wild places. Furthermore, she notes that female travelers in Asia [including Afghanistan] are safe: "I am convinced that when difficulties are encountered in Asia, women are more readily helped if they are seen to be without a man" (98) this is why she enjoys peace in Afghanistan (127). Indeed, Maillart enlightens her readership that instead of hostility, she encounters the Afghans who are "kind", know "how to smile," and treat them as "their equals and not like wrecks" (121). One can safely attribute the kindness of native people towards travelers to their Islamic culture. Tharik Hussain in his travelogue: *Minarets in the Mountains* remarks that "The tradition of looking after travelers has always historically been strong on in Muslim lands" (2021: part one: Muslim Town). Further, given the importance of travelers within the Islamic culture, suffice to say that the prophetic tradition explicitly states that the supplication of a traveler will be surely granted (Bukhari 2003: 339). One can observe the illustration of the local people's kind-heartedness towards Maillart and Schwarzenbach when three Afghans help these two ladies with their broken car in the middle of nowhere without harming them and getting their offered money. Their magnanimous gesture makes her hold them in awe:

Then, O joy, I saw three men coming towards us. I greeted them smilingly, made explanatory gestures, and offered the spade to the youngest. Two of them worked in turn for a few minutes. The third sat down, bored. Just as I was thanking our lucky stars, they walked away [. . .]. I ran after them, convinced that the word bakshish [Money] would alter their minds. But no. They did not want my tip (2013: 119).

Here Maillart's encounter with local people is a reminder of Levinas' favorable attitude toward the 'Other': "The other has a face, and it is a sacred book in which good is recorded" (Kapusinski 2008: 35).

In sum, contrary to the British travel writers like Eric Newby who have "entrenched existing negative generalizations into indisputable convictions about Afghanistan" (Aslami 2020: 437) due to the First Anglo-Afghan War, Maillart questions the Orientalist trope of the geography of violence in Afghanistan by parodying and refuting its legitimacy.

6. Conclusion

In her journey to Afghanistan, Ella Maillart neither cultivates the cult of exclusion nor inflates her home culture. One can equate her journey with receptivity towards, sympathy with, and desire and respect for her travellers and their cultures, finding expression in her enthusiastic encounter with food culture, the celebration of henna,

indicating her Islamophilic inclination, as well as the subversion of the myth of violent Afghanistan. In the course of her journey, Maillart practices cultural relativism since she seeks to see her encountered terrain from the lens of Islam and local people rather than European cultural baggage. Indeed, her emic approach results in defamiliarizing the orientalist image of Afghanistan and highlighting its cultural charms. Maillart's travelogue challenges Edward Said's claim in his *Orientalism*: "It is correct that every European, in what he can say about the Orient, is consequently a racist, an imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric" (1979: 204). Nevertheless, the findings of the study substantiate de Larquier's view about Maillart's travel book:

Maillart did not belong to a colonizing country ...her aim was not to reinforce hierarchical division or Western superiority, but rather to seek cultural awareness, admit misconceptions about others, and ultimately unify the self and other through both observations that transcend the colonial gaze [by extension orientalist gaze] or dominant discourse, and through the spiritual understanding of the foreign Other (2007: 197).

Here, de Larquier rightly attributes her favorable response toward an Islamic world to the neutral nationality of Ella Maillart. As a result, neither does she participate in the architecture of imperialism nor justify any colonial presence in Afghanistan. Instead, she is critical of Communist ideology affiliated with the Russian Empire. Moreover, one can extend de Larquier's thesis and posit that her gender also plays a significant role in her counter-orientalist perspective. In the words of Korte, some female travelers "are more willing to and able to cross-cultural boundaries than male travelers" (2000:123). In sync with Korte, Sara Mills in her *Discourse of Difference* asserts that "The work of women travel writers cannot be fitted neatly to the orientalist framework [because they] constitute an alternative and undermining voice. They act as a critique of some components of other colonial writings [by extension orientalist writings]" (1991: 62-63). Similarly, Foster and Mills in their *Anthology of Women's Travel Writing* note that travel books by female travelers are characterized by their interest in a domestic realm like food, their empathy for their female travelleses, and their egalitarian attitude towards the natives (2002:11). Ella Maillart, in her *The Cruel Way* demonstrates all these positive qualities highlighted by Korte, Mills, as well as Foster and Mills. This explains why her travelogue is dramatically different from those written by male travel writers. However, it should be noted that it will be an oversimplification to romanticize all women travel writers as anti-imperialist because travel writers like Freya Stark actively participate in promoting the British Empire in the Middle East as her travel book *Baghdad Sketches* illustrates the point (Bird 2020: 473).

Finally, Maillart's travel book validates Hannigan's perspective on travel writing: "Travel writing can be an attempt at understanding and sympathy and [it can be written] from the position of humility" (2021:65). One can safely claim that Maillart is a cosmopolitan traveler who refrains from Orientalist tunnel vision and her travelogue reveals the best side of travel writing: "The desire to open up the world to engagement between different ideas, cultures, and peoples" (Huggan 2014: 84). In a world in which Islamophobia is on the rise and the demonization of

Afghanistan in Western media is a bitter reality, reading Maillart's travelogue will help both Western and Eastern readership and viewership to look at Afghanistan and its Islam culture sympathetically and respectfully.

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