Resisting the Exotic: Eradicating Colonial Narratives of Desire

Reading Material

1: introduced from another country: not native to the place where found exotic plants
2: archaic: FOREIGN, ALIEN
3: strikingly, excitingly, or mysteriously different or unusual exotic flavors
4: of or relating to striptease exotic dancing

Merriam-Webster Dictionary

1: from a far-away place, exquisite, or can mean a stripper
2: anyone who is foreign and different, but beautiful in the same time. Basically anything that is not white. #exotic #sexy #beautiful #foreign #hispanic #indian #asian
3: being from asia, south america, caribbean, mediterranean, persia, arabia, etc... Basically, anyone with tan skin, black shiny hair, big luscious lips, can dance and gyrate, curvy and smart. Exotic people have mysterious, alluring, sensual eyes. ALL will surrender to those eyes when an exotic girl permits a guy she likes to catch a glance of them.

Urban Dictionary
“The Orient and Islam have a kind of extrareal, phenomenologically reduced status that puts them out of reach of everyone except the Western expert. From the beginning of Western speculation about the Orient, the one thing the Orient could not do was to represent itself. Evidence of the Orient was credible only after it had passed through and been made firm by the refining fire of the Orientalist’s work.”


“We discovered Korean barbecue in this town.”
“Before the Koreans?”
“Oh sure they cook it. But they don’t get it.”

The Simpsons, Season 23, Episode 5
“This is not to say that we were not, or are not, “world literature.” We might be different from what passes for regular American lit, or as I like to call it, common literature. What I’m saying is that there is more other, scarier other, translated other, untranslatable other, the utterly strange other, the other who can’t stand you. Those of us allowed to speak are the tip of the iceberg. We are the cute other.

I use the term jokingly, but also deliberately. All of us on that world-literature list are basically safe, domesticated, just exotic enough to make our readers feel that they are liberal, not parochial or biased. That is, we are purveyors of comforting myths for a small segment of the dominant culture that would like to see itself as open-minded. I don’t mean that as an insult—I love to be read; we all do—but we are serving a purpose that we might not be thinking much about.

In a New York Times review, one of my novels was called a “bridge to the Arab soul.” I find this phrase discomfiting, mostly because of the words “Arab” and “soul.” Is the Arab soul like the American Way? Do Arabs have just one soul, and if so, can someone please tell me how to find it? “Bridge” I understood. You see, my novel was seen not as American but as representing the Arab world. My novel is a bridge to this world of otherness. I get to talk because I am the bridge. No one on the other side of the bridge gets to. And truly, who would want to cross that bridge and touch the heart of darkness, be soiled by that dark other?

We get to talk because we are seen as the nice tour guides. We can hold the hands of readers of the empire as we travel a short distance onto the bridge and get a glimpse of what’s across it, maybe even wave at the poor sods on the other side. We make readers feel good about themselves for delving into our books because they believe they are open-minded about the other. We are purveyors of comforting myths.”

“Memoirs of a Geisha includes many detailed sexual scenes which satisfy the Western appetite, as “the desire for this immediacy of the real became a desire for direct and physical contact with the exotic, the bizarre, and the erotic” (Mitchell, 1989, p. 231). The sex scenes are set to titillate readers so they may experience the bodies of geisha, who in reality are not available for consumption. Western readers can imagine themselves as the characters who touch, caress, probe, explore, and consume the bodies of the Orient. Readers are invited to weave themselves into the text as sexual objects. At the same time, readers can maintain their distance because the characters in the novel are fictional, either Japanese or American soldiers/occupiers after World War II. Golden creates, for example, unsavory Japanese characters who conduct virginity checks by inserting their fingers into girls’ vaginas. He creates other equally undesirable Japanese characters who consume women’s bodies in other ways.”

“Some people who are irritated by these criticisms of “Miss Saigon’s” enduring popularity will say, *It’s only a show, nothing more.* But the enjoyment of the show’s fantasy is precisely why the show matters. Fantasy cannot be dismissed as mere entertainment, especially when we keep repeating the fantasy. Fantasy — and our enjoyment of it — speaks to something we deeply want to believe. The enjoyment of this show is based on the privilege that the audience feels, the privilege of not being that Asian woman who kills herself, the privilege of seeing the world from the viewpoint of the powerful white male savior who can both be so attractive that a woman would kill herself over him and be so paternal that he can adopt the mixed-race child who will stand in for childlike Asia, in need of Western benevolent guidance.

Racism and sexism are not incompatible with art, as Chinua Achebe showed in his attack on Joseph Conrad’s “Heart of Darkness” as racist. Our enjoyment of a work of art does not mean that the work cannot be racist or sexist, or that our enjoyment does not come from a deep seated well of derogatory images of Asians and Asian women. The unsettling paradox here is that we can indeed love and desire people whom we see in completely racist and sexist ways. That is the real, unintended universal truth of “Miss Saigon.”

Nguyen, Viet Thanh. “Close the Curtain on Miss Saigon”. The New York Times. 3 August 2019
“Given all the excellent writing about the challenges of rendering otherness, someone who asks this question in 2019 probably has not done the reading. But the question is a Trojan horse, posing as reasonable artistic discourse when, in fact, many writers are not really asking for advice — they are asking if it is okay to find a way to continue as they have. They don’t want an answer; they want permission. Which is why all that excellent writing advice has failed to stop the question thus far.

I don’t answer with writing advice anymore. Instead, I answer with three questions.

1. Why do you want to write from this character’s point of view?
2. Do you read writers from this community currently?
3. Why do you want to tell this story?”

Chee, Alexander. “When It Comes to Writer the ‘Other’, What Questions Are We Not Asking?”. Vulture. 30 October 2019