

Empire and Excess: Kipling and the Critique of Said's *Orientalism*

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Edward Said's *Orientalism* remains one of the most influential books of the last quarter of twentieth century. In an informative manner, Said locates the seeds of Orientalism right in the medieval European imagination that solidifies itself in the nineteenth century. It is through knowledge, power, reason, scientific technologies and disciplinary set-up, philosophical supremacy and commercial benefit that the Europeans tried to redefine and restructure the East. The result was the emergence of a new form of 'power' based on information and control. Behind all the sacrificial and religious garb of the 'white man's burden', Said notes, there runs hideous machinery that distorts the forms of knowledge, and remoulds the subject-object relationship in a Eurocentric mirror reflection. The orient becomes a textual study, a place, seen in mass, and considered to be transformed in such implacable homogeneity. Said writes:

"In the system of knowledge about the Orient, the orient is less a place than a *topos*, a set of references, a congeries of characteristics, that seems to have its origin in a quotation, or a fragment of a text, or a citation from someone's work on the Orient."¹

The Orient, like the 'terra nullius' notion of Australian imperialism, never exists, or exists in a manner which is vast, amorphous, and intractable. A proper administration of it requires both the 'accumulation of human beings and territories' and the channeling of 'documented knowledge'-statistical cognition, methodological verification and calculated execution. In the chapter named 'Oriental Residence and Scholarship', Said informs us about the rigorous effort of the ethnographers to participate with the Eastern people to understand their customs, behaviours, and operations in life. With this participation comes an intention of being invisibilized and documenting everything in full detail. But the Orientalist has always to maintain a distance, a form of dissociation from the 'other', or else the ethnography remains unverified and partial. It is through this entire armory that Orientalism became a politico-economic agenda, the proper maintenance of which marks the strength of empire, the desire for 'career making', and the valorization of self and nationhood. In doing this, what it incorporated was a 'doxology' that avoids any notion of 'authenticity', "since its mode, from the beginning, was reconstruction and repetition"².

It is this imposed, administered self that Said notes so carefully in his book. But what is left unsaid is any kind of agency the orient seemed to have in this scheme. In a confident tone, Said sketches, quite unknowingly, a linear, continuous journey of some writers and ethnographers, without investing much into deeper textual studies or subtle layers. It is this moment that gives space for Bhabha to emerge and contend that the relation between the self and the other was not one-sided, but a kind of 'mimicry' through which the other would not only imitate the self, so extensively intended, but also distort the complacency and assurance that the self has.³ The production of the 'hybrid' questions the Orientalist vigour and supremacy, so confidently noted in Said. In this paper, I do not intend to 'do' a psychoanalytic critique of Said in a Bhabha-esque way. Rather I would argue that Said, while investigating the machinery of Empire, fails to notice the excess within it, which, not only contradicts the former, but brings it almost to a silent pause – a pause which is deconstructive both in its humour and anxiety. For such a claim I will analyse a story by Rudyard Kipling – *The Phantom Rickshaw*.⁴

But the Saidian examples would question: is Kipling an Orientalist like Belfour or de Sacy? Kipling's writings as a young journalist, conservative, and prone against self-rule by natives, are done from within the imperial machinery. His attitude towards the natives is of confidence, suggestive of the latter's 'willed' dependency on the Empire for development and cultural betterment. Colonialist in colour, Kipling's Indian writings insinuate a reconstructive zeal – an ethic of imperial mission that poems like 'the white man's burden' so brilliantly capture. But are colonialism, imperialism, and Orientalism the same thing? Said himself attests to it: "To say simply that modern Orientalism has been an aspect of both colonialism and imperialism is not to say something very disputable". But when Kipling goes deeper into this 'willed' dependency, things start unsettling. Consider, for example, his travel writing, *The Letters of Marque*. This book literally 'constructs' the Englishman, prone to know the vast India, its contours, and analyze them in great detail; but at the same time the book contains a tumultuous tension between efficacy and excess. Mary Condé writes: "Just as Kipling's writings struggle between a night-time desire for knowledge and a day-time need for surface stability, so the *Letters* alternate between the affections of control and the admission of ineffectuality."⁵ Douglas Kerr notes a Saidian Orientalism in Kipling in his brooding over *Mother Maturin*, but also records the deep ambivalences within. Analyzing 'Lispeth', he writes, "Empire can effect no conversion deep down. It can barely ripple the surface of Indian life."⁶ Philip Wegner talks about the 'global imperial reality' and the invention of India in *Kim*, but concludes his essay on the notion of a 'distancing self', reconstructed every time with a sense of uncertainty and insecurity.⁷ It is this tension that culminates in the story – *The Phantom Rickshaw*. It does not only talk about an informational control and its sense of ineffectuality; it also underlines the tremendous desire on the part of the colonialist self to be understood in scientific and *in-dividual* terms. The story proceeds with this tripartite gesture where the last one imposes and reassures the mastery of scientific knowledge over the Powers of Darkness. But one can sense that this re-assuring is only a frustrated cry, a dejected resignation.

The Phantom Rickshaw is a story of Jack Pansay, who comes to Bombay and then Simla for administrative services. While sailing for Bombay, he met Mrs. Keith-Wessington and had sexual relationship with her. After coming to India, he desperately avoids the lady, even insults her in the bitterest language possible. But unlike any other woman, Mrs. Wessington does not think of revenge, and asks for his friendship repeatedly. As Jack becomes engaged to Kitty Mannering and is to marry her soon, he comes to know to his immense relief that Mrs. Wessington has died. It is after some months wandering in the hills of Simla with Kitty that he suddenly encounters Mrs. Wessington in the same rickshaw she used to come in. To his utter disbelief, Kitty transpires through it, suggesting the physical nothingness of that 'phenomenon'. The doctor, Heatherlegh, takes it to be spectral illusion, caused by indigestion and sickness. But he never seems to 'recover' from it, and talks it out once in his terrified cry, confirming the end of his relationship with Kitty. This 'phenomenon' never disappears, and with the same old cries for friendship, slowly takes control over his life – to such an extent that he cannot distinguish the Real from the Unreal. Mrs. Wessington's world seems more real to him, as he slowly penetrates it, ending in death. Till the last moment, we find his uncomfortable and confused demand between both inhabiting and escaping this world. He dies proclaiming him to be the person who ought to die for such crime.

The question is: what factors make this story oriental? The very first line of the story sets the tone: "One of the few advantages that India has over England is a great Knowability." This

Knowability is the easy availability and documentation of knowledge. To rule India, it has to be known. And for the foreigners, the country thrives on an unexpected simplicity and obviousness. Every British officer, Kipling writes, knows the other ones, even the lower ones. But What Kipling does not write is whether they knew the natives as such (wherein the tension ensues every time for him). However, the intention of knowing and the choice of retaining as much is a collective will, operated on the needs of imperial machinery. This knowledge works in many ways, mostly in the metaphor of 'construction' through which both the sense of knowledge-domination and reconfiguration seem manifest: in *The Bridge Builders* the protagonist is an engineer; in *The Strange Ride of Morrowbie Jukes*, it was construction officer. Here also, Jack Pansay was part of administrative body, documenting and dispersing knowledge as part of a rational bureaucratic system – a system which calculates and averages the result, a system that normalizes the abnormal through various institutions, and dispels the recalcitrant in the name of madness and 'delusion'.⁸ But how much the system will retain and dispel, as mentioned earlier, is a question of choice and opportunity.

This becomes clear as the story repeats the word 'delusion' for a number of times to designate Jack's condition. When Heatherlegh comes to know about it, he terms it 'delusion', caused by sickness. In fact, Jack himself thinks it 'delusion' at times, implying the rationally constructed and maintained self he wishes to retain: Ghosts do not exist on reason, and thus, should not be talked about. Reason dominates the argument – the reason that incorporates the outside into the inside, into the bodily, with the discourse of sickness. An empire built on industrial rationality and utilitarian logic, a philosophy based on Enlightenment, a mode of production based on overwork and systematic appraisal, can never tolerate such an argument; instead turns such words into immature, childish talk (Think of the child-adult metaphor that dominates Kant's thesis). Ghosts and other such creatures are the phenomenon that the rational Empire is fighting against. Jack, Heatherlegh, Kitty – everyone is part of that huge machinery. Any acceptance of this argument would shake the very ground of the imperial discourse. So it must be 'delusion' or 'a spectral illusion'. It must be a problem of sight.

The very intention of turning that ghostly encounter into a lack of proper eyesight adumbrates the late nineteenth century treatises on spectral illusion. Srdjan Smajic's book *Ghosts-seers, Detectives, and Spiritualists* subtiles itself 'Theories of Vision in Victorian Science and Literature'. He writes: "Ghosts, as we have seen, were regularly treated by nineteenth century physiologists as illustrations of everything that can go wrong with or in the eye".⁹ Much before the Victorian literature on vision, Descartes uses the geometrical notion of vision in *La Dioptrique* in 1637.¹⁰ Berkeley substitutes this for a linguistic model saying that the connection between different forms of seeing rises from experience and habitual association.¹¹ William Whewell mixes Kant's intuitionism and Locke's sensationalism into a hybrid theory, claiming: "*Signs and Meanings are Ideas, supplied by the mind, and added to all that sensation can disclose in any collection of visible marks*".¹² Later on, Mill in his *A System of Logic* embraces Berkeley's theory of inference and concedes that perception is a 'compound result' of inference and observation.¹³ The eye operates merely as an instrument governed by the mind and the habitat: "the fallacy", Lewes writes, "lies in confounding vision with inference".¹⁴

This entire oeuvre is chalked out in the greater time span of the Victorian period, the industrial expansion of which depends on a better management of the savage and the abnormal. Such a discourse on vision strips the other of any agency and incorporates it into the logic of its utilitarian aggression. As Berkeley notices, difference in seeing emerges from a different habitat,

so does doctor Heatherlegh. He turns it into an Eye disease. The unsaid other, too recalcitrant to be included, has to be generalized and assimilated, so that the machinery can run smoothly without the surfacial tensions and threats. The oriental zeal on knowledge and rationalizing everything that it confronts becomes sharper in this argument, as it carries the dominant discourse on the science of vision of the day. One must remember that the story was published in 1885, the time which will shortly see the rise of Sherlock Holmes and the aura of scientific production of truth.

Apart from the theory of vision, another dominant discourse of the day was the notion of sickness and health. The body has to be properly taken care of. The spectral illusion appears, Heatherlegh argues, because of indigestion and sickness. It is the combination of 'Eye-Brain-Stomach' that causes that. The Eye-Brain association has already been mentioned. But it is interesting to find the notion of indigestion and resultant spectral illusion. Pertaining to the physiological discovery of the day, this reasoning suggests the fear of un-hygiene and sickness in the Orient. The literally intractable oriental geography has to be tamed by a routine discipline of the body. One has to be alert always, 'dressed' and arranged. The body has to be maintained properly. And any such case as that of Jack's has to be treated with all the medicines possible. If resistant still, the 'case' has to be dispelled as madness.¹⁵ Jack writes in the end, "before I had been out and about a week I learned that the "fit" theory has been discarded in favour of insanity." Jack dies of madness, a person who talks to the wind, who isolates himself in society and who stands against the growth of Empire, both ideologically and financially.

I do not intend to go deeper into the sociological position and significance of madness on which a large volume of research has already been conducted. What interests me rather is the process through which he becomes mad. The story is not written from the doctor's perspective, but from Jack's. And we find him battling everyday with the supernatural presence of Mrs. Wessington with his imperial discourse of reason. In his first encounter, he writes; "the road was full of people; and yet here, look you, in defiance of every law of probability, in direct outrage of Nature's ordinance, there appeared to me a face from the grave". In this horror, there is a subtle touch of comic intentness – because any belief would shake the very ground of his 'rational' self. But who is the ghost here - Mrs. Wessington herself and not any native body on whom a theory of folk belief and foolish story-telling can be deployed. This is where the Orientalist moment encounters its fiercest terror: when the Orientalist finds part of its own self, own form of knowledge, own machinery comes to threaten its ground. More interesting is the fact that the ghost was not of Mrs. Wessington only but the entire troop- four red-liveried men who drew the rickshaw of Mrs. Wessington. The fear of the native, the inability to follow its forms of knowledge, the intended arrogance shown at the inferiority and absurdness of its forms of life and belief, never stops, nor is it documented fully in the Orientalist's account. When the surface is read, the subtleties, treacherous and ambivalent, push the study to a renewed end, disturbing all its calculated equations and assuring logic. The hybridized presence of Mrs. Wessington brings back that fear which questions all the accounts of perseverance and reason. Had the ghost been that of a native, the equation would work differently: the Empire against the oriental unreason. The problem rises because it is someone from within the empire that has infiltrated the geographic imaginary and inhabited a hybridized body. The story puts a brilliant question on Orientalist rigour: what if the reasoning self infiltrates its boundaries and inhabits the other, rather than distancing itself? Would the Berkeleyan theory of inference and observation be enough to justify and reason out a part which is immensely, madly perturbed? When Jack writes, "With

that knowledge came also a sense of hopeless, impotent rebellion against the unreasonableness of it all”, we sense that this hopelessness has rings of resignation. What interests us more is the word ‘impotent’. Such an encounter leaves the reasonable self impotent, castrated, almost like what Lacan argued as encountering the Real. The impotency slowly takes him into the ghostly world, from which the real world seems to be ‘the shadows – impalpable, fantastic shadows’. Like Mrs. Wessington his hybridity seems impending when he cries out: “I hungered to be among the realities of life; and at the same time I felt vaguely unhappy when I had been separated too long from my ghostly companion”.

It is this feeling of being painfully aware of each moment that his reasoning self is being taken away and he cannot do anything, that destroys him faster. He finds the mingling of the Seen and the Unseen as ‘strange’, which suggests that he can still argue with reason the absurdity of it all, but he seems carried away. He dies being ‘ruled by the Power of Darkness’. But the last four words go: “I am that man” – that victim of it all. In these moments of battling with reason silently, secretly and somewhat resignedly, there is a baffling awareness that the in-dividual self is getting divided, that the notion of man as potent is collapsed, that the European creed for enlightenment and rational machinery is being distorted and swallowed.

The story ends in such failed reassurance of the self, which collapses with the death of Jack Pansay. He dies writing his own story, trying to contend what he saw, what he did not believe (and here contrary to the Victorian discourse on vision), but where he slowly crept into. The story is perfectly fitting into a wider Orientalist agenda: sickness, madness, reason, knowledge, and control. But into such Orientalist discourse there are deeper discourses that were probably covered or burned, owing to their being a possible threat to the progression of Empire and the canvassing of the Western mind. Jack’s story may sound unreasonable, but it carries a very dominant metaphor, that of the European’s contact with the native and a resultant asymmetry. The ghostly aura is only one such asymmetry, as the use of cholera in *The Strange Ride of Morrowbie Jukes*, or the multiple incarnations in *The Finest Story in the World*. This asymmetry is inbuilt contradictions within the story of Empire. Here one does not need the other in the form of the native. The racial replication in the form of a phenomenon perfectly suitable with a native in this part of the world reflects the riddled tensions from within Empire – the excess that was too difficult to contain, since it works within the machinery, with its functionaries.

It is these inbuilt tensions, things unutterable within the Empire that Said seems to overlook in his book. All the calculated studies and methodological exuberance of the nineteenth century oriental ethnographer carry the knowledge from outside. But there were moments, pauses, contradictions, silences. In all the Orientalist literature, the task has been to find a linear arrangement, a continuity, a processed proceeding of their thought, but the time demands delving deep and encountering moments left unsaid, unuttered within them, going to a step that brings Said’s project to a new dimension. The excess abounds there – an excess that the Empire creates and battles throughout, an excess that constitutes the Empire everyday. For that, Said’s remarkable book remains the best entry point.

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- For such a 'discourse' on training, normalization, and madness, see Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, and *History of Madness* (Routledge: London and New York, 2006). Print.

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