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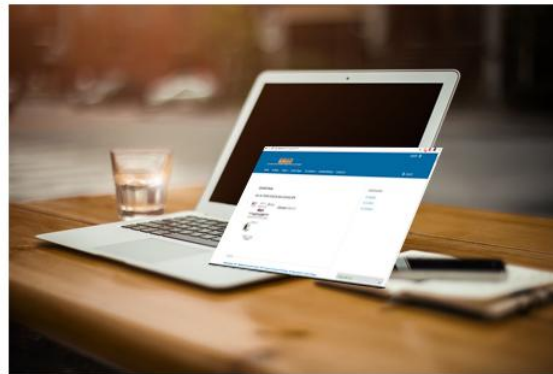
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The Inverted Orientalists: A Study of the Indian Diasporic Writings

Abstract:

The Oriental went through myriad representations in the colonial writings. The British officers, the travel writers, the Orientalists, each saw the Oriental through a different lens and conjured images that varied from that of a shrinking, lying, stooped brown man to that of bejewelled, elephant writing Maharaja.

With the disintegration of the Empire, the formerly colonial people of India rose to claim their rightful place under the Sun. To answer Spivack, the Subaltern learnt to speak. In writing back, the Empire infact became garrulous through the voices of Naipaul, Rushdie, Anita and Kiran Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Vikram Seth to name a few of the well known diasporic writers of India.

But what is the subaltern speaking of? The common themes seem to be emigration, rootlessness, search for identity, otherness. However what is of pertinence here is that the Subaltern speaks of 'otherness' without defining the other- ie the West. The aim of the present paper is to explore this anomaly in the diasporic literature and to explore reasons for it.

[Key Words: Orientalism, Subaltern, Diaspora]

Introduction:

Said dates the birth of Orientalism to the period of European enlightenment and colonization of the East. East was the non West- the Other and hence was an entity to be studied, judged and disciplined. (1978). Said's argument stems from and reinforces Foucault's theory that the way we think and write is shaped by the power structure of the society. Mamdani contends that it was important for the Empire to create a binary of a progressive, dynamic,

civilized West and a stationary, custom bound and backward looking East to (define and) rule.(2012) Thus was born a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between the Orient and (most of the time) the Occident. (Said,1978)

Literature of the Raj:

In India, Orientalism resulted in the literature of the Raj- ‘a new kind of literature depicting an exotic land, alien culture and inferior people’. (Roychowdhury &Randhawa ,2015).Significant additions to this corpus of literature were works of Fiction like *A Passage to India* (EM Forster), *Kim* (Rudyard Kipling), *Heat and Dust* (Ruth Pravar Jhabwala), *Jewel in the Crown* (Paul Scott), *The Far Pavilions* (MM Kaye) etc. Other writings worthy of note are *Wanderings of a Pilgrim in Search of the Picturesque*, (Fanny Parkes), *Rambles and Recollections of an Indian Official* (Sleeman), *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* (Todd) etc.

In penning these stories, travelogues and memoirs, the British drew freely from the rich resource of India and its people. They wrote extensively of the culture, religion, art, architecture, music, history, politics, physiognomy and character of the peoples of India. The Indian was a fascinating enigma- a true representative of the inscrutable East. Aziz(*A Passage to India*), Kim(*Kim*), Godbole(*A Passage to India*), the Tibetan Lama(*Kim*), Ameer Ali Thug(*Confessions of a Thug*), are endearing and enduring names of Indians in British fiction. Glimpses of myriad men and mores were also caught in the writings of Jim Corbett as he tells of his toils in the hills of Kumaon.(*Maneaters of Kumaon, The Temple Tiger* etc) Insights are gained into the character of household helpers in the matter of fact observations of Fanny Parkes as she ran the household of her District Magistrate husband – pictures of maids lying indolent, the men servants stealing ice on the way back from the bazaar and the fearful oarsmen who had to be soothed and pacified in the face of storm while on the river. (*Wanderings of a Pilgrim in Search of the Picturesque*). Indeed British contemporary literature abounds with portrayals of Indians.

Indian Writers of British Period:

If the literature of the Colonizers was rich, so was that of the colonized country. Contrary to what Macaulay claimed in his infamous minutes, India had a rich corpus of indigenous literature. But while literature is considered a mirror of the society, the contemporary Indian writers of British India appear oblivious to the British presence around them. The British

significantly impacted the life of the common Indian. Revolutionary changes were taking place in social customs and religious traditions, in economy and education. But from reading contemporary Indian fiction, one would never glean how all pervasive the British impact was on India. The noble laureate Rabindranath devoted himself to write of human emotions, of love and loss in works like *Gitanjali*. Bankim Chandra has written of love and patriotism in *Anandmath*. In Hindi, the celebrated short story writer Premchand has woven heart touching tales of natural sorrow, loss and pain in memorable short stories such as *Idgah*, *Bade ghar kii beti*, *Namak ka Daroga*. Bhishm Sahni tells the tales of horrors of partition in *Tamas* while Srilal Shukla laments the falling moral values in society in *Raag darbari*.

The absence of white characters in the tales of everyday lives of Indians in Indian fiction cannot be attributed to there being a veil around the coloniser. On the contrary as servants and maids, as chauffeurs and ayas, Indians were privy to the innermost sanctums of British households. But while the British painted the picture of an exotic east, the east did not write back. It remained content focussing on its immediate familiar environment, causing Spivack to pose her pertinent question, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (2012)

The Diasporic Writings

The absence of three dimensional white characters in the Writings of the Raj can perhaps be attributed to the fear of repercussions in the face of the Raj and its strong censorship. Then in the 20th century, the Empire disintegrated and the newly independent India sought its rightful place in the brave new world. The subaltern suddenly could speak - in English. Writers like Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Kiran Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Vikram Seth are today vying with the native speakers of English for the prestigious international literary prizes. The Empire is not only writing back, it has become garrulous. The contents of these books are typically diasporic. As classified by Safran, the Diaspora are 1. that are dispersed from an original 'center' to atleast two 'peripheral' places. 2. that maintain a 'memory' vision or myth about their original homeland. 3. that believe they are not and perhaps cannot be fully accepted by their host country. 4. that see the ancestral home as a place of eventual return when the time is right. 5. that are committed to the maintenance or restoration of this homeland and 6. Of which the group's consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by this continuing relationship with the homeland. (1991) True to this tradition, Indian Diasporic writings are about loss, rootlessness, crisis of identity, nostalgia, of a sense of 'otherness'. The

diaspora, however, speaks of otherness of self without once referring to the other 'Other' ie the white man.

The Idea of Europe:

To borrow Denys Hay's phrase, what is the idea of Europe or of the West in Indian writings? Choosing from the binary of West Vs the Other - the exotic, enigmatic, inscrutable East, Indian Diaspora writes of the other ie the native, without drawing the White. The protagonists in their writings remain India and Indians. The backdrop has in some cases, such as in the writings of Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Banerjee Devakumari, changed to the West but there is no living breathing West therein. These are stories of Indians, living their cocooned lives in the islands they have created for themselves in foreign lands. The West serves as a background, an alien, often hostile and incomprehensible institution against which the Indian labours and toils, serves and suffers and tells tales of its unhappiness - for all diaspora are unhappy but each diaspora is unhappy in its own way. (Mishra, 1996.) In other writings, even the backdrop remains Indian- a small town in Kerala here, a village of Bihar there. The visuals that are manifested are those of an outsider looking at an unfamiliar world. The literature seems completely devoid of any round, three dimensional Caucasian characters.

As representative works, one may study *The Namesake* and *Interpreter of Maladies* of Jhumpa Lahiri. The protagonist Gogol in the former is born in the US to Indian parents. His world is populated by the Indian friends of his parents. The Whites that are mentioned in passing are Maxine and her parents, the boyfriends of Maushumi, and there are some very random remarks on neighbours and colleagues. None of them grows. Not one of them offers an insight into his/ her thoughts. The one genuine observation of the other world is Ashima's: "that Americans, inspite of their public declarations of affection, inspite of their mini skirts and bikinis, inspite of their handholding on the streets and lying on top of each other on the Cambridge Common, prefer their privacy." (2012)

Lahiri is even more ambitious in *Interpreter of Maladies*, in which the stories are woven across 03 continents- of Indians, about people called Shobha and Shukumar and Pirzada and Twinkle and Sanjeev. The sole white protagonist Miranda is used as a manifestation of the brown man's attitude towards a sundry white girl.

Tilo is the protagonist in Chitra Banerjee Devakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*. She runs a shop of spices in California, is clairvoyant after Eastern fashion and by the tradition of her

trade is forbidden to cross the threshold of her shop, thus obliterating any opportunity of finding America or Americans. Her customers are people called Ahuja and Geeta's grandfather, and Jagjit and Manu. The sole American she encounters comes from a family that appears to be Red Indian, a people of mystic practices and magical charms.

Though no classic, a significant book on Indian writings of the US is *The Inscrutable Americans* by Anurag Mathur. It is a tongue in cheek account of the life of a young Indian as he battles his one year of stay at a University in the US. While Gopal is drawn with affection and humour, Mathur has also used him to voice all the stereotypical notions that Indians have about the US. Unidimensional as they are, Randy and the numerous girls that float around him are stereotypical images of Americans.

The West in Indian writings appears to have no positive identity. On the contrary it is a negation – the manifestation of all that is not East.

The Diasporic Dilemmas:

The West in its writings was openly nostalgic of home while being a keen observer and a meticulous recorder of man and milieu in India. The diaspora sees West as the Other but is not inclined to write of this. It writes of the erstwhile home or its present home which is what Bhabha calls the 'third space' (2006). This third space spells a perennial quest for identity. Socio Psychologists Erickson postulates that Personal Identity is, 'an individual's subjective sense of a continuous existence and a coherent memory.' (1968) This explains the diasporic preoccupation with the question of identity of self. It has no shared racial memory with the new home and sees it self forever as an outsider- everywhere. Bharati Mukherjee admits, "the experience of cutting myself off from a biological homeland and settling in an adopted homeland that is not always welcoming to its dark complexioned citizens has tested me as a person and made me the writer I am today." Reena Mitra contends that the pertinent question is if the migrant chooses or selects to put down roots after all. She asserts that this may not be the case taking into account that his or her sense of personal identity might deviate considerably from the (assumed and actual) cultural identities of the appointed destination. (2006)

Alienated from the new, the diaspora turns to the old. Naipaul for example attempts to trace his roots in India, while Rushdie explores the history and mythology. So does Jhumpa Lahiri

create a world of extended families, of pet names and good names, of christenings and rice eating ceremonies in *The Namesake*. So has Chitra Banerjee created a world of spices and voodoo and charms in *The Mistress of Spices*. So has Amitav Ghosh detailed the life of an opium fielded worker in *Sea of Poppies* and Gopal in *The Inscrutable American* is drawn with affection and humour and a deep understanding of the country cousin in the brave new world.

Conclusion

The Oriental went through myriad representations in the colonial writings. The British officers, the travel writers, the Orientalists, each saw the Oriental through a different lens and conjured images that varied from shrinking, lying, stooped brown man to that of bejewelled, elephant writing Maharaja. Roychowdhury & Randhawa have argued that the creation of the 'Other' was reflective, reflexive as well as devious device of the West. The portrayal varied with the reason for the portrayal: (i) to entice the West to this far off land (ii) to justify the discharge of white man's burden (iii) to explore the wealth of a different culture and civilization.(2015) The diaspora is perpetuating the myth of the exotic, inscrutable east. It has not assimilated with its new home and is forever doomed to be in the 'third space'. It has no common racial memory with its new compatriots and so dare not presume to comprehend them as individuals. The Diaspora has also assumed the mantle of portraying the true picture of India – the brown man's burden.

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