

BENEVOLENT RACISM: CAN THE OTHER REPRESENT ITSELF?

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Abstract. *Power has given the West the 'legitimate right' to define the Other as 'savage' or 'backward', and therefore bring the enlightenment of its 'civilisation' by either exterminating or 'taming' the 'savages' of Africa, Australia and India, or by 'civilising' 'rogue nations' by bombs, which was the common practice throughout the XX century, and is bound to continue into the future. The process by which the West imposes various complexes upon non-western nations has to a great degree been effective. However, these attempts would have been futile without the help of the people who are only too willing to accept the Western notion of the backwardness of their own culture and tradition, and the dire need of having them replaced by 'progressive' Western models and ideas. Cultural colonisation is grounded in the belief that one culture is inferior and has to be annihilated and completely written over by another. When cultural domination is seen as the ultimate power the superior nation can have over another, there is no talk of reciprocal influences between cultures. There are only 'winner cultures' and 'loser cultures'. The same stands true of the current events in the Balkans, which have for decades been described and invented. When the silenced Other finally decides to speak and retell its own experience, it is with a distinct foreign accent.*

I was once listening to a lecture by an Egyptian colleague who presented her methods of teaching English to junior university students. She mentioned that she once played Vivaldi's *Spring* for her students to see how they would react to a piece of classical music. She asked the students to describe their feelings and the atmosphere they imagined while listening to the music. Most of them described pastoral scenes of brooks, trees in bloom and green grass. She commented, "But that's when in Egypt we have sand storms". She also pointed out that it was the very first time her students had ever heard a piece of classical music, whereupon a European colleague in the audience jumped up and said "Impossible!"

Egypt, as much as the rest of the colonial world, has been free long enough for a generation of students never to have seen a colonial governor, yet this incident illustrates the mechanism by which a colonial subject internalises images, ideas and traditions of the

colonising country, while completely disregarding his own culture. Additionally, it demonstrates how the European collective mentality cannot imagine that the rest of the world is unfamiliar with European culture.

The primary point in my study will be to demonstrate the West's continued attempts to re-colonise the world in many different ways than before. The media are primary tools the West uses to accomplish these ends. The people of the non-western world are bombarded with film images that have nothing to do with the reality they are immersed in and surrounded by. If an international TV channel, always broadcast from the West, broadcasts images of spring in the Northern Hemisphere, a sub-Saharan TV viewer will get the picture of what a 'proper' spring should be like. The same is true of almost any aspect of life or human experience.

Western images, experience, knowledge and especially literature and the arts, are shown as universal, of global interest and thus universally acceptable, even desired. Everything else is 'local', 'limited', or, in a word, 'exotic' - interesting, but not globally appealing. Works of art written or made by western authors are à priori considered valuable and 'universal', appealing to the public across the globe. A film about, let's say, the problems of the working class in Britain is supposed to relate to workers the world over. The same story set somewhere in Kenya or China will definitely be regarded as local and of no interest to a wider public.

Marie-Paule Ha, in her book review of *Occidentalism: A Theory of Counter-Discourse in Post-Mao China*, quotes the critic W. J. T. Mitchell. In his book *Postcolonial Culture, Postimperial Criticism*, Mitchell "attributes the success story of postcolonial Latin-American writers such as Carlos Fuentes and Gabriel Garcia Marquez to the *total absence of colonial provinciality in their work*, and the presence of a sophisticated cosmopolitanism, including an awareness of contemporary criticism".¹ The underlying assumption is that the highest possible values by which the worth of a work of art can be measured, are western cosmopolitanism and criticism. West-authored works of art are thus automatically labelled 'universal', while artists from non-Western countries have to *earn* the designation. Their primary means of achieving this is either by pandering to colonialist prejudices about their nations' inferiority in comparison with the West, or by being educated in the West, and therefore imbued with Western ideas.²

Writers and critics living in Third World countries who are not familiar with Western discourse are denied access to the arena of postcolonial studies, where the West is supposedly being 'subverted'. According to Marie-Paule Ha: "it is quite rare to find in these publications serious engagement with writers from postcolonial countries who do not use the languages or the theoretical apparatuses of the West."³ If such writers get published in the West in translation, they are classified in the category of 'area studies' and never seriously included in the debate about the postcolonial condition. The discourse is guided from the centre and it firmly remains in the centre. Although formally, the voice is given

¹ Marie-Paule Ha, *Occidentalism* (book reviews), Vol. 28 *Research in African Literatures*, 12-22: pp. 154 (11) (1997) Italics mine.

² See Chinua Achebe's essay 'Colonialist Criticism' in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, Bill Ashcroft, et al. eds., Routledge, London, 1997, pp. 57-61. He quotes the words of a Western critic who praised Yambo Oloquem's *Bound to Violence* for its 'universality', because Oloquem is "an African intellectual who has mastered both a style and a prevailing philosophy of French letters" and "remote alcoves of French philosophical discourse". p. 60.

³ Marie-Paule Ha, op. cit. p.157.

to anybody wishing to speak, through this strategy the *Other* is re-silenced and represented instead of being encouraged to truly present itself.

The West has different strategies through which it can always 'prove' its benevolence to those unwilling to delve deeper into the heart of the colonial matter. Statistically, there has been an increase in the number of artists of African or Asian origin who have been rewarded and acknowledged in the artistic world of the West. They are usually praised for 'bringing something new' to the world of artistic expression, or 'contributing' to the 'multicultural' world of the West, etc. Often what lies behind this seemingly positive trend is just another ploy by the West in its struggle to preserve its 'whiteness'. Writers and artists who are 'lucky' enough to be allowed to enter the Western arts world get support and recognition if, and only if, they remain within the limits of their 'national/ethnic tradition'. It can be argued that they are not accepted into the artistic world as *individuals*, as *free creating subjects*, rather they are seen as *symbols* of the *Other*, and the recognition and praise they receive is a mere token gesture. They are desired for the exoticism of the *otherness* their native traditions supposedly bring with them.

Rasheed Araeen tags this Western attitude 'benevolent racism'.⁴ Even when they are citizens born and educated in the west, artists of African and Asian origin are deliberately, slyly directed to take the stance of the *Other* and write within the tradition they might know nothing about and not feel as their own. Araeen says:

I know that the recent success of the younger generation of African and Asian artists could be used as an argument against my position. But is this success not of a specific kind, based on their 'ethnic' identities? I would, in fact, argue that this success is not the success of the artists but a triumph of the system. By successfully coercing some artists into playing predetermined stereotypical roles, roles which would not threaten the centre and its exclusive white privilege, the system has been able to reinforce and maintain its eurocentric ideology.⁵

Some artists agree to play the game for reasons of their own, including fame and money. Sometimes they simply realise this is the only way they will be *allowed* to do what they are best at, and be recognised for it. The art they are praised for, however, is art that is *different* from that of the West, and is, therefore, *other*. On the surface western society gives the illusion of being democratic and providing an equal chance to just about anybody wishing to express themselves. Actually, it is safely blocking non-white artists from white territory by limiting their subject matter while allowing whites to freely choose their subjects and, thereby, be 'universal'. Rasheed Araeen calls this a 'positive stereotype':

[...] the 'positive' stereotype is especially put in an advantageous position to be admired and celebrated, which benefits and gives him/her a sense of (false) achievement. 'Positive' stereotyping is based on a fascination for the difference of those who are considered to be outsiders: 'They are not like us; they cannot there-

⁴ Cf. Rasheed Araeen, 'The Art of Benevolent Racism', *Third Text*, 51: pp. 57-64 (Summer 2000).

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

fore do what we do. But we must admire and value what they do within their own cultures since they are part of our society'.⁶

A poignant example of the inherent arrogance of Western discourse when judging other cultures comes to us from the art world. Kwame Anthony Appiah describes the organisation of an exhibition of African traditional art in his essay "Is the 'Post' in 'Postcolonial' the 'Post' in 'Postmodern'?" The 'judges' who were to decide which works of art would be shown, included, among others, a traditional artist and diviner from Ivory Coast and David Rockefeller. I list the two only, for they are the key to the story and a good illustration of my previous point. All the referees, except the Ivory Coast artist, were given a pool of pictures of the works of art suggested for the exhibition. He, however, was only given the pictures concerning traditional art of his ethnic group. The explanation given for this by Susan Vogel, the organiser of the exhibition, was that to show him all the pictures would have been 'confusing'. Vogel stated that, in her experience, "African informants will criticise sculptures from other ethnic groups in terms of their own traditional criteria, often assuming that such works are simply inept carvings of their own aesthetic tradition."⁷

Vogel's statement serves to confirm Achebe's observation that only westerners or western-educated natives are considered able to understand anything broader than the very narrow universe of their own tradition and surroundings. The Western mind, however, possesses breadth and that all-important quality of 'universality'. That is why the Western mind can judge all, while the inferior native can move only in the circle of his experiences. The other referee mentioned was David Rockefeller, a mighty art collector. This is what he said about a sculpture that was to be exhibited:

I own somewhat similar things to this and I have always liked them. This is a rather more sophisticated version than the ones that I've seen, and I thought it was quite beautiful... [T]he total composition has a very contemporary, very Western look to it. It's the kind of thing that goes very well with contemporary Western things. It would look good in a modern apartment or house.⁸

The work of art is 'universal', because it has a "very Western look to it". That is why it is appreciated and deserves to be exhibited. What would happen if Western cultural artefacts were judged by African art-lovers using the same standards? What would happen if, as Achebe suggests, we inserted Chinese or African names in a novel by a western author in order to test its 'universality'?⁹

Works of art that stay within the limits of the author's own cultural tradition, by analogy, exhibit 'provincialism' and, as such, are of no interest to the western public. The western public, just as any other, recognises symbols close to its own western tradition. This is why it searches for something 'modern' or 'Western' in works of art made somewhere in Africa or Asia. But Western culture is privileged to have prejudices; others are

⁶ Ibid., p. 59.

⁷ Quoted in Appiah, in "Is the 'Post' in 'Postcolonial' the 'Post' in 'Postmodern'?", in *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation & Postcolonial Perspectives*, Anne McClintock et al., eds., University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1998, pp. 420-421.

⁸ Appiah, p. 421.

⁹ Cf. Achebe, op. cit., p. 59.

not. Thus, Susan Vogel's explanation for not offering the complete pool of pictures to the Ivory Coast artist for fear of him criticising them however, does not apply to Rockefeller, although he searches for what he recognises in art, just as the African diviner looks for symbols of his own ethnic group.

WHAT IS NATIONAL CULTURE?

On the global level there has been a lot of 'exoticism' around in the past few decades. People in the west have literally gone crazy for bits and pieces of tradition of some exotic country. Music, jewellery, dances, clothes brought from the East or Africa have been all the rage in the streets of London or New York. Optimists claim this is one of the many benefits of globalisation: people learn about each other through such cultural exchanges, and this time it is not only the West that is influencing others; it is a two-way process. They are incorrect, however, because what they have presented as the 'culture' of other races and nations is not the true spirit of other peoples, but merely the superficial commodified layer of their culture.

There are no statistics proving that Westerners are reading more books by African or Asian writers, that they are learning African or Asian languages or are truly getting to know the traditions and religions of non-western peoples. In fact, Westerners merely incorporate tiny decorative bits of the visible expression of those cultures into their own cultural milieu. This cannot be taken for a two-way process, because the West enjoys being exotic, while the Others are expected to master Western culture, languages and standards in order to be accepted. Further in his essay Appiah says:

Postcoloniality is the condition of what we might ungenerously call a *comprador intelligentsia*: of a relatively small, Western-style, Western-trained group of writers and thinkers who mediate the trade in cultural commodities of world capitalism at the periphery. In the West they are known through the Africa they offer; their compatriots know them both through the West they present to Africa and through an Africa they have invented for the world, for each other, and for Africa.¹⁰

Viewed from this perspective, postcoloniality seems to be a rather pitiful condition where false 'culture traders' invent traditions they are certain will sell well in the international market. Such stereotypes become inseparably tied to a nation and its culture and are about the only association raised by the mention of certain countries. National culture and tradition become reduced and simplified to a commodity. 'National culture' is confined to a few folk-dances, culinary specialties and souvenirs. This phenomenon is not limited to former colonies. I will go one step further than Appiah's assessment above. It affects the West, as well, and, as such, is a subject of other fields of research and theory. As much as Africa is invented by "comprador intelligentsia" and presented to the West, other regions or countries are re-invented in the same manner for the purpose of either trade or tourism. The war dance of the Massai performed for a group of white tourists may have a very neo-colonial meaning, but watching an Austrian folk-group performing their national dances is the same in essence but without any colonial connotations.

¹⁰ Appiah, p. 432.

THE REPRESENTATION OF THE BALKANS IN ART

The Balkans have been a positive inspiration to a few writers, but they have mainly figured in the body of world literature as a setting for horror fiction about monsters hiding in the dark mountainous forests, as unfathomable as the souls of the Balkan population.¹¹ According to Ludmilla Kostova's analysis of a few nineteenth century British novels, Mary Shelley's *The Lady of the Shroud* among them, the whole region was "engendered". It was described as totally submissive to patriarchal authority; however its warrior-like male population was treated with benevolent condescension for its 'primitive little ways' and inability to truly rule over anything but their women.¹²

We cannot begrudge the negative sentiment and stereotyped description of the lands of Yugoslavia described by Rebecca West in her travelogue, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* (1941). She states the paradox she sees rather than endorse it. Even though she writes with a positive intention from beginning to end, her book is full of exotic delight in the primitive peoples of incompatible cultures. When she visits the capital Belgrade it is already a large town with a mixed population of urbanised villagers and newcomers, still in their traditional costumes, but determined to succeed in the big city. She is disappointed, because the primitive spirit of the old Serbia is dying out and is being replaced by an imitation of Western modernism. She says:

[...] Macedonia had been under the Ottoman Empire until 1913; it had till then been stabilized by Turkish misgovernment in precisely those medieval conditions which had existed when it was isolated by its defeat at Kossovo in 1389. [Serbia] was liberated in 1815. For a century it had been exposed to the peculiar poisons of the nineteenth century. I had perhaps come a long way to see a sunset which was fading under my eyes before a night of dirty weather.¹³

Serbia is being "corrupted" by the West and is losing its "innocence" and old ways of life, while Macedonia still inhabits the same Medieval life patterns and represents that 'true' Balkan spirit. While the West has the right to improve and modernise itself, the Balkans must either remain frozen in time, or else degenerate. Even here, the Balkans are not treated as an equal, as an area that has the right to make its own history, mistakes and change with time. It is perceived as interesting only while in the state of childhood innocence.

Sadly, the current generation of filmmakers is not immune to certain myths about the Balkan people. They are perceived as 'naturally' violent, firearms-crazy people, who shoot for the slightest offence, or even when they are 'struck' by the lyrics of a song. We can see this clearly demonstrated in the latest successes and themes of Balkan films. In *After the Rain* (Macedonia, 1994), a Macedonian character causes bloodshed in a London restaurant after a minor quarrel with another man in an unintelligible language.

Cabaret Balkan (Serbia, 1998), is a film based on totally unprovoked, terrible violence, caused as much by the collective madness that affected the whole Serbian population after all the wars and misfortunes in the past decade, as by their 'inherent' violent strain. The film, which took its title from the phrase which has become

¹¹ Bram Stoker's *Dracula* is the best-known example of this.

¹² Cf. Kostova, op. cit., for an analysis of Stoker's *Dracula*, and a few other novels set in the Balkans.

¹³ Rebecca West, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, Canongate Classics, London, 1993, pp. 482-3.

synonymous with the Balkans, has been greeted in the west as representing the 'everyday reality' of the Balkans. Although these films possess undeniably good qualities, it is apparent that their directors made films with such themes, because they had discovered the 'recipe' for international success: 'play the stereotype or die'.

Much the same can be said about Kusturica's films, most of which have won high prizes at international festivals. As long as Kusturica treated, in his characteristically bitter-funny way, the former Titoist era or the Serbian favourite Other, the Gypsies, he did well. His only attempt at making an American film, *Arizona Dream* (1991), was fairly ignored internationally, thus clearly showing him that in respect to that topic he was an outsider, and that he should firmly remain in his 'own' cultural milieu, either making poetry about the Gypsy soul, or ridiculing communists.

THE DEATH OF CULTURE?

Hegel in his *Philosophy of History* says: "The History of the World travels from East to West, for *Europe is absolutely the end of History*, Asia is the beginning."¹⁴ This was written with a very different intention than mine, and in a different context, but it sounds so true in the current state of world affairs that I could not resist quoting it here. I would only substitute 'the West', for 'Europe', for many feel that the whole West, led today by America, may well be the death of culture and civilisation as we know it. Culture and civilisation were born in the East, and, as the shift of powers took place between the East and West, were dislocated and transferred to the West, which now believes that it has an absolute claim to them.¹⁵ What the West today calls 'culture' and 'civilisation', however, is based on material consumerism: instead of developing human values, it promotes opportunism and obedience. Edward Bond in 'Dramatic Child' says: "Western affluence provides the means of existence more abundantly than traditional cultures" but it lacks "ideas which legitimise [...] economic systems and [...] humanise culture and psyche."¹⁶ The ultimate end of globalisation/Westernisation/Americanisation of the world will be the erasure of all differences (primarily cultural) and assimilation to the American model of superficiality and vulgarity, served up as culture. In line with the arguments presented in this paper, he notes that:

Western affluence erases other cultures because it is not a culture. It provides goods without the struggles of the psyche to create culture. [...] Western 'anti-culture' colonises the artefacts and form of the cultures it erases – but in dehumanised ways, replacing tradition with fashion, development with novelty, solidarity with charity. It assimilates a culture by reversing its meaning – even to those who created it.¹⁷

¹⁴ Cf. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, quoted in 'The Occasion for Speaking' by George Lamming in *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*, p. 15.

¹⁵ Umberto Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum* is a very interesting story about the shift of cultural supremacy from Byzantium to the West. In it Crusaders are in search of a 'stone of wisdom' that is kept by the Byzantines. They believe that if they get into the possession of it they will acquire knowledge and power.

¹⁶ Edward Bond, 'Dramatic Child' in *Tuesday*, Methuen, London 1994, p. 46.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Colonised cultures survive in the west as pieces taken out of context, as images washed of deeper meaning, and, of course, as catwalk shows. The world is drowning in what is generally called 'Western culture'. The author Kazuo Ishiguro states that this broad term 'Western culture' really means Anglo-American culture. In a dialogue with the Nobel Prize winner, Kenzaburo Oe, Ishiguro explains that the spreading of Anglo-American culture is a constant worry of European intellectuals, George Steiner among them:

One of his constant worries is that all the cultures of the world are disappearing because they are being swallowed up by this ever-growing, large blanket called Anglo-American culture.... He is very afraid of a certain kind of death of culture, because this bland, colorless, huge blanket called Anglo-Americanism is spreading around the world. In order to survive, people have to sacrifice many things that make their culture unique and in fact make their art and culture mean something, and instead contribute to this meaningless blanket, this strange thing that is conquering the world.¹⁸

As the sources cited here and numerous others insist, in the general trend of commodification of culture, paradoxically the West is simplifying itself. When the West is mentioned we do not immediately associate it with Wagner or Renoir, but, instead, we think of Levi's jeans and Coca-Cola. In the crazy rush to produce and sell as much as possible, the West is marginalising its own 'high' culture. The world is rapidly falling into the condition where the only 'art' known will be Warholian soup-cans and retouched celebrity images.

It can be said that in the cultural sphere two parallel processes are in progress. First, through the marginalisation of traditional cultures, the West is imposing its values upon non-western cultures, and secondly, through the simplification of its own culture, the West is turning it into an easy-to-swallow commodity. Both processes have as their outcome the definite annihilation of cultural difference and simplification of cultural and artistic expression. Difference is not accepted but is consciously assigned the position of the Other, marginal and insignificant. It is being turned into commodified difference, controlled by the market demand for the exotic, or tamed by the theoretical and critical jargon of the academy. Such devaluation leads to the easier imposition of values of the Self/Same upon the Other.

If the above claim that Western culture is being turned into anti-culture is taken as a premise, it is easy to discern what hides behind the project of new global imperialism. The more unified world it ceaselessly advocates is based on false 'harmony', created by the eradication of difference, not its conscious acceptance. Other signs of what is really going on are the gaps evident in other spheres, especially in the technological development and the financial ability of the world population, which are reaching abysmal proportions.

¹⁸ Kazuo Ishiguro and Kenzaburo Oe, 'Wave Patterns: A Dialogue', *Grand Street* 10:2:87.

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**BLAGONAKLONI RASIZAM:
MOŽE LI DRUGI SÂM SEBE DA PREDSTAVLJA?**

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Zapad je sebi dao neotuđivo pravo da 'otkriva', definiše, imenuje i klasifikuje svet oko sebe. Može da narode i kulture sa višestruko dužom istorijom od svoje proglašava za zaostale i primitivne, da ih odrođuje od ljudske vrste i istrebljuje, ako se potreba za tim ukaže, a da svetlo svoje civilizacije donosi čak i bombama. Svi pokušaji Zapada i angažovane snage nauke, sociologije i diplomatije, usmereni ka pokoravanju i kontrolisanju sveprisutne drugosti su urodili plodom: Zapad nije samo sebe i svoje javno mnjenje ubedio u sopstvenu superiornost, već je i definisani 'Drugi' čvrsto počeo da veruje u potrebu da svoju 'zaostalost' i 'kulturnu inferiornost' može da ublaži jedino ako se prilagodi i uveze 'progresivne' ideje i modele sa Zapada. Ukoliko se dugo učutkivani 'Drugi' ipak osmeli da progovori i proslavi svoju kulturnu tradiciju, njegovo iskustvo će gotovo sigurno biti marginalizovano zahvaljujući težnjama Zapada da svoju kulturu istakne kao superiorniju od drugih, dok sve druge tretira kao žive etnološke muzeje ili bedne pokušaje imitacije visoke kulture koju je sam stvorio. Zatiranje jedne kulture može biti uspešno samo ako se na njenim osnovama ustanovi nova, što su znali i drevni Rimljani, kada su uništili punsku Kartaginu i izgradili svoju tik pored nje. Ove prve se više niko i ne seća, a turisti hrle u razgledanje rimskih ruševina.