

## **Orientalism-in-Reverse: Indian Nationalism in the Works of M.K. Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru**

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*Nationalism differs from Orientalism as it gives voice to its muted subjects. By nationalism as Orientalism-in-reverse, the study implies that nationalism is a pride in cultural achievements rather than humility, which Orientalism breeds among its subjects. Significantly, the nationalists in their pride of cultural achievements accepted the cultural essences formulated by Orientalism. The nationalists constructed a hiatus between the “interior” spiritualism that the East represented and the “exterior” materialism that the West stood for. Thereby, it rendered ‘essential’ India in spiritual metaphor and identified the “inner” domain in terms of domestic sphere. To retain the pride in Indian culture, the nationalists asserted spiritualism as an antidote to Western “outer” materialism. This dichotomy of the East and the West continued to articulate a distinctive identity structured on the colonial differences. My methodology involves the analysis of M.K. Gandhi’s *Hind Swaraj* and Jawaharlal Nehru’s *The Discovery of India*, which are my main texts, since India was a textual subject for the Orientalists as well as for the nationalists.*

I shall examine the relationship between nationalism and Orientalism and show by way of arguments how nationalism doesn’t negate the Orientalist project as much as it complies with it, and that both are pedagogic disciplines ‘representing’ the Orient. I intend to scrutinize how nationalism is a kind of “Orientalism-in-Reverse” (‘Azm 5). Nationalism differs from Orientalism as it gives voice to its muted subjects. By nationalism as Orientalism-in-reverse, I imply that nationalism is a pride in cultural achievements rather than humility, which is what Orientalism breeds among its subjects. Significantly, the nationalists in their pride of cultural achievements accepted the cultural essences formulated by Orientalism. The nationalists did not step outside the Indian past, that is, they accepted the Orientalist formulations of a ‘glorious’ Indian past and its subsequent decline. Therefore, they thought it imperative to eulogise the past cultural ideals that could defend the invasion of “inner” spirituality from “outer” sphere and signified spiritualism as the core of the Indian traditions. Furthermore, the ‘pristine’ tradition suggested the ‘authenticity’ over the imported colonial knowledge. The nationalists constructed a hiatus between the “interior” spiritualism that the East represented and the “exterior” materialism that the West stood for. Thereby, it rendered ‘essential’ India through spiritual metaphors and identified the “inner” domain in terms of domestic sphere. To retain the pride in Indian culture, the nationalists asserted spiritualism as an antidote to Western “outer” materialism. This dichotomy of the East and the West continued to articulate a distinctive identity structured on the colonial differences.

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Orientalists as well as the nationalists. The first significant challenge to Orientalised India came from nationalism. While agreeing to the notion of an essentialised India, the nationalists transformed the object of knowledge – India – from passive to active. Despite following this concept about India, Gandhi and Nehru “used Orientalism against imperialism” in positioning non-violence and toleration as the strength of Indian culture (Ludden 273). Both these nationalists were a product of Western education. They had voraciously read European literature and incorporated some of the Western thoughts in their anticolonial discourse. To determine their cultural identity they reflected upon the Orientalist essences of the ancient origins of Indian culture. This implied that their nationalist discourse supported the colonial definition of a ‘timeless’ Indian culture with its trait of toleration and non-violence. Remarkably, Gandhi accepted: “ I have nothing to be ashamed of if my views on *Ahimsa* are the result of my Western education” (Gandhi, *Hindu Dharma* 199). Apart from the fact that most of the known nationalists were products of Western education, many of them especially Tagore, Aurobindo, Gandhi, and Nehru also belonged to the elite section that entered into the nationalist movement after a sufficient transformation. Gandhi’s reading of the English translation of the *Gita* and Aurobindo’s introduction to the *Upanishads* after reading the English translated works of the Orientalist Max Muller (Heehs 176) reveals the Orientalist moorings that spawned nationalist constructions.

My research paper is inspired by Edward Said’s theory of Orientalism that forms the backdrop against which I focus the nationalist predicament. Said’s Orientalism is a breakthrough in cultural studies that attempts to show the complicity of European scholarship and imperialism. Despite the various critical responses, Said’s Orientalism helps to examine Western epistemology and its underpinnings. I focus on Indian nationalism as a cultural space and apply the theory of Orientalism as a critical tool that posits nationalism vis-à-vis Orientalism. I attempt to view nationalism neither as a derived, monolithic European construct nor as a nativist agenda, though I have included both perspectives in my study. My understanding of nationalism is variegated, that is, nationalism draws upon the colonial model of defining Indian traditions, but in emphasizing its differences, it tends to establish an indigenous vocabulary. From this zone of overlapping between the indigenous and the Western discourses emerges the paradox of the Indian nationalism.

Despite the fact that it was the colonial and Orientalist imagination on which the nationalist movement premised, the nationalists reversed the imitative aspect to construct community within the parameters of a self-defined Indian culture and direct it as a mass agenda. The mutation from native informants to native participants not only provided subjectivity to the East, but also enshrined a homogeneous community with common descent, language, culture, religion, and aspirations. Undeniably, this was a prerequisite for national solidarity against alien invasions. However, what is neglected in the nationalist agenda of homogeneity is: who are responsible for the appropriation and transformation of the people into a national community? Can there be an ‘authentic’ representation either by the nationalists or the Orientalists? Is nationalism an excavation of the same ‘site’ explored by the Orientalists, but not with the purpose of annihilating our national achievements? These oft-ignored questions have been analysed in the course of this paper. Nevertheless, I have been wary of propounding reductive answers

or alternative domination/resistance formulae. I'm interested in unveiling the in-built power governed ideologies in nationalism and Orientalism and thereby show their alliance.

According to Gandhi and Nehru, the fixity of the past was the foundation, an experience, and a self-critical idiom by which India could gain insight to rejuvenate and regenerate its inner strength. The nationalists continued to rework on the traditional framework of India constructed by the Orientalists, to invert the European paradigms of hierarchy. By positing nationalism as a colonial legacy, I argue that nationalism is not a departure from essentialisms and political ideologies; rather it works within the polarities of the Self and the Other. As a 'site' of cultural resistance, nationalism is preoccupied with the centre-margin discourse in which the difference from the centre is articulated in the subjectivity of the periphery. But nationalism is not a replica of Orientalism. On the contrary, it emphasizes the rejection of colonial stereotypes, yet maintains the continuity and imagination of a pre-colonial past composed by the Western historians and Indian mythologies. The imaginative sphere so constructed did not move beyond a grandiose and spiritual past. The foundations of Orientalism lay in its attempt to valorize the 'spiritual' East. The West conceived the Indian culture in its own paradigms and subsequently contrasted it with Western prototype.

The engineering of identity by either school, that is, the Orientalist and the nationalist, stimulated by the revival of the past was informed by a notion of the Other, that is, to bring a deliberate contrast between the 'glorious' past and the 'decayed' present and hence the idea of regeneration and revitalization. The Other could only be reached through the cultural insights. These schools of thought chose ancient India as a launching pad for their 'knowing India contest.' The contest between the nationalist elites and the Europeans bourgeois, both of which constituted the intelligentsia, was to set authoritative accounts that affirmed India's past. The Orientalists related themselves as representatives of Indian culture, which was organically annihilated but was capable of renewal. Europe's craving for the restoration of a 'golden age' was required to engineer the concept of an advanced India. British supremacy could be subsequently asserted when the advanced 'golden' age was contrasted with the present lapse of glory, which the British could only revive. Hence, the obsession with the 'grandiosity' of the past aided in determining their identity vis-à-vis India and consequently affirmed their moral superiority. The colonizers had to alter India's 'murky' past into a logical European present. The chief purpose of resuscitation of the Indian past was to understand Indian culture as a basis for legitimizing colonial administration.

Now that the necessary theoretical framework has been set forth, I shall examine Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj*. This particular text spells out a distinctive Indian identity located within the ambit of spirituality as opposed to the materialism of the West. Gandhi's vision of India as a "*praja*" that could attain *swaraj* by self-control carries a metaphysical connotation (Parel 276). Instead of the words 'nation' and 'freedom,' Gandhi's usage of the native idiom reinforces his position as a nationalist who challenges the European discourse with the religious and traditional vocabulary. The interpretation of Gandhi's political discourse in this text is three fold. First, *Hind Swaraj* is

interspersed with the testimonials from the European authority. Although Gandhi's assimilation created his own political discourse, it was premised on Western commentaries and readings. Secondly, the villages, fundamental to Indian society, were fixed as "solid foundation of Oriental despotism" (Marx 350). However, in Gandhi's imagination the villages were organized political entities. Referring to Sir Henry Maine's comments on Indian villages, Gandhi emphasized, "the Indian races have been familiar with representative institutions almost from the time immemorial. The word panchayat is a household word throughout the length and breath of India." (Gandhi, Collected Works, 1:94-5). Thirdly, the resuscitation of the glorified past embodied in the traditions, gender and spiritualism was influenced by Oriental scholarship. Significantly, the nationalists' search for the Self implied a search for a national identity.

Interestingly, gendering the nation, conceived as a new avatar of Orientalism, integrated women and tradition as an indigenous space of purity and spiritualism. Gandhi's political discourse is a case in point. Gandhi countered European ideology by the feminizing politics. The British celebrated masculinity and aligned their courageous rule over the colonial subjects with masculine power. In stark contrast to the European stereotype of masculine power, Gandhi based his resistance on the power of feminine virtues, that is, purity, tolerance, self-control and spiritual strength. In Gandhi's discourse, women were considered paragons of 'pristine' Indian tradition. Gandhi advised the Indian women – "the enlightened daughters of Bharat Mata" – to be strong, pure and "conserve what is best in our culture [...]. This is the work of Sitas, Draupadis, Savitris and Damayantis" (Gandhi, Hindu Dharma, 383). Thus Gandhi's nationalist narrative not only appropriated the European paradigm of a gendered nation, but also ritualized the imaged of "woman-as-nation" (Zutshi 128).

Examining Nehru's *The Discovery of India*, I wish to critically analyze the need for the 'discovery' by "an alien critic" (50), as Nehru called himself, "soaked in Western culture," who wants to "find his roots" (Gopal 788). As he himself accepts in his *Discovery*, his approach towards India was "via the West" (50). Being an Indian he wants to 'discover' that very India. In order to understand Indian culture, he revisits the past without effacing the colonial discourse of an 'eternal' 'glorious' Indian past. The term 'discovery' gradually transformed from geographical lexicon to a cultural metaphor of identity. Nehru often adopts the Orientalist's view of India and he retains the stereotypes depicted in their discourse. His Indian is "lethargic" and passive and he intends to "waken them up" from their slumber to force them into patriotic action (472).

Nationalism is a resistance in Homi Bhabha's sense of mimicry. It is appropriation and reformation of the Other "as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha 86). The distorted image of the colonizer produced attempts to dislocate its Other through parody, "mockery" and "mimicry" (Young 188). Such a resistance is able to 'speak' from the authorised 'sites,' that is, where the "presence" or the "centre" in Derridean terms articulates the cultural identity of the Other (Derrida 90). In this way the "observer becomes the observed" (Bhabha 89). Nevertheless, it is "hybridity that makes visible the denied knowledges," and subverts the dominant colonial discourse of authority (114) "Hybridity" is an invention in the cultural space

of colonial authority and expresses the colonial and the indigenous knowledge simultaneously. Nehru's sense of a dual identity, that is, an "alien critic" anxious to define his 'Indianness' is ambiguous in its desire to resemble and differ (Nehru 50). Nehru was constantly disturbed in identifying with the Indian masses. His anglicized education made him a "mimic man" (Bhabha 87). Nehru's anticolonial approach was therefore articulated from a "hybrid" position. His 'hybrid' sojourn in the Discovery was instructed by colonial documentation.

The puzzle of the staying power of Indian civilization and the difference between Indian and Western society had been explicitly formulated within the Oriental essence of village India. Although the essences became a part of the nationalist discourse, it was given an "essentialist twist" in favour of the Indians (Breckenridge and Veer 11). For instance, Nehru regards the uniqueness of India in the continuity of its culture. Overwhelmed by the preservation of Indian culture, he appreciates the "unsubdued and unconquered" spirit of India. (Nehru 563). The Discovery spells out assimilation, tolerance and community living – village and caste system – as the mainstay of Indian cultural identity. Nehru's focus is akin to village and caste system – as the mainstay of Indian cultural identity. Nehru's focus is akin to Gandhi's vision of an idyllic village community where the rural life was highly organized and there was no coercive hierarchy. Gandhi's metaphor of "oceanic circles" substantiates his blue print for rural administration (Gandhi, Collected Works 85: 33). Nehru too shares Gandhi's vision of village government and concentrated on village administration. It was the organized and autonomous government at the rural level practiced in ancient India that served as a prototype for Nehru's construction of a democratic India.

Besides the interpretation of the Indian past, the issue of gender provides the colonial masters a discursive terrain to highlight the "degraded" and "objectionable" Hindu customs such as the sati (Kopf 103). Not only did it justify colonialism that is committed to "elevate the moral and intellectual character" (Cited in Veer 44) of the natives but it also confirms women as textually codified and embodiment of spirituality (Mani 94-5). Therefore, the condemnation of the status of Indian women enables the colonizers to reinterpret Indian traditions and assert their own identity. Nehru struggled to understand the symbol of *Bharat Mata*. His traditional self branded India with a "feminised identity" (Singh 154). In context of such an identity he wrote: "She is a myth and an idea, a dream and a vision, and yet very real and present and pervasive [...] shameful and repellent" (Nehru 563). It is striking to note the tenor of a nationalist whose imagined India is mystified in femininity. The idiom of *Bharat Mata* bespeaks of a nationalist who identified India in terms of gender. Moreover, Nehru fancies *Bharat* as "the holy land of the Hindus" (Gopal and Iyengar 514). Interestingly, such an essentialist evocation of India is similar to Gandhi's image of India as a holy land.

What I conclude is that as a reaction of a dent to their self-esteem at the hands of the Orientalists, the nationalists asserted a 'pristine' cultural identity within the parameters of a spiritual discourse. This promoted a tactic construction and the take over of the trope of imagination from Eurocentric to Indocentric activity. The nationalist discourse emerged from the mythical and religious

connotations of India's past. Faith, a political agenda in the guise of religion, manipulated and programmed a pan-Indian identity. Colonialism did not invent the Indian traditions and knowledge, but it characterised India as fundamentally religious, case-oriented and as a village society. In fact, these were the main co-ordinates which figured in the Orientalist texts and later shaped the counter discourse of nationalism.

By involving the past, the nationalists like Gandhi and Nehru provoked people into action. Shared beliefs and common ancestry were the important determinants of national identity. A reference to the pre-existing notions of religion, in particular, aroused sentiments akin to what a person feels towards a family. This was central to national solidarity and communal consciousness. The denigration of Indian civilization made the quest for identity all the more pertinent. To liberate Indians from the awe of British culture, these nationalists evoked an assertion of a pure' past. They endorsed nationalistic modes of analysis in the understanding of Indian culture to dislodge the privileged position of Western epistemology. The modes consisted of reviving a past that pictured India in mystical terms. This 'spiritual' India was a 'site' of power struggle between the colonizer and the colonized. Both Gandhi and Nehru located India within the spiritual core, but unlike the colonizers, they appealed to a common culture that united the masses and led them from subjugation to freedom.

In arresting a classical Indian past and its subsequent decline, social reform vectors the course of the nationalists and the colonialists. Implicit in the reforms are elitist appropriation that tend to speak for the entire nation. Interestingly, nationalism endorses the Orientalist's evidences and archaeological surveys. The canonical Hindu scriptures, widely translated and circulated by Orientalist scholars, became textual standards for the nationalist discourse. This is not to proclaim Indian nationalism as a second-hand or caricature of European epistemology. Despite the narratives of collective consciousness invoked by the nationalists, the search for the roots of Indian culture was appropriated within the Orientalist space.

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