

## WHEN WEST MEETS EAST: A STUDY OF REPRESENTATION OF INDIA IN THE MOVIE THE DARJEELING LIMITED

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**Received: 02 Dec 2018**

**Accepted: 07 Dec 2018**

**Published: 17 Dec 2018**

### **ABSTRACT**

*Films are the most popular form of entertainment across the world. More than merely being a mode of entertainment, films are cultural artifacts performing much more than the basic function of entertainment. Western representation of the East has always been biased to the effect that any representation adds to reinforce the Orient-Occident binary. Hollywood movies showcasing India present it in a stereotypical manner. India is identified as the binary opposite of everything that is western- it is the inferior 'Other' of the west. The West defines and constructs its image of the superior by describing the Orient as inferior. Hollywood movies with India as setting and westerners as characters often adhere to this formula of the westerner looking down at an inferior India.*

**KEYWORDS:** *West, Movies, India, Orientalism*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The way literature has altered the course of history is part of history itself. The mightier pen has delivered the world idealized and romanticized concepts, archetypes and stereotypes, ideas and fashions that mold a society. And once the mightier pen entered the Tinseltown, history was altered forever. Being the most celebrated form of entertainment, the significance of films in modern society goes beyond the entertainment quotient. It has become the most important cultural artifact affecting life today.

Films play an important role in shaping ethnic and national identities, especially in the absence of face to face interaction. It has become instrumental in generating and perpetuating national stereotypes. The image of India as represented in the movies is taken for granted as the authentic face of India by the non-native foreigner. But the Hollywood films portray Indian in a stereotypical manner. Hollywood movies with the 'Westerner in India' formula often provide the viewer with a clichéd picture of India. The Darjeeling Limited directed by Wes Anderson is an example. Released in 2007, the movie has Owen Wilson, Adrien Brody and Jason Schwartzman playing the roles of the main characters Francis Whitman, Peter Whitman, Jack Whitman respectively.

It is the story of three affluent but emotionally distant brothers Peter, Jack, and Francis who haven't seen each other since their father's death the year before. The eldest of the three, Francis organises a trip to India so that the brothers can reunite and repair their fractured relationship and enjoy a holiday together in India. They also plan to meet their mother who

is living in a convent in the foothills of Himalaya. The brothers begin their journey on a passenger train 'The Darjeeling Limited,' which moves through the countryside.

A close reading of the film reveals greater depths beneath the apparently simple plot. The movie funds on the stereotypical image of India –uncivilized and barbaric. As Edward Said argues in his seminal work *Orientalism*, there is a long-standing way of identifying the East as 'Other' and inferior to the West.

Said distinguishes between three usages of the term 'Orientalism'. Firstly, it refers to the long period of cultural and political relations between Europe and Asia. Secondly, the term is used to refer to the academic study of oriental languages and culture which dates from the early nineteenth century. And thirdly, it is used to refer to the stereotypical views of the Orient developed by many generations of western writers and scholars, with their prejudiced views of orientals as inherently criminal and deceitful. The distinction between 'the Orient' and 'the Occident' exists, in Said's view, only in 'imaginative geography'. (Carter, 2006, p.116)

The western concept of the Orient is based on this notion of the binary opposite. West and East form a binary opposition in which the two poles define each other. The inferiority that the Orientalism attributes to the East simultaneously serves to construct the West's superiority. The sensuality, irrationality, primitiveness, and despotism of the East constructs the West as rational, democratic, progressive and so on.

The Orient features in the Western mind as a sort of surrogate. This means, in effect, that the East becomes the repository or projection of those aspects of themselves which Westerners do not choose to acknowledge (cruelty, sensuality, decadence, laziness, and so on). At the same time, and paradoxically, the East is seen as a fascinating realm of the exotic, the mystical and the seductive. It also tends to be seen as homogenous, the people there being anonymous masses, rather than individuals, their actions determined by instinctive emotions (lust, terror, fury, etc.) rather than by conscious choices or decisions. Their emotions and reactions are always determined by racial considerations (they are like this because they are Asiatics or blacks or orientals) rather than by aspects of individual status or circumstance (for instance, because they happen to be a sister, or an uncle, or a collector of antique pottery). ( Barry, 2010, p. 186-7)

Representation of India in the movie distorts the experiences and realities its people and inscribes it with inferiority. The movie takes the viewer on a trip through public transport systems- the Indian roads that are crammed with people and cows, cabs dashing past the chaotic traffic system, overcrowded marketplace; in the train, the luggage car is populated by goats and peasants and general coaches brim with drab denizens. The soundtrack that accompanies the scenes: "Fields full of houses/ Endless rows of crowded streets" (Anderson, 2007) is an echo of the thoughts of the characters.

Robbing the foreigners for their goods especially by young children is a staple to the West's representation of India. A similar scene appears in the movie. The brothers are flabbergasted when the shoeshine boy runs off with one of Francis's loafers: " Now he can pay for this building. Those are \$3,000 loafers."(Anderson 2007)

The picture of Indian villages in the movie serves to further the cliché of a poverty-stricken India with underdeveloped and unscientific means of transportation. As the Whitman brothers walk next to a river, they notice three young boys trying to cross the river on a crude raft with a rope and pulley system. As they watch, the rope snaps and the boys fall into the river. The brothers jump into the rivers to save the boys. Jack and Francis are able to save two boys while Peter and a boy is

dragged down the river which ultimately results in the boy's death. There is also an instance that highlights the dysfunctional railway system. On their way, they encounter another difficulty- their train stops in the middle of a desert.

Jack: Where are we?

Francis: We haven't located us yet.

Jack: What did he say?

Peter: He said the train is lost.

Jack: How can a train be lost? (Anderson, 2007)

They feel lost at a place that does not even have a proper public transport system. The foreigners further conclude that India is technologically backward when they ask for power adapters and get battery instead. While visiting the market near a temple, Francis asks a vendor: "Do you have a power adapter?" to which the vendor replies: "No, no, no power adapters. Use battery" (Anderson, 2007). It startles Francis who feels like being pushed back to the stoneage.

The film explores the myth of the seductive yet paradoxically chaste Indian woman. As Latifa observes, "Orientalist travelers of the 19th century have provided fascinating representations of the sensual, exotic life of the Middle East. Especially memorable are the portrayals of Middle Eastern women, who have been depicted by Westerners in literature, painting, and photography as lascivious, wanton creatures sitting in idleness, waiting for an erotic encounter." A similar representation of a woman waiting for an erotic encounter with a western male is made through the character of Rita, the stewardess in the train Darjeeling Limited. She is depicted as an example of the voluptuous Indian woman. She is their "sweet lime" and "savory snack" (Anderson, 2007). When Jack invites Rita to smoke a cigarette with him in the bathroom, she jumps at the opportunity. Later we see her back nearly naked reflected on the mirror in the bathroom. Further in the movie when the brothers are thrown out of the train, Jack says to Rita "Thanks for using me" to which she replies "You are welcome" (Anderson, 2007). Here, the lady is presented as an easy prey to the handsome white man, ready to surrender at the slight suggestion blinded by an obsession with the white man's physique. The other woman in the movie, the Whitman brother's mother who is a nun, runs a school in the foothills of the Himalayas. When Peter asks her why she is here, she replies that "these people need me" (Anderson, 2007). Here, the white woman is in sharp contrast to the sultry Indian woman. The white woman is here to wash and make clean the white man's burden. As Said remarked,

All the representations of the Orient by the West constituted a determined effort to dominate and subjugate it. Orientalism served the purposes of western hegemony (in Gramsci's sense): to legitimize western imperialism and convince the inhabitants of such regions that accepting western culture was a positive civilizing process. In defining the East, orientalism also defined what the West conceived itself to be (in the way of binary oppositions). Stressing the sensuality, primitiveness, and despotism of the East underlined the rational and democratic qualities of the West. (Carter, 2006, p.116)

India is presented as an exotic land and the right place for salvation. The objective of the journey, as stated by Francis "is to find themselves" (Anderson, 2007) and they achieve it by visiting temples and spiritual centers. The movie also makes use of the time-worn western signifiers of Indianness- images of snake charmers, elephants, and cows on streets, huge flower garlands, colorful attire of people- to represent the intrigue and mystique that India has come to symbolize.

## CONCLUSIONS

It can be concluded that the movie *The Darjeeling Limited* have been crafted using the same stereotypes that has for long defined and described India. The movie represents India clearly from an ethnocentric perspective. India is presented as all that the west is not- uncivilized, illiterate, technologically backward, underdeveloped yet exotic. When the West met East the binary is reinforced, thus furthering the western project of ethnocentrism.

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