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New Orientalism in Literature: A Critical Overview

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Orientalism is a much discussed and debated term in postcolonial studies. It has acquired many shades of meaning through centuries. Starting off as a scholarly discipline in the Western academy, Orientalism went on to achieve notoriety as a hegemonic discourse that produced the ideological basis for European colonization. Orientalism fell into bad days because of scathing critiques by Eastern scholars in the 20th century. This paper will briefly look into the history of Orientalism and then analyze how Orientalism has adapted itself to the times, to successfully survive in literature.

Orientalism as an academic discipline

Orientalism is a term used for the subject and works of Orientalists, scholars studying the Orient. “Anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient – and this applies whether the person is an anthropologist, sociologist, historian, or philologist---either in its specific or its general aspects, is an Orientalist and what he or she does is Orientalism” (Said 2).

Tobias Hubinette in *Orientalism Past and Present* gives a short history of Orientalism as a scholarly discipline. Hubinette notes that the focus of Oriental Studies was initially linguistic in nature. The first Asian or Oriental language studied by Christian theologians in the early Middle Ages was Hebrew. In the middle of the 13th century, at the time of Crusades, a second Asian language namely Arabic, became necessary for the Westerners to master. Orientalism as a subject of study became established at European universities as early as the 15th century. In the 18th century, Western colonial domination became pronounced and the study of various languages of Asia gained momentum. In the 1780s, William Jones discovered that Sanskrit and the ancient European and West Asian Languages were related. The scholarly interest in the Orient led to the founding of the Orientalist Congress in Paris in the year 1873. In 1973, the congress changed its name from the International Congress of Orientalists to the International Congress of Human Sciences in Asia and North Africa, signifying a change in international political ontology.

Critiques on Orientalism

As early as 1798, Abd al Rahman al Jabarti, an Egyptian “chronicler and a witness to Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt [...] had no doubt that the expedition was as much an epistemological as a military conquest” (Prakash 200). Critiques on Orientalism came to the forefront in the early 1960s, during the years of decolonization from educated Asians living in the West. Anouar Abdel-Manek’s “Orientalism in Crisis” and A.L Tibawi’s “English-speaking Orientalists” are significant works in this regard. Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, published in 1978 remains the most influential critique of Orientalism to this day. In *Orientalism*, Said argued that Orientalism was a “Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient” (3). It depended on a culturally constructed distinction between the “Orient” and

“Occident”. Said noted that irrespective of whether the particular area of discourse was scientific, historical, linguistic, anthropological or literary, the same set of ideas about the Orient or Orientalism emerged. Commenting on Orientalism in the works of nineteenth century writers, Said writes:

[T]he differences in their ideas about the Orient can be characterized as exclusively manifest differences, differences in form and personal style, rarely in basic content. Everyone of them kept intact the separateness of the Orient , its eccentricity , its backwardness, its silent indifference, its feminine penetrability, its supine malleability; this is why every writer on the Orient , from Renan to Marx (ideologically speaking) , or from the most rigorous scholars (Lane and Sacy) to the most powerful imaginations (Flaubert and Nerval) , saw the Orient as a locale requiring Western attention, reconstruction even redemption.(206)

The extreme repetitiousness of these representations in works by scholars from different disciplines led Said to treat Orientalism as an enormous discourse, producing stereotyped knowledge about the Orient. Said argued that Western representations of Oriental inferiority provided an ideological basis that helped justify Western military or political domination.

Said’s *Orientalism* had a far reaching impact on postcolonial studies. Gyan Prakash sums up the impact of *Orientalism* in the following words:

Denounced as an uncharitable poisonous attack on the integrity of Orientalist scholarship, it opened the floodgate of postcolonial criticism that has breached the authority of Western scholarship of the societies. The hallowed image of the Orientalist as an austere figure unconcerned with the world and immersed in the mystery of foreign scripts and languages has acquired a dark hue as the murky business of ruling other peoples now forms the essential enabling background of his or her scholarship. The towering and sagely images of men like William (“Oriental”) Jones have cracked and come tumbling down from exalted spaces. (200)

Orientalism Today

Though Edward Said’s *Orientalism* overturned long held and often taken-for-granted Western ideological biases regarding non-Westerners, it has not succeeded in eliminating the Orient / Occident divide. Orientalism still continues to exist in myriad forms under different names. Tobias Hubinette in *Orientalism: Past and Present* discusses three forms in which Orientalism has survived: Post Orientalism, Re-orientalism and Popular Orientalism. Post Orientalism continues the ugly legacy of Orientalism perpetrated by the West. A noteworthy example of Post-Orientalism is the political theory of Samuel P. Huntington on the “Clash of Civilizations” that views the East as a source of threat to the masters of the planet, the West. Re-orientalism is a form of indigenized Orientalism whereby the Orient reorientalizes itself. Re-orientalism as fundamentalism, particularly Islamic fundamentalism confirms the notion of the Orient as religious-minded and despotic, while Re-orientalism in the form of nationalism, takes pride in portraying Orientals as diligent and hardworking. Orientalism has also survived in the academia as Popular Orientalism, eliciting a romantic and colonial nostalgia for the Orient, and reflected in arts, movies and literature. Hubinette points out that though Orientalism continues to manifest itself strongly in the geopolitical sphere of security politics, the academic institutions in the West have largely distanced themselves from the discipline and therefore Orientalism survives only as some kind of romanticism in academic circles.

In the wake of Hubinette's observation, studies by Saadia Toor and Lisa Lau are of much interest. In her 2009 study titled "Re-orientalism: The Perpetration and Development of Orientalism by Orientals", Lisa Lau discusses the perpetration of Orientalism in contemporary South-Asian literature in English. She notes that this Orientalism, termed "Re-orientalism" in the paper is not propagated by Occidentals, but quite ironically by Orientals, especially, diasporic Orientals. Re-orientalism dominates and to a great extent, distorts the representation of the Orient, consigning it again to a position of Otherness.

Saadia Toor, in her article "Indo-chic: The Cultural Politics of Consumption in Post-Liberalization India" published in 2000, discusses the phenomenon of New Orientalism in the Indian context:

If Orientalism past was a manifestation of the 'Occidents' will to power over the 'Orient', New Orientalism rehearses the same relationship but with a crucial difference; today the production-circulation- consumption circuit in the case of these cultural commodities originates and culminates in India. There is however, a crucial period of mediation by the West where the commodities are circulated and then sanctioned by cultural critics as authentically 'Indo-chic'. The diaspora features prominently in this process, the critics validating this authenticity are usually intellectuals of Indian origin. (9)

Studies by Saadia Toor and Lisa Lau point to the fact that Orientalism has resurrected itself in a new form. Rising from its ashes in the Western academy, it has crossed the Occident / Orient divide and now thrives in the Orient. Call it by any name – New Orientalism, Post- Orientalism, Neo Orientalism or Re-orientalism, Orientalism is here to stay. However for the sake of uniformity, the process by which the Oriental reorientalizes the Orient will be henceforth referred to as "New Orientalism" in the paper.

The Propagation of New Orientalism

The propagation or promotion of New Orientalism is observed as occurring at three levels: the Author/Text, the Market and the Academia.

The Author/ Text

A writer from the Orient, choosing to write on the Orient, often finds himself in a difficult situation. He or she is expected to present the "real Orient" to the world. His task is made difficult by the fact that the Orient is best known today in images conjured by the European imagination and circulated through European domination. Since an already constructed structure of meaning exists for almost all possible images of the Orient and the Oriental, reproducing the essence of their lives and lands without Orientalist contamination is well nigh impossible. One may observe two different writing strategies adopted by writers representing the Orient.

The first strategy is to represent the Orient in such a way so as to confirm and reinforce Oriental stereotypes. Aravind Adiga's Booker prize novel *The White Tiger* does precisely this. The novel is in the form of seven letters from an Indian named Balram Halwai to the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao. Balram Halwai belongs to a village in rural Bihar referred to as "Darkness" in the novel. Adiga introduces the village in the following words:

I am talking of a place in India, at least a third of the country, a fertile place, full of rice fields and wheat fields and ponds in the middle of these fields choked with lotuses and water lilies, and water buffaloes wading through the ponds and chewing on the lotuses

and lilies. Those who love this place call it the Darkness. Please understand your Excellency that India is two countries in one: an India of Light, and an India of Darkness. The ocean brings light to my country. Every place on the map of India near the ocean is well off. But the river brings darkness to India- the black river (14).

Adiga thus creates an image of the Orient that is at once exotic and repulsive. Balram was the son of a poor rickshaw-puller. He was very bright in studies. His talent is spotted by a school inspector who calls him “the white tiger”, a rarity in the animal world. However, Balram is forced to end his schooling when a moneylender forces him into work in order to pay the debt. Balram escapes the mundane life of his village to become a chauffeur in the city. Greed and ambition drive him to kill his foreign -returned master, Mr. Ashok. He flees from the police and settles down in Bangalore as a successful entrepreneur. Adiga presents the stereotypical Orient and Oriental in *The White Tiger*. Balram Halwai is dark, deceitful and dangerous and India is nothing but a jungle. Balram notes that pre-independence India “in its days of greatness, when it was the richest nation on earth, was like a zoo. Everyone in his place, everyone happy” (63). But “on the fifteenth of August, 1947 – the day the British left – the cages had been let open; and the animals had attacked and ripped each other apart and jungle law replaced zoo law”(64). According to Balram, “There are only two destinies in India: either “eat – or get eaten up” (64). Balram prefers the former. Lily Want in “The Poetics and Politics of Cultural Studies in Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger*” argues that “*The White Tiger* undoubtedly falls into the “imaginative geography” of the orientalist thought that constructed and thrived on the conceptual divide between the first and third worlds” (76).

The second writing strategy, used to deal with the problem of representing the Orient, can be clearly seen in Salman Rushdie’s remarkable novel *Midnight’s Children*. *Midnight’s Children* is a classic example of how a writer can use his awareness of Orientalism to create a text that subverts Orientalism. Graham Huggan in the “Postcolonial Exotic” notes:

Rushdie’s novel exhibits and hawks the wares of Western literary exoticism. Most of the familiar semiotic markers of Orientalism are there – snake charmers, genies, fakirs and the like –along with some less likely but still identifiable totems, the spittoon, for instance. These totems advertise their status as culturally “othered” artifacts [. . .] Swallow me, says Saleem Sinai, and you swallow the lives of countless others. This implicit parody of the reader as consumer is reinforced through the use of gastronomic metaphors [. . .] The novel reveals to its western readers their hunger to consume: it feeds their desire for entertainment; satiates their keen exoticist appetites; but it never fails to mock them for their complicitous enjoyment. (28-9)

Arundhati Roy is also found to adopt a similar strategy in her Booker Prize winning debut novel *The God of Small Things*. Roy begins her novel with a description of the wild, exotic topography of Ayemenem : “May in Ayemenem is a hot, brooding month. The days are long and humid. The river shrinks and black crows gorge on bright mangoes in still, dust green trees. Red bananas ripen. Jackfruits burst. Dissolute bluebottles hum vacuously in the fruity air” (1). Ayemenem proves to be truly a part of “God’s Own Country” for the tourists. An old colonial bungalow in Ayemenem is converted into a hotel called Heritage. The hotel is surrounded by wooden ancestral houses bought by the Hotel chain and transplanted around the bungalow for tourists to see. “Toy Histories for Rich tourists to play in” (126).The tourists blissfully enjoy the fresh tandoori pomfret and crepe suzette offered to them. “In the evenings, the tourists [a]re treated to truncated kathakali performances ('Small attention spans,' the Hotel People explained to the

dancers). So ancient stories were collapsed and amputated. Six-hour classics were slashed to twenty minute cameos” (127). Roy shows later in the novel how humiliated and guilty the kathakali dancers feel. They had been forced to perform before the tourists “to stave off starvation” (229). On their way back home, these dancers “stopped at the temple to ask pardon for their gods. To apologize for corrupting their stories. For encasing their identities. Misappropriating their lives” (229). Roy uses the exotic images of ancestral wooden houses and Kathakali dancers to show how the history and culture of Kerala gets commodified for the tourists to consume.

One can thus see that an author can represent the Orient using Oriental stereotypes either to reinforce these stereotypes or subvert them. Either way, the text keeps alive the Western image of the Orient.

The Market

The label “Orientalism” is a hot commodity in the market these days. Anything and everything that carries the Oriental label – be it food, clothing or music sells. The Orient has become “a fetish, a series of objects to be desired in order to inflict the anonymity of the global style with *couleur locale*” (Ponzanesi 128). The publishing industry knows this better than anyone else. Today authors and books from the Orient are packaged and marketed not so much for their aesthetic qualities as for their market value. While discussing HarperCollins’ plans for India in an interview in the *Financial Express* (Oct 29, 2006), Jane Friedman, president and CEO of HarperCollins remarked: “It is extremely important for Indian writers to spread across the world. Fine tales are popular everywhere, but that said, there is a certain curiosity, an exotic charm that intrigues the West. We are still fascinated by Indian stories and their touch of the orient, even when it is writers like Jhumpa Lahiri, who is fairly assimilated. And we are looking for more such authors!” This accounts for the sudden hypervisibility of writers with South Asian surnames in the writing world. Commenting on how the publishing industry has changed, Ponzanesi writes:

The literary industry [. . .] has shifted its focus from supplying potential audiences to planning them. Rather than merely reading submitted manuscripts and discovering new talents, they now proceed as if on a hunting campaign aiming to locate authors even before they have attempted to write, and commissioning subjects, topics, and areas to reach one major goal; to create a demand for the product, a real thirst for consumption, prior to production.(116)

Sandra Ponzanesi cites the case of Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* to support her view:

The marketing hype surrounding the novel had certainly to do with India’s newly acquired value as an exotic country to be consumed. *The God of Small Things* was launched with all the possible indexes for alterity: the story of a fascinating but downtrodden Indian woman, the subaltern subject, who succumbs to patriarchal oppression despite her overt agency demonstrated through her free sexual and personal choices. The novel pictures India suspended between the still unprocessed colonial past and the wave of modernisation that passed women by [...] But the book was an excellent product to quench the exotic thirst of Western and international audiences for far-off places and stories, now quickly and inexpensively reachable by charter airlines.(117)

The Academia

Postcolonial studies has become an inevitable and indispensable part of the English syllabi of most universities across the world. As postcolonial critics, teachers and subjects, we may rejoice in the fact that ultimately the subaltern has found its voice, but the reality is different. Gayatri Spivak in “Poststructuralism, Marginality, Postcoloniality and Value” asserts:

As teachers we are now involved in the construction of a new object of investigation – ‘the Third World’, ‘the marginal’--- for institutional validation and certification[. . .] in a certain way we are becoming complicitous in the perpetration of a ‘new orientalism’ [...] Today the old ways of imperial adjudication and open systemic intervention can’t sustain unquestioned legitimacy. Neocolonialism is fabricating its allies by proposing a share of the centre in a seemingly new way (not a rupture but a displacement): disciplinary support for the conviction of authentic marginality by the (aspiring) elite. (201)

Academicians and critics who enthusiastically teach or write about postcolonial texts are in fact unwittingly perpetuating Orientalism. Postcolonial texts are most frequently taught within a separate canon as “New literatures”, “Postcolonial literature” or “Commonwealth literature”. In ghettoizing literature in such categories, we are only confirming our position as the Other. What makes the situation all the more disagreeable is the fact that the West appreciates our literature and validates postcolonial critiques only when they showcase their marginality. Spivak cites an example from her own personal experience:

My friend was looking for speakers to comment on postmodern styles in the context of the Third world. She did not want her funded institute on the *avant garde* to be “Eurocentric”. I told her that I could only comment on a handful of writers in my native language. Her question: but do these writers show their awareness of being in a minority, being marginals? No, I said, and asked a counter question: Isn’t it Eurocentric to choose only such writers who write in the consciousness of marginality and christen them ‘Third World’? Answer: One must begin somewhere. (202)

Spivak is not the one to be appeased by this answer, nor should we be. The margin, we must realize, is today being constituted to suit the institutional convenience of the colonizer. Our academicians and critics who display new orientalist tendencies in their works are much favoured by the Western academy.

Symptomatic of this tendency is the enthusiastic exoticizing (and often also feminizing) vocabulary of postcolonial literary critiques: an ‘Arabian Nights’ exegetic language which lays emphasis on the narrative ‘magic’, verbal richness and ‘marvelous crowdedness’ of postcolonial texts, and is tied in with an institutional interest in privileging migrant, multivocal, Rusdiesque (and usually Indian or Indian subcontinent) writing as most vividly demonstrating that exotic otherness. (Boehmer18)

In effect, critics, theorists and writers from Third World countries are sometimes inadvertently propagating New Orientalism by cooperating with academic institutions in the West, accepting their funding and looking up to them for appreciation, validation or recognition.

Conclusion

Edward Said in the introduction to *Orientalism* had rightly pointed out, “One ought never to assume that the structure of Orientalism is nothing more than a structure of lies or of myths which, were the truth about them to be told, would simply blow away” (Said 6). Considerable

material investment by the West for generations has gone into the making of what we know as “Orientalism” today. Therefore it is least surprising that more than three decades after the publication of *Orientalism*, we are still haunted by this phenomenon, albeit in a new avatar.

The discourse of Orientalism had originated because of the political, economic and cultural hegemony of the West. It is this hegemony that allowed the West to penetrate the East, constitute it as the Orient and represent it within the discourse of Orientalism and use it to fulfill its vested interests. All along, the Orient had remained a mute spectator.

Although the West still retains its hegemonic position, there is a paradigm shift in power today from the West towards the East. New Orientalism is a manifestation of this power shift. The Orient is anything but silent and passive today. It has started speaking for itself, although using borrowed images from the West. The Occident has been relegated from the all-powerful position of the producer-propagator-consumer to merely the reader whose readerly expectations must be met. The fact that Western recognition or validation is still required for the survival of New Orientalism speaks volumes for the power of the West. Nevertheless, New Orientalism is a small, yet significant step towards deconstructing existing power structures.

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