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## REVIEW ESSAY

THE GAZE OF THE WEST AND FRAMINGS OF THE EAST, SHANTA  
NAIR-VENUGOPAL (ED.) (2012)

Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, XV + 264 pp.

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### Prologue

Sometimes books unsettle you. Sometimes it is hard to do justice to the way they defy, challenge or frame any of your words before you come to articulate a response. This book came as a gift, wrapped in a silk scarf, from an author whose pride was in no way misplaced. It came through those relationships of academic friendship and scholarship, which form a meshwork of hospitality, annual anticipation and warm physical embrace, when the conference season returns. A gift, as we know from Mauss (Mauss 1990) is part of a set of phenomena that are ambiguous and of multiple symbolic valence:

“[...] namely, prestations which are in theory voluntary, disinterested and spontaneous, but are in fact obligatory and interested. The form usually taken is that of the gift generously offered; but the accompanying behaviour is formal pretence and social deception, while the transaction itself is based on obligation and economic self-interest.” (p.vi)

The book, wrapped in the scarf, formed part of that delicate web of relations which form academic fields, the web which requires mutual citation and acknowledgement, which sees academic gatherings on the territory of each other's home cities and countries, which builds up into a particular shared histories, news of family, friends and colleagues, but which also has to be robust enough to enable critique, debate, academic argument and disagreement. In his 'Essai Sur le Don' Mauss distinguishes elements of the gift economy clearly at work in contexts in the “East” and draws on scholarship which was derived from anthropological work in the Polynesia, Melanesia

and then, moving west, in North West America. What is striking about Mauss's work, however, is that he pre-empts some of the later critical dimensions of anthropology (Clifford and Marcus 1986) by pointing clearly to parallel practices of morality and economy, 'in our own societies' and their moral unpinings.

To summarise Mauss's arguments: a gift functions within an economy which obligates the return of a gift. As such, this essay represents a gift too, in this economy, one given from a collective of scholars, in order to suitably honour and respect the original gift. It is part of the fabric of social relations in academic life which, controversial as this may be, seek and require citation, review, critique and in this case, space and authority. The gift – the book, the edited volume wrapped in a scarf - comes with what Mauss, following the M•ori understandings of *taonga* – terms '*l'esprit du don*' or 'spirit of the thing given':

I shall tell you about hau. Hau is not the wind. Not at all. Suppose you have some particular object, taonga, and you give it to me; you give it to me without a price. We do not bargain over it. Now I give this thing to a third person who after a time decides to give me something in repayment for it (utu), and he makes me a present of something (taonga). Now this taonga I received from him is the spirit (hau) of the taonga I received from you and which I passed on to him. The taonga which I receive on account of the taonga that came from you, I must return to you. It would not be right on my part to keep these taonga whether they were desirable or not. I must give them to you since they are the hau of the taonga which you gave me. If I were to keep this second taonga for myself I might become ill or even die. Such is hau, the hau of personal property, the hau of the taonga, the hau of the forest. Enough on that subject. (Mauss, 1990: 9)

According to Mauss, this passage, which was originally collected and translated from M•ori by Elsdon Best, shows that 'the obligation attached to a gift itself is not inert. Even when abandoned by the giver it still forms a part of him [sic]' (Mauss, 1990: 9).

I'm holding the book in my hand, reading it, picking it up, leaving it on my desk where it gnaws at me, nags me to review it, to honour it, and yet feeling, through the critique of its title, the framing of my gaze on its gaze, on my gaze, that this cannot be done by one author, one academic colleague, alone, that its *taonga* must be shared, and the *hau* of its forest, its soil, its homeland' must animate it. At the conference a year

later I see the colleague who has edited this book and know she will ask my opinion. I give it willingly yet aware of this complex array of obligations, the economy which is beginning to paralyze my ability to write of what I have read.

It is a gift, and Mauss has further interpretations which are weighing on me in this work which lies ahead, of writing about the gift I have received. It is part of a perpetual interchange, or material and spiritual matter to circulate repeatedly. I have a duty to move the thoughts and ideas I receive from the writing into the forms where academic ideas circulate. Further, in doing so there is an element in gift giving, and in acknowledging the spirit of the gift together with its matter, which means that restoration of relations, and a degree of peace, may be brought.

All this, in a book, wrapped in a scarf, which frames my gaze and I frame it. For the book is no easy book to review as it deconstructs from the moment the title slips into the world of post-colonial scholarship.

### ***The Gaze of the West and the Framing the East* Reviewed: Watched and Watching**

The sharing of intellectual resources is a fundamental aspect of academic hospitality. Like the gift, academic hospitality involves reciprocity and embeds social transactions in materiality (Candea and Da Col, 2012). Sharing a book with colleagues allows for intellectual resources to circulate, and for greater insights to be gained through dialogue. The sharing of ideas a book carries allows an 'epistemological form of academic hospitality' (Phipps and Barnett, 2007) to happen, and spaces for scholarship and professional growth are opened up. Within one of such spaces a multi-vocal book review has gradually developed.

Books can blaze a trail in understanding and point to solutions, or they can raise questions and spark debates and chains of thought, and forge connections. *The Gaze of the West and Framing of the East* is one of the latter books. Its gravitational pull attracted together our reflections and shaped them through its force. Reviewing this book means being challenged and interrogated at each turn, and also being invited to interrogate. As in a hall of mirrors, the book challenges the readers' quest for easy answers and reflects back to them their biases and expectations.

*The Gaze of the West and Framing of the East* raises questions of hegemony and power in everyday practices that may seem harmless but which rest on assumptions and discourses that have the potential to be infinitely destructive to individuals, communities and whole nations. The book raises Said's (1978) questions of hegemonic constructions of the Other, often in reference to mundane situations or occurrences, never in mundane terms. It aims to unsettle the understanding of the broad categories of East/Orient as opposed to West/Occident and the accepted assumptions that portray the first as passive or threatening and the second as active and enlightened. It lays bare the unremarkable but efficient ways in which Western influences are taken for granted and endorsed, while any Eastern impact is absorbed, denied or erased. A West that is struggling to maintain its image of superiority and civilisation cannot allow the Orient to exercise any form of active influence over its beliefs, cultures and practices. The West either prides itself on its civilising mission of the savage Other, or it beats itself up over the ways in which it is (alas, unavoidably) spoiling the exotic, innocent Other. In either case it denies the Other's agency or influence and, when this influence nevertheless percolates through Western's practices, seeks to diminish and neutralise it.

*The Gaze of the West and Framing of the East* is a collection of essays by academics and researchers who have a privileged view on the East, either because, as is the case for the majority of them, they live and work in Eastern countries or because their work has focussed for many years on understanding the global flows of cultural influences. Edited by Shanta Nair-Venugopal, the book was published by Palgrave MacMillan in 2012. Central to the book are the ways in which the West Gazes at the East, moving beyond the Orientalism to reveal the more nuanced and intertwined ways in which the West's gaze frames, shapes (but is also shaped by) Eastern culture, practices, ideas and artefacts. Developing this theme through a variety of examples, the collection of essays the chapters in this book looks at how processes of 'Easternization' of the West unfold; at how the West manages and moulds narratives of the East; at the ways in which it incorporates and absorbs Eastern practices and at the reflections this can have on the East itself. The volume's 15 chapters offer an in-depth analysis of the West's fascination with and anxieties about the East, drawing from a wide range of human experience and academic understandings.

The first essay by Nair-Venugopal introduces the terms of the discussion, and begins by problematising the concepts of West/Occident and East/Orient, questioning the ontology and the epistemologies that these entities embody, and querying the boundaries and the criteria that are invoked in their formation. Nair-Venugopal also retraces the steps that led to contemporary understanding of the East/West dichotomy and frames popular and scholarly understandings within a historical dimension. Demarcating the West (as a metonym for Europe) through Christianity and the Roman tradition of statecraft and government is possible in a way that does not have any equivalents for the East. 'The Orient' is an entity that is not reducible to one religious, geographical or secular tradition, not even one as loosely constituted as that of 'the Occident'. The Orient is thus defined by a negation: that which is not West.

'The gaze' (the Foucauldian, the Lacanian the Bourdieusian) is at the heart of part one of the book, as the author interrogates the ways in which the act of looking is inscribed within the power relation between the subject and the object of this gazing. How is the East framed by the Western gaze? What reciprocal positioning do different ways of looking enact? The aim is to build on Said's conceptualisation of *Orientalism* (1978) but also to move beyond it, to expand our understanding of the Orient/Occident binary and of the ways in which they are jointly, if not equitably, constituted. As in a hall of mirrors, the interplay between Easternization processes and the West's reactions to them, seen through the analysis of the (mostly) Eastern authors in this edited collection, can reveal the (re)construction of the East and bare the processes of (re)interpretation that have shaped and that still shape it.

Part two of this edited collection consists of three chapters devoted to mapping out the terrain of the discussion. Nair-Venugopal's essay further defines the parameters as she examines the grounds on which the East and the West are constituted, questioning conceptual boundaries and troubling common assumptions. This includes Orientalism and Occidentalism as conceptual tools for analysis and understanding, but also as academic fields of inquiry, in their failure to take into account of the composite nature of modern societies. The existence of these concepts and fields rest on the assumption of definable, discrete entities that do not exist in a world where people, practices and beliefs (as well as jobs, goods and financial capital) traverse administrative, cultural and experiential borders. Nair-Venugopal does not, however, embrace reductionist ideas of hybridity and post-

modern indefiniteness. Rather she turns the lens of East and Orientalism, West and Occidentalism onto each other, so that they act as analytical tools through which underlying assumptions can be questioned and opened up for scrutiny.

Drawing on post-colonial studies, Merican's essay provides a historical perspective of the dynamics that have led to the construction of the West (and of the East as its 'other') as systems of representation, bringing together discrete elements to create perceptions of homogeneous, natural categories. Merican builds on Alatas's (1972) concept of the 'captive mind' to argue how colonial understandings have become part of the hegemonic discourses around being and belonging and, in the process, have colonised the global ontological and epistemological spaces of perception and understanding. The resulting hegemonic narratives influence understandings in ways that are all the more disarming because of their seeming natural and pervasive nature.

Chapter 4 by Nair-Venugopal and Hui's outlines the ways in which Easternization increasingly affects Western understandings through the introduction of Eastern cultural, spiritual and practical elements. However, the authors also note how Easternization, in contrast to Westernization, engenders the need to absorb the 'alien' knowledge and practices through their objectification and commodification or by dissecting and then re-assembling them so that they fit into Western epistemological frameworks and established sets of behaviour. Moreover, the authors suggest, Easternization is increasingly the subject of a heated debate which exemplifies the anxiety it poses. This is contrasted with the processes of Westernization, which are accepted as inescapable and 'natural' even by those who investigate them from the critical perspective of post-colonial studies.

Part three of the book includes nine essays that deal with the ways in which Western practices have shaped and are shaped by Eastern ones. Dealing with a range of disciplines and contexts, the essays in these sections touch upon the different ways in which the Western gaze has framed the East and the nuanced degree to which these framings preserve, distort, combine and repackage beliefs, knowledge and praxes.

Merican's chapter 5 reflects on how Western philosophical historical and conceptual frameworks are used to make sense of non-Western thought. In this essay, Merican

shows how Western chronology, together with views about secularisation and the distinction between philosophical (logical) and religious thought, are superimposed onto Eastern epistemologies and practices, and used as a lens through which these same epistemologies and practices are understood and discussed by Western scholars but also in the East. As Merican argues, this is due to a view of Occidental thought and constructions as universal, rather than unique and specific to European experience and civilization.

Eastern religious practices and the way they are incorporated and adapted in the West are at the centre of Hui's essay. Having gained considerable popularity in the past four decades, practices such as yoga, tai-chi, feng shui, and some Buddhist practices have entered the everyday worlds of Western individuals as part of spiritual, new-age lifestyle choices aiming to fill the void left by growing secularisation. However, contrary to Western religion in the East, which has become part of the belief system of majority or minority groups in several countries, Eastern religious practices in the West are often dissociated from their underlying belief systems. They are bought and sold as commodities and as part of fashionable lifestyle choices. The defence of Eastern discriminated groups also carries with it the risk of a colonisation of struggles that allows the West to maintain a view of itself as a 'saviour' of the helpless and voiceless exotic other.

Shamsul's essay analyses the role of colonial administration in the development of classifications which have shaped the territory, history and society of present-day Malaysia, in parallel to what happened in other colonised regions worldwide. The author discusses the role of colonial boundary-setting also within the framework of the challenges faced by multiculturalism frameworks in Western societies, where the lack of an overarching thread has led to the compartmentalisation and reification of differences. To this form of multiculturalism, Shamsui contrasts Malay consociationalism, inscribed in the country's 1957 Constitution, which accommodates and legitimises the interests of each ethnic group and individual within a fluid federalist-based state. Having survived the economic divide on the basis of ethnicity which led to conflict after the 1969 general elections, present-day Malaysian society is witnessing, in Shamsui's account, a new way of organising diversity within the 'civilizational canopy' of the Malay polity.



Taking the history of colonization in Sarawak (Borneo) and of the ensuing struggles to guarantee Western dominance, Philip's essay explores the ways in which 'ideological history' (Jenkins 1991) constructs pasts which marginalise or even erase local perspectives. This has enabled the creation of a shared evolutionary narrative that opposes a Western, more advanced civilisation to non-Western backwardness and barbarity. Precisely by defining non-Western inadequacy, these narratives have been instrumental in forging and replicating a hegemonic view of Western superiority through which Occidental inferiority could then be predicated, in a vicious circle of obfuscated histories.

The essay by Bargiela-Chiappini and Tanaka explores the mutual gaze between Japan and the West in relation to management training. The authors identify four interlocking discourses. The first discourse looks at the West gazing on the West and at the construction of the European entity and identity with its historically shifting boundaries and interconnected narratives. Discourse two explores the West's gazing on the East and the influence of Japanese military values (e.g. respect for authority, honour, courage, loyalty, self-sacrifice, contempt for defeat) on the country's successful business management practices. Discourse three discusses the East gazing on the East and looks at how family-like hierarchy and harmony is reflected in structures that reward loyalty and link promotion to seniority and long-term commitment. Discourse four concerns the East's gaze on the West and the influence of the US management system, with its emphasis on egalitarianism and 'democratisation', on Japan's management training. However, the authors note how the US system was not taken up wholesale, but combined with the traditional values of self-sacrifice and team orientation. This mutual gazing reveals a two-way focus which, albeit in a shifting and unequal flow, results in reciprocal influence.

The Western view of Indian culture as collectivist, in opposition to the predominant individualist culture of the West, is the object of discussion in Paramasivam and Nai-Venugopal's essay. The authors challenge this narrative by highlighting the ways in which individualism constitutes an essential part of Indian collectivism. This can be seen either in the 'anarchical individualism' which allows each individual freedom of choice, independence of mind and to feel spiritually equal with others regardless of their position in society. Indian individualism is also visible in common practices that are aimed at maintaining and increasing individuals' social recognition, honour and prestige, but which, at the same time, also support the particular caste, family or

group to which each belong. By showing how Indian culture cannot be neatly categorised as collectivist and by arguing for the variations that exist within and between Eastern cultures, the authors challenge stereotypical Western perceptions and unsettle established classifications.

Liu's essay discusses the ways in which the West's constructions of the East as exotic, wild and primitive that started with colonial narratives are still discernible in the tourist industry. The 'empty' spaces - historically invoked by colonial powers in order to seize land - together with the depiction of any inhabitants either as simple and closer to nature or as savage - to be the object of the civilising, colonial mission - are still common tropes used to attract tourists to some parts of the East. Moreover, these same narratives colour the way in which communities in some Eastern countries describe themselves in tourist brochures, perpetuating stereotypes in order to tantalise the Western tourist's attraction for the exotic and 'unspoilt'. Taking as a case study that of the Rungus community in Borneo, Liu notes how two dominant discourses run in parallel: the touristic/commoditised one, which fixes the Rungus community in its 'traditional' condition for the tourist to peruse; and the non-touristic/commoditised Rungus community, which actively distinguishes between what is meant for tourist consumption and what is needed to survive in the shifting environment which the tourism industry has contributed to bring about.

Rasdi's contribution debates representations of Mosque's architecture in the discourses of academia and practice. Following a description of the different architectural styles used in Malaysian Mosque building, Rasdi notes how these religious structures are viewed and designed by architects predominantly trained in the West or through a curriculum influenced by Western perceptions of architecture, Islam, religion and history. This has resulted in the building of mosques in a revivalist style which values domes, minarets and ornamentation that are associated with traditional Mosques by the West. These are architectural structures that overlook the vernacular Malaysian tradition, but which satisfy Eastern clients whose tastes are influenced by a literature that showcases the historical mosques of Islam's 'glorious' past.

Eastern traditions of health and wellness are the focus of Newcombe's essay. The author discusses trends for Complementary Alternative Medicine (CAM) in the Western world (Europe, North America and Anglophone Commonwealth nations). In

many cases CAM therapies link to traditional Eastern treatments and practices (e.g. yoga, Ayurveda, acupuncture), and practitioners exploit and emphasise these links to market their services, However, Newcombe also notes that the way in which the West has incorporated, adapted and marketed these practices has in turn influenced how these same therapies are now viewed and presented in the East. This, - together with the impact of Western biomedicine on Eastern perception of illness and wellbeing - demonstrates how medical traditions influence each other and how the intense intercultural exchange of the past decades has left neither Eastern nor Western practices unchanged.

Poulain's essay explores the historical and cultural processes that led cuisines from Eastern countries to gain admission to the long-standing tradition of French culinary art. Poulain takes the reader through a socio-historical overview of the way in which French cuisine was shaped, from the haute cuisine of classical tradition to the *nouvelle cuisine* of regional traditions, to the incorporation of Eastern traditions and tastes (e.g. Japanese presentation of food; spices from the Indian subcontinent) into French cooking. The work of Bourdieu (1984) on distinction and the role of taste in signalling class belonging is drawn upon to discuss the position of food in French society. The author also highlights how Eastern influences on French food derive from exoticism and from a wish to enter the intimate space of different cultures through the act of assuming their products and tastes.

Part four of the book contains the conclusions by Nair-Venugopal. While acknowledging the importance of Said's work and the foundational role of post-colonial studies in highlighting the ways in which the West has depicted and assimilated the East, the essays in this book show a much more nuanced relationship between cultural traditions on both sides. The Western gaze can, indeed, be exploitative, exoticising and appropriating. It can shape the very way the Other sees him/herself, since, as Fanon argued:

Every effort is made to make the colonized confess the inferiority of their culture, now reduced to a set of instinctive responses, to acknowledge the unreality of their nation and, in the last extreme, to admit the disorganized, half-finished nature of their own biological makeup (Fanon, 1963:171)

The Western perceptions and characterisation of the East have, furthermore, influenced self-perception of the East itself. However, as Sen (1997) argues about the way in which India's identity has been shaped by the West, this relationship is not necessarily one of unquestioning acceptance, but rather it can include strategic responses that are suited to internal imaging. Moreover, the gazing is also mutual, revealing interaction and exposing the sense of vulnerability and uncertainty of a world that is quickly becoming less strongly differentiated, and where definitive identities are made even more improbable by increased mobility and changing global dynamics (Appiah, 2006).

### **The counter-gift**

The Western gaze is neither unidirectional nor univocal. As *The Gaze of the West and Framing of the East* clarifies, alongside the hegemonic, insistent gaze of old and new colonialisms, there are ways of looking that are more elusive, or more selective, or even ways of looking that reflect back on the looked, as Said (1979) also argued. Contamination between cultures is neither new nor is it avoidable or undesirable, and 'cultural purity is an oxymoron' as contends Appiah (2006:113). Nevertheless, academic and public discourses still centre on Western hegemony, while ignoring the ways in which it is resisted, altered and contested, and the ways in which it is itself contaminated by other ideas, practices and tastes, despite all efforts to erase their otherness.

The dangers of othering can be mundane, or they can be catastrophic. Or they can be catastrophically mundane, blinding us to the humanity of the other through the routine of dehumanising narratives. As we write these final thoughts, many of our governments are rushing around closing gates, drawing up bridges, building walls to keep the 'Other' out. Their desperation and hopes have no place in our countries. Orientalism runs wild in our newspapers and even our political discourses. 'Swarms' of migrants - as the UK's Prime Minister called them (BBC, 2015) - could harbour dangerous terrorists, hell-bent on destroying 'our' way of life, taking advantage of 'our' generosity towards refugees (Express, 2015) to infiltrate Europe and threaten our lives.

For a few days the picture of the body of a young child lying face down on a beach restored a sense of common humanity, the recognition that the Other is not different from Us, that their bodies suffer and die and that their hearts can be broken by loss. However, this realisation was quickly reversed by the Paris attacks of November 2015 when again the tide of public discourse turned against the refugees trying to find a sanctuary in a Europe that increasingly swings between compassion and contempt.

However, the fear of the Other, the orientalising narratives that create the threatening stranger, are not the only way in which we gaze at *the beyond* (Ahmed, 2000). As *The Gaze of the West and Framing of the East* argues, othering mechanisms can take other, less immediately identifiable forms, such as those that fetishize or commodify the stranger:

[...] it is the processes of expelling *or* welcoming the one who is recognised as a stranger that produce the figure of the stranger in the first place. That figure is also taken for granted in ethnographic discourses which seek to transform the being of strangers into knowledge [...] and consumerist discourses which invite the consumer to become the stranger or inhabit the bodies of strangers by wearing certain products [...]. The stranger does not have to be recognised as 'beyond' or outside the 'we' in order to be fixed within the contours of a given form: indeed, it is the very gesture of getting closer to 'strangers' that allows the figure to take its shape (Ahmed, 2000: 4, emphasis in the original).

But the Eastern stranger is not a passive recipient of Western scrutiny. The contributors in *The Gaze of the West and Framing of the East* shift the perspective and bring a refreshing challenge to the hegemonic flow of knowledge, practices and goods. The West is seen and changed by the East. Far from being passive object of Western's constructions, the gazed are gazing back, critiquing and evaluating, showing us the ways in which we, in the West, are also changed and transformed through the contacts that globalisation produces. Contacts which include academic gatherings, where the gift of a book can come wrapped in a silk scarf.

[...] If it's not to constitute an insult, the counter-gift must be deferred and different, because the immediate return of an exactly identical object clearly amounts to a refusal' (Bourdieu, 1980: 105).

The weave of multiple dialogues, thoughts and emotions the book has allowed has taken time to come together, but it is finally ready to wrap the *hau* of the *taonga*, the spirit of the given thing that originally came enfolded in a silk scarf. This is our gift, both deferred and different, to the editor and to other readers, so the book's ideas may go on travelling, and then coming back.

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