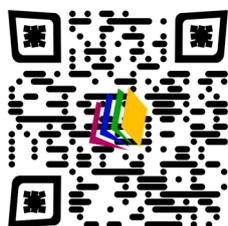




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The White Gaze: Critical Reflections on the East-West Dichotomy

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ABSTRACT:

In his much quoted verse above Rudyard Kipling revealed something of the nucleus of the long-lived tradition of Orientalist thought. According to J.J. Clarke, the ambivalence of the West towards the East is age-old. This ambivalence largely stems from the difference in religion and culture that the two poles share. Religion, an act of cultural construction circulates in a particular form and culture thereby, can be said to be a definer of character. Every culture thus develops its own particular values and beliefs. Elucidating this concept further, the paper intends to examine this thought by applying Said's study of Orientalism to hegemonically Western discourse about the East and seek to highlight the fact that the East-West dichotomy is a result of 'selective cultural mapping', a deliberate attempt to alienate the East. To lay bare the East-West dichotomy and highlight the West's selective cultural mapping of the East, the paper will analyze E.M Forster's A Passage to India (1924) and its movie adaptation by David Lean and will do a comparative study. Furthermore, I will concentrate on highlighting the West's fear of islamophobia and the consequences arising from it with due reference to the movie Khuda Ke Liye (2007), a Pakistani Urdu movie by Shoaib Mansoor.

KEY WORDS: Western Discourse, Dichotomy, Orientalism, Western

Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet

Rudyard Kipling, *The Ballad of East and West*

In his much quoted verse above Rudyard Kipling revealed something of the nucleus of the long-lived tradition of Orientalist thought. According to J.J. Clarke, the ambivalence of the West towards the East is age-old. This ambivalence largely stems from the difference in religion and culture that the two poles share. Religion, an act of cultural construction circulates in a particular form and

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Reality is an ideological construction. The dominant group in order to maintain its hegemony constructs this reality. Our beliefs, religious value systems, culture and traditions are a part of this ideological constructed reality. Ideologies are nothing but a set of beliefs and value system that have come down to be regarded as natural. It is this process of naturalization, that largely affects people's worldview- the way their beliefs and religious systems are shaped up in their formative years, affects their thoughts and directs their behavior. The dictates, customs, traditions and values of particular religion and society play a significant role in this regard. In this context then, the dichotomies between East and West are hard to ignore. The West has always been militarily and economically a dominant culture and as such labels other cultures as 'inferiors' and 'savages'. Hence, the West sees

it as the White Man's Burden to domesticate, tame and redeem the savages (the East). Western idea and knowledge about the East thereby is not produced from any factual evidence or reality but from the West's own preconceived assumptions about the Eastern societies which view Eastern societies as diametrically different from the Western societies. This discourse is referred to as Orientalism by Edward Said in his book by the same name.

Orientalism, Said in his book *Orientalism* (1978) states is "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident'" (Said 1978, 25). The idea of the Orient, he says is a European invention and has been "since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences" (Said 1978, 24). The land of the Orient, the East thus, has always been a mysterious, dark and an alien land for the 'fair' West. Said focuses on French and British Orientalist thought of nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Orient, he says, "is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other. In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience...The Orient is an integral part of European material civilizational and culture. Orientalism expresses and represents that part culturally and even ideologically as a mode of discourse with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles" (ibid.).

The Orient thus, has been significant to Europe not only because of its sheer proximity but for the fact that it has helped to define Europe/the West as its cultural Other. In addition, Europe has used the contrasting images, ideas, personalities and experiences of the Orient to define itself and this is what is reflected in the book cover of the first edition of *Orientalism*. The cover page has oil on canvas Orientalist painting titled *The Snake Charmer* (1880) by French artist Jean-Léon Gérôme. A naked girl with a serpent coiled around her body and a snake charmer by her side with Oriental men ogling at her is depicted in the painting. The girl is projected as showcasing her exotica to a group of men which itself highlights the image of lust, seduction, vulgarity and uncivilized; the very image the West associates with the East. The British artist, Frederick Goodall's 1884 painting titled *A New Light in the Harem* too projects this West's idea of the East. The notion of East-West dichotomy is aptly reflected in this painting where we can see a black woman sitting on the floor tending to her master's child while her white master leans back, sits comfortably on the couch and looks down upon her servant. The image of the 'Other' as sensuous, dark and thereby evil resonates in this painting through their manner of dressing. The white woman is dressed and covered up in white, which is a symbol of purity and chastity. The dark lady on the other hand, is dressed boldly in darker shade showing her ample cleavage. The Orient and the Occident then as Said says is not an inert fact of nature but purely a hypocritical creation of the West which is what Said reflects upon when he states: "Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient- dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling

it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said 1978, 25). The Orient thus, is an "idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West" (ibid.).

The relationship between Occident and Orient then is one of power, domination and complex hegemony thus giving itself the upper hand to link the Oriental to elements in Western society such as delinquents, insane, poor, emotional as compared to the rational West. The Orient thereby as per Western standards are feminine in nature. The question then arises whether such a system of representations framed by the Western consciousness regarding the Orient who are not given a chance to plead for their case is justified or not. It then appears that European and American interest in the Orient is goal driven and such an interest is created by a culture that acts politically, economically and militarily to project the Orient as a mysterious, alien land with a dark history. The relationship between the West and the East is thus, a "relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony..." (Said 1978, 26).

Such a cultural construction is as Louis Althusser calls is an agent of Ideological State Apparatuses which works subtly to ensure that there exists a reproduction of submission to the ruling ideology as well as a reproduction of the ability to manipulate the ruling ideology correctly for the agents of exploitation and repression. Althusser opines that individuals' views, values, desires and preferences are determined by their ideological practice and hence a European or an American would always identify himself from his

race first and as an individual second when talking about the Orient. Perhaps this is why the West's prejudices against the East still prevails. Such characterizations of people and cultures is thus categorically selective. E.M Forster's *A Passage to India* perfectly highlights the West's prejudices of the East. Using the trope of tourism, the connection of East-West dichotomy is laid bare.

The West has always been fascinated by the East. As tourists in Chandrapore, Mrs. Moore and Adela want to meet Indians and see the real India. Tourism, in Martin Heidegger's analysis of the world picture is a practice of bringing things nearer thereby forming a connection. The novel tries to forge this connection between the English and the Indians but is fraught with problems for Forster creates numerous incidents which make this connection impossible and the characters that initially are able to establish this connection break it off towards the end. As an ideal tourist, Mrs. Moore and Adela go to see the Marabar caves with Dr. Aziz with a picture of an incredible India in their mind only to return with horrifying experiences. Mrs. Moore nearly faints in the cave and she hits her head. She goes mad for an instant and starts hitting and gasping for breath like a lunatic. As highlighted in chapter 14 of the novel, she is not only alarmed by a crushing sound but a sudden stench repels her. She is also terrified by an echo.

What is surprising though is the fact that this echo of the caves also triggers off Adela's hysteria which makes her accuse Aziz of attempted rape. What exactly happened in the Marabar caves is still a mystery. Later in 1934, Forster admits that he "tried to show that India is an unexplainable muddle by introducing an

unexplained muddle- Miss Quested's experience in the cave" (Moran 1988, 597). In this context then, the caves in particular and India in general serves as the location for the rape of Adela's innocence for it is in these caves, where Adela becomes aware of her sexuality. The caves and India are thus dark, and formless as compared to the buildings of Venice in chapter 32. Thus, what was initially seen to be an attempt to improve East-West relations ends up strengthening the connection of East-West dichotomy.

David Lean's celluloid adaptation of the novel in 1984 however, ceases to even make an attempt to improve the East-West relations and presents in fact a prosaic evidence of the imperial's constructed view of the East. The film opens and ends in rainy England in contrast to the novel's Indian beginning and ending. Adela's trip to India is set to open up new 'horizons' as the ticket inspector informs her, an episode much absent in the novel. The use of the word 'horizons' is significant here for the imperialist English saw India as nothing but opening up new vistas for them whereby they can exercise their illegitimate power. The scene involving erotic temple carvings and Indians dressed as lewd monkeys seem to connote the high-end projection of India as the land of the Other. The scene wherein Adela arrives to the court with the Turtons, their car seems to roll over a placard stating 'Quit India!' thereby projecting an imperialistic tone and Lean asserting the rightfulness of British Raj over India. Lean's anti-Indian discretion is all the more reflected in framing Aziz at the mouth of the caves to show his presence and dispel ideas of Adela's hysterical imagination. Lean's film then is a journey to the lost bourgeoisie imperial world where relations between the English and Indians

can never exist. The downpour scene when Aziz comes out victorious from the courtroom and sees Fielding with Adela seems to wash away all means of continuing relations.

The novel and the film then seems to reinforce stereotypical notions of the Orient, in the sense of the term given by Edward Said in *Orientalism*. Years of colonialism, which is nothing but a cultural project of control and domination has further strengthened these stereotypical notions. Culture is “fundamental to the formation of class society, the naturalization of gender divisions in Western bourgeois society, and to developing discourses of race, biology, and nationality” (Dirks 1992, 57). However, at the same time metropolitan histories and contemporary narratives have been succoured and influenced by colonial events, troubled political events in Asia, Africa and Middle East and so on. The 9/11 attacks by the Islamist Al-Qaeda terrorist group against the United States of America has further exposed the deep fault lines of East-West dichotomy. Since the attack, the only image the West have of the Eastern religion especially of Islamic religion is that of a militant fanatic. The West views Muslims as extremists since the attacks.

It is of course Muslims who have been the worst sufferers of such cultural characterizations. In his essay “Islam Through Western Eyes” (1980), Said writes: “So far as the United States seems to be concerned, it is only a slight overstatement to say that Muslims and Arabs are essentially seen as either oil suppliers or potential terrorists. Very little of the detail, the human density, the passion of Arab-Muslim life has entered the awareness of even those people whose profession it is to report the Arab world. What we have instead is a series

of crude, essentialized caricatures of the Islamic world presented in such a way as to make that world vulnerable to military aggression” (Said 1980, par. 11).

The West, a dominant cultural space views Muslims as a threat in light of the recent political developments. The capitalists crush the proletariats so as to diffuse the site of class struggle since a dominant class (in this case the West) can hold State power over a long period only through exercising its hegemony over and in the State Ideological Apparatuses and this is what the Europeans and the Americans have been doing with Muslims. Post 9/11, the West seems to have intensified its hatred and prejudices against the Muslims and hence every Muslim is seen by them as a potential terrorist.

In the movie *Khuda Ke Liye*, the same is projected wherein after 9/11, the West’s fear and hatred for Muslims reached new heights and because of certain anti-social beings the whole community had to face the heat. In the movie a man dressed as Jew is shown distributing pamphlets meant to caution his fellow-whites against Muslims whereby it is written: “They want to kill us- It is written in the Quran. ‘Christians and Jews cannot be Trusted. They can never be Our Friends. Do Jihad and Kill Them’”. Such an act thereby further propagates the hatred against Muslims and sows the seed of age-old East-West dichotomy. Immediately after this, the protagonist is arrested when his white landlady out of mere suspicion calls up the police. The scene then shifts to a jail where the protagonist is beaten up, tortured, is forced to take off his clothes and is made to live in an unhygienic cell. The police here are not even looking for other evidences or suspects but is hell bent on proving

him as a terrorist only because he is a Muslim and for the fact that in spite of coming from a third-world country like Pakistan, the lead character still manages to live luxuriously. The consequence of such cultural mapping thus leads to identity crisis; not to forget the pain and trauma resulting from such events as seen in the last scene where we see the protagonist in a wheel bound condition. In this context then, the white country (USA) still continues to view the East, the third world with suspicion.

The West indeed, is the creation of the third world as Frantz Fanon once famously said. The West's creation and categorization of the world into First, Second and Third World- to refer to the US, Canada, Western Europe; the then Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc in Europe; and to refer to the developing countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America- has further deepened the fissures. Frederick Jameson's essay "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism" (1986) is in fact based on this binary opposition between a first world and a third world. In the essay, Jameson points out that all third-world texts are national allegories: "All third-world texts are necessarily, I want to argue, allegorical, and in a very specific way: they are to be read as what I will call national allegories, even when, or perhaps I should say, particularly when their forms develop out of predominantly western machineries of representation, such as the novel" (Jameson 1986, 69). Jameson thus, seems to contend that cultural productions emerging out of third world are common in nature-in terms of their representation and radical distinction of similar cultural forms as found in the first world. In the capitalistic tradition of first world as Jameson points out, there is a partition between the public and the private sphere but in

case of the third world, "the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society" (ibid.). Jameson's categorization of the capitalistic first world, a socialistic second world and a third world wherein he encompasses all the countries who have experienced colonialism and imperialism seems to have then reduced this third world space into a mere single space of 'shared experience' without even giving them a space to highlight their multi-ethnicity, multi-culture and so on, whereas in fact the first and second world are being defined in terms of their economies. It is this straightjacketed definition of the three worlds that makes Aijaz Ahmad to call out Jameson in his essay "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory'" (1987).

Noting his admiration for Jameson's work and calling himself and Jameson as "birds of the same feather [who]...never quite flocked together" (Ahmad 1987, 3), Ahmad in his essay critiques Jameson's concept of third-world literature and the essentialism of Jameson's understanding of the Third World and First World. Ahmad points out that the phrase 'third world' is highly polemical with no theoretical status whatsoever. According to him, there is no such thing as third-world literature because within this idea of third world, there are many fundamental issues ranging from periodization, to social and linguistic formations, to political and ideological struggles within the field of literary production and it would be wrong to generalize and bring it under one ambit. Case being in point is Ahmad himself who was born in Uttar Pradesh, India, is a Pakistani citizen, and writes poetry in Urdu, a language not commonly understood among the US intellectuals.

Jameson's characterization of first, second and third world then is hugely problematic because it is theoretically tenable and if it is tenable then an accurate mapping of the conception of literature based on this binary opposition is impossible. Jameson's concept of Three Worlds Theory as Ahmad points out is based on an "essentially descriptive way" (Ahmad 1987, 6). The only contention here though is that description is an ideological construct. It is through this construct that the West has constructed the discourse of the 'Other', the 'Orient', the 'East' and has described the Orientals as dark savages, uncivilized aliens and magical creatures with unregulated passions and sexuality. In this context then what Jameson is doing is validating the colonialist ways of description by asserting and reinforcing the very ideals of colonialism which needs to be condemned.

Cultures with their different customs and traditions might view another culture as exotic and mystical. The problem however, only begins if this view is taken by an economically, militarily and politically powerful and dominant culture and society, who can twist narratives and construct a fabricated 'reality'. Humans have had a long history and tradition whereby they have created their own cultures, identities, languages and geographies. But as Said says in "Resistance, Opposition and Representation" (1993), there should be "no reason except reason and prejudice to keep insisting on their separation and distinctiveness, as if that was all human life was about. Survival...also means not trying to rule others, not trying to classify them or put them in hierarchies, above all, not constantly reiterating how 'our' culture or country is number one..." (Said 1993, 98).

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