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Edward Said and William Jones: Negotiating Between Orientalism and Asiaticism

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Despite its status as a classic in postcolonial studies and cultural studies, *Orientalism* has been criticized many times over for conceptual inadequacy, factual errors and methodological flaws. To sample only a few of the very serious critical charges leveled against this work, Aijaz Ahmad's 1992 allegation that Said can be accused of the same homogenizing sweep, extreme, radical and anti-historic modes of denunciation of the whole of Western civilization which he himself criticizes in the Orientalist discourse is quite legitimate. More recently, Keith Windschuttle rightly argues that "Said's attempt to identify Oriental studies as an instrument of imperialism does not deserve to be taken seriously . . . At most, Said establishes that Orientalism provided the West with a command of Oriental languages and culture, plus a background mindset that convinced it of its cultural and technological advance over Islam. But these are far from sufficient causes of imperial conquest since they explain neither motives, opportunities, nor objectives." In his 1983 essay "*Orientalism* and its Problems," Dennis Porter argues that Orientalism suffers from an epistemic closure because it cannot step outside its own discursive formation to arrive at the truth which Said sometimes hints at in his book. Porter also points out that the unified character of Orientalism seems to preclude his-

torical discontinuities and epistemic breaks, which we find in Foucault, one of Said's intellectual gurus. Further, Said's notion of hegemony, according to Porter, does not seem to be a historical process through which "power relations are continually reasserted, challenged and modified"(152). Indeed, these critics of Said seem to agree that he can be as much blamed for overgeneralization, essentialism and anti-historicism as he himself blames the Orientalists.

By enumerating these critical remarks I intend neither to accept Said's critique of Orientalism unquestioningly, nor dismiss it altogether. In this brief essay, I wish to introduce a corrective based on Sir William Jones's Asiatic researches, with which we can reread *Orientalism* and see for ourselves afresh some of the limits to the Orientalist ideology, the contradictions inherent within the sites of authority and power the Orientalist inhabits and also those created in the relation between power and knowledge. In this essay I make an attempt to revise as much our reception of Jones as that of Said, and negotiate between Orientalism and Asiaticism. Such a negotiation can alert us to the overgeneralized nature of the conceptual schema of both terms in the postcolonial discourse that elides the differences between what Said thought Jones was within the hermeneutics of empire, and what Jones is perceived to be by other scholars, independently of postcolonial theories. It is my eventual aim to make a case for re-centering the concept of national culture in postcolonial discourse for the reason that it can be accommodated within comparative literature.

In *Orientalism,* Said chooses to look into the "strategic location," of the discourse, i.e., "the author's position in a text with regard to the Oriental material he writes about," and examines its "strategic formation," or the way in which texts form an intertextual ensemble and acquire, mass, density and referential authority. Said employs these two methodological devices in his book (20). In doing so he argues that the European imperial nations have created the Orient, domesticated it through epistemic as well as technological control, stereotyped it, and reduced it to representations and objects of knowledge as part of their imperialist cultural hegemony. To prove this thesis, Said ably marshals an amazingly large number of texts on the Arab-Islamic cultures of North Africa and the Middle-East in the fields of literature, history, travelogues, philology, ethnography and anthropology produced by the European colonial powers, mostly England, France ,and more recently America. But in this enterprise he not only misses out on a great German Orientalist on India, Max Müller, but makes only passing reference to William Jones, the most influential Indian Orientalist, or rather Asiaticist — Jones preferred the term 'Asiatic' to 'Oriental' and founded the Asiatic Society.

Among those who strongly favor Jones's work despite Said's implicit dismissal are R.K Kaul and Garland Cannon. Kaul

defends Jones from Said's anti-Orientalist attacks in the first chapter of *Studies in William Jones: An Interpreter of Oriental Literature* (1995) and goes on to offer a sympathetic reading of Jones's Arabic, Persian and Sanskrit translations. Cannon calls Jones "a good Orientalist" — apparently believing there can be such a thing as a "good" Orientalist or that the term itself is in fact stable. Nonetheless he asserts that far from being an agent of imperialism or an imperialist attempting to establish and then perpetuate political and cultural hegemony, Jones was often an opponent of the colonial project, particularly some of its more egregious aspects. While Cannon concedes that Jones saw the need for British rule for at least the short-term, he argues strenuously that none of Jones's activities suggested "that his research was ever motivated by a desire to keep India a colony, or that he was an ideological agent of Western imperialism seeking to exploit native peoples and their resources" (46-47). Rather, instead of controlling India for its own sake, Jones saw it as his and his counterparts' duty to prepare India for independence by helping Indians revive their once-great culture. Once this culture was revived, so Jones believed, ancient Indian governing institutions would again be in place, or Indians would create new ones based on their own cultural and historical traditions, and thus the need for the British would disappear (47).

In recent years, corporate finances, a multinational cultural economy and the digitized media have required the redrawing of the boundaries of economic as well as cultural groups in terms of a new set of binaries — the West and the rest, the First world and the Third World, the North and the South – which, while as compelling as other, in some ways earlier binaries like the Orient vs. the Occident, do not instantiate the same national divisions. People all over the world are re-conceptualized as groups no longer within nation-states, securely anchored in a sense of filiative place, collective memories, customs, traditions and histories, but instead as identities based in race, color, gender and ethnicity in a borderless, civic and multicultural globe. The globalization of literary studies in the academy has also militated against the idea of national literatures. Following the logic of the anti-Enlightenment critique and that of the narrative of nationalist modernity as a hegemonic project of the 'nationalist elite'(Chatterjee), postcolonial theory has problematized the nation-state and its ideologies to such an extent that we are persuaded to believe that nation and nation-state are either troglodytes or dodos, either too obsolescent and hegemonic a system in some epistemically dark corner of the Third World to merit mention, or simply extinct. But what is conveniently forgotten is the fact that nation-states continue to exist and exert their force palpably in the political, economic and cultural fields in many ways. Borders are enforced more often than not, and national interests are uncompromisingly guarded,

as happens in the U.S., for example, when it comes to deciding whether and how to allow a transnational flow of labor, grant H1B visas or work permits, permit outsourcing of jobs, or deal with the menace of international terrorism. Germany is still an "ethnic" nation which defines citizenship in terms of a shared descent and bars different racial or ethnic groups from acquiring citizenship (Kymlicka 132). Nationhood, such as *Hindutva* in contemporary India, is played out as a trope in cultural representations and political practice, with highly exclusionary intents and hegemonic effects. A case in point is the demolition of the Babri mosque at Ayodhya, the holy place of Lord Ram's birth, on December 6, 1992, by the activists of Vishna Hindu Parishad, an ultra-right Hindu organzation. When telecast, this incident, visually as disturbing to some as the September 11 bombing of the World Trade Center, underscored nationhood in terms of monolithic Hindu culture ancd creed, politically and culturally alienating Muslims. The representational use of saffron, the color symbolic of Hindu saintliness, trishul, the iconic trident of Hindu anger, along with various kinds of communally targeted graffiti, ralllies, and the rhetoric of Hindu radicals have built the discourse of *Hindutva,* strking not only at the secular Indian polity, but also at a pluralistic and coherent concept of nationhood. That the state has survived such onslaughts and has joined the process of globalization by becoming part of a transnational system of capital and culture is true, but no less true are the consequences of *Hindutva* and the structure of the nation-state.

Thus the contradiction between the feel-good myth of globalism and the continued presence of the nation-state, together with its repressive, exclusionary structures not just in the Third World but also within the First World, is elided by globalist discourses. Can one turn a blind eye to the forcible assimilation of ethnic minorities like Indian tribes, Hawaiians and Puerto Ricans in the national melting-pot in the U.S., because one believes too naively its neo-liberalist policy of multiculturalism? Can one ignore the recent ban of the French government on the use of scarf and hood by women of Muslim minorities because one accepts a notion of multicultural Europe?

Indeed, since the 1990s the globalist theories of identities, difference and contingencies in history, culture, cognition and knowledge — many of which are associated with post-modernism — have rubbed shoulders with some strands of postcolonial theory, which has resulted in a shift of postcolonial focus away from the complexities and nuances of the existing forms of the nation-state, and the specific, localized instances of such 'sub' and even 'counter' nationalism or even neo-tribalism as are, for instance, witnessed in the north-eastern states of India or in the western part of Orissa, the Indian state where I live. Besides, the "post-

colonial" discontents of specific nations and their histories — once again, for example, India vis-à-vis Pakistan or Bangladesh — are given short shrift in deference to the larger categories of imperialism, multiculturalism and Third World-ism that are formulated and fleshed out within the larger narratives of globalization churned out by First World academics, then lapped up eagerly in India and elsewhere at the margins.

My observations above do not serve as a polemical digression, but foreground one major epistemological problem not only pertaining to my argument for reading Jones against Said, but also for working out possible conceptual links between a postcolonial approach and comparative literature. The problem is the refusal on any given critic's part to get out of the discursive closure of a particular set of scholarly assumptions, representations and practices firmly entrenched in academia, where those issues and concepts are constructed and theorized, irrespective of the reality as perceived and lived in commonly accepted ways by the academics' other — the ordinary man or woman, or even the unaffiliated intellectual (since the academy does not necessarily monopolize intellect) — in specific material situations or chain of events. In India we all play out nationalism in numerous unacknowledged little narratives and roles in everyday life through symbols, rituals and practices, whether while cheering a cricket match between India and Pakistan, while watching any popular patriotic television program, or even when vandalizing shops that allegedly promote "foreign" culture by selling Valentine Day cards.

As for the discipline of comparative literature in the Indian context, at least, the efforts of eminent comparatists like Sisir Kumar Das, Sujit Mukherjee, Swapan Mazumdar, Indra Nath Choudhuri, among many more equally important scholars, have been directed towards theorizing the notion of "Indian" in the nomenclature of Indian literature, charting the interplay of western literary influence and Indian response, recognizing Indian literary historiography, formulatiing a metalanguage out of Sanskrit and Western poetics, all within the paradigm of an overarching cultural system that includes a diversity of classical as well as folk traditions and genres that wonderfully cohere and weave themselves into a richly multicolored diglossic tapestry. Notwithstanding our refusal to call this paradigm nationalistic, owing to our captivity in the postcolonial discourse, it still gestures towards a nationalist cultural cartography and hermeneutics. Therefore one suspects that postcolonial theory *sans* any conceptualization of nation and nationalism at its center will be a strange bedfellow to comparative literature in India. On the contrary, if we re-center an indigenous national culture and narrative within postcolonial discourse, they can benefit comparative literature,

but make postcolonial theory still more powerful in the process. I wish to clarify at this juncture that a concept like "nation" can be imagined and practiced in a non-hegemonic and non-repressive manner through comparative literary studies. The *pan*-Indian literature and culture that comparatists talk about in India is a catholic intertextual system of coherence and convergence of great and little traditions, with diverse languages interacting and functioning within "a well-constructed hierarchy of communication patterns, but never in isolation from the others" (Das 39).

Let me illustrate my argument with an essay by A.K. Ramanujan, a poet, linguist and anthropologist of great repute. He aptly defines Indian cultures as highly "context-sensitive" in the essay "Is there an Indian Way of Thinking?" Hindu rituals, systems of ethics, myths, customs, aesthetics, literary texts, all have an underlying set of context-sensitive designs, he argues, and goes on to say, "In 'traditional' cultures like India, where context-sensitivity rules and binds, the dream is to be free of context. So *rasa* (disinterested experience of emotion in art) in aesthetics, *moksa* (liberation from the cycle of birth and death) in the 'aims of life', *sanyasa* (renunciation) in the life stages, *sphota* (the bursting forth of meaning) in semantics, and *bhakti* (feeling of devotion) in religion define themselves against a background of inexorable contextuality" (48). In fact this refreshingly unpretentious essay points out to me not only how important it is for us to redefine knowledges and theories that travel to India from abroad within existing indigenous contexts, but also to re-examine the colonial agents of such knowledges who come from the outside into our cultures from our own perspective.

We already know that for enabling the British officials to rule Indians according to their own laws and religious precepts Sir William Jones (1746-94) prepared the digest of Indian law and translated the Brahminic code titled *Manava Dharmasastra* of Manu into English and published it in 1794. But this postcolonial knowledge that we were the objects of European knowledge and power is not enough for us. What we need is to "know" Jones and turn him into our own object of knowledge from the perspective of our national culture. Jones remarks in the Preface to the translation that Manu's work "is filled with strange conceits in metaphysikcs [sic] and natural philosophy, with idle superstitions, and with a scheme of theology most obscurely figurative and consequently liable to dangerous misconception; it abounds with minute and childish formalities, with ceremonies generally absurd and ridiculous; *the punishments are partial and fanciful*, for some crimes dangerously cruel, for others reprehensibly slight . . ." (Pachori 202). Here Ramanujan would teach us that Jones fails to understand the Indian cultural traditions and context sensitivity when he complains about the arbitrariness of rules. He writes:

> Universalization means putting oneself in another's place — it is the golden rule of the New Testament, Hobbes' 'law of all men': do not do unto others what you do not want done unto you. The main tradition of Judeo-Christian ethics is based on such a premise of universalization — Manu would not understand such a premise. To be moral, for Manu, is to particularize — to ask who did what, to whom and when. Shaw's comment, "Do not do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Their tastes may not be the same" would be closer to Manu's view, except he would substitute "natures or classes" for "tastes." Each class (*jati*) of man has his own laws, its own proper ethic, not to be universalized. Hegel shrewdly noted this Indian slant: While we say, "Bravery is virtue," the Hindoos say, on the contrary, "Bravery is the virtue of the Cshatriyas [military caste]."
>
> (39-40)

Ramanujan's knowledge of Indian national traditions of culture and his comparative perspective thus are useful in reading Jones, and, additionally, for reading him in the English cultural tradition of Whig Enlightenment. Both types of readings undertaken side by side, contextualized in the national cultures of the colonizer and colonized, can in turn be useful for rereading and critiquing Said. A complex interaction of traditions, a transaction of cultural semantics, an interplay of ideas are called into being through such a comparative reading strategy. Indian readers adopting such a strategy are not helpless colonial subjects as were their forbears under the imperial gaze of Sir Jones; they are now producers of an emancipatory postcolonial knowledge insofar as it delivers them from the closure of Said's discourse, and so agents of a new kind of epistemic control over a famous Orientalist.

Unlike Said, several scholars have had favorable critical reactions to Jones. In his book, Said only pays hasty attention to Jones's juridical and philological works to the exclusion of everything else, and treats them as part of an imperialist agenda in India. He does not care to view Jones independently of his own project and for that reason fails to understand Jones's neo-classical taste and romantic sensibilities, which largely account for his engagements not only with Sanskrit, but also with Persian and Arabic literatures. Said's omissions come from the sketchy view of Jones he gains through a secondhand source, namely A.J. Arberry's *Oriental Essays: A Portrait of Seven Scholars* (1960) and also from his theoretically key belief that no disinterested pursuit of scholarship can ever be innocent of ideology and politics. No wonder, then, that he puts Jones's Orientalist labor and passion

within a knowledge-power regime that continued from Anquetil-Duperron in the late eighteenth century to Lord Balfour in the early twentieth century. But this clubbing together of Anquetil-Duperron and Jones amounts to an inexcusable generalization on Said's part, as though both were confederates of a single agenda. Any careful reader of Jones would point out that he not merely disliked the French Orientalist Anquetil-Duperron for the latter's hostile attitude towards Oxford scholarship, but also in his *History of the Persian Language* (1774) dismissed – mistakenly — the Frenchman's historical findings in *Zend Avesta* as fraudulent. Said elides serious personal and ideological differences between the two and fits them together in his conceptual scheme. He remarks:

> To rule and to learn, and then compare Orient with the Occident: These were Jones's goals, which with an irresistible impulse always to codify, to subdue the infinite variety of the Orient "to a complete digest" of laws, figures, customs and works, he is believed to have achieved.
> (78)

Said also misreads Jones's oft-quoted remark that Sanskrit, Latin and Greek may have a common origin as none other than the expression of his goal through comparative philology to ground "the European languages in a distant, harmless, Oriental source" (78), as if suggesting thereby that European languages are charged with an imperialist power that is derived from the lands of their provenance. In fact this is an instance of essentialism on Said's part.

Another pro-Orientalist scholar, S.N. Mukherjee, sees Jones as a writer who, although exceptional in his expansive scholarly work, was nevertheless a product of his time, and brought into his scholarship many of the biases pervasive in Orientalist circles as well as late eighteenth-century Britain. He praises Jones for enabling an Indian renaissance to occur. Because this was a necessary event for the cause of Indian nationalism, whatever hegemonic and racist underpinnings Jones's work may have become insignificant for Mukherjee. In fact, Jones emerges at the end of Mukherjee's work as a greatly positive figure for India and the world in general as he "left behind an attitude of mind, a profound reverence for men irrespective of their race and different cultural backgrounds" (141).

One cannot give clean chit to Jones as easily as Cannon does, absolving him from imperialist ideology altogether; nor can one feel comfortable about the unresolved contradiction in Mukherjee's account that Jones was an imperialist and an admirer of Indian culture and traditions at the same time. So what is required is

a careful reading of Jones from the point of view of the indigenous, national culture of India. At the same time, and through the same process, it is possible to mount a critique of Said using Jones as its vehicle. One does find that Jones's romantic predilection for the aesthetic beauty, melody and passion of Persian and Arabic poetry, and subsequently for classical Sanskrit poetry, as well as his sincere appreciation of the Asiatic cultures in the famous essay "On the Poetry of the Eastern Nations"(1772) nuance the Orientalist discourse, making it much more ambivalent and complex than does Said. In the recent *Romantic Imperialism: Universal Empire and the Culture of Modernity*, Saree Makdisi has shown that romanticism started out along an anti-modernist trajectory as a mediating discourse through which diverse and often contradictory engagements with modernity, capitalist expansion and imperialism could be possible. As modernity began to emerge as the triumphal force of history, varied and wide-ranging in its impact, buttressed by technology, commerce, production, progressive and expansionist movement, political power and military might, romanticism as its natural reaction became its ineffectual spectator and began to resist it only superficially, if at all and while colluding with it at a deeper level, by keeping the exotic Other frozen in "spots of time."

In another essay titled "Orientalism: The Romantics' Added Dimension; or, Edward Said Refuted," Naji B. Oueijan, a Yemeni scholar, refuses to read romantic literature, either prose or poetry, as purely expressive of an aesthetic, psychic urge for imaginative and moral freedom, and never imperialistic in ideology. He argues that for the Romantic writer the tendency to reconcile and unify the inner elements of the psyche was reflected in an outer drive to unite all aspects of nature. Both Hegel and Schopenhauer advance the view that separateness in the world is an illusion. Thus Romanticism does not separate the world into an Occident and an Orient. When Lord Byron swam across the Hellespont, Wordsworth dreamt of the desert and the Arab Bedouin, and Coleridge had his dream of Xanadu, they were celebrating the unification of both worlds, the first in actual reality, the other two in their imaginations. Besides, the idea that the Orient represented emotion and freedom, a place primitive yet passionate and powerful, attracted the Romanticists. And the tendency to naturalize and idealize was itself exotic. The Orient gave the Romantic writer the chance to break the current classical forms which limited his imagination; it set his wild inner sense of the present free. If Romantic literature, as Bernard Blackstone believes, is a literature of movement, of pilgrimage and quest, then the Orient made it possible for the Romantic writer to move freely either in actual reality or on the wings of imagination. These works of Makdisi and Oueijan are instances of divergent kinds of recent

readings of romanticism to inflect romantic tradition with contradictory impulses that problematize our notions of both Said and Jones.

Indeed, while a historian like James Mill constructs the history of India in terms of modernist world history, narrating the convergence of capitalist and imperialist practices in the process of modernization, we can see William Jones charting a divergent, alternative, anti-modern path of historiography, following the romantic tradition, with sources in the Enlightenment. Jones's was to be the narrative of the civil society, dealing with the manners and customs of people (Mukherjee 38) and providing delight and instruction (37). Thus Mill's view of India's past, already determined by the imperatives of modernity, is dismissive, whereas that of Jones, colored by romantic fascination for the ancient and exotic, is – ambivalently — appreciative. To club them together is perhaps yet another mistaken generalization of which Said is guilty.

Said is largely correct to explain that Orientalism was a discursive practice to justify colonialism as a benign rehabilitative program under which the Orientals having suffered decline from a great classical past and languishing under despotism and tyranny can be rehabilitated into "productive colonies" (35). But here, once again, he collapses the modernist and anti-modernist/romantic ideological strands of colonialism into one undifferentiated discourse, without keeping in perspective their internal differences and conflicts. The phrase "productive colonies" has a genealogy in capitalism via utilitarianism that could not always be identified with romanticism. Jones demonstrated the glorious moments of the ancient Asiatic cultures and literatures in order to contrast them with the present state of their decline, and offered absolute British rule over Indians according to their own ancient laws for the reason that they had never been used to political freedom. However, it is doubtful if he wanted to rehabilitate them into sectors of colonial production. This is because the industrial revolution had not yet properly begun in Europe in the late eighteenth century, not really until about the time Mill wrote his history of India.

It is certain that Jones was divided in his political and administrative attitude towards India, bringing to bear upon it, as he did, a mixed baggage of dissonant beliefs and inclinations within Whig ideology. While in England, he was all for rule of law as the will of the people and for political freedom as ensured by the laws, but averse to the grant of license to the rabble and franchise to the destitute and vagabonds. He believed in class distinctions back home as well as in the colony. In India, he had genuine appreciation for propertied upper classes like the Rajas, or Brahmin and Muslim scholars, whom he treated as equals. He once said in the charges to the Grand Jury in 10 June, 1787:

> Excessive luxury, with which the Asiatics are too indiscriminately reproached in Europe, exists indeed in our settlements, but nowhere it is usually supposed: not in the higher, but in the lowest condition of men; in our servants, in the common seamen frequenting our port, in the petty workmen and shopkeepers of our streets and markets.
> (Mukerjee 135)

It is but natural that the same elitist whiggery of Jones that valorized industriousness, reason, and civic virtues was translated into his disapproval of the common masses, their superstitious customs, manners and political experience devoid of freedom. As a true neo-classicist would, he located civic and moral virtues of Indians and their sense of sublime beauty in the *Vedas* the *Upanishads*, the *Puranas* and Sanskrit literature, to which he attributed the same origin as that of the classical Greek culture and religion. But he saw an absence of all such virtues in civic life as a judge of the Supreme Court, and therefore believed in the British government's absolute rule over their colonial subjects according to their own law.

I think Said gives us only one side of the story with regard to the Orientalist enterprise of Jones and many others: "What the European took from the classical Orient was a vision . . . which only he could employ to the best advantage; to the modern Oriental he gave facilitation and amelioration — and too, the benefit of judgment as to what was best for the modern Orient" (79). But the story cannot be complete if we do not ask ourselves: Why did the Europeans — and Jones in this case — turn to the classical Orient in the first place? Were their Oriental visions only ever politically determined? Were they only engaged in a cartography of global knowledges within a comparative framework? What were the individual compulsions and private desires of the Orientalists? Were they mere mechanical agents of the great imperial machine, bound to its magisterial logic, and not human beings capable of apolitical volition, predilections and urges? Were all the Orientals arranged in a unified, synchronic space of theory, and not in highly uneven and discontinuous temporal spaces? These are questions that should inform a critique of Said through a reading of Jones in the contexts of the national cultures of India and England, and we need to follow up such questions for the sake of our own empowerment and emancipation.

These questions are also not separate from the project of working out possible conceptual links between postcolonial studies and comparative literature. As I have pointed out, in India the task of comparative literature has been to theorize the notion of "Indian." The pan-Indian literature and culture of India operates

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as a system of coherences and convergences between multiple traditions and languages that includes both indigenous and Western discourses. The study of this formation of indigenous national cultures and narratives within postcolonial discourse is clearly a project appropriate for comparative literature, one that would benefit both in the process of constructing a nation that can be imagined and practiced as a non-hegemonic and non-repressive collective entity.

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