

**POLITICS OF POSTCOLONIAL REPRESENTATION: ORIENTALISM  
IN THE MIMIC MEN AND A BEND IN THE RIVER**

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Orientalism is constructed on binary polarities between the Orient and the Occident. Each is assumed to exist in opposition to the other: the Orient is supposed to be everything that West is not; its 'alter ego'. The Orient is frequently described in a series of negative terms – irrational, barbaric, sensual and lazy – in order to assign a sense of superiority and strength to West. Thus Orient is represented as an unequal dichotomy between Europe and its 'Others'; this dichotomy is pivotal to the creation of the European culture as well as to the maintenance and extension of European hegemony over the lands. 'Said's Project, say Loomba, "is to show how 'knowledge' about non-European was the part of the process of maintaining power over them" (Loomba: 2007, p.43). Said incorporates in the introduction to the *Orientalism* that the Orient has been fundamental in the defining the West 'as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience' (Said: 1978, p.2). The West comes to know itself by proclaiming via Orientalism everything it believes it is not. As a result Said asserts that 'European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even ungrounded self' (Said: 1978, p.3). The aim of this paper is to examine the representation of landscape in V.S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* and *A Bend in the River*, which includes geographical and emotional cartography. In this paper, I shall provide a detailed account of orientalism, and take up *The Mimic Men* and *A Bend in the River* respectively. Finally, I shall do a comparative investigation of both novels.

'The Orient', Said says, 'became an object, suitable for study in the academy, for display in the museum, for the reconstruction in the colonial office, for theoretical illustration in anthropological, biological, linguistic, racial and historical thesis about mankind and the universe, for instances of economic and sociological theories of development, revolution, cultural personality, national religious character' (Said: 1978, 7-8). The variety of institutions, academic or otherwise, mentioned above indicates how embedded Orientalism was [and arguably still is] in the imagination and institution of daily life in the West. Orientalism is a Western fantasy. It is significant to note that the Western's views of the Orient are only a construct. It is based not on fact, or what they have observed in the territory of the Orient; but it is a result of their dreams, fantasies, and assumptions about (the seemingly) different place. 'Orientalism is first and foremost a *fabricated* construct, a series of *images* that come to stand as the Orient's 'reality' for those in the West' (McLeod: 2000, p.41). This constructed 'reality' is just a myth because it is not there in the Orient. It is not 'an inert fact of nature' (1978: 4) but 'man made (1978: 5), a conception formulated to rule. 'But crucially', say Loomba, 'its creation

from the stuff of the fantasy does not make it any less remote from the world. Orientalism may be fundamentally imaginative but material effect results from its advent, (McLeod: 2000, p.42)

Orientalism is literary. It permeates a vast institutional network, and at the same time influences massive amount of literary (and non-literary) writings. Said finds ‘philology [the study of the history of language], lexicography [dictionary-making], history, biology, political and economic theory, novel writing and lyric poetry’ (1978: 15) as coming to the service of Orientalism. More surprisingly, the Orientalism also celebrated the Western experience in its writings. These various kinds of writing are all influenced by the structures, assumptions and stereotypes of Orientalism, reminding us that Western culture is inextricably bound up with Western colonialism.

Orientalism is legitimating. The aforementioned facts state that Orientalism cannot be represented as it is, and any attempt to represent is ‘bound to a structure of political domination’. Moreover, it gives good reasons for the justification of western colonial rules; and any representation is an attempt to maintain ‘colonial rule through physical coercion’ (McLeod: 2000, p.43).

Keeping the Occident in mind, Said, borrowing the terms from Freud, divides the Orientalism in two parts: ‘latent’ and ‘manifest’. The former describes the dreams and fantasies about the Orient and the latter describes the versatile instances of Orientalist knowledge created at various historical junctures. McLeod says that latent Orientalism is like a blueprint; and manifest Orientalism is the many different versions that can be built from fundamentally the same design.

The novel incorporates such multifaceted aspects of landscape as the violation inflicted by colonial educational system, the loneliness of the big city, the futility of chasing ideal vision, racial wounds, the trauma of placelessness, politics and power and the far-reaching consequences of childhood experience. The novel gives a vivid description of life. Singh has shed some of his illusions and ‘no longer yearn for ideal landscape, and no longer wish to see the god of the city’ (MM, p.300). The novel offers the impossibility of organic, ordered, and meaningful society developing out of the mixture of races and creeds out of the group of the people bound neither to each other nor to the land. It was and would remain a society ‘fragmented, inorganic, no link between the man and the landscape, a society not held together by common interest. . .’ (MM, p.246).

Rootlessness and placelessness of the inhabitants of the island is reinforced time and again. The Isabella beach is littered with ‘the trunks of trees, washed up by the seas’ (MM, p.113). Kripal Singh writes, ‘Here lays the trees, fast in the sand which was deep and level around it; impossible now to shift, what once had floated lightly on the water . . .’ (MM, p.133). This image suggests not only uprooting but also the impossibility of return. It evokes Victor Burgin’s image of ‘melancholy tension’ which derives from a ‘separation from our origin’ (cited in Nandan: 2003, p.128).

The novel discloses that Isabella is a small island and lack economic resources, skills and knowledge. It lacks the homogeneity of population, culture and tradition that might provide unity and purpose (King: 1993). The denizens of the island are homeless. This is suggested through the series of homes that Singh occupies: Shylock’s boarding house, the expatriate bourgeois house in Isabella, the London hotel room in which he writes his memoirs.

Violence and racial tension are central to the novel. There is a deep racial animosity between Indian and blacks in Trinidad. Singh feels uncomfortable around blacks and is accused of racial exclusiveness (Nazareth: 1979). An example of deep racial wounds in West Indian

society is a searing scene in the novel where a young boy called Hok ignores his mother because she is a Negro, whereas he, being of mixed blood, does not look like a Negro. Violence done to the Indians in the *Isabella* is mentioned by Singh – ‘women and children assaulted, of hacking, of families burnt alive’ (MM, p.241). One of the groundbreaking notions which revolutionized our thinking of literature and cultural constructs is the concept of Orientalism. It changed our entire perspective of such broad and rich subjects as the Ideology, Egyptology and Oriental Studies. It debunks the most of the major European arguments and exposes the hidden agenda to construct the Orient. My aim in this paper is to explore the construction of the Orientalism in Edward Said’s monumental book *Orientalism* (1978).

The novel is replete with corruption. The elite class treats the other human inferior beings, and mistreat them for the sake of personal gain, advantage and position. The corruption reaches its highest point in the form of political corruption. The landscape of the novel subverts the dichotomy between the Orient and the Occident. Kripal Singh comes from his Caribbean Island to England with the usual expectation – fulfilment, completion, a sense of belonging to well established order – of the people from his region. But he only finds a greater isolation, a more acute sense of being adrift, of being shipwrecked. He finds the shock of disillusionment (Joshi: 1994). Singh feels lost in the city – lost and lonely. ‘I came to London – and I was lost. London was not the centre of my world, I had been misled. . .’ and he was, he says, ‘thrown more and more into myself, fighting to keep my balance. . . . All mythical lands faded and in the big city I was confined to a smaller world than I had ever known’ (MM, p. 142). The concept of the Orientalism comes from Michel Foucault’s contention that knowledge is not innocent but profoundly connected with the operations of the power. For the accompaniment of the colonial ‘power’ Europe produces and circulated ‘knowledge’ about the ‘Orient’. Orientalism uses the concept of discourse to reorder the study of colonialism. It can be seen as central to the making and functioning of the colonial societies. ‘It examines how the formal study of the Orient (what is today referred as Middle East), along with the literary and cultural texts, consolidated certain ways of seeing and thinking which in turn contributed to the functioning of the colonial power’ (Loomba: 2007, p.42). Said acknowledges that certain texts are accorded –

The authority of the academics, institutions, and governments . . . . Most important, such texts can create not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe. In time, such knowledge and reality produce a tradition, or what Michel Foucault calls a discourse, whose material presence or weight, not the originality of a given author, is really responsible for the texts produced out of it (Said: 1978, p.94).

Said gives more prominence to individual authors than does Foucault, but, like, Foucault, he also considers them as a pivotal part of the structure of thought and the working power.

I shall now take up another novel by Naipaul, *A Bend in the River*. The novel is set in an unknown territory of African country, which is bloody, lawless, threatening and unknowable: ‘The bush muffled the sound of murder, and the muddy rivers, and the lakes washed the blood away’ (BR, p.60). The novel, in a large extent influenced by Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. In *Heart of Darkness* it is Kurtz who orders the barbaric display, but in *A Bend in the River* it is ascribed to uncontrolled rage of Africans. The society depicted in the novel is liable to collapse any time into a state of chaos (Hayward: 2002, p.172).

The landscape of the novel is incorporated with enigma and menace. ‘The river and forests were like presences, and much more powerful than you. You felt unprotected and intruder’ (BR, p.14). The surroundings are hostile. This hostility is represented through the

image of water hyacinth; this vegetation relentlessly obstructs the river which serves an essential means of communication. The surrounding countryside remains almost entirely unknown: ‘No one liked going outside his territory’ (BR, p.15).

The landscape of the novel is very much similar to that of *Heart of the Darkness*: ‘travelling back to the earliest beginning of the world. . . .’ Naipaul Africa where ‘people would be living in villages more or less as they had lived for centuries’ (BR, p.269), has, like that of *Heart of Darkness*, remained unchanged from the time immemorial. The panorama of Africa depicted in the novel is conformity with the traditional representation of the continent. The Africans are represented as irrational, childlike and undisciplined. Africa is perceived as unchanging and untouched by history.

The representation of the Europe in the novel is Oriental – described in negative and alluding terms, which is not there. It is necessary feature of the novel. Salim describes the stock of his shop as a ‘sea of junk’ (BR, p.46). Further he says –

It was antiquated junk, specially made for shops like mine; and I doubt whether the workmen who made the stuff – in Europe and in the United States and perhaps nowadays in Japan – had any idea of what their products were used for (BR, p.47).

This implies that the west is the repository of technological expertise, while simultaneously disdaining its products.

Europe is variously constructed as serving as ideal of reason and order, and as having sown the seed of disorder which now prevails. The Europe also grants the gift of historical assessment: “All that I know of our history of Indian Ocean I have got from books written by Europeans. . . . Without Europeans I feel, all our past would have been washed away” (BR, p.18). Said writes in the introduction to his book that ‘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, ruling over it: in short *Orientalism is a western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the orient*’ [Emphasis mine] (Said: 1978, p.3). In this way the Occident [the West] find their way into and make possible, a whole institutional structure where opinions views and theses about the Orient circulate as objective knowledge, wholly reliable truth. Thus knowledge about and power over colonized lands is related enterprise.

Apart from the aforementioned shape of the Orientalism, it is embodied with several stereotypical notions. It is considered as timeless because there is no historical change, whereas the West is place of historical progress and scientific development. The West considers the Orient as strange, feminine, degenerate, and is concerned with race and gender. The Arabs are considered as ‘murderous and violent’, and the Indians as lazy. The male of Orient is described as impotent and females as sexually licentious exotic.

Both novels deals with the bitter and harsh reality faced by the citizen after having gained so called independence. The landscape of the novels is dehumanizing, and emphasises the racial animosity and violence among the people of the same nation. Both novels show the citizen of Africa and Isabella Island as puppets in the hands of capricious ruler, administrators and politicians. These two novels deal almost with similar issues; but in his representation of African landscape, in *A Bend in The River*, Naipaul appears to be, and has been accused of, ‘a lover of West, a black imperialist, a colonial renegade and even a racist’ (cited in Nandan: 2003, p.132). In this novel he dehumanises the African people and continent, whereas Westerns are depicted as icon of reason and order. Orientalism is constructed for power politics. It is constructed through

binary opposition, fantasizing, institutionalization, discourse and multitude of literary and non-literary works. Stereotyping is also pivotal in formation of Orientalism.

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