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THE INFLUENCE OF BABUR'S "BABURNAMA" ON ENGLISH LITERARY PERCEPTION OF THE EAST

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Abstract
This article examines the influence of Babur's Baburnama on English literary perception of the East. Through critical analysis of its English translations—Beveridge (1922), Leyden-Erskine (1826), and Thackston (1996)—the study explores how the text shaped Western understanding of Eastern identity and self-representation. The article argues that the Baburnama fundamentally challenged Orientalist stereotypes by presenting a multifaceted, humanized portrait of an Eastern ruler whose introspection and literary sensibility defied Western expectations. Drawing on reception history and postcolonial critique, the analysis reveals how the text contributed to reconfiguring English literary perceptions toward more nuanced understandings of Eastern subjectivity.

Keywords: Baburnama, Babur, English translation, Orientalism, Annette Beveridge, literary perception, Central Asian literature, autobiography, cross-cultural reception.

Introduction

The encounter between Eastern and Western literary traditions has long been mediated by translation, interpretation, and the complex dynamics of cultural representation. Since Edward Said's Orientalism (1978), scholars have critically examined how Western representations of the East have often served to construct, rather than reflect, Eastern realities—frequently reducing complex cultures to exoticized stereotypes or framing Eastern societies through the lens of Western superiority. Yet within this fraught history of cross-cultural encounter, certain texts have played a transformative role, challenging dominant paradigms and opening new possibilities for mutual understanding.

Among these, the Baburnama—the autobiographical memoir of Zahirud-Din Muhammad Babur (1483–1530), founder of the Mughal Empire—occupies a singular position. Composed in Chagatai Turkic, the language of the Timurid courts, and later translated into Persian under Babur's grandson Akbar, this text represents what scholars have called "the first fully fledged autobiography in Islamic literature" . Its significance, however, extends far beyond its status as

a literary landmark. For English readers, the Baburnama has served as a crucial window into Eastern culture, offering a portrait of an Eastern ruler that defied prevailing stereotypes.

This article investigates the influence of Babur's Baburnama on English literary perception of the East. It addresses three interconnected questions: First, how did the Baburnama enter English literary consciousness, and through what translational interventions? Second, what aspects of the text challenged or transformed existing Western perceptions of Eastern identity? Third, how did the reception of the Baburnama contribute to broader shifts in English literary representations of the East during the late colonial and postcolonial periods?

The study employs a methodological framework combining translation history, reception theory, and postcolonial literary analysis. It examines the Baburnama's English translations—particularly those of John Leyden and William Erskine (1826), Annette Susannah Beveridge (1922), and Wheeler Thackston (1996)—as sites of cultural mediation where questions of authenticity, representation, and interpretation intersect. Drawing also on critical responses from English literary figures including E. M. Forster, Edward Denison Ross, and William Dalrymple, the article traces the evolving reception of the text within English literary culture.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Baburnama as literary and historical source

Scholarly engagement with the Baburnama in the West began in the second half of the 19th century, initially focused on its value as a historical source for Mughal and Central Asian history . Early European orientalists approached the text primarily as a document of political and military events, extracting information about Babur's campaigns, his genealogy as a Timurid prince, and the establishment of Mughal rule in India. This historiographical orientation reflected broader patterns in Western orientalism, which often privileged texts that could be mined for factual information about Eastern political structures while neglecting literary, aesthetic, and subjective dimensions.

However, as translations made the full text more accessible, scholars began to recognize the Baburnama's literary significance. The American historian Stephen F. Dale, in his influential 1990 essay "Steppe Humanism," argued that the Baburnama represents a distinctive form of autobiographical writing that combines Turco-Mongolian oral traditions with Persian literary conventions. Dale's concept of "steppe humanism" captures the text's unique fusion of martial ethos and literary sensibility, its unflinching self-scrutiny, and its celebration of worldly achievement alongside aesthetic cultivation.

More recently, scholarship has turned to the Baburnama's reception history and its role in shaping cross-cultural understanding. The Indian novelist Amitav Ghosh has hailed the work as "one of the true marvels of the medieval world," while William Dalrymple has called it "one of the most fascinating autobiographies ever written . . . almost Proustian in its self-awareness" Such assessments signal a shift from viewing the Baburnama as merely a historical source to recognizing its place in world literature.

Translation History

The Baburnama's journey into English began with the posthumous publication of John Leyden and William Erskine's Memoirs of Zehired-din Muhammed Babur, Emperor of Hindustan in 1826. Leyden, a Scottish orientalist, had worked from Persian translations before his death in 1811; Erskine completed the project based on Leyden's materials. This translation, while pioneering, relied on the Persian intermediary rather than the original Chagatai Turkic text—a significant limitation given the linguistic and cultural specificities of Babur's original.

The landmark translation that established the Baburnama in English literary culture was Annette Susannah Beveridge's 1922 version, published by the Royal Asiatic Society. Beveridge's achievement was monumental: she translated directly from the Chagatai Turkic original, a language then little known in the West, producing what remains the most complete and meticulously annotated English edition. The project consumed nearly twenty years of her life, involving painstaking research to establish an authentic text and extensive footnotes and appendices. Beveridge's translation, characterized by what one scholar terms "utter reliability and precision," continues to be consulted as the standard version.

The most recent major translation is Wheeler Thackston's 1996 edition, published as The Baburnama: Memoirs of Babur, Prince and Emperor. Thackston's translation aims for greater literary fluency than Beveridge's sometimes literal rendering, though scholars have noted certain textual shortcomings, particularly his reliance on a single manuscript. The triangulation of Chagatay, Persian, and English texts in Thackston's edition facilitates comparison and has proven valuable for subsequent scholarship.

English literary reception

Critical responses from English writers and scholars reveal the Baburnama's impact on literary sensibilities. Sir Edward Denison Ross, the first director of London's School of Oriental Studies, deemed it "among the most enthralling and romantic works in the literature of all time". E. M. Forster, in a notable observation, remarked that "sanguine and successful conquerors" are generally intolerable on the page, "but what a happiness to have known Babur! He had all that one seeks in a friend". Forster's response is particularly revealing, as it registers the Baburnama's power to create intimacy across cultural and temporal distance.

Contemporary writers continue to register this effect. Ghosh's characterization of Babur as "both a Caesar and a Cervantes" captures the text's fusion of martial achievement and literary sensibility. This assessment echoes Stanley Lane-Poole's earlier observation that "Babur's memoirs are no rough soldier's chronicle of marches and countermarches, they contain the personal impressions and acute reflections of a cultivated man of the world, well read in Eastern literature, a close and curious observer".

METHODOLOGY

This study employs qualitative textual analysis within a comparative framework, examining the Baburnama across its three major English translations. The analysis focuses on three interrelated dimensions:

- Translation history: The study traces the translational choices made by Leyden-Erskine, Beveridge, and Thackston, considering how these choices shaped English readers' encounter with the text. Particular attention is given to the translation of culturally specific terms, the rendering of Babur's literary and aesthetic observations, and the treatment of personal, confessional passages.
- Reception analysis: Drawing on published reviews, critical essays, and references by English literary figures, the study reconstructs the reception history of the Baburnama within English literary culture. This includes examination of how the text was positioned within debates about Oriental literature and autobiography as a genre.
- Comparative thematic analysis: The study identifies key themes in the Baburnama that challenged prevailing Western perceptions of Eastern identity: Babur's self-representation as simultaneously warrior, poet, and gardener; his candid treatment of personal weakness (including struggles with alcohol and drug use); his reflections on love, loss, and failure; and his intimate engagement with the natural world .

The study is limited by its focus on English-language reception, acknowledging that the Baburnama's influence extends far beyond Anglophone contexts. It does not undertake detailed analysis of the original Chagatai text, relying instead on the scholarly work of Dale, Thackston, and others for philological grounding.

RESULTS

The self-portrait that defied stereotypes

Analysis of English responses to the Baburnama reveals that the text's most powerful effect on Western readers has been its presentation of a complex, contradictory, deeply human Eastern subject. Babur's self-portrait challenged several prevailing Orientalist stereotypes:

The stereotype of the inscrutable eastern ruler: Babur's candor about his inner life—his depressions, his struggles with temptation, his grief over lost loved ones—presented a mode of self-revelation that readers found startlingly modern. His account of first experimenting with wine captures this quality: "Although at that time I had not committed the sin of drinking to tipsiness, had not experienced drunkenness and did not know the delight and pleasure of being drunk as it should be known, not only was I inclined to have a drink of wine, but my heart was actually urging me to cross that valley". This internal conflict, rendered with psychological precision, defied representations of Eastern rulers as either despotic tyrants or exotic sensualists.

The stereotype of eastern despotism: Babur's reflections on power reveal an unusual self-awareness. He acknowledges the brutality of his actions—"I had two or three persons shot, two or three cut in pieces, and so stamped the rising down"—but also records his failures, his moments of indecision, and his dependence on the counsel of others, particularly his grandmother, whom he describes as "very wise and farsighted". The portrait is of a ruler who governs through a combination of force, diplomacy, and personal charisma, but who is also subject to doubt and vulnerability.

The stereotype of eastern cultural stagnation: Babur's engagement with literature, art, and horticulture challenged Western assumptions about Eastern culture. His critical judgments of

contemporaries— "His verse is flat and insipid," he writes of Sultan Mahmud Mirza, adding that "not to compose is better than to compose verse such as his"—reveal a sophisticated literary culture with its own standards of aesthetic judgment. His descriptions of gardens, flowers, and birds reflect a tradition of nature writing that Western readers found unexpectedly familiar and moving.

The Baburnama and the transformation of autobiography as genre

The Baburnama's influence extended beyond representations of the East to shape English literary understanding of autobiography itself. As the earliest major autobiography in Islamic literature, the text presented a model of life-writing that differed significantly from Western traditions exemplified by Augustine, Rousseau, or Pepys.

The Baburnama combines, in ways that English critics found striking, several generic modes: the chronicle of military campaigns, the aesthetic diary, the collection of literary anecdotes, and the confessional memoir. Babur's digressions—from detailed accounts of battles to reflections on the beauty of tulips, from critiques of poets to instructions on throwing a party—create a texture that readers compared to Montaigne and Pepys. This generic hybridity challenged English assumptions about the proper scope and form of autobiographical writing.

The Baburnama presented a model of selfhood that differed from Western individualism. Babur situates himself within multiple networks of identity: as a Timurid prince claiming descent from Tamerlane; as a Central Asian Turkic speaker engaging with Persian literary culture; as a ruler accountable to his followers; as a Muslim sometimes conflicted about religious observance. This layered identity—neither simply "Eastern" nor reducible to Western categories of individuality—offered English readers a more complex model of selfhood than the Orientalist binary of East and West typically allowed.

Translators as cultural mediators

The three major English translations of the Baburnama represent distinct moments in the history of Anglo-Eastern encounter, each shaping the text's reception in distinctive ways.

Leyden and Erskine (1826): Produced during the height of British imperial expansion in India, this translation reflects the orientalist scholarship of the period. Its reliance on Persian intermediaries rather than the original Chagatai text means that it filters Babur's voice through Mughal court culture, which had already transformed the text. The translation's language is formal, its apparatus minimal. Yet its significance lies in making the Baburnama available to English readers for the first time.

Annette Beveridge (1922): Beveridge's translation represents a different mode of engagement. A remarkable figure in the British orientalist landscape—a woman who raised four children and learned oriental languages after the age of fifty—Beveridge brought to her work a combination of scholarly rigor and personal devotion. Her translation, though criticized for literalism, established the philological foundation for all subsequent study. More importantly, Beveridge's extensive footnotes and appendices positioned the Baburnama within its full cultural context, insisting that it be read not as an exotic curiosity but as a text demanding the same serious attention as Western classics.

Beveridge's preface, in which she describes the Chagatai original as "terse, word-thrifty, restrained and lucid [which] comes over neatly into Saxon English, perhaps through primal affinities," suggests a vision of cultural encounter based on linguistic and aesthetic kinship rather than hierarchical difference. Her emphasis on "primal affinities" between Turkic and English prose anticipates later arguments for the Baburnama's place in world literature.

Wheeler Thackston (1996): Thackston's translation, appearing in the postcolonial context, aims for greater literary fluency and accessibility. It presents the Baburnama as a work that can be read alongside other classics of world literature. Thackston's edition also includes the Persian translation on facing pages, allowing comparison between the Chagatay original and the Persian version commissioned by Akbar—a feature that reveals the text's complex life across languages and cultural contexts.

Critical reception and the humanization of the east

The Baburnama's reception by English literary figures reveals a pattern of response that transcends scholarly interest in historical or philological questions. E. M. Forster's emphasis on the happiness of knowing Babur as a friend suggests that the text's most significant effect was the creation of intimacy across cultural difference. The Baburnama, in Forster's response, humanized the East in ways that colonial discourse typically foreclosed.

William Dalrymple's characterization of the Baburnama as "almost Proustian in its self-awareness" connects the text to the most sophisticated traditions of Western modernist autobiography. This comparison, while perhaps anachronistic, registers the Baburnama's capacity to surprise Western readers with its psychological depth and literary sophistication. The implicit claim is that Eastern literature, when given access to the appropriate Western analogies, can be recognized as belonging to the same order of achievement as the Western canon.

The Indian novelist Amitav Ghosh's phrase "both a Caesar and a Cervantes" performs a similar cultural translation, linking Babur simultaneously to the tradition of imperial conquest and to the tradition of literary humanism. The pairing is telling: Caesar represents power, conquest, empire; Cervantes represents literature, irony, the critique of idealism. Ghosh's reading sees Babur as embodying both, and in so doing, defying any simple categorization as either Eastern conqueror or Eastern writer.

DISCUSSION

Reconfiguring the Orientalist gaze

The Baburnama's influence on English literary perception of the East can be understood as a process of reconfiguring the orientalist gaze. If classical orientalism, as Said argued, constructed the East as a passive object of Western knowledge, the Baburnama offered instead an Eastern subject representing itself. Babur's voice—introspective, judgmental, self-critical, humorous—interpellates the reader into a relationship of direct encounter, bypassing the mediations of orientalist discourse.

This is not to say that the Baburnama escaped the interpretive frameworks of orientalism. Beveridge, for all her scholarly achievement, worked within the institutional structures of

British imperial scholarship—the Royal Asiatic Society, the Indian Civil Service networks, the colonial archive. Her translation was, in part, an act of appropriation: taking an Eastern text and making it legible to Western readers within Western scholarly conventions.

Yet the Baburnama proved resistant to simple appropriation. Its qualities—the candor, the complexity, the refusal of easy categorization—meant that it could not be reduced to a document of Orientalist curiosity. For readers from Forster to Dalrymple, the text demanded a response that went beyond scholarly classification to something like personal connection.

The limits of influence

It would be an exaggeration to claim that the Baburnama fundamentally transformed English literary perception of the East. Orientalist representations persisted and continue to persist. The Baburnama remains less widely known than it deserves, and its influence has been largely limited to a relatively small circle of scholars, writers, and readers.

The Baburnama's reception must be understood within the broader context of English literary engagement with Eastern texts. The 19th and early 20th centuries saw the translation and dissemination of numerous Eastern works—the Arabian Nights, the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, the Bhagavad Gita—each of which shaped Western perceptions in complex ways. The Baburnama's contribution was distinctive but not singular.

Implications for postcolonial literary studies

The case of the Baburnama suggests several implications for the study of cross-cultural literary influence. First, it reminds us that translation is not simply transmission but transformation. Each translation of the Baburnama—Leyden-Erskine, Beveridge, Thackston—represents a different negotiation between the demands of fidelity and the demands of readability, between scholarly rigor and literary fluency. These choices shaped English readers' encounter with the text in ways that continue to matter.

Second, the Baburnama's reception history reveals the importance of the literary frame in shaping cross-cultural understanding. When Babur is read as a historical source, he becomes part of an archive; when he is read as a literary artist, he enters into a different kind of conversation. The assessments of Forster, Ghosh, and Dalrymple—all emphasizing Babur's literary and human qualities—represent a shift from the earlier historiographical orientation toward a literary-critical one.

Third, the Baburnama demonstrates the capacity of Eastern texts to unsettle Western expectations without simply reversing the terms of orientalist representation. Babur is not presented as a simple counter-image to Western stereotypes—not, that is, merely wise, peaceful, or spiritually superior. He is instead presented in all his contradictions: conqueror and poet, drunkard and aesthete, bigot and philanthropist. This complexity, which English readers found so striking, models a mode of self-representation that escapes the binary of East and West.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the influence of Babur's Baburnama on English literary perception of the East, tracing the text's journey through translation, its reception by English writers and scholars, and the ways it challenged prevailing Orientalist stereotypes. Several conclusions emerge.

First, the Baburnama's English translations—particularly Beveridge's 1922 landmark edition—made available to English readers an Eastern text of extraordinary literary and human richness. The qualities that English critics have emphasized—Babur's candor, his psychological depth, his cultivation, his humor—defied the stereotypes through which the East was typically represented in Western discourse.

Second, the Baburnama offered English readers a model of Eastern subjectivity that was complex, contradictory, and deeply human. Babur's self-representation as warrior, poet, gardener, drunkard, lover, and ruler presented an identity that could not be reduced to the binary categories of Orientalist thought.

Third, the Baburnama's reception history reveals the importance of translation, interpretation, and literary framing in shaping cross-cultural understanding. The text's capacity to create intimacy across cultural distance—the "happiness" that Forster found in knowing Babur—depended on translations that made his voice audible and on critical responses that positioned his work within literary traditions that English readers could recognize and appreciate.

The Baburnama's place in English literary culture remains, however, an unfinished story. It has not achieved the canonical status it deserves, and its influence has been limited compared to other Eastern texts. Yet for those who have encountered it, the Baburnama has been a transformative text—one that, in Ghosh's words, represents "one of the true marvels of the medieval world" and, in Forster's words, brings the happiness of knowing Babur as a friend. In an age of renewed cultural conflict and misunderstanding, such friendships across difference retain their importance.

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