The Orientalist Rendition of South Asia Through Colonial Visual Practice

In his 1978 book *Orientalism*, Edward Said established the eponymous term "Orientalism" as a framework for modeling how imperial power works. The Orient as a geographical location is the part of the world colonized by Europe, and the Occident represents Europe and America. Said defines one who studies the Orient to be an Orientalist, and their study to be Orientalism. Said proposes that the West views the people and places of the East through a lens that distorts their reality, and he calls this lens Orientalism.

Said proposes that Orientalism has "less to do with the Orient than it does with" the European world (Said, 12). The Orient is the ideologically constructed inferior 'other' and negative inversion of the Occident that serves to establish Europe's self-image as civilizationally and ontologically superior. Orientalism helps us understand how the image of the superior Occident worked to turn attention away from the immorality of the Empire and towards the progress that it brought upon its colony and hence "European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self" (Said, 3). Orientalism serves as an exposition of the power dynamic between the East and the West, where the latter's superiority in power or "positional superiority" (Said, 7) shaped and enabled discourse about the Orient and allowed the British to "make the Orient speak" (Said, 20).

Orientalism is a heuristic that helps one understand how power works in a cultural sphere such as novels or artwork. Colonial art was deeply connected to politics and the working of the empire, and hence reflected an asymmetry of power and a dynamic of 'us' versus 'them'.

Saidean Orientalism helps us to map how the relationships between economic, historical and political context, forms of valuation, and power dynamics shape not only the context of art but what was deemed as art in British India, and how this continues to seep into societal values and interactions today. Analyzing images of South Asia using the conceptual tool of Orientalism, helps us understand the role they play in the larger context of economic and political domination. More specifically, Orientalism helps us understand how the British employed colonial art to document the Indian natural world and project white saviorism, categorize South Asians to facilitate colonization and impose the European imagination, and influence coveted Indian artists and the representation of their cities.

In the 18th century, European culturalists colonized traditional Indian artists and their artwork in the name of enlightenment and discovery. According to Rosie Llewellyn Jones, a British scholar specializing in the history of Lucknow and its culture, European patrons displayed a certain fascination with "the uncharted landscape of exotic plants and animals" of India (Jones, 30). Major General Claude Martin shared this fascination and would commission Indian artists to create watercolor paintings of flowers and send them to a doctor to identify them with a Latin name. This process culminated in the "600" piece *Claude Martin collection* at Kew, London (Jones, 30). One of these paintings is the *Gloriosa superba*, a watercolor painting commissioned by Martin and identified by Doctor Robert Bruce. This painting consists of a pencil-written note by Martin to the Doctor that

meticulously details the change in colors of the flower as it develops from “Greenish” to “Yellow and Red” to “Crimson & deel bulls Blod”, and a description of the seeds as “flat & triangular, but round on the angles” (Jones, 31). The quality of the painting is as exceptional as Martin’s description. Jones describes the painting to be almost lifelike where the leaves and petals appear to tremble with the wind, and the thorns appear “sharp enough to draw blood” (Jones, 32). At first glance, this appears to be a tremendous effort for the identification of one flower, suggesting that Martin must be in awe of the Indian natural world and it must be this genuine curiosity and passion that drove him to create work of such exceptional quality.

However, when we look at this painting through the heuristic of Orientalism, we uncover a reflection of the white savior complex and power asymmetries. The interest in botanical paintings stemmed from a desire to start “counting, numbering and naming things that had not been systematically counted, numbered or named previously” (Jones, 30). This reflects the British documentary pursuit where the British systematically colonized Indian flora and fauna with Latin names, which strongly echoes Said’s definition of Orientalism as “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (Said, 3).The highly detailed nature of this painting serves to persuade viewers that the painting of Gloria Superbia and other flora and fauna are authentic, scientific, and objective representations of the subcontinent’s natural world. Whereas, in reality, this process is highly curatorial, as reflected in Martin’s description of native flowers and fruits as a “nice acquisition in [his] garden back in England,” which suggests that perhaps similar to conquering Indian states, documenting India’s rich flora and fauna served as a medallion for the colonialists that they could display in their homes or in museums (Jones, 33). Additionally, the focus on “useful or working plants” (Jones, 32) in

conjunction with naming what had not been "named previously" reflects the idea of the white savior complex. Orientalism, which in this case is the documentation and naming of Indian plants, was a way for the British to "discipline" and even "produce" the Orient "scientifically" (Said, 3). The British projected the idea that they scientifically identified useful plants and documented them for future use, and thus enabled the development of the Orient, hence projecting themselves as superior and the "saviors."

Furthermore, requirements such as the level of detail and precision required, the white background, the unnatural stem, and the flowers to focus on were precedents set by the British, and "the master painters had learned what their patron wanted and adapted their work accordingly" (Jones, 32). British patrons brought about a shift in the fundamentals of Botanical painting. "This new, European, way of botanical painting was radically different from the late Mughal style of painting, where flowering plants were essentially ornamental compositions, neatly balanced and springing from a conventionally agreed base" (Jones, 32). British patrons deprived Indian artists of their identity, right to express, and also their traditional technique. The shift in perspective of natural art in India influenced what those who were strangers to India would perceive of South Asian nature. A shift in style was also carried out in portrait painting (Jones 32), where British patrons invalidated the portraits of even the highest members of society, hence shifting the trajectory of Indian art. It is important to note that, as Edward Said explains, "The Orient was Orientalized not only because it was discovered to be the "Oriental" but also because "it could be - that is submitted to being - made Oriental" (Said 5 & 6). In this case, the Indian artists had to comply with British demands to earn a living, but also due to power asymmetries. When employing Orientalism, it becomes clear that just as the British

"retained some of the ceremonial trappings of pre-colonial state ideology" to "mask their essentially amoral political behavior," (Bose and Jalal, 63) European patrons put on a guise of fascination and sensibility as it upheld the values of enlightenment and was therefore perceived as a noble task, masking their colonization of Indian natural world.

The British conquered not only militarily, but also culturally and ideologically, as along with soldiers the British employed historians and scientists to document India in every conceivable manner in order to ultimately understand South Asians in a way that facilitated the imperial conquest. *A Dancing Girl called Kandar Baksh (Delhi, c.1815)* was painted by Lalji or Hulas Lal and is part of the *Fraser Album* (Jones, 156). This painting depicts a courtesan with loose hair dressed in dance clothing and adorned with bangles, necklaces, earrings, and a waistband. The dancer's exorbitant clothing and accessories is a manner of anthropological aesthetic stylization that serves as a display of Indian culture for Europeans, one that they considered to be 'natural' or native, and would appeal to their European imagination. The dancer in this painting stares directly at the viewer from the corner of her eye, in a mysterious yet alluring manner. This is a much sought after colonial artistic tradition of objectifying and exoticizing native women. Said describes the Oriental woman as one who "never spoke of herself" and "never represented her emotions, presence, or history" (Said, 6). Here, Said is pointing to the lack of consent by the women, and hence the lack of authenticity in their representation. At first glance, the courtesan is portrayed as exotic and voyeuristic, perhaps because the Patron was enchanted by her, and thus

wanted to celebrate or appreciate this woman and her distinct cultural identity. However, the Orientalised courtesan, who has a lack of power and agency can be seen as a metaphor for the nature of empire and power in itself.

“Orientalism is premised upon exteriority” (Said, 20), whereby the colonial gaze creates Orientalist renditions of people in order to sort the colonial population into ‘types’ based on their exteriority. Courtesans are captured having a similar pose of one hand on the waist, a striking facial expression, and similar attire. Instead of capturing a courtesan dancing, or in her natural environment, they are all set against a white background and made to appear the same. Courtesans like other members of society such as priests, landlords, or kings are painted “as representations, not as natural depictions of” themselves. The article “a” in the title of the painting “A Dancing Girl” cast her into a “type” or a standard representation of what all Indian courtesans look like. This strips them from their individuality and by doing so the Orient is “transformed from a very far distant and often threatening otherness into figures that are relatively familiar” (Said, 21). Understanding a vast and complex region through the narrow lens of such paintings takes away from the humanity and diversity of millions of South Asians in pursuit of making them easily identifiable and “familiar” to the West.

Orientalist paintings create an image outside of history, of something that is static and unchanging, as though the costumes, behaviors, and people of South Asia do not develop but remain as these eternal ‘types’. This served the wider purpose of the imperialist denigration of Indian culture and the espousal of “European superiority over Oriental backwardness,” (Said, 7) by portraying the idea that India unlike the West does not develop, and requires the British to

assist its development by categorizing its people in a clinical and “scientific” manner. The power dynamic between the East and the West where the latter was superior in power and strength, shaped and enabled discourse about South Asia. The continued investment by the Occident in the propagation of their ideas about the Orient through such paintings, led to its endurance and legitimacy. Orientalism helps us understand that the casting of ‘types’ through paintings capture clothing, people, and native heritage in ways that perpetuate essentialist notions of South Asian identity. Typecasting can have an inordinate influence on determining what South Asians were viewed as, leading to stereotypes that continue to perpetuate today.

Delhi was a site of flourishing artistic expression and “intense symbolic competition between the East India company and Mughal rulers” (Sharma, 140). Ghulam Ali Khan, the most influential artist in 19th Century Delhi had a significant role in maintaining this symbolic competition. At a time when Mughal authority was declining in India, Ghulam Ali Khan gave the deposed Mughal state symbolic authority through his artwork. Ghulam Ali’s painting of the *Jama Masjid (Delhi, c.1820)* part of the *Wellcome collection* is an illustration of one of the largest mosques in India. Due to his status as one of the most coveted artists of India, Ghulam Ali gave this mosque symbolic importance by simply painting it. Similarly, his use of Mughal visual symbols in his illustration of *James Skinner’s regimental durbar*, and his illustration of Emperor Shah Alam II served to assert Mughal identity and alter power dynamics. Ghulam Ali certainly voiced his own political

agenda, using his authentic and influential art as a conduit, despite economic and political circumstances. However, his work does not escape Orientalism and overarching power dynamics.

The detail and precision in Ghulam Ali's illustration of the Jama Masjid reflects the British interest in realism painting and is one of many emphatic endorsements "of the topographical genre in the service of the imperial identity." (Sharma, 144). The dichromatic and minimalistic backdrop of this painting places the monument in focus. This bears a strong resemblance to the white background in botanical paintings, which as Sharma states, complies with the European ethnographic approach to recording Delhi's historic architecture. When we look at the *Jama Masjid* and other works of Ghulam Ali through the lens of Orientalism, we uncover that although he emphasized the history of Mughal rulers, the British obsession with the Orientalist documentation of India's architectural history is the root of influence on the focus on Ghulam Ali's work. The British were interested in collecting knowledge about South Asia in an Orientalist mode, and Ghulam Ali and the Delhi school indirectly aided their exploration. As Said states, "Men make their own history, that what they know is what they have made" (Said, 5). Similarly Ghulam Ali's artwork which has had a major impact on Indian Art History was influenced by British colonial visual practice and ultimately perpetuated the Orientalist rendition of the East.

It would be a mistake to see colonial art as solely a visual tool that aids our understanding of how the British gained and maintained political, economic, and social control. It certainly provides this, but when we look beyond this, Indian art reveals how the British influenced the

fundamentals of India’s ontology and epistemology. As Edward Said states, the Orientalist “restructured the Orient by their art and made its colors, lights, and people visible through their images rhythms and motifs.” The British instrumentalized botanical paintings to mask their amoral actions and project genuine fascination by the Indian natural world and the idea that they were enabling South Asian progress. The British ethnographic pursuit led to a focus on stylized depictions of India ‘types’, that served to perpetuate the Orientalist rendition of the East and the positional superiority of the West. The British interest in Mughal architecture and a focus on detail, realism, and topography influenced and altered the Delhi school, and led us to question the work of key figures in Indian art history such as Ghulam Ali Khan, and influenced how Delhi was represented. Orientalism helps us understand the visual power of colonization in the broader restructuring of Indian art and representation of South Asia. The economic and political power projected over South Asia certainly led to the gradual economic destruction of the subcontinent, but it also infused into art, literature, and Indian national consciousness. Economic revival is viable and straightforward, however cultural and ideological colonization through colonial art is deep-rooted because art is subjective and impressionable, and perhaps holds a power far greater than empire as it continues to shape the way people relate to themselves and others to this day.

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Paintings

1. Gloria Superbia. Claude Martin Collection. Library of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.
2. Lal, Lalji or Hulas. A Dancing Girl called Kandar Baksh. C.1815. Opaque Watercolour on paper. 24.6 x 16.3 cm. Collection of Prince and Princess Sadruddin Aga Khan. Fraser Album, Delhi.
3. Khan, Ghulam Ali. Jama Masjid, exterior view of the east facade. c.1820. Watercolour on paper, 43.6 x 65.4cm. The Wellcome Collection, Delhi.

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