

Writing Back or Writing for? Re-Orientalism and the Burden of Representation in South Asian Fiction

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Abstract

*Postcolonial studies have critically deconstructed Eurocentric narratives, exposing the ideological constructs embedded in colonial discourse. Eastern writers have actively contested these representations, resisting the West's portrayal of the East as an inferior "Other." Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) elucidates how Western discourse systematically depicted the East to reinforce its own dominance. Expanding on this critique, Lau (2009) introduced re-Orientalism—a phenomenon in which diasporic writers, often from formerly colonized regions, reproduce and internalize Western stereotypes about the East. This study examines *The Good Muslim* (2011) by Tahmima Anam, analyzing how Bangladeshi diasporic authors engage in re-Orientalist portrayals by accentuating negative cultural tropes. Through textual analysis, the paper argues that such narratives risk perpetuating, rather than subverting, colonialist frameworks by exaggerating and distorting indigenous traditions. The findings contribute to ongoing debates on re-Orientalism, revealing the complex ways postcolonial literature both challenges and reinforces hegemonic representations.*

1. Introduction

As a distinct literary canon, postcolonial studies opened new avenues for scholars to challenge the West's Eurocentric perspective. The extremely subjective ideology construct of the colonial agenda was contested by this canon, which was created by many Eastern authors (McLeod, 2000). Most of the Eastern writers documented opposition to this subjective ideological construct (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2002). The agenda was referred to as Orientalism by Said (1978). Lau and Mendes (2011) believe that during the colonial time period Western writers portray the East as the West's alter ego and the West as a highly good self-image. This action was taken with knowledge and purpose by the Western authors to further their Eurocentric agenda.

Lau (2009) introduced the idea of re-orientalism in the last ten years, keeping in mind the brief history of postcolonial studies and orientalism. According to her paper, re-Orientalism is the practice of Orientals depicting the Orient as "other," which has been done in ways that are strikingly like those used by Western authors and academics in the past. Most frequently, diasporic writers who were born in colonized nations and now reside in the West employ re-orientalism to highlight the negative aspects of their own culture. This study examines selected South Asian works and concludes that the primary trait of diasporic writers is the distortion of Asian culture and the depiction of its negative aspects. It is hoped that while examining the chosen novel's text, it will become clear that authors have appropriated more brutal and deceitful elements of the local way of life.

2. Literature Review

To comprehend orientalism, Loomba (2007) highlights that power and knowledge are connected to power actions rather than existing in a physical location. She claims that this relationship between power and knowledge is the foundation of Edward Said's orientalism, which shows how much colonist ideological ideas shaped the conversation about the Orient. According to Said (1978), history, literature, and philosophy all contributed to the west's representation of the East and the development of a discourse about the Orient to support colonization. By analyzing colonialism through the prism of discourse, Orientalism shows how colonists' perceptions of the East were reinforced by literary and cultural works as well as scholarly research on the region. In the Orient, these works influenced not only knowledge but also reality. Additionally, she asserts that these texts supported colonial cultures in their activities. Orientalism highlights the power of colonial writings, showing that they are more than just sources of information for analysts and that books have the same authority as organizations and scholars.

This subject has been expanding and creating new hierarchies, and post-colonial scholars like Edward Said, Homi K. Bhaba, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have all contributed to this changing post-colonial process, according to Shands (2008). Furthermore, Spivak (as cited in Karishna 2009) argues that the culture of imperialism is inextricably linked to the post-colonial. According to Brouillette (2007), several factors, such as post-colonial literature's complexity, skepticism of nationalism, use of exile and subjective language, and anti-realist inclinations, contribute to its success in the current market.

According to Huggan (2002), post-colonial writers both support and undermine the global "alternative industry," which uses cultural differences and post-colonial literature as top commodities. This phenomenon is known as the "global commodification of cultural differences in post-colonial literature." Several academics have attempted to investigate the issue of contradictory self-representation in postcolonial literature. According to Said (1978), this negative representation of the East in western literature is linked to a larger Western scheme to justify the entire colorization process, in which the civilized West seeks to rescue the barbarian East.

By identifying its origins in the language and philosophy of the West, Spivak provides a more thorough explanation of the purported process of self-othering in postcolonial writers and critics (Krishna, 2009). Spivak argues that the writers' mental freedom is not ensured by the physical absence of western authority because, even in postcolonial times, the east is defined in relation to the west, and they defend their national identity through dialogue with western ideology. Orientalism (Said, 1978) has shown how the East's dispositions were shaped by the West's distinct discourse. Furthermore, by drawing a contrastive line between the East (the other) and the West (the self), the western elite defined the East as simply an alien place. Lisa Lau was influenced by this idea of Orientalism and created re-Orientalism, an updated theory that was thought to reflect the Orientals' preservation of Orientalism in its infancy. The theory describes how South Asia's current global positionality is reshaping contemporary discourse.

It is also important to note that the associated rhetoric has an Eastern tone even though it was clearly produced by the postcolonial diaspora. It's also important to remember that re-Orientalism is not the same as orientalism. It considers not only the apparent dichotomy but also the active participation of diaspora literature and its reception and acceptance in India (Mendes & Lau, 2015). Scholars have debated orientalism and re-orientalism, so Lau (2009) is not the first to voice concerns about how India is portrayed in Anglophone Asian narratives. Lau and Mendes (2011) claim that the terms "reverse orientalism," "internal orientalism," "self-orientalism," and "ethno-orientalism" have become more popular in discourse over the past two or three decades, adopting a few terms for themselves. As a result, the idea of re-Orientalism generated controversy and harsh criticism globally.

Many critics have expressed interest in the new Orientalism practices of diasporic writers (Salagado, 2011). In his view, the literary endeavors of Oriental 'elites' expose their part in maintaining a cultural dichotomy between the Orient and the Occident, where the Occident holds the top spot. However, in contrast to Lau's (2009) concept of re-Orientalism, he emphasizes the importance of portrayal authenticity. His ideas about representation transform the more general problem of Orientalism and re-Orientalism into a claim that diasporic authors offer an earlier version of the Orient that aims to accurately portray the East.

The legitimacy of Oriental fiction authors writing in English has been questioned by numerous South Asian critics. The problem of representation and authenticity seems to be a two-pronged phenomenon, where the author attempts to satisfy both the expectations of the source culture to be accurately represented and the demands of Western readers and publishers. According to Raja (2018), to satisfy the demands of the foreign reader and publisher, the authors deliberately ignore the norms of the source culture in this instance. Chambers (2014) claims that Tahmima Anam's book *The Good Muslim* (2011) creates an incredibly permeable wall between religion and secularism. Both concepts now share some similarities in terms of illogical, reason, radicalism, and moderation. However, Majid and Jalal Uddin (2018) believe the play merely portrays a religious and secular way of life.

Habib (2015) examines traditional feminism's work patterns and contrasts them with the lives of women in developing nations. Ahmad and Ahmed (2024) discussed the presence of re-Orientalist aspects in Pakistani English literature while focusing majorly on Aslam's narrative in his *The Wasted Vigil* (2008). Afzal and Abbas (2025) observed Oriental othering through gender stereotypes is prevalent in the portrayal of Pakistani Muslims, portraying women as oppressed yet alluring beings and men as violent. Additionally, it presents Pakistani food, culture, and urban areas in an exotic way as a paradox of sensuality and chaos. Similarly, Ahmad, Ullah and Ammar (2021) discussed the exotic representation of Pakistani culture and the othering of Pakistanis on a foreign land in their study. Previous research suggests that the South Asian literary canon needs to investigate re-Orientalism techniques. The chosen South Asian fictional work was not previously examined from a re-Orientalism perspective, and the evaluated work primarily deals with different topics. Because of this, it could be argued that the selected work is not assessed using re-Orientalism, which leaves a gap that the current study could fill.

3. Research Methodology

Using the interpretive research paradigm, the study looks at the hidden realities in the selected work. Since the interpretive research paradigm maintains that reality is not static and fixed, it makes it easier to discover various interpretations of it (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). To accomplish its goals and address its research questions, the study also uses a qualitative research approach. This study is qualitative in nature. The aim of this study is to examine the selected work from the perspective of Lau (2009) and Lau and Mendes' reorientation (2011, 2015). Several extracts that illustrate re-orientalism are examined using interpretative paradigm techniques.

Lau (2009) claims that there is an unexpected power dynamic in South Asian fiction that upholds the colonial goal of depicting Eastern cultures and societies in a peculiar way. According to her, the argument of orientalism is being revived by South Asian literary writers with its new, complex dimensions, wherein the authors themselves portray an Orientalized view of the East. Lau's concept of re-orientalism emphasizes the role of eastern writers who practice orientalist agendas to meet the demands of western readers. Additionally, South Asian literary writers use a western perspective to present a cliched representation of eastern civilization and culture, which is noticeable to western readers and publishers. Orientals' role in preserving orientalism while positioning the West at the center and themselves and the East at the periphery or as alien is the focus of re-orientalism. They intentionally and generally harm the entire Orient in the process. The positionality of re-orientalists and the paths they asserted to Orientalize the east are clarified by the second characteristic of re-orientalism. The third element of re-orientalism is "strange internal coherence," which portrays the perpetrators of deceptive orientalism and deceptive behavior while preserving a coherent story. The radical instability of representation must therefore always be considered by re-orientalism theory and nowhere is this truer than when Orientals engage in (new forms of) orientalism, which brings up the difficult, troublesome questions of representation accuracy and realism, or, to put it briefly, authenticity.

Textual analysis is the study method used to examine the selected literary work. The researcher has concentrated on a detailed analysis of the chosen literary work rather than a cursory understanding of the data. According to McKee's (2003) methodical approach to

textual analysis, choosing a topic should be the first step in the process, followed by the formulation of research questions to help the researcher stay focused on a specific subject. Considering the stated research topics, the next step should be to highlight the pertinent texts and use further research to find more pertinent examples from the chosen text.

4. Data Analysis

In his book *Orientalism* (1978), Said referred to the Western agenda as "Orientalism." In the West, he was seen as promoting, creating, and projecting a positive self-image while at the same time portraying the East or Orient as antithetical to the West. He talked about how the West and Western authors negatively portrayed the East by maintaining a Eurocentric canon and image. In most Western literature, the colonized were portrayed as primitive and uncivilized, while the Westerners were portrayed as the epitome of civilized behavior and etiquette. This dichotomy of "Us" and "Them" pushed the East to the periphery as a marginalized nation because, to put it simply, the West saw itself as a center and the East as othered. Lau (2009) presented a similar idea in her article, but this time the roles are reversed. This time, the Orientals themselves have begun self-othering, and the West is no longer interested in portraying the East or Orient as othered. During the presentation of the concept of re-Orientalism, Lau believes that the writers from the Orient are intentionally portraying a negative image of the Orient. The Orientals take this action to improve their ties with their former colonizers and masters. Furthermore, this self-deprecating portrayal is an attempt to gain acceptance and recognition in the canon of Western literature.

Tahmima Anam, in her book *The Good Muslim* (2011), depicts Bangladesh in 1984. Her main character, Maya, is a female doctor who embodies Bangladesh's contemporary ideals. However, Sohail, Maya's brother and a former army officer, stands in for Islamic customs and principles. Anam portrays a conflict between "old" Islamic traditions and values and modern ones; as an Oriental, she paints a negative picture of Islamic values that began to flourish in Bangladesh following the country's independence and that it is an Islamic nation. Anam portrays Islamic principles as primitive. In the book, Silvi, Sohail's wife, wore a burkha. She delivers this act in a highly ironic manner. She also cites this as the cause of Maya's more than seven-year self-exile from her home. "The prospect of facing Silvi sanctimonious, her face packed tightly into the burkha she hadn't been seen without since the war – was largely what had kept Maya from her home." (p. 9). Although wearing a burkha in an Islamic nation is not unusual, Anam points out that it is a significant problem for self-exile. She appears to represent burkha as a manifestation of the contemporary, westernized Bangladesh.

Maya chooses to keep her distance from her family and embarks on a new life as a lady doctor. She is forced to relocate to Rajshahi after her initial encounter with Nazia in the hospital city, where she is convinced to pursue a career as a lady health doctor. However, Maya quickly departs Rajshahi because the locals view her as a curse. Additionally, she leaves the village because Nazia received a hundred and one lashes in front of her as punishment. "That Chink is not my baby. Lying cheating whore of a wife. The punishment was one hundred and one lashes." (p. 23). It is crucial to note that Anam depicts Bangladesh in the 1980s in *The Good Muslim*. In 1971, Bangladesh gained its independence from Pakistan, and thirteen years later, Nazia was living in a completely ruled and judicially powerful nation. In addition, Bangladesh was ruled by a dictator in

1984. It is hard to imagine carrying out such actions and enforcing the law in a dictatorship. Anam, however, portrays the situation in a way that makes it appear extremely primitive and uncivilized. Such misrepresentations are referred to as re-Orientalism by Lau (2009), in which an Oriental person distorts their own culture and society.

“Instead of a word, she was marked by the whip, her hand rushing to the place on her neck where it has touched her and returning with blood. And was that a smile in the man’s eye? The one who was only following orders, protecting the village, the name of the village.” (p.23). From one perspective, it is evident that Anam is misrepresenting her own nation by harshly depicting its people and culture. It is also evident that in Islam, whipping is a form of punishment for a guilty individual whose offense has been established following a protracted legal procedure. Anam, on the other hand, makes a very weak case in which Nazia, the accused, is given a hundred and one lashes despite not having been proven guilty. The protagonist Maya is forced to leave Rajshahi because of the incident because Nazia, her only friend and hope, rejects her and won't meet her. Without knowing what will happen to her, Maya departs Rajshahi.

After a long and stressful journey, she finally makes it back to her childhood home, where she had resided since she was a small child. Throughout the novel, Maya encounters conflicts regarding the notions of so-called "extremism". She feels uncomfortable around Silvi, her brother's wife, who is wearing a burkha, so she chooses to go into home exile for herself once more. Maya has observed many architectural changes, so she anticipates her home will have changed significantly by the time she returns after seven years. However, she is startled to see women in burkhas wandering around her home and standing in the kitchen when she first gets there. “Instead, she found the kitchen packed with women. They wore long black burkhas and squatted over the grinding stone, the sink, the stove... One of the women rose to greet her. Maya couldn’t make out her features beneath the loose black cloth.” (p.14).

The incident demonstrates how Anam creates a stereotype of women in burkhas. Her depiction of wearing a burkha is a misinterpretation of the Islamic significance of the garment as well as its culture and customs. Furthermore, wearing a burkha while preparing breakfast or any other meal in front of a stove or sink is not customary. These incidents demonstrate how Anam has distorted the perception of religious women in her nation. Islam places a lot of significance on the burkha, and it is evident that the West constantly seeks to disparage and discredit it. According to Lau (2009), Eastern writers present such images to suit the Western agenda to appease former colonizers and improve ties with them. This is not the end of the struggle between Islamic and Westernized traditions. Anam portrays a different picture of Bangladesh and society through her main female character, Maya. Islamic values are denigrated by Maya, who stands for westernized and modern values and views them as civilized values. Maya has wished for Sohail's son to be westernized and away from religion since his birth. “She had loved him, how fiercely she had needed him to be like her, how she has turned away when he had leaned towards God.” (p. 17).

For Maya, liberty and civilization are defined as the ability to choose for oneself, and she views herself as a liberal and free woman who can do so. However, she would rather avoid Sohail's son when he makes his own decisions. Is it not a paradox? These instances clearly demonstrate how Anam has misled and misled the readers. Anam also demonstrates how Sohail has forgotten his earthly obligations and is only interested in his afterlife because of

his propensity for reward. "Only that he had moved upstairs, that his wife had delivered a son, that she saw hardly anything of them, so busy were they with their religion." (p. 21). All world religions advocate for a well-rounded outlook on life. This portrayal of Sohail's personality misrepresents a devout individual who is constantly preoccupied with religious matters. According to Lau (2009), Anam's goal as an orientalist writer is to foster an orientalist mindset in which the West presents a very good image of itself while changing the East's image. Anam, however, is occupied with presenting a favorable image of the West and a terrible image of himself since he is Oriental. Furthermore, Anam has depicted Silvi's and Sohail's religious gatherings in a highly dubious light. These kinds of gatherings are a common occurrence in Islamic societies, and people eagerly and freely attend them to learn about Islam and other topics. Nevertheless, they are sometimes portrayed in a highly dubious manner. "Silvi had held discussion meetings upstairs, preaching to the women about everything there was to know about being a Muslim. God, men, morality. Purdah and sex." (p. 22)

The characteristics of Lau's (2009) idea of re-Orientalism are obvious. It primarily emphasizes three key points. The first is that Westerners portray themselves positively, while Orientals portray themselves negatively. According to the second, their efforts are conscious and purposeful since they wish to please and get acceptance from the former colonists or masters. The idea of publication politics is emphasized in the third element. According to Lau (2009), the writers fabricate and offer a bad picture of the East to get acceptance and recognition in the Western literary canon and publication market. In the findings section, the researcher notes that Tahmina Anam is misrepresenting Islamic traditions, values, and rituals. Through her characters in the book, it is easy to see her attempts to gain popularity in the western market. Through its characters, the story vividly depicts a clash between the West and the East, or between modernism and Islam. Furthermore, she establishes a dichotomy of good and less good or terrible through this fight, which demonstrates how Islamic and local values are purposefully marginalized and pushed to the side.

5. Conclusion

In his *Orientalism* (1978), Said highlighted Eurocentrism's Western objective while referring to it as Orientalism, a name he had created. According to him, the East or Orient is being emphasized as the negative and opposing ego of the West, while the West is marketing, projecting, producing, and portraying itself as a very positive self-image. In order to preserve a Eurocentric image and canon, he discussed how the West and Western writers negatively depicted the East. In most Western literature, the Western occupants were presented as icons of culture and manners, while the colonized were depicted as uncivilized and savage. The 'Us' and 'Them' duality, in short, drove the East forward, while the West regarded itself as a center and the East as othered. Lau's (2009) concept of re-Orientalism is quite clear in many respects. It mainly highlights three crucial components. The first is that Orientals portray themselves negatively while Westerners portray themselves favorably. The second claims that their endeavor is intentional and purposeful because they want to win the approval of their former colonists or masters. The third element emphasizes the idea of publicizing politics. Lau (2009) asserts that authors present a negative image of the East to gain acceptance and recognition in the Western literary canon and publishing market. According to the researcher's conclusions, Tahmima Anam

misrepresents Islamic customs, values, and practices. Throughout the story, her characters demonstrate her attempts to get recognition in the western market. Through her characters, the novel powerfully portrays a conflict between Islam and modernism, or the West and the East. Through this conflict, she also creates a binary of good and less good or horrible, which shows how Islamic and local values are deliberately pushed to the sidelines and troubled.

Numerous queries and suggestions are also brought up by the current investigation. The conflict between Westernized and Islamic traditions is evident in this study, but it is not over yet. Through her protagonist Maya, Anam presents a skewed picture of Bangladesh and its culture. Maya disparages Islamic values since she represents modern, westernized standards and views them as admirable. Given all of this, I, as a researcher in the field, propose that future researchers should investigate new facets of the subject to fill this enormous gap. While analyzing the author's proficiency in depicting a culture in a unique way, the scholars could examine previous works by the same author. Furthermore, given that South Asian texts in English are currently becoming recognized as a distinct literary canon, it is advised that other Eastern authors be chosen for comparable research.

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