

SAD, BAD AND THE MYSTERIOUS INDIAN: EXPLORING THE IMAGE OF THE INDIAN

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Three images of the Indians that are recognizable, acceptable and saleable by the West are of poverty, hopelessness and mystery. The flinching of the Golden Globe award and the 2009 Oscar for the Best Motion Picture by 'Slumdog Millionaire' and the Booker Prize for Literature by Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* have very recently reinforced this image.

Desai's novel *Fasting, Feasting* was reviewed as "unhappy Indian families are unhappy in their own ways." Another novel that the paper critically examines set during the 1990s in an overcrowded and politically corrupt Bombay is Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters*. It depicts a family being torn apart by lies, love, and its unresolved demons of the past. The novel presents a life of deprivation and hopelessness. Martel's *Life of Pi* is a tale of Piscine "Pi" Molitor Patel, "small, slim man" from Pondicherry with an Indian complexion. This mysterious image of Pi, the Indian, synthesizes very well with the Western view of the "exotic" East and the Eastern.

When one tries to understand India and the Indian through these novels, the understanding often implies essentializing and prejudiced interpretations of Eastern cultures and peoples. The paper attempts to examine this understanding of the image of the Indian.

Edward Said in the textual representations of the Orient in *Orientalism* highlights the fact that representation of an image can never be natural or real. The book *Orientalism* also brings forth an approach that facilitates the West not only to come to terms with the East but also to (represent) construct the East as a binary opposite to the image of the West. Scholars from various academic disciplines like, history, philology, linguistics and literature created the same image of the Orient, by relying solely on the Eurocentric understanding of the Orient. (Said, 1976) The Orient, thus, is a phenomenon constructed by the naturalizing of a wide range of Orientalist

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assumptions and stereotypes, a representation or an image, which is not a natural or real depiction. Any image, to borrow Spivak's terms, can be representation or re-presentation, the former being a "proxy" (*Vertretung*) and the latter is a "portrait" (*Darstellung*) -

The relationship between the two kinds of representation brings in, also, the use of essentialism because no representation can take place - no *Vertretung*, representation - can take place without essentialism. What it has to take into account is that the "essence" that is being represented is a representation of the other kind, *Darstellung*. (Spivak, 1990)

In both the cases—"proxy" and "portrait", as explained by Spivak, there is a grave danger of essentialising the objects, persons or even nations that are represented or re-presented. To complicate the matter further, if we go by the semiotic meanings of the word 'representation' it is believed that it is close to reality, it is a 'presence' or a simulation. It is equally unlikely that these simulations can be completely true or real.

In this age of globalization and multiculturalism, the representation of society through texts may not hold as much value as it used to centuries ago, when texts were primarily the only window to the world. Yet, in the contemporary world, when these representations beget international literary prizes, they invite scrutiny and speculation. Three images of the Indian that are recognizable, acceptable and saleable by the West are of poverty, hopelessness and mystery.

This paper examines the orientalist and stereotypical representation of the Indian by some of the writers who had been nominated for or have won the prestigious Booker Prize. The paper explores this deprecatory Western view of the Indian in four praiseworthy novels namely- US based Indian writer Anita Desai's novel *Fasting, Feasting*, Canada based novelist Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters* and Canadian writer Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* and lastly, Indian writer Arvind Adiga's novel *The White Tiger*. The first and the second novels were shortlisted for the Booker in 1999 and 2002 respectively whereas *Life of Pi* and *The White Tiger* won the Booker Prize in 2002 and 2008 respectively. In the long span of a decade, surprisingly, the protagonists in these novels represent the trite image of the Indian as sad, bad and mysterious Indian. This image, in the

ethos of the new millennium, is not the only real image of the Indian.

It is deplorable to note that Western imagination still retains the same old image and assumption of the Orient and the Oriental in contemporary world of literature and cinema. The two recent evidences of this credence are-the 2009 Golden Globe award and the Oscar Award for the Best Motion Picture to 'Slumdog Millionaire' and the 2008 Booker Prize for Literature to Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*. Both the works offer a realistic tribute to India by presenting her as a metaphor for the sad, bad and the poor. In both the cases, whoever their creators are, accolades have come from the Western world. These international honours have put us back into-

our pre-ordained squalor-celebrity slot. We have salvaged our garland of global recognition, but this time it has made up of all the stereotypes we thought we had put in the shredder of Corus, Arcelor, and nine percent growth. (Karkaria, 2009)

Vikas Swaroop's Q&A, the movie's inspiration and Adiga's novel had earlier failed to grab much attention from the Indian media but with the stamps of approval from the Western world, they both experience exponential growth in book sales in the national as well as international markets. Norbert Schurer, in his book *Midnight's Children: A Reader*, gives statistics of how the fortunes of any prize-winning novel soar, by giving *Midnight's Children*'s example. He claims that before the Prize, only 650 copies of the first print run of 2,500 books were ordered in advance, whereas, after the announcement of the Prize, the sales rocketed to about one thousand copies in one month. (Schurer, 2004).

Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* is a novel in two parts- the first set in a quintessential small town of India and the second in Massachusetts, America. Uma, the protagonist of the first part, is a slow-witted, clumsy, eldest child of a middle-class close-knit Indian family. This spinster is trapped at home, smothered by her overbearing parents and their traditions. The back-and forth movement in the novel brings to fore Uma's childhood events -her failure at school, birth of her brother, Arun and her eventual withdrawal from the school, and of the near past -her unsuccessful engagement, and marriage, both for the sake of dowry, highlighting her plight, sadness and misery. These incidents also depict the failings of the Indian society -supremacy of the son to the subjugation of the daughters, the inferiority of a woman/

bride and her family in a marital situation, and the repressive Indian traditions and customs. Arun, who is close to Uma, observes her plight, as he is growing up and later remarks-

...the contorted face of an enraged sister
who, failing to express her outrage against
neglect, against misunderstanding, against
inattention to her unique and singular being
and its hungers, merely spits and froths in
ineffectual protests...(Desai, 2000).

Very subtly, Desai presents her critique of the institution of marriage on which the Indian society rests. Through Mira-masi, a widowed relative who does not have a home and travels "all over the country, quite alone, safe in her widow's white garments," cousin Anamika, "the first fruit to be picked" for disastrous marriage, her continual beatings by her in-laws and a miscarriage which made her "flawed...damaged good" and through a broken engagement of Uma's (to secure dowry to help the flagging business of the boy's family) and a foiled shockingly fraudulent marriage of Uma's (the boy/man had already been married, had four children and lived with his family in Meerut), Desai portrays 'the bad and the ugly' of the Indian societal customs.

Mira-masi's pilgrimages and her devotion-obsession to her deity, Shiva brings to us the mystical, mysterious India. When she once takes Uma on a pilgrimage with her, the world of ashrams, prayers and sages is opened up to Uma. The devotees attempt to draw her into their coterie claiming that "She is possessed. The lord has taken possession of her" (p.60). Later this is cited as a reason by Mira-masi for her not being able to bring forth a successful marriage.

Martel's *Life of Pi* is a tale of Piscine "Pi" Molitor Patel, "small, slim man" from Pondicherry with an Indian complexion. Pi is a person dedicated to finding his connection to the Eternal. To everyone's horror, he tastes every religion. In addition to his own native Hindu beliefs, Pi adds Christianity and Islam, and happily integrates them into his daily life. He prays to Jesus and Mary, Allah, Krishna and Vishnu. He studies with a priest and a Sufi mystic. This mystical and mysterious Indian narrates one of his journeys-

I left town and on my way back, at a point where
the land was high and I could see the sea to my
left and down the road a long way, I suddenly felt I
was in heaven. The spot was no different from

when I had passed it not long before, but my way of seeing it had changed. The feeling, a paradoxical mix of pulsing energy and profound peace, was intense and blissful. Whereas before the road, the sea, the trees, the air, the sun all spoke differently to me, now they spoke one language of unity. Tree took account of road, which was aware of air, which was mindful of sea, which shared things with sun. Every element lived in harmonious relation with its neighbour, and all was kith and kin. I knelt a mortal; I rose an immortal. I felt like the center of a small circle coinciding with the center of a much larger one.

Atman had met Allah. (Martel, 2001)

Among many things, this mysterious image of Pi, the Indian, synthesizes very well with the Western view of the “exotic” East and the Eastern. *Life of Pi* is full of mystery — so much so that both booksellers and book reviewers described it as a “magical-realist fable” or one that “makes you believe in the extraordinary.”

Rohinton Mistry’s *Family Matters* is set in the mid 90s in the Business/economic hub of India, Bombay. It’s a story about Nariman Vakel, a 79 year old Parsi widower who is afflict with Parkinson’s disease and lives in the memory of his past. He lives in once-elegant apartment, Chateau Felicity with his two unmarried, middle-aged, stepchildren, Coomy and Jal. He is miserable by the maze of rules that Coomy has laid down for him-

...Besides the prohibition against locked doors, he was required to announce his intention to use the WC. In the morning he was not to get out of bed till she came to get him.....There were more rules regarding his meals, his clothes, his denture, his use of the radiogram,... (Mistry, 2002)

While unfolding the story of *Family Matters*, Rohinton Mistry portrays ‘the bad and the sad’ face of modern day Bombay which is beset with poverty, dirtiness, “ditches, potholes, traffic.....” It is a city in which-

...lawlessness is the one certainty in the streets of Bombay. Easier to find a gold

nugget on the footpath than a tola of courtesy.

(Mistry, 2002)

Yezad once reveals his desire of having "... clean cities, clean air, plenty of water, trains with seats for everyone..." but he is confined to Bombay with its "14 million people, half of them living in slums, eating and shitting in places not fit for animals."

Besides poverty, loneliness and selfishness, Mistry focuses on political corruption and religious divides. For instance, Hussain, a Muslim peon at the Bombay Sporting Emporium, tells how, during communal riots, "the police were behaving like gangsters... Firing bullets like target practice."

Adiga's *The White Tiger* studies the contrast between India's rise as a modern global economy and the lead character, Balram, who comes from crushing rural poverty. This novel takes the form of a series of letters to Wen Jiabao, the Chinese premier, from Balram Halwai, the Bangalore businessman who is the self-styled "White Tiger" of the title. Bangalore is the Silicon Valley of the subcontinent, and on the eve of a state visit by Jiabao, our entrepreneur Halwai wishes to impart something of the new India to the Chinese premier:

Out of respect for the love of liberty shown by the Chinese people, and also in the belief that the future of the world lies with the yellow man and the brown man now that our erstwhile master, the white-skinned man, has wasted himself through buggery, mobile phone usage and drug abuse.(Adiga, 2008)

Halwai's lesson about the new India is drawn from the rags-to-riches story of his own life. For Halwai, the son of a rural rickshaw-puller is from the "Darkness":

Please understand, Your Excellency, that India is two countries in one: an India of Light, and an India of Darkness. The ocean brings light to my country. Every place on the map of India near the ocean is well off. But the river brings darkness to India - the black river." The black river is the Ganges, beloved of the sari-and-spices tourist image of India. ("No! - Mr Jiabao, I urge you not to dip in the Ganga,

unless you want your mouth full of faeces, straw, soggy parts of human bodies, buffalo carrión, and seven different kinds of industrial acids .(Adiga, 2008)

Thus, we notice that the four novels, namely, Desai's *Fasting Feasting*, Mistry's *Family Matters*, Martel's *Life of Pi* and Adiga's *The White Tiger* portray the image of hopelessness, depression and inscrutability. If Uma and Nariman Vakeel epitomize isolation and despair, Pi and Halwai exemplify mysticism and enigma. Halwai, superficially appears to have a better understanding of the pragmatic world yet his analysis of India is akin to Pi's understanding of the same.

Mukul Joshi, in his essay, "Illusions and Discoveries: India in the British Imagination" lists out some fictional images of India and the Indians held by the Western people. Among these is a portrayal of Indians in two-dimensional characters-one, as innocent, gullible, found in the likes of loyal servants and sepoys and the second is the middle class or a westernized Indian. In both the cases, characters are 'types' because, as Joshi argues, the writers wanted to avoid complexities. Analyzing the portrayal of Indians in Rudyard Kipling's stories, Joshi affirms that "the illiterate native servant is the most commonly depicted character in Kipling". (Joshi, 2008)

What Joshi sees, as a "standardized response", is understood as "exploitation of voyeuristic curiosity of a foreign audience" by others. (Thakkar, 2009) Thus, analyzing this kind of lop-sided representation of the Indian in so many Booker-nominated novels, one can easily surmise that whether it is the representation of the characters of Uma, Roxana, Coomy and Pi, belonging to the higher strata of society or Balram Halwai, representing the plebs, the image of the Indian as the sad, bad and the mysterious, subsists for rest of the world even today and in a way, this identity has become "age-old claim to fame" (Karkaria, 2009) or a truly prized catch. When one tries to understand India and the Indian through these novels, the understanding often implies essentialised and prejudiced elucidation of the Orient, as had been analyzed by Edward Said in *Orientalism*. Centuries ago, the Western world visualized India as the land of elephants and snake-charmers, and today too, the country, in these novels, remains the land of the 'sad, bad and the mysterious'.

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INTERNET SOURCES

1. James Wood (1994), after the experience of having been a judge, says he made a pledge never to judge a big fiction prize again, because of the inevitable horse trading that goes on between the judges and he 'intensely disliked the way we reached that verdict [of who the winner was going to be] and felt that the arbitrary, utterly political process discredited the whole project'. David Lodge [1989] veers more towards Woods' suspicion of prizes and what they are about: '...[but the overtly competitive nature of these prizes, heightened by the publication of long lists and shortlists, takes its psychological toll n writers; and given the large element of chance in the composition and operation of judging panels, the importance now attached to prizes in our literary culture seems excessive. A committee is a blunt instrument of literary criticism. <http://51stories.wordpress.com/2008/09/06/judging-panels-and-the-booker-prize>.