
The Stereotyping and Othering of The Orient Through The Locus Point of The Character “Raj” In The Big Bang Theory

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ABSTRACT

Over the years, American sitcoms have been widely criticised for their problematic portrayal of the East or the Orient. The genre sitcom is often used as a vehicle in normalising the Othering and stereotyping of the Orient. Where laughter is used as a shield to pass off clichéd comments and stereotyping of the Orient as harmless, this paper will be looking at the character of Rajesh Koothrapali, who is depicted as an Indian physicist. The paper will also be examining how his voice is silenced and spoken for, thus ending up being Othered and overpowered. The study will also focus on how this Othering and stereotyping produces a feeling of superiority, thereby generating the impression that the Orient is something to be dominated and subjugated.

Keywords: *Mimicry, the Orient, Othering, Exotic.*

INTRODUCTION

Post colonialism can be seen as the new perspective with whose lens, through which imperialism is viewed, that is through the cultural perspective. It engages with Orientalism, cultural hegemony, power, identity politics and essentially the relationship between the East and West, deconstructing it to create a new understanding of imperialistic control over the East. It also functions as a protest against the imperialist powers to represent the subaltern voices or that of the marginalised. This process has emerged as one of the most influential academic studies whose representatives are Edward W.Said, Gayatri C.Spivak and Homi F. Bhabha[1]. Nevertheless, Post colonialism cannot be reduced to an academic study as it acts as a source for the East to re-identify and re-define itself away from the stereotypical narratives of the West.

Orientalism is one of the main concepts in Post colonialism. One of the pioneers that re-defined the discourse of Orientalism is none other than Edward Said[1]. He explains it as the discourse constructed by the West to assert power and control over its East counterpart. It primarily reflects the unequal relationship shared by the East and the West. Furthermore, through this same discourse, the West has created certain ideological assumptions and suppositions about the East. Thus the East is constructed, stylised and imagined through the lens of the West. Owing to this concept of Orientalism, this paper will be looking at how Western visual media represents the Orient as the other, drawing in the stereotypical and cliched representation of Raj's characters from the popular sitcom "The Big Bang Theory". For the theoretical framework, ideas from "The Essence, Characteristics and Limitation of Post-Colonialism: From Karl Marx's Point of View" by Geng Yang, Qixue Zhang and Qi Wang[2] will be utilised. The paper at length discusses post-colonialism along with its characteristics and its limits. This will aid in my analysis by building a broad knowledge of what constitutes the area of Post colonialism and its shortcomings. The research gap of the paper is that it fails to provide any practical examples."CHAPTER ONE: Orientalism: The Making of the Other by Shehla Burney[3] helps in creating a comprehensive idea on the politics of Othering of the Orient. This will benefit in understanding how the character of Raj is Othered in the show. The gap in the work is that it doesn't provide any examples of contexts where such Othering occurs. "CHAPTER TWO: Edward Said and Postcolonial Theory: Disjunctured Identities and the Subaltern, a sequel of the first paper by the same author, creates an understanding of postcolonial subject and understanding of the location is drawn in the paper. This will aid in the analysis of the character of Raj with much more precision as an Orient and as a postcolonial subject. The paper also introduces all the prominent critics in this field and their respective theories. This would help in creating an informed analysis backed by apt theories. The gap in this piece is that the inclusion of too many theorists makes it fail in analysing each theory in depth.

METHODOLOGY

This paper will follow the methodology of textual analysis, backed by the theories on Orientalism put forth by Edward Said[1].

DISCUSSION

The sitcom is the story of four friends who are essentially labelled as geeks and their endeavours with life. One of them is American, one is of Jewish origin, and the other is of Indian origin named Raj. By closely looking at how the character of Raj is portrayed, the paper wants to bring out the reductionist approach of western media in representing the Orient. Wherein his character is stereotyped and portrayed as the other. Stereotyping is the term that refers to the making of generalisations about groups of people which may be positive or negative, which results in the Othering and alienation of particular groups of people. It is often seen to isolate people belonging to a particular race or a minority community. Many sitcoms have been criticised for the stereotypical depiction of the Orient. "The Big Bang Theory" is one among them. This thus reinforces the idea that the Orient is someone to be subjugated and ruled over.

From the beginning of the sitcom itself, it is apparent that there is an obvious form of power politics or hegemony between the characters, represented subtly. Where the two American characters exercise more control and power over the group, this idea can be contested by stating that the sitcom has those two actors as the main leads, but then the question arises then why cast an Indian actor for a subservient role why can't he be the one leading this is where it becomes problematic. The character of Raj does not have any power over himself throughout the series. In the beginning, it is revealed that he is suffering from a condition where he cannot converse with women due to his anxiety. This delimits his power to express himself. Until he recovers himself, someone else speaks for him when women are present in several episodes. This exhibits the underlying idea about the Orient constructed and narrated by the West for centuries. Where in the Orient is represented as the weak counterpart who needs guidance from his Western other. The silence of the character also explicates how he has been stripped of the power to represent himself; through the lens of the West, his thoughts are represented.

His character is represented in such a manner that it arouses the audience's curiosity and laughter. He is portrayed as a peculiar being who is afraid of women, over indulgent in his affection towards his dog, with a weird accent. These arouse Said's understanding of the representation of the Orient where the Orient is represented as the exotic, mysterious and weak. Even in the incident where the character named Sheldon hides a snake to frighten Raj, remarks on how the West has stereotyped the Orient where upon seeing Raj's reaction Sheldon utters that "I tried to scare an Indian with a snake".

Throughout the sitcom, Raj fails to get a partner; not until the last season he is paired up with someone. The reason for this is pointed towards his weird and peculiar character. This thus works essentially in Othering him as someone whom no one understands. The character of Howard is more problematic than Raj still; Raj is portrayed as the one that everyone hesitates to create an acquaintance with. The cultural hegemony that lies behind such treatment is revealed wherein the Indian cultural background makes him subservient to his American and Jews counterparts. In his work, "Orientalism", Said discusses how imperialism depends on the culture and the problem of the collision between culture and power. Here the cultural background of Raj is what gives the others the power to stereotype and mock him. Culture is "hegemonic", not in itself but in the oriental discourse. It is made so by the collusion of politics, economy and technology. Else it would have remained as the doctrine or an abstract concept. Thus, culture can be seen as a form of subdued form of power that derives its strength from its political and economic counterparts.

As in the case of Raj, cultural hegemony is thrust upon him as the West sees his nation as a third world country –which speaks for itself as an economically backward land compared to that of America. The character of Raj never contests this; instead, he consolidates this idea by abstaining from following his culture and showing aversion towards it. There are multiple contexts in the sitcom where Raj shows his fear of going back to his country due to its lack of living standards and poor lifestyle. Thus, the Orient himself is made to admit that he accepts this hegemonic structure in which he is placed at the very bottom. "In a quite constant way," as Said argues, "Orientalism depends for its strategy on this flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand."

Also, the love-hate relationship between Raj and the other characters are portrayed where when he loses his apartment, no one wants to take him in. This shows the age-old attitude of the Occident where they want only to appreciate the Orient from a distance but do not want any personal or close relationship with them. Here the idea of ambivalence as proposed by Homi Bhabha can be seen. According to him, ambivalence links the coloniser and colonised, which fluctuates between the extremes of love and hate. It is the conflicting feeling of continually wanting something and at the same time not wanting it. Bhabha further discusses how the West is forever unsure about its position towards the East by continually switching between the positive and the negative. This can be seen in the case of Raj, where the characters frequently show love towards him, simultaneously detesting and mocking his peculiar character. Bhabha's idea of mimicry shows us the reason for Raj aversion towards his cultural background. As throughout the sitcom, he tries hard to mimic the American lifestyle. This mimicry is often mocked by the characters subtly by making jokes on his accent as if reminding him that no effort can make him an equal to them. That is through mimicry; although Raj tries to become one among them, he remains the other. Bhabha also discusses how stereotypes are created through the constant repetition of specific images, ideas, images or words on the East's culture. This can be seen in the sitcom where constant comments and jokes on the living condition in Indian are made where it is continuously asserted that India is overcrowded. Also, there is a scene where Sheldon's mother in Season 1, Episode 4, jokes to Raj that "I made chicken. I hope that it is not one of the animals you think is magic". The list is long, where the repeated jokes are made on the difficulty in pronouncing his name. The most problematic part is that Raj himself makes such comments wherein he says, "not only are children starving in Indian but there is also an Indian starving here. This shows the reductionist approach towards India as a country. Its cultural background, ideals, and residents are frowned upon, thus asserting it as the physical other of the West. This shows the Eurocentric worldview of the West, where the West is portrayed as the wealthy, accomplished and sophisticated other of the East. This also reveals the stereotypical presupposition that all that East is composed of is either exotic, traditional or mystical.

CONCLUSION

So from the character of Raj, the stereotypical view of the West on the Orient can be seen. His character is portrayed in such a manner that he seems to be weak, mysterious and silenced. Throughout, he is spoken for by others. This puts the Orient in a vulnerable position as his identity is re narrated and probably re-defined according to the perspective of the Orient. This shows how the Orient has no control of his disposition in the hegemonic position asserted by his Western counterpart. The Orient always comes at the lower rung of the strata, and the Orient's subaltern voice goes unheard amid this power politics. Thus all he gets is subjugation and oppression. The importance of space in the discourse of Orientalism is also highlighted throughout. Where in the

fact that he hails from an Eastern background makes him the victim of subjugation. All this is shielded under the mask of laughter wherein the characters themselves excuse it as mere jokes to arouse laughter. However, the underlying ideologies behind these jokes make it problematic, and this paper has tried to look at through orientalist discourse.

REFERENCE

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