

When and how do we call a text “Orientalist”? : A Reading of Mircea Eliade’s nights at Serampore

Souradip Bhattacharyya

"Re-mapping" of the English Literary Canon entails the re-discovery of the way the canon has been arranged or organized thus far. To "re-" as I understand in here is to problematize what has been existing, to question the way literary texts have been qualitatively grouped under a banner by simply imposing upon them a methodological structure without assessing multiple other possibilities that may exist or that may require historical investigation. To apply the theoretical principles espoused by Edward Said in his seminal work *Orientalism* in analyzing texts that fit into the slot has been, ever since its popularization a widely practiced phenomenon. What exactly does "fit into the slot" mean? Until and unless this position is cleared, it is futile to carry on with just another textual analysis. In the same context it is reason enough to say that textual analysis that either follows the structural aspect of Orientalism or uses Said's argumentative principles in critiquing a text or-for that matter-critiques Said in turn, should not use the texts to find (mis)-matches or points/places of sameness or difference to be identifiably related or not. The point is to come out of the archaic "fit into the slot" problematic of the over-arching colonial ambience and retrospection and the criticism of that time and place and attempt to use in turn the Said-ian methodology through a certain diachronicity, in order to just not critique practices that resemble colonialism functionally in a different time and space but also in considering conceptual modes of understanding that dismantle the dominant exploitative mode of representation of

colonialism. My textual analysis shall follow the latter mode of understanding. Applying the theoretical principles, for me, doesn't mean their superimposition over the concerned text but, the understanding of the latter through the technicalities under the Said-ian methodology.

The novella *Nights at Serampore* (*Nachte in Serampore*) by the Rumanian philosopher and author Mircea Eliade bears special significance to the above-mentioned context. Placed thematically in the early twentieth century in Serampore-now a satellite town of Kolkata situated some twenty-five kilometers from the city-the novella talks about the experience of three European men (but not British) in the town narrated to us by the author in first person in-what has been famous with Eliade-the autobiographical mode. In other words, as Eliade mentions in the Preface, the characters from the novella existed in reality and the narrator's interest in Tantric practices coincides with the author's interest in the Sanskrit language and various other religious practices. However, outside that the author engages in what can be called the literature fantastique and the "conception of "camouflage" as a dialectical moment". The novella *Nights at Serampore* was published under a volume comprising of two novellas, the name being *Two Tales of the Occult* and, the book from which I have read it is called *Two Strange Tales*. It is not just a series of information that is being provided above but an attempt to link up what can be called the strangeness of the situation, the inexplicably fantastic and magical occurrences, the creation of a mythical geography with the nature of their construction, the mode of interpretation and the role of language in the discourse. My claim in this paper shall be that the magical representation of the orient and the association of Tantric practices with irrational religious practice, a feeling of terror before the sacred (a sacred that belongs to the Hindu/oriental religious experience) does not necessarily place the novella only in the position of an Orientalist discourse. Subsequently the point to be made is that I do not talk of positions outside of Orientalism but how textual references (a fact and fiction at the same time) that make a text orientalist, dismantle the very construction.

What are the chances that the actions of the characters and the narrative technique do not make the novella an Orientalist discourse? After all, Serampore is exoticized as the typical "other" of the city; it is not just a space for recreation and relaxation. The natural environ in and around the town is produced as an imaginary space. The forest, the trees and the pond cease to remain as "nature" ("nature" on an equitable plane with "nature" of the West) but are recreated through the spicy ingredients of mystery and

magic, that clichéd experience of a chilling suspense imparted by the silence of nature; where to be silent is not a virtue, not exemplary of the choice of the silent witty to observe and not talk excessively, but where silence rises from incomprehension. The silence of oriental "Nature" is the failed attempt of the Westerner to understand it. By the Said-ian logic, such a "nature" takes part in the daily materiality of the native. It is present in and through the "internal coherence" of the Oriental. The Orientalist discourse would never challenge that. Instead of being skeptical of the internal functionality of the oriental and his world, the orientalist would adopt an objective, scientific position from where to comprehend the oriental, make it intelligible and provide an identity to it. From such a point of view, the wilderness, the forest or the night becomes incomprehensible just like the indiscernible mumblings of uneducated natives in so many Orientalist accounts.

As the story proceeds, the images of the constructed geographical milieu that are made to cohabit become more complex and interesting. The creative talent in Eliade lies in the interweaving of the imagined spaces, in problematizing the line of division between fact and fiction. Calling this the "conception of "camouflage" as a dialectical moment", Eliade ultimately does not hierarchize between the factual existence of man on earth and the fictional world of magical spells that make man hallucinate across space and time, but employs the concept of hierophany to question the so-called superiority in the scientificity of factuality. Let me elaborate by first explaining in a nutshell the incident from the novella that has made me propose the above-mentioned concept. While returning from what was later to become their last expedition to Serampore, the three Europeans (the narrator, Lucien Bogdanof, and Van-Manen) lost their way at night in the forest. It wasn't just baffling for them because there was supposed to be just one way from their bungalow at Serampore to the main road (and hence the impossibility of getting lost) but also because they had to stop the car in the middle of the unknown forest after hearing a native woman make a blood curdling cry for help only to not find the woman anywhere but in turn getting more confused as they walked deeper into the forest. This was then followed by them being a part (and just not witness) to a space, time, and incident which as they were later to realize had occurred some hundred and fifty years back. As the narrator would then say, the reason behind such a horrid experience was the suspicion they had raised in the mind of Surendranath Bose, a Tantric and a scholar in Sanskrit who in order to prevent them from interrupting a secret "awful" ritual which he must have been performing in

the forest transported them across space and time to a different world, the world of the past. Interestingly, towards the close of the story the narrator (who is also versed in the rituals of Tantra) is found arguing the logic and technicality of such a transportation through the tantric discourse with a certain Swami Shivananda, who he holds in high regard not just for the vastness of his knowledge but also due to his humble nature.

Eliade's production of such a literature fantastique is simply not a work of fiction. The elements of the fantastic that form the narrative must also be described through adjectives that are just not synonymous with "fantastic" but denote a qualitative difference. The literary technique of the fantastic or the uncanny, the marvelous usually produces a narrative with supernatural occurrences, invested in analyzing/understanding the event after it has occurred. According to the theory of the "Fantastic" proposed by Tzvetan Todorov, while the fantastic uncanny analyzes the occurrence as an illusion, a result of dream or madness which therefore fails to hamper the "laws of reality", the fantastic marvelous disrupts reality itself. Distinction between the two can be made by the fact that while the fantastic uncanny is an illusion, to have not happened in reality, the fantastic marvelous actually occurs in reality and hence disrupts the pre-existing laws of reality. Eliade's usage of the fantastic falls under the domain of the "fantastic marvelous" where he disrupts the line of division between fact and fiction. And it is this disruption, making illusion or the supernatural a universal condition that keeps Eliade outside the traditional Orientalist discourse. I shall explain this with Eliade's concept of the hierophany. Hierophany is an act of manifestation of the sacred. Dividing the world into the orders of the sacred and profane, Eliade says that the "Sacred" or the numen (the Latin for God) manifests itself in this world through hierophany. The act of manifestation is necessary because the sacred or the numinous is "wholly other" (the ganz andre), something "basically and totally different" and the way mankind can become aware of the sacred is through its manifestation as something totally different from the profane. This manifestation, or religious experience by man is defined by hierophany where the mysterious act of manifestation of the ganz andre occurs in and through objects (like a stone or tree) that are part of our material profane world. Such objects thus cease to be mere objects, though they nevertheless are material objects but become hierophanies, signifiers of the sacred. Under the order of the sacred therefore, the entire cosmos attains the status of sacrality, a cosmic sacrality. However, such cosmic sacrality would probably not deny the materiality of/in the profane without

which the act of manifestation (manifesting on the material) would itself become an impossibility. As the narrator and Swami Shivananda argue in the novella, the mythical geography created by magical powers through the tantric practice of Suren Bose is just not an illusion, the un-real fantastic uncanny as against the real material world of which they are a part of. The narrative representation of such an imaginative geography is not an "exercise of cultural strength" in the context of framing the oriental. By challenging the strict line of division between fact and fiction, reality and supernatural, Eliade places this inter-relation between the material place of Serampore and the mythical geography under the domain of the fantastic marvelous. The forest region around Serampore coming under the magical/mysterious influence of tantric practice attains the status of hierophany, a manifestation of the *ganz andre* through a sacred ritual that manifests the numen (the God) as a terrible power, an "awe-aspiring mystery", the *mysterium tremendum*. However with the technique of hierophany, the fantastic marvelous camouflages the real and the supernatural. As Shivananda would say, "no event in our world is real...Everything that occurs in this universe is illusory" where "the encounter between you, living men, and their shades-all these things are illusory." No event is of any permanence, any reality and it is only through the construction of laws that mankind (for Eliade the "profane" world) tries to tame illusions. However, such taming is individualistic, happening at the level of the individual leaving the universal functionality of illusions unchanged. Under such a phenomenon the fantastic marvelous seizes to remain a literary technique of fiction. If its objective is to disrupt the divisive boundary between fact and fiction, the fantastic marvelous cannot just be constricted within the boundaries of a work of fiction (such a fact/fiction binary becomes problematic) but becomes a condition of life universally. Through *Nights at Serampore*, the binary of the real and supernatural forest is challenged, where the reality of the real doesn't just get transmuted through sacred ritual into a supernatural space, but where the qualitative nature of the real becomes subjective. In other words what is materially real (and hence really real) for one may become real for the other only through illusion, where illusion is the only mode of existence. The objective is therefore to modify the tremendousness of the mystery, a feeling of terror before the sacred by making hierophany a universal, cosmic phenomenon and not just limited to the domain of oriental tantric practices which may have led the West to relate the irrationality in such terrible power to the superstition and occult powers typical of the Orient.

However, there exist certain instances that prevent the narrative from adopting a

position totally outside the typicality of Orientalist discourse. In the Said-ian sense what I do now is examine the internal (in)-consistency of the text to tease out its position as I have suggested above. Very interestingly the universal nature of illusion and the marvelous is argued out in the text only towards the end, in the mountaneous region of Rishi Kesh and Laxmanjhula, as a secret conversation between the narrator and Swami Shivananda. And even the realization that happens in secret does not place Suren Bose's ritual in a fair light. It is still referred to, by the narrator as an "awful" ritual. Bose's ritual is not horrid in itself but is framed so by the narrator. If the multiple situations in the novella are taken into consideration, the secrecy of the narrator's discovery and partiality in its mode of understanding constantly thwart its universality. I shall give one vital example to prove my point and propose an interconnection between secrecy and partiality to show that secrecy doesn't just lie in the lack of popularization of this knowledge but also is ultimately concealed from the narrator's experience. Let me explain. For the three Europeans to have experienced the traumatic transportation across space and time (the narrator being one of them), the tantric ritual was something to have affected them personally, that is, not just bodily but mentally. And such mental affectation was not the result of just any other experience but such a ritual which even the narrator (who held special interest in Eastern religions) considered as secret, something "which no one would dare-or be able-to reveal to you" (italics mine). For the narrator as well as for the others (Bogdanof took tantric rituals as nothing more than "a demoniacal orgy") the knowledge of Tantra turned out to be something which even if they gained would continue to remain "an impenetrable mystery of Indian religion and magic" because it was one such ritual the knowledge of which would not give them the power to dominate or authorize over it, where authority-as per the Said-ian methodology-would mean the denial of "autonomy" to the Oriental country to the point of producing the existence of the Orient according to the knowledge of the orientalist. The three Europeans in the novella had failed to gain authority over Tantric rituals; tantra as the object of knowledge denied the orientalist of the penetrability and power to scrutinize it through which the Europeans might have been able to grasp a fundamentally static and unchangeable base of the Tantra. Rather it was the unpredictability of the ritual in practice that perplexed them and the mental trauma is a result of this unintelligibility, a deep-seated trauma which the narrator would like to forget, more so why he fails to tolerate a revisit to that same mythical geography, now with Shivananda. Had he taken the problematic line of division between illusion and

reality as an universal phenomenon the revisit would have been a mode of acceptance. The lack of penetrability on behalf of the orientalist mystifies the ritual, a *mysterium tremendum*, a manifestation of terrible power which is the "other", the unintelligible inexplicable orient which for the former is like a bad dream, fantastic uncanny from which the narrator wakes up after the revisit to cast his eye on the gentle waters of the Ganges, "incomparably clear and soothing." The incomparable nature of the water is a hyperbole, an exaggerated appraisal possible only through comparison. The narrator fails to challenge the "laws of reality" by accentuating the division itself, the reality of the Ganges: a real that can be measured, penetrated, scrutinized and authored in its materiality as against the demoniacal indiscernible ritual.

The paper which had started off with the objective of refusing to put into the slot of the popular form of Orientalist discourse a priori any such text has, I believe been able to carry out its job. In its denial to associate any colonial text with the traditional post-colonial mode of analyzing such texts as blatant representations of a hierarchy (the superiority of the colonizer and inferiority of the colonized), this paper has tried to show how texts like *Nights at Serampore* work through a dialectic between modes of universality and partiality. The reader should be careful to note that this dialectical relation doesn't undermine but in turn accentuates the larger question that Edward Said had tried to raise. The strangeness of the East would be subject to the scrutiny of the West as far as Orientalism was a political vision of reality. A pull between imperial interests and local interests of orientalists (which could be at odds with imperial interests) was perceivable through out the novella, where imperial interests weren't objectives existing outside of the Oriental's mind. The universality of hierophany would have thwarted the process of establishing a hierarchical relation between the West and East, a reason why its realization takes place in secret. And even when in secret, such cosmic sacrality fails to transcend the boundaries set by imperial interests, to limit and authorize. Mircea Eliade's novella gets stuck in this loop.

Bibliography:

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