



## NEW ORDER ORIENTALISM AND ITS STEREOTYPES: A SCRUTINY OF DARJEELING LIMITED

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In the contemporary Postcolonial milieu, late capitalism has inextricably been tied up with a new order Orientalism in the production, dissemination and reception of a fixed, essentialist Third World subjectivity. Seen from this perspective, Wes Anderson’s widely acclaimed 2007 drama *Darjeeling Limited*, with its backdrop of Indian matrix and spurious benign humour, manoeuvres the construction of exoticized narratives and tales of India, sultry and lascivious Indian womanhood, ignorant and tricky Indian people. My paper is a modest attempt at analyzing and unveiling the stealthy, seemingly benevolent productions of ideologies that mould a stereotyping and othering of the “Third World”. First of all, it would be better to have a glimpse of the course of the evolution of Orientalism, its present-day manifestations, and its corresponding modes of representation of the “Third World”, particularly of the Indian context.

Edward Said’s groundbreaking book *Orientalism*, brought out in 1978, debunked the various, but intertwined processes of the construction of the East as something pagan, exotic, sensual, undeveloped, decadent, lazy and cruel. He, in his work, identified “a European cultural tradition of ‘Orientalism’, which is a particular and longstanding way of identifying the East as ‘Other’ and inferior to the West.”(193). Thus, the West and the East were discursively represented as dichotomies or binary opposites. The term “Orient” has been considered “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”(5). Many instances of such propagandist literature could be traced, beginning right from the ancient Greek Aeschylus’s play *The Persians*; the translations of various Indian texts by scholars from the West including William Jones; the writings of Ernest Renan, Antoine Sacy and Edward Lane; the poems of Rudyard Kipling; to the novels of Flaubert, Disraeli and Nerval. However, with the decline of Western imperialism, Orientalism dwindled and it began to be heavily critiqued more and more as a hegemonic and discursive practice that disseminated stereotypical representations of the East, validating European colonialism and domination. Early 1960s witnessed significant corpus of writings that contained caustic criticism of Orientalism by Asian scholars. Most striking instances include “Orientalism in Crisis” by Anouar Abdel-Malek and “English-speaking Orientalists” by A.L. Tibawi.

In the contemporary milieu of globalization, digitalization and Neocolonialism, the analysis of Orientalism demands a clearer and keener perspective. From overtly and direct forms of hegemonical representation of the Orient, Orientalism has transformed itself into a more complex, eclectic and sophisticated phase nowadays. The production, transmission and reception of the current Orientalism have been inextricably associated with the social, economic, technological and political undercurrents of late capitalism and Neocolonialism. Gayatri Spivak in the very opening section of her 2012 book *An Aesthetic Education in the Age of Globalization* expounds that the process of globalization takes place only with the availability of capital and data (1). In other words, the whole phenomenon of globalization is undoubtedly associated with the undercurrents of economy and technology. Here, the term “Third World” gains immense political and economic significance. The word, coined by the prominent French demographer and historian Alfred Sauvy, was originally related to nations who remained unaligned either with the Capitalist NATO bloc or the Communist Soviet bloc during the Cold War. Third World has also acquired the more common idea of all the developing countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America put together. However, due to its innate political bias and hierarchy, the appellation “Third World” has invited blistering criticism from some sections of intelligentsia. Hence, the problematization and the portrayal of the “Third World” gain deeper hermeneutic signification.

Said’s notion of Orientalism has also not been free from severe opprobrium. Critics of Said argue that his thinking is highly essentialist, and that his treatment of colonialism seems to be homogeneous. The conventional conceptions of Orientalism have undergone drastic changes, and have assumed multiple, novel facades including Post-Orientalism and Re-Orientalism. The widely discussed and controversial political theory of “the clash of civilizations” by Samuel P. Huntington would make an illustrious case of the concept of Post-Orientalism, a cultural and intellectual continuum of the classical Orientalism that tends to view the world in terms of dichotomies and hierarchies: “Economic power is rapidly shifting to East Asia... India is on the verge of economic takeoff... The willingness of other societies to accept the West’s dictates or abide its sermons is rapidly evaporating”(82). Re-Orientalism is almost an indigenized format of Orientalism in which the Orient

redefines itself in response to the increasing demands and interests of the West. Thus, at least some luminaries in the arena of Indian Writing in English have been acknowledged of “having cowardly, mercenary, western-approval-seeking motives” (17). These ultramodern versions of Orientalism may be dubbed ‘New Order Orientalism.’

The varied and myriad representations of India in literature, history and films have been subjected to many critical analyses and debates. The infamous 1835 Minute of Thomas Babington Macaulay could be traced back here as one of the earliest modes of these depictions whereby he himself unfurls the socio-political underpinnings of his educational policy, to mould “Indians in blood and colour but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect” (Quoted in Jayapalan. *History of Education in India*.56). The eminent British philosopher and political theorist John Stuart Mill once claimed that political emancipation and representative government could not be applied to Indians because they were inferior in terms of civilization. Katherine Mayo, in her polemical and notorious 1927 book *Mother India*, a work that caused intense reproach from Indian thinkers and scholars, pinpoints the ‘pitfalls’ of Indian civilization: “Inertia, helplessness, lack of initiative and originality, lack of staying power and of sustained loyalties, sterility of enthusiasm, weakness of life-vigour itself- all traits that truly characterize the Indian not only of today, but of long-past history” (78). These lines conspicuously exhibit the racial and political predilection and bigotry of European colonialism.

Felix Regnault, a French physician and anthropologist, wrote extensively on the physical characteristics of the people of India. On seeing gatherings of Indian pilgrims, Regnault describes, “real museums of the pathological where lepers, those with elephantiasis, microcephalics, and the deformed of all kinds happen to find themselves assembled together” (Quoted in Rony. *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema and Ethnographic Spectacle*.32). A deep sense of bitterness and sarcasm towards the Indians is highly noticeable here. The exoticisation and delineation of Indian women as sensual and lascivious can also be found in some narratives of Orientalism and Western colonialism. For example, the caricature of Indian womenfolk made by the late eighteenth century French scholar and missionary Jean-Antoine DuBois is blatantly racist and chauvinist: “Experience has taught that young Hindu women do not possess sufficient firmness and sufficient regard for their own honour, to resist the ardent solicitations of a seducer” (207).

Many decades have passed since the decline of Colonialism and Orientalism. However, the remnants of these hegemonic discourses continue to exist in the contemporary socio-cultural matrix. From indiscreet and visible appropriation of the Orient, the Western power centres have taken superficially sophisticated and gentle stances. In this juncture, the reading of the 2007 drama film *Darjeeling Limited* by Wes Anderson- a celebrated American film director and screenwriter who was nominated twice for the Academy Awards for Best Original Screenplay- from a critical point of view would be feasible. The screenplay is a collaboration of Roman Coppola, a notable American film-maker and music video director; Jason Schwartzman, a popular American actor, musician and screenwriter who also plays a leading role in the film; and Anderson himself. The critical reception of the film has generally been positive, acknowledging the brilliant blend of humour, pathos and catchy visuals.

The film is starred by established American actors Owen Wilson (as Francis Whitman), Adrien Brody (as Peter Whitman) and Jason Schwartzman (Jack Whitman) who play the roles of three affluent, but emotionally distant American brothers, jointly called “Whitman brothers” who travel together on a luxurious train in India, “The Darjeeling Limited.” Since the death of their father, the three brothers have not met each other. Francis, the eldest of the three brothers, plans the journey in advance deliberately, in the guise of a sojourn of spiritual self-discovery, to meet their mother who resides in India. Other important characters include Rita, the charming stewardess of the train, enacted by Amara Karan; the train’s Chief Steward, represented by Waris Ahluwalia; Brendan, the assistant to Francis, whose role is done by Wallace Wolodarsky; Patricia Whitman, the mother of the three brothers, played by Anjelica Huston; the wife of Peter, Alice, performed by Camilla Rutherford; and Jack’s ex, presented by Natalie Portman. Majority of the scenes of the film was shot in Jodhpur, Rajasthan.

In spite of all the laudatory reviews, Wes Anderson’s *Darjeeling Limited* has been replete with manipulating and deviatory mechanisms of representation. The politics of sexism and racial prejudice could be visibly detected in the film. The role played by Amara Karan, Rita, is almost a picturesque manifestation of the sensuality and eroticism that the West wants to identify with the women of the East, particularly of India. Rita is frank and candid in terms of her behaviour; she speaks fluent English, just like an educated Western lady; she wears fashionable and bright clothes. Also, she is not shy and reluctant in expressing her emotions and thoughts. Here, one may feel that these qualities of Rita, given by Anderson, would break her from the chains of Orientalism. However, such a reading is only apparent and spurious. Rita is called “Sweet Lime”, for the drinks she offers to Whitman brothers. She is also seen carrying herself a packet of “savory snack.” All these images of refreshment are undeniably associated to Rita’s bodily appearance, especially when she has been found wearing a sari in an extremely voluptuous and sultry fashion. Her belly is bare when she offers them drinks. Thus, the very terminology involved in the presentation of an Indian female character is deeply intertwined with the flashy and sexy visualization of her body. This is in fact a way of co-modifying the ‘other woman.’ The

word "sweet" and "savory" can have many linguistic and cultural overtones including something tasty, spicy, hot and even sexually seductive.

After the sensual delineation of the external physical features of Rita, Anderson goes on to bring in a deft, but politically problematic scene in which Rita is having a fling with Jack, and that also in the bathroom of the train's compartment. Jack is portrayed as a 'clever', 'smart' and 'triumphant' Western Male who successfully seduces the 'innately sensual and lustful' Indian Female into a brief, sexual tryst: "You want to smoke a cigarette with me in the bathroom?"(Darjeeling Limited). Rita just allows her natural instincts to operate to be physically united with a stranger, without any tinge of reason and restraint. On the other hand, Jack has maneuvered himself into a dominant position here, physically and rationally. So, the scene is a contemporary 'multicultural' recapitulation of the age-old discourses of sensuality and emotionalism of the female of the Orient. This could be taken as an example of the contemporary New Order Orientalism. One would be reminded of the same words about Indian women uttered by the French Jean-Antoine DuBois mentioned earlier in the paper. Again, an instance of offensive vulgarity and racial provocation ensues. The eldest brother, Francis, asks Jack after the latter reaches their compartment after his dalliance with Rita: "Did you just fuck that Indian girl?"(Darjeeling Limited). The 'four letter' word used to refer to a culturally different woman is highly contemptuous and a sign of sheer racialism, colonialism and chauvinism. All these contexts in the film promulgate the current modes of Orientalism, rather disguised as 'normal' and 'natural'. A very recent case of this New Order Orientalism is the highly controversial cartoon published by *New York Times* India's Mars Orbiter Mission titled "Mangalyaan."

Rita is again filmed as somebody highly 'sexy' and 'earthy'. In this scene, her back is nearly naked when we find her image on the mirror in the train. Only the knock of the Chief Steward of the train prevents Jack from having a physical intercourse with her this time. Somehow, they manage to enjoy a smooch. The subject position repeatedly created for Rita is that of one who is bawdy and susceptible to persuasion. When Jack and Rita are about to separate in the course of their journey, the words of the former need to be caught one's critical dragnet: "Thanks for using me"(Darjeeling Limited). A dexterous reversal or manipulation of roles is to be seen here; a spectator needs to remove the speculation, who has used and who has been used? Also, Rita is shown emotional, while Jack takes the separation in a more or less rational way.

Stereotyping of the Indian rural-side and its people in Anderson's movie is reinforced by the scene in which one of the loafers of Francis has been snatched away by an Indian boy who is a shoeshiner. Francis reveals his moral angst and proudly declares that a single piece of his loafers is worth of 3000 dollars, and that the boy can pay for a building out of the money he gets for it. The poverty-stricken, dishonest, and tricky picture of the Indian village and its people is disseminated. In the course of their itinerary through an Indian village, the Whitman brothers rescue two out of the three Indian boys who fall into a river. The death of the boy and his funeral rites make the three brothers aware of the significance of family relationship. Soon, they realize the role of their forlorn mother who lives in a convent on the foothills of the Himalayas.

As a whole, Wes Anderson's film *Darjeeling Limited* is a specious and outwardly innocent cultural artifact, a blend of brilliant shots, patches of humour, sophisticated technology and monetary funds, crammed with racially prejudiced stereotypes and clichéd narratives of India; with explicitly lubricious presentation of Indian womanhood. The traits of the New Order Orientalism occupy the visual, linguistic and thematic aspects of the film. But, these elements are difficult to identify from an exterior level of reading; instead, one has to read between the lines as Said himself proposed, a mode of 'Contrapuntal Reading.' India and its citizens simply relegate into the background as a mere invigorating setting for the foregrounding of the American brothers' spiritual and emotional betterment. To conclude, the words of Fatimah Tobing Rony, Associate Professor, Film and Media Studies, Yale University, would come handy here: "...cinema has been a primary means through which race and gender are visualized as natural categories, cinema has been the site of intersection between anthropology, popular culture, and the construction of a nation and empire"(9).

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