

SUKETU MEHTA'S DYSTOPIAN BOMBAY: AN INDIAN, NEO-ORIENTALISM?¹

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Over the past few decades, Indian Postcolonial and Subaltern scholars have made great progress towards resisting, subverting and rewriting Anglo-American accounts of India's recent history. The disruption of Orientalist orthodoxies has enabled India, the former object of Western academic analysis, to become a participating subject in the negotiation of this discourse. The sub-continent has found its voice and is now telling its own stories.

However, in spite of the work of Homi Bhabha, Ranajit Guha, Gayatri Spivak et al, Orientalist literary accounts of India haven't entirely disappeared from view. They have, instead, evolved into subtler, more sophisticated forms. Moreover, it is probably more accurate to say that this evolution has taken place specifically *because of*, not in spite of, the work of Bhabha, Guha, Spivak and their peers.

A particular feature of this new writing, which I shall tentatively label "Neo-Orientalism", is that while its readership remains predominantly Western, its authors are often Indian.

This paper seeks to investigate the role of expatriate Indian authors in mediating this Neo-Orientalism, and will concentrate upon the book *Maximum City* by Suketu Mehta.

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As a background to this discussion it will be useful to briefly summarise Orientalism as expounded by Edward Said in books such as *Orientalism*, *Covering Islam*, and *Culture and Imperialism*.²

In *Orientalism*, Edward Said discusses the political dynamics and processes through which the hegemonic West has constructed a discourse within which Islam, Arabs and the “Orient” form an object that is theorised about and discussed by, and for, the West. Said describes three stages of Orientalism. The first is the academic Orientalism that arose in European universities during the colonial heyday, comprising philology, philosophy, religion, art and architecture. The second stage of Orientalism, which was intrinsically related to the academic form, comprised a style of thought “based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident’”.³

The third stage was Orientalism as political and/or ideological discourse, which Said saw as being more historically and materially defined than the other two. Said thought this third form to comprise:

... the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short: Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.⁴

At the heart of this third form of Orientalism was the construction (through negative reductionism, misrepresentation, and so on) of an oppositional Oriental “Other” – particularly the Muslim Middle East – in American political and media discourse. Said explores this oppositional bias at length in his book *Covering Islam*.

Said’s third form of Orientalism is what I am interested in addressing in this paper. Within the Indian context, classic literary examples of this third form of

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² Said has come under much critical scrutiny recently, his work accused by Ibn Warraq, Ian Buruma and others of essentialism, anti-intellectualism and historical inaccuracy, and for tacitly defending Muslim fundamentalism. While some of this criticism is warranted, a discussion of the finer points, pro and contra, is beyond the scope of this paper. My position, briefly stated, is that Said’s work is flawed in places, but on the whole remains cogent, relevant and useful.

³ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, Penguin Books, 2003, p. 2

Orientalism would include James Mill's *History of India* (a landmark early nineteenth century scholarly work which descends, at times, into racist caricature: “that active cruelty which lurks under the smiling exterior of the Hindu”⁵), Katherine Mayo's *Mother India* (1927), and V.S. Naipaul's *An Area of Darkness* (1964). Mayo's book, with its consistently venomous tone, is perhaps the classic example of oppositional literary Orientalism within the Indian context, and will serve as a useful comparison for Suketu Mehta's more recent book.

Mayo's visit to India in the mid-1920s was, ostensibly, motivated by a desire to gather intelligence on a neighbour that was half as large as the United States but had a population three times greater. The author describes herself as an unsubsidized, uncommitted, and unattached volunteer who wishes to observe common things in Indian daily life, confining her enquiry to such workaday ground as public health and its contributing factors, and leaving untouched the realm of religion, politics and art.⁶

What follows this articulation of objectivity is a vicious polemic full of stereotypes and generalisations, depicting India as fatally compromised by deep-seated incompetence and feverish carnality – and thus in dire need of ongoing imperial supervision. Mayo's proclamations were such that Gandhi was moved to describe *Mother India* as “a drain inspector's report”.⁷

Of Indians' fundamental weakness of character Mayo writes:

Inertia, helplessness, lack of initiative and originality, lack of staying power and of sustained loyalties, sterility of enthusiasm, weakness of life-vigor itself – all are traits that truly characterize the Indian not only of today, but of long-past history. All, furthermore, will continue to characterize him, in increasing degree, until he admits their causes and with his own two hands uproots them. His soul and body are indeed chained in slavery. But he himself wields and hugs his chains and with violence defends them.⁸

⁴ Ibid., p.3

⁵ James Mill, *History of India*, I, 1817, pp. 325-326

⁶ Katherine Mayo, *Mother India*, University of Michigan Press, 2000, p. 75

⁷ “The carefully chosen quotations give it the false appearance of a truthful book. But the impression it leaves on my mind, is that it is the report of a drain inspector sent out with the one purpose of opening and examining the drains of the country to be reported upon, or to give a graphic description of the stench exuded by the opened drains.” From M. K. Gandhi, “A Drain Inspector's Report”, *Young India*, 15 Sept 1927

⁸ *Mother India*, pp. 78-79

Of their incompetence around health and their obsession with sex, she writes:

The infant that survives the birth-strain – a feeble creature at best, bankrupt in bone-stuff and vitality, often venereally poisoned, always predisposed to any malady that may be afloat – must look to his child-mother for care. Ignorant of the laws of hygiene, guided only by the most primitive superstitions, she has no helpers in her task other than the older women of the household, whose knowledge, despite their years, is little greater than hers. Because of her place in the social system, child-baring and procreation are the woman's one interest in life, her one subject of conversation, be her caste high or low. Therefore, the child growing up in the home learns, from earliest grasp of word and act, to dwell upon sex relations.⁹

Of their irredeemable fanaticism she writes:

But a creed through tens of centuries bred into weak, ignorant, and fanatical peoples is not to be uprooted in one or two hundred years; neither can it be shaken by the wrath of a single prophet [Gandhi], however revered.¹⁰

Mrinalini Sinha, in her introduction to the University of Michigan reprint of *Mother India*, offers the following about Katherine Mayo's motives in writing the book:

It was the sexual excess of the Indian male, Mayo concluded, that had left him with hands, "too weak, too fluttering ... to hold the reins of Government". Mayo's further point was that the ills of Indian society, unlike anything to be found in the West, were not merely problems that were regrettable and thus subject to correction. Rather, the ills of Indian society belonged to the very essence of Hinduism and, as such, were actually condoned by Hindu religion and culture. Her argument that the backwardness of India stemmed not from political or economic causes but from religious and cultural ones served two important purposes: it countered nationalist Indian claims of Indian superiority

⁹ Ibid., p. 84

in the realm of culture and spirituality over the materialistic West; and it exempted colonial rule from any responsibility for the backwardness of India, eliciting instead sympathy for the reform work of the countless British men and women who labored selflessly against such odds.¹¹

History – or more accurately, historiography – has consigned Katherine Mayo's toxic diatribe to the archives, where it resides as a slightly embarrassing curiosity. With the growth of Postcolonial theory (along with other political and economic factors – the emergence of Asian super economies, for example), Orientalist assumptions like Mayo's have been challenged and displaced. It is no longer acceptable, desirable or expedient for Western commentators to define and judge Asian cultures. Doing so would risk being demonised for racism, anachronism, and so on.

But while the Anglo-American voice has lost a good deal of its authority, the Anglo-American appetite for accounts of Asia has remained, as has its more problematic adjunct – an ingrained ontological curiosity about Asian “Others”.

Publishers have been quick to spot this gap in the market, and into the void left by Western Orientalist commentators have moved expatriate Asian commentators, new citizens of America and Britain (and elsewhere) who are able to write authoritatively on the countries of their birth – telling their own stories, writing their own histories. This trend is supported and enjoyed by the Westerners who consume much of this material – a scan of the winners' list for the Man-Booker prize will demonstrate this point.

At the more popular end of the literary market is the plethora of biographies written by expatriate Chinese charting their journeys from rural poverty in Maoist China to the challenges and opportunities of life in the West – books like Jung Chang's *Wild Swans*, Adeline Yen Mah's *Falling Leaves*, and so forth.

The same trend can be seen, to a lesser extent, in biographies and travel narratives about India by expatriate Indians, or Westerners of direct Indian descent. These include Pico Iyer, Pankaj Mishra, V.S. Naipaul, and Suketu Mehta.

Mehta's *Maximum City*, published in 2004, is where this paper will now focus.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 126

The cover of the hardback edition of *Maximum City* (published by Alfred A. Knopf, New York) is testimony to the acumen of publishers in exploiting the market for Westerners seeking authentic commentary upon India. Mehta's standing as an expert commentator is verified by back-cover praise from a who's who of expatriate Indian literary luminaries, including Shashi Tharoor, Rohinton Mistry, Jhumpa Lahiri and Salman Rushdie.

And appealing to this milieu, Mehta asserts his Postcolonial credentials early in the book, describing a fundamentally liminal existence, and describing the uncertainty around identity that accompanied his move to New York from Mumbai as a teenager:

'Where're you from?' Searching for an answer – in Paris, in London, in Manhattan – I always fall back on 'Bombay'. Somewhere, buried beneath the wreck of its current condition – one of urban catastrophe – is the city that has a tight claim on my heart...¹²

Elsewhere he talks of life in transit:

I had met my wife, who was born in Madras and raised in London, on an Air India plane, the perfect metaphor for a meeting of exiles: neither here nor there, happiest in transit. I was going to Bombay and Sunita to Madras. We talked about exile – and I knew at once.¹³

At the start of the book Mehta describes how his return to Bombay is ostensibly to rediscover his “home”: “I went back to look for that city with a simple question: can you go home again?”¹⁴

583 pages later, Mehta – drawn back to New York by the family he misses – answers this question:

You can go home again; and you can also leave again. Once more, with confidence, into the world.¹⁵

¹¹ Ibid., p. 4

¹² Suketu Mehta, *Maximum City*, Review, 2004, p. 3

¹³ Ibid., p. 12

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 3

What falls within this framework of question and answer, however, is problematic. A short way into the book, Mehta's quest for home veers off into a series of overwhelmingly negative snapshots of Bombay – essentialised caricatures that carry the hallmarks of ideological Orientalism. And the very liminality Mehta uses to establish Postcolonial credibility, aligning himself with the work of Homi Bhabha and others, is the fulcrum upon which his Orientalism turns.

Mehta's use of liminality seems to parallel the ideologically loaded liminality of Kim O'Hara in Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*. Edward Said, in his essay “The Pleasures of Imperialism”, writes of how Kim, in the novel, “can pass from one dialect, one set of values and beliefs, to the other. Throughout the book Kim takes on the dialects of numerous Indian communities; he speaks Urdu, English..., Eurasian, Hindi ... Bengali ... Pashtu ... Chinese Tibetan...”¹⁶ In *Kim*, we have “...the positive boy hero who travels in disguise all over India, across boundaries and rooftops, into tents and villages, [and] is everlastingly responsible to British power, represented by Creighton's Great Game.”¹⁷ Kim's liminality is the key to Kipling achieving a key political outcome in the novel, as Kim delivers the package of papers to Colonel Creighton's men, and the Russians are thwarted.

Similarly, Mehta's liminality allows him to cross many boundaries and achieve his literary objective. Using his various identities – his languages, his knowledge of the city, his status as a noted New York journalist – he enjoys privileged access to the deepest, darkest parts of Bombay. And what starts as an account of his struggles to set up a home base in Bombay rapidly becomes a portrait of a city in civic and moral collapse.

Littered throughout the narrative are heavily critical, essentialised descriptions of Bombay; many of them prurient in focus, echoing the descriptions penned 80 years earlier by Katherine Mayo in *Mother India*. As with Mayo, a key feature of Mehta's writing is the tendency to use carefully selected local episodes and details as the basis for extrapolated, generalised conclusions about India as a whole.

The following selection of quotes (which is by no means exhaustive) conveys some of the negativity of Mehta's carefully structured representation of Bombay.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 586

¹⁶ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, Vintage, 1993, pp. 191-192

¹⁷ Ibid., p.195

Several of the quotes also serve to exemplify the way Mehta uses local details to support judgements about India.

Of Bombay's/India's incompetence around health, Mehta writes:

Amoebic dysentery is transferred through shit. We have been feeding our son shit. It could have come from the mango we gave him; it could have been in the pool we took him swimming in. It could have come from the taps in our own home, since the drainage pipes in Bombay, laid out during British times, leak into the fresh-water pipes that run right alongside. There is no defence possible. Everything is recycled in this filthy country, which poisons its children, raising them on a diet of its own shit.¹⁸

There are two million people without access to latrines in Bombay. You can see them every morning along the train tracks, trudging with a tumbler of water, looking for a vacant place to squat. It is a terrible thing, a degrading thing, for a woman to be forced to look every morning for a little privacy to go to the toilet or to clean herself while she's menstruating. No city this rich should make its women suffer this way.¹⁹

Of Bombay's intemperate sexuality:

There is nothing gentle about sexuality in the slum; it is furtive and feral.²⁰

Bombay is a city humming, throbbing, with sexual energy. A city of migrant men without women; a city in heat. The womanless rickshaw-wallahs, the Bollywood wannabes, the fashion models, and the sailors from many countries – all in search of some heat, a hurried, furtive fuck in whatever hidden corner the world will permit them. They do it in trains, railway stations, the backs of taxis, parks, urinals. [...] But the sexual hunger isn't confined to the lower classes. In the China Garden, at the Oberoi, groups of society women discuss

¹⁸ *Maximum City*, p. 31

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 59

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 99

their lovers over lunch. The young blades of Walkeshwar watch the painted women of the West gyrate on the music videos and download hardcore pornography on the Internet and can't get a peck on the cheek from the good girls of their social circle. In the five-star hotels , young male models pray to their gods before beauty contests while ageing Parsi queens cruise them in the toilets, trying to look at their dicks. [...] It is the sexual frenzy of a closed society, and the women of Golpitha are the gutters for these men's emissions.²¹

Of Bombay's/India's general civic incompetence:

In one panoramic sweep you can see the whole decline of culture in India. The original pillars, built a thousand years ago, are delicately fluted and in proportion, curving gently outward like an infant's belly. The ASI [Archaeological Survey of India] pillars are stolid blocks of stone, each unmatched in shape, color and size with the others; at a glance you can tell they are wonky. [...] What we could do so exquisitely in this country a thousand years ago we can't even attempt today.²²

The total backlog of cases in the Indian courts at the close of the twentieth century stood at at least twenty-five millions cases, one lawsuit for every forty men, women, eunuchs and children in the country. [...] Forty per cent of the judgeships in the Bombay High Court are vacant; each judge has over 3,000 cases pending.²³

And so on.

Mehta writes of a society in disarray, marked by extreme violence and concupiscence, presided over by vicious gang-lords and corrupt politicians. His choices of topic in these sections, and the forceful language he employs, seem intent upon producing an exposé of Bombay. And liminality is the portal through which he accesses this underworld. His choice of topic, moreover, is at marked odds with the

²¹ Ibid., pp. 345-346

²² Ibid., pp. 131

²³ Ibid., p. 194

warm family life he describes at the start of the book.

More troubling than the sensational topic matter is the fact Mehta limits his character portraits to despotic politicians, violent cops and tragic figures from Bombay's demimonde. In his portrait of “home” there are no oppositional, sympathetic characters, and this seems a very suspicious absence.

His major characters include, severally:

- ∞ Sunil, a Shiv Sena hit man – avowedly anti-Muslim.
- ∞ Ajay Lal, an anti-gang police officer renowned for brutal “encounters”, in which police suspects are often beaten to death.
- ∞ Mohsin, a Muslim hit man in the “D-Company” (the Dawood gang).
- ∞ Mona Lisa, the beautiful, self-harming dancer at Sapphire night club.
- ∞ Vinod Chopra, a film director whose art-house aspirations lay ruined by gang directives and the financial need to churn out Bollywood dross.
- ∞ Sanjay Dutt, a Bollywood megastar whose career was destroyed by his being implicated in the 1993 bomb blasts.

Mehta's carefully delimited cast of characters, in which contrasting and positive points of view are entirely absent, echoes Rudyard Kipling's careful removal of Indian dissent from *Kim*, in which Indian characters like the old soldier and the widow of Kulu go so far as to explicitly endorse British rule.

The Bombay Mehta conveys is, one suspects, nothing like the Bombay of his childhood – the home he purports to be attempting to rediscover.

His dystopian Bombay is also nothing like the Bombay of Gregory David Roberts' bestselling *Shantaram*; published a year earlier than *Maximum City*, and an obvious literary comparison. *Shantaram* paints a conspicuously more compassionate and positive portrait of the city. The novel doesn't flinch in depicting the city's harsher aspects, but pushes through the ugliness in search of explanation and in search of commonality, not Otherness:

What is necessary? That was the unspoken but implied and unavoidable question everywhere in India. When I understood that, a great many of the characteristically perplexing aspects of public life became comprehensible: from the acceptance of sprawling slums by city authorities, to the freedom that

cows had to roam at random in the midst of traffic; from the toleration of beggars on the streets, to the concatenate complexity of the bureaucracies; and from the gorgeous, unashamed escapism of Bollywood movies, to the accommodation of hundreds of thousands of refugees from Tibet, Iran, Afghanistan, Africa, and Bangladesh, in a country that was already too crowded with sorrows and needs of its own.²⁴

It becomes clear, from comparisons scattered throughout the text, which are there presumably for the benefit of the reader, that Mehta intends his exposé of Bombay for a Western audience. At one point we are told:

The narrative principles that propel the plot [of a Bollywood film] are alien to those of, say, the Iowa Writers' Workshop where I spent two years.”²⁵

In another reference we are told:

The judge–population ratio in the US is 107 judges per million people; in India it is thirteen judges per million.²⁶

In another reference we are told:

People defecate all around the toilets, because the pits have been clogged for months or years. To build 100,000 public toilets is to multiply this problem a hundredfold. Indians do not have the same kind of civic sense as, say, Scandinavians...²⁷

There is also a kind of “inner” Orientalism at play in the book – an element of Indian middle-class voyeurism as Mehta is drawn, like a moth to flame, to the margins of Bombay society, then reports on his adventures to his peers at dinner parties and such. During a phone conversation with Chotta Shakeel, the exiled Don of

²⁴ Gregory David Roberts, *Shantaram*, Scribe Publications, 2003, p. 105

²⁵ *Maximum City*, p. 389

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 194

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 140

the D Company, Mehta is offered a free “hit” on anyone he chooses. Of this he writes:

Later, when I repeat this story to close friends in Bombay, in New York, a wistful look comes into their eyes, and they start making lists of the people they would eliminate if they were granted such a favour. They are only half-joking, and I am genuinely shocked by some of the names they give me – ex-lovers, colleagues. The women are more interested in using such a gift than the men. If men dream about killing someone, they want to do it themselves, squeezing the trigger, plunging the knife. Women need it done for them. Most of the names they have in mind are those of people they once loved greatly and now hate with equal passion. Each one of us, I am beginning to discover, has a circle of people close to us whose deaths we fantasise about.²⁸

Despite his assertion towards objectivity, Mehta occasionally hints at how seductive he finds the margins of Bombay society. Midway through the book, Mehta writes:

And yet, and yet ... at the time I am sitting with them, when my eyes are anxiously following the gun as it goes from hand to hand, the clip as the bullets are removed and reloaded, the angle of the gun as it is aimed, and the finger put on the trigger – they are doing it so fast, like three-card monte artists, might they not make a mistake and have one bullet left when they think they’ve emptied the chamber? – that time in the room when I am with these men who think good and evil, sin and virtue are for the common people, for frogs in the well, is there not an exhilaration in me? Why am I not tired of listening to them? Why do the nine hours pass effortlessly, as with a new lover?²⁹

Later on the same page he describes the extent of this seduction:

Now, ordinary conversations bore me. ‘How much more do you need?’ my wife, my friends keep asking me, concerned about my safety. They are asking me the question based on the wrong premise. They think I keep meeting the

²⁸ Ibid., p. 272

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 256-257

gangsters for material for my book.³⁰

Towards the end of the book, Mehta writes:

I had the freedom – indeed, the mission – to follow everything that made me curious as a child: cops, gangsters, painted women, movie stars, people who give up the world. Why did I choose to follow these particular people and not others? They were, for the most part, morally compromised people, each one shaped by the exigencies of city living.

[...]

In Bombay I met people who lived closer to their seductive extremities than anyone I had ever known. Shouted lives. Ajay and Satish and Sunil live on the extreme of violence; Monalisa and Vinod live on the extreme of spectacle; Honey is on the extreme of gender; the Jains go beyond the extreme of abandonment. These are not normal people. They live out the fantasies of normal people. And the kind of work they do affects all other spheres of their lives, until there is no separation between the work and the life. They can never leave behind the work at the bar of the police station or the political party office; in this sense they have all become artists. The attraction, the immense relief, of total breakdown, a renunciation of order in one's life, of all the effort required to keep it together! Since I couldn't do it in my own life, I followed others who did and who invited me to watch. I sat right at the edge of the stage, scattering these pieces of paper over them as payment. And in watching them I followed them closer to my own extremity, closer than I had ever been.³¹

Mehta's honesty regarding how attractive he finds this other world of “morally compromised people” living close to their “seductive extremities” makes clearer the dissonance between the book's proposed narrative framework (rediscovering a childhood home) and the author's singular, vicarious fixation with the Bombay demimonde. Indeed, the framework seems disingenuous.

These brief notes of desire set his book apart from the consistently disapproving tone of Mayo's earlier work, but in the main – in the darkly rendered Otherness of the

³⁰ Ibid., p. 257

³¹ Ibid., p. 588

Bombay he represents, in the reduction of a city of countless million souls to a handful of negative caricatures, and his extrapolation of these caricatures to encompass the whole of India – there seems a clear line of inheritance between Mayo's book and his own.

Why would Suketu Mehta write an account like this? It is difficult to say. The author describes himself as a homesick exile caught between worlds, then, in this guise, disappears into the Bombay underworld with notebook in hand. The resulting book, which details his encounters with the souls of the damned, is targeted at a Western readership with an ontological interest in the chaos and Otherness of India.

What is most interesting is that the author of *Maximum City* is an Indian national – not an Anglo-American commentator (an “area expert” or such), nor a descendant of Indian migrants struggling to come to terms with the ancestral homeland (as was V.S. Naipaul, whose dyspeptic, younger views of India caused controversy). Mehta avoids anything as facile as patriotic endorsement of the United States, where he now resides, but what starts as a search for home, seasoned with the phraseology of Postcolonial theory, reveals itself as a bleak, sometimes prurient picture of an impossibly decayed and irredeemable Indian Other.

In writing this book, Mehta is, perhaps, the author of an Indian Neo-Orientalism.