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Victoria And Abdul: An Exploration Of Jan Mohamed's 'Imaginary' And 'Symbolic' Texts

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Abstract

The film 'Victoria and Abdul' is about a burning discontent in the royal household of Queen Victoria - the epicenter of the Empire's colonial enterprise. The Queen of Great Britain mixes with a brown Indian Muslim servant by the name of Abdul Karim. An Indian waiter turns into the Queen's Munshi, the Queen's teacher and official Indian clerk in the span of a year. While Bertie, the future King Edward VII and the other members of the household, along with the director Stephen Ferars, perceive it as an unusual, rather a scandalous relationship of love and friendship, one that shakes up the very foundation of monarchy, it calls for a careful look to see that the nature of this relationship is not quite what it appears.What Frears recreates out of Shrabani Basu's account is a story imbued with strong overtones of love that definitely is not platonic by any chance, if not bordering on the sexual. But even a contemporary film like this glosses over the complex ramifications of this situation and chooses to tell a story of "History's most unlikely friendship" weaving an emotionally charged tale of love and affection.This paper will explore the nuances and intricacies of this relationship between Queen Victoria and her Indian servant and argue that it is more a case of 'pathological narcissism' that only helps the monarch redefine herself as 'The Empress of India', her recently acquired title. I would refer to Lacan's psychoanalytic concept of the mirror stage and the formation of the ego to analyse the nature of objectification and representation of Karim. In the light of Abdul R. Jan Mohamed's classification of 'imaginary' and 'symbolic' texts, the paper would also like to analyse whether the film, which seems to hint at a syncretism between the native and his ruler, can therefore may be categorized as a 'symbolic' text.

Key Words: Colonial narcissism, film, centre, margin, objectification, representation, Empire, Empress of India, 'symbolic' text, syncretism, 'imaginary'.

Stephen Frears' film *Victoria and Abdul* is centered on a deep discontent right at the heart of the great British Empire, more specifically within the royal household in Windsor Castle which begins with the decision to present the Queen with a 'mohur' on the occasion of the Golden Jubilee celebration for "her services rendered to the Indian subcontinent." It is for this purpose that Abdul Karim, a young 24 years old Muslim Hafiz, working at the Agra prison, travels to England and enters the royal household. This is what the film kicks off with and then goes on to present a quite different and, as I would argue, a reductive reading of this central Indian character, having wider ramifications in the context of the colonial discourse. For an account of some of these discrepancies and to get a better understanding of the real life Karim and his interactions with Queen Victoria, I will refer to Shrabani Basu's book on which the film is loosely based.

Writing about Karim, Shrabani Basu in her book *Victoria and Abdul* recounts that in a letter to Sir Henry Ponsonby, her private secretary, the Queen wrote: "As for Abdul Karim, the Queen can never praise him enough. He is zealous, attentive and quiet and gentle, has such intelligence and good sense…"(Basu 93) He was soon relieved of his service as a manservant while his companion Mahommed Buksh continued in the same post. In 1888, Abdul Karim was given the grand title of Munshi Hafiz Abdul Karim. Basu writes, "He became the Queen's official Indian clerk and said goodbye to waiting at tables, a job now left to his colleague Buksh and the other Indian servants." (Basu 87). We are also informed that his salary saw a significant raise from 144 pounds a month to 240 pounds a year. "In a year Karim had more than doubled his initial salary and achieved a prestigious position in Court" (Basu 87). Soon all earlier photographs of him waiting at the table were destroyed and his portrait was commissioned to Joachim von Angeli, the famous an Austrian history and portrait painter. Basu continues, "While the other Indian servants watched in wonder and slight envy, Karim grew in importance. He was always by the Queen's side, talking to her in his gentle voice, caring for her needs and providing a sympathetic ear when she needed it." (Basu 87) Of Abdul the Queen wrote to Louise, the Duchess of Connaught, "I am so very fond of him.. He is so good and gentle and understanding all I want & is a real comfort to me". (Basu 87). When in November 1888, Karim set off for a year long leave to his family in India, the author summarizes his first visit to Britain thus, "Karim had landed on British shores to be a *khidmatgar* and waiter. A year later, he was returning to India on annual leave as a Munshi, the Queen's teacher and official Indian clerk. He was still only twenty-five." (Basu 90).

What Frears recreates Basu's account is a story imbued with strong overtones of love that definitely is not platonic by any chance, if not bordering on the sexual. This controversial aspect of the relationship is also hinted at in the film when Lady Churchill tells Dr. Reid, "I say he's brown John Brown", referring to her controversial relation with her Scottish gillie on whom Basu notes, "So close were the Queen and her Highland servant that she was often referred to as Mrs. Brown, and there were whispers in the Court circles that she had secretly married him…" (Basu 71).

When the Queen went so far as to give Karim the room that was given previously to her beloved Highlander servant, John Brown, it did raise everyone's eyebrows. This "symbolic act" (Basu 89) was immediately noticed by members of the household and in the introduction to her book Basu states clearly that Karim was "...the lonely monarch's closest confidant, filling the shoes of John Brown, her trusted Scottish gillie, who had died four years earlier." (Basu 20) She further recounts that on a visit to Italy the young and well-dressed Karim was "mistaken for a young Prince with whom the Queen was in love" (Basu 20). At the height of Britain's imperial saga an Indian Muslim servant "occupied a central position of influence over its sovereign". (Basu 20) Quite unsurprisingly Windsor Castle was alive with the whispers of this scandalous affair as the news spread outside the castle inviting more scrutiny and scandal. In the film this brewing scandal, and the deep discontent in the household is fueled by frequent scenes where the Queen shares screen space with her Munshi alone, either behind closed doors or in the idyllic backdrop of the gardens around Windsor Castle.

Stephen Ferars claims his film *Victoria and Abdul* to portray "History's most unlikely friendship" and "an extraordinary true story" on its posters released worldwide but ends up overweeningly romanticizing the account and weaving an emotionally charged tale of love and affection suggested by the motif of the Taj Mahal in both verbal and visual modes in the film. In fact the first scene opens on a dawn in Agra where the Taj Mahal clearly looks prepossessing/ dominant in the distance. On a fine Indian morning in Agra 1887, an Indian man in a religious attire bows down in devotion and worship. The only other thing that is remarkably prominent is the Taj Mahal in the distance so that it almost seems like a prayer for love.

A few minutes later we have an exterior scene in a canopied writing station at Windsor castle where the Queen asks where Abdul is from to which he replies, "I am from Agra. The Taj Mahal. You have been to the Taj Mahal?" Soon their conversation veers towards the stories of the Taj Mahal and its creator Shah Jahan and his unending love for his wife to which the Queen remarks "How romantic!" Karim goes on praising the Taj and the other monuments of the Shah like "the Red Fort, the Gardens of Shalimar, and the Peacock Throne." Karim excitedly and lavishly described the Peacock throne for the Queen and added, "And in the throne was the Koh-i-Noor. He would look at the Taj Mahal through the diamond." Incidentally, Victoria wears the Koh-i-noor as a brooch and she commissions a replica of the Peacock throne for her Indian Durbar Room later on in the film. Some minutes later in the gardens outside Windsor Castle, walking through an avenue of trees their discussion goes back to Shah Jahan with the Queen asking, "But what happened to Shah

Jahan?" and Karim faithfully recounts the sad ending of Shah Jahan due to, what Victoria comments, "The wickedness of children." Curiously enough, we will see how distraught Bertie, eldest son of the Queen and the future Edward VII, remains throughout the length of the film about the presence of Karim in the household and his proximity to the Queen and as soon as the Queen dies how he orders a raid on Karim cottage and ruthlessly burns down all accounts of any communication between him and the Queen.

An endearing and mutual love between the Queen of England and a humble Indian servant is what one might find most appealing in the film adaptation. The Times of India commented, "Despite an uneven narrative and historical inaccuracies, Victoria and Abdul is a delightful film…"(Vyavahare, Renuka.) A viewer who remarks the film as "Surprisingly endearing" goes on to comment further, "We were immediately drawn in and pleasantly surprised by the story, even though we thought it may have been a little far-fetched. Until we found that it is a biography and mostly fact. That made the story even sweeter" (IMDB) Yet another viewer reports, "I love how they made this film so funny, and yet so touching. I laughed and I cried all the way through" (Ruthszulc). In fact the most typical audience responses relish in this romantic element that the film's emotive content builds out of the surviving facts. And one can observe how this romantic lens is thrust on the audience from the very first scene itself when the screen fades into a prepossessing image of the Taj Mahal in the distance. Thus Frears creates his own version of history that reduces an otherwise intriguing story into a commonplace tale of love, similar to that of Senior Puccini's new opera about "two lovers separated by the class divide who run away together" which is interestingly narrated by him to the Queen and Karim seated beside each other, one night in the romantic city of Florence.

Ferars also detracts significantly from Basu's detailed portrayal of Karim as an able, qualified and dignified Indian who was repeatedly praised by the Queen for his several talents on several occasions. In the film we have a Karim who is almost bereft of any agency apart from his knowledge of Urdu and his expertise in manipulation of the Queen, in the matter of the prime responsible behind the Mutiny of 1857, for which he appears as a liar.

As stated earlier Basu in her book makes it abundantly clear that being a manservant was for Karim a "A demeaning job" (Basu 87). As Basu notes, he managed to "convey to her that he came from a good family, that his father was a doctor in Agra jail and that he himself had been a clerk in the jail and had never done menial work before" (Basu 87). When Karim's petition to return to India was placed before the Queen, she entered in her journal, "Am making arrangements to appoint Abdul a munshi, as I think it was a mistake to bring him over as a servant to wait at table, a thing he had never done, having been a clerk or munshi in his own country and being of rather a different class to the others" (Basu 86). Sadly, in Stephen Frears' portrayal Karim never had a grievance for the post of a manservant or being a table-hand neither does the Queen ever admits to this issue. The film thus chooses to present a Karim slavishly devoted to the Queen's service. In fact, Andrea Gronvall while reviewing the film writes, "... his (Stephen Frears) attitude toward the young Asian man at its center veers on condescension, somewhat surprisingly for a director whose own films (*My Beautiful Laundrette, Dirty Pretty Things)* have been part of Britain's stride toward racial and ethnic inclusion" (Gronvall)

Frears also overlooks the way Karim became the eyes and ears of the Queen over almost anything concerned with the Indian subcontinent. Basu writes, "The Queen's closeness to Karim meant that she remained constantly concerned for Muslims in India and never failed to convey this to the Viceroy or the Secretary of State" (Basu 136).

Besides, even in the scenes relating to the Queen's Urdu learning lessons, Frears bypasses the symbiotic process of the Queen's learning of Urdu and Karim's learning of English which is unmistakable in Basu's account. In her book Basu explains how the Queen took her Urdu lessons:

Karim patiently helped her along, encouraging her at every step. He enjoyed these lessons as much as she did… Sometimes, in the English translation Karim would make a grammatical mistake. The Queen would discreetly correct the English when she wrote it again, teacher and pupil now both learning from each other. (Basu 139)

Yet one cannot ignore the fact that even in Basu's own account it is unmistakable how Karim was regarded initially by the British administration as a Jubilee gift to the Queen. He was chosen because of his good looks and tall stature and nothing to do with his qualitative attributes. In Frears' film Dr Tyler makes this abundantly clear when he says "I need someone tall to present the mohur and you are the tallest one here". Karim's height and presentable look then becomes the first defining aspect of Karim to the British eye. The inordinate concern of the British over the Indian guests' outward appearance and presentability is unambiguous Basu's account of the Golden Jubilee celebrations: "The Viceroy, Lord Dufferin, sent detailed profiles of the Princes to Lord Cross, the secretary of State, carefully weeding through the suitable candidates, cherry-picking those who would look handsome..." The Indian retinue was supposed to be a major part of the Jubilee celebrations, "showcasing the British Empire" (Basu 37).

That Queen Victoria was keen to elevate her royal title to that of an Empress can be understood from her correspondence to her secretary Henry Ponsonby in 1873, when she asked him, "I am an Empress and in common conversation I am sometimes called Empress of India. Why have I never officially assumed this title?" (Goldfinch). Historians surmise that her eagerness to assume the new title as the Empress of India might lie in the fact that "Prussia, Russia and Austria all had emperors and Victoria felt unable to compete unless she, too, assumed the title" (Goldfinch). In 1877, Victoria finally assumed the title of Empress of India, as a gesture to link the monarchy with the empire further and bind India more closely to Britain.

In order to go into further discussion on the nature of objectification and representation of Karim, I would refer to the psychoanalytic concept of the mirror stage and the formation of the ego, as theorized by Jacques Lacan. The French psychoanalyst emphasizes the crucial moment in the life of the child when for the first time she looks at her own image on a mirror or any reflective surface like her mother's face and becomes enamoured by this image. The identification of the baby with the image seems to have a quantum of libido attached to it, which Lacan calls 'narcissistic libido'. It is also the moment when the ego comes into being. The prevalent view of narcissism is thus a "libidinal investment in the ego—"His Majesty the Baby" (Freud 90), as Freud famously calls it in his essay "On Narcissism: An Introduction" (Freud 67).

In the beginning of the film, where scenes of Karim's preparation for his journey to England are juxtaposed with scenes inside the Queen's bedchamber, we find the Queen in the form of an "enormous mound" (Hall) that needed to be upholstered. From within that bundled mass the Queen, like an infant, is held up and dressed and made ready for the day's activities. Like a child she eats her lunch clumsily and falls asleep towards the end of the course so that she needed to be awakened by Sir Ponsonby to draw her attention to the 'mohur' that Karim presented. And then, as Karim begins to walk back, he takes a moment to look at the Queen directly in her eyes and Frears makes this a moment of instant connection between the partners in a romantic tale, somewhat in the line of 'love at first sight'. Instead, I would compare this moment to the infant's first look at the mirror. For the first time the child gets to see her in her totality and gets "the feeling of being "His Majesty the Baby" and living at "the centre and core of creation" that give infants the wonderful, if illusory, feeling of being all-powerful and completely independent." (Herman). In a similar vein, the Queen takes an instant liking to this young Indian in whom she soon discovers the complete image of an Empress of India, the language she must speak, the Durbar Room where she must meet her subjects, the flavours of Indian curries, the delightful sights and sounds of India, the land where she is prohibited from visiting and she suddenly begins to take an inordinate interest in everything Indian. The Queen's attachment towards Karim, thus, may be interpreted as the Queen's narcissistic desire for her own self-image as the Empress of India and thus to refashion herself as such.

If we direct our critical attention to the interactions between the Queen and her Indian servant in the film, it won't be difficult to notice how often the title "Empress of India" comes up throughout the length of the film. A discussion on the Taj Mahal and Shah Jahan and the love for his wife ends bathetically in "Garam Masala and mango chutney" and right after the Queen demands to have a mango. And when she is told that it's impossible because they are only grown in India, the Queen retorts back, "I am the Empress of India, so have one sent." In another scene inside the Queen's study room the Queen asks Karim to teach her "Indian", his native tongue which naturally confuses him and once again the Queen clarifies, "I am Empress of India." Unlike Ponsonby, Karim only reflects her enthusiasm towards India and assures her that instead of Hindi,

which is the language of the masses, she must learn Urdu, the language of the Mughal rulers because "You are the Empress of India." Again, when Bertie, the Queen's eldest son asks her if learning Urdu was "entirely appropriate" she reassures him, "I am the Empress of India. What could be more appropriate than learning Urdu?" And again, when Abdul says, "....every Emperor had a Durbar Room. Full of the finest things known to man," the Queen immediately makes up her mind, "Well, I am the Empress of India. I should have a Durbar Room."

There are several other instances throughout the film where the Queen, after or during an interaction with Karim finds it necessary to assert herself as the Empress of India. Therefore, I would like to argue that Frears' film allows the Queen to establish and uphold herself in her new-found identity as the "Empress of India" through the presence of Abdul Karim. On several occasions Karim also addresses the Queen as the "Empress" just as when the Queen asks Karim if she may take a look at the Munshi's wife, Karim replies, "Of course it is allowed. You are a lady. And the Empress of India." The number of times Karim addresses Victoria as such, only serves to validate her assumption of the title.

In his famous book *Black Skin, White Masks* Dr. Frantz Fanon describes how the colonized black native looks at the White European male as the ideal ego that the child beholds on a mirror and builds a false sense of her own self. He desperately tries to copy and imitate the White master but fails miserably and he realizes this when he finally steps foot on the colonizer's soil, or France, in Fanon's discussion. In a curious twist in the way colonial narcissism plays out in the film, we have Karim, a brown Indian servant stepping into England only to find great favour with the very Crown that has dominated his native land, the Empress of India herself. In another twist it is the colonizer, the Queen, in her attempts to fashion herself as a proper Empress of India seems to imitate Karim's image of an Indian Emperor. The key to the 'ideal ego' of the figure of the "Empress of India" which the Queen desperately tries to achieve and imitate lies with Karim. That is why when Abdul says, "....every (Indian) Emperor had a Durbar Room" the Queen determines "... I am the Empress of India. I should have a Durbar Room." For the Queen then, it might be said, Karim is nothing but the reflective surface on which she looks at the image of an ideal Indian Emperor and decorates herself as such. Interestingly the film bolsters this reductive reading of the character of Karim by avoiding his subjective views on the incidents or on the Queen and almost never showing him without the screen presence of Victoria. The infinite otherness of Karim is never explored as the film revolves around the narcissist's "compelling need to suppress subjectivity in the other, so that the narcissist's subjectivity is always the exclusively important and only valid focus in any dyad or group" (Shaw 6)

In his essay "The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature, prominent Colonial critic Abdul R. Jan Mohamed distinguishes colonial texts between the 'imaginary' texts and 'symbolic' texts. The imaginary text is the 'essentially specular literature' which instead of seeing the native as a bridge towards syncretic possibility,... uses him as a mirror that reflects the colonialist's self-image' (Jan Mohamed 65). On the contrary a 'symbolic' text, instead of reducing the native to an image that justifies the coloniser's supremacy, is willing to examine the specific individual and cultural differences between Europeans and natives. Given how the Queen apparently shows interest in anything Indian and how she defends an Indian subject against the racial prejudice of her household, the film seems to hint at a syncretism between the native and his ruler and therefore may be categorized as a 'symbolic' text. But the portrayal of the native by director Frears fails specifically in achieving just that, offering us instead another heavily biased and reductive image of the native. On careful analysis any claim for syncretism can be easily refuted with the unambiguous truth that the Queen nevertheless fashions herself not as an Indian, with a genuine wish to learn the language of the common people and appreciate the culture of the Other (Indian) for its own sake, but only utilizes the native to establish herself properly as his ruler - the Empress.

Besides this unalterable truth, the Queen's efforts at knowing the Indian culture and language, as represented in the film, are at best cursory, verging on the narcissistic and the comic. To substantiate my claim I will refer to the scenes inside the Queen's study room where she takes her Urdu lessons with Abdul and the very first sentence that she utters in poor Urdu is "Main Rani hoon (I am the Queen)". In the next instance the Queen narcissistically reiterates Karim and states, "Apni akalmandi pe Raani ko naaz hai (The Queen takes pride in her wisdom)". She laughs as she tries to imitate Karim's pronunciation and to help her pronounce the word

"Apni" Karim has to break it into the English "Up" and "Knee", gently tapping on her knees, unknowingly but metaphorically denoting the place his native language can ever have in the life of the Empress.

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