

From Orientalism to Re-Orientalism: An Analysis of A Pakistani English Fictional Narrative

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Abstract

Introduction: Re-orientalism refers to the act of representing the Orient by the Orient itself as the 'Other,' a role historically undertaken by Western scholars. This phenomenon is often carried out by diasporic writers who, while residing in the West, portray the dark aspects of their native cultures.

Methodology: The study used interpretivist research paradigm as a mode of analyzing the hidden realities in the selected work. This paper conducts a close reading of Nadeem Aslam's novel *The Wasted Vigil*.

Results/Findings: The analysis reveals that Aslam presents a skewed image of local culture, both by emphasizing its darker sides and by twisting core cultural concepts to align with his own interests as a comprador writer. This misrepresentation not only distorts the cultural narrative but also

reinforces the harmful divide between the global 'centre' and the 'margin.'

Future Direction: *The study underscores the need for further examination of the role diasporic writers play in cultural representation, particularly in the context of global politics, to mitigate the harm done to the perception of the Orient.*

Keyword: *Re-orientalism, Orientalism, Postcolonialism, Diasporic Writer, Pakistani Literature*

Introduction

Postcolonial studies emerged as a resistance against the colonial agendas. Postcolonial literature produced by the authors from past colonies challenged the ideological constructs of colonial agendas (McLeod, 2000) and the empire started 'writing back' to oppose the notions of the West (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2002). The colonial literature represented the East as a 'negative alter ego' of the West (Said, 1978). A self-positive image was casted in contrast to the negative image of the East. Said's *Orientalism* (1978) particularly highlighted this aspect of colonial agenda and focused on the colonial ways of othering the East by its misrepresentation. He was of view that the Orientals themselves helped the Europeans to define them as exotic, dangerous and mysterious by appearing as a convoluted part of western culture.

The concept of re-Orientalism (Lau, 2009) is an extension to the concept of Orientalism (Said, 1978). Its epistemological constraints lead it to a new emerging field of study within the domain of postcolonial literary canon. Lau's re-Orientalism stresses on the role of Orientals where Said's Orientalism is practiced by the Orientals in casting a negative self-image of the East 'no less than non-Orientals' while focusing on some particular types of Orientalism (Lau & Mendes, 2012, p. 3). In this new framework of power and representation, Orientalism is practiced by the Orientals and by doing so the voice of the Orient is altered and transferred into a new position of 'other'. Moreover, it is represented stereotypically as per the demand of Western reader (Lau, 2009). While coining the term re-Orientalism, Lau (2009) explores that the strategies of Orientalism, this time, have been adopted by the Orientals and while doing so they deliberately alter the authenticity of representation. Partial truths are depicted in a way that they other the Orient and generate a stereotypical image of the Orient that satisfies the demands of global market.

Deriving the concept of re-orientalism from Lau (2007), the current study has tried to explore and analyse the novel, *The wasted Vigil* (2008) by Nadeem Aslam. Moving into the textual practice of the novel, it is impertinent first to establish what re-orientalism is.

Literature Review

Lau (2007) suggests that:

The curious development over these few recent decades is that Orientalism is no longer only the relationship of the dominance and representation of the Oriental by the non-Oriental or Occidental, but that this role appears to have been taken over (in part at least) by other Orientals, namely, the diasporic authors. This process of Orientalism by Orientals is what I will be terming as 'Re-Orientalism' for the purposes of this article, which is the same relationship of the powerful speaking for and representing the other, who is all but consigned to subalternism. (p. 572)

Interestingly, the texts Lau (2009) selected for analysis in order to substantiate her point of view were those written by female south East Asian diasporic writers in her article on re-orientalists. Simply put, re-orientalism is a term used for those postcolonial writers who are born in the East and yet in their writings represent the East as the Western scholars used to do in the past. They claim to be postcolonial writers trying to deconstruct the discourse of us versus them as developed by the west. But in fact, they are doing more harm than the good. They are in fact projecting and perpetuating the discourse of the West and it is very common among the diasporic writers. Pakistani diasporic writers are also no exception in this regard. From the viewpoint of literary representation, these writers are in a position of dominance and power having close affiliations with the local ethnicity, culture etc. (Lau, p. 574), they have taken up a position, like the western scholars particularly during the times of colonization, that the east is same exotic, uncivilized, brute, unable to speak for itself and to represent its emotions and thoughts (Said, 1978).

Salgado' (2004) comments that the migrant writers (from the colonized countries) are in a better position when they become the part of western metropolitan culture and have wider readership and more access to publications generating a feeling of envy for the other writers. But it does not seem to as simple as has been put forth by Salgado. Many other aspects are also involved in this migration and publishing activity. Perera's (2005) response suggests that the

indigenous writers are not ‘envious’ rather they have to compromise their ‘artistic integrity’ being ‘pawns of the publishing industry’ (p. 241). In this context the home writers seem to be in a better position. But do the migrant writers also have to make compromises their artistic integrity for wider attention and readership in the world? Lau (2007) argues that these diasporic writers are no doubt in a ‘position of power and dominance’ where they have easy access to literary representation (p. 572). Almeida (2014) also shares the similar views stating that ‘location and domicile’ play a vital role in making a writer celebrity (p. 178). It is this ease and availability of the opportunities that makes the domestic writers ‘envious’ of the diasporic writers.

However, it is not just the matter of having opportunities. There is also more to this than the eyes could meet i.e. the politics of publishing. Nabar (2014) relates the story of an Indian poet who wanted to get his poetry published and every time he got rejected. Finally, frustrated by the situation, he resent his poetry but adding that it was a translation of the original Indian language and it got published. Nabar (2014) suggests, commenting on this incident that the publishing of the exotic is ‘subject to market criteria and to location’ (p. 13). There are certain market pressures on the writers by the publishers for which the orient writers have to go through and adjust themselves and accordingly, their writings as well. Instead of bridging over the gap between the orient and the occident and bringing people together, globalization has given an extension to the divide. Nabar also points out that the roots of such incidents are ‘grounded in the politics of First World/Third World Western discourses’ (p. 13).

Besides the issue of acceptance of the literary works of the orients by the western societies, there are also marked differences how the orient is being portrayed by the Indian writers who can be broadly categorized as the diasporic or migrant writers and the native writers. Dwivedi and Lau (2014) point out that the themes and concepts of both the writers are different. The representation of India portrayed by the diasporic writers is different than the native writers living within their own country of origin. Which version is more acceptable by the western scholars and postcolonial thinkers? The answer to this lies in the assertion by Dwivedi and Lau (2014) that the one which is given out by the diasporic writers is generally more acceptable by the Eurocentric scholars and postcolonial thinkers all over the world. Lau (2007) goes so far as to argue that the important thing is not what is being presented by the migrant writers, but who is presenting and this ‘who’ depends solely on where the writer is located. This furthers the divide

between the migrant writers who are thus the privileged ones than those who are living within the native land. The issue becomes further complex when the dark images of the orient are made acceptable to the people at large all over the world through the interplay of the consumerism and global market (the doings of the capitalists whose sole focus is the profit making through this agency as well). Narayanan (2013) quotes Dev Sen, a popular Bengali writer, has pointed out that the distortion of the Indian culture has become a matter of profit making consumerism which is a very sad reality. Thus the exploitation is being used as the tool for money making by the marketing strategies and capitalism activism all over the world. The ideas that are propagated and sold widely to the public are the ones that are 'darker' in representation of the orient than the ones that might project a clearer and brighter side of the exotic orient. The diasporic writers are thus blamed for promoting a new culture of their countries of origin, to which they retort that they are not dancing to the 'tunes of global marketing demands of production and consumerism' (Dwevidi & Lau, 2014, p. 03). Brouillette's (2007) remarks about this new 'market colonization' and the act of acceptance and projection of the specifically dark portrayal by the diasporic writers is an act of 'western fetishization of the rest of human experience' (p. 24). Such 'diasporic representations' are thus more damaging to the cultures of the orient than the actual works of the colonial scholars because it was very clear, in their case, that they are the others and they always looked at the orient in specifically different ways which could be easily discerned from the native writers painting their own culture. Here, there is a clear blurry and complex situation for the diasporic writers are one of the orient's own but then they are also not the part of the orient. They are in fact the comprador intelligentsia who are doing more harm than the good. And this phenomenon is being regarded as an act of re-orientalism as suggested by Lau (2007) having far more damaging implications in for the coming generations both in the east as well as in the west. Dwevidi & Lau (2014), as evidence, also suggest that the syllabus of postcolonial literature as taught in the western universities may be taken up as example which include generally the works by the diasporic writers. The native orients are completely taken out of picture which suggests that they are never going to be heard in comparison to diasporic writers.

On the part of the diasporic writers, it is also a matter of positionality i.e. in the current context it positioning themselves in the global market. Goh (2014) argues, analyzing the case of Arvin Adeja's writings, an indo-Australian novelist, that the themes of crime, corruption and social anxiety have been vehemently projected by diasporic writers in the past one and half

decade. His main argument is that it is because of the desire of the diasporic writer to position himself in the global market because this is what is being accepted, printed and projected. In the social unrest of the orient, there is the solace and peace of the occident. The diasporic writers are the most appropriate choices to support such portrayal for it would be a substantial evidence when coming from the pen of the one belonging to the orient.

Lau (2007) also opines that these diasporic Asian writers have been successful in airing re-orientalism by applying three distinctive techniques in their writings: writing in a way that their writings clearly seem to belong to South Asian genre, making generalisation and totalisation, and claiming their writings appear truthful in an ‘insidious’ manner. Instead of relying completely on the analysis by Lau, I have taken the discussion further by incorporating the concept of use and misuse of language and culture like a double edged weapon, which is more dreadful and dangerous that further legitimizes the discourse created by the western colonizers. Moreover, Lau analysed the female diasporic writers, whereas, I have selected a male diasporic writer to argue that the case of re-orientalism, in its bitter form, is more to be found in the works like *The Wasted Vigil* (2008) by Nadeem Aslam. Rather the writer has misappropriated more brutally and dishonestly those aspects of local culture which were otherwise hinted at clad in symbols by the female writers.

Flannery (2013) provides an interpretation of Nadeem Aslam’s *The Wasted Vigil* (2008) while considering the work helping in internationalizing 9/11 incident and its link with Afghan Taliban. On the other hand, Parveen (2015) traces the colonial discourse and colonial agenda in the work. Her purpose is to deconstruct the presented colonial discourse. Another study by Parveen (2014) interprets that Aslam has tried to form a multicultural society where the identities of the individuals are not static. She claims that he tries to portray a postmodern society while deconstructing the national boundaries. Kiran (2018) views this work from the perspective of deterritorialization while claiming that Aslam has blurred the boundaries between ‘Us’ and ‘Them’ in order to understand the causes of trauma and loss. A study by Frawley (2013) asserts that Aslam’s work helps in understanding the concepts of civil war and the recent discourse of extremism in the twenty first century. O’Brein (2018) affirms that *The Wasted Vigil* is work of war trauma where the condition of post 9/11 is linked with the Soviet war and its aftermaths.

Research Methodology

The study selects interpretivist research paradigm as a mode of analyzing the hidden realities in the selected work. Interpretivist research paradigm helps in identifying multiple interpretations of a reality as it believes that the reality is not fixed and static (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In addition to this, the study adopts qualitative research method in order to achieve the research objectives and to find out the answers of research questions.

In addition, exploratory research design is selected for the current study to investigate the selected literary works as it helps in building a well-versed image of the overall situation. Another reason of selecting this research design is that it also helps in developing new ideas and theories (Cuthill, 2002). As the researcher aims at contributing into the current phase of selected theoretical perspective, the selected research design seems the most suitable research design for getting involved in exploring new dimensions of the domain.

Theoretical Framework

The concept of re-Orientalism was presented by Lau (2009) in her very famous work, *Re-Orientalism: The Perpetration and Development of Orientalism by Orientals*. Moreover, she further contributed into the concept of re-Orientalism in collaboration with Prof. Ana Cristina Mendes in their mutually written work *Re-Orientalism and South Asian Identity Politics: The Oriental other within* (2012). Lau (2009) reveals that there is an unexpected form of power relation in the South Asian fictions that perpetrates the colonial agenda of presenting the Eastern cultures and societies in a very peculiar manner. She asserts that South Asian literary writers are bringing the debate of Orientalism back to the center of discussion with its new complex dimensions where the South Asian authors themselves present an Orientalized picture of the East.

Lau's concept of re-Orientalism stresses on the roles of Eastern writers practicing orientalist agendas in order to satisfy the demand of Western readers. Moreover, South Asian literary writers use Western lens to portray a stereotypical representation of Eastern society and culture in order to gain the attention of Western readers and publishers. Lau and Mendes (2012) introduce three key aspects of re-Orientalism. First aspect of re-Orientalism focuses on the role of Orientals in reinforcing Orientalism while placing West at the center and themselves, the

East, at the periphery or as other. In doing so, they deliberately and generally other the entire Orient. Second aspect of re-Orientalism sheds light on the positionality of re-Orientalists and on the directions that they set to Orientalized the East. Lau and Mendes (2012) view that the Orientals are motivated to place West into the center as they try to build their relationship with the previous colonizers. Third aspect of re-Orientalism deals with the “curious internal coherence” that shows the misleading and mis-representational behavior of the agents of re-Orientalism while showing a consistent narrative.

Re-Orientalism theory therefore always has to take into account the radical instability of representation, and never more so than when Orientals are perpetrating (new forms of) orientalism, and this in turn raises the thorny, problematic issues of accuracy and realism of representation or, in a nutshell, authenticity. (p. 7)

Discussion

The Wasted Vigil by Nadeem Aslam (2008) is a story of five individuals who gather in the post 9/11 Afghanistan. Marcus, an English doctor and converted Muslim lived in Afghanistan for many years after his marriage with an Afghani girl Qatrina who was later killed by Taliban. Lara, a Russian woman, comes to Afghanistan in search of her brother who was misplaced during the Soviet invasion. Casa, a young jihadi who is eager to sacrifice his life for Islam and James: a CIA agent who is protecting America from the Islamic Jihadists. Through the lives of these characters, Aslam takes us to the heart of post 9/11 Afghanistan and reveals the impact of decade long war, exploitation and repression. He portrays the ties of fondness and apprehension and torture and retrieval.

Representing himself of Pakistani origin, Aslam places his characters in Afghanistan and moves them to Pakistan as well and then back to Afghanistan touching upon the system and culture in both of the countries. The centrality of his writing, characters, themes and cultural play places the novel in south Asian genre of literature. Yet, the introduction of the characters staying in Afghanistan whose true selves and identities have been diluted by the environment of Afghanistan creates a fearful image of Asia which is as if a place of brutalities and violent conflicts. Aslam introduces that Lara has a mind which is a ‘haunted house’, Marcus is a ‘prophet in wreckage’ (Aslam, 2008, p. 01), David who associates first two words of call to prayer as ‘muslim battle cry’ (p. 25), Zameen is taken away from her home at the age of

seventeen (p. 09), Qatrina is introduced as suffering from violence (p. 13), Casa is introduced as ensuring Bihzad for suicide bombing (p. 30), Dunia as defying the violent locals and taking refuge at Marcus's home (p. 122). All these characters are engulfed by the violence that is occurring around them in that society. Happiness is completely missing in that area. There is a perpetual hang-over of violence, conflicts and wars on the minds of the characters. Such descriptions strengthen the Western discourse about the orient that Orientals are 'savages' and 'brutes'. Thus the placement of the characters is clearly made in south East Asia. With the facts of the writer's Asiatic origin, the placement of characters in Asia, and the plot of the story set in Asia substantiate it belonging to south East Asian genre.

The technique of generalization and totalisation has also been used by Aslam in the novel. Same kind of fear has also been expressed by Said (1978) in *Orientalism*, "My fears are distortion and inaccuracy, or rather the kind of inaccuracy produced by too dogmatic a generality and too positivistic a localized focus" (p. 08). The generalization and totalisation is through taking up the concepts of the few deviating forces and elements in the Afghani society and applying these on the rest of the Islamic culture. There are various examples from the past and present of Islamic history and culture that have been presented from a peculiar perspective and generalized over the rest of the Islamic culture. One such example is that of distortion of history or presentation of a peculiar sadistic account of the history. It is more like the propagation of the bad(s) in the history of an otherwise remarkable civilization that is infested in its good aspects and influences all over the world. Aslam states,

The clerics had the brilliant al-Kindi whipped in public for his words in the ninth century, he said earlier. The Father of the Perfume Industry as well as philosopher, physician, astronomer, chemist, mathematician, musician and physicist al-Kindi was sixty years old and the crowd roared approval at every lash. Al-Razi was sentenced to be hit on the head with his own book until either the book or his head split. He lost his eyesight. (p. 112)

Instead of mentioning the greatness of the scholar, Aslam enforces a particular version of the story, the acts of the clerics and their hegemony over the masses in the past. West is also not devoid of it. The example of Galileo is still being quoted but with reference to the past. Aslam has tried to relate that old event with the present and presented it in such a way as if it is the totalizing event that signifies the history of Islamic civilization.

Marcus, who had claimed he was a Muslim, sits drinking wine at dinner. There is indeed no limit to the cunning of the infidels. He deceived the trusting and amenable Muslims of this land just to marry a woman, but at heart he is still a non-believer. No wonder Allah punished him by deranging her, by taking away his hand. (p. 110)

At another occasion in the text, Aslam has tried to generalize the concept that the people of Pakistan are anti-American and militants. Aslam thus relates,

The Americans have asked the Pakistani government to control the spread of what they call militant Islam within its borders as though you can treat the government of a country as a friend but its people as an enemy. As though, along with mere bodies, you can bomb ideas out of existence too. They have sent a few arrows towards the sky and think they have killed Allah. (p. 120)

The clause in the above extract from the novel that refers to the Pakistanis as an ‘enemy’ is a too broad a generalization of condemning them that those who dislike America are actually militants. There are also many other examples through which, Aslam has tried to generalize and totalize a specific concept about the Muslims i.e. status of women in society. Aslam states,

She has always tried to be careful, aware that when a woman ventures out of the house she must, upon returning, account for every single step she has taken since leaving the front door. (p. 122)

These lines suggest as if all the women in Islamic society are held accountable for ‘every step’ that they take and go out. There is quite a lot number of women residing in the Muslim countries who work side by side the men and are to be found almost in every walk of life. Of course, there are certain elements who disallow women stepping outside, but the number of women working outside is far greater than. This kind of totalizing and generalizing is like reinforcing what western scholars have tried to propagate that the Orientals are uncivilized. This is markedly a re-orientalist piece of work. The bitterest of the generalization and totalisation has been done with the religion of Islam. Misquoting the verses from the Holy Quran in a misplaced and ill-intended way, Aslam becomes the most untoward and irresponsible person being

uncivilized in himself and placing himself among the most critical western opponent scholars. To quote just an example from the novel, as Aslam mentions illogically and wrongly that,

“We have a new kind of enemy, David. They are allowed to read the Koran at Guantánamo Bay, as their religious and human right. But have you read it? They don’t need jihadi literature—they’ve got the Koran. Almost every other page is a call to arms, a call to slaughter us infidels.” (p. 124)

Mentioning the Holy Book of a specific religion with wrong spellings whereas born and bred in Pakistan, the writer must be aware of the true spellings and the contents of the book. However, he has quite wrongly tried to create the impression that the Holy Book of Muslims advocates war on every second page. Whereas anyone who reads the Book intently is definitely going to find out that it is full of love and Guidance towards the Path of Love and righteousness and good behavior with the fellow human beings placing a lot of emphasis on self-purgation and abstaining from harming others. Of course, It does talk about fighting the enemy but only with certain conditions and in such manners that the innocent are not hurt at all.

Thus the acts of belonging to South East Asian genre and generalisation and totalisation are ‘insidious’ in nature filled with ill-intentions. These are more harmful in stealthy manner. These strengthen the image of the Muslim culture and societies in the west that they are uncivilized and brutal. Even their Scripture states the same. This kind of attitude is harmful for one third population in the world who are innocent and peace loving according to the teachings of their Scripture and Holy Prophet (Peace be upon Him). It is a blind following of the hegemonic and hateful actions and ideas of the western scholars.

Conclusion

Pakistani literary practices emerged as an established canon of self-representation in the recent decades. However, this self-representation does not focus on the ontological and epistemological distinction between the West and the East. The focus of the argument is on a more complex and subtle phenomenon that does not set the Orient against the Occident but to pit the Orientals against the Orient in the recent decades. In doing so, the writers knowingly present a negative, exotic and alluring image of the East. Apparently the literary works produced by Pakistani authors writing in English show the socio-politico and socio-economic condition of the

East generally, yet the works foreground only a few selected aspects that contribute into presenting a cynical and gloom-ridden image of the East. It is a practice of harping the old tunes through recent narratives when the emotions appeal to the senses more than logic and reason.

Such kinds of writings are double edged. Having been part of a particular society and knowing that culture from the inside, it becomes easy for the hating critic, who just wants to see and represent the evil image of that culture, to use the ideas and twist at his own will according to his hidden agenda. The twisting of the ideas becomes easier once the writer is well aware of the inside of the culture and its writings. The picking and choosing of the particular ideas is easier and the writer can use these accordingly in any manner he/she wants. This is re-orientalism in its most blatant form. This is what Aslam has done in his novel *The Wasted Vigil*.

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