

S Satish Kumar

University of Georgia

ORCID: 0000-0002-4920-5272

Otherwise than Epistemology

1

Contemplating *Orientalism* a quarter of a century after its publication, Edward Said wrote in a preface to the 25th anniversary edition of what continues to be his most popular book, “But there is a difference between knowledge of other peoples and other times that is the result of understanding, compassion, careful study and analysis for their own sakes, and on the other hand knowledge that is part of an overall campaign of self-affirmation.” (Said: xv). What is at stake here is perhaps, self-evident. There are two distinctly different approaches to the knowledge of the Other. The question that then becomes pertinent is whether or not these two approaches culminate in different epistemologies of the Other. This has nothing to do with the fact of the existence of the Other or otherness. The question becomes even more pressing in the times we presently inhabit. It would be preposterous to suggest that the knowledge of alterity has become problematic only recently. It would not, however, be very far from the truth to suggest that the need for a contemplation of the ethics of inquiries into alterity are becoming increasingly pressing. The knowledge of designated Others, their comings and goings, their internet search-histories, are all used for much more than just placid contemplative self-affirmation. Anybody with even a marginal familiarity with history will agree that none of this is new. It does not take a Holocaust expert to speculate that the attempted eradication

of Jews from Europe had to have started with a census – the systematized gathering of knowledge of the Jewish presence throughout Nazi Germany and German occupied Europe. There was no real need to seek verifiable proof of the essential racial and civilizational inferiority that was seen as justification for the massacring of ethnic Others to the tune of eleven million and more.

The question however still begs an answer. Is the knowledge of the Other predicated on the motivations with which one seeks out an understanding alterity? In beginning of “Knowledge and Human Interest: A General Perspective”, Habermas argues: “The only knowledge that can truly orient action is knowledge that frees itself from mere human interests and is based on Ideas- in other words knowledge that has a theoretical attitude.” (Habermas: 300). Framing primarily a critique of Husserl, Habermas posits a possibility for knowledge that is divorced from mere human interests in philosophy, but not in the way Husserl’s formulations would suggest. For Habermas, this is achieved by demonstrating that which, according to him, objectivist discourse conceals, in other words the obvious connection between knowledge and interest (Habermas: 317). As Figueira argues in her latest book, such an approach – the Habermasian critique of ideology – views all discourse as being distorted by ideology. The approach as she defines it, borrowing from Ricoeur’s terminology, is founded on a “hermeneutics of suspicion” (Figueira, 2015: 3).

Based on such an understanding of epistemology, one could argue that a hermeneutics of suspicion is the basis for any critique of discourse and the interlinking structures and systems of knowledge that discursive practices are in turn based on. One could certainly, for example, read Foucault in such terms. Let us briefly consider the central argument in a work like *The Archeology of Knowledge*. In the first chapter titled “Unities of Discourse”, Foucault introduces a notion of “continuities” that define a vision of history and acts of historiography (Foucault, 2002: 23). Continuities imply the privileging of certain sets of successive and repetitive phenomena that perpetuate conjectures of originary moments (Foucault, 2002: 23). Such teleologies are achieved by the systematic weeding out of discontinuities to create a discourse of continuity, or in more fantastic cases such as Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae* – the fabrication of historical continuities. The concern in Foucault’s archaeology

is the identifying of these very frames that privilege continuity and harmonic resonances over discontinuities and dissonances.

A similar concern is voiced in his previous works as well. In *The Order of Things*, Foucault elaborates on the centrality of “History” as a discourse within all the Human Sciences. According to Foucault, History – within the Human Sciences – occupies a space of both privilege and danger (Foucault, 2004: 317). One could infer that such a danger stems from the space of privilege that history occupies within the Human Sciences. As he continues to explain such a dangerous position of privilege, Foucault underlines the fact that history is in effect a discourse that enjoys a position of power, for it serves to validate the existence of all the ‘sciences of man’ (Foucault, 2004: 317). Every discipline in the ‘sciences of man’ is defined by a history of its own by which it seeks to validate and vindicate its practices and its relevance as a field of inquiry. A history of any discipline, the evolution of its lexicon, foundational premises that have come to define it, the innovative genius of its practitioners – all constitute its claim to the relevance and indispensability to human understanding. The inherent danger Foucault identifies within the domain of history is perhaps in the fact that it functions on a very basic level at defining the very *episteme* of a discipline. Such authority (or authoriality), according to him, not only limits these fields of inquiries, but also, at the outset, destroys them by claiming universal validity (Foucault, 2004: 317). In doing so, what Foucault is then suggesting, is the end of history:

The human being no longer has any history: or rather, since he speaks, works, and lives, he finds himself interwoven in his own being with histories that are neither subordinate to him nor homogeneous with him. By fragmentation of the space over which Classical knowledge extended in its continuity, by the folding over of each separated domain upon its own development, the man who appears at the beginning of the nineteenth century is ‘dehistoricized’.

(Foucault, 2004: 369)

It might be useful here to dwell for a bit on the idea of History itself, in order to more fully understand the ramifications of Foucault’s arguments.

What is History? As Carr rather succinctly sums it up – ‘our answer to the question, consciously or unconsciously, reflects our own position in time,

and forms a part of our answer to the broader question, what view we take of the society in which we live' (Carr: 5). Interestingly, Carr's work comes at a moment of crisis within the disciplinary and methodological praxis of History. Such a methodological crisis in History, for Carr, seems to manifest itself in the epistemological position of 'historical fact' within the discourse of History (Carr: 7). Facts are the same for all historians. The attention to fact is an essential premise that every history and historian functions on (Carr: 8). However, is there nothing to be said then of the order in which these facts are arranged within the discourse of history? Is there a qualitative difference between referring to the events of 1857 in India as 'the Indian Rebellion of 1857' and referring to the same events as 'the First War of Indian Independence'? The answer is quite simply locational. If one calls it a 'Rebellion', then the question that would logically follow would be – A rebellion against whom or what? Depending on the location, the same events can be seen as a rebellion that the then British masters of India triumphantly stamped out or as the first step in the final triumph of the Indian peoples' in their independence from British dominion.

One could see obvious resonances between Carr and Foucault. Considering the example just cited, the events in real-time are exactly the same, however, they are configured differently in histories written from two different locational and ideological vantage points. In one colonizer's version it was a mere "Sepoy Mutiny" that the supremely competent British forces were able to successfully stamp out, while in the colonized's version it was the first step taken by a colonially subjugated people towards their emancipation. Already, in Carr there is a definitive move away from the 19th century view of history as being no more than a description of facts towards an understanding of history that points to its constructedness and historiography as an act of interpretation. Foucault's conceptualization of "History", pushes such a problem of constructedness even further. Both Carr and Foucault in their own way are addressing the same problem. As Carr points out, "The nineteenth century was a great age of facts" (Carr: 5). Such an insistence on factuality, within Carr's schematic is tied to the grand tradition of empiricism that dominated a greater part of the nineteenth century – a tradition that demanded the separation between the subject and the object (Carr: 6). Viewed from a vantage point of common sense, empiricism in its insistence on facts and empirical verifiability, valorises

and celebrates an absolute of objectivity. This is perhaps the imminent danger Foucault perceives in any discourse based upon empiricist claims of absolute objectivity. The moment there is a claim laid to an 'absolute', discourse moves towards being transcendental and such a move actively draws attention away from the process by which the discourse itself is generated. Such a discourse is no longer validated by intrinsic evidence, but rather lays claim to a validation that is extrinsic to it – a validation that is transcendental. Almost as if to say that a discourse is validated by the mere fact of being historical. Such validation dispenses with any sense of the actual processes of historicity and historicization. Foucault, then is not talking about an end of history, per say, rather he seems to be proposing a re-envisioning of not just "History" but also the way one approaches the history of "History" (Foucault, 2004: 370). While calling attention to the fact that the exact opposite happens in practice, Foucault also draws attention to the 'historicity discovered within man' and how such an approach necessitates looking beyond narrow empiricist structures to include the objects man 'made', the 'language he spoke' and 'even further still – to life' (Foucault, 2004: 368). Such an emphasis on language is not unique to Foucault. According to Foucault, taking away the process of production from the engagement with discourse is what dehistoricizes both the discourse and the engagement, which in turn radically disassociates it from 'life':

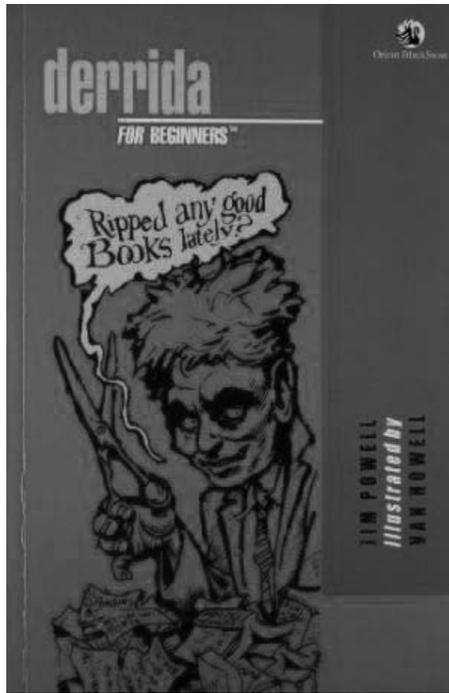
Things first of all received a historicity proper to them, which freed them from the continuous space that imposed the same chronology upon them as men. So that man found himself dispossessed of what constituted the most manifest contents of his history: nature no longer speaks to him of the creation or the end of the world, of his dependency or his approaching judgement; it no longer speaks of anything but a natural time; its wealth no longer indicates to him the antiquity of the imminent return of a Golden Age; it speaks only of conditions of production being modified in the course of history; language no longer bears the marks of a time before Babel or of the first cries that rang through the jungle; it carries the weapon of its own affiliation.

(Foucault, 2004: 368)

While the Foucauldian model seems to be best explained using the example of “History”, it can just as easily apply to any of what he describes as the ‘Human Sciences’ (Foucault, 2004: xxvi). It could apply to any field of human inquiry and thereby knowledge at large. Especially last above-cited passage from *The Order of Thing* – more specifically the very end of the passage, is evocative of the literary experience one encounters in a work like *Heart of Darkness*. It is evocative of the entire gamut of experience – both documented and undocumented, in which one is confronted with alterity. In this case, more specifically so, the Western world’s earliest documented colonial encounters with the “non-West”. Joseph Conrad’s 1899 novel has been cast/recast/discussed/critiqued/deconstructed/reconstructed *ad nauseum*, and therefore, there is very little anyone could say about it, that would seem “new”. Does it espouse, uphold and perpetuate a predominantly Western, European, White, Enlightenment-Humanistic view of the world? Does it reinforce assumed civilizational superiority as a foundational justification for colonization? Does it cast a people in the role of the endemically inferior as a means to their subjugation? An incontrovertible and resounding – “Yes!” to all of the above. However, could it be but, otherwise? That is, perhaps, a more problematic question to negotiate. From our vantage point today, it may seem odd that a people would be thought of as being anything other than human. This is not to say that being viewed as human, always warrants humane treatment, as evidenced by the fact that we are constantly confronted with events that question the very limits of humanity and humaneness. Although it is also important to note, as Achebe points out, what lies at the core of *Heart of Darkness* is not a fear of difference. The paranoia is one of possible resonances rather than dissonances. This is made evident at the very outset of the novel when Marlow, in speaking of the Thames in contrast with the Congo, remarks that it too was once a dark place. The place the Thames serves was once a dark place, just like the regions surrounding the Congo, but what separates the two is that one had emerged from, to use Kant’s words, its “self-imposed nonage”. Its speech/language no longer bears the marks of the time before Babel nor any resemblance to the first cries that rang through the jungles. The fear is not of the Other, but the Self-in-Other. Marlow’s aunt beatifies the

beacons of light – the young men – who sacrifice their lives in the service of the savages, while Marlow on the other hand – a world-wise man – obviously thinks otherwise for he knows that they sacrifice more than just their lives – the horror that is Kurtz. The savage self that is suppressed in order to achieve civilization re-rears its ugly head. This one will say about *Heart of Darkness* – it is not about the Congo. It provides no knowledge of the alterity, because it is not about the Other. It is representative of a crisis in Western ontology and epistemology confronted with non-Western alterity. The self-centrality of such a crisis becomes amply evident when one sees how the Other figures in the narrative – shadows, black forms, unresponsive eyes etc.

Similarly, when Said traces the alterity of the Oriental Other back to Aeschylus and Euripides, one cannot help but speculate the validity of such a claim (Said: 21, 56–57). Was *The Persians* about the Persians to begin with? One might even ask, was Goethe's *West-Eastern Divan* only and only about the discovery of a marvellous poetic tradition far removed from the poet's own German one? Does such a reading not dehistoricize a work of literature/art/poetry? Why does Goethe turn "Eastward"? Similarly why does Lessing turn to Shakespeare and not Racine? Could one not argue resistance to French cultural imperialism as a motivation behind the seeking of non-French and non-European models and structures of feelings? Would one then call this desire for knowledge of the Other – under these circumstances – pure or political? As Said proceeds to demonstrate, the two can never be thought of as being entirely mutually exclusive (Said: 10–11). Even if one asserts that "Art is for Art's sake alone", one is being political in one's stance. Such a position could be assumed in relation to a politics of canonicity or political attempts at the ideological regimentation of literary production. As for the question of motivation, dwelling on motivation alone robs one of the sheer delight in reading a literary work. It is a fine line one treads. One is reminded here of the cover of the 2000 Orient Longman edition of Jim Powell's and Van Howell's *Derrida for Beginners*. The cover had an illustration of what seemed to be a mix of Derrida and Edward Scissorhands with the caption, "Ripped any good books lately?" The cover, probably intended as a catchy joke on Deconstruction, was troubling for reasons far beyond the grotesqueness of the illustration.



Quoting Montaigne at the start of the essay “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences”, Derrida argues for a pressing need for the interpretation of interpretations over and above the interpretation of things in themselves (Derrida, 2001: 351). Presented as a lecture at a conference titled “The Language of Criticism and the Sciences of Man” hosted by John’s Hopkins in 1966, the essay later became a chapter in *Writing and Difference* – his first book. It was this lecture that, as one might say, put Derrida on the map and can in many ways be thought of as a well laid out explication of the methodology of Deconstruction. The essay outlines key concepts that would go on to become central not only to Derrida’s work, but to Deconstruction as a whole. He starts by negotiating the ideas of structure, episteme, center and presence.

It would be easy enough to show that the concept of structure and even the word “structure” itself are as old as the episteme – that is to say, as old as western science and western philosophy – and that their roots thrust deep into the

soil of ordinary language, into whose deepest recesses the *epistémé* plunges to gather them together once more, making them part of itself in a metaphorical displacement. Nevertheless, up until the event which I wish to mark out and define, structure-or rather the structurality of structure – although it has always been involved, has always been neutralized or reduced, and this by a process of giving it a center or referring it to a point of presence, a fixed origin. The function of this center was not only to orient; balance, and organize the structure – one cannot in fact conceive of an unorganized structure – but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the freplay of the structure. No doubt that by orienting and organizing the coherence of the system, the center of a structure permits the freplay of its elements inside the total form. And even today the notion of a structure lacking any center represents the unthinkable itself.

(Derrida, 2001: 351–352)

The event Derrida mentions at the start of the essay can be understood as the growing attention to the structurality of structure. There is an increasing awareness, as we have seen in both Carr and Foucault, to the constructedness of the discourses of knowledge, or the interpretation of interpretation. To this already existing awareness of the structurality of structures, Derrida adds the awareness of centrality. One could view such centrality or centeredness as the core of any discursive practice – the foundational elements that validate a discourse and are in turn validated by it. One can see such relations between centrality and validation operating within a variety of fields in human knowledge. There is a degree of “freplay” that the structure allows, but as Derrida points out there is no possibility of “freplay” at the center. Such restrictions on “freplay” could be thought of as being true for all fields of human knowledge, however, it can be most easily explained in the context of religion and/ systems of belief/faith. All religious systems have a set of core facts on which belief is based. The scripture of religion, written or oral, has always been open to exegesis and hermeneutic engagement. For example in the case of messianic religions the unquestionable core or center lies in the fact of messianism. Accepting the messianism of Jesus Christ is central to the Christian structure of belief, just as that of the Prophet Muhammad is to Islam and perhaps in a more complex sense the Buddha to Buddhism. In all these religious systems of thought there have been agreements and disagreements in the explication of scripture and

scriptural learning. Buddhism has, over the course of its history, separated into various schools based on the interpretation and canonization of scripture, and on the basis of philosophical and hermeneutic engagements with scripture. However, regardless of school or sect, Buddhists across the world agree upon the centrality of Buddha's enlightenment and his status as a model for salvation.

One could also see the fixedness of a center in other discursive systems as well. Derrida returns to the notion of play in many of his works. In "White Mythology", for example, where he deals with the philosophy's age old bugaboo regarding the issue of rhetoric, the metaphor in particular, we see how a certain idea of language structures and understanding of what constitutes philosophical speech or writing. Starting with Plato's disdain for the Sophists and his demand for the separation of philosophy and the dialectic from sophistic rhetoric has continued to colour the way the space of the metaphor is conscribed within the discourse of philosophy (Derrida, 1984: 224). Derrida extends such a critique even further in works such as *Dissemination*, where he argues that Western Metaphysics as a whole is predicated on the dichotomy of good and evil (Johnson: viii). As Johnson explains in her translator's introduction to *Dissemination*, for Derrida the notion of "Western Metaphysics" extends not only to Western Philosophy but also everyday thought and language.

Western thought, says Derrida, has always been structured in terms of dichotomies or polarities: good vs. evil, being vs. nothingness, presence vs. absence, truth vs. error, identity vs. difference, mind vs. matter, man vs. woman, soul vs. body, life vs. death, nature vs. culture, speech vs. writing. These polar opposites do not, however, stand as independent and equal entities. The second term in each pair is considered the negative, corrupt, undesirable version of the first, a fall away from it. Hence, absence is the lack of presence, evil is the fall from good, error is a distortion of truth, etc. In other words, the two terms are not simply opposed in their meanings, but are arranged in a hierarchical order which gives the first term priority, in both the temporal and the qualitative sense of the word. In general, what these hierarchical oppositions do is to privilege unity, identity, immediacy, and temporal and spatial presentness over distance, difference, dissimulation, and deferment. In its search for the answer to the question of Being, Western philosophy has indeed always determined Being as presence.

(Johnson: viii)

It is such a privileging of one over the other that, as Derrida argues, has defined Western thought and, therefore, by extension Western knowledge

systems. To return to our discussion on Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, while it is true that the novel is not about Africa, one cannot also disagree with Achebe on the fact that it does present "An Image of Africa". While it is in no way accurate to suggest that Conrad is the originator of this image of Africa, as Achebe concedes, it is also undeniable that a work like *Heart of Darkness* serves to perpetuate it. In constructing the European Self confronted by the non-European Other, and herein one agrees with Achebe's critique, a work like *Heart of Darkness* does advertently or inadvertently construct an image of the Other. This image of the Other is both sustained by the episteme of the Self and simultaneously contributes to the epistemology of alterity.

3

We are now shifting towards a slightly different *problématique* here. It is still the question of the motivation for knowledge creation and/or acquisition but approached through an analysis of the place of the Other within discourse. In the first chapter of *Otherwise Occupied*, Figueira lays out a view of how the Other figures in the discourse of structural anthropology. In the same chapter she also outlines the changes that occur in the configurations within which alterity figures in Western structures of inquiry with the rise of Foucauldian discourse analysis and Derridean deconstruction. Let us for the time being dwell on structural anthropology. As Figueira argues, Claude Lévi Strauss is the principal theorist of the "structuralist" trend in anthropology and before him ethnography was considered to be a part of the larger domain of the natural sciences (Figueira, 2008: 5). Borrowing from the formulations of Ferdinand de Saussure within the field of linguistics, Lévi Strauss sought to redefine the study of anthropology aligning it more with the social sciences (Figueira, 2008: 5). Also, it was Lévi Strauss who first acknowledge the role of the unconscious as mediated through language, his work along with Sigmund Freud and Emile Durkheim that argued the role of the unconscious in structuring society and collective practices, cause a move towards psychologism within structural anthropological inquiries into textualities (Figueira, 2008: 5).

Freud and Durkheim would influence structuralism's quest for the hidden mechanisms underlying all textualities. Structural anthropology's examination of the Other would become analogous to psychoanalysis's examination of the estranged Self. Just as psychoanalysis gave access to the Self and sought to represent the Other in the repressed libido and unconscious, ethnology now gave access to the foreign other revealing the repressed of history.

(Figueira, 2008: 5–6)

This seems to line up fairly well with our previous exploration of *Heart of Darkness*. As we observed with Achebe's analysis, the fear was not of a radical difference, but rather an essential similarity. The absentee Congolese Other is configured in terms of the repressed internal Self, in other words the carnally motivated "Id". Europe too was once a dark place, but had emerged from that primitive darkness into "enlightened" civilization. Kurtz, who "goes native", therefore serves as a cautionary tale. The horror is not the fact that Marlow starts cohabiting with a native women and starts to establish his dominion over the local people. The horror is not that he got too close, but rather that getting too close seemed to have reactivated the primitive savage Self that had to be sublimated in order to cultivate the civilized enlightened Self. This is not a problem unique to post-Enlightenment colonizing Europe, such a view can, in fact, be traced as far back as European historiography of the Crusades, as revealed in a conversation between a soldier and a clergyman in Bernard Shaw's *Saint Joan*:

WARWICK: I am a soldier, not a churchman. As a pilgrim I saw something of the Mahometans. They were not so ill-bred as I had been led to believe. In some respects their conduct compared favorably with ours.

CAUCHON [displeased]: I have noticed this before. Men go to the East to convert the infidels. And the infidels pervert them. The Crusader comes back more than half a Saracen. Not to mention that all Englishmen are born heretics.

(Shaw: 104)

One is merely citing this as an example that serves as a precedent in some sense to Marlow's fear of Kurtz's predicament. Marlow's fear of acknowledging the humanity of Congolese natives is not the same as the Cauchon's disdain for the Saracen and their sympathizers, but one could argue that it stems from a similar cultural ethos, a similar epistemology of alterity. The shift is in the psychologization of the Other and the fear of alterity. That aside one could

observe clear parallels in the language used to describe the encounter with alterity in both cases. The lexicon deployed is one of contagion. Kurtz had been patted on the head by the wilderness, he had been consumed by the darkness that was the Congo. The difference is in the case of the Cauchon, is merely that the apprehension is on a religio-political level, and while in Marlow's it is more a clinical-psychopathology.

The psychologization of ethnography manifests in yet another way in Octave Mannoni's *Psychologie de la colonization*. In the "Author's Note" to the 1956 edition Mannoni writes:

For years I have been interested in everything I could find out about that country and its inhabitants, but for a long time I deliberately confined myself to ethnographical rather than psychological studies. However I realized, almost in spite of myself, that there was a background of more disturbing psychological problems behind the ethnographical ones. I found myself taking part either in imagination or in reality in a kind of community life that was quite new to me, and realized with surprise that my own essence was being gradually altered. If for instance I took part in ceremonies concerning the cult of the dead I tried to do it in the spirit of a good ethnographer with questionnaires, photographs, etc.; but I discovered that this cult in its Malagasy form had an equal significance for me, and one which I could not ignore, surround it as I might with the ethnographical bric-a-brac I was collecting. I seemed to have unearthed that single root, from which, according to a Malagasy proverb, the branches of the human race divided off like the branches of a pumpkin plant. At the same time, driven like everyone else by my own private devil, I carried out various strictly personal experiments which led me to further discoveries, and during my leave in Paris after the end of the war I began a training analysis in the hope of clarifying my ideas.

(Mannoni: 5)

Following this, he goes on to state, how his stay in Madagascar was cut short by the Rebellion in 1947. He describes it as the tearing of a veil that brought on a moment of dazzling light in which a series of intuitions he otherwise would dared not have believed were verified (Mannoni: 6). Mannoni's agenda behind writing *Psychologie de la colonialism (Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization)* is laid more precisely in the introduction he writes to the book. Explaining the flawed analysis of the colonial situation by scholars who operate only through the lens of ethnography, he argues the need for a psychological approach to understanding the "colonial problem"

(Mannoni: 17). The problem, Mannoni states, with sociologists and ethnographers before him, is the attempt to identify and analyze the “primitive mentality” using the apparatuses of the natural sciences (Mannoni: 18). What is interesting to note is the fact that Mannoni does not challenge or refute the concept of such a so called “primitive mentality” or the “native’s lack of gratitude” (Mannoni: 18). What he does is offer a psychological explanation instead. Though he argues that the very notion of primitivism is antiquated, he continues to use the word savage and later justifies his own use of the word ‘primitive’, and in proffering a psychological explanation he holds on to the view that the “native” is “inherently inferior” (Mannoni: 23). He explains the fear of the “savage” by aligning the “savage” with the unconscious or the Freudian Id (Mannoni: 21). The fear of the “savage” stems from the fear of one’s own unconscious (Mannoni: 21). The “savage”, the “primitive”, the “primordial” all become manifestations or projections of the unconscious repressed Self.

One can easily identify parallels between Mannoni’s ethno-psychopathology of the “savage” and Marlow’s views on the natives of the Congo in *Heart of Darkness*. Consequently, one need not think too hard as to what the contents of Marlow’s report on the ‘Suppression of Savage Customs’ might have been. One can however surmise the purpose behind the suppression of said “savage customs”. As Mannoni, explains, in the passage quoted earlier from *Psychologie de la colonization*, despite approaching the customs and rituals of the Malagasy from a purely ethnographic stand-point, participating in their practices starts to obscure the academic distance he tries to keep. The practices, for example, of the cult of the dead start to have meaning for him and start to alter his “essence”. The ramifications of such a statement are, needless to say, far reaching. The idea of essence, as we have seen in Derrida’s arguments, are problematic in more ways than one. The idea of essence is tied inextricably to a Western episteme of Being. There is both an essential difference and similarity between the Thames and the Congo, just as there is an essential difference between Kurtz and Marlow. The difference lies in the fact that the Thames is a River Emeritus, to use Achebe’s terminology, and the Congo on the other hand has rendered no great service to mankind, and enjoys no old age pension (Achebe: 3). However, here too, the cause for concern is not the difference, but rather similarity. What is disturbing is that the Thames too was once a dark place.

It conquered its darkness, of course, and is now at peace. But if it were to visit its primordial relative, the Congo, it would run the terrible risk of hearing grotesque, suggestive echoes of its own forgotten darkness, and falling victim to an avenging recrudescence of the mindless frenzy of the first beginnings.

(Achebe: 3)

4

The reification of difference, therefore, is a reification of the Self. The projection of the unconscious on the Other only serves to reinforce the fact that conscious Selfhood has been achieved by suppressing and controlling the unconscious. One can see why the admittance of a similarity is so very horrifying, why even the slightest trace of the Other must be suppressed in an ontology of the Self. The “horror” is exemplified in the reaction the Cauchon has to the Crusader who is willing to admit that the Saracen is not the savage he is made out to be. The change in essence that Mannoni alludes to can therefore be understood in terms of the admittance of this trace into the constituting of the Self. In “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak seems to recognize a similar underlying principle in Western discourse:

Some of the most radical criticism coming out of the West today is the result of an interested desire to conserve the subject of the West, or the West as Subject. The theory of pluralized ‘subject-effects’ gives an illusion of undermining subjective sovereignty while often providing a cover for this subject of knowledge. Although the history of Europe as Subject is narrativised by the law, political economy and ideology of the West, this concealed Subject pretends it has ‘no geo-political determinations’. The much-publicized critique of the sovereign subject thus actually inaugurates a Subject.

(Spivak: 66)

The critique she launches into, however, is not of the Subject or its conservation. Spivak’s critique is of representation, more specifically the representation of the non-Subject in a discourse of the West as Subject. Similarly, Said inaugurates *Orientalism* with a quote from *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, “They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented.” Such a perceived inability to self-represent then sets the tone for the mode of analysis

that the entire work follows. *Orientalism* is a critique of the representations of Oriental others in Western discourses, or what Derrida rather wittily terms a “White Mythology”. Drawing upon a Foucauldian legacy, Said meticulously documents and analyses events in Western thought and discourse where such an Other has been configured. His work in *Orientalism* not only draws much needed attention the configuration of the Other within Western structures of episteme, but also lays the groundwork of a contemplation of such constructions within Western knowledge systems, laying the ground for what Spivak later defines as “epistemic violence” (Spivak: 76).

The critique of representation ultimately boils down to a critique of power. There is, no doubt, a validity to such arguments. As Said asserts, the body of knowledge that comprises the discourse of Orientalism, is an exercise of hegemonic cultural power (Said: 40). As Foucault reminds us at the start of *Birth of the Clinic*, “it is about the act of seeing, the gaze” (Foucault, 2003: ix). The very idea of a “gaze”, implies the existence of a subject and an object. It also implies a power-differential, because the subject is understood as gazing at an object that is assumed to be passive, existing only to be beheld and accorded a place in the “order of things” by the ordering subject. It is the sovereign claim of an empirical gaze to shed light on truth that lies buried at the dark center of things (Foucault 2003: xv). It is such an assumed empiricism that privileges the subject’s gaze. Therefore, when Said defines the discourse of Orientalism in terms of an assumed civilizational superiority of the West over the Orient, he is speaking in terms of the West as subject and the Orient as the object of its inquiry. The object is cast in terms of passivity. It passively subjects itself to inquiry and thereby in turn also being represented. It is not very different from the age old maxim that gives the victorious the power to make history. In both Said’s and Spivak’s schematic, at least in the works discussed, the location of the discourse is also the location of power. However, as we have seen with both Foucault and Derrida, power is only a part of the problem. The larger problem lurks beneath the exercise of power and the committing of violence (epistemic or otherwise).

Representation is no doubt important, but it is only a symptom. The real problem runs deeper. It is, as we have already seen in Derrida’s critique of Western thought, a problem of foundational polarities. Such dichotomies are,

one might argue, the very foundation of Western thought. We see such polarities manifested in the constant resuscitation of the 'Us vs. Them' rhetoric, and true enough, such divisive polarities are not unique to the Western world alone. Such a rhetoric can be observed throughout human history. As Arundhati Roy writes in "The Algebra of Infinite Justice", an essay that appeared shortly after the attacks of 9/11, both President Bush and the Taliban invoked the absolutes of Good and Evil, to each theirs was the ultimate Good and the other's the ultimate Evil (Roy: 165). The issue truly is the discourse of power and its use and abuse of rhetoric to sustain itself. Both cast themselves in the role of the 'ultimate good' and cast the other in the role of the 'ultimate evil'. Both assume an 'all or nothing' stance. The sad reality of such a situation is that at least one side is almost always left with nothing. The problem at the heart of the situation is absolutism in the pronouncements from both sides. The rhetoric of the triumph of Good over Evil, the rhetoric of the triumph of the indomitable human spirit in the face of dire adversity, is all very Romantic, but it is also true that fundamental to such a rhetoric is the fundamental divide between an "Us" and a "Them". It reinforces the notion of dichotomies and irreconcilable alterities. We live in times that, Roy in another essay in the same collection explains, are marked by the "End of Imagination" (Roy: 3). This was the title of her first political essay after the *God of Small Things*. She explains, in a subtle way, why she cannot bring herself to write fiction in a world staring nuclear doom in the face (Roy: 4). She decides to instead channel her skills as a fiction writer towards writing political commentary (Roy: 4). This could just well be interpreted as her personal 'Quest for Relevance' as a writer. However it is, and especially for us as students and researchers in the Humanities, a quest that we share. In times where the world is always either on the brink of complete annihilation or in the throes of salvaging itself, how does one justify imagination? One can see how alluring the discourses of 'absolutes' can be in times like these. One can also see how depressing the truth of things, as they are, can be in comparison to the Utopic Truths of fundamentalist discourses. Narratives of the building of a unified people or a nation tap into such fundamental human needs for community and collectivity, but these very narratives are also simultaneously exclusionary. In critiquing the tendencies of teleological historiographies, Hans Robert Jauss uses the example of Gervinus' *History of*

the Poetic National Literature of the Germans (Jauss: 8). Jauss draws attention to the problem inherent in projects of such nature. One need to only ask what do histories such as these leave out. In the case of Gervinus, as the title of his history suggests, it leaves out all things not national, not German, not literary and not poetic. The problem with nationalist historiography lies in the fact that it considers the nation as pre-given. History is then written as a fulfilment of such an *a priori* category.

The same can be said of colonial historiography. When European nations set out to colonize they defined the colonized in terms of an absence of nation. In fact as Frantz Fanon would argue, they defined the colonized subject in Africa in terms of a series of negations – not White, not Christian, not civilized, not literate, not lingual, not nation, not intelligent, not independent, etc. (Fanon: 90). Fanon's critique of Mannoni is simple:

What Monsieur Mannoni has forgotten is that the Malagasy no longer exists; he has forgotten that the Malagasy *exists in relation to the European*. When the white man arrived in Madagascar he disrupted the psychological horizon and mechanisms. As everyone has pointed out, alterity for the black man is not the black but the white man.

(Fanon: 77)

Fanon's critique targets the discourse of essentials in Mannoni's work – the colonized subject is inherently dependent and therefore colonizable (Fanon: 78). Of course, the white man too is subject to Mannoni's psychoanalysis, he suffers from leadership complex (Fanon: 79). The two fit rather nicely together, one needs to rule and the other needs to be ruled, together they form two parts of a co-dependency complex. However, Fanon points out in Mannoni's schematic that "Malagasyhood" is always defined in terms of the White European frame of reference, the Malagasy is Malagasy because "at a certain point in his history, he was made to ask the question whether he is a man, it is because his reality as a man has been challenged." (Fanon: 78). The colonized in Madagascar suffers from being defined in terms of a lack – suffers from the affliction of not being white and thereby not being human (Fanon: 78). The black man, Fanon argues, is relegated to a zone of "Non-Being" (Fanon: xii). Quite simply, the black man is rendered incapable of having a Being, because he has no place in the Ontology of the Colonizer within which he is constantly defined (Fanon: 90).

The questions of representation and motivation, as we have seen earlier, are no doubt important and pressing. But they address only the symptoms. Discrimination and the politics of representation are only symptomatic of the larger problem inherent in any epistemology of the Self. The ontology of the Self, as Fanon states, is incapable of accommodating the Other. The Self has always and continues to be defined as not-Other, and the Other as not-Self. This is, one should think, the most intense form of epistemic violence. Given such a situation, one is tempted to ask not – “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, but rather why should the Subaltern speak at all, when everything the Subaltern says is subsumed under rubrics of knowledge that deny him/her the possibility of Being. The only way the Subaltern can communicate, yet again to not be wholly understood, is through inscription (Spivak: 104). Let me not be misunderstood. I am not arguing for a disengagement with the Other. I am not moving towards a foreclosure of any engagement with alterity. I am simply arguing that engaging alterity from a position of knowledge that is founded in an ontology of dichotomies is insufficient.

Works Cited

- Achebe, Chinua. “An Image of Africa.” *Research in African Literatures* 9.1 (Spring 1978): 1–15.
- Carr, Edward Hallett. *What Is History?* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967.
- Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*. iBooks.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Dissemination*. Trans. Barbara Johnson. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981.
- , “White Mythology.” Idem. *The Margins of Philosophy*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984. 207–257.
- , *Writing and Difference*. Trans. Alan Bass. London: Routledge, 2001.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin White Masks*. Trans. Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press, 2008.
- Figureira, Dorothy M. *Otherwise Occupied*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2008.
- , *The Hermeneutics of Suspicion: Cross-Cultural Encounters with India*. London: Bloomsbury, 2015.

- Foucault, Michel. *The Archeology of Knowledge*. Trans. A.M. Sheridan. London: Routledge, 2002.
- . *The Birth of the Clinic*. Trans. A.M. Sheridan. London: Routledge, 2003.
- . *The Order of Things*. London: Routledge, 2004.
- Habermas, Jürgen. “Knowledge and Human Interests: A General Perspective.” Idem. *Knowledge and Human Interests*. Trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro. Boston: Beacon Press, 1971. 301–317.
- Jauss, Hans Robert. *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception*. Trans. Timothy Bahti. Minneapolis: University Press of Minnesota, 2013.
- Mannoni, Octave. *Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization*. Trans. Pamela Powesland. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2000.
- Roy, Arundhati. *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2013.
- Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books, 2003.
- Shaw, George Bernard. *Saint Joan: A Chronicle Play in Six Acts and an Epilogue*. New York: Penguin Books, 2003.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. “Can the Subaltern Speak?” *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*. Eds. Patrick Williams, Laura Chrisman. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994. 66–111.

Otherwise than Epistemology

Summary

Can one claim authoritative knowledge regarding the Other? What is the epistemic basis of a discursive practice that lays claim to knowledge of the Other? And more importantly, can such epistemological claims to knowledge, authoritative or otherwise, be the basis for an engagement with the Other? These are a few questions that this current piece returns to by means of reflection, meditation, analysis and argument. In doing so, I focus on questions of representation within critical and imaginative discourses as a means of access to and knowledge about the Other. I begin by reflecting on Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), a work that is often received as having inaugurated a critique of representationality within an anglophone, Euro-American academic context. Following subsequent iterations of such critiques in works by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and responses to the same in the works of Dorothy Figueira, while also exploring the bases

for such critiques in the work of previous scholars such as Jürgen Habermas, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, I explore the complex relations between discursive representations of alterity and the functionings of power. Concluding with an analysis of Frantz Fanon's critique of Octave Mannoni's "ethnopsychology" of the colonized Malagasy peoples, I propose that an epistemic or epistemological basis for engaging the Other is insufficient.

Keywords: comparative literature, African studies, alterity, deconstruction, epistemology, historiography, identity, postcoloniality, postmodernity, South Asian studies, subaltern studies

Słowa kluczowe: literatura porównawcza, studia afrykańskie, odmienność, dekonstrukcja, epistemologia, historiografia, tożsamość, postkolonialność, postmodernistyczność, studia południowoazjatyckie, studia o podrzędności