

WRITING ORIENT

On Western Gaze and its Discontents

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The narrator was sincerely minding her own business when she came across the prose that felt like a cold glass of water being thrown on the face, Hamid Dabashi's *Hollywood Orientalism* is not actually about the Arab World. It is about the American world, that builds on Orientalist tropes while borrowing (or seeming to borrow) from Islamic lore, Muslim Culture and Muslims. He takes the knives out for the white gaze as:

"...the epicentre of Hollywood as an industry stands a factual, virtual, or fictive white narrator telling the world he is the measure of truth and wisdom, joy and entertainment".

Dabashi's dissection of Denis Villeneuve's *Dune: Part I*, based on Frank Herbert's novel of same name, engages with the much lauded giant Edward Said's work on Orientalism, and simultaneously makes a point for its relevance

to date. Said's contribution of comparative literature has since its publication surpassed its efficacy as a theory of literature to a well-grounded political theory that explains the manner in which Western cultures imagine the 'Orient' from their own vantage point – laying bare the political nature of imperial contact with the 'other'. An important to note here, however, is that this particular kind of discourse actually predates imperialism as per Said.

The classic essentials of Orientalism include an 'imagined community' of the West's choosing, written out of a mould. The Orientalized cultures, people and realities are above differentiation and incapable of social growth. Their development, myths, experiences remains the same across multiple temporal junctures.

The Orientalist mythologies subsist and thrive off the absolute inability of the writers to rid themselves of the entrenched ideologies imprinted in their sub-conscious by the way they have read, listened, seen these communities being portrayed through time. Said attributes this plight to the foundations of Middle-Eastern Studies programs in the West, one which centres the political importance of the West. The result is naturally outright racist scholarship.

The foundational roots of the Orientalist discourse demands these writings on history, culture, and politics to be read with a degree of reflexivity, keeping in view the process and actors that produced it. He refers to this ideology seeping into contemporary political subjectivities as:

"It is quite common to hear high officials in Washington and elsewhere speak of changing the map of the Middle East, as if ancient

societies and myriad peoples can be shaken up like so many peanuts in a jar”.

Another problem is that over the course of time the discourse has made its way into the art-forms which are sociologically grounded as low-brow arts including pop-culture, media reporting, television, Hollywood and even video-games. These mass consumed cultural forms have contributed to shaping the public subjectivities of the non-West or, as Stuart Hall dubs it, ‘the rest’.

The Oriental inertia showed a degree of flexibility following 9/11: incorporating Western fears to ‘the othered’ in West’s grand tragedy. The Oriental subject and cultures, now branded in the image of an essential villain, i.e. a violent and backward terrorist, in juxtaposition to American Innocence.

American innocence did not merely rely on the character attribution of terrorism and criminality to black, brown, and indigenous individuals at its own convenience, this ‘image attribution’ and profiling negated, de-politicized, and de-historicized 9/11 itself. The Orientalized cultures became a vassalage for Western interests, the art merely acquiesced.

In the process of Eastern writing, the praxis of Orientalism follows these cultures back home; language as the Master’s tool becomes a conduit for reproducing these forms of imagination. Post 9/11 Anglophone fiction as a medium came at the forefront of this inspection; the writers becoming ‘cultural brokers’ to the West. They presented the cultures back home in a similar vein as their Western counterparts. Instead of subverting stereotypes, they strengthened them.

The top three most engaged with works of fiction written by Pakistani authors followed this playbook in an almost religious fashion. Mohsin Hamid centres a terrorist as protagonist of his bestseller, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the success of which presented a perfect blue-print for appealing to Western curiosity: informing other budding writers about how to depict Pakistan for the West. The layered narrative of the prose jumps between a food blog on the one

hand and the ‘making of a terrorist’ on the other. What it fails to do is to present Pakistani lived experiences in all their complex details, reducing the whole to disfigured and disaggregated parts. Another bestseller, *Exit West*, depicts the ‘migrant other’ of an un-named war torn country. It is a derivative of European pre-Brexit ‘The Great Replacement’ paranoia, i.e. waves of people from the Global South moving in great numbers to the Global North.

Kamila Shamsie’s *Home-fire* is a diaspora narrative that introduces a binary characterization of a British-Pakistani member of parliament: the ‘high achieving immigrant’ against the evergreen ‘terrorist immigrant’ in relation to the British Security State. These characters are an embodiment of what is desirable to the Western gaze, largely dependent on the western political climate and its ‘informed’ subjects.

The writers’ ‘native informant’ status gives their voices and literary narratives a degree of legitimacy that Western authors do not have. These fictionalized oriental cultural scripts end up defining the social imaginings of the portrayed community and remain inadequate, controversial, and contested. The East does not write for and about the East – rather, the East writes for West.

A single set image which has been reproduced so much so that it has come to literally define entire personalities, national character, and common sense of the defined is difficult to shrug off. Chimamanda Adichie refers to it as: the danger of a single story. The question remains, how can knowledge production be rethought/reimagined to rid subjects from the Western gaze? There are no radical solutions. But, to take a leaf out of Dabashi’s critique:

“You don’t fight Hollywood with critical argument . . . You signal, celebrate and polish the representations that are works of art.”

In this spirit, there exists a dire need for the promotion of a diverse range of voices in publishing spaces to signal and celebrate the well-informed, true to matter representational

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