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Shakespeare's Rome and Egypt and their People in *Antony and Cleopatra*: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract:

William Shakespeare's *Antony & Cleopatra* (1606) has been viewed as a Roman history, a heroic drama and a monument to romantic passion. The play is appreciated primarily for its splendid representation of human life in political, moral, sexual, sensual, feminine wiles of Cleopatra, sensuality, emotional excess, politics versus love, and transcendent themes. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) contends that the portrayal of the Orient in Western texts was a sort of discourse based on a transcendental dichotomy between the West and the Orient that designated Asia or the East, geographically, morally, and culturally by scholars from Europe who depicted what they saw or imagined about the Oriental and its people. Considering the portrayal of the Occident and the Occident in the play, this paper aims to argue that Rome and Egypt's oppositions are far from being abstract or universal. Rather the oppositions are closely linked to the preservation of the Orientalist discourse in Renaissance Europe. The first part of the paper describes the theoretical assumption, the second deals with the textual analysis and the last part informs the critical observation in the play.

Keywords: Cleopatra, Antony, Egypt, Rome, Orientalism, Orientalist-discourse.

I

Lexically, the word 'Orientalism' derives from the word 'Orient', and Orientalism was a school of scholars primarily from Western European places who visited the Middle East and North Africa. These scholars recorded what they saw in these places, and, at times, their depictions were romanticised. It also referred to a branch of scholarship dated from the great expansion of scholarship in Western Europe from the time of the Renaissance onwards. In the

past, the Orientalists engaged with only one discipline—philology and the Middle East places. Over the following years, the geographical areas associated with the earlier Orient changed by extending to far places, such as India, China and other places in the East. It then became the European colonial masters' well-defined cultural and political discourse. The concept of Orientalism gained critical attention after the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978. Said contends that Orientalism is a discourse based on a transcendental dichotomy between the West and the Orient. It has become an academic tradition of study, teaching and writing about the Orient, a kind of discourse formed on “ontological and epistemological distinctions made between the Orient and the Occident” (Kennedy 21). Said further argues that the choice and formation of “Oriental” was canonical which was employed by the canonised writers, such as Chaucer, Mandeville, Shakespeare, Dryden, Pope and Byron, who designated Asia or the East, “geographically, morally, and culturally” (Said 31). Orientalism being a discourse, anybody in Europe could talk and be understood about an Orient's cultural forms and atmosphere. With systematic approaches by embracing politics, cultures and historical contexts, Orientalism promotes a sort of ideas that associate the Orient with a place of passionate romance, exotic cultures, and mystical landscapes to define Europe or the West as its contrasting images and personalities. Several terms were used to express the relationship between the Orient and the West: “The Oriental is irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, different: thus, the European is rational, virtuous, mature and normal” (ibid...40).

William Shakespeare's *Antony & Cleopatra* (1606) has been viewed as a Roman history, a heroic drama and a monument to romantic passion. The play is appreciated primarily for its splendid substantial hieroglyph, a representation of human life in political, moral, intellectual, sexual, sensual, spiritual and instinctive terms that has raised conflicting judgements and emotions (Brown 21). Traditional criticism appreciates the play for its poetic descriptions of romance, emotion, reason, passion, imagery, feminine wiles of Cleopatra and the importance of public duty over passion. The play symbolises Rome with reason and public duty and Egypt with sensuality and emotional excess. Informed by Said's reading on Orientalism described in the above paragraph, this paper aims to analyse that Rome and Egypt's oppositions are far from being as abstract or universal as traditional criticisms consider so. Rather, this paper intends to emphasise that the oppositions are closely linked to the preservation of the Orientalist discourse in Renaissance Europe.

II

Antony & Cleopatra is one of the most popular plays by Shakespeare that shows passionate love and romance. Having defeated Julius Caesar's assassins, a triumvirate, Mark Antony, Octavius Caesar and Lepidus rule the Roman Empire. In Alexandria (Egypt), Antony is enchanted by its queen Cleopatra. This debauched behaviour of a Roman ruler causes dissension between Octavius and Antony. Meanwhile, a dissatisfied senator challenges the rule of the triumvirate and Antony's wife (Fulvia) dies. Antony returns to Rome and then he marries Octavius's sister Octavia for political alliances and benefits. Cleopatra becomes furious on learning about the marriage of Antony and Octavia. Later in the play, Antony returns to Cleopatra after war breaks out between Octavius and Antony. She accompanies him to the Battle of Actium, where it becomes a disaster for Antony and his army. Both of them return to Egypt, pursued by Octavius. After Antony's close aids have taken sides with Octavius, Antony is defeated in Alexandria. Cleopatra sends him a false report stating that she has died of suicide. Believing it to be true, Antony attempts to kill himself which renders him brutally wounded. He is brought to Cleopatra and dies in her arms. To avoid being captured by Octavius, Cleopatra kills herself with a poisonous snake. Such a scant summary of the play does little to justify the twists and turns in the play, but it is noticeable that the passionate love of Cleopatra and Antony and the interaction of the West and the East are depicted in the play to reinforce the Orientalist discourse in Renaissance Europe.

Setting and its people's activities

Traditional criticism appreciates this play for its heroic drama, romantic passion, and representation of political life. By examining the representation of various places and the different activities in these places, this paper highlights that the oppositions are closely linked to constructing contrasting images and personalities of the Occident and the Orient. The first part of this section analyses various places and the latter part the activities of characters in these places. Regarding the geographical and historical setting, the Western empire in the play is associated with rich names and glittering catalogues creating an atmosphere of imperial magnificence. Scenes occur at Rome, Messina, Syria, Athens, Actium and other places: "Extended Asia: from Euphrates/His conquering banner shook, from Syria/To Lydia, and to Ionia" (I.II.97-100)¹. They also command over the sea "rid all of the sea of pirates" (I.II.183)

¹ Textual references from William Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*. Edited by M.R. Ridley. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1951.

and “He is an absolute master” (II.II.164). The Western protagonists are referred to as superhuman. Caesar is considered ‘the universal landlord’ while Antony is addressed as ‘the greatest prince o’ the world’. This world seems dull in Antony’s absence “no better than a sty” and when Caesar hears of Antony’s death, he thinks: “The death of Antony is not a single doom, in the name lay/A moiety of the world” (V.I.16-17). This geographical description implies the Western empire’s magnificent and human grandeur. Antony has been idealized more than any person on earth.

However, Antony, ‘the greatest prince of the world’, changes his temperaments and values once he is in Alexandria (the Orient). He is no longer an ideal ruler as per the Roman standard. Antony’s passion is primarily depicted as lust, the lower elements of physical passion and physical indulgences. His life with Cleopatra is composed of love and feasting. Enobarbus cries:

Bring in the banquet; wine enough
Cleopatra’s health to drink

(I.II.11)

Mine and most of our fortunes, tonight
Shall be—drunk to bed

(I.IV.45)

Antony “fishes, drinks and wastes/The lamps of night in revel” (I.IV.5). He also engages in “lascivious wassails” (I.IV.56). Pompey prays that Cleopatra may keep Antony from the wars: “Tie up the libertine in a field of feasts/Keeps his brain fuming: Epicurean cooks...” (II.1.27). In one of the scenes in the play, a party goes on with music sounding, more and more riotous in humour, conviviality and song showing there is fun and feasting yet the party has less gravity as compared to the Alexandrian and Egyptian feasts: “This is not yet an Alexandrian feast/It ripens towards it” (II.VII.95) and “Shall we dance now the Egyptian Bacchanals/And celebrate our drinks” (II.VII.104).

Besides feasting and merry-making, physical eroticism happens in the Orient (Alexandrian). Here, the protagonists no longer have control over their passions and everybody talks and discusses sex boldly. At the beginning of the play when he is in a Western empire, Antony talks of cooling “a gypsy’s lust” (I.I.10) but later in the play, Mecaenas talks of “the adulterous Antony” (III.IV.93). When tragedy overtakes him, Antony abuses Cleopatra for her impurity: “this foul Egyptian...triple-turn’d whore (IV.XI.23, 26). The scale of sensuous and

erotic increases after the play shifts its setting to the Orient. Charmian talks and discusses sex freely with the soothsayer: “Then belike my children shall have no names...how many boys and wenches must I have?” and “And fertile every wish, a million” ((1.II.34, 36). Cleopatra’s ladies devote most of their time to physical love and they emphasise ‘fertile’ only. Her palace has been given all the perceived ‘Oriental’ settings, the nakedness of her slaves that have serpentine and ungodly attraction: “Horrible villain! I’ll spurn thine eyes” (II.V.63). It is evident that the Occident and its people are shown to be magnificent, virtuous, and rational whereas the Orient and its people to be mysterious landscapes, exotic and sensuous. To quote Said, such representation of the Orient as fallen, childlike, erotic, remarkable experiences and romance enable the Occident to be rational, mature, virtuous and normal (39).

Forms of communication

Based on the style of language that the characters in the play utter, the difference between Rome and Egypt is further divided. Human beings do not use only words for communication to share and exchange information, views, opinions and information. A complex system consisting of several forms of non-verbal communication is involved in communication. Voice, body sounds and gestures continue to form a wide range of activities. If one’s communicative system depends on two interdependent units, voice and body, the play assigns voice alone to Rome and body alone to Egypt. Rome is shown to be a place of words whereas Egypt is where love is made. Close physical, tactile and embracing contact constitute the mode of everyday communication and existence in Egypt. When Antony embraces Cleopatra on stage, their bodies unite, the word ‘thus’ and its concomitant gesture stands for ‘embrace’. Characters in Egypt focus on a simple matter of body alone, of sexual coupling, of doing, ‘thus. One tends to use language not for rational discourse but rather as a physically luxurious thing, for sensuous. Even a messenger says: “Rain thou they fruitful tidings in mine ears/That long time have been barren” (II.V.23-24). In short, in Egypt, non-verbal language speaks potently, however silently. “I know by that same eye there’ some good news,” tells Cleopatra to Antony (I.III.19). Thus, apart from the world of tastes, textures and perfumes, the language in Egypt is the silent language of the body whose covert meanings usurp over utterance, however exotic and erotic.

On the other hand, Rome is shown to be Egypt’s direct opposite. If Egypt emphasizes the body that symbolises the womanly powers of Cleopatra, Rome appears to be a place of words that stands for manly prowess. Octavius expresses concerns with discursive verbal matters and Antony’s ‘unmanly’ behaviour: “...not more manlike...More womanly than he” (I.IV.5,6). In

Rome, there are precise distinctions between the people; each accords a distinct role in the community. The scene (II.II) in which Antony, Caesar and Lepidus meet to resolve their differences shows that they talk and use language primarily for developing political relationships. It also shows that the relationship between men and women is only a politically convenient marriage, for example, the marriage prospect between Antony and Octavia (II.II.117-121, 137-140). In Rome, marriage is considered to be an institution to be admired while in Egypt it is a "dead".

The speech of Antony and Caesar that represents Egypt and Rome respectively shows that both of them have different purposes of their speeches. There may be no direct reference to the defeat, but the language is such that it conveys Antony has been defeated in the battle. He wishes to be stronger in the next encounter, but in the same breath, it suggests that he should fill up his time with more pleasure. He may dwell in his past glory for a fleeting moment but his predominant emotion is to seek pleasure (III.XIII.177-185). Caesar's speech in comparison is unemotional, despite the fact he is noticing Cleopatra's death. It is difficult to know how he feels about the death of the two lovers. It is felt that he is simply carrying out the formalities of a ceremonial death without having an inkling about the magnificence of the tragic death of Antony and Cleopatra (V.II.361). This shows the Roman tradition of honour and duty and those who are brought up in the environment of Egypt. Antony may have been brought up in the traditions of honours and duty of Rome but his living in Egypt, as the play shows, has taken away the 'Roman tradition'. As a result, his sensibilities as such are naturally inclined towards seeking pleasure and love.

Through the characterisation of Cleopatra, the play further deepens the difference between the Orient and the Occident. "Cleopatra" and "Egypt" are synonymous in the play. She is addressed as "Egypt": "I, dying, Egypt, dying" (IV.XV.18). The Orient has been always considered to be a place full of explosive passions, and so is Cleopatra in the play. Despite her queenship, her world is full of love-bitten. After she has fallen in love with Antony, her mental horizon is based on infinite love. She sends messengers daily to Antony. Day and night, she always thinks of Antony and even music cannot relieve her longing: "Give me some music, moody food/Of us that Trade in Love" (II.V.2). The war between Caesar and Antony does not matter anything to her. She is absorbed in love; she waits with the girls for Antony to the extent of becoming an irresponsible queen. When Antony dies later in the play, Cleopatra considers that the world is: "And there is nothing left remarkable/Beneath the visiting moon" (IV.XV.68). She considers that her world is barren. However, there is a contradiction in the portrayal of the character, Cleopatra. At times, her 'masculinity' traits, such as force and violence, become more

visible though she succumbs to her ‘femineity’ traits, strong passions. She is shown to be a tigress in wrath. She strikes the messenger who brings news of Antony (II.V.110). When Caesar and Antony oppose each other in Act III, Cleopatra assumes the role of a warrior. She boasts of her navy by aspiring ‘man’s courage. After the fatal action, ‘femineity’ rules her and she bows to man’s strength (IV). Thus, through the portrayal of Cleopatra, Egypt is represented with ‘feminine’ quality and contradictory qualities, such as a variety of shifting evanescent moods of passion, compact of weakness and infinite pride, of strength and weakness intertwined. In other words, Cleopatra or Egypt represents eroticism and it appears to be a threat to the values of the West or Rome in the play.

According to Said, Orientalism is not an accidental discourse of the West but a created and invested theory and practice that has been there for many generations. In their discourse, the Orient is depicted to be “gullible, devoid of energy, much given to flattery, intrigue, cunning and unkindness to animals”. They are represented in everything that opposes “the clarity, directness and nobility of the Anglo-Saxon race” (39). Cleopatra or Egypt’s identity serves as an adversary of Roman leaders in Egypt. Egypt itself becomes ‘feminised’ a place of political danger and sexual fascination against whose subversive strategies Rome defines and tests its values.

Occident and Oriental Women

In various discourses, women are depicted as a homogenous depressed group even though their sufferings are different from each other. Likewise, the experiences of third-world women are different from those of first-world women, and even among the third or first-world, their experiences are different. Regarding the third-world woman (the Orient), Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s essay, “Under Western Eyes” argues that third-world women have been portrayed as “a singular monolithic subject” in Western texts. She argues that they have been reduced to an “average third-world” homogenous group leading a life based on socially constrained gendered identity. This “average third-world woman” is considered to be “ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, religious, domesticated, family-oriented, victimized”, etc. She further argues that this representation is in contradiction to the image of Western women who can control their bodies and sexualities. They are considered to be educated women having the will and freedom to make decisions independently (65-66). In the context of the play, Octavia (Occident) is depicted to be the opposite of Cleopatra (Orient). In Act III, there are no emotions in Octavia’s speech. She pleads with Antony not to make war with her brother, Caesar,

since this would cause her to split her loyalty. Her speech represents the concept of honour and duty of the rich Roman empire. In contrast, Cleopatra's words are overflowing with emotion. To cite an example, for Cleopatra, love and emotion take preference over duty and honour: "From my cold heart let heaven engender hail" (III.XIII.157). The Oriental woman (Cleopatra) is shown to be leading an essential life based on her gender and sexualities whereas the Occidental woman (Octavia) has control over her body and sexualities.

III

Based on Said's *Orientalism*, it is evident that the play, *Antony and Cleopatra*, serves as a discourse to show that the Orient is different from the Occident. The Occident (Europe) is civilization itself with its sexual appetites under control and its dominant ethic that of hard work, whereas the East has been represented as static, feminine, underdeveloped, inferior and barbaric. Antony is addressed as the prince of the world. His rationality and emotions are under control while he is in Rome, so do all people in Rome have control over their emotions and temperaments. Antony loses his 'Roman' characteristics once he is in Alexandria and he becomes like those oriental 'irrational' people. However, such discourse of differentiation is vulnerable in particular when the Occident meets the Orient. Cleopatra's (Orient) histrionics serve as a source of empowerment. The discourse on actions and speeches of Romans promotes a hierarchy of political order and human identity, yet Cleopatra's histrionic intrinsic disrupts such notion of fixity (Singh 319). It also implies the vulnerability of the Occident's discourse when it comes to the Orient as the Easterners are not at all passive and submissive. Homi Bhabha argues that the colonial discourses cannot smoothly run as Orientalism might seem to suggest (144-65). In the process of their delivery, the discourse is diluted and hybridized. The fixed identities that the West (colonialism) seeks to impose upon both the masters and the slaves are rendered unstable (Loomba 232). Likewise, all human categories of sexual, racial, East and West dissolve in the union of Cleopatra and Antony. At the moment of death, Antony transcends the rigid boundaries dividing Egypt and Rome: "I will be/A bridegroom in my death, run into/As to a lover's bed" (IV.XIV.99-101). Further, in her suicide, Cleopatra resolves the gender categories, the feminine and the masculine aspects: "I have nothing/Of woman in me. Now from head to foot/I am marble—constant" (V.II.238-239). However, the dissolving of the human categories happens with a heavy price leading to the death of the protagonists, Antony and Cleopatra. It shows that Orientalist stereotyping can be diluted only with death. In other, Shakespeare might be giving a warning to those who dare to question and break the fixed notions associated with the West and the East. Hence, it can be said that though the play has

been traditionally appreciated for poetic description, various forms of imageries, themes of battles, feminine aspects of Cleopatra, passionate romance, etc., the portrayal of the West and the East in the play shows that it stimulates and preserves the Orientalist discourse. In that, the West (Rome) stands with reason and its people are dutiful whereas the East (Egypt) becomes a play of mystery and sensuality and its people's prime motives to gratify sensuality. The portrayal of the Orient as a fallen 'other' to the Occident might have justified the European's subjugation of the East in the following centuries.

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