

The Gaze

At first, I was thrilled when a catchy song such as “Lean on” by Major Lazer and DJ Snake became a hit last Summer: nothing like seeing Indian girls dancing in saris, palaces draped in silk curtains and hand-painted buses becoming the stages for wonky dances in the song’s accompanying video-clip (and by all means, I still play the song on a loop and dance to it in all my euphoric clumsiness whenever it comes up at a party). Then, more recently, I came across “Bounce” by Iggy Azalea: the song’s video is another hymn to India, with the Australian rapper sporting what seems to be a wedding attire, complete of golden-embroidered red sari, opulent jewellery and jasmine flowers adorning her hair, as she dances in a temple-courtyard, on an elephant, and in a street flanked by Indian children throwing colour-dust into the air, as is custom on Holi. When today I saw “Hymn for the weekend”, the latest music-video by Coldplay, wherein the same (or, at least, equally anonymous) children play Holi as Chris Martin travels the city in an iconic Mumbai cab passing by fire-eaters, Kathakali dancers and Beyonce, also dressed in an - albeit more extravagant - Indian wedding outfit, I started wondering, what is it that makes India so appealing to Western musicians lately?

How has this country, so often portrayed as dirty, noisy, corrupt and poverty-stricken, suddenly become the perfect setting for stylish music videos and dance performances of Western musicians? Is India finally being given the recognition that it deserves as a major participant in the world-economy, as the cradle of ancient philosophies and influential histories, and as the repository of so much of the world’s most astonishing cultural heritage (not to speak of the fact that it is home to 1.2 billion people), after having endured the exploitative colonial ambitions of a foreign power for centuries? Is India at last being upgraded from being portrayed as the culprit of everything the West doesn’t want to be: chaotic, poor, polluted and backward?

Oh my, was I wrong when this is what initially crossed my mind. The rest of the world might no longer be able to afford to push India into a corner and label it as poor and dirty or simply ignore it. But there is a great difference between no longer identifying it as oppressed, backward and pitiful, and recognising it as an equally dignified reality, a country with a say and an opinion to be listened to; and, in-between these two extremes, there is a vast array of possibilities of relating to it.

India has always fascinated the West, be it for its rich culture, its esoteric religious traditions or its plentiful produce. In colonial times, India was never the territory that could be ruled by simply deploying strength; India was a player that had to be engaged with, that had to be understood (albeit it was done through foreign conceptual categories), before it could be ruled. It is in this process of exploration, which accompanied and guided the almost two-hundred years of British rule, that India's identity was negotiated and ultimately defined in contrast to that of the invaders: the latter asserted their felt superiority and virility by stressing the "otherness" of the subjugated. Indian men became the effeminate repositories of exotic traditions, against which British men could shine in all their rediscovered masculinity, rationality and increasingly white whiteness.

What strikes me of the above mentioned music videos, is that while they might not directly aim at emphasising the white man's virility and superiority, India, its people, dresses and customs, remain the exotic, anonymous frameworks for Western subjects. The uncontested protagonists are Western musicians in search of some exotic flair, while a host of romanticised Indian tropes - from orange-clad sadhus to laughing, unnamed, children, via elephants, the festival of colours, rickshaws and temples - serve to emphasise the Western musician's longing for adventure and (self-)discovery. Because the setting is so oriental and exotic, so different and "other", it offers Western men and women the perfect background from where to stand out in all their ordinariness, reaffirming their positionality as default subjectivities, as the yardstick of everything that is normal, ordinary, "self", and, conversely, of everything that is exotic, different, "other".

Probably none of the musicians or producers of the videos had the explicit, conscious intention of highlighting the exotic "otherness" as a way to reaffirm the white subjectivity and its default normalcy. The fact is that these videos, despite seeming inclusive through the featuring of South Asian elements, do nothing but reshape those very modalities of "othering", sexualising and objectifying, through which the colonial gaze has for centuries defined who is the subject and who is the object; who is the definer and who is the defined; who is the "self" and who is the "other"; who is the default and who is the exotic; who is the normal and who is the abnormal. How deeply ingrained, powerful and unconscious the Western "othering" is even today, becomes evident from the fact that we mistake its very act of reaffirming differences and unbalanced power-structures for something that bridges and overcomes them.

However, cultural appropriation does not come only one way. To believe that the “other” is the passive recipient of foreign aesthetic imaginaries is sheer naivety and denying agency to anyone but the enunciator. The encounter of cultures is complex and dialogical, resting upon a continuous negotiation, redefinition and reimagining of precarious “non-selves” and “selves”. It should be of no surprise, then, that there is a reversal of the brown “other”, resulting in an objectification, exoticisation and sexualisation of the white woman, recurrent especially among newly affluent Indian classes: it is not uncommon to be greeted with a staged “namaste”, inclusive of folded hands and deep bow, by white women clad in saris and jasmine flowers in their hair at the entrance of fancy Indian wedding halls. And it has become somewhat of a status-affirming trend to have one or two white faces among second-row dancers in Bollywood item-songs or as extras in Indian movies. The cards on the table are here turned: now it is the white women’s function to solely look pretty and exotic and represent the emblem of everything that is “other”. The almost casual “purchasing” of white aesthetics, paired with its positioning into the background of Indian-spun stories, is in a way reminiscent of the statues of sensual young black women that were embellishing Victorian living-rooms, and of the black slaves serving luxurious fruits to white masters in paintings of the XVIII-XIX centuries. The display of whiteness - the symbolic epitome of richness - at the margins of a wedding party or in the backdrop of a choreography, is laden with subversive significance, as it denotes not only the lavishness of the Indian wedding host or Bollywood director (suggesting standards of wealth superior to even Western measures), but inverts the usual power-dynamics by figuratively encompassing and appropriating whiteness.

We need not to forget, though, that the perpetration of dominant power-structures through “othering”, as seen in the recent music videos, and their subversion, as displayed in Bollywood choreographies, remains within the purview of a minority of people. It is a fact that the majority of Indians, while having been irredeemably affected by the economic implications of colonialism, have not been touched by the moralising discourses put forward by the invaders: in many a village, people barely know who the British colonisers were, or what Western pop-music is. The vast majority of Indians is not in the least concerned with the unfolding of such politics of identity, when it is the daily bread and water that they have to worry about.

This makes me hope that there is still the possibility of a genuine and sincere coming together that comes before, goes beyond, and precludes the unfolding of

pervasive, tainted power-structures (so fashionable and apparently unavoidable ever since Foucault pointed them out to us). I like to believe that in the encounter of differing cultures there still *is* scope for moral growth, genuine curiosity, healthy pride and balanced exchange. It is in this vein, that I think back to one starry night, about a decade ago, on a roof-terrace in Udaipur, where the owner of a small café had lured my travel-companion and me into watching a private show of a “very special” movie. With two chilled beers, balancing on unstable plastic chairs, from a fuzzy cathode ray tube TV we were made to watch “Octopussy”, the 1983 James Bond film partially shot in the café-owner’s very own city of Udaipur. Our host’s smile revealed an uncontainable pride, and with the back of my eye, I could see how in the darkness his shining eyes were gazing at us, who were gazing at Roger Moore, who was gazing at Udaipur’s Monsoon Palace.

Whose gaze is appropriating or defining whom, and who is “othering” the “non-self”, in order to affirm the “self”, is not easily said and done. For each “self” there needs to be an “other”, but the “other”, in order to be “other” to the “othering self”, needs to be a “self” in itself. Ultimately, we need to keep alive the indeterminacy of the gaze, and learn to live open-endedly, as the gaze may turn around at any moment. However, there need not always be a winner and a loser; a subject and an object; an exotic and an ordinary. Depending on the angle, there can be multiple subjects and multiple truths. And, where there is curiosity and respect, we might even find the “other” inside the “self” and the “self” inside the “other”...like that one starry night.