

The Oriental Propaganda

A Postcolonial Reading Of Modern Myths - Batman And Doctor Strange

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Abstract

It has been more than four decades since Edward Said discussed about Orientalism in his book. Orientalism, as a discourse opened up the academic platform to discuss the necessity to let the people speak for themselves. It highlighted the importance of not letting the East be represented by the West which in most cases was a comparative representation. And it also highlighted the importance of a non-biased representation in a post-imperial world. Since then, the idea of the Oriental East has undergone numerous modifications along with the changed across the globe. And stories played a major part in it. Stories that were written by the East and of the East became a major source for reading the East through their own words. But the West still continues to represent the East in the manner exactly similar that existed four decades ago. While representations of the “authentic” East is promoted, there is still a huge popularity when it comes to the Western representations of the East. The following paper discusses two such stories that are prevalent today and are consumed worldwide. The paper discusses the Western graphic novels gaining in on the story telling market, construction of the modern myths by mass acceptance and representation of the Oriental East in the classic Saidian way. The paper also discusses the implications of the continuation of such feudal representations in a neo-colonial world and provides a possible alternative.

Keywords: PostColonial, Orientalism, Edward Said, DC Comics, Marvel Comics, Batman, Stephen Strange

Introduction

“The only thing Oriental about me is my face” ~ Soong May-Ling

From snake charmers to black magic, from mystic powers to resurrections, from cow herders to cannibals there have been numerous representations of the East that were established and propagated by the West century after century. The representation of the Oriental East which propagates the exaggeration of the differences between the Orient and the Occident has been into existence and practice since time eternal whether be it the ways the Oriental beliefs are represented or be it the practices. And since the longest time, the Oriental discourse has remained the representation of the East as compared to the West. For most of the past, the discourse put the Occident and the Orient on a pedestal describing the feudality of the Orient as compared to the Occident and thus the Occident almost always being portrayed as the savior of the Orient, better than the Orient and likewise. The ideas of the Occident being the sole savior of the Orient was used as propaganda to justify colonisation for most of the history. And it is when the post colonial world emerged that the discourse was established as a field more than just representation of the East by the West.

With the emergence of the new world, colonialism was is now no more dominion over a territorial state using military force. Colonialism has now become a soft power. A way of showcasing superiority of one territorial state over another not in terms of the armed forces but in

terms of its culture, arts and other socio-political aspects. Such methods of influencing a developing country using globalisation, capitalism and cultural imperialism rather than using direct military control is called Neo-colonialism. Neo-colonialism is much more lethal as it influences the territorial states through ideological apparatus which leads to subversion of the native ideologies and their identity. Neo-colonialism does not directly enforce any regulation that leads to the loss of identity of a territorial state but influences the state through various soft ideological apparatuses like art and culture et al. Neo-colonialism thus not only puts the developing state under a constant pressure of getting at par with the Western states, it also ingrains the notion of inferiority in its subjects which in turn leads to a confused status in terms of the ideologies that should be catered to.

With the rise in neo-colonialism, the representation of the East has also undergone major modifications. No more is the East a singular Oriental entity. Afghanistan in the East is now quite different than South Korea in the East. And it is no more just the Western English countries who are a part of the neo-colonial propaganda. For instance, the massive cultural wave of South Korea entering India through the North-East was an example of neo-colonialism, wherein Korea was trying to cater to the North-Eastern Mongoloid community to appreciate their culture and follow it and propagate it throughout the country to establish a cultural stronghold in the Indian subcontinent and now the Korean wave has successfully been scaled throughout the country. And thus a crucial part of such neo-colonial agenda is the propagation of the history through art, and when history is propagated a components that has been observed to attract most people's attention are the stories about the myths, legends and heroes. And thus, in this neo-colonial era we have two distinct categories of mythical heroes.

The ancient myths and heroes are the ones that have existed since the time man has known how to speak. Legends of heroes and villains were imprinted by the ancient man on the walls of the caves in the form of murals. Legends of heroes and villains were handed down orally from generation to generation and more legends were written down, on stones, on barks or dried leaves et al. The legends that survived time, that survived for more than at least a century are ancient myths, are stories created by the ancient man. And those stories were not merely meant for entertainment. Those myths were supposed to help the ancient to look up to for strength and motivation. Those myths were the way of the ancient man to keep the memories alive through time. And those myths were created so that the ancient man could at least have someone to look up to. And in a similar manner, in today's world we are creating our own myths. We are creating the modern myths. We are creating stories to look up to, to keep the memories alive and also to have stories of "Super" men that can be told through time eternal henceforth, just like the legend of Hercules, just like the legend of Poseidon, just like million more such legends that have existed since ancient times, we are now creating our own myths in our attempts to sustain through time. And it is these modern myths that are being propagated throughout the entire world at a massive speed. And thus it becomes imperative to look at these modern myths closely so as to know whether the representations are genuine or are they still as feudal as they were before. And what might be the implications if the same ideologies are propagated in today's neo-colonial world. Thus, one of the widely accepted artform that is creating modern myths for us can be looked at to understand the representations that is being propagated in today's time. The western graphic novel series.

DC and Marvel Comics

“This. This is what I am. This is who I am. Come hell or high water, if I deny it, I deny everything I’ve ever done, everything I’ve ever fought for” ~ Green Arrow, Green Arrow Vol. 2

With the golden age of comic books taking the world by storm, it was in 1938 when the Detective Comics Inc. launched the action comics series which introduced the world to “Superman” the first of its kind modern English legend. Malcolm Nicholson founded the National Allied Publications which later went on to become bankrupt, forcing Nicholson out and being taken up by Detective Comics Inc. Superman was the first English modern legend which was widely accepted by the masses (much as a result of the Golden Age of comics) and which is still fetching millions of followers. With the ages (golden, silver and bronze) passing by for comic books, DC comics began reforming a lot of its characters so that it suits the public demand and taste that has developed over time. DC entertainment, a subsidiary of the Warner Bros. was founded in 2009 as an attempt to bring the modern myths on the silver screen for the masses to consume. And thus, the modern myths from being selectively available to certain groups of people became available for most of us across the globe.

Another company established by Martin Goodman under the name Timely Publications in 1939, also began publishing similar action graphic novels in English which brought into picture even more modern myths. The Timely Publications is now known as the Marvel Comics. The first modern mythical legend that they published were the Human torch and Sub-mariner Namor. Similar to the DC comics, Marvel entertainment, a subsidiary of the Marvel comics was bought by Disney in 2009 so that the stories could be brought on the big screen for everyone to watch.

And thus, both the DC and the Marvel gained huge fanbase over a period of time, and even more with these new motion picture contracts. Hence, while earlier these myths were only for a few groups of people are now available for everyone in various ways. And with an ever-growing fanbase for either companies, it also becomes important to see what ideas are they propagating. And how the ideas that they are propagating are at times far from being modern and inclusive and are completely feudal as they used to be in the past, and yet being widely accepted by the masses. Thus, two characters from either of these publications' comics shall be looked at in order to understand what are the ideas about the Orient that are being propagated in these modern myths and how much influence they are from the age old Saidian Orientalist ideas along with the aspects of cultural penetration and influence.

Batman and Nanda Parbat

“You either die a hero or live long enough to see yourself become a villain” ~ Batman

Batman was introduced in the DC comics soon after Superman in 1939 by Bob Kane and Bill Finger. Bruce Wayne, the secret identity of Batman is a playboy, philanthropist and a billionaire who inherits the Wayne Enterprises after his father's death. Batman works out of the fictional city of Gotham and more than a superhero is identified as a vigilante. Batman was accepted and applauded by the masses. There were several storylines for Batman which included various other characters like Robin, Cat woman et al. In the 1950s, the Batman series turned darker as he was made to suffer hallucinations with extensive mind-bending gases and sensory deprivation training. Later, in the Batman R.I.P (The final crisis), the character of Bruce Wayne as Batman dies a painful death and his protege Dick Grayson becomes the new Batman. And it is in 2010, Batman: The return of Bruce Wayne that has Bruce Wayne travelling through history

and come back to life in the present time. And it is here that we have the representation of the exotic and mystic Orient, the Nanda Parbat coming into picture that shall be discussed and analysed for its representation in the current neo-colonial period.

Nanda Parbat is a fictional city that first appeared in the Strange Adventures number 205 in October 1967. Nanda Parbat is the hidden city in the Hindu Kush range. From the descriptions in the novels and further, the part that it plays in most storylines the place is a classic example of the Saidian Orient. Nanda Parbat is a place of healing and enlightenment. The place is protected by the goddess-like figure Rama Kushna and other monks who possess mystical powers. The notion of time is cyclical in Nanda Parbat and hence the monks in the place are firm believers of reincarnation as well as mystic powers of the soul. Time also moves at a pace much faster than the world outside the Nanda Parbat. The place was introduced in a storyline where Rama Kushna was responsible for turning a White man named Boston Brand into a mystical character named Deadman. And it is Deadman who is required to come back to the Nanda Parbat time and again to save the place from external threats. Nanda Parbat can only be reached using an invisible map which is scattered in the form of a tattoo, parchment, poem and a birthmark among other such totems. Over the long history of DC comics, various characters have been to Nanda Parbat, which includes Batman, the Green Arrow, Barry Allen et al. And what can be observed are the development of certain distinct mystical attributes that these characters develop after staying in the Nanda Parbat.

A few instances that highlight the exoticizing of the Orient and representing them solely through the mystic element as is understood by the West are as follows: The Judo master lived in the Nanda Parbat and thus attained the ability to remain as youthful as he was when he reached

there forever. The Crimson Avenger during his stay at Nanda Parbat had a vision about the death of Superman. Batman as well as the Green Arrow were resurrected from the dead at the Nanda Parbat, because of which, post resurrection they were endowed with certain mystical powers. Bruce Wayne, during his stay in Nanda Parbat learned the craft of Martial Arts from Ra's Al Ghul and his disciples, using his photographic memory to memorize more than hundred forms of martial arts that helped him in his vigilante endeavours back in Gotham city. While, Bruce Wayne did not possess any superhuman powers, post his encounter at Nanda Parbat he grew extra-sensory powers that enabled him to fight better. In Batman #663, he also uses a *Mantra* (prayer) that he learned at Nanda Parbat to resurrect a man from death. In that issue he also attains the state of utmost serenity called *Nirvikalpa Samadhi* to unravel the pattern in Joker's villainous acts and apprehend him. Similar to Deadman, Batman (also Green Arrow and other characters who had been to Nanda Parbat) returned to Nanda Parbat time and again to save the place from getting destroyed by external forces.

In the recent televised versions of these stories, Nanda Parbat was shown to have a pond with water that supposedly had mystic powers to resurrect anyone from the dead, but the implications being complete loss of memory along with seriously aggravated feelings of aggression and hostility. The monks of Nanda Parbat were chosen to protect the place from anyone who had ill intentions. Although, it can be argued that the initial representations of the Nanda Parbat and the stories revolving around it were Saidian in representation as they were written at a time quite close to when Orientalism was written but even today the representation has not changed as the stories still highlight the mystical elements of the place and it is still

Batman, Green Arrow or the other superheroes who need to come to the place and save it every time there is an attack on the place.

Doctor Strange and Tibet

“Death is what life gives a meaning to know your days are numbered, your time is short”

~ Doctor Stephen Strange

Doctor Stephen Strange first appeared in the Marvel comics series, Strange Tales number 110 in July 1963. Doctor Strange is the Sorcerer Supreme and the primary protector of Earth against magical and mystical threats. Written by Steve Ditko and Stan Lee, Doctor Strange was written during the Silver Age of comic books that introduced the theme of mysticism in the Marvel comics. Like Batman in DC, Doctor Stephen Strange was a genius doctor who damaged his nerves in an accident and lost his ability to perform surgeries. He searched across the globe to find a remedy and thus landed in Tibet at the hands of the Ancient One. The Ancient One was the Sorcerer Supreme then and was the holder of the time stone and was the Master of both the mystical arts as well as the martial arts. But, according to the prophecy, Doctor Stephen Strange was supposed to be the best amongst them. And thus, when Doctor Strange mastered the mystical magic arts and the martial arts, he became the Sorcerer Supreme. Apart from the time stone, which is one of the six infinity stones in the Marvel universe, Doctor Strange also possesses the cloak of levitation and the Eye of Agamotto that makes him the best sorcerer of all time. And hence, it is Doctor Strange who is always the one saving the Earth. After learning the mystical arts and becoming the Sorcerer Supreme, Doctor Strange returns back to New York and begins living in a mansion called the Sanctum Sanctorum. Lee and Ditko described the series as having black magic theme set up in far East.

The Ancient One, who was the mentor of Doctor Strange first appeared in Strange Tales number 110 in 1963. The character was born more than 500 years ago in a hidden high land in the Himalayas. His friend discovered the power of magic and wanted to conquer the nearby villages but upon disagreement between them, they cast a spell on the village which backfires resulting into banishing of the friend and revoking the immortality of the Ancient One. The prophecy was in play even then about the best sorcerer who would come and become the master of the power.

Thus, both Batman and Doctor Strange were white men, one of whom inherited an immensely massive property and the other who is a doctor. One who became a vigilante after his parents were murdered and the other who became a sorcerer after having an accident. But what is common for both the modern mythical heroes is the fact that they had to come to East which held the mystical powers to heal them and also provide them with necessary mystical powers to aid them in their endeavours. And in both cases, it was them who were the saviors of the Orient from their own destructive powers that they manifested. In both the cases, the Orient needed the Occident to assist them ward off the evil, which for most cases were manifested because of the mystical powers that they possess and practice. And thus, the implications of such representations must be taken into consideration before such ideas are naturalized across the world.

Implications

“The choices we make today have important implications.” ~ Adam White

While, both the characters have enjoyed massive success in both the comic books as well as the televised versions, it is essential to look at how the background of these storylines were

established. While Orientalism has slowly modified into new Orientalism which discusses about the current situation of the Orient by the Orient about conditions of Islamic states, the uprising of the neo-colonial world still has the classic representations of the Orient farther East. And these representations are not overtly visible, but are always veiled. And the storylines are such that they include the representations of the Orient in a manner that not only valorises them, but also describes them as the ones with the most powers. But what is essential to understand is that, while the Orient is depicted as the most powerful, it still is a white man who is required to assist the Oriental to save them from the evil, thus still establishing the classic Oriental idea of the white man as the savior of the East as they were destined to gain the powers and thus be able to save the Orient.

Thus, the modern myths are propagating the classic representation of the Orient veiled under exhaustive and rich plotlines. Thus, the ideas of the mystical East, of the magical powers that the East possesses, of the evil that such powers of the East might cast over the world, and of the white man becoming the saviour of the world after acquiring the powers from the Orient themselves is being propagated and more so widely accepted and appreciated by the masses. And this might lead to naturalization of the age-old Oriental ideas boosting the current wave of neo-colonization.

Conclusion and Discussion

“Finally, in conclusion let me just say this” ~ Peter Sellers

The Saidian concept of Orientalism has existed since a long time, representing the East through the eyes of the West. The representation was always such that it had a comparative perspective, wherein the Orient was always represented in a comparison to the Occident. And the

popular artforms, since a long time were propagating such Oriental representations across the globe. But, as the world understands the importance of letting everyone speak for themselves, it is imperative that the representations in the modern artforms also be authentic and not propagate the feudal representations. And with the emergence and widespread popularity of the modern myths of which the entire world is the witness, it is even more important that the representations not be prejudiced, especially when the majority of the consumers of such stories are the youngsters.

Thus, while the modern myths have obtained immense popularity within a decade, it can also be observed the representations that these stories have veiled under their extravagant plotlines and heroic endeavours. But, in consuming such stories without enquiring about such representations leads to unequivocal acceptance of such concepts regarding entire communities, further leading to internalization of such ideas and hence prejudice against such communities.

It is thus imperative that such representations be checked, and let the Orientals be their own heroes and not propagate the necessity that the Occidentals are the only saviours and thus break the stereotypical savior white man image and propagate just and balanced ideas.

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