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How Do the French have Fun in India: A Study of Representations in Tintin and Asterix

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Abstract

From the times of Ctesias and Megasthenes down through to today, there have been many representations of this exotica in other literatures. Mostly these are serious recounting of travelers aimed at raising the commercial and political interest of their fellow countrymen. In contrast, the writings of Herge or Goscinny and Uderzo are aimed at entertainment. While not discounting the rise of sensibilities of the west with the intervention of postcolonialism, the paper will argue that the othering of India continues in modes of production that are more exclusively western than others. In situations where the west is the producer as well as the consumer of cultural products, these seem to crawl back to stereotypes and projections that demand interference. The paper will try to show how the picaresque interference of the comic heroes serves to turn the nation, that is India, into a mere destination which has little or no sovereignty. In a world of post colonialism, the continued ideological challenges that comics, with their popularity with children poses, cannot be taken for granted. The paper will try to read the comics with the hope of problematising the ideas of comics and fun in relation to depictions of India.

Keywords: Postcolonial, Stereotype, Tintin, Asterix

The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences (Said 20). This 'invention' has played a crucial role in the project of European imperialism. It was not simply 'the other' against which the West found its own definition. It, in fact, provided them the fodder around which an entire discourse was built, through which certain images of the Orient are repeatedly sold as a system of knowledge with impressive resilience. With the advent of postcolonial studies, there has been a renewed interest in rereading these images as continuing the project of colonialism through cultural hegemony. A majority of these images were

distributed and maintained through texts, a reason why Greenblatt has suggested them to be the 'invisible bullets' (Ashcroft, et al. 93) in the arsenal of empire. Today, the way we read *Robinson Crusoe* or perceive the character of Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*, has changed completely. Texts and textuality are no longer seen as an innocent medium through which the Europeans exercised their 'civilising mission', but rather as weapons which have played a major role in both conquest and colonization. These texts - be it fiction, histories, anthropologies - have all captured the non-European subject as the 'other' of the European man, prominent in his alterity or lack from the latter. Not only did these images provide material to the

Europeans, but also polluted the mind of the colonized through formal education or other cultural relations, making them believe in these projections as authoritative pictures of themselves. Evidently, the celebrated norm in all of these images was that of the white European man who had to be followed and emulated, while the image of the 'other' became a signifier of what the colonizer's own past had been like – to quote Marlow from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*: "And this also has been one of the dark places of the earth" (Conrad 6).

Bhabha takes this argument one step further when he looks at these images as stereotypes which reiterate the position of the colonized as a fixed reality "at once the 'other' and yet entirely knowable and visible" (Bhabha 41) that needs no proof. The stereotype becomes the primary mode of identification, penetrating human consciousness as a reality, through which one claims knowledge over the other race and culture. Having been consumed unquestioningly over time, stereotypes that have been fed repeatedly create an illusion of reality. One fails to realize that it is merely a false representation of a given reality that has become a fixity without giving space to its evolving differences. The stereotype assumes the role of a fetish, which according to Bhabha has an ambivalent relation with the source that generated it. It is at once an object of desire in its alterity, as it is an object of terror. The image of the subject becomes more important than the problematisation of the way the subject was formed. The colonial power continues to exert its power through the knowledge of the stereotype that it has created instead of questioning the "function of the stereotype as phobia and fetish that, according to Fanon, threatens the closure of the racial/epidermal schema for the colonial subject and opens the royal road to colonial fantasy" (Bhabha 43). Reading against this grain, one can specifically take up the case of comic books which generally exploit

stereotypes within their storylines. For the sake of this paper, I will be looking at two of the most popular comic characters of all time, Tintin and Asterix and their adventures in India.

Assouline, who has traced the timeline of *Herge: The Man who Created Tintin*, mentions an episode from the writer's life:

George and his parents rarely spoke; they communicated with drawings. Herge remembered it was by this means that he understood what he had common with, and how he was different from, his father. One day both were drawing airplanes; his father gave his the lightness of dragonflies, while George's versions carried the whole weight of the aeronautics industry. From that Georges deduced the fact that his father was an idealist and that he was a realist... (Assouline 6)

The George here is Georges Remi, who wrote under the nom de plume of Herge, and the creator of *The Adventures of Tintin*, one of the most influential comic-strip art of the 20th century that changed the face of European comic scene forever. With the usage of high quality illustration where special attention was given to minute details and the introduction of speech bubbles inspired from American novels, Herge (the word which comes from reversing Georges' name and pronouncing them in French) received almost instantaneous popularity. However, how much of a realist was he, is a question one has much to debate about.

He began as an illustrator of a conservative newspaper in Brussels, "The Twentieth Century" (Le Vingtième Siècle), run by Abbé Norbert Wallez, a staunch Roman Catholic. The paper described itself as a "Catholic Newspaper for Doctrine and Information" and was run under Wallez's strict rein. The aim of the paper was to disseminate a far-right, fascist viewpoint among the people. Aiming to propagate his socio-political views among the young readers, Wallez started a

new Thursday youth supplement, titled “The Little Twentieth” (“Le Petit Vingtième”) and appointed Herge as its new editor. Tintin, a reporter, made his first appearance through this supplement on 10th January 1929, finding immediate fame. It is believed that Herge, who wanted to be a reporter himself, got to live his adventures through Tintin - remaining an “armchair traveller” (Farr “Introduction”) for a long period of his life. It is needless to point out the influence of Wallez on his earlier works, to which period we can accord two of his most controversial works, *Tintin in the Land of the Soviets* and *Tintin in the Congo*. Commenting on this time, Harry Thompson writes,

Looking back now, the adventures that inspired such excitement, such as *Tintin in America*, *Tintin in the Congo* and *Tintin in the Land of Soviets* itself, seem slipshod. They are plot-free, happy-go-lucky adventures, a stream of unrelated cliffhangers composed at a time of jollity and youthful exuberance, by inky-fingered juniors in a newspaper office. Little thought went into them – it was too exciting for that. Today they are lauded for their primitive artistry, but at the time their readers were not too deeply concerned with the significance of Herge’s emerging clarity of line. The boy reporter was bringing the world to life in their living rooms (Thompson 2).

Who cared if the first stories were cheap right-wing propaganda, instigated and directed at small children by a Catholic newspaper editor who kept a framed photograph of Mussolini on his desk? Herge certainly didn’t. When he started Tintin he was still a naïve young man who knew little of the world, intelligent, but socially immature like so many of his contemporaries. The early Tintin reflects essentially childish concerns, in particular, the influence of the boy scouts and the Red Indian games they played, is strongly present. Today the idea of boy scouts in copious shorts and enormous hats being encouraged by adults to

pretend to be Red Indians right up to their twentieth birthdays is somewhat laughable, but the inter-war Belgium was an innocent place. Scout only escape from the boredom of life at home, and life at home had a habit of dragging on right to the end of one’s teens.

While Thompson has been too forgiving towards Herge for such stereotypical depictions of the non-European races in his earlier albums, not everyone had brushed it off just as lightly. As Tintin was slowly being made to go on cosmopolitan adventures, beginning with the Orient, Abbe Gosset, a teacher of Chinese students in Louvain, learnt of Herge’s intentions and wrote to him out of a deep concern that he might end up misrepresenting the Far-East and its people. He introduced him to Chang Chongren who further introduced Herge to the complexities of “oriental art and culture” (Mountford np).

Herge writes,

He made me discover and love Chinese poetry, Chinese writing “the wind and the bone”, the wind of inspiration and the bone of graphic solidity. For me this was a revelation... (Mountford np)

Thus began a long friendship, whereby Herge promised himself not to give in to floating ideas but rather research it out for himself. Tintin’s adventures to the “Orient” which was later divided into the two parts of *The Cigars of the Pharaoh* and *The Blue Lotus* are considered to be much more mature, especially the latter which has a more nuanced and sympathetic representation of the Chinese and is seen as a turning point in Herge’s oeuvre. In some sense, this was his real brush with reality. Herge himself grew to be profoundly embarrassed about his earlier work. He confessed that it was a result of an upbringing in a society where such stereotypes were prevalent. In his defense it was his naivety and ignorance that were seen as the reason behind such depictions rather than underlying racism spread through the project of colonial stereotypes.

While such confessions of naivety do not leave much scope for criticism, it is equally unnerving to realize how such images get ingrained in the minds of unsuspecting victims, who believe in them in all their ignorance as nothing but historical truths. Bhabha has rightly pointed out that the knowing of the 'other' is done solely based on racist stereotypical discourse which inscribes a form of discriminatory and authoritarian rule over the colonized by recognizing:

...the difference of race, culture, history as elaborated by stereotypical knowledges, racial theories, administrative colonial experience, and on that basis institutionalize a range of political and cultural ideologies that are prejudicial, discriminatory, vestigial, archaic, 'mythical', and crucially, are recognized as being so (Bhabha 52).

It is because of these reasons that the politics of representation have always assumed such prime importance in the discourse of postcolonialism. Such European texts, where the non-European subject is presented in his alterity or lack i.e. as the other, becomes a projection of European fear of the unknown rather than an objective truth. With the centrality of the colonizer in the postcolonial discourse, where the actual historical time of the colony gets re-appropriated as pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial, there is a denial of the colony's actual past irrespective of its colonizer. And, this is what we see happening in Herge's projections of the Indians too, in Tintin's first adventure to India in *The Cigars of Pharaoh*.

While much has been written about Herge's depictions of the blacks, the Jews and the Russians; his representation of the Indians haven't been extensively discussed. In an overt simplification, we find "Egypt is full of pharaoh's tomb, Arabia and Mecca are barren sandy desert regions and India is full of dense jungles and scattered with mystic fakirs and maharajas in palatial residences". Serialised

weekly from December 1932 to February 1934, the story tells us about the adventures of Tintin, the Belgian reporter, and his dog Snowy, who while travelling in Egypt discover a pharaoh's tomb filled with dead Egyptologists and boxes of cigars. Pursuing the mystery of these cigars, they travel across Arabia and India (albeit a little improbable), and reveal the secrets of an international drug smuggling enterprise. They reach the imaginary kingdom of Gaipajama, a strange motley-ised name, in Bombay. India is depicted as the plentiful exotic other, which nonetheless is in need of western aid. From the first scene onwards, where India has been depicted, there is a marked transition in the scenery, from yellowed deserts to lush green jungles. The motley-ised naming is carried on to the motley-ised architecture that fuses elements of predominantly Hindu or Sikh society with Islamic minarets and domes. Tintin is almost immediately presented with an opportunity for ethical intervention when he finds an elephant burning with fever. Tintin, the modern scientific traveler from the West is shown to have his quinine ready with him, and he graciously administers it to his grateful patient - the white man's elephantine burden. In return for this intervention the colonial subject accepts the intervention as godly and accepts the white man to be his superior. The parallels with Robinson Crusoe are striking: "for my man, to conclude the last ceremony of obedience, laid down his head again on the ground, close to my foot, and set my other foot upon his head, as he had done before, making all the signs of subjection, servitude, and submission imaginable, and let me understand he would serve me as long as his life endured." The elephant's health is instantly restored, and it considers the white traveler to be some sort of a magician and carries him to his herd to recruit him as an "elephant doctor".

The elephant episode continues with Tintin making a trumpet, telling Snowy that he has figured out the elephant speech and

that he is making the trumpet able to communicate with them. His mission is accomplished as the elephant starts to understand him, and is immediately put into his service by Tintin by bringing him water or carrying him around. "Hooray," shouts Tintin in joy, "I have learnt to talk elephant". The ease of language acquisition that Tintin demonstrates is akin to that of the colonialist who could afford to get away with speaking motley versions of Indian languages, or by fashioning locals into translators. At any rate, picking up oriental knowledge and getting the natives to do their will, seems to be the easiest thing on earth for the white western traveler.

When Tintin comes across a bungalow with another white occupant, Mr. Zoty, we realize that the setting is that of British India. However, later, when we discover this man to be a mediator in the much organized drug dealing business, there is a light reference to the whites as having come to India to plunder its resources. Many Tintinologists like Thompson believed that the inclusion of British colonialists as antagonists made "partial amends" for the colonialist attitude displayed by Tintin in *Tintin in the Congo*. Fellow Tintinologist Michael Farr further praised the scenes set in the Indian colonial bungalow, commenting that it was "claustrophobic and sinisterly dramatic" (Far 48).

The very next Indian object that we are introduced to is the kukri, a very North-Indian symbol, which has been gifted by a fakir, who is said to possess magical powers. The kukri has long been associated with the violence and danger of the east. Then there are instances of ghost sightings - again adding to the supernatural and mystic spirit of India. The servants in Bombay look typically North-Indian with turbans and beards and are joined by fakir-s - again very North-Indian, who have hypnotizing powers along with powers to charm ropes like those of snakes. The most stereotypical picture imaginable of India proceeds to unfold through the pages, with

Tintin being the voice of reason and sanity, imposing justice and upholding what is right. The fakirs also throw arrows poisoned with the Rajaijah juice, the potion for madness. Madness seems to run in the subcontinent as we are shown a ward full of mad people - mostly white, with white doctors but Indian servants. The destination that is India is shown to turn even the rational western mad but the source of cure for this madness too lies with the west. The Indian is the cause of the madness, while the treatment for it lies with the West. In another stereotype of lethargic listlessness associated with the Orient, potbellied Indian men are shown having their afternoon siesta under the trees, whose bellies act as spring cushions for Tintin helping him escape the madhouse.

In another striking scene, we have a conversation between Snowy and a cow, all regal and sacred. It charges at Snowy for his impudence and is in turn bitten by him. This arouses the wrath of the common people who all capture Snowy to sacrifice him on the altar of Siva. This is a recurring motif in Herge, which we find again in *Tintin in Tibet*, where a bull is lying in the middle of the street obstructing all activity, while the men watch on without disturbing it and waiting for it to move on its own. When Captain Haddock asks them to move the bull, people warn him that it is sacred and that the white traveler should not mess with it. The Captain, however, is impatient and tries to step over it. He is duly punished as the bull charges with him on its back, running madly on the streets of old Delhi. Going back to *The Cigars of Pharaoh*, the Siva statue, where Snowy is being sacrificed is actually a Nataraj, the dance god. The men are superstitious and are easily persuaded that God is speaking to them when Thomson and Thompson order them from behind the statue as God to let go off Snowy. Finally, we are introduced to the Maharaja of Gaipajama, again turbaned and on an elephant back, out hunting royal Bengal tigers. The white traveler is then received as a royal guest

towards the end of the album after he busts the opium racket, dressed in Indian clothes of kurta and turban. One must also note the absence of women in the domain of the white-man's adventures, making the colonial enterprise as an exclusively male-centric space. This probably was inspired from popular imagination of viewing the project of imperialism as being exclusively male. It was an all boys world of adventure where the white man had taken upon him the task of taming the wild exotic colony - imagined as the feminine. Be it the real life accounts of colonial adventurers or travelers, or that of the fictional world of Haggard or Conrad, the valour and cultural ethos of the boy adventurer was held up as a glowing justification for the process of colonisation. Women either occupied the peripheral spaces or they were completely out of the adventure. The main relationships men built were with other men, intensifying the imagination of the process of colonisation in its masculinity and male-bonding. The white boy traveler became an emissary of light upholding the call of imperial duty, functioning as an inspirational figure for future colonialists.

Before his next venture, Herge had already come across Chang and there had been a change of perception towards comic book writing. The result is apparent in *Tintin in Tibet* considered to be one of his masterpieces, in the absence of an antagonist and in the high level of accuracy that he has maintained. However, before moving onto that, one should also have a look at *Tintin in India: The Mystery of the Blue Diamond*. It is a Belgian theatre piece in three acts written by Hergé and Jacques Van Melkebeke, featuring Tintin and covering much of the second half of *Cigars of the Pharaoh* as Tintin attempts to rescue a stolen blue diamond. Unfortunately, the script of the play was permanently lost, but the story has all the elements of the former, with the white traveler turning a rescuer at the naïve king's distress. The name of the palace that Tintin goes to is Padakhore, another parody of

an Indian name, literally, "One who farts" as we saw in the previous case of Gaipajama too. There are instances of hypnotism, Indian ballet and an elaborate Indian performance which is interrupted with the loss of the Blue Diamond.

Though *Tintin in Tibet*, serialized from 1958, strikes more realistic in its representations, with Tintin and Haddock as sightseers at the Qutub Minar and the Red Fort, we see some of the same stereotypes here too. The Indian men are inevitably all turbaned, although in Delhi it seems more probable. At Kathmandu, people start speaking Hindi, which is a little unrealistic, while the Sherpas are shown to speak broken English. There are monks who levitate and predict future, and Yeti-s that exist, although kind and caring ones. According to myths and legends, Yeti-s are supposedly fond of liquor, which is shown here when the Yeti steals Haddock's bottle of whiskey. Although it does away with much of the misrepresentations of the earlier story, it retains the story of the white traveler who is compelled to come and rescue his Asian friend Chang (from *The Blue Lotus*) amidst exotic adventures.

But there seems to be some recurring motifs that are to be found in such representations of India as an exotic locale with sacred cows, fakirs and snake-charmers. One could take the example of *Asterix and the Magic Carpet* where we have a turbaned fakir on a flying carpet. A collaboration between script-writer Rene Goscinny and artist Albert Uderzo, *Asterix* first appeared in the magazine *Pilote* on 29th October 1959. Set in 50 BC, *Asterix the Gaul* lives in a little village on the north coast of Armorica who refuse to give in to Julius Caesar. In the above mentioned adventure of *Asterix*, the Orient comes looking for help to the West and finds help in a bard in the Gaulish village. The kingdom that he comes from is described to be beside the river Ganges, with "hot and dry" weather with few months of monsoon. However, with no rains that year, it has

become imperative to find someone who could prevent a famine in the kingdom and also save the princess from being sacrificed to the Gods, because of a prophecy made by the evil Vizier. The trope of the west being called upon by the east in order to save itself from itself comes up again. The party comprising the fakir, Asterix, Obelisk and the bard Cacofonix, reach India, after many adventures, only to find that the bard has lost his voice. As treatment, he is ordered to take an overnight bath in elephant milk. The cures of the east are exotic and rare. The Indian kingdom is again shown to have palaces built in the style of Islamic architecture, something that had come to India much later with the Mughal rule. Here again the narrative deviates from the real historical time of the country. Later one encounters other animals such as tigers, monkeys and a rhinoceros. Finally the bard restores his voice, sings his songs and brings rain and saves the life of the princess. Amidst the obvious exoticisation lies the detective mystery enforced through the names of the Indian characters. The Indian Fakir is named “Whatzizname” rendering him nameless and impotent. He must literally “Getafix” by approaching the west for the solution to the “Whodunnit”, saving the Raja from his eternal fix of wondering “Whatzit” is really going on. The western must intrude, investigate and intervene in order to save the east from the predicament it is facing because of itself.

Cartooning, which is an outgrowth of caricaturing, has always fed on stereotypes. Especially in cases when the west is representing the east, the exaggeration seems to be taken to a new height, equally disturbing when it is targeted at children. The very first marker is pointing out the otherness and alien-ness of this eastern culture to that of the west. It is an exotic land rich with green forests and dense with animals, especially elephants and tigers. There are turbaned maharajas with turbaned servants who go for royal processions or hunting expeditions on elephant backs, but are highly incompetent

when it comes to ruling the kingdom. It is there that he requires western intervention, the white traveler, who can remove these obstacles and restore normalcy.

India has always been seen as an exotic destination. We have had other such real travelers, who have left behind similar representations of the country, some of them actually having visited these places. Be it accounts of one legged tribes of brown Indians (Ctesias’ *Indika*, Ctesia was an ancient Greek doctor, court physician to the Persian king Artaxerxes II. His accounts stirred the imagination of Alexander) or India as a land of unimaginable power, riches and magic (Megasthenes’ *Indica*, who had actually come as the ambassador to the court of king Bimbisara), India was always an exotic locale that attracted tourists, not just to travel or plunder but also to bring about a change. This patronizing attitude is apparent in such representations of the nation, albeit in mere fun and naivety. It, however, becomes more problematic when the text is of such prominence, translated in more than 70 languages – disseminating a wrong picture throughout, based on tales heard and assumptions. In a postcolonial world, the continued ideological challenges that comics, with their popularity with children poses, cannot be taken for granted. Despite rising sensibilities we realize that some stereotypes do stay back. As Bhabha states, “it is a much more ambivalent text of projection and introjections, metaphoric and metonymic strategies, displacement, overdetermination, guilt, aggressivity; the masking and splitting of ‘official’ and phantasmatic knowledges to construct the positionalities and oppositionalities of racist discourse” (Bhabha 51). Therefore, one needs to raise awareness and question the picaresque interference of such comic heroes who serve to turn the nation that is India into a mere destination which has little or no sovereignty. In a way, it seems like a continuous reassertion of the white man’s burden that is evident even today,

where the Indians must turn to the outside white for aid and assistance. It is only through such problematisations of the complex contact between the two that one can truly resist such representations “without losing sight of the persisting and historic inequalities within these relations and structures” (Ashcroft et al. 94).

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