Transmitting Orientalism: Pedagogical Implications

Rashna Singh
Colorado College

In Orientalism, his seminal study of how geographical sectors such as the “Orient” and “Occident” were essentially “man-made” (5) and thus any distinctions between them ontological and epistemological, Edward Said asks: “How does Orientalism transmit or reproduce itself from one epoch to another?” (15). This question is especially pertinent to those of us who teach courses that concern any aspect of Asian culture, and it becomes a significant pedagogical consideration.

For Orientalism does transmit and reproduce itself from one epoch to another, and our students are certainly not immune from the effects of such reproduction and transmission. In teaching Asian or Asian-American literatures, a professor soon becomes cognizant of the fact that a student walks into the classroom trailing images that have attached themselves from a variety of sources. For the current generation of students, those sources are so often visual: cinema and television, computer and video games. But print media remains a perennial source of the production of such images as well.

Let us examine some of the images about India that may be embedded in the minds of students from a variety of media when they come into the classroom. These images are sometimes difficult to dislodge and certainly must be contended with in teaching Anglophone Indian literature. Preexistent images may come up against images in the literature we are reading in the course and the resultant clash is something both student and professor must examine in order to think critically about the material. Of course when images contend with each other the result is not inevitably a clash. There can be mutation and modification, adjustment and amendment in a continuing process of intertextuality and the result is a richer understanding of the complexity and composite nature of our imagistic apprehension. Texts exist in contexts, Said reminds us (13). Images do not exist in isolation but network with prior images.

Sometimes these images succeed in dislodging each other; sometimes they exist in simultaneity like the “consumed multitudes…jostling and shoving” that Salman Rushdie describes in Midnight’s Children (4).

The discourse of Orientalism, which, Said, drawing upon Foucault, reminds us is always a corollary of power, remains operative. This is hardly surprising since power still slopes from west to east, even if its points of equilibrium have shifted. For students this discourse operates in two important ways. First it reinscribes the positional superiority that underlay the building of vast empires. Second, it succeeds in sustaining the binary divisions on which this superiority is premised.
cultures to an essential set of characteristics. One of these characteristics is the unchanging nature of “Oriental” societies, the “timeless eternal” as Said terms it (72). “Oriental” cultures don’t progress; they stay still and stagnant. Leaving aside the problematics of definition for the purpose of this article, when ‘progress’ such as modernization and industrialization is evident and cannot be disaffirmed, it is often undercut representatively by overlaying reminders of the past.

For instance, the August 17, 1998 issue of Chemical & Engineering News features a cover story on “India’s Chemical Industry.” The cover portrays a modern steel and concrete chemical plant but foregrounds it with a picture of a somewhat skinny and indolent looking cow. The message is clear; the more things change, the more they stay the same. Inside the article is a picture of a laborer carrying a computer in a woven reed basket. The caption reads “In Bangalore, part of India’s new Silicon Valley, a laborer carries a new computer to a customer across town.” That this is factual, that labourers might actually carry computers in woven baskets is not being argued here. The point is that the self-image of India, as represented in Westernized Indian magazines is, however, very different—it is one of a cosmopolitan, global, high tech, entirely modern society. No doubt this too is only a partial image, a distorted representation, but it is interesting to note the deviance between Western images and the country’s image of itself.

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juxtapositioning of atavistic symbols with symbols of advancement is not accidental. It is part of an Orientalist perception and projection of India as a country that straddles the centuries, where change, if and when it occurs, coexists with backwardness. Pictures of cows abound in newspaper and magazine representations of India, part of what Roland Barthes calls “a familiar repertory of gestures” or a “gestuary” (1953, 13). As Said says, “Each work affiliates itself with other works” (20). A cartoon about U.S. civil nuclear technology depicts George Bush as a snake charmer and India as the cobra.

Now that the image of India is undergoing a transformation as it becomes a player in the global market, there are signs that this Orientalist mindset may finally be fading away. The March 20, 2006 issue of Chemical & Engineering News illustrates its cover story on “India: Scientific Powerhouse in the Making” with a picture of a lab worker in his state of the art lab. No sacred cow obtrudes. On the other hand, one cannot be too optimistic. The cover story of the March 6, 2006 issue of Newsweek is captioned “The New India: Asia’s Other Powerhouse Steps Out” and uses as its cover illustration not something new at all, but something quite stereotypically Orientalistic, not a high tech Call Centre nor a computer station, but an exoticized, sensual Indian woman, the actress and model Padma Lakshmi. Dressed in red and gold with flowing hair and mesmerizing eyes, her bejewelled hands are folded in greeting. Time, on the other hand, in its June 26, 2006 issue, where the cover story is “India, Inc.” juxtaposes both centuries and perceptions. On the cover is a head shot of a fully costumed Bharata Natyam dancer, practitioner of a dance style that goes back 2000 years at least, but updated by a pair of speaker phones around her adorned head! The self-image of India, as represented in Westernized Indian magazines is, however, very different—it is one of a cosmopolitan, global, high tech, entirely modern society. No doubt this too is only a partial image, a distorted representation, but it is interesting to note the deviance between Western images and the country’s image of itself. However, there are also ample instances of self-Orientalization in internal images of the country, whether in writing or in photojournalism.

The basic though constructed difference between East and West becomes the foundation for a series of binary distinctions, one of the most tenacious of which is the positing of rational knowledge against superstitious beliefs. In a series of articles about India’s new highway system, New York Times correspondent, Amy Waldman, does not begin by discussing this ambitious infrastructure project but by describing the temple that sits under a peepul tree in the middle of the highway. After all, for Hindus, “trees are sacred,” we are told. Either the highway must go around it or risk the ire of Kali, Hindu goddess of destruction. So Waldman lays it out in a

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set of binary oppositions taken, it would seem, from some Orientalist primer: “Goddess versus man, superstition versus progress, the people versus the state—mile by mile, India is struggling to modernize its national highway system, and in the process, itself.” The article ends with a reference to the goddesses Durga and Saraswati, and lest we miss the significance, a reference to “idol-makers” clearly contextualizes the goddesses as belonging to a more primitivist religion, one that stands in clear contrast, in Waldman’s prose, to the “highway overpass” and “the sound of speeding cars.” (New York Times, December 4, 2005).

Again, whether the details are accurate or not is not the question. Such representations become tropes, part of the politics of representation: “knowledge no longer requires application to reality; knowledge is what gets passed on silently, without comment, from one text to another” (Said, 116). From a pedagogical point of view, such representations constitute a “second-order knowledge” (Said 52) that serves a hermeneutical function. Some images may have been embedded in students’ minds since childhood. Disney of course is one of the worst perpetrators of neo-Orientalism. “Aladdin” opens with Arabian Nights music that sounds almost like a spoof of itself. An image superimposed on flames would suggest either a sinuous woman or a snake. Protests from Arab American groups forced the producers to eliminate the original version of the fourth line of the song: “Where they cut off your ear/ if they don’t like your face,” but the line “It’s barbaric, but hey it’s home” was left in.

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Hangzhou, before flying back to America from Shanghai. As students walk along the paths of Suzhou gardens, and meander on bridges over water, the scene unfolds before them, like a scroll, gradually. They also see the buildings and trees reflected in the water. The colors of the flowers, the feel of pebbles underfoot, the scents around them, and the imaginative use of compressed space—all are part of this experience.

In Hangzhou, we were able to arrange a one-day class on traditional and contemporary Chinese art at the Zhongguo Meishu Xueyuan (China Art Academy)—previously the Zhejiang Meishu Xueyuan. Students toured this impressive campus and gallery; and more, they practiced painting mynah birds and writing calligraphy (such as the word jian “to see”) with a Chinese brush. We were amazed at the two-storey calligraphy of Zhuangzi’s Daoist text Xiaoyao You (freely flying) recently painted by an art professor at the campus (see fig. 3). The flowing line of the calligraphy, and the Daoist significance of the text, suitably returned us to some of the key themes of our course.