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Imagined Image: Exploring imagination surrounding colonial and contemporary exotic representations

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Abstract

In order to understand the relation of the visual and graphic representation with the world order viewed by the colonizer's gaze, picture postcards have to be studied as a political medium carrying misrepresented and exaggerated exotic image of the colonized nation to foreign land. The trajectory of the paper analyses Victorian England's Pear's soap advertisement spree, with its overarching ambition to clean and white-wash the white society, and its aim of polishing self image of the whites. Studying the images, with almost occult projection of transparent soap in a black man's hand, these graphics foreground and echo the images seen on popular postcards of the time. A comparative observation is made of the advertising images, colonial postcards (of India) and post-colonial contemporary postcards. Repetition of representation is studied along some minor motifs like representation of women etc. Major argument running through it is an effort to study the no-exit negotiable space of representation that India has succumbed to, and is projecting itself through colonizer's gaze.

Key words: imagination , surrounding , colonial, contemporary ,exotic representations

Article

“How does meaning get into the image? Where does it end? And if it ends, what is there beyond?”

- Roland Barthes,

Rhetoric of the image

Post-colonial conscious is still contemplating the image of its lineage, its representation and position within the paradigm of imperial architecture. The contemporary mediation within the space of projection is about negotiating colonial leftovers and managing the colonial residue. India with its exotic aesthetics is still packed in three-by-five picture postcards and advertised as a reflection of the colonial construction. Though picture postcards and postage has lost its former glorious position, images and travel photography has gained a momentum in globalised space, making postcard a collectible souvenir photograph. The mass visual culture in present novel commercial space emerges with its colonial ethos which are reproduced and distributed to global conscious.

1. Genesis of British Imperial Capitalist Mass Visual Culture

Victorian England witnessed rise of visual advertisements and created history in visual culture for the masses, the overwhelming wave of imperialism had bought coffee, tea, ink, mirrors, clocks, clothing, stones, and colonial consciousness. Pear's advertisement in mid 1880s (Figure 1) was clinging on to national jingoism and asserted the facade propagated by imperialism. The coinciding birth of picture postcards in 1890s¹ and the changing nature of art magnifies capitalistic trends aiming at producing mass images to control the gaze of the audience. The repetitive nature of content and its treatment insinuates the intention of creating a symbol, which reasserts the British imperial project. It wouldn't be incorrect to suggest that this process is a fringe idea of Jungian archetypal myth construction in simplistic ways, since the repetition of these images creates mental symbol in the subconscious of the viewer with direct links to the colonized entity. In figure 1 the commodity of soap becomes a

symbol, it becomes everything that Britain wants to illustrate, and thinks of itself. Figure 2 shows the attempt at packaging two identities into a trivial commodity, these identities are packed in the bar of soap. Here a domestic product almost becomes a missionary counterpart with its claims of cleansing and whitening the complexion. It is also endowed with magical qualities that could cleanse the African child's body and make him white. This reasserts the facade of spiritual-superiority of colonizers. Another image (figure 3) illustrates the strangeness of the commodity to the native gaze. The soap acquires occult dimension and becomes a transparent strange object, native sees it as alien commodity, whose possession is projected as a "step towards improving civilization". The signifiers of all the images lead to creation of culturally standardised perception in the mind of the viewers. The claim to "lighten the White Man's burden", wiping off the colour of child and the "reading" of the "message from sea" are connotative meanings, which are reasserted and sealed by the text imprinted on the advertisement². The denoted meaning of the image (figure 3) is only illustrating keen vision, or contemplation of the strange object, it does not necessarily create an image of inferiority of one culture vis-à-vis other, the viewers in this case see the image in isolation through natural gaze and are defamiliarized from the commodity in absence of all the text within and around the image. The constructed meanings around the image complete the advertisement and seize the target audience.

In this basket of time, when "Advertising took the intimate signs of domesticity (children bathing, men shaving, women laced into corsets, maids delivering night caps) into the public realm...and advertising took scenes of empire into every corner of the home, stamping images of colonial conquest on soap boxes, matchboxes, biscuit tins, whisky bottles, tea tins and chocolate bars."³, came the wave of picture postcards. Picture postcards cannot be viewed in isolation from its genesis because; the transformation of Art to mass visual culture in England is deeply entwined with its capitalist history. The rising bourgeoisie of eighteenth century was extending the realm of luxury and leisure, vacations and tourism, rise of travelogues, memoirs along the rise of postal communication created spaces for new hobbies. Postcard became a souvenir commodity that could be collected and exhibited, advertisement, as already mentioned, had brought art into domestic realm⁴, the bourgeoisie in this context was only an extending shadow of the Royalty. Queen Victoria's Osborne House is still adorned with portraits of her Indian subjects, which were painted by an Austrian painter in 1880s and 1890s, a period which is remembered for being ripe period of British Raj in India.⁵ Her portraits are displayed based on occupation; caste and religion, the categories of humans are created to exhibit variety of subjects. Corresponding to this is the genre of postcards popularly known as "native views"⁶, which were consumed massively in Europe. These post cards chiefly captured the Indian landscape, British architecture in Indian landscape, and the portraits of people. It became a commodity that could be collected, arranged and exchanged.⁷ Market of postcard collectors were filled with postcard albums covered with decorative red cloth, or with letters like "Beautiful things", Often the postcard would not be a medium of communication and would be marked with words like "Here's another for your album" or "You must let me know when you get tired of these postcards."⁸ Labelling, arranging, exchanging and exhibiting is the visible unfolding of colonizer's mind. It shows the capitalist facet of renaming, recreating and possessing the nation and nationality. Royal colonial collection, "The people of India, is an eight volume catalogue published between 1868 and 1875" with "500 photographs of India's ethnic types."⁹ The native views postcards offered "human types" and labelled the subject as "a tailor, a shoemaker, a Sikh, a Muslim" to the limit that "collectors could organize and arrange the entire caste system through...these representations of natives."¹⁰ All this was often packed in postcard series titled like *Our Glorious Empire*, which makes the native views postcards born of 19th century scaffolding to post-colonial exotic images and representation of India, and also display the self-appointed ownership of the British royalty and public.

2. Creation of archetypes/symbols representing native identity in portrait native view postcards

Commodity fetishism, as explained by Marx, finds the mystique more interesting than the actual utility of the commodity. Commodity in such cases begins to encroach anthropological realm instead of economics; however, it still remains rooted in the economic base structure. The mysticism of commodity, as granted to the Pears' soap, becomes a foundation for forming enigma around these images. The connoted space of the commodity is exploited for potency of becoming a representative symbol, a possible signifier which leads to construction of standardised aesthetic meaning. Standardised meaning is constructed through the politics of repetition, or archetypes; Figure 4 in denotes the jewels and the lady, but the language seals it as "Jewel of Asia", Jewel as an image and as a word is transferred to the perception of viewer, with a force that swallows the woman as the "Jewel". The portraiture of women has been highly criticised for sexualized fantasies, created in the light of "otherness" with "...an exposed hand or foot of an otherwise heavily ornamented female body."¹¹ A commodity, that is used to adorn a human, becomes human. In figure 5 the tea becomes India, and the symbol of jewellery is reasserted. A no exit situation is created through archetypal myth creation, the motifs are reasserted to the extent of becoming mental images in the culture's subconscious. Further, genesis of postcard should not be forgotten and it should be viewed as advertising agent of the colonized nations. Not only were they advertised as tourist destinations, they were also being projected as dark spaces with mysterious aesthetics. They were advertised as extension of British Empire, which was ugly yet beautiful, dangerous yet wonderful, like the 'land-of-snake-charmers'. The consumption of English advertisements and of postcards is happening in the same temporal-spatial sphere. The viewer of the image has to receive, at one and the same time the perceptual (denoted) message and the cultural message.¹² this construction is thus intentional, as previously hinted, because the entity of Soap will not emerge in the absence of Dirty, similarly the contrast of the complexion will only emerge through the similar dichotomy of light-and-dark, soap acquires its symbolic meaning through the extensions attached to the 'other', and in the absence of what 'other' has. This possession of the other becomes central to constructing aesthetics and meaning of image, the colour of skin is 'off-putting', while the jewels are aesthetically pleasing. It is a constructed surrealism which is not only playing with vision, but is also simultaneously constructing standardised aesthetics. Thus to twist the denotation, or natural effect that an image might produce, an alternative artificial, or cultural perceptions are produced. So jewellery as a stereotypical Symbol is constructed through repetition, and not only repetition but packaging of ideas and cultural perceptions for symbol. The colonizer is actually creating archetypes to construct a mythic visual.

These symbols are consequently transformed into objects, which function in brackets and groups, like the object "Elephant" popularly becomes the bracket of "India"; or a typical image of India. As mentioned before, these images have a constructed artificial aura, which produces the exotic character of these mundane commodities. On visiting East India House, a departmental store, an American visitor describes it as "Aladdin's cave" and a "sumptuous establishment" with "faintly perfumed" rooms, using "sandal and other scented woods".¹³ Arthur Liberty, the owner of the departmental store knew that exotic essence would not come naturally with the products of India, to create the spectacle of "Aladdin's cave", it had to be created artificially to satisfy the stereotypical cultural perception. This construction works something like "While buying a cup of coffee at a local café one morning, I was transported to an exotic far-off land. Immersed in the aroma of coffee brewing and surrounded by pictures of farmers picking coffee and their children smiling, I could imagine who had grown the

coffee in my mug.”¹⁴ Thus the things, which are repeatedly asserted and showcased as native, acquire a link to imaginative geography.

3. Landscape native views postcard and imagined lands

In 1903, Raphael Tuck and sons introduced the “World-Wild Oilette series”¹⁵ with number, label and caption for the collectors, these postcards were facsimiles of oil painting and were signed by the artisans. “While imperial architecture was often represented through authoritative aesthetic of full size sepia tone photographs, Pre-colonial architecture in India was more often depicted in a drawing or painting...with a fuzzy border evoking a sense of nostalgia”¹⁶ the borders were also embellished with golden tint (figure 7) and wooden design stamps. These extensions to the native views were not only making them more collectable, but were also adding an exotic extension to the complete visual. The package is beautified and “Imagined Geography” is created. The landscape and local settings have also been turned into the vague “sandal perfumed” air which is only reasserting the stereotypes or only exhibiting itself as an extension of the Imperial Empire. The otherness created by painting, in contrast to sepia, constructs a “nostalgic” depiction which showcases the Indian landscape as past, primitive and away from modern. Further, these postcards were inscribed with messages like “This is Benaras where the brassware comes from, Love Jim.” Or “Here is where Mother lived when she was here, yours Karen”¹⁷, transport the colonial gaze. The positioning of Benaras as a place becomes controversial because it is given the colonial label of engraved-brass-producing-place; it only remains a work site devoid of its humanistic character. Secondly, figure 7 glorifies the British industrial advancements in the Indian landscape and delivers India as a site for British imperial project. These postcards subtly showcase the movement from before to after the colonization; from “nostalgic” to “sepia”. Secret to understanding the reception of the two images and spectacle associated with it lies in the chasm between before and after. The presence of soap, its treatment and extraordinary nature emerges due to lack of knowledge in the native (figure 3), Thus the colonial knowledge of the native lands is constructed as uncivilized, whereas soap is actually only a foreign product which is not produced by natives and is alien to their know-how. In such regressive presentations the orient projects the identity of the other, which is away from modern mundane industrialised west, or from the sepia.

In 1870s Liberty & Co. owned various stores of Indian fabrics like Cashmere Shawls, Mysore silk, carpets with Allahabad marigold, Rangoon poppy and other ‘desirable’ patterns. The company’s catalogue advocated the patterns that “assimilated to the styles and designs of Europe”.¹⁸ A journalist remarked on exhibition of the company outlet that “it constructed an eclectic image of East through...seductive displays...” with everything “quaint, Eastern and unlike modern everyday life.”¹⁹ This mixing of, what is the “everyday life” to the colonial perception, with the native views created a spur of interest and wonder. Thus situating the mundane-modern into what is advertised and portrayed as primitive and savage is terribly beautiful for the European consumer who is witnessing the growing modernity.²⁰ So postcards like figure 7 and 8 become popular because they put the “fabricated difference”²¹ in spotlight and the onlooker, who knows the native to be a savage, is surprised at the proximity and operation of modern tools in the savage land by “thick minded” natives. This makes presence of railways in Madras and fountain in Bombay a spectacle.

4. Current representations

India is still placed between colonial and post-colonial gaze. Industrial development and modernity is an everyday feature, which was not the case in colonial India, but advertising tactics, previously for the imperial aims and now by the tourism industry, have not changed. Figure 6 shows the “Tribal woman” through colonial lens, the labelling is not very different and becomes a stickler to colonial fanaticism of allotting typology to people. Landscape postcard (figure 9) also fails to do justice to commercial face of India and serves as the bridge to the taste of chilli which lands in the market of chilli-heaps like the imaginative farm materialized by the essence of brewing coffee. Chilli becomes spectacular because in relation to European cuisine it gains attention. Further, the massive volumes of chilli become more spectacular because the imaginative space of the audience is not just limited to pinch-of-chilli-in-the-curry but to consumption of volumes of chilli. This second-hand colonial perception, which was once forced, is accepted and regulated in the globalised economy by the natives because despite the changes and development, India has not asserted for its honest representation, and is buried beneath the chilli heaps, looking for its identity.

Notes

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3. McClintock, Anne. “Soft-Soaping Empire: Commodity Racism and Imperial Advertising”. The Visual Culture Reader. Ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff. London. Routledge. 1998. 304 - 316. Print
4. See “Barratt bought Sir John Everett Millais' painting 'Bubbles (originally entitled 'A Child's World') and inserted into the painting a bar of soap stamped with the totemic word Tears. At a stroke, he transformed the artwork of the best known painter in Britain into a mass-produced commodity associated in the public mind with Pears” in Anne McClintock’s Soft Soaping Empire
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Figure 1 "... brightening the dark corners of the earth..."



Figure 2 "I have found PEARS' SOAP matchless for the hands and complexion"



Figure 3 "The consumption of SOAP is a measure of the wealth, civilization, health and purity of the people."



Figure 4 "Jewel of Asia"



Figure 5 "Good Morning" , 20th century



Figure 6 Tibal Women - India, 2015

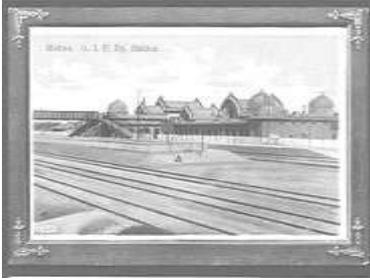


Figure 7 Madras Railway Station



Figure 8 Bombay Rampart Row



Figure 9 Chilli shop, 2015