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**Embracing the Orient, undoing the Occident: Cultural Study of Pierre Loti's *India***

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**Abstract**

Cultural studies incorporate praxis of representation, custom, routine in the groundwork of culture through language. Chris Barker symbolizes cultural studies as a magpie which borrows from others' nest yet maintains individuality. Indian culture also witnessed multicultural interactions during Imperialism. It fascinated many European writers like P.B. Shelley, T.S. Eliot, Edward Thompson, Flora Steel, Maud Diver etc. But Pierre Loti has unique reverence for the vivid culture of India during nineteenth century. He attempts to discover idyllic and intriguing India through an inside-out technique in his work *India* 1901, translated by George A.F. Inman. This paper examines how Pierre Loti's *India* describes facets of Indian culture not from a Eurocentric approach but as comprehensive study of culture as postcolonial entity within travel narratives.

**Keywords:** Pierre Loti, Indian culture, cultural studies in India, cultural materialism, ethical criticism, secular criticism, travel writing about India

**Introduction**

Cultural studies in India largely cover the ambit of either popular culture or religious fanaticism. It has been preceded by Edward Said's *Orientalism* that beacons on criticism of the Occident's knowledge production of the Orient to maintain hegemonic ideology. It has perpetuated hemispherical debate of Europeans and Asians. Said's essay "Secular Criticism" as part of his work *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, focuses on individual critics' attempt to balance literature with social structures, political power and knowledge for making it accessible to mass consciousness within a culture. He had shifted from epistemological standpoints of Foucault, Derrida towards an ontological approach of theory that addresses the concerns of the society using literature. Critiquing the travel narratives of the millennium, he analyzes fiction, particularly Arab novels, to be engaging, and embattling and problematic (Foreword pp. x, xi) due to the struggles of political power. Most of the postcolonial discourses on travel, including Edward Said's *Orientalism* (Said 1978) have delineated role of theory in travel

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narratives. His book is pioneer in connecting discourse analysis of travel writings directly to into the discursive power representation, difference of political sides and desire of experience in a globalising world. They criticize the loop side of European imperialism for calling travel literature outside Eurocentric realm as other-literature, as pointed out by Paul de Man in *Allegories of Reading* referring to dismissive reference towards external the external politics of literature. (De Man 1979, 3). But cultural studies hunt for the stories like those European texts which opposed the occident vision. Time stacked these positive stories with dust in archives of dark oblivion. To establish a framework of discourse on cultural studies in India, it is necessary to study such texts which map both location and language, containing multicultural essence in clusters of images, ideas and practices.

Discussing Indian culture in isolation can never fulfil the aim of cultural studies that is to trace continual cultural difference in the currents of textual, social, historical and anthropological thoughts. Nineteenth century French author Pierre Loti is one such European author who attempted to discover the vivid culture of India through an inside-out technique in his work *India* 1901, translated by George A.F. Inman. *India* exhibits cultural studies' paradigm as it is a unique representation of Indian culture from French perception, an

amalgamation of multiple location and language. Such cultural writing stands apart from the occident-orient cultural war.

Indian culture has witnessed multicultural interactions during Imperialism. It fascinated many European writers like P.B. Shelley, T.S. Eliot, Edward Thompson, Flora Steel, Maud Diver etc. Romantic poet Shelley could not visit India. To satiate his interest for Indian culture he ordered Southey's *The Curse of Kehama* 1810, Edward Moore's *Hindu Pantheon* 1810, Lady Morgan Sydney Owenson's *The Missionary: An Indian Tale* 1776-1859. Modern poet Eliot draws on *Brihadaranyanka Upanishad* for his poem *The Wasteland* 1922. The image of India appealed to many British authors but Pierre Loti has unique reverence for the vivid culture of India. Louis Marie-Julien Viaud was a French naval officer and novelist of mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. His first book introduced to the wider public is Polynesian idyll originally titled *Rarahu* 1880, which was reprinted as *Le Mariage de Loti*. Here the narrator explains how the name Loti was bestowed on Julien Viaud by the natives, after his mispronunciation of "roti" (a red flower).

The book inspired the 1883 opera *Lakmé* by Léo Delibes. This was followed by *Le Roman d'un spahi* (1881), a record of the melancholy adventures of a soldier in Senegal. In 1882, Loti issued a

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collection of four shorter pieces, three stories and a travel piece, under the general title of *Fleurs d'ennui* (*Flowers of Boredom*). In 1883 Loti achieved a wider public spotlight. He published the critically acclaimed *Mon Frère Yves* (*My Brother Yves*), a novel describing the life of a French naval officer (Pierre Loti), and a Breton sailor (Yves Kermadec, inspired by Loti companion Pierre le Cor). Loti published three articles in the newspaper *Le Figaro* in 1883 about atrocities that occurred during the Battle of Thuận An (August 20, 1883), an attack by the French on the Vietnamese coastal defences of Hue. He was threatened with suspension from the service for this indiscretion, thus gaining wider public acclaim. In 1886 Loti published a novel of life among the Breton fisherfolk, called *Pêcheur d'Islande* (*An Iceland Fisherman*), which Edmund Gosse characterized as "the most popular and finest of all his writings." (50)



Loti, engraving after a drawing by Gaston Vuillier, c. 1891 *Courtesy of the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.*

It shows Loti adapted some of the Impressionist techniques of contemporary painters, especially Monet, to prose, and is a classic of French literature, followed by *Propos d'exil*, a series of short studies of exotic places, in his characteristic semi-autobiographic style, *Madame Chrysanthème*, a novel of Japanese manners that is a precursor to *Madama Butterfly* and *Miss Saigon* 1887 (a combination of narrative and travelogue), *Le Roman d'un enfant* (*The Story of a Child*) 1890, a fictionalized recollection of Loti's childhood that would greatly influence Marcel Proust. Loti was aboard ship at the port of Algiers when news reached him of his election, on May 21, 1891, to the Académie française. He

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described a visit to the Holy Land, Istanbul in three volumes, *The Desert, Jerusalem, and Galilee*, (1895–1896), and wrote a novel, *Ramuntcho* (1897), a story of contraband runners in the Basque province, which is one of his best writings. The Turkish government named one of Istanbul's famous hills "Pierre Loti Tepesi" or "Hill of Pierre Loti". Also, there is a coffee shop located at the top of that hill which changed its name to "Pierre Loti Coffee Shop", and there is also a Pierre Loti Street in another part of Istanbul - all of which suggests that most Turkish people have not yet forgotten Pierre Loti. Between 1900 and 1902 he was put in retirement then reinstated in the navy for which he spent in Asia, where he wrote *The Last Days of Beijing* 1902 and *India without the English* 1903 and from that year, he spent twenty months again to Istanbul, the Constantinople in charge of the East.

Loti in three articles for Le Figaro criticized colonialism. Each of Loti's novels corresponds to a crisis faced by the country and he courageously criticizes the colonialist splurge of France for which he had been cancelled commission, be it Indochina war. He immerses himself in the host culture. He has a vision of otherness that is both intellectual and sensitive. According to him, there is nothing to do at home, so he goes abroad to find something to exalt, a unique nihilistic

worldview. Though alienated he transposes his self and sensibility in the milieu of the culture he visits. Roland Barthes explains that,

Loti knows, transposed into modern terms the three graduated moments of all alienation: the journey, the sojourn, and naturalization...Of these three moments the most contradictory is the sojourn (the residence): here the subject no longer has the tourist ethical irresponsibility (who is simply a national on tour), but does not have the citizens' responsibility (civilian, political, military)...whether Turkish or Maghrebi, the Orient is merely a square on the board, the emphatic term of an alternative: The occident or something else. As long as the opposition is unresolved, merely subjected to forces of temptation, meaning functions positively: the book is possible, it develops. (105)

Barthes emphasis on the development of a book by a resident indeed

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overshadows the binary of orient and occident. Loti embraces the Indian culture. He never refers to it as 'orient'. He writes about Indian culture as a resident. He is familiar with local culture, manners, and languages. He is always free to leave and go back to his country, and he eventually does it.

The cultural non-fiction narrative *India* contains six chapters covering Ceylon, Anuradhapura, Travancore, Tanjore, Hyderabad, Banaras. It begins with voyage on Red Sea from where Loti reaches to Ceylon, modern day Sri Lanka. He visits a buried city of Anuradhapura, "the city which was buried in a night of leaves more than a thousand years ago." (7) He describes how Buddhist religious spiritualism reached Anuradhapura. Princess Sanghamitta is believed to have brought a branch of the tree under which Lord Buddha realized true faith to receive enlightenment. In the whole book he never uses the word 'Lord'. It shows a kind of cultural jet lag. He accepts Buddha, a spiritual leader more as a living, breathing human than as incarnation of God. The next chapter he mentions his visit to Buddhist Rock Temple where Loti describes a moment where dream and reality intermingle. He is perplexed by the priests' silent poised position of meditation. A naval officer who knows only travelling to farther lands, away from home, encounters such practice for the first time. This speaks

volumes about the origins and perpetuity of Yoga as a Buddhist ritual. He shares his doubt openly:

I cannot understand these symbols, and this Buddhist peace is as yet hidden from me; the guardian in the yellow robe goes calmly back to his hermitage- priest of strange temple, having no other care than the arrangement of his flowers, living a joyless life in this deserted place, where sorrow never comes, living only in the hope that he may prolong his ego- after this present incarnation has ended- it is an impersonal and sad entity. (19)

Despite Loti's Christian beliefs, he thinks of the detachment of spiritual guardian as a sad impersonal gesture. He calls the place both a deserted area and a place without sorrow. He constantly questions detachment of spirituality unknowingly, that he himself delves into a similar spiritual journey by leaving his homeland and seeking for greener pastures. He is similar to the animal that sees its own reflection on water and rebels it. His Christian practices depend on the image of Christ as saviour. Hence contrary to the culture Loti grew up with is totally opposite

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of a meditative saint who subjectively attains redemption or at least tries to achieve it.

Yet his dialectical approach to fathom the depths of host Indian culture is particular in its cause to present an organic whole word-image of the feeling of tranquillity Loti experiences. We can examine universals across cultures while admitting that the meaning assigned by individuals to a particular event may differ from culture to culture. This must also incorporate the individual differences in behaviour of understanding different cultures. He lands in Travancore, modern day Kerala under the hospitality of Maharaja of Travancore. As Loti narrates his account of the journey, always recording the exact day, night time, he confuses with stars and night flies. It is a raw, natural description devoid of imperialistic prejudices. He compares Ceylon to Kerala, and Buddha Rock temple to oak woods of Saintonge, Aunis. Even the statue of Buddha resembles that of St. Peter. He is mesmerized by the view of Goddess twelve-feet height because he is influenced by the idols, statues as mighty symbols. He is a protestant so there is no culture of idol worship. This speaks volume about his interest in these rocks sanitized into heritage. He is astonished at how these figures were designed and overcame the test of perennial time. Loti's *India* fits best in Said's critical opinion that, "Secular

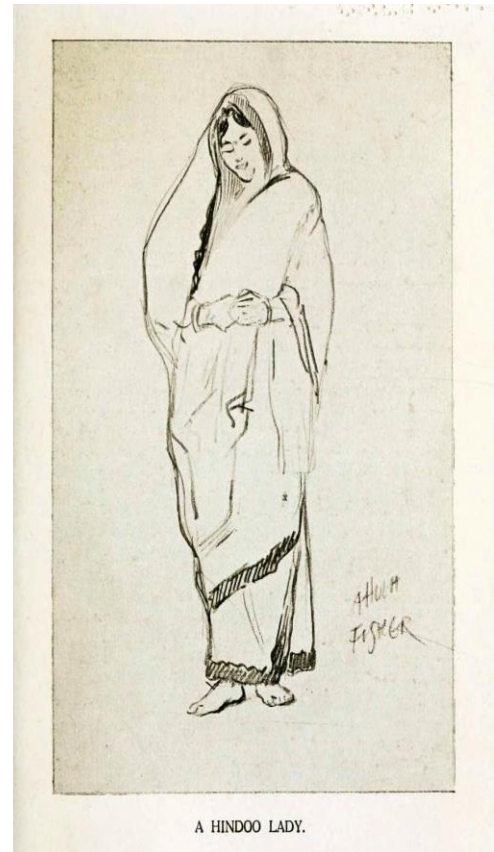
transgression chiefly involves moving from one domain to another, the testing and challenging of limits, the mixing and intermingling of heterogeneities, cutting across expectations, providing unforeseen pleasures, discoveries, experiences."(238) Said postulates the concept of 'Contrapuntal reading' which takes into account both processes, one of imperialism and other of resistance to it. It is a way to include what has been forcibly excluded. Loti also approaches his text with individual insider's view to understand both dominant and suppressed voice.

Cultural studies is never devoid the political enumerations. Like Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*, *Plain Tales from the Hills* presents fictionalized account of India to discuss the political agenda. India was initially occupied by the French but Loti remains aloof from political discussion. It may be because of his isolated profession. Loti's voice does not seem to question Imperialism as he is neither a British nor has political overtures. Said always ends up interpreting metropolitan texts and theorists, not with the aim of telling an 'Other' story, but of being a critical, interlocutor of imperial culture. He somewhere failed to comprehensively discuss the 'absent' oriental culture, for which he has criticized occidental at length in his works. While Said pointed the western works, he could compare and position a category of works such as Loti's

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where the stereotyping of ‘West’, ‘East’, ‘Orient’, ‘Occident’ is avoided and the focus is objective depiction of a subjective experience of culture in Ceylon and India. He compares the Siva temples to the temples of Thebes, in Greek myths, as the site of the stories of Cadmus, Oedipus, Dionysus, and of Memphis. The Aryan civilization migrated to as far as Egypt as it is interesting to note the presence of myths of Bull and Shiva’s lingam in the Egyptian, Mesopotamian coins.

Unlike Joseph Conrad whose description of African lady is considered prudish, Loti emotionally depicts the atrocities on Indians due to imperialism. He is moved by the deprivation in Golconda, where he feels pity to come across thin women with hanging breasts as leather bags. He is not sure about which stance should he take. He writes, “Need I say that India, the mother and the cradle of European race, is a land full of ruins!” (166) he is very critical about the poverty, hunger which the poor people suffer.



A HINDOO LADY.

Loti is refused permission to enter temples of Siva by Brahmins. It is strange to note the presence of feudal system and its repercussions on the basic survival of poor people. He criticizes the forced prohibition to eat flesh. He witness ruins of cultivated rice, crops fields, which now lay arid like desert which he refers to as ‘ashes’. The women weak and pale flock towards him to sell the stinking skin bundles stripped from cattle which died due to hunger. He reiterates: “But the price of a cow which still shows signs of life has fallen to a quarter of a rupee (about five pence), for it is impossible to provide food for cattle, and nothing in the world would

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induce the people of this Brahmin country to eat the flesh. So who wants to buy a stinking hide that warms with flies?" (168) He also visits Udaipur in west and Indore, Jagannath in east.

In Benaras the priests tell him, "Our philosophy begins where your ends." (250) Even British acknowledged the religious sanctity of India but they attacked the multiple offshoots of Faith due to presences of Islam which sprouted conflict in the ancient Hindu way of life. They used 'divide and rule' policy.' But Loti himself on quest towards higher faith appraises the Hindu philosophy in words none British could ever try. "Surely their bodies must be less earthly and more ethereal than ours, and by their long heredity of meditation and prayer they must have reached subtleties of perception and a delicacy of intuition impossible to us. But they simply say, 'We know nothing and simply seek to learn'." (251) Loti comes across a European woman who is staying among priests to seek peace and shelter from the turmoil of the world. He wishes to witness glimmer of faith. He attempts to hearken to the inner call that spurs him to seek certain sites, under the guidance of scripture and certain exegeses and commentaries. Thus he relays some detailed historical explanations and analyses by a priest. They suggest him to cling to his faith and seek no further.

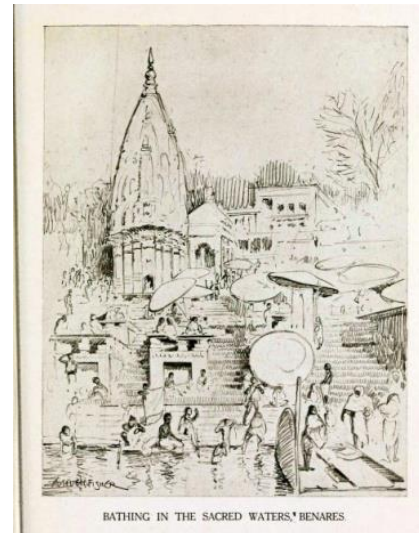


Fig. 1 the serene Banaras Ghat depicted in *India*

Loti never uses the word 'orient' throughout his discourse. Writing about the Indian culture became a widespread phenomenon in the nineteenth century, and was undoubtedly linked, amongst writers and statesmen, to non-literary spheres such as economics, religion, and politics. Inasmuch as Napoleon had been influenced by the writing of certain orientalist, so his 1798 campaign might have consequently inspired many writers to head eastward and record their views and ideas concerning this orient that is at once so near and yet so mysterious. But Loti never apes the superiority complex that taints the work of his orientalist predecessors, and contemporaries. Considering that composition for him was a highly emotional state rooted in movement and place, he is often an exceptionally vivid narrator, albeit one that we must sometimes



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consider unreliable. Nevertheless his ability to strike something of a balance between narration and description does distinguish his style to the point that Marcel Proust was influenced by him.

His aim to depict culture is not only to provide chronological progression and continuity – though this is extremely important – but also to express his vision, to epitomize the attitude of his contemporaries as well as those who will come after him. He seeks to cast all that within the framework of the dialectic between life and death, faith and unbelief, and the linking and disjoining of heaven and earth. It can be discerned through Loti's almost photographic lens, particulars of human behaviour and manner of living, including what people eat and drink, and what they wear. One can enter with him into the mirror of self, though it is known that Loti does not tell the whole truth. According to critic Edmund Gosse:

At his best Pierre Loti was unquestionably the finest descriptive writer of the day. In the delicate exactitude with which he reproduced the impression given to his own alert nerves by unfamiliar forms, colors, sounds and perfumes, he was without a rival. But he was not satisfied with this

exterior charm; he desired to blend with it a moral sensibility of the extremist refinement, at once sensual and ethereal. Many of his best books are long sobs of remorseful memory, so personal, so intimate, that an English reader is amazed to find such depth of feeling compatible with the power of minutely and publicly recording what is felt. In spite of the beauty and melody and fragrance of Loti's books his mannerisms are apt to pall upon the reader, and his later books of pure description were rather empty. His greatest successes were gained in the species of confession, half-way between fact and fiction, which he essayed in his earlier books. When all his limitations, however, have been rehearsed, Pierre Loti remains, in the mechanism of style and cadence, one of the most original and most perfect French writers of the second half of the 19th century. (104)

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One might say that Loti's personality appears enigmatic and contradictory to the careful reader. In his writing Loti appears to be divided against himself. At one instant he describes a moment of spiritual illumination and emotional serenity, then he suddenly reverses himself to reveal the other side of the occasion, a most pessimistic and nihilistic side. One might call this the Adamic syndrome, after Adam's dissatisfaction with the felicity of Eden that drove him to disobedience and the loss of the garden, leaving him grieving and yearning for his lost paradise.

The more complex the culture, the more frequent the sampling of the public and private self and the less frequent the sampling of the collective self. The more individualistic the culture, the more frequent the sampling of the private self and the less frequent the sampling of the collective self. Collectivism, external threat, competition with outgroups, and common fate increases the sampling of the collective self. Cultural homogeneity results in tightness and in the sampling of the collective self. Indian culture during Loti's visit seems to be a collective self. This is the reason why Loti picks religious encounter in Banaras, animal description, cities, as collective self. In Pondicherry the school children delight him the most. They come dressed as rajahs in robes of gold-embroidered velvet, and can work out problems on the blackboard and can do

exercises, which is better than the French school children. Loti experiences trance in the dance rituals by men and women. He depicts,

She has a body lithe as a serpent, yet firm and plump; enchanting arms that seems instinct with assurances of embrace, which twist and writhe like snakes loaded and encircled to the shoulders by diamonds and rubies. But no! The attraction lies in those eyes whose expression is ever changing. (131)

Many of Loti's novels depict stories of lands he visited, as in *Rarahu: Or, The Marriage of Loti*, for example, based on his seventy-three-day stay in Tahiti, includes Tahitian letters adapted from those sent to one of his acquaintances. *Madame Chrysantheme* fictionalizes his month-long "marriage" to a Japanese woman in Nagasaki. Such novels usually center on a primitive but rather melancholy love affair between a native girl and a French sailor, and they contain vivid descriptions, in which the author captures the sights, sounds, and smells of exotic scenes and places. Other novels are set nearer home. His most famous work, *An Iceland Fisherman*, pictures life among the Breton fishermen, and *Ramuntcho* is a story of the

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Basque country. A mood of pessimism pervades these works. In his novels Loti is emotional rather than thoughtful and more interested in a poetic, romantic style than in plot construction.

At a moment where anti-imperialist like Franz Fanon exposed the pitfalls of nationalism in his liberationist manifesto, *The Wretched of the Earth*, the atrocities on the psychology of African first people was more traumatic than the condition Loti accounted. According to Said, “Fanon was the first major theorist of anti-imperialism to realize that orthodox nationalism followed along the same track hewn out by imperialism, which while it appeared to be conceding authority to the nationalist bourgeoisie was really extending its hegemony. To tell a simple story therefore is to repeat, extend, and also to engender new forms of imperialism.”(146) Pierre Loti experienced acute internal bouts of spiritual and psychological conflict, even while making this pilgrimage. He constantly expresses his lack of belief and weakened religious convictions, particularly when contemplating the simple believers around him as they perform their religious rites with unshaken faith and piety, untangled with doubt. Pierre Loti’s work can be seen as a humanist scholarship which is found better than Eurocentric scholarship as it does not show India as marginalized culture at the disposal of British rule. In the MLA presidential

address, Said seems to have expressed the disenchantment with the extreme opaqueness and solipsism of contemporary literary criticism in general and postcolonial studies in particular. He reasserts scholarship as secular effort to concern world beyond being oppositional. He imputes a heroic quality to activity of humanist scholarship as “heroic ideal at its core”. (45) He believes hand-written text serves as an expression of this heroic ideal.

Hence the cultural encounters in *India*, is secular as it does not adhere to the hegemonic representation. His traveler’s position is nothing less than a “heroic ideal” that gives him unique direction to avoid indulging in neither appraisal of dominant British rule with inherent diplomacy, nor ridicule or objectify Indian culture. As Henry James, a long time fan of Loti, once wrote: “Loti belongs to the precious few who are not afraid of being ridiculous”, it aptly expresses how Loti fearlessly presented his cultural stance. Criticism is to maintain its commitment to non-coercive knowledge and freedom, guard against its own consecration. Pierre Loti hence is a secular critic who is honest as an outsider about his opinions about the vivid culture of India.

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