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**STEREOTYPES, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND CONSTRUCTION OF THE SELF: A
POSTCOLONIAL ANALYSIS OF SAANIYA ABBAS' YOUTUBE VIDEOS**

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Abstract

The content on social media, while seemingly harmless, are often deeply rooted in the prejudices that the society has come to naturalise over times. While the postcolonial problematic of social media content has only been recently entering discussions, they become an important area of inquiry due to their widespread audience and influence. This paper argues that Saaniya, a YouTube vlogger creating videos that often focus on the differences between her own Indian culture and her British husband Tom's, perpetuates Oriental stereotypes wherein the West is represented as logical and progressive and the East as irrational and "stuck in time". Her videos become specimens of, what Lisa Lau calls, "re-Orientalism" where the diasporic Orient is seen to further the stereotypes that were once created by the colonisers. Four videos that specifically use the East-West binary to create humour have been used in this study to understand the modern-day implications of crystallising these colonial stereotypes, leading to skewed identity constructions.

Keywords: Post colonialism, YouTube videos, social media, Re-orientalism.

British colonisation may have ended decades ago but, the impacts continue to be realised in the everyday lives of the erstwhile colonised. The Orientalist school of thought, established during the colonial period, provided a biased representation where Europe ("The Occident") was established as rational and superior in contrast to "the Orient" who was culturally backward (Said 15). While the Occident helped propagate these stereotypes during that period, recent trends show a shift in this role with these representations being continued by diasporic Orientals, a phenomenon that Lisa Lau terms as Re-Orientalism (572). One of the popular mediums for the propagation of this has been social media. This paper argues that the YouTube content creator Saaniya Abbas, through her videos contrasting British and Indian cultures, propagates Re-Orientalism, characterising the West as rational and critical, and the East as hyper religious, emotional, and uncultured.

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Saaniya Abbas is a diasporic Indian YouTuber who creates content, intended to be humorous, with her British husband Tom ("Saaniya: About me"). While a lot of the content she generates has an underlying orientalist stereotyping to them, this research will focus on four specific videos namely, "White vs Brown Moms", "CRICKET: INDIA vs ENGLAND", "White VS Brown Spicy", and "Applying for UK Visa vs Indian Visa". These particular videos have been chosen considering how they have directly compared the two cultures, in contrast to the others which have implicit connotations. Though the videos frequently feature both Abbas and her husband, it has been indicated explicitly, with the YouTube channel named as "Saaniya", and implicitly, through the videos, that she is the mastermind behind the content. This has crucial implications for the critical analysis attempted in this research as it doesn't become a continual Orientalism, as the case would have been had the dominant creator been the British Tom, but an act of Re-Orientalism.

Lisa Lau, in her paper titled "Re-Orientalism: The Perpetration and Development of Orientalism by Orientals", introduces the concept of Re-Orientalism. This is a phenomenon through which the diasporic Orientals, belonging to erstwhile colonies, continue the perpetuation of the Orientalist stereotypes established by the

colonisers to construct the Orient as 'The Other' (Lau 571). The Orientalist stereotypes, as Edward Said had elaborated in his seminal work *Orientalism* and in other interviews he had given, like "Edward Said On Orientalism | 1998 Documentary", characterises the East as backward, exotic, and mysterious consequentially portraying the West as progressive and rational (Said 9). Furisch's and Matsukawa's research will help in understanding how these representations continue to be present in media representation today. "Potential Problems in Cross-Cultural Communications: Stereotypes, Prejudices, and Racism" by Nguyen-Phuong-Ma and "Media and Ethnic Stereotyping" by Ramasubramaniam and Sousa have informed this paper in how skewed media representations affect the identity construction of individuals coming from these communities in real life. Dizayis research has helped this research look at the diasporic identity of Abbas and how it has affected her representations. Rosenberg and Heath have provided secondary referential support for specific arguments made in the paper, when Abbas' video "Saaniya: About Me" has given the biographical information required to situate the arguments. The literature available until now has shown that academic research on social media is only emerging and content on these sites have escaped vigorous deliberation. Further, no research is found to be available on the specific YouTube content creator that this

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paper will be focusing on, where the research gap has been located and this research hopes to situate itself.

This research attempts a qualitative postcolonial analysis on Saaniya Abbas' videos to understand how Re-Orientalism is perpetuated through social media content. The first video, "White vs Brown Moms", as the title suggests, is based on the differences between Indian and British mothers. The video portrays how the parent from each culture differs in their reactions to similar situations. "CRICKET: INDIA vs ENGLAND" portrays the difference in the perception of cricket by Indians and British. The former is shown as emotionally attached to it, cricket becoming a national symbol, while for the latter it is just another sport. "White VS Brown Spicy" explores how the exotic Easterner's love for spices has been contrasted to the Westerner. Lastly, "Applying for UK Visa vs Indian Visa" looks at the difference in Visa procedures in both the countries where the former is shown as thoroughly questioning the applicant while the latter is shown as being casual and inefficient. These images continue to perpetuate images of the East as exotic, mysterious, incapable, stuck in time, and culturally inferior, a perfect Other, as Said calls it, to the rational Western culture ("Edward Said On Orientalism | 1998 Documentary").

It is the irrationality and childlike nature of the Orient that underlines the European's "rational, virtuous, mature, "normal." (Said 48). The construction of the British mother as rational and understanding has been possible because of the picturisation of the Indian mother as not only illogical and hyper religious but also stupid and narrow minded. When the British mother is a progressive parent who gifts her son alcohol on his birthday, the Indian mother is a naïve, stupid woman who has been represented as incapable of differentiating between the odours of alcohol and perfume. This Western rationality has been consistently portrayed even with the way they answer their children's questions. When asked questions like how children born or about religions are, the Western mother provides her son with informative responses that answer their questions. On the other hand, an Indian mother responds to how children are born in a non-sensical manner about praying to gods. While Indians, today, do hesitate to talk about sexual matters, it is to be remembered at this point that 'obscenity' is often regarded to be a concept that was introduced in the Indian minds by the British, and Indians until this point were much more open-minded (Heath 14).

The counterpart to the rational British mother is the 'uncultured' Indian mother who is overly dramatic and emotional. To punish her child, she runs behind her with a

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footwear in hand and makes the child repent by promising on the mother's life. The calm, composed, and poised British mother, on the other hand, simply asks her son to sit on the 'naughty step' in an orderly manner. This emotional versus rational dichotomy is also visible in the video on cricket. When, for Tom, cricket becomes a means of entertainment, Abbas, who has been otherwise shown to be unaware of the match schedule, becomes extremely enthusiastic when she hears that India is playing. Led away by her emotions, she is also seen showing her husband excerpts from the movie *Lagaan* in an attempt to instil in him the emotions that she has. However, the British character continues to retain his rationality, offering a logical middle ground where they both support their own teams until one of it loses.

The choice of *Lagaan* is an important point of consideration as well. Reflecting upon the significance of cricket in the movie, Rosenberg elaborates how the sport becomes a battleground for national identity (1). The sport, in extension, becomes an important and essential part of the Indian identity (Rosenberg 2). For Abbas, then, at all points in the video, it is essential to represent her national identity in relation to Indians. Unlike Tom, Abbas feels the need to assert her national identity, exhibiting a postcolonial identity crisis. National identity being an important factor in all aspects of life, decolonization brought with it the by-

product of a struggle to reproduce a social and individual identity (Dizayi 12). Her construction of her own identity, however, is happening as an opposition to that of Tom's. In the postcolonial sense, she situates herself as a part of the Indian "us", othering Tom as the contrary "other" (Dizayi 12). However, the postcolonial problematic of the need to define her identity in opposition to Tom's cannot go without deliberation. Even as she has taken the agency to define her national identity, the fact that it comes as an opposition to Tom's, to prove to him her attachment and commitment to her nation, comes with an uncomfortable significance given back to a colonial approval and highlighting the importance of the West, yet again.

Exoticisation of the East hasn't escaped the representation either. Spices as a characteristic factor of Indian identity is a nostalgic realisation of the colonial image of India as a land of spices (Matsukawa 32). While Indian food may have higher spice levels than British, the representation in their video is quite problematic. Showing Abbas effortlessly eating raw chilies "like chips", as Tom says, the video exoticizes Indians as a strange other. The mannerisms, expressions, and picturisation supplement the eroticization.

According to Abbas' representation, not only are Indians irrational and exotic, but also inefficient. The video on applying

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for UK VISA versus Indian VISA helps further the representations that have been attempted until now. While the racial prejudice of the UK officials has been mocked at, what will be emphasised more in this analysis is the representation of Indian VISA procedure as inefficient. The video starts with applying for a UK visa that follows an intense interview with extensive questioning. However, in contrast to this, the Indian visa procedure has been shown to be inefficient and casual. For one, there is a drastic shift in the setting. The office setup of UK visa has been completely discarded for a casual, homely setting for the latter. There are no questions pertaining to the visa or the visit to India asked. Rather, the official indulges in a casual conversation with the applicant, talking about cricket and getting carried away by emotions to sanction the visa.

These stereotypical representations of India and England have consequences in the perception of these communities in real life. The influence that media has on the audience is as dangerous as it is powerful. A closer look at the videos makes one realise that, even though the videos provide an apparent comparison, the standard set has already been Western. Indian cultural representation is only an Other to further bolster the already established Western rationality and cultural superiority, comparison to the exotic other of India helping to further this belief

(Ramasubramanian& Sousa 2). The biased representations of the two ethnicities by content creators like Abbas can have longstanding cultural implications on the perception of these and continue to perpetuate social and political inequalities, already established (Furisch 115).

The dangers of the ethnic stereotyping that is visible through this Re-Orientalism are plenty. Firstly, such stereotyping creates a distorted image through the careful selection of a few irregular traits and turning them into typical trademarks (Nguyen-Phuong-Mai 5). By picking out a few traits of Indian parenting or preferences for particular kind of food, the videos have crystallised these as norms for the people of this ethnicity. A rational Indian mother or a person of Indian origin who does not like spicy food becomes outsiders that cannot be accommodated within this stereotyping. This leads me to the second danger. Stereotypes are often stable and difficult to change (Nguyen-Phuong-Mai 5). In such a situation, an Indian who falls out of these stereotypical assumptions, like the examples mentioned before, become special cases (Nguyen-Phuong-Mai 5). The Indianness of the individual maybe questioned but not the stereotype itself. A third danger to this stereotyping is the perception of their own identities by the group that is getting stereotyped (Nguyen-Phuong-Mai 5).

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Ethnic stereotyping is as harmful to the identity construction of the minority group for themselves as it is to the perception of the ethnic minority group by the dominant group (Ramasubramanian & Sousa 2). Abbas herself becomes an example of this. The ethnic bias that she perpetuates in her videos is only the reflection of what she was led to believe about her culture. This has happened through the social conditioning she received, media definitely playing an important role, as it does with an average Indian.

This diasporic identity dilemma, through her videos, seem to be resolved through an overt representation of Indian culture "over simplistically, stereotypically, and ... sensationally" (Lau 581). This, Lau recognises, as a technique often employed by South Asian diasporic writers (which in extension shall be used for content creators of all kinds here) to claim authenticity (581). There is a need to be recognisably belonging to the culture one is representing and they feel pressurised to represent this with "recognizable" characteristics or stereotypes (Lau 582). Such representations result in a generalising tendency to propagate cultural images that may only be true of certain parts, as the essential identity (Lau 584).

The third danger of these representations, for Lau, is that of "truth claims". She says that by creating narratives that blur the line between fiction and

personal experiences, these writers tend to bring in authenticity and validity to their stories (Lau 586). While these are often claimed to be non-biographical, the close resemblance to personal lives that is made known to the reader establishes a "truth claim", even if it is implicitly (Lau 585 – 586). Though Lau is exploring the problematics of novel writers, this argument maybe extended to the case of the You Tuber in question. It has been made known to the audience that Saaniya Abbas and Tom are a real-life couple and most of their videos are also made with this basic backdrop. However, the narratives themselves are fictional. This positioning of the narratives as neither all fiction nor all experiential, gives it the truth claim that we had been discussing previously.

Orient was a European construct for the non-Western population that it encountered. Considered exotic beings from a mysterious land, often romanticized, it was everything the Occident did not think itself to be (Said 9). These ideas were propagated through the academic work produced during the colonial period to crystallise in the minds of the people, this construction that was then to be sold as the reality (Said 10). Said called this "Orientalism" (Said 10). Through her Re-Orientalism, Abbas continues to perpetuate these by occupying the role of the erstwhile coloniser. While this research has only focused on four of her videos, it is to be remembered that the stereotyping is not

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exclusive to these and her other videos like "The Inner Indian", "How to Offend Indians", "Indian Relatives 101", etc. have implicit orientalist tendencies as well. The stereotypes that her YouTube videos perpetuate have implications in the identity construction of Indians, thus proving to be extremely dangerous. While these are meant for entertainment purposes, content creators of social media platforms need to come with a social responsibility, which this research is hoped to have highlighted.

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