

The Darjeeling Limited: Critiquing Orientalism on the Train to Nowhere

By Nandana Bose

Wes Anderson's latest offering, *The Darjeeling Limited* (2007) represents a significant contribution towards de-mystifying the Orient and critiquing Orientalism through farce, self-reflexivity and comic, intertextual resonancesⁱ. Co-written by Roman Coppola and Jason Schwartzman, *The Darjeeling Limited* is a finely-tuned critique of American materialism, emotional vacuity, and lack of spiritualism. It can also be read as a tribute to Satyajit Ray's films, which, according to Anderson, "were part of what inspired [him] to try to make movies in the first place."ⁱⁱ

On one level the film is a simple—even clichéd—story of the three estranged Whitman brothers, Jack, Francis and Peter, (Jason Schwartzman, Owen Wilson, and Adrien Brody respectively) who embark on a "spiritual journey" through India by trainⁱⁱⁱ in order to find themselves and their elusive mother, to bond with each other, and, to quote Wilson's character, Francis, "to say yes to everything" (Amsden 4). Through their many misadventures and antics, both on and off the eponymous Darjeeling Limited, the three men lament the recent death of their father, their angst, and their fractured family's irreconcilable problems prior to their reunion. Their unexpected brush with death while attempting to save an Indian boy leads to a chain of self-revelatory moments that foresee a possible reconciliation for the brothers, but not before they find themselves running after yet another train, the *Bengal Lancer*.

Said's Orientalism and India

Closer reading of the film reveals greater depths and inter-textual allusions beneath this apparently simplistic plot and its farcical elements. From a non-Western, Indian perspective, I contend that *The Darjeeling Limited* turns Orientalism and its inherent notions of the exotic East/"Other" on its head. My ideas of Orientalism in the Indian context is indebted to Edward Said's 1978 groundbreaking work *Orientalism*:

The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences.... Unlike the Americans, the French and the British...have had a long tradition of what I shall be calling *Orientalism*, a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western experience. The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other. In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience. (Said 1-2)

Although Said's work primarily focuses on the Middle East and Arabic world, India has always been and continues to be integral to the West's imaginative depiction of the mysterious and exotic "otherness" of the East. Said mentions how Orientalism was originally closely tied to British imperialism and colonialism in India:

To speak of Orientalism therefore is to speak mainly, although not exclusively, of a British and French cultural enterprise, a project whose dimensions take in such

disparate realms as the imagination itself, the whole of India and the Levant, the Biblical texts and the Biblical lands... Orientalism derives from a particular closeness experienced between Britain and France and the Orient, which until the early nineteenth century had really meant only India and the Bible lands. (Said 4)

Orientalism in Film

Orientalism as a “style of thought” based on the dichotomy between the Orient and the Occident, the East and the West, was such a powerful and pervasive European ideological creation that its stereotypes and myths influenced all registers of knowledge, becoming “the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, ‘mind’, destiny and so on” (Said 1-2). As Bernstein observes:

Western narrative and ethnographic cinemas of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries inherited the narrative and visual traditions, as well as the cultural assumptions, on which Orientalism was based, and filmmakers discovered how popular Orientalism could be. (Bernstein and Studlar 3)

From the early days of cinema, Hollywood has provided fertile ground for engendering Orientalist cultural assumptions through the production of films using exotic locales and femme fatales, such as the Orientalist fictions of George Melies, the Douglas Fairbanks film *Thief of Bagdad* (1924), Paramount’s *She’s a Sheik* (1927), and Universal’s *Arabian Nights* (1942) to name just a few in a rich history of cinematic peddling of the Oriental. Ella Shohat observes “how the social pressures that resulted in Hollywood’s self-censorship compelled filmmakers to exoticize and erotize the Third World” by adopting a rape-fantasy structure that evades official Western courtship (Bernstein and Studlar 3-5). As Bernstein points out, “Orientalism ... continue[d] to infiltrate new genres and film series as the decades progressed, turning up in the exotic background to film noirs like *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) and *Chinatown* (1974) and informing spy thrillers like the James Bond series” (Bernstein and Studlar 4). Thus, Hollywood and other Western cinema played a major role in Orientalizing the Orient (Said 6). David Lean’s *A Passage to India* (1984) and Merchant Ivory productions in India such as *Heat and Dust* (1983) have been criticized for articulating Western investments in Orientalist ideology, for perpetuating the Oriental-Occidental binary, and for contributing to the West’s romanticizing and myth-making of the East.^{iv}

Bernstein opines that “cultural critics and theorists have taken up Orientalism as an intriguing and compelling paradigm for the representation of race, ethnicity, and gender in the media and particularly in film” (Bernstein and Studlar 4-5). I locate a critique of this paradigm of Orientalism in Anderson’s trademark technique of exaggeration and hyperbole in characterization, situations, cinematography, lighting, color and mise-en-scene, which has often been the source of subversive comedy, irony and humor.

Hyperbole and Hyper-Reality as Critique

I argue that the exaggerated use of the time-worn “Western” signifiers of Indian-ness—the iconic images of the snake, the elephant, the huge garlands, the alluring Indian woman—is Anderson’s way of laughing at the West’s stereotypical representations of the intrigue and mystique that India and the East have come to symbolize. It shows the innate stupidity and

futility of Westerners who are naive enough to embark on a so-called spiritual journey of self-discovery through “mystic, spiritual East/India” that cannot possibly lead to anything because it is doomed to failure and nothingness from the very beginning. The objective as stated by Francis is to “find ourselves and bond better” by visiting temples and spiritual places, which is at best a self-defeating purpose and might possibly explain the sense of emotional vacuity experienced at the conclusion of the film.

The surfeit of iconic signifiers; the warm, rich texture; the riot of lurid colors (such as the vibrant blue painted interiors of the village huts and the train), beautifully captured by Robert Yeoman’s photography; the chaos and the rhythm (or often the lack of it) all possibly signify the heightened senses of someone experiencing India for the first time. Anderson’s meticulous attention to minute details—the ornate interiors of a train satiated with Indian iconography, patterns, and Rajasthani artifacts hand-painted and crafted by local artisans; the chandelier—adorned dining car with miniature Mughal paintings, and intricate wood-carved interiors; the chaotic, congested scenes of traffic, both human and vehicular, and the semi-urban sprawl - creates such exaggerated emphases on the authentic and “the real” that it enters the realm of hyper-reality. It is almost too real to be believable.

Locating the Sources of Subversion through Farce

From Aristotle to Bergson, comedy in the narrative arts has been located in situation (in the sense of plot), language, and character (Cohn 11). According to the French philosopher Henri Bergson (1859–1941), who analyzed the dialectic of comedy in his essay <http://www.britannica.com/eb/topic?idxStructId=332299&typeId=13> *Laughter* (1900), one of the conditions essential for the comic is that the spectator remains insensible to the character’s condition, because laughter is incompatible with emotion (or “the absence of feeling”) (Bergson). Farce creates distance instead of identification so that it is possible to laugh at the predicament of the protagonists and their idiosyncrasies, foibles and follies. Bermel points out that, “Farce has two main laughter-releasing mechanisms: characters who are only partially engaging, and the improbable situations in which they are caught up” (Bermel 22). These mechanisms find ample expression in Anderson’s quirky universe. Elements of incongruity (trying to fit in by wearing head scarves inside the *gudwara* [Sikh temple] which only make them look more conspicuous as the other worshippers are without head-dresses); farcical situations (thrown out of the train for concealing a poisonous snake and stranded in front of a booking window in the rural obscurity of a Rajasthan village called Dhelana); accoutrement (the designer leather cases); horseplay (breaking up a fight with pepper-spray) and impromptu buffoonery (the charade with Francis’ expensive leather belt) all contribute towards a sense of detachment that enables the audience to appreciate the comic situations in which the Whitman brothers find themselves.

The perception of incongruity becomes one of the primary sources of laughter. A key sequence depicts Indian children on roof-tops, diegetic spectators who assume the position of the non-Western viewer, laughing at the obvious awkwardness and discomfiture of the three brothers who are clearly marked as foreign/Other, attired in their crisp suits that are incongruous in the heat of Rajasthan, heavy garlands hanging like nooses around their necks and sporting red *tikkas* (dots) on their foreheads. Observing how “farce unrolls in settings that keep the characters feeling unsteady” (Bermel 33), Bermel elaborates on how a farcical character is often placed by its author (or director in this case):

...on unfamiliar terrain where he appears odd and outnumbered...He is different from everybody else. His clothes,...his accent, his manners can make him look like an intruder...This sort of incapacity, being lost or not belonging, singles the character out when he would rather remain inconspicuous. (Bermel 24-25)

The Whitman brothers have shades of the Marx brothers^v about them in their horseplay and buffoonery, examples of which include their weird ceremonial gestures, absurd yogic stances and rituals involving the peacock feathers and throwing stones at the disappearing train.^{vi} As Bermel comments, “Farce flouts the bounds of reason, good taste, fairness, and what we commonly think of as sanity” (Bermel 21).

The Darjeeling Limited is a comedy of character and of situation that creates quirky protagonists enmeshed in amusing complications, primarily of their own making. The contrasting physiognomies, physiques and temperaments of the three brothers--the simmering melancholy of Jack and Peter and the controlling, restless nature of Francis--caught in unreal situations and “shaky environment” produces the desired comic effect (Bermel 33).

Apart from farce, the film draws on other comic traditions such as elements drawn from the “theatre of the absurd,” as exemplified by the plays of Samuel Beckett (Cohn 11- 17), a comic strain that is epitomized by the train getting lost in the middle of the desert leading to the ironic, epiphanic realization by Francis: “We haven’t located us yet”:

Jack: What did he say?

Peter: He said the train is lost.

Jack: How can a train be lost? It’s on rails.

As the film proceeds, Peter Sarstedt’s melodious song, “Where Do You Go To My Lovely,” is imbued with comic resonance as audiences recognise the tune to be an integral part of Jack’s seduction routine. Francis’s idiosyncratic refrain “Can we agree to that?” becomes yet another source of laughter that is later revealed as an inherited trait from his mother.

It may be argued that *Darjeeling Limited* comes close to “drowning in quirk,” an aesthetic defined by Michael Hirschorn in the *Atlantic Monthly* as the “embrace of the odd against the blandly mainstream.” Citing Anderson’s films as a prime example, Hirschorn claims that the problem with quirk is that it “can quickly go from an effective narrative tool to an end in itself” (Amsden 3). However, there is a critique couched in the apparent frivolity that quirk brings to this film, which is a pastiche that employs the parodic practices of self-reflexivity and intertextuality to offer another way of looking at the East/India, where the fight for survival compels children to risk their lives eking out a livelihood (symbolized by the shoe-shine boy who runs off with one of Francis’s precious loafers).

Objects as Characters

According to Bermel, “farce shrinks the difference in consciousness between objects and people” (Bermel 27). The fetishistic use of objects in Anderson’s world is, quite obviously, for comedic purpose, and in keeping with the tradition of farce wherein “objects are would-be actors,” playing a continuing, thematic role; recurring in and out of the action much like the characters do (Bermel 28-29). Some of the objects that thematically reappear in Anderson’s eccentric universe are the eleven leather suitcases designed by Marc Jacobs for Louis Vuitton; the deceased father’s glasses, car keys, razors, and later, through flashback, his

Porsche; the perfume, Voltaire No. 6; Francis' \$6,000 leather belt and \$3,000 loafers (all obvious signifiers of decadence and consumerism), Hyno-aid tablets; Narco Cough, Francis' bottle of pain killer; the snake-containing box painted with the skull and bones insignia, which becomes Peter's appendage; the printer and laminating machine; and the pepper spray used to break-up a brotherly brawl.

De-Orientalizing the Mystique of the Oriental Woman

The film also explodes the myth of the elusive, seductive yet paradoxically chaste Indian/Oriental woman. As Said summarized in his work in 1985, "...the Orient was routinely described as feminine, its riches as fertile, its main symbols the sensual woman" (Berstein and Studlar 3). Rita's overt markers of Indian-ness—her sultry and earthy features and skin tone accentuated by her huge kohl-lined eyes—confound Orientalist depictions of women as she has sex with a stranger (Jack) in a lavatory, smokes, is fluent in English, and has a boyfriend (the unfathomable, snake-catching, chief steward of the train played by Waris Ahluwalia) who she plans to break up with. She speaks her mind, is impatient when Jack wants to talk to her, and shows more sense than him in covering up their tryst in the toilet. This is in sharp contrast to Said's analysis of Flaubert's encounter with an Egyptian courtesan which, according to him:

... produced a widely influential model of the Oriental woman; she never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence, or history. He spoke for and represented her. He was foreign, comparatively wealthy, male, and these were historical facts of domination that allowed him not only to possess Kuchuk Hanem physically but to speak for her and tell his readers in what way she was "typically Oriental." (Said 6)

Rita, played by the luscious-lipped Amara Khan, undercuts romantic expectations traditionally associated with the Oriental woman by the ordinariness of her sexual encounter. Thus her traditional, "authentic" Indian appearance is incompatible with her brazen, "Western" behavior, and this contrast is yet another source of comic irony.

Huston as Nun: Comic and Orientalist Inter-textuality

Laughter arises from comic association--the casting of Angelica Huston as the unlikely nun recalls the black comedy of *The Addams Family* (1991) and *the Addams Family Values* (1993), films that are, quite significantly, about dysfunctional and eccentric family members much like the filial relations and sibling jealousies and rivalry depicted in *The Darjeeling Limited*. Huston carries intertextual baggage for the informed viewer who discerns at once that her evangelical zeal cannot be taken seriously.

The Orientalist dimension to Christian missionaries in India who found themselves bearing the "white man's burden" to educate natives is important to my argument. Christian missionaries have long been acknowledged for their role in exoticizing the East and in strengthening "the relation between Occident and Orient [which] is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony" (Said 5). Ella Shohat refers to "the civilizing mission" of British nuns in India as depicted in Powell and Pressburger's Orientalist film *The Black Narcissus* (Bernstein and Studlar 40). By casting Huston as the nun, Anderson makes a mockery of this Orientalist discourse and undermines the West's:

...creation of a series of stereotypical images, according to which Europe (the West, the 'self') is seen as being essentially rational, developed, humane, superior, authentic, active, creative and masculine, while the orient (the East, the 'other') (a sort of surrogate, underground version of the West or the 'self') is seen as being irrational, aberrant, backward, crude, despotic, inferior, inauthentic, passive, feminine and sexually corrupt. (Macfie 4)

Desperately Seeking Salvation

A turning point in the meandering narrative occurs when the trio chance upon three boys whose raft capsizes in a swollen river. Despite the brothers' attempt to save them, Mukesh, one of the boys, drowns. The brothers carry the body to the boys' village, where they are invited to attend the funeral. Suddenly the brothers' bickering and angst is replaced by a sense of sadness and a burgeoning self-awareness that colors the rest of their journey, evoking memories of their father's funeral a year before. Death is accepted with quiet resignation and dignity by the villagers no matter how premature it is, as depicted by the cremation of Mukesh, whom Peter attempted to rescue from the turbulent river. This acceptance and resignation is in stark contrast to Peter's failed attempts to come to terms with his own father's death. Peter's use of his father's sunglasses and razor symbolizes an excessive material attachment and a need to shed his excess baggage, both literal and metaphoric, in his spiritual quest. As Francis says, they have "still got a lot of healing to do," both physical and emotional.

The Indian landscape performs a choric function, a primordial, timeless presence against which the three brothers play out their petty vexations. The brothers experience the full cycle of death and birth, symbolized by a newborn baby placed on a reluctant Peter's lap. Comedy arises not only from Peter's woebegone physiognomy and the visual juxtaposition of the frail baby against his reed-like, masculine physique, but also from the knowledge that he has been running away from his imminent parental duties; he is soon to become a father, and yet he has deserted his pregnant wife, Alice. Hence comic irony emanates from a combination of hilarity and desperation, as Peter's past catches up with him in the most unusual and unexpected circumstances--in a rural Indian village.

Conclusion

Said observes how the media is complicit in perpetuating the myth of the Orient: "One aspect of the electronic, postmodern world is that there has been the reinforcement of the stereotypes by which the Orient is viewed. Television, the films and all the media's resources have forced information into more and more standardized molds" (Said 26). However, despite such media predilection for cultural stereotyping, Anderson succeeds in mocking the Orientalist prism through which India is often refracted in Western discourses.^{vii} The film takes an overtly Orientalist premise of seeking spiritual growth in India as its starting point and then subverts it through the course of the film by ridiculing such an intent through comic characterization and the farcical situations, actions and reactions of its main protagonists--three white men desperately seeking short-cuts to salvation or *nirvana*. Anderson's treatment is epitomized by an articulation of an Orientalist cliché that is defanged as it is mouthed by the comic Peter character: "I love the way this country smells. I'll never forget it. It's kind of spicy."

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Notes

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ⁱ Besides comic intertextuality in the film, it is replete with allusions, visual, aural and situational, to the films of the renowned Indian director Satyajit Ray, particularly to *Sonar Kella* (1974) or the “Golden Fortress,” which is based on a detective novel written by Ray in 1971 and set in the Rajasthan desert areas of Jodhpur and Jaisalmer. The bandaged face of Francis recalls the injured Dr. Hajra, who sports identical face bandages in *Sonar Kella*, and the train journey through Rajasthan (Robinson 234) is reminiscent of the adventures of the detective Feluda, his teenage nephew Topse and the comic character, Jatayu encountered on a train en route to the eponymous Golden Fortress in Jaisalmer and in the deserts of Rajasthan. The soundtrack of *Darjeeling Limited* is a compilation of the title music from several Ray films such as *Teen Kanya* (1961), *Charulata* (1964), *Jalsaghar* (1958), and *Joi Baba Felunath* (1978); and Merchant Ivory productions, *The Householder* (1963), *Shakespeare Wallah* (1965) and *Bombay Talkie* (1970).

ⁱⁱ Mentioned in the booklet accompanying the audio CD of the original soundtrack for *The Darjeeling Limited*. By some strange coincidence, Anderson was inspired to film in India after viewing Jean Renoir’s “lush and evocative” (Amsden) 1951 film, *The River*, at the behest of Martin Scorsese, which is the very same film that inspired a young Ray to develop his neo-realist oeuvre whilst observing Renoir during its shoot (Robinson 69). Ray has often mentioned Renoir’s considerable influence on his craft in his writings and biographies. Anderson’s use of the rich palette of Indian colours is both a tribute and an appropriation of Renoir’s Technicolor. See Marie Seton’s biography, *Portrait of a Director: Satyajit Ray* (1971) and Ray’s book, *Our Films, Their Films* (1976) for more details.

ⁱⁱⁱ Wes Anderson has probably been on or at least heard of the “Palace on Wheels,” a luxury train similar to the Orient Express, running from Delhi through Rajasthan that only affluent foreign tourists can afford. The mise-en-scene bears close resemblance to the ostentatious interiors of the “Palace on Wheels”.

^{iv} See Parama Roy, “Reading Communities and Culinary Communities: The Gastropoetics of the South Asian Diaspora,” *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 10.2 (2002).

^v According to Albert Bermel, “The Marx Brothers also look out of place; they seem even to resent being stuck with one another,” much like the Whitman Brothers (Bermel 25).

^{vi} This directly references a situation in *Sonar Kella* when the detective, his side-kick and the comic character find themselves stranded, described by Ray’s biographer thus: “scenes around a tiny railway-station in the middle of nowhere, as the trio settle down to a long wait for the train that is due in the small hours” (Robinson 236) which transposes to Anderson’s *Dhelana*.

^{vii} For Orientalist constructions of India see Ronald Inden, ‘Orientalist Constructions of India’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 20, 3, 1986; Aijaz Ahmad, ‘Between Orientalism and Historicism’, *Studies in History*, 7, 1, n.s., 1991; Carol A. Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer, *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press) 1993; and, Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion* (London: Routledge) 1999.

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