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A Deconstructive Perspective of India in the French Gaze in Tasleema Nasreen's *Farashi Premik (The French Lover)*

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Abstract

Our paper discusses the [mis]representation and the imaginary notions of India constructed through the European gaze in Tasleema Nasreen's *Farashi Premik* or *The French Lover*. As the protagonist Nilanjana Mondal begins her search for love and independence far away from her home, in Paris, she feels herself continuously trapped within a prison-house of European gaze—where her motherland India is simply a barbaric land of beggars, poverty and prostitutes. It doesn't take her long to realise that the French have a subconscious awareness that the Indian culture and civilisation is in some ways, far better and older than theirs and their gaze is an attempt to mask this schizophrenic fear behind a superiority complex. It is easy to give in to this gaze, like many of Neela's Indian fellow diasporic Indians in Paris do, but much more difficult to deconstruct it, but that does not mean Neela would not try.

Keywords: India, French, gaze, Neela, Benoir Dupont, European, oriental

“They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented.”

---Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*

The Europeans' view of India, Indians and everything associated with the subcontinent can be summed up exactly in the quote above. The tendency of Europeans has always been to speak and write in stereotyped and dehumanizing ways about “The East”, in order to construct an imaginary other and India too

Edward Said's “*Orientalism*” makes it clear. According to Said, the “rational west” has to be distinguished from the “irrational” oriental countries like India, simply for the purpose of the construction of an European identity that is superior to non-European cultures like India, which have always been portrayed as

which is amply borne out by Kipling's portrayal of Indian characters and his unforgettable comment loaded with colonial overtones - "... East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet". India no longer remains a geographical entity, rather it becomes an European invention--- a land of "romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes ..." (Said 1). At the same time, India was seen as an oriental land of wish-fulfillment, as Jimmy Porter, the hero of Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* points out in his process of "looking back" with longing and nostalgia at the days of India's colonization:

All home-made cakes and croquet, bright ideas, bright uniforms. Always the same picture: high summer, the long days in the sun, slim volumes of verse, crisp linen, the smell of starch. What a romantic picture. Phoney too, of course. It must have rained sometimes. Still I regret it somehow, phoney or not" (I/6).

It is in the light of this ever pervading desire mixed with disgust that has always framed the European gaze and it has been further incensed by the "us-verses-them" contest that we, in this paper, would analyse the (mis)representation of India in the eyes of the French in Tasleema Nasreen's *Farashi Premik (The French Lover)*.

The French Lover is the tale of a woman's search for love and independence in Paris, far away from her home. The plot centres around the protagonist Nilanjana Mondal, a young Bengali woman from Kolkata who moves to Paris after her marriage to Kishanlal, a Punjabi restaurant owner in Paris. After the breaking up of her marriage she meets Benoir Dupont, a blonde, blue-eyed handsome Frenchman, and is swept off her feet. What follows is a passionate and sexually liberating relationship with Benoir which ends with her realisation that they both love the same person---she loved Benoir, Benoir too loved himself and only himself and she was nothing but an exotic taste for him.

During her long stay in Paris, Neela is continuously confronted by the European's [mis]conception about her motherland---they consider it to be an exotic yet uncultured civilization full of poverty, beggars, hunger and diseases. As Greenblat explains, we define our identities always in relation to what we are not---who must be demonised and objectified as "others" (Selden 164) The "unruly" and the "alien" are internalized "others" who help us consolidate our identities; their existence is allowed only as evidence of the rightness of the established order. That is exactly the reason why the Europeans have always sought to hide their fear of an alien culture behind the mask of a superiority complex. For the French, as Neela comes soon to realise, the poor India is the real India. This attitude of the French towards India surfaces when Neela watches a documentary film on India broadcast by a French channel with some of her French friends. The documentary begins with a close-up shot of an empty broken tin plate which diffuses into the picture of naked and bare-feet starved Indian children begging for alms and returning at the end of the day to a dirty unhygienic slum. It is also interesting to note that before his visit to India, Benoir had got himself vaccinated against almost all diseases known to medical science because, according to him, "We Europeans need it"(162) and in spite of the vaccinations, he says that he considers himself lucky to have come out hale and hearty from a disease-ridden country like India There is a reference to yet another documentary on India in the novel---on the life of prostitutes in India and their agitation for their rights causing Benoir to remark:"Holy Earth! There are so many prostitutes in your country, Neela!!"(278).

Though the word "gaze" literally means an exchange of looks, in the post colonial perspective, it can be taken to mean a gaze that gives primacy to the European look. Thus,

¹ Our translation of all quotes from the Bengali original.

when talking about India in the European "gaze", the word "gaze" actually is the look which denotes the dominant position of the European who controls the Orient as an object of desire and deceit. Thus India is always the object of the gaze---she can never look back, because she has no subjectivity. On the contrary, India and the Indians are expected to model themselves according to the Occidental gaze. The interesting point is that usually the Indian is co-opted into the occidental point of view.

The European gaze is a kind of whirlpool, into which many Indians, including Kishanlal, Sunil, and Choitali had already been sucked in. Comparing Paris to Kolkata, Kishanlal once says: "Do you think this is your dirty Kolkata that I have to wash my hands and feet every time I come home from outside? Ha Ha!" (30). Again, during her visit to Sunil and Choitali's house, Neela notices that their baby daughter Tumpa does not respond at all to Bengali words. Choitali and Sunil inform her that Tumpa does not know Bengali, she has only been taught French. Since, according to her parents, two languages might confuse the child, they had stuck to French and had decided to leave out Bengali because "of what use would that language [Bengali] be of to her?"(44). Kishan's view about the Bengali language is also no better; according to him, Neela shouldn't be proud that she had been a Bengali major in her graduation, because "What can you do with your degree of Bengali literature? Would you be able to earn a Franc with it? You can't.... So stop showing me your temper"(55). Actually, in spite of being Indians by birth, the European gaze towards their motherland had been thrust on them and they had begun to see India, Indian culture and Indian languages with the spectacles of disgust that the French had lent them, because, after all, it is far easier to swim with the current than against it.

Once when, after a fight with Neela, Benoir walks out of her flat, he turns down her invitation to leave only after having had his

meal with the words: "Food and eating is not as important to us [Europeans] as to you [Indians]. People die in your country out of hunger and that is precisely the reasons why you all have never learnt to think beyond food."(227) What is beyond Benoir's understanding is that Neela comes from the country where guests are treated as one's God - *atithi devo bhava* - and Indian culture and manners do not allow a hostess to let anyone (even her enemies) leave her house with an empty stomach. Yet, it is Danielle who, from her artificial notions and the way she had been taught to "gaze" at India and Indian culture accuses Neela that Indians are barbaric because they cannot give due respect to human beings. That is why after going out to Danielle's friend Nikol's house for dinner with Nikol, Neela had not explicitly thanked her host, because she had considered him her friend and Indian culture demands what can aptly be summed up in a very popular dialogue from Salman Khan's first commercial hit "Maine pyar kiya" - "*Dosti mein no sorry, no thank you*" (There is no sorry, no thank you in friendship.) She had not meant to demean Nikol in any way, but that is exactly how Danielle interprets it, because she had had a pre-conceived idea of Indians as ill-mannered and barbarous drilled into her from her childhood. When Neela announces her intention to Danielle to go to Kolkata to visit her sick mother Molina, Danielle advises her against it: "No point going now. You can go during her cremation"(120). When Neela argues that the question of cremation doesn't arise, because her mother is not dead, but the question is of nursing and spending time with her sick mother, Danielle's inevitable question is: "Aren't there nurses in your country?"(120). What Danielle's view of Indian culture, restricted by her colonial glasses doesn't allow her to see is that no matter how "barbaric" they might see Indian culture and civilisation to be, in this country, a nurse cannot be a substitute for a daughter's care. What she doesn't realise while throwing up her hands in the air and shouting "*La famelia! La*

famelia!"(121) or when sarcastically mimicking Neela and her love and obligations towards her family ("My mother, my father, my brother, my sister, all rubbish!" (121) is that in India, family is the longest surviving institution irrespective of the ages, transformations, religious and political views. Moreover, respect and obligations towards one's mother are one of the essential characteristics of Indian upbringing.

Neela's emphatic protests that "India is not just a country with poor starved people; there are so many rich Indians. Moreover, while talking about India, it would be unwise to leave out the middle class" (97) falls on the deaf ears of the French. As Danielle points out, "Why on earth should a French documentary show rich Indians? If at all they have to show rich people, why not Bill Gates?"(97). What Danielle, unable to see beyond the European constructed artificial image of India she had grown up with, had absolutely ignored is that, if Bill Gates is the richest person on earth, the nineteenth richest person is the richest Indian - Mukesh Ambani. Interestingly, Ambani had also won the laurel of being the richest person on earth following the bull in the Indian Stock market, surpassing the American software czar Bill Gates and could have proved as interesting a subject for a documentary as the poverty of India. Therefore, as Neela understands, the question for the Europeans is not what India is, rather it is what they want to see India as.

This representation, or more appropriately misrepresentation is justified by the French with the same logic with which the Europeans had for ages justified their colonization of the Orient---that it was their duty towards the world to civilize the uncivilized world. Danielle too tells Neela: "It is for **India's own good** that we are portraying India's poverty in these documentaries. India, after all, is going to profit, it would get economic aid."(97) (emphasis: ours)

Although at the beginning Neela is deceived into thinking that it is the Europeans' magnanimity and their concern for the third world countries, she gradually realizes that it originates in a kind of schizophrenic fear of a culture far older and in many ways better than theirs which has to be negated and hence Benoir says: "You Indians have nothing other than Taj Mahal to boast of. I never got to see anything very old in India yes of course, I saw the Victoria Memorial in Kolkata, but that was also made by the British"(256). On being asked by Neela his views on the Harappa Mohenjodaro civilization, Benoir replies that Indian history does not interest him. What he had forgotten is that the civilization of Harappa and Mohenjodaro is a golden chapter of the book of world history, not just Indian history. Therefore, Neela's counter argument that the civilization that they called barbarous had already produced some of the finest gems of world literature when his French ancestors, still in their savage stage, were fighting over pieces of raw flesh is met with a violent outburst from Benoir, and he throws the book that Neela was reading out of the window. Like most other Europeans, Benoir too had been conditioned to believe in a certain picture of India, and any attempt to shake him out of it disorients him and is met with a violent response.

Indian women, to the Europeans, remain an oriental mystery—with their light brown skin and "Mississippi long hair", serving as an ideal metaphor for feminine beauty, fidelity, patience, love and trust, and both Danielle and Benoir fall in love, not with Neela, but with the myth of exotic beauty that they had constructed around her. The European culture had actually managed and even produced the picture of an India and its women to suit their needs. Benoir, in fact, on his very first meeting with Neela had informed her that it was his intention in life to find himself an Indian girlfriend (or, to be more precise, an Indian mistress, because Benoir was already married

and had no intention whatsoever of severing ties with his wife Pascal. Rather, he only wanted a woman with whom he could maintain a merely sexual relationship, absolutely devoid of feelings and commitments). Both Benoir and Danielle emphatically praise Neela's skin colour which is brownish and not white. This surprises Neela because it is a known fact that grooms have always been harder to find for Indian girls with a darker complexion. That is precisely the reason why, when Benoir tells her that she is beautiful precisely because she doesn't have a white European skin, Neela is absolutely swept off her feet. But it doesn't take her long to realise that all he had merely wanted was to lock her within the mould of an eternally bewitching exotic Indian doll (Benoir jokingly calls her once "Neela, the Indian beauty" (161) -- a paragon of beauty only to be placed on a pedestal and to be simply desired, not as an individual woman of flesh and blood, with her own priorities and wishes. We cannot, in this context, forget Flaubert's encounter with an Egyptian courtesan—who could have served as an ideal model for an Oriental woman in the eyes of the Europeans; she never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence, or history. *He* spoke for her, and that is exactly what Benoir had also wanted from Neela. She realises that she had simply been an object of the European gaze, a mixture of desire and deceit. Neela had probably never, in her long relationship with Benoir, understood him better than when she proclaims: "You had thought that I have come from a poor country, you thought that she probably doesn't get two square meals a day or proper clothes to wear. It wouldn't be difficult to draw her to bed with a few sweet words of love"(183). East, for the young European men, had once simply been a career, and in the post-colonial age, Indian women, simply mistresses, not wives. Like a child whimsically deciding that a toy would now stand for this thing and now for that and beginning and terminating a game at will, so had Benoir thought that he could cuddle

Neela whenever he wanted and stamp her beneath his feet at his own sweet will, while Neela, being the "Indian woman" - the epitome of virtue and patience that Europeans had woven around her - would continue to endure his whims with a smiling face. What he had forgotten was that human beings, unlike toys, have feelings that can be hurt beyond repair. The moment Neela starts resisting the web of fictions being created around her and her country, both Benoir and Danielle start misbehaving with her.

It is extremely difficult to resist such a European gaze, but that does not mean that Neela would not try. She rejects the temptation of flesh offered by Benoir, because a life as his mistress and the shame and humiliation associated with it in return for the comforts he could offer her had filled her with disgust and was not acceptable to her. Therefore she rejects Benoir with the firm words:

"You always need a Madame Butterfly, isn't it Benoir? ... For a long time I have given you a different kind of taste, you have enjoyed the smell and taste of an exotic species for a long time, but enough is enough now. Because I had not an ounce of faith or self-respect for myself I had allowed myself to be carried this far in my desire for you. But now you must release me, I don't want to spend the rest of my life weeping for you as your Madame Butterfly...You had thought that you would derive fun by watching a foolish exotic girl from the Orient love and endure separation pangs"(296).

Neela's rejecting of Benoir is an obvious example of the Orient "writing back" and deconstructing the Occidental gaze that had relegated it to a position of passivity and irrationality. The same way the rationalist in Poe's "House of Usher" turns out to be a mad-man, so does Benoir (who had been European rationalism personified) act like a mad-man—he calls Neela a "slut" and a "murderer"

(because she was aborting his child), accuses her of having transmitted AIDS to him, breaks the furniture of her house and attempts to murder her---because he, who had only been accustomed to gazing at India, was being unable to bear its counter-gaze. Neela resists the co-option (which Sunil, Choitali and Kishanlal could not) by creating an oppositional point of view, which constitutes a challenge to the European gaze. It is thus, that she had found a key out of the prison-house of gazes in which she had been trapped and she is ready to fight back this psychological colonization by the Europeans.

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