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THE TRAP OF RE-ORIENTALISM



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"Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet," wrote Rudyard Kipling, a man with a silly name who only had a career because West met East and immediately mugged it, running off with wallet, shoes and pants. Through Kipling's pen, the British learned about India, and through Kipling and English medium schooling the British taught India about 'itself'.

West and East are not just changeable, cardinal directions, but a worldview. Edward Said said in *Orientalism* that the Orient (East) was a construction of the Occident (West), whereby Westerners (Judeo-Christian, European, white) could

identify themselves as superior to an imagined Eastern Other. East and West in this context are concepts agnostic of time and space, equally relevant in the colonial, postcolonial, post-Cold War and post-9/11 worlds. Regardless of where in the world you were or who you dealt with, East and West was the binary split between the colonised and the colonisable, the civilised and the savage, the powerful and the powerless. This is why the imagined West includes Australia while excluding Albania.

While the details have changed, key to the East-West binary is the notion that the West's position of relative material power makes it producer, curator and arbiter of legitimate knowledge. America was not 'discovered' by the people already living there before Columbus rolled up. Domination of knowledge not only allows the West to constitute who and what count as Eastern, but determines 'facts' about the East. Facts such as the legitimate existence of an Iraqi nation, but not a Kurdish one. The practise of the West imagining the East and then telling the East what it is, Said called Orientalism.

While the West of yesterday attempted to define the East through cartography and the science of skull shape measuring,

about gay marriage can attest.

While it might be tempting to dub this as reverse Orientalism, in the case of Easterners stereotyping the West there has not been an equivalent reversal in material power that would give these stereotypes teeth, and the domination of national minorities is invariably the continuation of colonial-era, Western-led, projects.

Nevertheless, Orientals are arguably capable of Orientalism. Lisa Lau has presented the theory of re-Orientalism, which states:

"...the East (in particular South Asia) has now seized self-representation to a large degree, yet continues to draw on Western referential points and use Western yardsticks as it attempts to self-define. Moreover and insidiously... contemporary re-Orientalising, Eastern representations continue to be Western-centric: maintaining the status quo of the original orientalist dichotomy, reinforcing the centrality of the West."

Lau formulated her theory through an examination of English language literature by diasporic South Asian writers. In her analysis, writers in the diaspora have a tendency to stereotype, simplify and exoticise their 'home' countries in their work—a joint result of themselves often not being situated in the societies they write about, and the need to convey meaning to the Western audiences of their Western publishers.

Readers of diasporic authors will recognise this in narrators explaining their societies to readers like outsiders looking in, talking about 'common' practices such as arranged marriage or kite-flying as though there is a secret understanding between them and the readers that these are, in fact, rare and remarkable phenomena. Characters and situations in re-Orientalist literature must display and embody Indian-ness, or Muslimhood, or whatever other label they are classified under for the convenience of the Western reader. With its fetish for presenting South Asia as excitingly different to the West, re-Orientalism prevents the presentation of complexity. The development of empathy through nuanced, natural and diverse storytelling is axed in favour of homogenous exoticism.

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