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# An Early Nineteenth Century *Vade Mecum* for India

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## Abstract

A Guide-Book for an Empire is bound to be of epic dimensions, more so if it is on India. In its length and largeness, in its depth and diversity, in its grand ambition and ambivalence, such works would inevitably reflect the geographical, political and cultural drama of a country that is so varied. There can be no clear distinctions, no acute significations even, as the tragic and the comic, the grand and the common dissolve, intermingle and produce a chaotic discursive montage of what India is. One such early work which presents India through the eyes of an Englishman is the *The East India Vade Mecum* of Captain Thomas Williamson written in 1810. Meant as a 'Complete Guide to Gentlemen intended for the Civil, Military, or Naval Service of the Hon. East India Company', this colonial archive is probably the first patient and meticulous noting down of minute aspects of life and people in India. Spread over two volumes of more than thousand pages, the author's professed aim in undertaking this stupendous labour was for 'public utility', 'with the view to promote the welfare, and to facilitate the progress, of those young gentlemen, who may from time to time, be appointed to situations under [the] several Presidencies...' (Letter to the Hon. Court of Directors of the East India Company in *Vade Mecum*).

[**Keywords:** Colonial Bengal, East India Company, India, *Vade Mecum*.]

About Captain Thomas Williamson we come to know from what he writes about himself in this book. The author attributes his considerable insight and knowledge to his long stay of 'twenty years' in Bengal. He first arrived in India in 1778 and was a Captain in the Bengal army. It is apparent that the Williamson family had spent some time in Calcutta. His father, whom he mentions also lived in India and is buried in Calcutta. By the time he was writing the *Vade Mecum*, he had already achieved some fame with his *Oriental Field Sports, or the Wild Sports of the East*, published in 1809, an extraordinary book that documents vivid descriptions and picture plates of animal hunting in India, especially tigers. As a first travel guide to India intended

for Europeans, Williamson's *Vade Mecum* was intended to fill up the gaps in information required by the statesmen, military men, merchants, civilians and all those who proceed to this new country.<sup>1</sup> Keeping this in mind Williamson adopts an 'easy' and 'familiar' style rather than a 'didactic style'. The guide book is

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<sup>1</sup> A variety of works critically evaluate the Europeans', particularly the British, attitudes toward India. See *The Illusion of Permanence: British Imperialism in India* by Francis Hutchins, Princeton, 1967; *British Orientalism and the Bengali Renaissance: The Dynamics of Indian Modernization 1773-1835* by David Kopf, Calcutta, Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1969; *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* by Bernard S. Cohn, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1997; and *Reading the East India Company, 1720-1840: Colonial Currencies of Gender* by Betty Joseph, India, Orient Longman, 2006.

meant for those who would travel to India for a long stay and will need information of the place and people of this foreign country. His guide, he claims, has been written with the purpose to provide a 'just' conception of the 'characters of the natives' in India, and would remove all doubts, prejudices and national opinions, which if allowed to prevail "must occasion every object to be seen through a false medium"<sup>2</sup> (I:Preface,vii).

Williamson's assertion that his guidebook is not a false medium is apparently a rejection of such historical interpretations which are perceived very often through the narrow and distorted glasses of western preconceptions of India. From the seventeenth century onwards especially with trade links opening up, Western imagination and curiosity were fed with fantastic stories of India's fabulous wealth and its rich markets. European relationship with India for the next 300 years remained based on vague knowledge, assumptions and misconceptions. From the latter half of the eighteenth century as the British began to consolidate their physical territories in India there began a simultaneous process of constructing a vision of the Empire. Such a vision shaped by the contemporary Enlightenment ideal in Europe, was at once based on an imaginary construct and fashioning of the ways the British conceived of India and their role as rulers. As they undertook from the 1770's a more detailed study of India, there began an intense cataloguing and categorising of languages, races and tribes in India to secure a better understanding of the unchartered civilization they had to administer. Warren Hastings and his coterie of Oriental scholars like William Jones, Charles Wilkins and Nathaniel Halhed with their massive scholarly endeavours of translations and texts, reasoned that their effort to impart learning would be 'useful to

the state' and would 'lessen the weight of the chain by which the natives are held in subjection' (Letter of Hastings to N. Smith, October 4, 1784, quoted in Kopf, p.18). Although there were obvious political and ideological differences between the Anglicist and the Orientalist point of view, yet both their perceptions were essentially those of the outsider. Charles Grant considered "the people of Hindostan, a race of men lamentably degenerate and base" (Grant: 71) and proposed in his *Observations* that "The communication of our light and knowledge to them, would prove the best remedy for their disorders" (Grant: 148-9).

Such viewpoints and scholarly enterprises reflected usually two extremes; on the one hand, there was an exuberant display of wonder and curiosity in those who saw India as a land of exotic differences. To comprehend such a mystifying entity, there was the obsessive desire to find parallels and common origins of languages, race, literature, etc. The attempt was to divest India of its strangeness and to fit it into a familiar framework that would be more comprehensible for the Western onlooker. The other extreme was to conceive India as a threat – as a land of dirt, disease and death – an exotic but a dangerous place. Throughout the eighteenth century as the British tried to contend with territorial supremacy, first in Bengal and later in the rest of the country, such contradictory tensions of differences and similarities continued to bother them. The sense of doubt, anxiety and uneasiness existed side by side as they tried to 'master' the land, the languages and the laws.<sup>3</sup> Captain Williamson's *Vade Mecum* shows this inevitable contrast between a seductive desirous India and a land which is at the same

<sup>2</sup> *The East India Vade Mecum* of Captain Thomas Williamson in two volumes, 1810. London: Black, Parry, and Kingsbury. All further quotes from the texts are indicated in parenthesis.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas R. Metcalfe in *Ideologies of the Raj*, New Delhi, Cambridge University Press, 2013, p.167, asserts that India's attraction lay in the contrasting tensions it generated between mastery and submission, denial and desire, difference and sameness.

time threatening and fearsome.<sup>4</sup> His insistence that the young English recruits ought to 'know' this land reflects to a large extent Wellesley's ambition in setting up the Fort William College in Calcutta in 1800. Wellesley's anxiety "for the better instruction of junior Civil Servants of the Company" as they were "totally incompetent and ignorant of the languages, laws and usages and customs of India", was with a view to "the stability of our own interest, as to the happiness and welfare of our native subjects" (Wellesley's Minute in Council, dated 18<sup>th</sup> August, 1800 in Roebuck: xx). Williamson's inducement for writing the guidebook was quite similar, as he says:

The consideration, that great numbers of young gentlemen proceed to India without the smallest idea of the customs peculiar to that country whither they are adventuring; and, that the want of some previous instruction has often proved of the greatest inconvenience...not only many a guinea, which could perhaps be ill spared, is thrown away, but many a lasting injury entailed..." (I:1)

The geographic contextualization of India in Williamsons guidebook is that of a vague nebulous expanse, mainly comprising the Eastern region of Bengal and parts of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, an indefinite piece of land called 'upper provinces', and areas encompassing the rivers and swampy lands in the delta basin. The centre stage of action is understandably Calcutta, the hub of mercantile and military action and the seat of governing for the English East India Company in India where the Europeans coming to India were likely to land first. Volume I of the *Vade Mecum* provides precise information about precautions to be taken while sailing to India,

how to run a household, types of servants, and the domestic manners and customs of the 'natives' to be kept in consideration. It is, as the author states, intended for 'obviating misconception' and for 'the better management' of every candidate and 'to shield him from every imposition' (I:2) while these young men from England are instructed and groomed, improved and prepared to gain the respect of the 'natives'. Williamson's advice to them is to divest themselves of their English possessions and 'alienate their English opinion' and to view 'our Indian possessions, not as colonies, but as conquests, to which our laws and privileges are every way either unsuitable, or unwelcome' (I:7). He then proceeds to giving a list of clothing required both by the military and the civil upon their arrival in India which will conform to the image of a superior well dressed Englishman. 'Europe is the great source' (I:12) with respect to woollens and shoes, and they should bring four dozen fine cotton calico shirts to be used in hot climate (some with frills), undershirts, uppershirts, with precise instructions to the length and opening, pantaloons and silk stockings, socks, tie with ribbons, four dozen neck handkerchiefs, small cotton handkerchiefs, warm waistcoat, cotton drawers, great coat, dressing gown, an assortment of shoes, boots and hats. The new recruits therefore are to come with every possible baggage, cotton bed sheets, mattress made of horse hair, pillows filled with feathers, table clothes, towels, napkins, soap, liquor, tobacco, wash basin, chamber utensils, cutlery, razors, looking glass, knives, pencils, watch, telescope, tea, sugar, and for those who love hunting a good double barrelled gun and well bred dogs. The list is evocative of all that Robinson Crusoe needed on his island. The colonizer who travels from the 'centre' of civilization has to typically reinforce himself with all the tropes of western materialism to make his stay comfortable and secure. Beset by scepticism of an unknown people and alien place, the practical Englishman must make himself 'at home' with his prudence, far

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<sup>4</sup> An early reviewer considered this work to be beneficial for youths who are introduced "into a new world, and to new temptations." *The Monthly Review or Literary Journal*, Vol. LXXII, 'The East India Vade Mecum'. London: Becket and Porter, 1813, p. 159.

sightedness and enterprise. He remains the quintessential Englishman in “some corner of a foreign field/ That is forever England” (Brooke: 115).

The *Vade Mecum* provides detailed instructions on how to run a house, lay a table, stock up on wines, fowl and meat, maintain a retinue of servants, and the incurring expenses on all these conveniences which are ‘indispensable’ to establish a gentleman at his residence’ (I:172) will be roughly 700 rupees. Williamson’s advice to these young boys proceeding to India is to pass the first year in the following manner:

Rise at daybreak, and ride gently for one hour in the hot season, and two hours in the cold season; make a moderate breakfast, avoiding melted butter, salt meats, salt fish, sweetmeats, etc., good tea or coffee being assuredly the most wholesome; study the language for an hour; attend some office gratuitously, with the view to become acquainted with the accounts, price-currents, markets, provisions, commodities, etc.; about two o’clock retire to rest; about an hour before sun-set bathe, by means of three or four large pots of water poured over the head; put on clean linen, and dine moderately upon plain viands, taking care never to exceed four or five glasses of the best Madeira; proceed for two hours with studying the language, and, after taking a cup or two of tea, or of coffee, or a crust of bread and a glass of Madeira, go to bed, avoiding to sleep in a strong current of air. (I:176-77)

Williamson’s daily to-do list shows, on the one hand, the Englishmen who must lead a life of careful ‘moderation’ and routine discipline in order to ‘master’ the unfamiliar climate, food and languages. Alternately, such lifestyles demonstrate an existence of leisure, luxury and indulgence of these ‘nabobs’ as these young men were soon to be known in England for the wealth they amassed during their stay

in India. They must have, Williamson insists, a horde of servants very much in the fashion of the rich native gentlemen of Calcutta. A considerable portion of his *Vade Mecum* is devoted to a long list of the types of menials the Englishmen must provide themselves with, there being two distinct categories of servants – the ‘*noker*’ and the ‘*chauker*’. The former are ‘exempt from all menial duties’ (I:185) and are considered superior in rank to the second class of servants. Williamson points out the finer nuances of religion, caste and designation of these servants and how quickly they can be offended if due respect is not shown.

The European should be careful not to stride over any of his domestics who may occasionally lay down in the veranda of his house; such an act on the part of the unbeliever (applying the term to ourselves), being considered doubly laden with mischief. (I:185)

The guide book then provides extensive details of their work, responsibilities, attire, wages, positions and contributions to the society. The *Banians* are ‘first in fortune, as well as rank’ (I:188), the *darogahs* and the *sircars* are ‘self appointed dignitary’ (I:192), the *moonshy* has very little learning but is a ‘very haughty class of servants’ (I:193), the *cranny* has a pretentious pedantic style of correspondence (I:210-11), and generally, most of the servants are ‘rogues’, ‘shrewd’, and involved in ‘forging transactions, extortions and fraudulent accounts’ (I:200-8).

I believe all, who have experienced their kind offices, will readily confess that no completer knaves are to be found in any part of the world. And this under the most sedulous appearance both to please, and to serve, those whom they are about to plunder. (I: 200-1).

These servants are seen as indispensable for the upkeep of a life of luxury and to maintain a status of respect in society. And at the same time there is a constant lingering anxiety of

being cheated, plundered, and defiled, especially the young children in the care of female attendants known as *ayahs* and *dhyes*.<sup>5</sup>

...children born of European parents...under the care of *ayahs*, become crafty, proud and unmannerly...Unless great attention be paid, *ayahs* will initiate their young charges in many practices, and especially in language, such as must require infinite assiduity to subdue; and after all, may not be completely suppressed. Besides, they are usually very slovenly and offensive in their persons. The *Dhyeis* more generally an attendant upon native ladies: many of these are perfect in all the arts of intrigue... (I:341).

The *Vade Mecum* then seeks to rectify “the very confined knowledge which Europeans have of the domestic manners and customs of the inhabitants of the Company’s territories...arising principally from the total want of familiar intercourse with the natives...” (I:347). The underlying subtext of fascination especially for the “private lives and customs of those native women that are secluded from the public eye” is amply evident by the long account of several orders of women in India, furnished to the author as he claims, by a learned friend (I:346). Williamson provides a lengthy and fair knowledge of types of Indian women – Hindu and Muslim women, single, married, widowed, wives, concubines, prostitutes, upper rank women, women of the lower class, nautch girls, slave girls, angry women and jealous wives. “Plurality” (polygamy) he says, “is common among natives of opulence, and is not unprecedented among Europeans”, and one such elderly gentleman “solaced himself with no less than SIXTEEN, of all sorts and sizes!” (original emphasis, I:412). As regard to the expenses “a certain sum to be paid monthly...an allowance for beetle (sic),

tobacco, shoes, clothes, and *gynahs* (gold and silver ornament)...we may put down the whole at about forty rupees monthly” which is no great price “when compared with the sums laid out upon *some* British damsels”(I:414). Williamson presents remarkable minute observations of the elaborate dressing, toilette, and ornamentation of native women, which then can be a practical guide for the newly arrived Englishmen to negotiate native customs to ‘retain’, and ‘domesticate’ native mistresses.

Williamson points out that in India the women who are euphemistically “under the protection” (I:451) of European gentlemen consider such relations to be as sacred as marital ties. Such connubial attachments with native women which are liable to be deemed in terms of ‘Christian religion’ as “libidinous or licentious” (I:453) are justified because of the sheer shortage of mates for these men.

The number of European women to be found in Bengal, and its dependencies, cannot amount to two hundred and fifty, while the European male inhabitants of respectability, including military officers, may be taken at about four thousand. The case speaks for itself; for even if disposed to marry, the latter have not the means. (I:453)

The impediments that stand in the way of a ‘consummation devoutly to be wished’ are frequently monetary, but at the same time lack of friends and an incompatible climate can be oppressive enough to prevent the arrival of European women to India. (I:453-4) Williamson’s advise to those importing worthy dames from Europe is to have the requisite ‘well-lined purse’ which has to take care of the expenses to be borne for clothing, accommodation, number of domestics, in keeping a carriage, in sending the children to Europe, and the mother herself being frequently compelled to return so as to restore her health. Because “matrimony is not so practicable in India as in Europe” (I:456),

<sup>5</sup> Sara Suleri argues that homoeroticism and the imagery of rape defined the sexual appeal of India for the British in *The Rhetoric of English India*. Chicago, The University of Chicago, 1992, pp.16-17.

admirable doctrines like “fornication is a deadly sin” must be kept aside, and it is advisable for the European to keep a concubine rather than marry a native of India (I:457). Such a companion

...takes care of his linen, aids in cleaning his accoutrements, dresses his hair, and sometimes proves no bad hand at a beard! These doxies do, certainly, now and then, kick up a famous row in the barracks; but, on the whole, may be considered highly serviceable, especially during illness, at which time their attendance is invaluable. (I:458)

Worth noticing is the way Williamson parleys about what is morally right according to the Christian theology, and what would generally have been considered ‘pagan’ or ‘heretic’. Rules, doctrines, scriptures are squeezed and modified, and conventions negotiated to often justify the ways that will work out in India. Moreover, such alliances and attachments were to be allowed in the private sphere but to be kept strictly separate from the more formal public existence of the officers. European men who had Indian mistresses and children did not enjoy the same social position and respect as those whose alliances were more ‘pure’. The text manifests the anxiousness of potential complications arising out of such alliances, and legal and state responsibilities towards children born of such biracial relationships and mixed marriages.<sup>6</sup> The central representational modes of such writings showed the powerful attractions of a sensual seductive India which had to be held in check by an imposing policing. Williamson mentions the orphanages and the institutions where children born of such illicit alliances were removed, to the considerable “distress of mothers”(I:463). These institutions then were attempts to hide and efface some unwanted,

<sup>6</sup> In 1792, Lord Cornwallis banned the biracial children from being sent to England. See Percival Spear, *The Nabobs: A Study of the Social Life of the English in Eighteenth Century India*. USA, Oxford University Press, reprint 1998, p.63.

undesired aspects of life in colonies. Such writings make it evident that the enduring vision of India was of a temptress and seductress. India embodied the overwhelming of the rational by the sensual, but such aberrations of the senses were considered inevitable, transitory and unregulated.

Williamson’s *Vade Mecum* also projects an invaluable glimpse of the reciprocal imitation and mutual fascination that the Europeans and the natives had for each other. Smoking, Williamson points out, is common among the ladies of Hindostan, but “still a certain idea, not very comfortable to feminine propriety creeps into our minds, when we see an European lady thus employed”. Such a habit is seen as an “intrusion upon masculine characteristics” and the senses ‘revolt when the European ladies adopt the costumes of the natives, and this in no ways “raised them in the estimation of those they imitated.”(I:501). Then, there are natives who are

Smitten with our general character, and partaking of our pastimes, lay aside their appropriate garments in favour of jackets, jockey-caps, boots, and leather inexpressible! Some indeed do more; they sit at table, and devour, with no small degree of eagerness, the viands prepared according to English fashion; washing them down with copious libations of Claret and Madeira, to the utter degradation of their persons, and reputation, in the eyes both of their new, and of their old, companions. (I:502)

Europeans’ imitation of the natives is regarded as disgraceful, undignified and even scandalous. The natives copying the Europeans dressing, table manners and titles are considered to be vain, boastful and pretentious.<sup>7</sup> It is simultaneously the contrary

<sup>7</sup> For a study of how the British experience of India had an impact on their body, clothing and food habits, see E.M. Collingham’s *Imperial Bodies: The Physical Experience of the Raj, 1800-1947*. Cambridge, Polity Press and Blackwell, 2001.

feelings of attraction and repulsion, of desire and derision, and an overwhelming feeling of being threatened in those very aspects that mark their greatness as Englishmen.

*Volume II* of the *Vade Mecum* is a long repetitive account of almost every aspect of life in India. Every piece of information which is deemed essential, or otherwise is located, categorised and reported. Compared to the first volume, this volume is digressive, disorderly, and has considerable portions that are completely out of place. Williamson provides detailed information about types of houses, *cutcha* house, *pukka* house, old buildings, sorts of roofing, matting, carpets, window blinds, kinds of timber, trees, fruits and its uses, furniture, snakes and insect repellents, modes of entertainment, preservation of rain water, tanks and rivers, makes of boats, hiring of labour, elephants and their qualities compared with camels, trade and situation of Calcutta, etc. As a reviewer from a contemporary magazine pointed out,

The author seems quite to have lost sight of his original intention, when giving us long descriptions of the various kinds timber, and methods of building. This, however, we shall not very severely censure. The information he supplies is not without its use, though superfluous in a Vade-mecum... Among the faults of this publication we should notice the avowed neglect of order, the unsuitableness of many of its details... (*The Eclectic Review*: 426)

But the keen observations, the attention to minute details and the humour with which Williamson writes these texts ensure that the *Vade Mecum* would have been an entertaining and informing companion for Europeans on their long voyage to India. The delineation of the Indian society in *Volume II* though many a times repetitive of what was reported in the first volume, is marked with the same vivid colouring of an outside observer. The

fascination and fear of an unknown place remain a constant thread through this volume too. The fear of predators like tigers and alligators lurking to catch the unsuspecting victim looms as large as the difficulty to survive in a hostile terrain of swampy lands, swelling rivers, unbearable heat and diseases.

... the immense expanse of slime, suddenly exposed to the sun, then on the equinoctial, throws forth the same destructive miasma, whereby epidemics, of the most dangerous description, are propagated (II:337).

The apprehension then spills over to the hold that the native *femme fatales* have on the European gentlemen. Though Williamson light-heartedly admonishes his countrymen to be wary of the “deceptions practiced by native women retained by European gentlemen” (II:425), yet the sense of horror is palpable when he recounts the cases of those women whose hair was chopped off, or worse, were beheaded by their husbands or relatives who suspected them of adultery (II:426). “In every part of India the profession of a prostitute is devoid of that stigma annexed to it in Europe” (II:423), but “adultery, under any circumstances whatever, is held up as a mortal sin, to be atoned for by death only” (II:425).

Williamson observes the rigidity of beliefs among the natives, their dislike for the Europeans, and their intense antipathy towards “adoption of the customs of a race held in abomination by even the lowest *casts*, (or sects), throughout the country” (II:87-88). Such Eurocentric views of European-Asian relations are often marked with scepticism, exaggeration and misconceptions in the text. At the same time what strikes one as remarkable are the instances of acute observations and comparisons which startle the reader with its hint of ingenuous truth. What Williamson very astutely points out is that rather than use coercion, it would be easier to make the native population



conform to 'our system' if they could be convinced by reason.

...the shrewd native...imitates that which his faculties convince him is founded upon science...he sees the practice is good and he adopts it; whereas, if any regulation were to be framed to enforce his compliance with our system, in that, or in any other particular, we should assuredly witness his receding, if possible from every idea of improvement; or, if under the necessity of conforming, that his whole deportment would betray the reluctance, and antipathy, he felt on the occasion. May not this trait in the character of Asiatics in general, serve as a hint to those who talk of coercing them to the adoption of Christianity?...Certainly ! (II:88)

Charles Grant's proposal for introducing Christianity had been influential in the second half of the eighteenth century, but the Government had been wary of sponsoring Christian evangelism. The Pious Clause had been withdrawn in 1793, and from 1800 onwards the notion of despotism as an appropriate form of government for India was considerably modified with a more benevolent and 'understanding' stance. Post-Cornwallis the focus was on the emotions, to 'convince' the natives for a need of superior systems of governance. Voluntary compliance rather than coercion was the emphasis of the government wanting to rule by a more sympathetic understanding and intimate knowledge of the country and its people.

Captain Williamson's *Vade Mecum* is a microcosmic representation of British comprehension of India of that time, of what the West saw the East as, of what was seen as distinctively 'Oriental'.<sup>8</sup> Such efforts to gather information, and methodically presenting them were based on a presumption that the description of India could be neatly packaged

and prescribed to foreign travellers. Such an India was by implication then a bounded, fixed, enduring reality, and 'knowing' it meant to contain and subordinate it. The connection between colonial knowledge and colonial power in such texts manifest what Partha Chatterjee says of "modern regimes of disciplinary power...that no longer has a centre...and are dissolved and dissipated by modern disciplinary practices into capillary forms of power." The production of such knowledge can be seen as 'capillary forms of power' (Chatterjee: 8), a part of a larger enterprise that sought, what Wellesley stated so unequivocally, "the stability of our own interest, as to the happiness and welfare of our native subjects" (Roebuck: xx). Williamson's work is an excellent representation of alternate imaginings of nations, and the perceived notions of similarities and differences of native and colonial identities. Such imagined places set the non-European world as the Other, a mirror to "reflect Europe's gaze back upon itself" (Metcalfe: 5). The following review of Williamson's *Vade Mecum* reiterates prevalent perceptions and enthusiasm with which it was received when it was published:

Those of our readers, who have any intention of visiting India, will do well to peruse these volumes with attention. They will perceive by them that the Asiatics are not a whit behind the most ingenuous Europeans in the arts of deception. Let them learn never to trust to Asiatick descriptions of articles they mean to purchase, ... and should his [Captain Williamson] suggestions prove useful, his country as well as individuals will have cause highly to esteem his ingenuity...gentlemen designing to visit that country will find them no unprofitable preparative, as to matters of familiar occurrence, connected with personal conduct, in that branch of the British Empire. (*Select Reviews*: 36)

<sup>8</sup> Said's *Orientalism* (London, 1978) has been seminal in shaping all discourses on the European views of the Orient and the dialectics of cultural hegemony.

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