# South Asia and Its Others

# South Asia and Its Others: Reading the "Exotic"

Edited by

## V.G. Julie Rajan and Atreyee Phukan

**CAMBRIDGE**
**SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

# COVER ART

***Finding Home* #46 "*Tikkun ha-Olam*"**
By Siona Benjamin

In exploring manifestations of the exotic in South Asia, we include on the cover of this collection the work of Siona Benjamin. Born in Bombay, Benjamin was raised Jewish in a predominantly Hindu and Muslim India. Now a resident of the United States, she reflects on the complexity of her life experiences through her artwork. In her paintings, Benjamin combines images of her past with her present life in America today to produce a mosaic inspired by both Indian miniature paintings and Sephardic icons.[1]

Benjamin notes: "The featured painting, *Finding Home* #46 '*Tikkun ha-Olam*,' which means 'the reconstruction of the world,' is inspired from a concept in *Kaballah*. The world is compared to a pot or vessel which contains all the virtues. However the cosmos was unable to contain this divine energy. The pot shattered, but the broken shards retained the divine light or energy. It is humanity's task to reconstruct this vessel, which is attempted through various ethical, spiritual, intellectual, and aesthetic acts that will re-establish values in our world. By making images that contribute to this '*Tikkun*,' I am thus participating in my own small way in this reconstructive process of 'Restoration.'"[2]

In drawing attention to Benjamin's work, the Editors hope to complicate hegemonic notions of what may be construed as exotic renditions of South Asia. Through Benjamin's work, we aim to draw attention to how what may at first appear to project exotic images of South Asia to an "insider" may indeed be indicative of the many authentic, yet less visible, ways of understanding the phenomenon of South Asia in today's global society.

---

[1] Siona Benjamin, "Recent Biographical Statement: Siona Benjamin," <http://www.artsiona.com/SionaBenjaminBiography.pdf>.
[2] Siona Benjamin, E-Mail Correspondence to V.G. Julie Rajan, March 2009.

# INTRODUCTION

# RE-VISITING THE POSTCOLONIAL "EXOTIC": ALTERITY, DIFFERENCE, AND OTHERNESS

## ATREYEE PHUKAN AND V.G. JULIE RAJAN

With the mainstay of post-colonial theory, it would seem that the topic of the exotic has been discussed to tedium and appears anachronistic in a new century where the market strategies of trade, travel, and technology present themselves as bonhomous attempts to ease differences between distant societies. It becomes tempting to imagine that as geographies are brought closer through technological advances, the cartographic basis for what is often construed as modern (meaning, Western) identity—instrumental in marking the hemispheric separation of the West from the East and South—may be mitigated in an era where physical expanse is increasingly covered in cyberspace. However, whereas before the colonial Other had connoted difference and threat in the age of imperialism, the existence of an Other in today's post-colonial, late-capitalist context does not contradict its former avatar, but rather symbolically exaggerates those original characteristics by repacking and reprojecting them into a commodity disseminated via multiple genres for eager consumption by an international audience.

Critical analyses of South Asia, even literary ones, must recognize the enormous contribution of Asian economies to international markets. Many critics have suggested that post-colonial Anglophone South Asian literature itself is one among other products, manufactured by "local" hands as it were, that can be used to de-code previously "foreign" cultures in a well-meaning attempt to educate the benign interests of the rest of the world. It is also true that the growing demand for "world literature" in bookstores, schools, universities, and even movie theatres has made it easier for writers (especially from post-colonized societies) to find publishers, since they will likely be guaranteed a world-wide readership. A sweep of the critical entries from Edward Said to Graham Huggan, however, surfaces and maps the still lingering aspect of exoticism and

essentialism, especially in the contemporary climate of easy information exchange. From its stronghold as the signifier of otherness and inferiority in early textual constructions of the "mystical East," the trope of the exotic now has its function as a marker of desirability for post-colonial products that allow knowledge itself to become a possession.

When compiling *South Asia and Its Others*: *Reading the "Exotic,"* the Editors, V.G. Julie Rajan and Atreyee Phukan, have considered alterity in its emergence in conventional contexts and unconventional trajectories. For example, we hope to draw visibility to speculations about how in the context of globalization, notions of Otherness no longer mark only Western approaches to the Global South, but also circumscribe the way in which non-Western peoples conceive of and perceive of themselves and the socio-political conditions of post-colonial states.

In that vein, we consider how diasporic reflections on native homelands have complicated traditional spatial and cultural theorizations of exoticism, and are also conscious of the problematic ways in which Western projections of difference and Otherness have been integrated into post-colonial states, the very spaces that had "resisted" against colonial ideologies. For example, in India, Hindu nationalists continue to employ ideologies of exoticism to point to the "difference" between Hindus and religious minorities in India in order to justify the marginalization of non-Hindus in the nation. Throughout South Asia, discourses of Otherness have reinforced more explicitly the line between caste and out-caste, to mark the boundary between those deemed worthy and unworthy of dignity.

The Editors are also mindful of the multiple ways in which the Global South itself has often been complicit in perpetuating the racist underpinnings of exoticism. This is true, for example, in regards to the Western push for a War Against Terror in the post-9/11 era, a War that the Indian government has committed itself to as it perceives what it deems to be comparable elements of terrorism (read: Islam) waging war against both India and the United States. Thus a major aim of this Collection is to introduce, discern, and critically assess various representations and repercussions of exoticism in South Asian writing on the discourse of South Asia and its place in global culture today.

## Interpreting the Aesthetics of Postcolonial South Asian Literature

A core agenda of *South Asia and Its Others* is to re-examine the trope of the exotic in an analysis of South Asian aesthetics. By this we mean

that we aim to look at how South Asia—as one of the regions figured in colonial Orientalist discourses of the East—has become a refuge of political, cultural, and aesthetic signs and symbols that refuse to disappear. The essays in the compilation explore various re-orientatations of the "exotic" in South Asian literature, an aesthetic movement in the post-colonial era that ever more increasingly shifts us away from an West–East polemic to consider how the exotic may be manifested in other contexts and in terms of other alterities. Whereas in the colonial context constructions of the colonized Other or Exotic had served to make clear the latter's inferior and subjugated position, in the post-colonial South Asian literary paradigm this same mechanics of identification-through-difference can be interpreted to be used by writers of South Asian descent to re-examine local interests earlier considered to be of tertiary importance in the eras of colonialism and decolonization.

The essays in this Volume comprise postulations from scholars who theorize broadly on exoticism and its relationship to South Asia in various geographical contexts in contemporary global culture to revisit how it engages with and negotiates against notions of difference. Our Contributors write about the exotic from a wide range of geographies, including North America, South Africa, Nepal, and Israel. With these essays, we not only hope to demonstrate the wide girth of attention that South Asian literature receives across the globe, but also to bring attention to a recent trend in which South Asian-descent writers have begun to strategically "self-exoticize" ideologies of nation, identity, and culture related to South Asia in their own works to complicate, problematize, and extend traditional interpretations of the phenomenon of South Asia in a global context.

In past decades, much critical attention has been given to the colonialist "exoticization" of Eastern Others by Western writers, without exploring the ways in which the exotic has marked the aesthetic and critical projects of Eastern writers themselves. Our anthology considers how the phenomenon of "exoticization" may be interpreted as a strategic methodology utilized by writers of South Asian descent to examine critically both the post-colonialist ramifications of casteism, religious intolerance, and gender violence across differing cultural contexts within the South Asian region, and how current perceptions of 'native' and 'diasporic' South Asian subjectivities have problematized ideologies of authenticity across Western–Eastern cultural and economic divides. In "Exotic Ruses?: Sri Lanka As Seen through Romesh Gunesekera's *Reef* and Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*" (p. 103) Maryse Jayasuriya considers the disparate ways in which Gunesekera's and Ondaatje's

approaches to exoticism mediate the representational value of conflict situations in Sri Lanka. While Gunesekera's text overemphasizes the notions of difference with regard to conflict situations, for example by "emphasizing the food, landscape and even the violence of the country's ethnic conflict as markers of difference in order to appeal to his implied audience of Western readers," Jayasuriya observes that "Ondaatje uses exoticism more judiciously-focusing on religion, art, and other aspects of Sri Lankan culture in order to make a connection between the political situation in Sri Lanka and global issues." Such representational differences round out and texturize exotic postulations of South Asia globally and impact differently their readers' receptions of the ongoing conflict in Sri Lanka, and by extension, of other conflicts in South Asia as a whole.

Several papers in *South Asia and Its Others* speculate on how South Asian authors construct and render their own versions of an "exotic" South Asia and how they have employed this colonialist discourse as a discursive tool to uncover the ambiguity in certain subjects that continue to mark them as "marginal" even today. In "The Indian on the Bookshelf: Placing Jhumpa Lahiri in Contemporary American Literature," (p. 55), Raj Chetty considers how American speculations on the exotic nature of Indian-American author Jhumpa Lahiri's writing have problematized the reception of her work in the United States. Chetty evaluates U.S. critiques of Lahiri's short story collection, *The Interpreter of Maladies* that primarily fix her "into an ethnic minority category" to consider how such speculations ultimately categorize Lahiri as an ethnic, not an American, writer. Despite the fact that Lahiri has won the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for her collection, Chetty contends that the tendency to exoticize Lahiri may problematize the acceptance of her work into the American literary canon. Regarding Chetty's discussion, the Editors consider the gendered aspects of Othering that often mark the work of South Asian authors in the West. The exotic representations used to market South Asian texts, particularly those written by women, may impact the "salability" of those texts by catering to Western fantasies of the exotic Third World woman. Certain South Asian literary works, such as those written by Indian-American authors Jhumpa Lahiri and Samina Ali, emphasize on their covers and in their propaganda materials striking images of the authors themselves that may encourage and emphasize exotic approaches to South Asia. Such strategies also surface questions about the degree to which the authors themselves may have been involved in or conscious about these "exotic" projections of their texts.

In that vein, the Editors deemed it critical to question if writers who exoticize their own familiar habitus are in effect feeding a system of sign and product exchange that is no different from traditional forms of Orientalism as posited by colonialism. Several pieces in the Volume explore whether self-exoticization in literature may pose to have political meanings that can prove valuable to non-Western subjectivities in the post-colonial context, and whether readings or writings concerning the Other can reveal a constant mediation between the known and the unknown, the knowable and the unknowable. We point to the contributions of Ronie Parciack and Nancy E. Batty, which reflect on these questions in their assessment of the work of Indian-Jewish writer Esther David and South Indian author, Shashi Deshpande, respectively. In "Displacing Authority, Exoticizing the Self: Indianness and Jewishness in the Literary Work of Esther David," (p. 11) Ronie Parciack contends that Esther David's approach to the exotic hinges on a dialectic produced between the nation and religion. When dominating a nation-state, any religion can act in a supremacist mode that endows it with what may be construed as a colonizing authority within that nation-space—even within geographies that have themselves recently been decolonized. Parciack draws attention to manifestations of this supremacist mode through David's writings which she contends, through a hybrid Jew-Indian lens, captures modes of exoticization linking Jewish and Hindu identity politics that have been given little visibility in explorations of South Asian literature. In "'Think of the Brontës': Domesticating the Exotic in Shashi Deshpande's *Small Remedies*," (p. 33) Nancy E. Batty considers how the lack of attention given to the work of Shashi Deshpande globally has impacted interpretations of exoticism in her work not only in the West, but throughout South Asia itself. On the one hand, Batty considers how Deshpande's refusal to cow-tow to Western notions of exoticism —for example, in her tendency to write about local contexts in India and in local languages with little or no translation or contextualization—may render her narratives cryptic to Western readers who may be unaware of such particularities. This, Batty argues, may be one reason why Deshpande's opus has drawn considerably little attention in the context of the South Asian canon globally. On the other hand, Batty explains, close readings of Deshpande's work reveal the ways in which her stories turn on "subjects whose range of reference is neither proscribed by the local, nor dominated by the global," but speak to a type of symbolism that may be read as excessively exotic in its refusal to fit neatly either into the symbolic codes of the West or of South Asia.

    An additional distinction between colonial and post-colonial constructions of the exotic lies in the former's dependency on the dictates of a single, unified point of reference and the latter's emergence out of a multipronged response necessitated by the pressures of that single point of reference. In her article "White, Foreign, But So Within Reach on the Page": Exoticist Modes of Fantasy in Ardashir Vakil's *Beach Boy*," (p. 149) Heather Snell addresses the unlimited and ambiguous nature of post-colonial responses to colonialism, for example, by drawing attention to how the disturbing repercussions of colonialism may be discerned in the aesthetic representations of the normal, mundane fantasies and longings of a teenage boy living in Bombay.  Snell considers that while readers of Vakil's *Beach Boy* may be disturbed by the representations of sexual and psychological violence endured by the novel's central character, the teenaged Cyrus, they are in fact experiencing how Cyrus' random, innocuous desires for the exotic and his experiences of violence reflect his attempts to "situate himself problematically within [the] complex network of global cultural flows" permeating his post-colonial environment.

    Several articles in *South Asia and Its Others* reflect on whether it is useful or valuable to think of a literary enterprise that can be termed "post-colonial exoticization," and whether attempts to re-read the exotic in a post-colonial context nevertheless turn on a costumed version of conventional ideologies of Orientalism, wherein the now "native informant" takes over the job of imposing cultural hegemony from the inside-in.  The contributions of Puspa Damai and Pamila Gupta underscore the ways in which South Asians, in their attempts to articulate post-colonial subjectivity, have themselves only reinscribed various aspects of colonial exoticism in their work. In "Spectrogenetic Translation in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Elsewhere," (p. 79) Puspa Damai argues that South Asian author Arundhati Roy's rendering of untouchability in terms of godliness in *The God of Small Things* resonates with colonial ideologies that read "subalterns" as objects, not as subjects. Damai speculates on how Roy's invocation of colonial methods of translation envisions untouchability in "absolutist terms"—a strategy that may ultimately mitigate against a recognition of the highly varied experiences, social agencies, and subjectivities of *dalits* living in South Asia and abroad. Along similar lines, Pamila Gupta's piece "*Goa Dourada*, the Internal Exotic in South Asia: Discourses of Colonialism and Tourism" (p. 123) considers how post-colonial Indian approaches to and representations of the Indian state of Goa participate in an internal exoticism of that state that mirrors prior British colonial historiographies

of it. Gupta further considers how expatriates of Goa themselves may contribute to the exotization of their home state.

## Reflections on the "Exotic"

When initiating this Collection, the Editors questioned how far have postcolonial theorizations come in reinventing the exotic, a term once considered to be at the very heart of the colonial enterprise. We also pondered the ramifications of new approaches to the exotic, for example, in terms of mitigating against traditional forms of epistemic violence, and whether those approaches indeed have revealed or engendered new breeds of violence. As we close this Anthology and craft the *Introduction* to it, we perceive that a conception of South Asia as an unvariegated plane, consolidated through its struggle against imperial rule, is no longer possible. What is privileged in this method of literary examination are subjects, such as religious fundamentalism, internal civil unrest, and caste exclusion, that have long had to percolate at the margins in the anti-colonial agenda, and these topics can now join international discussions on similar issues of political significance. The articles in *South Asia and Its Others* treat the "exotic" as discursive, enabling rather than restricting, productive readings of the local context without ignoring their connections at the global scale. In reflecting on this Collection, we perceive that critical terms associated with the realm of the exotic—such as "foreign," "other," "abnormal," "unusual"—are shed of their colonial significations; this shedding allows for a reassessment of the value of those terms as linguistic and ideological devices that help to produce more nuanced readings of South Asian identity and history because, as never before, the central point of reference does not lie "elsewhere." As such, South Asia becomes a heterogeneous site that is opened up to expose the hidden narratives of oppression and occlusion inflicted from its own centers of power. Suggesting that "othering" encourages nuanced readings that defamiliarize the norm, the essays in *South Asia and Its Others* engage with the ways in which writers of South Asian origin deliberately confuse the insider–outsider positionality of the narrator (as neither insider nor outsider) in order to fragment the inner national landscape. This provides for a reconfiguration of South Asian identity that is connected to the ways in which South Asian nation states, identities, religious communities, and languages continue to be distanced from one another even within the national geographic terrain.

This outlook has powerful ramifications for cultural and literary studies because it enables writers to successfully redefine the parameters

of nation and community: Intranational boundaries signify as much as international borders; and zones of contact between diverse national citizens are studied in tandem with the diaspora. These points uncover some of the ways literature from South Asia projects a self-exoticization of the mainland in order to search for a fuller picture of its unexamined histories and identities. This endeavour, however, has yet to be met with full popular support or political realization.  Because South Asian nations have only recently become independent and because only one model of modernity (Western capitalist) is currently at work in the region, South Asian nations are required to present an image to the rest of the world that convincingly shows their ability to join the fast-track of late capitalism.  In this quandary, it is in fact harder to criticize one's own culture and society because "impatience" and "analysis" are themselves seen as products of Western analysis. Problems of representation will thus remain when presenting the post-coloniality of South Asia as a condition that builds on positive as well as on negative elements, and as a state in which insiders are free to examine the inside.  This is particularly the case for South Asian writers who shed light on identities that have remained hidden or forgotten within their own national environment, even while catering to the aesthetic gratification of foreign audiences.

As we pen this *Introduction*, international acclaim abounds for *Slumdog Millionaire*, a cinematic adaptation of the novel *Q & A* by the seasoned foreign diplomat Vikas Swarup.  In India, many cannot forgive or ignore what they consider to be a foreign, commercial appropriation of India's life force, its poor.  Most notable among those who have publicly criticized the cinematic version for its subject matter is the luminary Bollywood actor Amitabh Bachchan.  Bachchan claimed that *Slumdog* had helped to secure the First World's impression of the Third World as a primarily chaos-ridden, lawless, polluted place. His reaction is particularly enlightening in lieu of the fact that when Bachchan himself was for 6 years the host of *Kaun Banega Crorepati* (the Indian version of U.K.'s *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*)—a show that paid him rupees twenty-three crores (i.e., 23 million Indian rupees) and on which the young star in *Slumdog Millionaire* raises himself out of poverty—he did not mind that the royalties he received proved instrumental in saving him from imprisonment for fraud and bankruptcy and that his involvement with the show helped propagate the myth of India's stellar rise as a global economic power.  A fact made increasingly clearer in the twenty-first century is that this economic upsurge, while improving some features of everyday life for all Indians, is widening the gap among its socio-economic classes—and in fact this fundamental, persistent inequality is

one polluting truth about globalization that the Mr. Bachchans are eager to keep out of their invective against the West's Third-Worldism of India.

The example of *Slumdog* is warranted because of its resonance with our own endeavours to trace the elements of both positive and negative forms of exoticization within South Asia. The fulcrum of the criticism levied against the movie by Indian politicians, media, and celebrities rests on two recurring points: that the poor of India are not to be treated as so much flotsam for titillation to the accompaniment of catchy tunes and stunning cinematography; and, furthermore, that the poverty of India is a subject best left to be assessed by Indians, certainly not by the British or by any other Western entity. Or, apparently, the poor are best left alone to fend for themselves. While it would seem that the main line of criticism against the movie falls back on assuming the authority of the native insider over the foreign outsider, the debates unfolding around *Slumdog* are far more illuminating. What was most objected to was British director Danny Boyle's apparent exploitation of a real and serious plight, the irresponsible abuse of a social condition that his production did not intend to alleviate. These kinds of objections presume that certain subjects remain taboo for "outsiders" and that although "insiders" have the natural right to analyze insider problems, they are not obliged to personally involve themselves in rectifying them. These objections further emphasize anti-colonial rhetoric of how views from outsiders, foreigners, and abroad will always be seen as a re-imposition of the shackles of empire's essentializing mission, a regressive position for a modernizing country.

*Slumdog* does portray uncomfortable aspects of Indian society such as its unsanitary conditions and multitudes of poor. And because the film was shot through the British lens, it may be difficult to divorce those aspects from conventional colonial views of British India that have always emphasized those "unseemly" aspects of India to underscore its difference, backwardness, barbarism, and inability to develop vis-à-vis Western culture. Yet the tendency to claim only this perspective in a critique of the movie and of the West draws attention away from the fact that these aspects nevertheless *do* exist and very much form the everyday reality for many people in South Asia today. As such, in light of the American media's enchantment with what has been termed "the cute slumdog kids," the potential romance between Dev Patel and Frieda Pinto, the stars of *Slumdog*, or the constant focus on Pinto's dresses at the various awards ceremonies she attended to promote the movie, what should be critiqued more astringently is the media's singular attention to the superficial aspects of the movie, rather than to the serious content on which it is based, in a manner that is not sensationalized. For although the movie

may be critiqued for skewing the representation of this reality and for capitalizing on it, the story itself is rooted in a very real fabric of human rights violations plaguing India today.

In the course of developing *South Asia and Its Others*, the Editors call for a more progressive and fresh critique of exoticization that is mindful of multiple perspectives—both from insiders *and* outsiders, and with regard to multiple issues, such as class, gender, sexual orientation, language, and religion—that may contribute to projections of Otherness in any context. It is this perspective that is often lost in the urgent need for "insiders" to point out the imperial eye, the unwelcome perceptions of "outsiders" that tend to focus explicitly on the unseemly aspects of South Asia. The complexities of this debate further make clear how dialogues within South Asia and among South Asians, native and diasporic, often engage in the exoticization of their own under-classes. For this reason, this Collection values the work of contemporary South Asian authors for whom the trope of the exotic allows for an examination of the disempowered subjects of the nation-state. To write about the disempowered in one's familiar territory, we suggest, is an art that undoes the stamp of inferiority associated with Orientalist perspectives in the colonial paradigm— especially in the objectification of human beings and their experiences. In this post-colonial example, all human experiences are recognized and the "othered" subject becomes a new and empowering form of analysis.

# CHAPTER ONE

## DISPLACING AUTHORITY,
## EXOTICIZING THE SELF:
## INDIANNESS AND JEWISHNESS
## IN THE LITERARY WORK OF ESTHER DAVID

### RONIE PARCIACK
### *TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY, ISRAEL*

> Black hats, Fez cups, turbans, long beards and tight black suits dominate the family photograph. The elders incline their heads and look at us. The girls are in long flowing dresses […] and the women in nine-yard saris secured between  their legs. They wear nose-rings and under the frilled sleeves of their blouses their armlets gleam […].
> —Esther David, *The Walled City*[1]

A family portrait: All the manifold manifestations of the domestic are gathered into one single frame. That is how Esther David, an Indian-Jewish writer living in the town of Ahmedabad, India, pictures her family in *The Walled City* (1997). *The Walled City,* a partially autobiographical work, offers a collection of David's fragmented memories, images, and scenes depicting the lives of three generations of Indian-Jewish women.[2]

---

[1] Esther David, *The Walled City* (Madras: Manas/ East-West Books, 1997/2002), 9-10.

[2] The novels of Esther David  that are discussed in this paper, "The Walled City", and "The Book of Esther", are based on the author's biography, located mostly in her hometown and are narrated in the first person voice by a  female narrator named Esther. These may identify the author with the narrator. However, such an identification is somewhat misleading, as various scenes depicted in both novels may be fictitious. Furthermore, a comparative reading reveals contradictions in the depiction of major personal events (such as the birth story of Esther – see my discussion at the end of this exploration). These texts can therefore be classified as

Allegedly, this very frame could have served as an intimate arena for the
familiar Self, namely, the narrator's own family. However, a glance at the
excerpt noted and at David's literary work reveals it to be an arena in
which a totally different path is taken: A detailed and indulging
description moves the gaze from the family members to their attributes, to
Fez hats, moving fabrics, nose-rings, and hidden bracelets that gleam
through yards of fabric. In this movement, the Self becomes the exotic
Other.

    This turn, obliviously performed by the text, is quite surprising as the
Self, any Self, is expected to be perceived as an unnoted norm evoking no
detailed fascination, as would an exotic Other. What meaning might,
therefore, be attributed to the conversion of the Self into the exotic? Is the
Self capable of being exoticized? Theoretical discourses on the process of
exoticization are premised on the assumption that the exotic is associated
with Otherness. Is it therefore possible to locate David's literary work
against the well-established background of binary oppositions of Self and
Other? Is it possible to assess the Jewish-Indian family in a manner that
perceives the Jewish identity as the Self and the Indian/Hindu
demographic in which this Jewish family lives as its Other? And what
kind of interpretation does David provide to these two polar components,
Jewish and Indian, of her identity? Using two of her novels, *The Walled
City* (1997) and *The Book of Esther* (2003)*, which is also a partially
autobiographical work that is set within the Indian-Jewish communities
mainly in India and partly in Israel, I suggest a refined dialectic model of
Self and Other that is articulated through processes of exoticization.

    My exploration becomes remarkably intense when considering the
supremacist standpoint of the two systems through which David's writings
are produced: the Hindu–Indian and the Jewish. Both systems can be
regarded as supremacist in their claim of superiority and authority over
other cultures and, in interest to this essay, to one another. It is from this
supremacist point of view, employed by both cultures, that each is unlikely
to serve as an Other. My essay exposes the way David creates a structure
that displaces, decentralizes, and exoticizes both the Hindu-Indian and
Jewish cultures so that they both circulate in a system in which at times

---

partially-autobiographical or semi-autobiographical. For the sake of accuracy, I
will mostly refer to the narrator as separate from the author. For further
biographical notes  on the works of Esther David see: Shalva Weil, "Esther David:
The Bene Israel Novelist who Grew up with a Tiger," In *Karmic Passages; Isareli
Scholarship on India*, eds. David Shulman and Shalva Weil, (New Delhi: Oxford
UP, 2008), 232-256.

they are either Self/Center or Other. I term this continual circulation through both positions as "bipolar exoticization."

## Self, Other, and the Exotic

Systems of inter-cultural relations can be located in primary and structural divides between the Self and Other. This binary distinction has acquired further strength, both with the rise of nationalist thought, which is by nature essentialist, and with the conversion of nationalism into a ruling organizing factor in the modern world. A theoretical examination of exoticism primarily relies on the binary model engendered by European colonialism underlying the relations of colonizer/colonized, which is widely exposed and conceptualized in Edward Said's *Orientalism*.[3] The firmness of this model and its categories has gone through several refinements. Postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha, for example, addresses the comprehension of the inevitable fluidity within this structure by outlining a dialectic structure in which the categories of Self and Other themselves can be split into subdivisions, each of which can simultaneously serve as Self and Other.[4] These subdivisions may be premised on the mechanism of attraction and invitation; hence, a momentary dialectic between Self and Other could be formed, for example, when the Other allures, attracts, or invites the Self. Structurally, this attraction/invitation is a moment in which the Self discovers a lack or partiality within itself, and thus desires to compensate for, and even to cure, that lack by appropriating the Other's symbolic assets. The experience of lack might, therefore, motivate a process of estrangement within the Self, as it is fulfilled by elements of the Other. At the same time, the structured Other of the binary model becomes the pole embodying self-sufficiency and wholeness—and thus, in a way, can be interpreted as a Self. In this context, the Self is established as Other and the Other as Self—so that the border between the categories cannot be easily discerned. The essentialist wish—desiring the firmness of these categories—thus dissolves and paves the way for a fluid pattern that extensively challenges the rigid categorization of the Self/Other binary.

This definition of the structural intricacies underscoring the Self and Other are essential to understanding the complex ideologies circumscribing

---

[3] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Verso, 1978).
[4] Homi K. Bhabha, "The Other Question: Difference, Discrimination, and the Discourse of Colonialism," In *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader*, eds. Baker A. Houston Jr., Manthia Diawara, and Ruth H. Lindeborg, (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1996), 87–106.

the notion of the exotic and to understanding the processes of exoticization. In light of that dialectic, what is the exotic? Simply speaking, the exotic is Otherness. Literary theorist Tzvetan Todorov noted: "The best candidates for the exotic label are the people and cultures that are most remote from us."[5] Similarly, in his essay examining the terminology of the exotic starting from Montaigne's essay "Of Cannibals" published in 1561, cultural anthropologist Roger Celestine employs the word "exotic" as a substitute for the term "foreign," a term that emerges mainly in pre-colonialist texts.[6] Such formulations depict an essential aspect in the discourse of the exotic: its binary foundation. Underlying the discourse of Otherness is a basic structural layout premised on a familiar Self. This Self is the locus of power, constituting an authority and focalization through which both Self and Other are catalogued and deciphered. However, the Otherness formulated by the discourse of the exotic requires a more complex consideration. This is evidenced for example when Celestine notes that those who did not use the term "exotic" chose instead to employ the word "exceptional."[7] The Otherness in this respect is indeed wondrously different, for it is an otherness that becomes an object of fascination, a spectacle of Otherness.

The Otherness within the discourse of the exotic is, therefore, an Otherness that opens a discourse stretching beyond it—an Otherness that exceeds itself. This understanding leads, then, to a structural aspect. Exoticization processes indeed depend on a binary model. At the same time, the exotic constantly challenges this construct. In the primary sense, the fascination aroused in the Self by the Other displaces the Self's authority and grants its potential to the Other. As I shall indicate through an analysis of David's texts, the moments in which the Self discovers a lack within itself allows it to draw, to open up, spaces within itself. These moments set in motion processes of exoticization in which foci of authority are displaced and moved on, enabling fluidity between and within the categories of Self and Other.[8]

---

[5] Tzvetan Todorov (n.d.), cited in Graham Huggan, "The Postcolonial Exotic", *Transition* 64 (1994): 26.

[6] Roger Celestine, "Montaigne and the Cannibals: Towards a Redefinition of Exoticism," *Cultural Anthropology* Vol. 5 no. 3 (1990): 292.

[7] Roger Celestine, "Montaigne and the Cannibals: Towards a Redefinition of Exoticism," *Cultural Anthropology* Vol. 5 no. 3 (1990): 292.

[8] In this respect, I wish to detach from the interpretation of exoticization processes as a domestication of the Otherness, as seen, for example, in Celestine's words ("somehow, the non-Western can be capted, brought back from 'out there,'

Esther David's literary work serves as an arena through which I intend to demonstrate the model of bipolar exoticization. Her work is especially adequate for this purpose since it tosses between two supremacist cultural systems: Judaism on the one hand, and Hinduism on the other. Each system is premised on a demanding authority and toils to articulate itself as an unequivocal focus of all-obliging authority, "a greedy total institution," as Israeli political scientist Ephraim Tabori coins this stand.[9] In light of that observation, the question arises whether it is possible to induce exoticization within authority.

## Supremacism in the Cases of India and Israel: Traditional and Modern Contexts

The manifestation of the religions of Judaism and Hinduism[10] in the context of the nation–state allude to a unique model.[11] The secular nation–state is interpreted by philosopher and social anthropologist Ernest Gellner as the sign of modernity. It is interpreted by International Studies theorist Benedict Anderson as the product of the industrial revolution—as the fruit of the enlightenment and as the climax of the secularization process, the height of which had engendered the disintegration of religious communities and the dynastic realm of the previous eras.[12] Notwithstanding this secular model, the modern nation–states of India and Israel identify their national ideologies with religion. The imaginaries of both nations can be read as the realization of the primordialist/nationalist wish to integrate

---

translated […]." Roger Celestine, "Montaigne and the Cannibals: Towards a Redefinition of Exoticism," *Cultural Anthropology* Vol. 5 no. 3 (1990): 293.

[9] Ephraim Tabory, "Life Models in a Mixed Neighborhood," *Living Together*: *The Relations of Religious and Secular Populations  in Israeli Society,*" ed. Charles Liebman  (in Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Keter, 1990), 104. Note that Tabory refers to a Jewish stand, but his term could fit and explain the Hindu supremacist stand as well.

[10] Hinduism is a term that was coined under European colonialism. It is a relatively new and a somewhat artificial construct. I am making use of this term for convenience only.

[11] See, for example, Peter Van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism—Hindus and Muslims in India* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1994), 11.

[12] For a exhaustive summary on this topic, see: Peter Van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism—Hindus and Muslims in India* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1994), 1–18; Asad, Talal, "Religion, Nation-State, Secularism," in *Nation and Religion*, eds. Peter Van der Veer and Hartmut Lehmann  (Princeton : Princeton University Press, 1999), 178–196.

their ancient communities and associated religious beliefs into the processes and policies of the modern nation, a process to which Anderson referred with no small amount of irony as "alchemy."[13]

Founding national ideologies within a religious framework is an extremely potent tool in establishing an authority within the nation that can be identified as a source of an absolute validity. This source is transcendental, single, and central in the case of Jewish monotheism, and offers multiple points of entry in the case of Hinduism in the modern Indian nation–state. In the discourse of the exotic, a comprehensive meaning should be attributed to the structuring of a culture as supremacist. The discourse of the exotic depends, as detailed, upon Otherness. However, the supremacist construction does not recognize Otherness as one of its possible marks—not internally, since the *greedy total* authoritative aspect within it subjects and confines all its members to a firm notion of an authoritative Self, and also not externally, since the supremacist standpoint produces this subjection also in relation to other cultures/nations as well. These two cultures, therefore, produce themselves as constructs that cannot be subjected to any possible exoticization.

## Supremacism and Authority in the Jewish Context

Ella Belfer writes in her in-depth comprehensive research devoted to the political dimension of Jewish thought: "The Jewish World Picture is founded on these three matters: the belief in God, the belief in the Divine Providence, and the belief that Israel is the Chosen People."[14] The examination of the modes by which the Jewish People collectively establishes itself reveals that Jewish nation-building is tightly linked with the bond with God—the transcendental, absolute authority placed at the heart of the monotheistic system. This bond is exclusive and grants the Jewish People a supremacist status in the hierarchy of all peoples worldwide, not only within the nation. In a somewhat roundabout move, this status can be extrapolated to establish the Jewish people's transcendent authority as absolute.

It is possible to detect these establishing notions in the Bible—the authoritative text of Judaism, where God entered into a covenant with "his" People. The covenant states: "Now therefore if you will obey my

---

[13] Yaron Zur, introduction to *Imagined Communities* (Tel Aviv: Open University Press, 1991), 15. (Hebrew).

[14] Ella Belfer, *Malkut Shamayim and the State of Israel—Studies in the Political Aspects of Jewish Thought* (Ramat Gan: Bar Illan UP, 1991), 21. (Hebrew).

voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine."[15] This supremacist covenant privileges the Jewish Self and manifests through that privilege the structuring of a Jewish Self that is further realized and reified through subsequent holy wars undertaken by it against archetypal Others, or gentiles. In addition, this biblical covenant is the source for thinking that the land of Israel is sacred—as the arena where the exclusive bond between God and the people of Israel is actively realized. The land becomes thus a living evidence of this covenant, and the "living" nature of it is evidenced by its compellation of a life style geared toward this supremacy within its borders—an idea formulated in what is named "the precept of settling the land of Israel," which states: "For you are to pass over the Jordan to go in to take possession of the land which the Lord your God gives you; and when you possess it and live in it, you shall be careful to do all the statutes and the ordinances which I set before you this day."[16]

The establishment of the Jewish People is, therefore, outlined via their recognition of and subjection to a transcendental authority through their own ascription to a certain mode of living and adhesion to a sacred territory in which this layout is implemented. Those ascriptions eventually lead to the delegation of authority (originally transcendental) to the People itself, and to a concept that at the end of time, all the other people will recognize and accept this same belief by subjecting themselves to the supremacy of the Jewish authority. This is also evidenced in the covenant as noted in the book of *Isaiah*:

> And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established in the top of the mountains and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it. And many people shall go and say, come ye, and let us to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths; for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.[17]

The core of these ideas is echoed in the socio-political dynamics of modern-day Israel. Despite the long time span and extensive changes experienced by parts of the Zionist-Israeli-Jewish society—namely, the processes of secularization, the embrace of socialist ideas, and subversive consolidations of a post-Zionistic critical school that absorbed influences from deconstruction, the critique of colonialism, and postcolonial

---

[15] *Exodus* 19: 5-7.
[16] *Deuteronomy* 11: 31–32.
[17] *Isaiah* 2: 2–4.

theories—these ideas still constitute a base-model that outlines the political agenda in Israel, at least on the formal level.

Israel is defined as the homeland for the Jews. The Israeli territory is still perceived as sacred, and as the arena of the covenant between the People and the transcendental authority—in fact, this assumption is the basis on which Israel demands its sovereignty over the land and is a chief reason for difficulties in achieving a solution to the continuing Israeli–Palestinian conflict. In Israel's 1950 "The Law of Return," every Jew is to be granted an immediate Israeli citizenship; as such, Israel becomes the home for every Jew, and those residing within its borders are automatically subject to laws governed by the Jewish calendar, ultimately to produce a religious Jewish order within the nation.[18] Tabory reads this enforcement of religious obligations in public and private senses on citizens as a part of the all-obliging authority, the "greedy total institution."[19] Tabory analyzed the political implications of Jewish thought in the Israeli nation–state. However, this term can also be applied to the other concern of this exploration—that of citizens in the predominantly Hindu space of India.

## Authority and Supremacism in the Hindu Context

The Hindu religious system is different in terms of its organization than many other religions, including Judaism. While the Jewish system is founded on a clear monotheistic premise—thus acknowledging one single authority and relying on one establishing text—Hinduism has been interpreted as monistic, monotheistic, and polytheistic, hence, without a clear, single authoritative core and also without a single establishing text that could be paralleled to the Jewish Torah. Yet Hinduism's influence within India is comparable to Judaism's influence in Israel in that it

---

[18] This is on the formal level only. The real practice is flexible and rather contradictory. Extensive changes have been made in the social situation in Israel over the last decades and some of these laws are only partially implemented. However, on the formal level, i.e., in the ideological layout of Israel that links the national with the religious, this thought still stands.

[19] Ephraim Tabory, "Life Models in a Mixed Neighborhood," *Living Together*: *The Relations of Religious and Secular Populations  in Israeli Society,*" ed. Charles Liebman  (in Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Keter, 1990), 104. .Other significant works examining this topic are: Gershon Weiler, *Jewish Theocracy* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1976); Eliezer Schweid*, Between Orthodoxy and Religious Humanism* (Jerusalem: Van Leer, 1977); Ella Belfer, *"Malkhut Shamayim' and the State of Israel—Studies in the Political Aspects of Jewish Thought"* (Ramat Gan: Bar Illan UP, 1991).

constitutes a type of authority that coheres both the religion and the territory to produce a modern nation–state.

The points of similarity between India and Israel lie in their common assumption of a total obligation from all members within their national borders, regardless of their religious backgrounds, that would subject them to the dominating religious tenets of the land, and, hence, to reside in a socio-political hierarchy of that central religious authority and its Others. Even as the paradigm is linked to this from the colonialist age onwards, following the rise of nationalism and its vast absorption in India under British rule,[20] notions of Self and Other can be traced earlier in the Indian subcontinent to the Vedic period (1500 B.C.E.), and its reference most notably to what is now regarded as the *arya*, the "noble" Sanskrit-speaking population (which would constitute the Self), and *anarya* ("un-noble," impure) non-Sanskrit speaking population (constituting the Other). Later periods, such as that of the *Dharmaśāstra* literature (600 B.C.E. onwards), reveal the employment of the term *mlecchas* (impure, barbarians), which also refers to non-Sanskrit speaking people, to people outside the *varṇa* (caste) system, and at times directly to the Greek people in the subcontinent (constituting the Other).[21]

The concepts of Self and Other grew sharper from the seventh century, following the Muslim invasions into the subcontinent. In his essay on the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the political imagination in India, Indologist Sheldon Pollock states that from the twelfth century onward, a binary categorization induced by that Hindu epic was employed to demonize the Muslim Other.[22] The war of the prodigious protagonist of the epic, Rāma, against the demon Rāvana, was understood as analogous to the Hindus (the Self) facing the "demonic," or Other, Muslim invaders. The historical impact of demonizing the non-Hindu Other poses profound consequences for understanding the notion of supremacy in contemporary India against non-Hindu others, especially in light of the rise in right-wing Hindu fundamentalism and the concept of *Hindutva,*[23] a term coined by V.D.

[20] See Romila Thapar, "Imagined Religious Communities? Ancient History and the Modern Search for a Hindu Identity*," Modern Asian Studies*, 23:2 (1989), 209–31.
[21] Cynthia Ceppley Mahmood, "Rethinking Indian Communalism: Culture and Counter-Culture," *Asian Survey*, 33:7 (1993), 730–731.
[22] Sheldon Pollock, "Ramayana and the Political Imagination in India," *Journal of Asian Studies*. 52:2 (1993), 261–297.
[23] Joining the word Hindu with the suffix "-tva" creates a Sanskrit-like concept. As said, this concept is not a Sanskrit word but a modern term, addressing Sanskrit as

Savarkar in 1923. *Hindutva* serves as a focus through which being "[a] Hindu means a person who regards this land of Bharat Varsha, from the Indus to the Seas, as his fatherland as well as the holy-Land that is the cradle of his religion."[24] The notion of *Hindutva,* and also what is termed *Rashtriyatva* (*rashtra*: land) identifies religion with nationality to both sanctify the geographical territory, and to establish and legitimize the Hindu Self as the source of its supremacist, firm authority—all contextualized in the concept of an imagined community with borders, which in this context is the nation. The authority of this community is premised on a xenophobic dimension that excludes the non-Hindu from its national ethos, or at least confines it to an inferior socio-political position. A succinct expression of this oppression might be found in the quotation of Madhavrao Sadashivrao Golwalkar (1906-1973), the second leader of the militant Hindu Nationalist Organization RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh), whose rhetoric has a considerable influence on the public arena in modern India. In 1949, Golwalkar stated:

> The non-Hindu people in Hindustan must either adopt Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect and revere Hindu religion, must entertain no idea but the glorification of Hindu nation […] they must cease to be foreigners or may stay in a country wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges […].[25]

Notwithstanding the fact that modern India was founded as a secular democracy, the *Hindutva* rhetoric re-positions it as a sacred territory that subordinates all to its religious authority, both externally (in relation to other cultures/nations) and internally (in relation to its own members). The words of Golwalkar seem rather extremist, but they are echoed in the popular discourse of the modern Indian nation-state.

## Authority and Exoticization: The Case of Esther David

The firm authority at the heart of the Judaic-Israeli and Hindu-Indian systems privileges each of them as the firm and authoritative Self in their particular cultures. This Self is supposed to be self-sufficient; a Self embodying wholeness and impenetrability; functioning as an authority

---

a means to create an alchemical bond between the ancient noble people—the Aryans—and the modern Indian nation.

[24] Peter Van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism – Hindus and Muslims in India* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: U of California P, 1994), 1.

[25] Tapan Raychuaudhury, "Shadows of the Swastika: Historical Perspectives on the Politics of Hindu Communalism," *Modern Asian Studies*, 34: 3 (2000), 263.