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**Lisa Lau and Ana Cristina Mendes (Eds.). *Re-Orientalism and South Asian Identity Politics: The oriental Other within*. New York: Routledge. 2011.**

This volume comprises a collection of articles by specialists from disciplines ranging from English to human geography and gender studies. Each interrogates South Asian cultural production at the turn of the twenty-first century. According to editors Lisa Lau and Ana Cristina Mendes, their purpose is “to observe how re-Orientalism is deployed, made to circulate and perceived by cultural producers and consumers within the specific context of South Asian identity politics” (1). The contributors thus aim to locate instances of re-Orientalism in contemporary novels, television, and films that are produced in South Asia and South Asian diasporic cultural formations. Specifically, their work is set predominantly in India, Singapore, and Britain. While some authors congratulate re-Orientalism for exposing new, unexpected, and multifaceted power relationships, a majority critique re-Orientalist works for feeding into a hegemonic, post-colonial desire to consume “the exotic.” Consequently, rather than destabilizing Orientalist discourse, this volume exposes the many South Asian producers of culture as participants in a “resurfacing of new manifestations of Orientalism”—albeit at times most willingly and self-reflexively (3).

Aptly titled “Introducing re-Orientalism,” the first chapter apprises readers of the book’s themes and objectives based on the theory of Re-Orientalism, a framework that was originally introduced in the editor Lisa Lau’s 2009 article “Re-Orientalism: The Perpetration and Development of Orientalism by Orientals” (Lau 2009). Inspired by Edward Said’s watershed work *Orientalism*, re-Orientalism imagines the production of “the Orient” (or “Asia”) by Orientals themselves—instead of by Europeans or other Westerners in positions of imperial power. As a result, the Orient is constructed by those who write as “authentic” Asians in both positive and less than positive ways. As editors Lau and Mendes explain, re-Orientalism is “based on how cultural producers with eastern affiliations come to terms with an Orientalized East, whether by complying with perceived expectations of western readers, by playing (along) with them or by discarding them altogether” (1). Based on this premise, their volume aims not only to highlight the power of Orientalist discourse, but moreover to “underscore its instability and mutability” (1) while identifying its fictions and frictions (11).

In chapter two, Lisa Lau deals specifically with questions of authenticity, realism, and the commodification of literature in contemporary Indian Writing in English (IWE). Her concerns revolve around recent criticism that IWE writers are guilty of “selling out” or “pandering” to Western desires to consume “real” stories about South Asia. While IWE has attracted high praise in the West, some postcolonial critics have accused its authors (including such “hypervisible” figures as Salman Rushdie, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Aravind Adiga) of “having cowardly, mercenary, western-approval-seeking motives” (16-17). While Lau acknowledges this problem, she questions the feasibility of writing an authentic or “real India” in any novel in the first place.<sup>1</sup> Ultimately, she suggests that the expectation for realism in this genre would be, to put it simply, unrealistic (18-22). As a work of fiction, she emphasizes that “ultimately, a novel is a game of make believe . . .” (21). Moreover, when demanding a “faithful representation” of India, she asks which and whose reality should take precedence (23). With this interrogation of realism, she thus reminds readers that any demand for such a monolithic “truth” about India would be akin to denying its pluralism and heterogeneity.

Amidst these problems, Lau draws attention to a theme that circulates throughout most of the volume: how the powerful demands of the global market, which is currently located in and driven by a Western audience, negatively challenge the self-(re)presentation of Orientals. As a result, one of the main problems for Lau is that the true creative potential of IWE (as well as the artistic merit of lesser-selling Indian authors who do not write in English) is sacrificed by a publishing industry that caters to Western consumer tastes (35).

This catch twenty-two of narrating an authentic “India” in order to thrive in a Western-based market is a theme that continues to resonate throughout the entire volume. According to Sarah Brouillette, IWE authors like Aravind Adiga may indeed be seen as guilty of “serving up the East as spectacle,” as Lau and Mendes say, in a strategic re-Orientalist effort to promote his book, *The White Tiger*, in the West. The issue of “repackaging the ‘Orient’ for global consumption” is so critical, Brouillette argues, that it is adapted as the central irony in Adiga’s depiction of an exotic and dehistoricized India. Given Adiga’s acknowledgement and critique of the global market, Brouillette suggests that scholars might even adapt a new term, “meta-Orientalism,” to describe his self-conscious portrayal of re-Orientalism, which is simultaneously critiqued, shaped, and reinforced by increasingly globalized cultural markets (54).

Turning to film, other authors continue to explore the ironies and demands of global capitalism in re-Orientalized television and cinema. Jigna Desai claims in chapter five, for instance, that the global success of Bollywood “has much to do with the fact that it is not an Indian film, but a film about an India” (73). With this in mind, she argues that the power of global capital can be witnessed through multiple and competing forms of re-Orientalism that are apparent in such productions in Bollywood films as well as *Slumdog Millionaire*, which was also produced in Mumbai. An example of this, she notes, can be found in the Indian Muslim megastar Shah Rukh Khan, who embodies two competing visions of the Asian Other for Western viewers: first, that of “exotic spectacle” (when in the presence of an ethnocentric Hollywood) and second, that of “state threat” (when he is later detained as a potential terrorist at a major US airport) (72-3). Despite the promise of re-Orientalist production, Desai ultimately concludes, Indian actors and films are still “misread” by Western consumer desires and Orientalist blind spots.

Like Desai, Tamara S. Wagner is also suspicious of Bollywood’s current bid to transcend the power—or “cultural baggage” (1093)—of a postcolonial, neo-liberal Orientalist logic. In her exploration of *Bride and Prejudice* (Ch. 5), Mendes returns to a consideration of the limits and merits of marketing a self-reflexive, re-Orientalist narrative to a global audience. Like Brouillette, she sees the significance of using re-Orientalism to show a satirical awareness of the presence of Orientalist desires in the production of Bollywood film, and she claims that “the film’s self-irony does much to shatter [Orientalist] expectations and thus forms a vital redirection” (120). Nevertheless, she ultimately critiques *Bride and Prejudice* for failing to effectively parody—and thus potentially disrupt—Western demands for a so-called “boutique multiculturalism.”

Ana Cristina Mendes also considers the problem of postcolonial production in an industry “dominated by the logic of multinational capitalism” (99). Again, similar to Brouillette’s notion of “meta-Orientalism,” Mendes identifies a “metatextual awareness” among postcolonial readers that inspires the self-conscious narrative of a number of postcolonial writers. In her analysis of Rushdie’s *The Aliens Show* and *The Kumars at No. 42* (Ch. 6), she finds that re-Orientalism allows for such ironic engagements by “manag[ing] to mirror the global spectacularization of cultural difference back at itself [while] exposing and exploring the spectacle’s flaws and contradictions, turning it on its head by working from within it” (98). Ultimately, Mendes finds that this brand of re-Orientalism can work “to reinstate agency and foster empowerment in the

face of an engulfing global literary marketplace” (98). In addition, she finds that it allows for a more sensitive accommodation of “the complexities of the permeability of borders and of the fluidity of identification” (99).

Mendes’ (rather optimistic) view of the re-Orientalist potential to disrupt “the worn-out two-dimensional map” (99) of East-West dichotomies points to another powerful and recurring theme in this volume: the theoretical capacity of re-Orientalism to illuminate the plethora of complicated and multi-dimensional power relationships that simultaneously feed into cultural production. The re-Orientalist framework also allows authors to identify multiple identities beyond East-West allegiances. Wai-chew Sim’s investigation of Gopal Baratham’s *A Candle or the Sun* (Ch. 4) accomplishes this, for example, by focusing on the historical and social context of this novel. Considering the essentialist “Asian values” campaign conducted by the Singapore government in the 1980s and 90s, Sim recognizes Baratham’s critique of re-Orientalism as it was used by the state to justify what some have labeled “soft authoritarianism” (59). In this instance, Sim finds re-Orientalism in Singapore “now serv[ing] the interests of the ‘transnational capitalist class.’” Thus, like Orientalism, “Asian values” discourse is equally culpable of “us[ing] the other to essentialize the Self” in order “to suppress heterogeneous voices within” (69). While this scenario may be rather disconcerting, Sim concludes that it is (at least) one in which the easy categories of East/West might finally be “de-fetishized” and “deconstructed” (69).

While Sim identifies essentialist discourse at a transnational level, Mita Banerjee locates the same effects within both a global and intra-national sphere. In her reading of the film *What If?* (Ch. 8), she proposes that re-Orientalism not only illuminates (re)presentations for a Western audience but also offers an analytical framework for understanding the cultural production of an “Asian-ness” (or in this case, “Indian-ness”) that appeals to certain dominant groups in Asia/India while marginalizing other minorities within. She bases her argument on her analysis of the vibrant colors typically found in Bollywood film, which on the one hand, offer “a dazzling spectacle” of “bizarre” Indian “*jouissance*” for Western observers but, on the other hand, proffer an equally alluring narrative of the “Indian self” for a larger and more populous mainstream, middle-class Hindu audience. In the latter interpretation, color is central as a sign of Muslim marginalization, “precisely because they are said to lack [color]” (126). Given its predilection for color, Bollywood thus re-Orientalizes not only India but also its Muslim communities. With this reading, Banerjee contends that the recent paradigm of re-Orientalism reveals “the polyphony of contemporary Indian film, and its negotiation of both multiple audiences and multiple religious communities in [Asia].” Meanwhile, it also recognizes a (previously unexplored) “dialogue about who represents the ‘East’ to Western and non-Western audiences, and who has the power to resist such representations, and on what levels” (141).

Despite the promise of layered readings that Banerjee recognizes in *What If?* Tabish Khair argues that re-Orientalism creates serious problems—“even as it remedie[s] some of the imbalances and problems of colonial discourse . . .” (149). In his chapter “Re-Orientalisms: Meditations on Exoticism and Transcendence, Otherness and the Self” (Ch. 9), Khair laments that postcolonial texts “take for granted the need to narrate, defend, [and] justify the colonized and the subaltern” (150). This is problematic because in doing so, such texts enter into the same space in which the dominant discourse was originally framed. In attempting to “explain away” the colonized Other (the “Self” of re-Orientalist text), he argues, re-Orientalism never manages to transcend earlier, Orientalist paradigms of alterity. Khair thus regards re-Orientalism as simply a “genetically modified” version of Orientalism, as it lapses into a “smooth” reaffirmation of the “base of power” on which the dominant discourse depends—and “dialectically” creates

(151). While re-Orientalism might not necessarily reproduce the colonialist view of “civilizing” the world, it nevertheless gives priority to certain aspects of the Western narrative—especially its exoticizing tendencies (156).

To conclude, Khair leaves readers with the “meditation” that re-Orientalism “narrate[s] the space of the Other in ways that do not, finally, disrupt, inconvenience, or question the space of the Self.” Despite intentions to break free of a Western-dominated episteme, he argues, re-Orientalism simply reinforces it, which unfortunately lets the (Western/dominant) writer, reader, and critic bask in a comfortable bath of self-deception. Re-Orientalism consequently allows for the (re)production of “soft” texts or “soft” fiction (stories that are “just a civilized lie of imperialism”) by reproducing the hegemonic discourse of Orientalism. Ultimately for Khair, the most regrettable aspect of re-Orientalism is its inability to break “the trend towards a definitive simplification and the [centering] of perception and experience around a post/imperial West” (155-6).

With this final chapter, the volume ends on a note of regret. Readers are left with the feeling that despite its curative aims, re-Orientalism fails the subaltern as a means for “speaking” in a truly original or authentic voice. Certainly, the volume is effective in identifying the challenges and missteps that postcolonial authors have faced in the process of (to use Lau and Mendes’ words) “playing (along) with” and/or altogether “discarding” Orientalist discourse. Still, their volume is nevertheless successful in a handful of ways. Above all, it highlights the agency of the various writers who have aimed to consciously confront—and even parody—the market forces. In addition, it demonstrates the illuminative power that re-Orientalism offers as a framework for cultural analysis. Perhaps it elucidates a number of problems, but it also recognizes a number of previously ignored instances of transnational and intra-national hegemonic production. Moreover, in its elaboration of the problems of postcolonial texts, it suggests novel and concrete plans for someday transcending the past.

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<sup>1</sup> In her current work, Lau intends to criticize two different practices: a) the "writing *of* India" and b) that of "writing India." Like most post-colonial authors, she sees the former—the "writing *of* India" (italics original)—as a historically Orientalist practice that has been enacted from a distance—and from a position of power. In addition, Lau also critiques the latter, re-Orientalist response, which purports to "write (a real) India" (or to "write the subaltern") by giving voice to the subaltern, who speaks from an "authentic" or "real" position. Lau's latter critique of writing an authentic or "real India" is the primary stimulus that underlies her cogent analysis of (the oxymoronic nature of) "realist" fiction.