



Orientalisms within: Encountering Indian Subaltern Experiences

by Tom Thomas

Edward Said's *Orientalism* has been considered as a book that literally changed one's perception of the world around. Said theorized that "Orientalism...*is*, rather than expresses, a certain *will* or *intention* to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is manifestly a different (or alternative and novel) world" (1978: 12). S. N. Balagangadhara points out that "Orientalism is constrained to describe non-Western cultures not merely in terms of Western culture. It is also forced to do it in a way that effaces the differences between the two" (1998: 104).

The new economic world order finds it imperative to suggest that the Third World is dead. This underlies another proposition that "with the Third World as (the) Other disappearing, the Orientalist framework is no longer relevant" (Chakrabarti, Cullenberg and Dhar n. d: n.pag.). Attempts are made to force a transition of the Indian economy into a free market global economy. But "while the forms of Orientalism have changed, the framework through which the transition of the Indian economy has been looked at remains Orientalist" (Chakrabarti, Cullenberg and Dhar n. d: n.pag.). The Orientalist framework is no longer between the West and East of the North and South but between the new global order and an excluded space called the Third World.

Internal Orientalism seems to be the most problematic issue in postcolonial scholarship of India (Breckenridge and Veer: 11).



In India, it is the “essentializing and exoticizing gaze of orientalism that makes bio-racial commonalities and differences the principle of its politics of difference” (*Ibid.*: 9). The very cultural basis of public life has been affected and infected by ideas of difference and division that have Orientalist roots. Breckenbridge and van der Veer argue that “this essentialization and somaticization of group differences is probably the most damaging part of the oriental bequest to postcolonial politics” (12). The markers of religion, caste and gender cast their shadow over cultural politics in India and reinforce the “politics of otherness,” threatening solidarist positions and controlling lives. This paper tries to interrogate and journey along multifarious Orientalisms and Orientalist discourses that crop up along the identities of religion, caste and gender especially within the Indian subaltern experiences. This would illustrate the crosscurrents in the arena of Orientalism and open up new vistas for intervention. These experiences within the country are sometimes more problematic than the challenges and threats offered by an external “Other.”

The Indian subcontinent seems to grow increasingly intolerant of heterogeneity and plurality. Take the case of the celebrated artist M. F. Husain who faced an exilic death in London on 9 June 2011. Husain had to flee India in 2006, in the wake of protests and vicious campaign of harassment and intimidation including death threats by right-wing Hindutva groups citing his artistic depiction of Hindu deities. Madanjeet Singh comments that they accused Husain of “painting ‘obscene’ images of Hindu goddesses-traditionally depicted naked in temples and shrines” (2012: 13). Charges of hurting religious sentiments were levelled against him. His film *Meenaxi* was withdrawn from the cinemas following the protests by the All India Ulema Council, which had “a song that lauds a woman’s beauty using words that occur in an Islamic hymn that defines the persona of Prophet Mohammad” (Singh 2012: 13). Husain’s right to artistic freedom was not protected by the successive Indian governments. Aspersions are thus cast on the secular credentials of the nation. The country’s greatest artist had to die in exile. Fanatics won the day.

The controversy regarding the visit of Salman Rushdie at the Jaipur Literature Festival (JLF) January 2012 also sparks similar concerns while the villains here are the inverse; Muslim fundamentalist forces. Living a precarious existence post *The Satanic Verses* (1988), Rushdie was unable to participate in the festival following “security threats”. Though he had earlier participated in the JLF in 2007, the protests surfaced only this time. The critics of this process have pointed out that the elections of the state of Uttar Pradesh was around the corner, and the government did not want to displease the 18% Muslim population of the state (ndtv.com). When *The Satanic Verses* was banned a month after its publication, fearing it would provoke communal tension, it was then criticized as the failure to protect the right to free speech.



The charges of blasphemy and distorted interpretation of the Quran by the work, had led to the issue of *fatwa* for Rushdie's assassination, by the Iranian spiritual leader Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989. A secular democratic country was bowing down under pressure while denying Rushdie at the JLF 2012.

The removal of A. K. Ramanujan's essay "Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation" in late 2011, from the reading list of an undergraduate course in history of Delhi University was also on charges of "blasphemy" and being "offensive to the beliefs of millions of Hindus." The first objection was raised in 2008, by the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), whose activists vandalized the office of the then head of the Department of History, S. Z. H. Jafri (Mahaprashasta 2011: n.pag.). The censoring act has indeed curbed the plurality of narrative traditions that enrich the Ramayana to be dealt with in the classroom. The scholarly essay which provides an outlook into the multitude and diversity of traditions surrounding Ramayana has now been shown the way out, in tow to a homogenous ideology. "Ramanujan's essay, by receiving many tellings from oral to textual, characterize an openness to contexts in order to engage and transform, and unlike other texts, does not signal a closure of possibility" (Mahaprashasta 2011: n.pag.).

Though these three instances are symptomatic of the ripping of the secular fabric of the Indian nation, it is interesting to see the Orientalist stereotyping, the fear of the "Other" and the silencing of the marginalized by the dominant in them. The space for variance, dissent and free and fearless articulation was shrunken in all these cases.

It was on 4 January, 2003 that the Adivasi Gothra Mahasabha (AGMS), the grand assembly of tribals, entered the deforested portions of Muthanga and its vast eucalyptus plantations in the Wayanad Wild Life Sanctuary, in the state of Kerala (Bijoy and Raman 2003: 1975). "It was a culmination of the politics of laxity and deceit on the part of governments – both Left and Right – employed against ethnic minorities which constitute 1 per cent of the State's population" (Bijoy and Raman 2003: 1976). Six weeks later in a shocking brutal police action to evict the "encroachers", an Adivasi was shot dead. A policeman too died. Unofficial reports put the toll much higher. The Muthanga agitation, spearheaded by C. K. Janu, later proved to be the herald of many land struggles undertaken by the marginalized subaltern people of Kerala for arable agricultural land. 30% of the tribal households in Kerala are landless, with the districts of Wayanad and Palakkad taking the lead (*Ibid.*). Abject poverty and misery plague their lives, coupled with landlessness on the rise.

The act of eviction was mobilized on charges of the adivasis being "anti-national" when they declared Muthanga as an area of "self-government" (*Ibid.*: 1975). C. R. Bijoy and K. Ravi Raman point out that the Part IV of the directive Principles of State Policy under Article 40 titled "Organisation of Village Panchayats" empower panchayats to



function as units of “self-government” but when the Adivasi tries to insist on this constitutional provision, it becomes “anti-national” (2003: 1975). Their rights to organize and protest is also questioned; they become worthy of bullets. This discriminatory approach reveals the deeply entrenched Orientalist mindset of the mainstream civil society of Kerala which is “famous” for its indices of human development.

The Chengara land struggle under the leadership of the Laha Gopalan and the Sadhu Jana Vimochana Samyuktha Vedi (SJVSV), was to acquire rights to own agricultural land, by the landless dalits of Kerala. The movement began on 15 August, 2005 (Alex 2012: 35). The struggle exemplified the proportionate relationship between caste and landlessness. In continuance with the tribal agitation of Muthanga, a similar strategy was adopted. On 5 August, 2007, over 2000 dalits, encroached the Chengara HML estate and pitched makeshift tents overnight (Alex 2012: 26). The estate is a rubber plantation tract of Harrisons Malayalam of R. P. Goenka group Mumbai, in the Pathanamthitta district of Kerala. Over 7000 dalit families joined in this struggle for land, dreaming about a better tomorrow. The struggle still continues into its fifth year.

These two struggles – Muthanga and Chengara – compel one to reorient the land question in Kerala from the class perspective to that of community and caste (Rammohan 2008: 16) Erstwhile colonial practices and failed land reforms have created a quagmire for the landless subaltern in Kerala. K. T. Rammohan points out that the land reforms in Kerala had excluded the plantation sector and had transferred land to intermediate small tenants and not the mass of landless workers who were mostly of socially disadvantaged castes and communities (2008: 14). The persistence of colonial landholding patterns perpetuates landlessness among the subaltern. The land question in Kerala is “as much a question of caste and tribe as class” (*Ibid.*: 15).

The Muthanga agitation was repressed by the Congress led Right government while the Chengara struggle faced the fury of the Left government. The Muthanga agitation fizzled out also due to the schisms within the movement, among various Adivasi groups, especially those controlled by mainstream political parties. Memories of Naxalite vintage and the subsequent mass entry of tribals into the Aaralam state agricultural farm also led to the loss of momentum (*Ibid.*: 15). The Chengara struggle was strangled by “plantation workers” who owed “class” allegiance to the Marxist party. The “caste” agitators faced social boycott, being denied food, water, medicines in Kerala’s civil society! Threats to their lives, molestation of women, being branded Maoist and thieves, were common to both these struggles. Their ranks were infiltrated by elements from outside who deliberately tried to create ruckus and social tension. Muthanga and Chengara were transformed to “model villages” where liquor was prohibited and equality was practiced.



Chengara went further in the Ambedkarite vision and started a remarkable communitarian vision and alternative life thereby worrying the class-based Marxist outfits. Land to dalits could only be “homestead” and not “agricultural” (Alex 2012: 42); the right to strike could only be of the “proletariat” and not of the “dalit” (*Ibid.*: 15).

The geographical spaces occupied by these struggles are also significant. The occupation of Muthanga was preceded by the convening of a tribal court in Wayanad in August 2002 by the AGMS in a symbolic move. It was declared that in the context of the state’s failure to honour all agreements made, they would occupy their ancestral domains (Bijoy and Raman 2003: 1982). The Adivasi bears a symbiotic relation with the forest; like the fish in water. Asking them to move out or evicting them is like making the “fish breathe out of water.” They were accused of “encroachment” when they had only occupied the “outskirts of the Muthanga range to which the adivasis have a natural claim—ownership being an irrelevant or foreign concept to them” (Bijoy and Raman 2003: 1982). These rights may have been erased when eucalyptus plantations were grown instead for Indian big capital—Birla Gwalior Rayons—or while it was converted to a sanctuary in 1973 (Bijoy and Raman 2003: 1982). The forest has to be handed over back to the adivasis.

Dalits have been the backbone of Kerala’s cultivation; “initially as slaves and following the ban on slave traffic in the mid-1850s, as attached labourers, and finally with the advance of caste based social movements and communist trade organization in the 1940s emerging as ‘free’ labourers” (Rammohan 2008: 15). The Chengara estate comprises of 6000 acres of land held under lease by Harrisons Malayalam (the inception of HML began with lease in 1862 AD), to which it illegally claims ownership, though even the lease period has ended. The state government has not shown the political will to reclaim these lands as it fears corporate power. Abetting the corporate crimes, of non-payment of rent to the tune of Rs 5,000 crores and illegally holding land, the government finds it “very difficult” to find land to be given to dalits for cultivation. (Alex 2012: 28). It is ironic that the dalits had to “reclaim” land for themselves by encroachment; the land with which they always had an organic relationship; the land which gave produce under their labour. Chengara estate saw the monoculture rubber go away and varied crops being grown instead during the struggle; rejuvenating biodiversity too. These two struggles of Muthanga and Chengara were the outcome of the failure of the land reforms, whose benefits never reached the landless agricultural workers and also the total failure of the Kerala Model of Development, to address the issues of dalits, adivasis and other marginalized sections.



C. K. Janu and Laha Gopalan represent a new alternative subaltern eco-politics which is the need of the hour to address the crises of the Indian subcontinent, reeling under the backlash of the capitalist mode of development (Nalunnakal 2012: 49). The life story of Janu titled *Mother Forest*, gives a passionate account of her struggle to get back the lands of which the adivasis were dispossessed. “[...] no one knows the forest like we do, the forest is mother to us, more than a mother because she never abandons us” (Bhaskaran 2004: 5). The story calls attention to the gendered aspect of reality and that of the tribal woman in particular. It is the assertion of a voice that had been silenced for centuries, moving from a fixed object position to that of a subject, revolutionizing earlier norms of autobiographical writing. “Orientalist stereotyping on the one hand portrays them [adivasis] as innocent naïve, nature loving, uncorrupted by modernity, and on the other hand as immoral drunkards and wretched living beings. The adivasi is thus an eternal ‘other,’ defencelessly marginalized and unrepresentable” (Thomas 2011: 232). Dalit autobiographies too play a similar role in problematizing caste.

Orientalist stereotyping of the subaltern woman is further exemplified in many other life writings like that of Mukhtar Mai and Nalini Jameela. Mukhtar Mai’s *In the Name of Honour*, blurts out “I wasn’t really an ardent feminist...I became one through experience, because I am a survivor” (2007: 113). She was gang-raped in retribution to her brother Shakur’s speaking to a young woman, Salma, of the upper caste. Mai incidentally belonged to the lower Gujar caste. It was as if her “honour” lay to be raped by a group of vicious men. Her story of survival problematizes the question of “honour.” This query finds a curious twist in Nalini Jameela’s *Autobiography of a Sex Worker* which initiated a “wider public discussion on sex and the need for proper sex education, and it has questioned prevailing hypocrisy on sex both of which are rarely discussed in Kerala” (Leela 2006: 1249). Jameela, who belongs to a lower middle class, lower caste (ezhava) family, was removed from school at nine, worked as a labourer and a domestic worker before becoming a sex worker. Later, she became an activist and a filmmaker. She compares her work to that of other professions like teaching, and quips that while some work with their head and others with their hands, the sex workers work with their body (*Ibid.*: 1250). The text not only creates an oppositional voice that challenges morality but by the intentional titling “sex worker,” also announces the marginalized “poor laboring women’s voice” (Devika 2006: 1677). This is where the subaltern woman, her sexuality, and the choice of her profession interplay. Jameela “performs different kinds of labour – productive, reproductive, sexual” (*Ibid.*: 1677). The ordinariness of sex work in the lives of the poorest women, its place alongside other strenuous, exploitative and demeaning work is laid bare in the narrative.



Orientalist representations of women have always been obsessed with their sexuality and the misrepresentations of the excessive sensuality of Oriental women. "Orientalist gaze in general has had sexist blinders rendering Oriental women objects of a male power-fantasy. The Oriental women have been seen as unlimitedly sensual, lacking in rationality, and, most importantly, willing" (Jouhki 2006: 4). Janu, Mai and Jameela, by their subject positions maybe "exotic" tales to be rendered, but the reality check of life situations tilt their stories heavily in favour of the authentic, challenging patriarchal, casteist, elitist notions of "honour," "morality" and "civility."

The incidents of "honour killings" show that the notion of "honour" coupled with gender and subalternity creates a deadly mix. Under the guise of redeeming lost honour, they target the woman's body in the most brutal way and give licence to deadly forms of violence. The reasons maybe varied; from wearing an "unacceptable" dress, desiring to marry within the faith but not within permissible norms, or transgressing community and religious boundaries by marrying across caste, community or ethnicity or being audacious enough to commit adultery (Menon 2006: 123). These "dishonourable killings" as Ritu Menon calls them, try to control women's sexuality and acknowledge "'honour' as acceptable motivation, mitigation and justification" (*Ibid.*: 125). A reorientation is needed against the hype surrounding "honour" to save women, especially the subaltern, from colonizing language games and "myths."

The spectacle of "Slut Walk," while celebratory in some parts of the world, in India, while coupled with caste, has different ramifications. Though the "Slut Walk" aims at exercising the freedom to dress, the term "slut" in many regional Indian languages also has a caste epithet attached to it. And it always carries reference to one untouchable caste or another (Kandasamy 2011: n. pag.). Tripta Chandola elaborates further on this "politics of body" that, mere dressing up "bodies as sluts" is not enough but an inquisition into the "bodies of sluts" who face violence almost on a daily basis and encounter normalizing narratives that make harassment towards them a given of the social order, is needed (2011: n. pag.). As Jameela's tale also points out, the sex worker is expected to be a "public woman" (Devika 2006: 1677) who can be treated in any manner by a "civil" society.

Breast tax in the erstwhile Travancore kingdom of Kerala was levied on women who belonged to the lower castes. They could cover their breasts only on the payment of a certain amount as *mulakkaram* or "breast tax". It was levied "as soon as a woman of the Ezhavas and castes below, attained puberty and more attractive the breasts were, the more the tax she had to pay" (Sadasivan 2000: 394). The orientalist male gaze was directed towards the subaltern woman. In 1840 AD (*Ibid.*), Nangeli, a 35 year old Ezhava woman of Chertala town, covered her body without paying any tax. When the village officer demanded the tax from her, she cut off her breasts, and died on the spot (Radhakrishnan n. d.: n.pag.). It was abolished the very next day.



In 2009, the Hindu right forces alleged that there was a “Love Jihad” or “Romeo Jihad”, organizations supposed to have been launched by Muslim fundamentalists and youthful Muslim men to convert Hindu and Christian women to Islam through trickery and expressions of false love. The states of Kerala, Karnataka and Delhi saw such vicious hate campaigning, speaking of such an Islamist conspiracy. The campaign constructed an image of the Muslim male as aggressive, lustful, lacking character and created a common enemy, the “Other”, who was all set to violate the pure body of Hindu women (Gupta 2009: 14). This added to the Orientalist stereotyping of Muslims as lecherous, with high sexual appetites, leading a life of luxury and religious fanaticism (*Ibid.*).

The body of the Hindu woman becomes a site here for community homogeneity and honour (*Ibid.*: 13) and she is regarded as the exclusive preserve of the Hindu man and safeguarding her virtue is regarded as his exclusive prerogative (*Ibid.*: 14). But in the process her legitimate right to love and to choice is ignored. The campaign went on as if to portray that the mere act of marrying and staying with a Muslim ensures that a woman is leading a dreadful and unhappy life. Charu Gupta points out that the lament was also over “the loss of child bearing Hindu wombs”, and therefore it was necessary to “exercise greater control over women’s reproductive capacities to enhance Hindu numbers” (*Ibid.*: 14). Investigations revealed the allegations to be false and in January 2012 the Kerala police declared that the Love Jihad was “a campaign with no substance”, bringing legal proceedings instead, against certain websites for “spreading religious hatred and false propaganda” (Padanna 2012: n. pag.).

These illustrations amply prove that the terrain of Orientalism is not monolithic; nor is it a singular transhistorical discourse. The identities of religion, caste and gender create intense complex situations within Indian experiences. There are diverse profiles of the Orient and it inhabits Orientalisms of varied hues and colours. They have separate histories with distinctive substance and interactions with power. The “discriminated” at times become the “discriminators”. Critical interventions have to consider many “other ways of making sense”, revising traditional perspectives on Orientalism, addressing all plurisignifications. The journey ahead is thus to rendezvous all at the victory stand, all those who have been occluded so far, in the sweeping generalizations and umbrella terms, when the story of the Orient was written.

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