

The Representation(s) of “The Other” in *Passage to India* by David Lean

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This work presents a critical approach to *Passage to India*, a film directed by David Lean (1984), based on the novel written by Edward Morgan Foster in 1924, focusing attention on micro representations of Indian society under British imperial power. To structure the work, the ideas of two prominent thinkers whose critical approaches are grounded on the concept of Representation and its implication in relation to perceptions of the “Other” were selected as theoretical framework, namely Herieta Lidchi and Stuart Hall. In this way, the work aims at highlighting the power of visual images, represented by the film, in the construction of ethnocentric images created by Imperial power(s) and their importance for the development of critical thinking in relation to residual marks of such representations in post-colonial era.

Keywords: Representation, Other and Post-Colonialism

Introduction

Representation of the “Other” was one of the most powerful weapons used by the cultural industries of the West in order to justify their colonial occupation of the “Rest”.

This essay is produced from a perspective that representational systems like advertising, museums, exhibitions, films and other systems are not innocuous and simple means used to show or promote cultural diversity.

The essay aims to explore the above referred arguments by highlighting the consequences representational practices, during colonial processes, having *A Passage to India*—the film as an example.

In order to achieve the above aim, two perspectives of Representation, related to Western systems of categorization, will be presented and will function as the theoretical support of the analysis.

Theoretical Background

In general terms, the Other, in the sense post-colonial critics (Ashcroft et al. Edward Said, Stuart Hall, G. Spivack) use it, that is, the non-Western, was (and still is in some contexts) associated with the primitive, non-civilized, barbarian, connected to a subculture and always contrasted with Western, white and civilized world. Inside this discriminatory perspective, Western cultural industries developed strategic ways through which the “Other” was “adequately” represented.

In the context of this work Representation, which can be a process or an activity, is defined as the way

meaning is constructed and conveyed through language and objects, as defined by Henrietta Lidchi (2003, p. 153). The embodying of concepts, ideas and emotions in a symbolic form which can be transmitted and meaningfully interpreted are considered, by Stuart Hall (2003, p. 10), as,

...the practices of representations. Briefly speaking, Representation is the production of meaning through language(s). The relation between "things", concepts and signs lies at the heart of the meaning in language. The process that links these three elements together is what is called Representation. (Hall, 2003, pp. 16-19)

The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, referred to by Hall (2003, p. 16) suggests two relevant meanings for Representation:

The first one says that to represent something is to describe or depict it while the second one defines representation as symbolization, construction of specimen.

In this way, films, museums and books for example, are no longer simply revered as spaces promoting knowledge and amusement or the automatic screens for historically and culturally important ethnographic objects (ibid.). Taking Lidchi's argument into consideration, it is important to present some theories on the way the West classifies, categorizes and represents other cultures and makes use of language(s).

The theories provided here are offered by Stuart Hall in the article "The Work of Representation" published in the Book *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices* and also by Lidchi in the article "The Poetics and the Politics of Exhibiting Other Cultures" published in the same book.

Hall starts by presenting three distinctive accounts, namely the reflective, the intentional and constructionist approaches to representation (2003, p. 15). The first one places its concerns on the way language is used simply to reflect meaning that already exists inside objects, people and events, while the intentional approach investigates if language expresses only the intention of the addresser (speaker, writer, painter) and, finally, the constructionist one, focuses its attention on the way meaning is constructed through language.

Although the three approaches are important for the analysis of representational practices, relevance will be given to constructionist theory, as it will serve as the foundational point upon which our arguments will be produced.

The constructionist, also called constructivist approach of Representation, offers two major significant categories of constructionist method.

The first one is based on semiotics and the way language constructs and conveys meaning. This perspective analyses the different ways in which exhibitions create representation of other cultures, and is associated with the work of Ferdinand Saussure. The second category, linked to Michel Foucault's work, highlights the question of discourse and power, by exploring the relation between knowledge of other cultures and the imperial notion. This critical view considers Representation in the light of the politics of exhibition (Hall, 2003, p. 12; Henrietta, 2003, p. 153).

Hall calls our attention to meaning and to the way and the places it is produced. In his introduction to *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (2003, pp. 3-4), he suggests that meanings are produced in different sites and through different processes and practices and in a variety of different *media* by complex technologies. Meanings also regulate and organize our conduct and practices. They help to set rules, norms and conventions by which social life is governed. The different ways of producing meanings are connected to languages, which work through representations. In this sense, language is a signifying practice.

According to principles of representation through language, representational practices use audiovisual images and body language to communicate a meaning of a particular community or person.

For Hall (2003, p. 6), language provides a general model of how culture and representation work, known as the semiotic approach and its general role as vehicles of meaning in culture.

However, in some approaches, meaning, representation and culture are seen to be constitutive and are considered as integrating part of a discursive approach.

It is worth emphasizing that there are some similarities between the semiotic and discursive approaches. As it could be seen, the semiotic approach is concerned with how representation and language produce meaning, that is, its poetics. In its turn, the discursive approach is more concerned with the effects and consequences of representation, that is, its politics (Hall, 2003, p. 6).

The discursive approach offers critical analyses on how language of a particular discourse produces connection to power, constructs identities and subjectivities and defines the way certain things are represented, with emphasis on the historical specificity of a particular form or regime of representation, the way representational practices operate in a concrete historical situation (Hall, 2003, p. 6). Furthermore, says Hall, identity is profoundly grounded in the process of representation. In this way, molding and re-molding inside different representational systems have strong effects on the way identities are represented and located and presented in different cultural and historical moments (Hall, 2011, pp. 71-72).

This claim takes us to the way the "Other" associated to the "racial" paradigm was represented in the colonial period. The non-scientific nature of the concept of race did not prevent colonial authorities from activating a racial logic and it is referential to be articulated in a way to promote the supremacy of the "white" and the consequent subalternisation of the "Other", non-white.

The concept of the "Other" in cultural and literary studies is diffuse and flexible. According to Antony Easthope (1991, p. 133) "it is (...) easily defined as structure rather than a content- a relationship in which a first term privileges for itself an inside by denigrating a second term as outside". One of the explanations for this definition is found in psychoanalysis, as it defines the subject as a split between conscious and unconscious. That is, the I becomes possible only because it remains its repressed other, says Easthope (1991, p. 133). In cultural analysis the "other" is exemplified by the alien creature of the 1950's in horror movies and also as monsters while in patriarchal structures the masculine was equated with the self and the feminine with the other (1991, p. 133).

A second sense of the "other" finds its support in Jacques Derrida's work, whose aim is to expose and deconstruct oppositions operating at a deep level in the structuring matrix of the Western discursive tradition, which have been constructed based on binary oppositions, such as: speech/writing, life/death, good/evil, soul/body just to mention some.

In these binary oppositions the term placed on the left privileges itself by denigrating its other. For example, in the case of gender masculinity has become privileged as self-present, norm, the knowable, light, the sun while the feminine has been constructed as other, deviant, different, unknown, darkness, the moon (Easthope, 1991, p. 34).

These metaphors used here can be also used to describe the ideological assumptions of imperialism and their subsequent representation of the colonized. However, Antony Easthope (1991, p. 132) considers that the relation between race and imperialism requires a separate and specific analysis that would be undertaken by a mere extension of those concepts. The author argues that the arguments which are present in *Orientalism* by

Edward Said (1978, p. 43) constitute a sign of the need of that specific analysis. For him the definitions of Occident and Orient (as natural places) have been fixed by Western cultures as representatives of opposition between norm(ative) and familiar (Europe, the West, "us") and the strange, different (Orient, the East, "them").

In Easthope's view, as the West assumes itself as the norm, it constructs the "Orient" as the "Other" to be known by the European (1991, p. 134) and as "naturally" the "Other", with all metaphoric considerations above mentioned, constitutes the object of domination and domestication by the Western. Based on a constructionist view linked to a discursive perspective, Western "natural" superiority was also reproduced by its cultural industries of representation, as we can observe in the film *A Passage to India*.

Critical Analysis: *A Passage to India*—The Film

The next pages of this essay will offer an analysis of the Western representation of the "Other" having as corpus the film *A Passage to India*. The critical approach to be used in this analysis is based on critical theory of representation presented by Stuart Hall, more specifically the constructionist approach. The major argument of this essay is that the film, even though an entertainment activity, constitutes a representational practice in which a colonial perspective of the "other" is artistically explored in order to metaphorically justify the British Raj.

***A Passage to India*—The Plot**

Set in 1920's during the period of Indian independence movement during the British Raj, *A Passage to India* is a film directed by David Lean in 1984, based on a homonymous novel written by Edward Morgan Foster, in 1924.

Generally speaking, the film portrays the socio-political environment of India under the influence of the British Raj. The screenplay presents the story of a visit to India made by two English ladies, Mrs. Moore, an old lady, and Adela Quested, a young woman who was engaged to Mrs. Moore's son Ronny Heaslops. During their stay they meet Dr. Aziz, an Indian man, who welcomed them and invited them to visit the "exotic" scenery of Marabar caves. This invitation met their expectations of knowing the real India and to "run away" from the Anglicized environment created for them by the British authorities ruling India. During the trip, in a particular moment, Mrs. Moore does not feel comfortable with the idea of visiting the caves and decides to rest in a particular point of the route. Adela and Aziz continue the program. When they reach the cluster of caves at the top of the hill Aziz takes some time to smoke a cigar and Adela decides to get inside one of the caves without being noticed by Aziz, who tried to find her with no success. Presumably, Adela feels scared by the darkness of the caves, and runs away in despair. When suddenly Aziz sees her, she was bloody with a lot of scratches. He calls her as she runs and he sees her being helped by Mrs. Darek who takes her to the hospital.

Dr. Aziz and Mrs. Moore went back to the city by train and he is arrested on their arrival and charged with sexually assaulting Adela Quested in the caves. Although the police had very little evidences of the assault, Aziz is kept in the prison until his trial.

This episode brings out the racial tensions between Britons and Indians and constitutes the core of subsequent scenes of the film.

The trial was just a way to legitimize Aziz's imprisonment, as the final sentence had been already produced. He was considered guilty by "colonial judgment". Exceptionally, two people from the British community, Mrs. Moore and Richard Fielding believed in Aziz's innocence. As a result of this, Mrs. Moore

was sent back to England when her son realizes that she could break the colonial principle of natural culpability of the Other (and dies during her voyage) and Fielding is rejected by the British community. However, this did not prevent him from continuing to struggle to prove Aziz's innocence.

During the trial, Adela Quested recognizes her mistake. She admitted that she was initially confused during the period of severe fever when she was taken to the hospital. In fact, she admitted she had not been sexually abused.

This revelation provoked a complete desolation for British authorities and consequent happiness for Indians. Aziz is taken out on the shoulders of a large group of Indians while Adela is completely left behind by the British community and finally is invited to stay in Fielding's house until her departure.

Analysis and Discussion of the Representational Practices

The complex of inferiority and total dependence of Indians in relation to British power, as well as the value attributed to them by colonizers is present throughout the film.

In the opening scenes of the film the viewer is sent to the setting and its representation based on binary oppositions.

India and Indian's image was represented with an exotic glance and associated to chaotic traffic, bright colors of the garments, sensual exposition the bodies, and "natural obedience" to superior white individualities, and to the strange way to deal with death and the corpse. In contrast, the British side is presented, using positive images and language linked with a "normal", calm and rational way of life demonstrated by English people living in India. The "chaotic city center polluted" by Indian colors and customs, tastes and (dis)organization is counter-acted by an image of a calm and well organized British compound, to where Mrs. Moore and Adela Quested are taken soon after their arrival. The way local people welcome the visitors is contrasted with the power demonstrations of colonizers who did not care about the Indian people involved in an accident on their way to British compound, for example.

Every detail is taken into account to demonstrate to Indians the power of the British Raj.

However, even being exposed to these acts, reproducing unequal power relations, and consequent demonstrations of the rigid borders between the local Indian community—that represents the Oriental(ist) side, and the British community—the Western side, the two ladies broke the rules and established a quasi transgressive contact. This is the case of their relationship with Dr. Aziz and to some extent their respect of locals, their habits and cultures. This occurs for example when Mrs. Moore enters into the local temple.

In fact, transgression constitutes the base for the main episode of the film, the sexual abuse supposedly perpetrated by Dr. Aziz during the trip to the caves. The episode was, indeed, the alibi the British Raj used in that situation to promote cultural and racial arguments to support the superiority of Western ideologies of the "Other".

The moments prior to the trial emphasized the racial tensions between the two communities in confrontation. The film, as a cultural representation when analyzed in light of a constructionist view of representation, evidences the views of Western power in a historically important moment—the period of colonization and its stereotypes associated to cultural and racial assumptions.

Being historically situated, representational practices in the film, promote cultural and racial differences that privilege the Western ones. In doing so, it is not surprising to see the reaction of the British community who did not admit the possibility of Dr. Aziz's innocence. This occurred because of the colonial assumption

that all dark skinned men lust after white women¹. Apart from that, it was difficult to understand Mrs. Moore’s and Fielding’s attitude in relation to Aziz’s innocence, the reason why both are, in different ways, rejected by the British community, as already mentioned.

These transgressive behaviors, mainly Fielding’s, although apparently normal, reveal in a sophisticated way the core of the film. That is, the representation of the inferiority of the Indians. In this case, it demonstrates the incapacity of Indians to feel confident, even when they are sure about their innocence. This “incapacity” is represented by body and facial language evidenced by Aziz and his hopeless and humiliating begging, exposing his complete dependence on Fielding’s generosity.

Another aspect to be referred to is the cultural assimilation as synonym of proximity to Western culture, for instance the way Dr. Aziz and other “educated” people dressed in the film. However, as Mohammad Jajja says, “despite mimicry and education among Indians they are not seen as British and still not accepted as fit and suitable to dine at Englishmen table” (2013, p. 42). Even those mimicry men, are shown in the film pleasing their British masters, for example the Judge, who, despite having knowledge about the basic norms and principles of a criminal investigation was not able to act accordingly.

In the final part of the film, the transgressive behavior is brought back again by a woman. In this case, Adela Quested finally admits she was mistaken. In fact, she says, Dr. Aziz has never assaulted her. As a result Aziz is freed while Adela is completely abandoned in front of the court and is finally protected by Fielding. Like other scenes, this one reinforces the idea of dependency of the inferior “other” in relation to the West because the (in)justice, impregnated with colonial stereotypes was able to see culpability based on inexistent evidences that could only be corrected by the Western voice (Adela’s Confession of the Truth).

Conclusion

The construction and representation of stereotypes to describe India and Indians as inferior is used to justify and perpetuate the British Raj and the superiority of Western culture and its diverse representational practices.

Based on a constructionist approach to representation and its use of language, the film *A Passage to India* like an exhibition, pairs and attributes positions to scenes/pictures in a way that the complete image projected exposes and reinforces stereotypes and demonstrates the “natural” inferiority of colonized Indians.

In embarking in this direction, the film promotes colonialist ideology and its inherent biases and prejudices, strengthening the binary division West-East (sociologically) invented by the West about India (Jajja, 2013).

As a representational practice of Western cultural industry, the film “naturally” reproduces a colonialist discourse produced in language (in the sense referred to by Hall) that constructed an image of India located in an historical context of the British Raj and its signifying practice is associated to British cultural and racial superiority and the subsequent inferiority of its “Other”.

When situated in a post-colonial perspective, and located in the period the film is produced (1984), five decades after India’s independence and almost six decades after the (formal) end of the British colonial empire, the silence of critics of the film, in relation to the representational practices of the “stereotyped Other”, clearly evident in the film, is remarkable. No references are made on the oppression and consequences of the colonial encounter in India in particular, and in the “Rest” in general.

¹ In *Gomal University Journal Of Research*, 29 (1). June 2013, online, retrieved 27. 01. 2014 from www.gu.edu.pk.

This silence from Western critics can be read as an example of the residual images of Western stereotypes which are still present in critical thought in Western “academy”, although many efforts have been made to eradicate them.

In the end, the construction of the stereotypes to describe Indians as inferior is used in the film to justify the British Empire, as said, and to consolidate the representational superiority of Western culture and its diverse representational practices (Jajja, 2013).

As can be seen, throughout the film, like in an exhibition, the pictures were artistically placed and combined in a way that the colonialist discourse could be promoted. This exercise took place through a cultural representation made by language that constructed a strong, powerful and intentional image, oriented to highlight the underlying reasons of the (pre)dominance of the West in relation to the Rest.

In fact, generally speaking, the spoken language used by Indian characters, mainly the educated ones, reproduced the acculturation process, as they used the English norm only. In relation to body language, as said, Indian characters were shown either as disoriented, hysterical or showing total obedience or dependence on British characters (if we take Azizi’s or Judge as examples).

However, by making these practices evident the author may have intended to make the viewer question these attitudes.

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