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and "Outsourced" (2006)

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Abstracts

English Abstract

This study examines the portrayal of Orientalist narratives in the films *Outsourced* (2006) and *The Man who Knew Infinity* (2015), analyzing whether they reinforce or challenge such ideologies. Orientalist portrayals have historically served colonialism and exploitation, while also shaping audience perceptions and reinforcing stereotypes. Consequently, a critical examination of these texts requires that one analyzes how these portrayals are reflected in these contemporary films. Drawing on Edward Said's critique of this discourse, in his text, *Orientalism*, as well as other postcolonial concepts, I evaluate how these films portray the power dynamics between the East and the West. While both films contain elements that could potentially deconstruct an Orientalist narrative, they ultimately fall short of dismantling it. The framing of Western culture as the standard, the persistent Western gaze in both films, along with the humor in *Outsourced* aimed at a Western audience all reinforce the power dynamics between the Orient and the Occident. Thus, despite moments of potential subversion, both films perpetuate rather than challenge Orientalist representations.

German Abstract

Diese Studie untersucht die Darstellung orientalistischer Narrative in den Filmen *Outsourced* (2006) und *The Man who Knew Infinity* (2015) und analysiert, ob sie diese Ideologien verstärken oder infrage stellen. Orientalistische Darstellungen haben historisch Kolonialismus und Ausbeutung gefördert, während sie zugleich die Wahrnehmung des Publikums prägen und Stereotypen verstärken. Daher ist eine Analyse, wie diese Darstellungen in den zeitgenössischen Filmen vermittelt werden, erforderlich. Auf Grundlage von Edward Saids Werk *Orientalism* und anderen postkolonialen Theorien untersuche ich, wie die Machtverhältnisse zwischen Ost und West in den Filmen dargestellt werden. Obwohl beide Filme Elemente enthalten, die ein orientalistisches Narrativ potenziell dekonstruieren könnten, gelingt es ihnen letztlich nicht, dieses zu überwinden. Die Darstellung der westlichen Kultur als Norm, die westliche Perspektive in beiden Filmen sowie der Humor in *Outsourced*, der auf ein westliches Publikum abzielt, verstärken die Machtverhältnisse zwischen Orient und Okzident. Trotz einiger subversiver Ansätze tragen beide Filme dazu bei, orientalistische Vorstellungen eher zu festigen, anstatt sie abzubauen.

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1. Introduction

In order to understand the complexity of postcolonial identity and discourse, it is essential to examine the lasting impacts of colonialism. This analysis includes uncovering the ways in which media serve or deconstruct the Orientalist perspective and, therefore, a colonial narrative. As Edward Said demonstrates, imperialist ideologies significantly influenced the majority of texts produced in the 19th century, even when they did not overtly express imperialistic intentions. These influences are central to Orientalism, a colonial episteme that operates through various forms of cultural, intellectual, institutional, and political power, all of which contribute to shaping the narrative of the East (Said, *Orientalism* 12). In this thesis, I analyze two contemporary films, *The Man who Knew Infinity* (2015) and *Outsourced* (2006), to explore their depictions of the Eastern world in relation to the Western world, drawing out their implications within the context of postcolonial identity and discourse. By focusing on how Orientalist portrayals manifest in two different films with distinct genres and themes, this study sheds light on the enduring presence of such representations in contemporary media.

Previous studies have analyzed *Outsourced* (Dir. Jeffcoat) and its eponymous television series (Dir. Kwapis), noting the film's inherent contradictions (Guttman and Smith 134, Garg and Pawar 190). Anna Guttmann and Megan Smith, for example, argue that while it deconstructs some stereotypes, it simultaneously reinforces Western superiority. The Western protagonist, accordingly, "engages in a civilizing mission", seeking to impose Western values and norms on the Indian characters (134). However, their focus lies on the series, noting that it features more overtly racist elements (134-138). Sukanya Garg and Smital Pawar similarly emphasize the film's contradictions, focusing on the Western gaze and the manner by which it reinforces power dynamics (190). After viewers and critics took note of its explicit racism and Orientalist depictions, NBC cancelled the series after just one season (Gutmann and Smith 137). As a result, the show has received more critical and scholarly treatment than the film has (Gutmann and Smith 135, Nadkarni 219, Oh and Banjo 459-460, Wolock and Punathambekar 673-674). However, other, subtle forms of Orientalism reinforce an Orientalist narrative and perpetuate power dynamics, some of which we find in the film version. Locating these subtle cues and signs, therefore, requires taking a more detailed analysis of the film. Similarly, when I survey the available research on *The Man who Knew Infinity*, I find that it has also been limited. Siti Ayu Wulandri et al. analyze the film's portrayal of racism, including the use of racist stereotypes and prejudices (62-66). However, their findings are descriptive rather than

interpretative; summarizing instances of racism in the film, rather than offering deeper interpretation or insight into the underlying causes and broader implications of these power dynamics. Such a research gap provides an opportunity for me to supply a new perspective on both films.

The analysis of the films helps shed light on the societal impact of persistent Orientalist depictions, which perpetuate and reinforce stereotypes. These stereotypes are often used in the service of not only prejudice and discrimination, but also wider projects of imperial power and domination. These ideological representations, embedded in cultural narratives, extend beyond the realm of fiction to have real-world consequences for individuals. For instance, Orientalist portrayals in *The Man who Knew Infinity* and *Outsourced* shape the way Western societies engage with Eastern societies, particularly in a neo-Orientalist context, creating dangerous political implications for immigration and labor. Just as colonialism was historically justified through Orientalist representations (Said, *Orientalism* 33), this ideology, along with neo-Orientalist portrayals, continues to perpetuate fear of the 'Other,' reinforcing power imbalances that influence contemporary military interventions and economic exploitation (Sa'di 2507). By focusing on these lasting depictions in narratives, this thesis seeks to highlight how they subtly reflect and reinforce power dynamics that continue to influence political discourse and shape individual attitudes. Given the rise of globalization and migration, I argue that it is now more crucial than ever to critically engage with these representations.

To investigate whether the films perpetuate Orientalist ideologies, I conduct a meticulous analysis of both works through the lens of the following research question: “Does the portrayal of the Eastern world, especially in relation to the Western world, in the movies *The Man Who Knew Infinity* (2015) and *Outsourced* (2006) reinforce or challenge the Orientalist perspective?”. My arguments are grounded in the postcolonial cultural theory derived from Edward Said’s book, *Orientalism*, providing a critical lens to evaluate the representations depicted in the film.

The thesis begins with an overview of postcolonial theory, focusing on *Orientalism*’s theoretical contributions to the field, including its discourse on power, and the subsequent critiques of the theory from a later generation of scholars. Based on this foundation, I introduce the concept of neo-Orientalism, a more subtle form of representation that, like Orientalism, constructs a binary relationship between the East and the West. However, it often presents

actions driven by economic motivations as benevolent efforts for peace, while being shaped by contemporary events such as 9/11 and migration, which foster fear and justify a focus on security (Altwaiji 314, Sa'di 2511). I then use this theoretical framework to guide my detailed analysis of the film *Outsourced*, examining its representation of the Eastern world in relation to the West. The analysis begins by exploring the Western perspective in the film, including its cultural perspective, the use of language and humor, and the central themes. I then build on this analysis, determining whether the film essentializes its characters, examining the portrayal of stereotypes and the function of these stereotypes in the service of imperial power. I conclude this chapter with a discussion of neo-colonialism in the film, specifically focusing on neo-colonial power dynamics and the portrayal of labor exploitation. The second part of the thesis focuses on *The Man who Knew Infinity*, starting with an analysis of the Western perspective that the film appeals to. I follow this section by exploring essentialization and stereotypes, including the film's portrayal of Indian culture, identity, and relationships. I then shed light on the depiction of racism and colonialism, as well as the power dynamics present both at character level and within a larger structural context. Finally, the thesis concludes by summarizing the key findings and discussing the influence of Orientalist portrayals in shaping audience perception.

1. Postcolonial theory

The term postcolonialism encompasses both historical and political aspects. Initially, it marked the time following the end of colonization. Historians recognize the period from 1914 to the early 1970s as the era of decolonization, during which many countries achieved independence. However, as Robert Nichols notes, “postcolonial” does not equate to “post-imperial”, as this moment also brought new forms of imperial governance (114). Additionally, the term is used to analyze how the effects of colonialism and decolonization continue to shape global politics.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, a new field of study developed: postcolonial theory, a term popularized by Edward Said in 1979 (Marrouchi 37). This discipline focuses on challenging and critiquing the Eurocentric assumptions of Western scholars. Beyond merely concentrating on non-Western societies, postcolonial theory aimed to “‘provincialize’, ‘de-naturalize,’ or ‘de-transcendentalize’ Western forms of knowledge and the universalist pretensions that came with them” (Nichols 115). Theorists such as Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak

addressed (and continue to address) issues such as “identity, representation, hybridity, diasporas, [and] migration” (Nichols 115). Their work, furthermore, delves into cultural dynamics and the marginalization of oppressed groups. Additionally, scholars in this field question how the West constructs its own identity, showing the extent to which this process depends on defining itself in opposition to an “Other”.

2.1. Orientalism

In 1978, the Palestinian-American literary critic Edward Said published *Orientalism*, a foundational work in postcolonial studies. This book provides a critical analysis of how the Western world has constructed and represented the Eastern world, showing that such representations are sustained by underlying power dynamics that the West seeks to preserve (Said, *Orientalism* 1-3).

Orientalism, as a concept, describes the way in which the Western world perceives, represents, and studies the East. It is not merely a style of thought; it also constructs the manner by which Orientalists research and write about the Orient (Said, *Orientalism* 2-3). Until the beginning of the 19th century, the Orient primarily referred to India and the Holy Lands; and the scholars predominantly researching and writing about the Orient were British and French. After the Second World War, the United States also assumed political dominance over the Orient, leading to the emergence of Orientalist scholarship in American institutions. Thus, these three Western nations – Britain, France, and the United States - form the origin of Orientalism as a discourse, constructing a set of ideas and representations about Eastern cultures that served Western interests (Said, *Orientalism* 3-4). The motivations of these colonial powers were far from coincidental; Orientalism played a crucial role in justifying colonialism long before it took place by establishing a clear distinction between the West (Occident) and the East (Orient) over centuries (Said, *Orientalism* 39-40). The close relationship between France, Britain and later the United States with the Orient has led to a vast collection of writings known as Orientalist texts, which emphasized the West’s dominance over the East. It was a cultural and intellectual project that went beyond academic study, actively shaping Western ideas about the East. This project connected different areas, including literature, religion, the spice trade and colonial military operations (Said, *Orientalism* 3).

The term “Orientalism” is used for three distinct, yet interconnected, things. First, the term is used as a description characterizing and labelling researchers or writers of the Orient and the

type of discourse they practice.¹ Second, Orientalism describes a particular ideology rooted in a fundamental separation and opposition between the Orient and the Occident. Writers in various fields - including authors, philosophers, political theorists, and economists - have relied upon and internalized this ideology as the foundation for their theories and other works. For instance, in *Oeuvres complètes*, the French linguist and philosopher Renan articulates his views on “the Semitic race” through an Orientalist lens, adopting a comparative and derogatory approach (qtd in Said, *Orientalism* 149). Third, the term describes a Western institutional framework that exerts influence over the Orient through its descriptions, portrayals, and teachings, thereby establishing a hierarchy where the Orient is positioned subordinate to the Occident (Said, *Orientalism* 2-3). Orientalism perceives the Orient and its people as “an ‘object’ of study,” emphasizing their otherness and differences from the West. This perspective highlights the passivity of the Orient, positioning the West as the active subject and the Orient as the passive object of analysis (Said, *Orientalism* 96).

The texts that are produced by Orientalists are far from being mere fabrications; otherwise, the knowledge would not have had such a long-standing and enduring impact since the 1840s (Said, *Orientalism* 6). However, Said describes the Orient as an “European invention” (*Orientalism* 1) – a body of knowledge perpetuated and invested in across generations (7). The durability of the system of knowledge lies in what Antonio Gramsci calls hegemony. Rather than emerging through coercive domination, hegemony establishes itself as a form of leadership in society through (active and passive) consent. According to Said, hegemony imparts a collective notion of a European identity that is perceived as distinct and, most importantly, superior to non-European identities (*Orientalism* 7). Additionally, hegemony promotes and constructs the European conception of the Orient. “The relationship between Occident and Orient,” writes Said, “is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony” (*Orientalism* 5). In the context of Orientalism, discourse does more than merely describe the Orient; it actively shapes and constructs our understanding of it. Knowledge and power work together to create this understanding. As Said notes, “we can better understand the persistence and the durability of saturating hegemonic systems like culture when we realize that their internal constraints upon writers and thinkers were productive, not unilaterally inhibiting” (*Orientalism* 14). The West establishes its superiority by portraying the East as inferior, thus

¹ However, today, universities more often refer to “Oriental studies” or “Area Studies”, considering the term Orientalism has a strong negative connotation due to its history, which will be discussed later.

perpetuating an unequal power relationship between the two. Hegemony, and the purported knowledge of the Orient, facilitated its emergence as an object of academic study and museum exhibitions, and Orientalism became a theoretical framework in disciplines such as anthropology, biology, linguistics, racial studies, and history (Said, *Orientalism* 7).

Said argues that texts whose authors purport to not be acting with an explicit political agenda (such as those by scholars in the field of Soviet economics, for example) are not inherently non-political, either (*Orientalism* 10-12). Their work can still affect and shape political dynamics. Similarly, European or American Orientalists approach the Orient „as a European or American first, as an individual second”, operating within a power structure, in which the West has the upper hand (Said, *Orientalism* 11). Orientalism as a concept extends beyond mere politics and a set of written works. Rather it represents a complex framework that reproduces global power dynamics across various fields, including art, academic writing, historical accounts, and economic analyses. Such works not only establish but also reinforce specific narratives about the East, fostering a desire for understanding and dominance over the Orient. Cultural texts are never isolated; they always exist within a particular context, interacting with a web of discourses and social structures. Authors write within certain “political, institutional, and ideological constraints” (Said, *Orientalism* 13), and these texts are interpreted within their context. Consequently, even works by humanists can be political, and it is exactly these cultural texts that have shaped the West’s political interest in the East (Said, *Orientalism* 11-13).

The origins of Orientalism are rooted in colonialism, which was often justified as a benevolent act. Arthur James Balfour argued in a speech that Egyptians are incapable of self-governance, framing the administration by Western powers as charitable: “I suppose a true Eastern sage would say that the working government which we have taken upon ourselves in Egypt and elsewhere is not a work worthy of a philosopher—that it is the dirty work, the inferior work, of carrying on the necessary labour” (Balfour qtd in Said, *Orientalism* 33). Evelyn Baring, the first Baron Cromer, similarly asserted that the West needs to consider the limitations of the East and determine what they “conscientiously think is best for the subject race” by relying on “Western knowledge” (Cromer qtd in Said, *Orientalism* 37). These viewpoints illustrate how the West rationalized colonial rule as a moral obligation, reinforcing the belief that Eastern nations needed Western governance.

Orientalism serves primarily as a means for the West to define itself in contrast to the East, shaping its self-perception through ideological constructs and stereotypes. According to Said, “Orientalism [...] has less to do with the Orient than it does with ‘our’ world” (*Orientalism* 12), meaning that Orientalism says more about the West than it does about the East. The purpose of Orientalism lies in the West defining itself in comparison to the East. Said quotes Cromer to illustrate this perspective, suggesting that “The Oriental generally acts, speaks, and thinks in a manner exactly opposite to the European” (*Orientalism* 39). Moreover, both Cromer and Balfour described the Oriental as “irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, ‘different’” (Said, *Orientalism* 40). As a result, the European is portrayed as being “rational, virtuous, mature, ‘normal’” (Said, *Orientalism* 40). Orientalism is grounded in the concept of “an unchanging Orient”, which stands in direct contrast to the West, despite the reasons for this perception changing over time (Said, *Orientalism* 96). Since the Renaissance, Orientalists have employed language to describe the peculiarities, differences, and exoticism of Orientals, portraying them as subordinate to their European counterparts (Said, *Orientalism* 72). Until the late 19th century, the study of the Orient and the Oriental was primarily textual and transmitted through texts, without direct contact. In subsequent expeditions, Orientalists sought to prove their hypotheses and knowledge, leading to the dismissal of information that did not align with their preconceived notions (Said, *Orientalism* 93).

2.1.1. Orientalism as a discourse of power

The Orient is deeply embedded in European culture. Orientalism, described as “a mode of discourse with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles,” serves to frame and represent the West in this context (Said, *Orientalism* 2).

Said explicitly calls upon a definition of discourse derived from Michel Foucault who describes it as a system of statements, ideas, and practices that construct meaning and knowledge within a specific context and society (*Orientalism* 3). More precisely, the analytical question for discourse is: “What was being said in what was said?” (Foucault 28). The regularities of discourse determine who is permitted to speak and what can be said, thereby influencing the production, organization, and communication of knowledge. These regularities are not explicitly stated but are embedded in the practices and institutions that govern discourse. For example, institutions such as schools and other public organizations regulate our knowledge

and conduct by controlling which ideas and information are promoted and which are suppressed (Foucault 64-69). Moreover, discourse is not only shaped by language but also by non-discursive practices, such as social institutions, power relations, and everyday structures. Manifest discourse refers to the visible or spoken aspects of discourse which are, simultaneously, shaped by underlying, unspoken “already-said” concepts. These repressed or implicit ideas significantly influence what is openly expressed. This connection between the manifest and underlying aspects of discourse reflects how discourse subtly reinforces power structures by defining true knowledge and regulating who is permitted to speak (Foucault 25). However, previous statements on a topic also heavily influence subsequent ideas, as seen in the field of Orientalism. Orientalists often relied on unquestioning adherence to the work of earlier scholars (Said, *Orientalism* 52). According to Said, Silvestre de Sacy, the director of the school ‘langues orientales vivantes’, where he was the first to teach Arabic, is considered the pioneer of Orientalism: “The living legacy of Sacy’s disciples was astounding. Every major Arabist in Europe during the nineteenth century traced his intellectual authority back to him” (*Orientalism* 129). Students from various European countries in the field of Orientalism drew heavily on Sacy’s work.

Tanmay Chatterjee, drawing on Foucault, explains that in situations of power imbalance, subjects with more power will dominate the discourse, and their information will be accepted as the true knowledge in the case of a disagreement or discrepancy (202). Knowledge that falls outside the dominant discourse, by contrast, is often dismissed as meaningless or incorrect (El Aidi and Yechouti 1063). Thus, in the field of Orientalism, “true knowledge” of the Orient is not necessarily the one that most accurately reflects the actual Orient, but rather the one that aligns with the dominant discourse on Orientalism. As already outlined above, power not only shapes knowledge and discourse, but is also reciprocally shaped by them, which creates a dynamic interplay. This makes discourse a crucial tool in both maintaining and challenging power, as it dictates which voices are heard and which knowledge prevails (Said, *Orientalism* 12-13).

According to Said, Orientalism as a discourse of power enabled the West to conquer the East (*Orientalism* 94-95). What began as an academic discourse evolved into an imperial institution. In colonial discourse, cultural and racial differences are both acknowledged and simultaneously negated. The primary objective is to depict the colonized as inferior, thereby justifying colonial rule (Bhabha, “The Other Question” 154). The postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha compares

colonial discourse to the “Freudian fable of fetishism (and disavowal)”, where ethnic and cultural differences are simultaneously acknowledged and denied, feared and fetishized (“The Other Question” 160). Similarly, “the other” is both foreign and yet not unfamiliar.

Building on this idea of power and discourse, Bhabha introduces mimicry as a concept that reveals the complexities and contradictions inherent in colonial power (“Of Mimicry and Man” 126). Said argues that the West constructs the East as its inferior counterpart to reinforce a perception of its own superiority (*Orientalism* 7). Simultaneously, colonial powers imposed their culture, norms, and values on the colonized with the expectation that they would assimilate into Western culture. This is exemplified in Lord Cromer’s assertion: “Even the Central African savage may eventually learn to chant a hymn in honour of Astraea Redux, as represented by the British official who denies him gin but gives him justice. More than this, commerce will gain” (Cromer qtd in Said, *Orientalism* 37). Cromer refers to the idea that even the most “inferior” by colonial standards can assimilate and even appreciate Western culture. Additionally, he implies that colonial rule benefits both the colonized, through supposed justice, and the colonizers, through economic gain.

In response, the colonized engage in mimicry by imitating their colonizers. This act of imitation reflects both the colonizers' dominance and their attempt to impose Western culture, which is portrayed as being more progressive. However, mimicry is not merely an act of assimilation; it is also a form of resistance. Bhabha describes mimicry as “almost the same but not quite” (“Of Mimicry and Man” 126), referring to how the imitation is never perfect and often incorporates subtle alterations that reflect resistance to colonial authority: “Mimicry is, thus, the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which “appropriates” the Other as it visualizes power” (“Of Mimicry and Man” 126). As a result, the colonized are neither fully assimilated into colonial culture nor entirely separate from it (Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man” 126-130). The concept of mimicry thus challenges the binary system inherent in Orientalism, highlighting the nuanced power dynamics and the complex nature of colonial discourse.

2.1.2. Critique of *Orientalism*

Orientalism by Edward Said is often regarded as a groundbreaking and highly influential work in postcolonial theory, reshaping the understanding of Western representations of the East and

making significant contributions to postcolonial studies (Ahmad 286, Bhabha, “The Other Question” - Screen 22, Hallaq 13). While the book has been celebrated for its insightful analysis, it has also faced substantial criticism from scholars who argue that it oversimplifies complex power structures and, at times, reproduces the very patterns it aims to critique (Ahmad 289-290, Bhabha, “The Other Question” - Screen 23, Hallaq 9-10, Warraq 235 qtd in Güven 420-421, Nichols 127)

Ibn Warraq, for example, questions Said’s portrayal of imperialism, arguing that it overlooks certain positive contributions made by the British in India. According to Warraq, British colonial rule did not only have negative effects but also fostered significant developments (235 qtd in Güven 420-421). For instance, British colonial rule provided individuals from lower castes with more access to education and opportunities within administrative institutions (Chakraborty 160). However, it is important to stress that this does not diminish the cruelty and exploitation of colonial rule.

A different perspective comes from Wael Hallaq, a scholar in Islamic legal studies, who addresses a preferred distinction between “orientalism” and “Orientalism” made by other authors (9-11). The capitalized term refers to an “ideology-motivated” biased study of the East, while the lowercase term pertains to an “objective” and ongoing study of the East, particularly in the field of religious studies. Hallaq emphasizes that both concepts have been misconstrued partly due to Said’s *Orientalism* (9-11). If the terms can be separated and distinguished from each other, “Orientalists” could be freed from Said’s criticism and accusations. Said, on the other hand, clearly states that an objective study of the Orient does not exist, emphasizing that any engagement with the Orient as an object of study inevitably involves a power disparity (*Orientalism* 11). He argues that individuals from Western societies always hold a position of power: “No production of knowledge in the human sciences can ever ignore or disclaim its author’s involvement as a human subject in his own circumstances” (Said, *Orientalism* 11). He further explains that “there can be no disclaiming the main circumstances of his actuality: that he comes up against the Orient as a European or American first, as an individual second” (Said, *Orientalism* 11).

Nichols presents another critique of Said, challenging his assertion that the Orientalist discourse constructs the Orient as its object of study, while simultaneously misrepresenting the ‘true Orient’ (127). In doing so, Nichols also challenges Foucault’s concept of discourse, drawing on

the critiques articulated by postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak (*Can the Subaltern Speak?* 127). Michel Foucault's theories aim to critique and deconstruct the concept of the sovereign subject; however, according to Spivak, they often end up inadvertently reinforcing it. She contends that the 'pluralized "subject effects"' only create "an illusion of undermining subjective sovereignty" while in reality failing to dismantle this concept (Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* 66). Furthermore, Foucault's and Deleuze's emphasis on desire brings back the "undivided subject", overlooking the complex, intersecting identities and therefore reinforcing existing power dynamics (Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* 66). Spivak further argues that their focus on desire, in the context of understanding identity, simplifies and homogenizes the concept of subjectivity (*Can the Subaltern Speak?* 69-70).

She also critiques the conflation of two different ways of representing individuals or groups. The first is political representation, meaning "speaking for someone", where someone acts as a spokesperson for a group, often based on the assumption that the group members cannot represent themselves. This type of representation places the representative in a position of authority. The second form is representation as "re-presentation", which refers to the way "art or philosophy" can depict or interpret reality (Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* 70). This form of representation focuses on how reality is depicted rather than who is speaking for whom. Spivak criticizes how neglecting this distinction can obscure the dynamics of power and representation (*Can the Subaltern Speak?* 70-71).

She further argues that this conflation can lead to "essentialist, utopian politics", which suggests that the subaltern can "speak, act and know for themselves" (*Can the Subaltern Speak?* 71). This assumption overlooks the complex inequalities embedded in these power dynamics, reducing marginalized individuals to mere symbols within a rigid power relationship and erasing their unique voices and experiences (Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* 71). According to Spivak, the concept of subalternity emphasizes the unique experiences of the subaltern. It serves as a category with the commonality of being excluded from the dominant framework, while still taking individual circumstances into account ("Scattered Speculations" 475). Kevin Potter, summarizing Spivak's argument, notes that "even in the well-meaning campaign to tell the history of the subaltern, as the Subaltern Studies collective aims to do, they cannot avoid the fundamental contradiction at the heart of representation: the problem of speaking for a subject slipping into speaking as that subject" (125). In other words, even efforts in Subaltern Studies, which aim to deconstruct power relationships and uplift the subaltern, risk

inadvertently reinforcing the very structures they seek to dismantle by combining these forms of representation. Spivak highlights this view by quoting Deleuze and Guattari: "The person who speaks and acts ... is always a multiplicity", no 'theorizing intellectual ... [or] party or ... union' can represent 'those who act and struggle' (FD 206 qtd in Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* 70). She underscores that attempts to represent marginalized voices often oversimplify their diverse experiences, leading to misrepresentation rather than empowerment.

This error in representation, according to Spivak, unintentionally brings back the idea of the "constitutive subject" in two ways: first, it highlights a subject shaped by desire and power, and second, it suggests that the oppressed subjects have the capacity to speak for themselves (Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* 74). She contends that this perspective oversimplifies the complexities of agency by assuming a unified subject with "undifferentiated desire" (Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* 69). In contrast, Spivak posits that subaltern identity emerges from a pluralistic landscape of desires that exists outside established structures of knowledge and mobility, leaving subaltern voices vulnerable to misrepresentation and exclusion (*Can the Subaltern Speak?* 70-75). Spivak's central question, "Can the subaltern speak?" will be explored in greater depth in the following chapter.

Bhabha further scrutinizes Said's theory, addressing the problematic combination of latent and manifest Orientalism ("The Other Question" 157-158). While latent Orientalism refers to the implicit beliefs present in texts, manifest Orientalism is explicit and shaped through discourse and history. Moreover, he claims that Said introduced the concept of discourse without adequately addressing the challenges associated with the terms "knowledge" and "power". Said would not sufficiently engage with the complexities that arise when discourses are employed to dominate and expand power structures, thus accusing him of reductionism. With complexities, Bhabha refers to the non-symmetrical and non-diametrical nature of power relationships ("The Other Question" 157-158). Michael Richardson raises a related concern, criticizing Said for neglecting the reciprocal nature of power relationships (208-212). He contends that by portraying Orientalism as a unidirectional force, Said fails to account for how power structures are influenced by elements like mimicry, which have the potential to challenge them. Consequently, Richardson argues that Said's critique, which condemns Orientalism for imposing representations, inadvertently engages in this practice himself, failing to acknowledge the potential for the Orient to challenge or reshape these representations (208-212). While Said

simplified and generalized his theory for clarity, I argue that he acknowledged the intricate interplay between latent and manifest Orientalism and their mutual influence.

Another accusation towards Said regarding *Orientalism* is that he is holding contradictory views: while he criticizes categorization and classification in Oriental studies as negative, he simultaneously acknowledges the importance of these practices for representing and understanding foreign cultures (Richardson 209-211). I argue that Said occasionally replicates the pattern he criticizes in *Orientalism*: he tends to essentialize, particularly when discussing broad categories such as "the West" and "the East." This means reducing complex and diverse individuals into certain categories. This could potentially also strengthen prevailing power structures, as Spivak also emphasized (*Can the Subaltern Speak?* 70-75). For instance, Said frequently depicts the entire West as dominant and authoritative, which could also replicate the essentialization he criticizes in his own work.

Said's *Orientalism* does indeed overlook some of the complexities inherent in power relationships. Although I do not believe Said entirely "neglected" the idea of reciprocity within these power dynamics, I agree that his portrayal of Orientalism is rooted in a rigid power structure. Within this structure, it is challenging for "the other" to represent itself, at least within the dominant Western discourse. Said did not ignore the possibility of counter-representation by the subaltern, but rather underscored the central issue that Spivak also highlights: the structural barriers that prevent the subaltern from having a voice and representing themselves. Therefore, I contend that Said describes a power dynamic in which colonized, or formerly colonized peoples and cultures could, in theory, represent themselves, but due to hegemonic discourses, this is often rendered impossible. He did not ignore the potential for reciprocity but emphasized how the prevailing power structures suppress it.

2.1.3. Neo-Orientalism

Considering that *Orientalism* was initially published in 1978, it is crucial to incorporate the insights of more recent scholars who have responded to Said's theory. As Foucault highlights, it is critical to engage with discourse in the moment, rather than focusing solely on its history or origin. Instead, we should focus on discourse in its current context and acknowledge that it can be "repeated, known, forgotten, transformed, utterly erased, and hidden" (25) – in other words, discourse is dynamic, continually reshaped and interpreted in contemporary contexts.

“Orientalism [sic] continues to serve the interest of the powerful nations and elites”, explains Ahmad Sa’di (2507). This enduring influence of Orientalism is reflected in the way the Western world is still frequently portrayed in the media as “the civilized world” or “the free world”, especially in opposition to the Eastern world. This binary framework serves to advance economic interests, particularly under the pretext of democracy, peace, and humanitarian aid.

When analyzing texts to discern whether they reinforce or challenge the Orientalist perspective, it is of utmost importance to consider contemporary events. For example, we can look at terrorist attacks, the wave of migration in 2015, and globalization, which influence media discourse and the use of Orientalist tropes. According to Mubarak Altwaiji, the 9/11 attacks marked a pivotal moment that reshaped the East-West dynamics and gave rise to “neo-Orientalism” (314). This concept is primarily centered on Arab nations while excluding countries like India, Turkey, and Iran that were previously categorized as part of the Orient. Although this paper focuses on Indian protagonists in relation to the Western protagonists, I contend that contemporary events leading to neo-Orientalism operate within a broader Orientalist framework that can significantly influence Western perceptions of the entire Eastern world, including India.

In the 1980s, globalization reshaped the production of knowledge, which led to the emergence of a new field called transnational sociology. Keskin refers to this modern field of research as neo-Orientalism, which resembles traditional Orientalism and may even be more harmful in perpetuating stereotypes and power imbalances (5). Following WWII, the United States assumed the role of global power, superseding the British Empire. As the US lacked theoretical knowledge of the Orient and the Oriental, they established study centers in the 1950s (Vaughan qtd in Keskin 7). According to Keskin, the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) is the “most neo-Orientalist institution in existence today” (7-8), with about half of its presidents working closely with the U.S. government, providing advisory support. The Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, which took place just a year after the publication of *Orientalism*, already marked the beginning of neo-Orientalism. After September 11, 2001, these study centers sought to secure government funding, which led to conflicts between classical Orientalists and neo-Orientalists. In response to these tensions, The Association for the Study of the Middle East and Africa (ASMEA) was created in 2007, aiming to introduce perspectives outside the hegemonic discourse (Keskin 10). The 9/11 terrorist attack rendered neo-Orientalism even more focused on national security and policy, which is a key difference from traditional Orientalism,

as Sa'di (2512) and Andreas Tietze (qtd in Keskin 14) also demonstrate. Neo-Orientalism is characterized by fear, particularly regarding the potential changes that immigration could bring to Western societies. As Sa'di highlights, there is fear that "dark-skinned immigrants [...] will change Western societies beyond recognition," (2512-2513) threatening the established binaries and the perception of a coherent Western identity.

This new form of Orientalism, referred to as neo-Orientalism, is often seen as more acceptable and less overtly aggressive than traditional Orientalism. A significant shift in this iteration is the movement away from the concept of race toward terms such as "ethnicity," "culture," and "religion" (Hall qtd in Sa'di 2511). Both forms are grounded in binary oppositions; however, the more subtle and covert methods of neo-Orientalism allow it to blend into societal discourse, making it less recognizable as a form of Orientalism (Sa'di 2514). Whereas traditional Orientalism is rooted in fields like anthropology and ethnology, neo-Orientalism draws on areas such as migration studies and foreign language studies (Sa'di 2513).

In 1994, philosopher Jacque Derrida introduced the term "globalatinization" to critique the religious and philosophical roots of globalization. Specifically, he refers to Kant's distinction of cult and moral religion, positioning Christianity as the true moral religion (Li 3). In the 1970s, globalization was not a significant topic, which is why it was not mentioned in Said's *Orientalism*. Victor Li argues that Derrida's theory is closely connected to Orientalism, proposing that globalization could be referred to as "globalorientalization" (3), since it is fundamentally rooted in Orientalist ideas (Derrida qtd in Li 6).

Li compares the "imaginative geography" of Orientalism to modern globalization (9). This term refers to the portrayal of geography as objective and scientific, with the intent of controlling and exploiting the Orient for Western identity, rather than genuinely understanding it. Said describes imaginative geography as "less a fact of nature than [...] a fact of human production" (*Orientalism Reconsidered* 90). However, he also indicates that while it is rooted in human creation, it is not entirely fictional either (Said, *Orientalism Reconsidered* 90). In both contexts, geography is used to create a world centered around the West, which symbolizes progress and development, while marginalized voices outside of this center remain unheard.

As already outlined in the previous chapters, colonialism has frequently been portrayed as a benevolent endeavor, exemplified by Arthur James Balfour's praise for British rule in Egypt under Lord Cromer. He asserted that "everything he has touched he has succeeded in... Lord

Cromer's services during the past quarter of a century have raised Egypt from the lowest pitch of social and economic degradation until it now stands among Oriental nations" (Cromer qtd in Said, *Orientalism* 35). Similarly, former U.S. President George W. Bush defended and justified the U.S. occupation of Iraq in a 2003 speech by claiming it fulfilled a "moral duty" and promoted "stability" (Sa'di 2508). Traditional and neo-Orientalism both employ indirect methods of representation and narrative to exert influence over the Orient. However, while traditional Orientalism was used to justify explicit means, such as colonization, neo-Orientalism does not involve direct control over countries. Instead, it relies on monitoring, sanctions, and other more covert approaches (Sa'di 2514-2515). According to Sa'di, "the aim is no longer to 'normalize' or discipline the 'incompetent Orientals' but to prevent them from reaching the West and sharing the wealth that has been accumulated there over centuries, largely as a result of colonialism" (2512). However, I argue that the portrayal of the Oriental as inferior and the imposition of Western values have only been surface-level justifications that helped rationalize the colonization and exploitation of Eastern countries, as Said also points out (*Orientalism* 94-95).

To counteract the beliefs of fixed identities and a world divided by ethnic, religious and cultural differences, Said advocates for critical humanism and critical cosmopolitanism. Individuals should question their own identities and view outside of their cultural and ethnic circles. This would allow for more understanding of and empathy towards others (Said qtd in Li 15-16).

2. Orientalism in film

While the emergence of cinema did not mark the start of colonial representation, many racist stereotypes originated from portrayals in films during that era (Stam and Spence 6). Since cinema emerged at the height of European imperialism, depictions, and as a result, negative stereotypes of the colonized were shaped by these imperialist attitudes: "Many of the misconceptions concerning Third World peoples derive from the long parade of lazy Mexicans, shifty Arabs, savage Africans and exotic Asiatics that have disgraced our movie screens" (Stam and Spence 6). As Rodanthi Tzanelli demonstrates, cinematic representations and media production play a central role in shaping identity, values, and beliefs within societies (12). In response to these objectifying portrayals, marginalized groups sought to represent themselves rather than being (mis)represented by others, a movement Robert Stam and Louise Spence refer

to as "progressive realism" (8). However, this countermovement also introduced challenges. For example, reality is not easy to represent. Additionally, there is a difference between "realism as a goal"- with aims to reveal the truth about something or someone - and "realism as a style", which focuses on creating the effect of reality (Stam and Spence 8).

Stam and Spence further argue that an excessive emphasis on realism in films, and on whether portrayals align perfectly with reality, can be limiting (3). Films, they contend, should not be expected to perfectly reflect life. Furthermore, the issue with how reality is portrayed goes beyond racist stereotypes. Sometimes, entire oppressed groups are absent from the narrative, further reinforcing their marginality from the social and political mainstream (7). For a comprehensive analysis, Stam and Spence suggest shifting the focus away from perfect accuracy in representation. Instead, attention should be given to the "narrative structure, genre conventions, and cinematic style rather than perfect correctness of representation or fidelity to an original 'real' model or prototype" (11-12).

How an audience perceives the representation of characters in a film also depends on factors such as their cultural awareness and socioeconomic background, including race, class, and gender. While cultural media can reinforce existing power dynamics, the possibility of "aberrant readings" - interpretations that diverge from the dominant discourse - should not be overlooked. Even films created with the intention of deconstructing Orientalist frameworks can be misread, inadvertently reinforcing Orientalist representations. Thus, an audience's expectations, attitudes, and experiences play a significant role in shaping how a film is understood (Stam and Spence 19).

3. *Outsourced* (2006)

Outsourced (Dir. Jeffcoat, 2006) is an American romantic comedy. The customer call center of the American company Western Novelty is outsourced to India, where the American manager Todd Anderson is expected to train his replacement. Initially, he struggles with cultural differences; but he soon adapts and develops not only friendships but also a romantic relationship with his colleague Asha. Notably, the movie primarily takes place in the Indian town of Gharapuri and consists of a predominantly Indian cast, with the exception of the American protagonist and his boss. In contrast, the eponymous TV series, which is based on

the film, unfolds in Hollywood, featuring predominantly American and British actors of Indian descent (Dir Kwapis, 2010).

Anna Gutmann and Megan Smith claim that the viewer in *Outsourced* experiences India through the Western perspective of the American protagonist Todd and, importantly, through the Indian characters, offering an authentic glimpse into the real India (191). However, I contend that the Western gaze, which becomes apparent in the employed humor and the depicted power dynamics, often favoring the West, predominantly shapes the audience's experience of the movie.

4.1. Western production for Western consumption

The movie *Outsourced* caters to a Western audience, despite being set in a non-Western context. This is evident in its cultural perspective, humor, language and themes. The humor employed in the film relies on cultural misunderstandings and stereotypes based on Western norms. While the narrative centers on the personal growth of the American protagonist, the Indian characters and traditions serve primarily as a backdrop to his journey. Indian culture is continuously filtered through Todd's perspective, and therefore a Western lens. Together, these elements highlight the film's appeal to a Western audience.

4.1.1. Cultural perspective

Although the film is set in India and features a predominantly Indian cast, the audience experiences Indian culture primarily through the perspective of the American protagonist, Todd. His viewpoint shapes the audience's understanding of Indian culture, as they see the world through his eyes and interpret it through his thoughts and feelings. This lens filters the representation of India, making it subjective rather than an authentic portrayal of the culture. When featuring a marginalized cast in a movie, the emphasis should not be on the absolute correctness or objectivity of the representation, according to Stam and Spence (11-12). Instead, one should analyze aspects such as “style, figures of speech, setting, narrative devices, historical and social circumstances” (Said, *Orientalism* 21). For example, a satirical film often employs exaggerated stereotypes of certain groups rather than striving for an accurate representation (Stam and Spence 11-12). Additionally, Said emphasizes that Orientalism is not concerned with “a correspondence between Orientalism and Orient, but with the internal consistency of

Orientalism and its ideas about the Orient [...] despite or beyond any correspondence, or lack thereof, with a 'real' Orient" (*Orientalism* 5). While I agree with Stam and Spence that the focus should be on the overall cinematic discourse rather than just accuracy, it is crucial to acknowledge that marginalized groups are often depicted through the lens of a dominant group, which can lead to a distortion of the marginalized experiences and identities (Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* 92-93).

Said also claims that in Orientalism "the West is the actor, the Orient the passive reactor. The West is the spectator, the judge and jury, of every facet of Oriental behavior" (*Orientalism* 109). This aligns with the concept of a Western gaze, or what Stam and Spence describe as "First World's voyeuristic gaze" (4). They argue that the portrayal of hierarchical power dynamics in films plays a significant role in reinforcing colonial ideologies, especially the superiority of Western cultures over non-Western cultures. This can be compared to a male-dominated worldview, where women are defined as lacking or inferior when compared to men, thus reinforcing male dominance. According to Stam and Spence, "the cinematic and televisual apparatuses, taken in their most inclusive sense, might be said to inscribe certain features of European colonialism" and therefore can reinforce the idea of a Western superiority (4). The intended Western audience occupies the "subject position," described as the "audio-visual masters," who observe the "Third World objects" from a position of perceived superiority (Stam and Spence 4). The white gaze similarly refers to a perspective that assumes whiteness as the norm, positioning it as the central viewpoint through which the world is perceived. This gaze is deeply ingrained, and viewers often refuse to engage with alternative viewpoints, as doing so would require challenging the foundational assumptions of the white gaze itself. Dan Flory, referring to Frantz Fanon, explains that "Some viewers [...] are unwilling to consider certain challenges to their 'default' cinematic perspectives due to an unwillingness to suspend or reconsider the values and presumptions they bring to viewing films in the first place" (20-21). In this sense, the white gaze reinforces racial hierarchies, similar to how the Western gaze perpetuates cultural hierarchies. Although the Western and the white gaze are not identical, they are closely related. The Western gaze, or "First World's" gaze (Stam and Spence 4), emphasizes the West's cultural superiority, often exoticizing and essentializing non-Western cultures. In contrast, the white gaze involves seeing the world through a "lens of racial whiteness" (Flory 21), reinforcing whiteness as normative.

In *Outsourced*, the Western gaze is deeply embedded within the narrative, as the audience perceives the story through the perspective of the Western protagonist. For instance, when Todd is told to eat and uses his right hand, he receives disapproving looks from Aunti G., the owner of the guesthouse (*Outsourced* 00:14:50-00:15:10). Puro, Todd's trainee, steps in to explain that he should "not place the hand that has been in your [his] mouth back in the food" and that he "should not eat with your [his] left hand", because the "left hand is considered to be unclean" (*Outsourced* 15:10-15:28). Todd, clearly confused, asks for the reason. In response, Aunti G's husband gets up and pretends to wipe his butt with his right hand. Todd, perplexed, simply replies: "okaaaaay" and looks skeptical. This scene illustrates how the audience gains insight into an Indian tradition through Todd's perspective, which is neither neutral nor objective. Instead, it filters cultural practices through his confusion and Western viewpoint.

While *Outsourced* can be criticized for its lack of authenticity in portraying India and its culture, the main concern here is to determine whether it perpetuates existing power dynamics. On the one hand, as Sukanya Garg and Smital Pawar highlight, several aspects of the movie deviate from reality, such as the placement of the call center in a rural area, whereas in reality, it would typically be situated in a major city (192). They argue that this misrepresentation contributes to the portrayal of India as a third-world country, leading them to question the reliability of the portrayal of both India and its people. However, the accuracy of representation and its alignment with reality are of secondary importance (Said, *Orientalism* 5; Stam and Spence 11-12). What matters more is how the movie reinforces existing power structures through its Western perspective.

On the other hand, there are a few instances where American culture is questioned by Indian characters. For instance, when Puro and Todd are in a restaurant having a conversation, Puro is surprised by Todd's relationship with his parents back in the U.S. He is confused that Todd neither lives with, nor frequently visits his parents. Puro explicitly expresses his difficulty understanding certain aspects of American culture. First, he is puzzled by the idea that it is uncommon for adults to live with their parents. Second, he questions why Todd, despite disliking his boss and company, does not pursue a different career path. Through this scene, the audience gains insight into Puro's perspective on American culture, which in turn sheds light on Indian customs and values (*Outsourced* 00:47:00-00:48:53). In another sequence, when Asha tells Todd that she has been engaged since she was four years old, Todd is taken aback. He exclaims that he "just can't believe that someone strong and smart and as opinionated as

you [Asha] would settle for an arranged marriage” emphasizing his apparent revulsion toward this convention. While the audience perceives the Indian tradition of arranged marriage through Todd’s Western lens, Asha responds by pointing out that “some people would say America’s 50 percent divorce rate is crazy” (*Outsourced* 01:12:00-01:13:33). This exchange not only challenges Todd’s assumptions about Indian customs but also highlights the complexities of both cultures. Asha’s viewpoint encourages the audience to reflect issues inherent in each, emphasizing that there is no single “right” tradition or way of life.

Most scenes of the film, however, are presented through the perspective of the American protagonist. Garg and Pawar argue that “[t]he physical setting may be India, but the mental setting is the Western envisioning of it” (192). This is also the case in the following scene: Aunti G, asks Todd if he is married or if he has a girlfriend. Todd denies and justifies that “he wasn’t quite ready yet” to start a family. Aunti G. is then surprised and says: “Not yet? Oh my god. You’re old enough to be a grandfather, what are you waiting for?” (*Outsourced* 00:14:10-00:14:40). Again, Todd appears confused. This confusion highlights how Indian traditions can be misunderstood when viewed through a Western lens, which inevitably imposes its own norms and expectations (Said, *Orientalism* 11). As Lord Cromer stated: “I content myself with noting the fact that somehow or other the Oriental generally acts, speaks, and thinks in a manner exactly opposite to the European” (Cromer qtd in Said, *Orientalism* 39). Todd’s reaction embodies the Western perspective, as traditions that diverge from Western norms are represented as strange or illogical. Said argues that the Oriental is portrayed through “dominating frameworks” (*Orientalism* 40), and this is clearly reflected in the respective scene, where customs that do not align with Western norms are framed as bizarre and peculiar.²

The Western concept of marriage has historically been deeply intertwined with issues of power and societal structure. Initially, early communal households were matrilineal, with women holding high status in society. However, as society transitioned from a state of savagery to barbarism, economic changes began to weaken these traditional structures. As populations grew and economic progress advanced, women found the “traditional sexual relations” degrading and sought a new form of stability in marriage (Engels 217). Hence, this shift led to the

² However, it must be noted that Todd’s reaction could also be influenced by the issue of child marriage; yet this problem is neither highlighted nor addressed in this scene, nor anywhere else in the entire movie. This omission reinforces the focus on cultural clashes, portraying the American protagonist as superior, rather than addressing more complex societal issues such as child marriage.

transition towards pairing families, with women taking the initiative in reshaping family structures. In response, men “introduced strict monogamy”, but only for women (Engels 217). This shift was influenced by economic changes, such as the rise of private property, the “domestication of animals”, and the rise in slavery (Engels 218). Men became responsible for providing food and acquired an authoritative role within the family. The wealth that was accumulated through cattle and slaves belonged to the men. Historically, “maternal law” refers to a system of inheritance where property was passed down through the maternal line, meaning descent was traced through the mother rather than the father. However, as men’s wealth grew, they sought to change this system to ensure inheritance through the male line. Monogamy became central to ensure clear paternal lineage, as it secured the inheritance rights of the father’s children. Unlike pairing families, which were more collective, monogamous marriages were designed to serve the interests of men. While monogamy provided stability, it also reinforced strict limitations on women, marking a significant shift in family dynamics (Engels 219-220). Friedrich Engels, describes this shift as “one of the most radical ever experienced by humanity” (219). The exact place and time of this change to a patriarchal family structure remains unclear.

As already mentioned, Todd’s interaction with the Indian characters, along with their customs and traditions in *Outsourced*, are depicted through his perspective, thereby reinforcing the dominant Western viewpoint. This representation mirrors the concept of epistemic violence, which reveals how marginalized voices have historically been framed as “Other” through power hierarchies. Spivak argues that, as a result, the subaltern cannot represent themselves (*Can the Subaltern Speak?* 76). With the term ‘subaltern’ she refers to those who are marginalized and lack social mobility, having no voice in societal structures or political discourse (Spivak, “Scattered speculations” 475). Therefore, the term also applies to the Oriental, who have similarly experienced epistemic violence (Said, *Orientalism* 7). The construction of the colonial subject as “the Other”—a process that defines them as fundamentally inferior to the colonizer—imposes a Western worldview while taking away their identity and voice serves as “the clearest available example of such epistemic violence” (Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* 76). Although the Indian characters in *Outsourced* are not depicted as categorically inferior, the narrative is filtered through Todd’s viewpoint, thereby including his Western biases. Not only does this lead to a perpetuation of stereotypes; it is also a form of epistemic violence.

However, scholars who strive to depict the voices and experiences of the subaltern, also risk reinforcing rather than dismantling the power dynamics they seek to challenge (Spivak, *Can*

the Subaltern Speak? 70-71). When studying subaltern groups, Spivak suggests that analyzing their actions, such as insurgencies, can reveal aspects of their consciousness (*Can the Subaltern Speak?* 82). Postcolonial intellectuals, positioned in privileged contexts, often interpret these insurgencies to give voice to the subaltern. Yet, their superior status often hinders them from fully grasping the experiences of the marginalized (82). One of *Outsourced*'s primary focuses is on Todd's personal development, relegating most of the Indian characters - aside from Asha - to supporting roles that serve to contribute to Todd's portrayal. Consequently, the Indian characters lack agency in their own narratives, as their voices are rendered secondary. John Jeffcoat, the American director of *Outsourced*, occupies a privileged position. While Jeffcoat does not entirely "speak as" the Indian characters, as the movie mostly features Indian actors, compared to the eponymous series (Nadkarni 215), he nonetheless controls the narrative. He determines which aspects of the Indian characters' voices are emphasized, muted, or reframed to suit a Western audience. As Spivak argues, the concept of the universal "sovereign subject" is a Western construct, making it impossible to truly give voice to the subaltern (*Can the Subaltern Speak?* 66). Although the film *Outsourced* provides insight into Indian culture and characters, these depictions do not represent the voices and experiences of Indian people in general. Instead, the Indian characters are portrayed through a Western lens, aligned with Western ideals, and ultimately serving Todd's portrayal and character development.

Despite these challenges, Spivak emphasizes the importance of ensuring that subaltern voices are heard. She argues that it is the responsibility of those in dominant positions to create frameworks that facilitate this, which primarily involves listening to the subaltern rather than speaking for them (*Can the Subaltern Speak?* 92-95). As outlined by Spivak, the "construction" of subaltern voices is not an authentic representation and therefore often bolsters and maintains power structures: "Yet the assumption and construction of a consciousness or subject sustains such work and will, in the long run, cohere with the work of imperialist subject-constitution, mingling epistemic violence with the advancement of learning and civilization" (*Can the Subaltern Speak?* 90). She further outlines that "the subaltern woman will be as mute as ever" (90), pointing to the intersectionality of subaltern women, who are marginalized by colonial and patriarchal structures. Spivak ultimately argues that efforts to reconstruct and give voice to the subaltern are bound to fail. By defining a unified subject for analysis in the first place, one inadvertently reinforces existing power structures, making it impossible to fully dismantle them and give voice to the subaltern (*Can the Subaltern Speak?* 71). *Outsourced* offers insights into the diversity of Indian culture and its characters; however, it fails to challenge the dominant

framework or grant significant agency to the Indian protagonists, as their voices are predominantly filtered through the perspective of the Western protagonist.

4.1.2. Language and jokes

Although the American protagonist does not openly mock the Indian characters in *Outsourced*, it becomes evident through the film's use of language and humor that it targets a Western audience. Despite being set in India, the film is primarily in English. There are few scenes where characters speak in Hindi; but these moments are often marked by humor, emphasizing the cultural differences for a Western audience.

Several researchers have examined the series *Outsourced* for instances of racism, often hidden under the guise of ethnic humor (Gutmann and Smith 135, Nadkarni 219, Oh and Banjo 459-460, Wolock and Punathambekar 673-674), while only few focused on the film (Garg and Pawar 190, and Gutmann and Smith 134). Despite sharing the same storyline and the protagonist's name, there are significant differences in how the respective versions portray characters and their relationships. In the film, the character Todd evolves morally and intellectually, becoming more open toward the Indian culture throughout the story, whereas the series emphasizes culture clashes and frequently ridicules Indian characters.

The dual nature of ethnic humor can be explained with the so-called "sword and shield metaphor" (Rappaport 2). On the one hand, the sword represents disparaging humor that attacks and insults those in lower positions within a power dynamic. This is evident in *Outsourced* during an early scene where Puro, the Indian colleague of Todd who he has to train, repeatedly mispronounces Todd's name as "Toad" (00:09:40). Although Todd corrects him, Puro and the other Indian characters still call him "Toad". This humor appears directed at a Western audience, as it plays on the stereotype of Indian accents, openly mocking differences in pronunciation. In contrast, an Indian audience may not interpret the scene the same way and might not focus on the meaning of the word "Toad" but more on cross-cultural communication in general. This is an example of disparaging humor, as it illustrates how the "sword" aspect of ethnic humor can reinforce stereotypes (Rappaport 2). Additionally, at the end of the movie, when Puro goes to Shanghai to train the new manager of the call center, Todd tells him not to worry and that he will do a good job: "Break a leg". Puro is shocked and responds: "Break a leg?" Todd explains: "Expression. Basically means good luck". Puro smiles and says: "Thank you Todd. I hope that both your legs get broken" (*Outsourced* 01:36:10-01:36:23). This scene

is clearly aimed at a Western audience, as Puro's lack of understanding suggests that he, and likely a non-Western audience, would not grasp the meaning behind the idiom. This highlights the cultural divide between Todd and Puro, underscoring the movie's emphasis on Western humor that may not translate effectively to those from different cultural backgrounds.

This dynamic is also evident in an early scene where Puro reads Todd's job title from a card and he remarks that it sounds impressive. Todd responds: "Not as impressive as it sounds. What I really do is I sell kitsch to rednecks, and now I have to train some other schmuck to do it". When Puro asks what the terms mean, Todd realizes through the card that Puro gave him, that he is the person he has to train. He therefore explains that "schmuck" means "a nice guy". At the end of the scene, Puro calls Todd a schmuck, wanting to give him a compliment (*Outsourced* 00:11:15-00:12:50). This scene clearly mocks Puro, portraying him as naive and inferior to Todd, also emphasizing the movie's appeal to a Western audience, while reinforcing a power dynamic, with Todd being in the superior position (Said, *Orientalism* 5-7). According to Leon Rappaport, disparaging jokes, which intend to enforce existing power structures and prejudices, include contrasting adjectives (33). However, only the negative adjective is explicitly stated or shown, while the positive attribute of the joke teller remains implicit, as exemplified in this scene, where Todd's superiority is implicitly highlighted by the humor at Puro's expense (*Outsourced* 00:11:15-00:12:50).

On the other hand, humor can serve as a shield when it exposes stereotypes about a certain group (Rappaport 1). For instance, in another scene, when Todd explains that the workforce needs to sound like native English speakers to lower the MPI (Minutes per Incident), Asha clarifies that they are native speakers of English: "English is the official language of our government. You got it from the British and so did we. We just speak it differently. Sometimes our pronunciation is better. We say 'internet' [British- influenced pronunciation with a clear 't'], and you say 'internet' [American pronunciation with a flap 't']" (*Outsourced* 00:22:30-00:22:50). Todd's response - that this is exactly what he is referring to and that he wants them to say the American version - highlights the Western viewpoint of the film, implying that the American pronunciation is superior. Although this scene underscores the movie's Western audience, Asha's comment also highlights that the English language originated in Great Britain, not America, emphasizing that linguistic differences do not indicate inferiority.

Ultimately, how a joke is perceived and the meaning it carries depend significantly on the situation and the audience (Rappoport 2). As Joseph Boskin and Joseph Dorinson argue “aggressive humor or wit serves two salient functions: conflict and control” (83). Conflict manifests through various forms, such as “satire, irony, sarcasm, parody, and burlesque”, which “reinforces the in-group and weakens the out-group” (Boskin and Dorison 83). Although the employed humor in *Outsourced* is not overtly aggressive, it nevertheless aligns with this function, as it is clearly aimed at a Western audience. While this kind of humor often seeks to assert power, subversive humor - where a minority group makes fun of the stereotypes that are assigned to them - can be a form of self-acceptance and a powerful way to express their experiences (Boskin & Dorinson 97). This can be compared to the concept of humor as a shield, where it becomes a protective tool for marginalized people (Rappaport 1). The Indian characters, though the majority of the film, are still positioned as a minority in *Outsourced*, as the narrative is filtered through Todd’s perspective. As pointed out above, in most humorous scenes, the film uses the “sword” of humor, reinforcing power dynamics, rather than subversive humor that could challenge these dynamics.

4.1.3. Themes

The fact that the film *Outsourced* is a Western production aimed primarily at a Western audience is evident not only in its cultural perspective, language and in the employed humor, but also in its themes. These themes include personal growth, cultural differences and misunderstandings, and romantic relationships.

In this context, the experiences of the Indian characters are only secondary, serving primarily to support the main themes rather than being explored in depth (*Outsourced*). This reflects a common pattern in cinematic depictions of cross-cultural encounters, where travelers experiencing different cultures “do not have much to say about the communities or nations. [...] The center of attention is the viewer, the tourist or consumer or alternatively the producer, rather than the ‘consumed’ host” (Strain qtd in Tzanelli 6). This is evident in *Outsourced*, where the focus lies on Todd’s personal growth. The Indian characters, along with their customs and traditions are relegated to the background; rather, they contribute to Todd’s personal development and increase his openness toward them. However, the emphasis is placed on how Todd perceives and interacts with the Indian culture.

Moreover, the film employs the common cinematic trope of a romantic relationship between a white male protagonist and an Eastern female character (Balaji and Worawongs, 227; Singh 44). However, the portrayal of Asha, the Indian female character, diverges from the traditional Orientalist narrative, which often depicts Western men as speaking on behalf of and representing the Eastern female (Said, *Orientalism* 6). Despite this, their relationship primarily serves to highlight Todd's personal growth and self-discovery, reflecting storytelling patterns typical of Western films (Strain qtd in Tzanelli 6). This romantic plot reinforces the film's focus on a Western perspective, appealing to its intended audience (Singh 43). The complexities of the female protagonist, Asha, will be further explored in the subsequent chapter.

4.2. Essentialization

The concept of Orientalism is rooted in a foundational distinction between the Orient and the Occident, and this discourse has shaped Western scholarship (Said, *Orientalism* 2). This “basic distinction between East and West” formed the framework of countless “theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient”, contributing to the simplification and essentialization of entire cultures (Said, *Orientalism* 2). Essentialization refers to the way cultures and identities are reduced and generalized to fixed, stereotypical traits, ignoring their diversity. Through this process, the East has often been portrayed as exotic, irrational and inferior, in contrast to the West that has been viewed as rational and superior (Said, *Orientalism* 40). Said notes that Orientalists rarely challenged the assumptions of their predecessors; rather they built on them. For example, when Western scholars in the late 19th century travelled to the East, they only sought to prove the “knowledge” about the Orient they had acquired from other scholars (Said, *Orientalism* 52). Furthermore, the Orientalist discourse has been the dominant discourse in the West, therefore, knowledge that did not align with it was neglected (Said, *Orientalism* 94-95). As a result, alternative voices or representation of the East were often ignored or silenced, solidifying the idea of a single Oriental identity (El Aidi and Yechouti 1063).

This pattern of essentialization frequently appears in popular culture (Ramirez 3). In *Outsourced*, the audience is introduced to Indian culture through glimpses of religious practices, music, dance, food and traditional clothing. For example, during the celebration of Holi the Indian characters are shown laughing, speaking in Hindi, and throwing colors at one another (*Outsourced* 00:39:16-00:42:50). While Todd is initially hesitant to participate, his eventual

engagement in the festival marks a turning point in his character development, symbolizing his new openness and positive attitude toward the customs and traditions of India. Therefore, these scenes displaying aspects of Indian culture do not depict the Orient or its people as irrational or inferior, a contrast to traditional Orientalist representations (Said, *Orientalism* 2). In the following scene, Todd is seen wearing Indian clothing, which could be interpreted as representing his acceptance of the culture (*Outsourced* 00:44:07). However, since Todd wears the clothing out of convenience, because his own have gotten stained during the Holi festival, this act lacks deeper appreciation or acknowledgement of the cultural significance and can be seen as a form of cultural appropriation. When he returns to the office, he acknowledges his previous ignorance about Indian customs and apologizes to his colleagues (*Outsourced* 00:45:03). Although these scenes effectively portray Indian traditions without essentializing them, they primarily serve to underscore Todd's personal growth throughout the narrative. As a result, his transformation is foregrounded, therefore overshadowing Indian cultural elements.

Although *Outsourced* offers a multifaceted portrayal of Indian culture, it leans toward certain essentializations, overlooking cultural and historical contexts. For example, in response to Todd's suggestion that call center employees should sound like native English speakers, Asha points out that both Americans and Indians inherited the English language from the British (*Outsourced* 00:22:41). This brief exchange touches on colonial history but avoids delving deeper into it. Furthermore, the movie completely omits other important aspects of Indian society, such as the caste system (Chakraborty, 159-160). While the caste system might be less relevant to the movie's narrative, the legacy of colonialism influences language, social dynamics and the economic system (Chakraborty, 162). By only briefly and implicitly referencing colonialism, the movie recognizes its historical impact but frames it as a minor backdrop. While a detailed historical exploration of this topic might not suit the genre of a romantic comedy, such omissions reinforce the Orientalist narrative. As Said argues, information or viewpoints conflicting with the Orientalist narrative have historically been suppressed or ignored (*Orientalism* 52). These omissions contribute to reductive portrayals and an essentialized representation of Indian culture, subtly reinforcing an Orientalist ideology that upholds the notion of a benevolent West, while disregarding complex histories.

While *Outsourced* avoids overtly essentializing Indian identity and culture, its portrayal remains complex and, at times, reductive. Most side characters appear stereotypical and lack depth, limiting the audience's insight into their individual experiences, reflecting Said's

assertion that Orientalism simplifies cultures (Said, *Orientalism* 2). A more detailed analysis of these representations and their implications will be provided in the next chapter.

4.3. Stereotypes

As I suggested above, Said notes that Western scholars have historically framed the Oriental in a way that emphasizes otherness and difference, thereby reinforcing a perception of Western superiority since the Renaissance (*Orientalism* 72). This essentialized representation has influenced popular culture, specifically film, leading to the emergence of certain cinematic tropes and stereotypical portrayal. Common stereotypes include that of conscientious workers, evil sorcerers, Kung Fu masters and the erotic, sensual female (Ramirez 3).

Stereotypical representation in films can serve various functions. For example, Aki Uchida asserts that stereotypes help explain and validate beliefs and actions against those who do not belong to the dominant group. This process establishes a clear distinction between the “in-group” and the “out-group”, reinforcing and perpetuating existing power dynamics (170). Those belonging to the dominant group, specifically the West in the context of Orientalism (Said, *Orientalism* 2-3), often objectify those outside this privileged position, thereby strengthening their dominance and influence over them (Uchida 170).

4.3.1. Shedding light on Western ignorance

While some jokes reinforce negative stereotypes about minorities, contemporary media also includes humor that seeks to critique certain stereotypes by mocking them. However, this does not mean that such humor is without harmful effects toward the targeted out-group. Rappoport discusses the so-called “Archie Bunker Question”, which inquires whether humor, when used in a satirical context designed to reveal how “narrow minded and stupid” negative stereotypes about marginalized people can be, genuinely reduces stereotypes or instead makes them more socially acceptable (3). He contends that there is no definitive solution to this issue (Rappoport 3). Nonetheless, I argue that some moments in *Outsourced* effectively highlight the irrationality of Western stereotypes about the East, and it does so through the portrayal of Todd.

The stereotypes in *Outsourced* are primarily critiqued through the character of Asha, who challenges Todd’s Western perceptions. Although the setting in *Outsourced* is in India and the majority of the cast is Indian, it is not Todd who is depicted as the outsider. According to Shilpa

Davé, referring to the sociolinguist Rosina Lippi-Green, individuals with accents are often categorized as outsiders (4). In the film, the Indian employees are expected to assimilate to American culture and speak like a “native English speaker” to ensure the company’s success (*Outsourced* 00:22:34). This scene reflects a traditional Orientalist perspective that associates accents with difference and, by extension, a lack of competence or inferiority (Said, *Orientalism* 7). Although this moment is not overtly humorous, it subtly critiques these Western stereotypes. Stam and Spence argue that including stereotypes in the portrayal of marginalized people is important, as they can reveal patterns of consistent misrepresentation. However, they warn that an excessive focus on stereotypes, whether positive or negative, risks essentializing the portrayed group. As they note, “such reductionist simplifications run the risk of reproducing the very racism they were initially designed to combat” (Stam and Spence 10). This perspective aligns with Spivak’s argument, that attempts to “give voice” to the subaltern can inadvertently reinforce power structures (*Can the Subaltern Speak?* 70). Asha’s argument in the aforementioned scene, that they are, in fact, native speakers of English, highlights Todd’s ignorance and, in turn, misconceptions of the West, as he embodies Western culture. The scene, therefore, effectively challenges and dismantles the negative stereotypes that Todd, representing the West, holds about the East.

A further scene underscores Western ignorance - though not necessarily through stereotypes - when an Indian employee asks what the item “burger brander” is (*Outsourced* 00:28:08-00:28:55). Todd explains that Americans use it to “burn their initials in their food with a red-hot iron before they eat it” and he compares it to a cattle brand. When the employees still look puzzled, he elaborates: “the thing you use to burn a symbol into a cow with. [...] In America that’s how you keep track of your cow”. When one employee expresses her shock at the use of a heated iron for branding, another one questions whether the cow would not run away, prompting Todd to clarify that this practice is only done to calves. Asha then raises her hand and suggests that Todd should learn about India. This scene underlines Todd’s lack of cultural awareness, as he casually describes practices that are shocking to his Indian colleagues. It highlights Western ignorance by showing how Todd assumes his customs are universally understood, while being unaware of the cultural significance of cows in India.

4.3.2. Perpetuation of Western superiority

The portrayal of Orientals has historically been dehumanizing and grotesque, both in literature and film. The natives in the novel *A Passage to India*, for example, are depicted as “dangerous and unreliable creatures”, unable of governing a country themselves (Forster 794). Similarly, Joseph Conrad, the author of the colonial novel *Heart of Darkness* employs dehumanizing language to portray the Congolese as inferior, often referring to them as “niggers” or “brutes”, and using physical descriptions such as “fierce nostrils” to suggest biological inferiority (128, 144). However, while *Heart of Darkness* and *A Passage to India* reflect the overtly racist attitudes of their respective times, *Outsourced* and also *The Man who Knew Infinity* were created in a different historical context. The movie *Outsourced*, for example, does not explicitly use racist language, but it still reinforces a sense of Western supremacy. As Said argues, Orientalism frames the Orient as something unchanging and timeless (*Orientalism* 108). Despite its persistence over time, this “system of knowledge” about the East has been continuously adapted to remain acceptable, while still serving as a framework that filters and shapes how Eastern cultures are represented (*Orientalism* 7).

While the stereotypes present in *Outsourced* are not overtly racist, they function to position the Western character and the Western world as superior. Said notes that “European ideas about the Orient” reinforce a sense of “European superiority over Oriental backwardness” (*Orientalism* 7). As the audience experiences the movie primarily through Todd’s, and therefore a Western perspective, this power relationship is particularly evident in the first part of the movie. For instance, in an early scene, when Todd arrives in India and looks for a taxi, he is surrounded by several Indian drivers, and he appears to feel harassed. Eventually, he approaches a man standing by a taxi, and wants to get in. Then, the driver takes Todd’s luggage and loads it into his rickshaw, parked next to the taxi. As the driver starts the rickshaw, Todd tries to retrieve his luggage, clearly reluctant to ride in the vehicle. However, the driver speeds off with Todd lying in the back of the rickshaw. The portrayal of Indian drivers swarming around Todd emphasizes the depiction of his superiority in this scene. Additionally, his reaction to the rickshaw, as well as the cultural clash depicted in this scene, conveys the impression that the means of transportation of a rickshaw is inferior to standard Western vehicles (*Outsourced* 00:04:32-00:05:35). Srividya Ramasubramanian notes that traditional means of transportation, such as rickshaws are commonly used as stereotypical representations of India in movies (253).

While I do not criticize their inclusion in *Outsourced*, since rickshaws are a prevalent means of transportation in the country (Ramasubramanian 253), the portrayal of them is problematic and suggests inferiority. Guttman and Smith also suggest that Todd's first impression of India is completely negative, reflecting various negative stereotypes (133). As he rides in the rickshaw, he encounters dirty, chaotic and littered surroundings, all of which contribute to his aversion to the country, visible in his facial expression. The portrayal of a "dark India" is further reinforced during a scene in the car with Puro and Todd, where they are unable to pass, as the street is crowded with rickshaws, people and cows (*Outsourced* 00:10:18-00:10:45). When Puro asks Todd whether he likes India, he responds that "Bombay was a little crazy, but Gharapuri looks different [...] cleaner". Puro agrees, stating that "Bombai is terrible" but "Gharapuri is very clean". After his response, the camera shifts toward the side to show a person urinating against a building, contradicting both Todd's and Puro's statements about Gharapuri being a clean city, and reinforcing Todd's earlier negative reaction to the Indian environment. By positioning the camera directly behind Todd as he turns to look out the window, the scene is presented from his perspective. This moment underscores the pervasive stereotype of India as a dark and unclean place.

The Indian workers are largely represented as skilled, especially as Todd becomes increasingly accepting of Indian culture. Nevertheless, there are still scenes where the Indian characters are portrayed as backward and lacking knowledge. For instance, when Todd encourages the employees to learn from American customers and engage in small talk, Manmeet asks what "small talk" is (*Outsourced* 00:23:14). In another scene, Todd explains the difference between rubber and eraser in American English, noting that rubber means condom. None of the employees seem to know what a condom is; therefore, Todd elaborates: "birth control". Manmeet then asks if it actually works, while Asha smiles, indicating that she understands (*Outsourced* 00:30:20-00:31:05). These portrayals present the Indian characters, particularly Manmeet, as less knowledgeable and naïve, especially compared to Todd, subtly reinforcing a sense of cultural inferiority to him and beyond that to the West.

This theme of cultural inferiority is also reflected in the film's treatment of concepts like "mail-order brides". The term "mail-order brides" refers to women from developing countries who seek to find love in developed countries through agencies. This booming industry has also made its way into cinematic representations, often reinforcing racial, gender, class as well as colonialist stereotypes (Mendoza and Zare 366). In *Outsourced*, however, it is not a woman

looking for love in a Western country, but the Indian employee Manmeet. He is depicted as struggling to focus on his job of selling products, instead asking the callers who reach the call center whether they are married (*Outsourced* 00:37:28). In a scene at the end of the movie he also announces his engagement to one of the callers (*Outsourced* 01:28:00). According to Lilly Mendoza and Bonnie Zare, “the continued peddling of reductive/stereotypical images of Third World women seeking marriage with Western men serves to perpetuate a regime of colonialist and patriarchal relations not only between the immediate contracting parties, but in the imagination of the public at large” (367). In *Outsourced* this dynamic is reversed, with a man seeking a Western partner instead of a woman. Therefore, the movie does not reinforce gender or patriarchal stereotypes in the same way, however, it does indeed perpetuate colonialist and class-based stereotypes, reflecting underlying power imbalances.

4.3.3. Representation of “the Oriental woman”

Contemporary popular culture often portrays the racial “Other” as exciting. Cultural differences are embraced to make mainstream white culture more interesting, “intense and satisfying” while simultaneously revealing underlying fantasies involving the racial “Other” (Hooks 21). Representations of the Orient in film, particularly of Oriental women, strongly influence audiences and profoundly shape perceptions (Uchida 167). Although engaging with other cultures has the potential to challenge racism, the continuous portrayal of desire for the exotic “Other” often manifests as fetishism. These representations typically neglect to address the deeper issues of racism, allowing existing power dynamics to remain intact (Hooks 22).

This depiction, however, is not confined to contemporary media. Said argues that Orientalists have portrayed the Oriental, as strange, different and inferior, while also emphasizing the “exotic sensuousness” specifically associated with Oriental women since the 1840s (*Orientalism* 72, 6). He notes that an encounter between the French novelist Gustave Flaubert and an Egyptian woman produced a “model of the Oriental woman”: “she never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence, or history. He spoke for and represented her. He was foreign, comparatively wealthy, male” (Said, *Orientalism* 6). In contrast, we can think of the Indian protagonist Asha in *Outsourced* as someone who challenges the stereotypes of the Oriental female, as Gutmann and Smith also note (133). Asha not only speaks for herself and speaks up against Todd; she is also depicted as a competent worker within the company. However, this portrayal is primarily based on Todd’s comments, which might be influenced by

his infatuation with Asha, suggesting that his praise of her competence could be driven by his attraction to her.

The portrayal of the Indian women in *Outsourced* is multifaceted and ambiguous. While the analysis centers on the protagonist Asha, it is important to note that the other women in the movie only have secondary roles. Asha is portrayed as a self-confident woman who stands as almost an equal to Todd. Nevertheless, her character also serves to entertain the Western protagonist and the audience. According to Ono and Pham, Asian women in Hollywood productions often fulfill the only role of entertaining men (qtd in Singh 43). While Pardeep Singh argues that this dynamic is evident *Outsourced* (43), I claim that it is more complex, as Asha's character transcends mere entertainment. She possesses her own point of view, which she expresses confidently, along with her desires and ambitions.

In examining the portrayal of Oriental women in popular media, Uchida identifies a prevalent narrative that reduces their complexities to mere objects of desire for Western men. According to her, the narrative starts with her being depicted as existing solely to please the "Western Man, who represents the powerful, the superior, the dominant people" (168). In the following step "the Oriental Woman chooses the Western Man over Oriental Men" (Uchida 168). However, Uchida shows that the Oriental woman occupies an object position rather than an active subject position, meaning it is ultimately she who is chosen. Uchida further explains that the Oriental woman "cannot legitimately become the Western man's wife; the position is saved for the superior, privileged white woman" (168). This common narrative, however, does not apply to the film *Outsourced*. As already noted above, Asha's character transcends the purpose of solely satisfying Todd. The dynamics of their relationship are also more complex than the second step identified by Uchida (168). It is Asha, the Oriental woman, rather than Todd, the Western man, who makes it clear that their relationship lacks a future when he asks about the nature of their relationship, to which Asha responds: "Holiday in Goa", a phrase she and her friends use to describe engaging in a romantic relationship before marriage. However, by emphasizing that this is her "only holiday in Goa", Asha conveys that this experience holds potentially even greater significance for her than her eventual marriage, even though she might be constrained in her choices in this aspect (*Outsourced* 01:13:40-01:14:30). Therefore, in the relationship with Todd, Asha is not in the object position, thus challenging the typical narrative outlined by Uchida (168).

Additionally, a common cinematic narrative in the portrayal of Indian women is the concept of “virginal purity”, where the woman is depicted as sexually attractive and desired by men but simultaneously “untouched by sexual desire” (Singh 43). Contrary to this trope, Asha effectively challenges these stereotypes by explicitly demanding Todd’s affection and sexual attention. For instance, at the end of the movie, the workforce is told that the call center will be outsourced again. Asha then asks Todd if they can return to the center to save the novel she has been writing during her breaks. When Todd inquires about the title of the novel, Asha replies: “Holiday in Goa”, referring to their affair. Moreover, she has obtained the keys to a friend’s apartment, where they can spend two hours together (*Outsourced* 01:29:40-01:30:33). Through her actions and words, Asha not only asserts her agency but also highlights her desires. However, as outlined above, a common narrative is also that the white male wins over the initially reluctant Asian woman (Balaji and Worawongs 226; Uchida 168). This pattern is evident in *Outsourced*, where Asha first appears averse to Todd, particularly in response to his indifference and ignorance toward India. This shift from Asha’s initial reluctance to her eventual acceptance of Todd’s affections along with her own explicitly expressed desires reflects both empowerment and the stereotypical representation of power dynamics.

This contradiction highlights the complexity of the concept empowerment. While embracing sexual desire can be empowering in some contexts, I argue that whether it is genuinely empowering depends on the cultural norms of a given society. As Keshab Chandra Mandal notes: “The term empowerment has different meanings in different socio-cultural, economic and political contexts” and “these definitions are embedded in local value systems and beliefs” (18). Empowerment takes on various forms, including social, educational, economic, political and psychological empowerment (Mandal 19-23). In Western contexts empowerment is often framed through the lens of individual autonomy and rights. This approach, advocated by “liberal feminism” is, however, criticized for its assumption that these principles are globally applicable (Masoda 6). In contrast, empowerment in non-Western contexts is often understood as being more deeply rooted in societal and cultural frameworks (Masoda 8, Rajan and Pathak 17-18). Indian cultures were historically more open toward sexuality, however, colonialism imposed stricter societal norms, significantly influencing female sexuality (Mitra 2020 in Rajan and Pathak 2). Shivani Rajan and Swati Pathak found that female sexuality and desire in India is often associated with feelings of regret and embarrassment due to the prevailing cultural norms (9). The respective study also reveals that the interviewed women emphasize sexual relations with their partners over sexual desire in a broader sense. Rajan and Pathak argue that

“there is [...] an undeniable reflection of a sense of social compensation for displacing the acceptability of pleasure derived in the female body and placing value solely in the pleasure of emotional bonds in predominant sociocultural discourse” (11). Although the study’s sample size involves only ten Indian women, it illustrates that embracing sexual desire frequently conflicts with traditional cultural norms. I contend that demonstrating sexual desire can still signify empowerment in non-Western contexts if it challenges the cultural and societal restrictions imposed on women. However, challenging these norms may also create a tension between personal autonomy and societal expectations, highlighting the context-dependent nature of the concept empowerment.

In *Outsourced*, Asha challenges typical stereotypes of American films not only with her sexual agency, but also with her competence and ambition. As Singh notes, Hollywood often depicts Indian women according to a limited set of stereotypes, portraying the "ideal" Indian woman as "tremendously compliant, family-oriented, selfless, unambitious" all while being visually appealing and catering to the desires of men, and remaining sexually reserved (44). They are also often portrayed as if they need guidance from a white male partner (Besana et al. 215; Singh 44). Uchida similarly contends that “the stereotype/image of the Oriental Woman that appears in everyday discourse today seems to be a direct descendant of the sexism, racism, and Orientalism in the historical practices of the United States”, specifically in relation to the immigration history of Asian women (167). As mentioned above, Asha challenges this trope of the ideal Indian woman. She is portrayed as the most capable Indian worker in the company, besides Puro, and the narrative does not suggest that she requires assistance from Todd or any other male figure. Instead, she is shown to be ambitious by actively contributing to the call center's success (*Outsourced*).

While the female Indian protagonist Asha subverts certain stereotypical narratives, she also conforms to the trope of the exotic and visually appealing character, as she is highly desired by Todd (*Outsourced*). Moreover, Minjeong Kim and Angie Chung found that the eroticized portrayal of Asian women in advertisements serves to attract a broader audience by incorporating multiple ethnicities, while simultaneously reinforcing white supremacy "through the visual consumption of Asian/American women’s bodies" (88). This observation aligns with Asha's portrayal in *Outsourced*, where, despite her representation as a complex character, the film also emphasizes her attractiveness and desirability, reinforcing certain exotic tropes.

4.3.4. Arranged marriage trope

Marriage and domesticity are prevalent themes in Hollywood movies about India, often portrayed in the context of arranged marriage. (Singh 43). As noted in the previous chapter, Asha challenges the trope of the “mail-order bride” by perceiving her relationship with Todd as a fling, referring to it as a “holiday in Goa” (*Outsourced* 01:13:45). For her, this relationship is a temporary escape before her marriage. When Asha informs Todd of her engagement, he is taken aback and asks how long she has been engaged. Asha responds that she has been engaged since she “was four years old” and that their “families have known each other since generations” (*Outsourced* 01:12:40). While her character challenges the “mail-order bride” narrative, it highlights the theme of arranged marriage. As noted by Spivak “the subaltern woman will be as mute as ever” (*Can the Subaltern Speak?* 90), highlighting the intersectionality of subaltern women, who are doubly marginalized – both by colonial structures and the patriarchal systems within their own societies. Although Asha challenges the typical representation of the Oriental woman and, to some extent, colonial structures, her character does not critique the patriarchal systems that confine her. She subtly reveals the constraints within her culture when she expresses that they cannot be seen having such an intense conversation (*Outsourced* 01:12:07). The movie briefly touches on these issues when Todd asks: “What about the right to choose for yourself? This phrase, however, also suggests that all individuals in Western societies have the freedom to choose, particularly in the context of marriage. While marriage is often presented as a personal choice in the Western world, it is tied to a “bourgeois respectability” and provides legal and financial benefits, such as “guaranteeing health care, equity upon divorce, tax benefits, and so forth” (Marso 146). These benefits may make marriage seem empowering, but they also highlight that marriage is not an individual choice for every Western individual, especially for women. For many it is shaped by economic decisions and societal pressures. Furthermore, the concept of marriage itself must still be critically examined, as Lori Jo Marso, drawing on the feminist Simone de Beauvoir, suggests. She argues that marriage is deeply embedded in societal structures that enforce traditional gender roles and reinforce racism and classism (148). Thus, decisions about marriage, and the institution of marriage itself, remain closely tied to socioeconomic factors, also in Western societies, complicating the idea of personal autonomy.

Asha’s response, however, does not explicitly convey her lack of choice: “My parents met each other on their wedding day. They love each other” (*Outsourced* 01:13:19). Instead, it reflects

her acceptance of a system that limits her agency. Nevertheless, her silence on this topic also suggests that questioning her arranged marriage is not an option. Ultimately, Asha's perspective as a subaltern woman is complex. While she demonstrates a degree of agency by challenging certain stereotypes, she remains constrained by a patriarchal society.

4.3.5. The competent and silent Indian worker

As mentioned earlier, the “diligent worker” is a common trope in the representation of Asians in Western media. Maya Ramirez claims that this trope represents “Asians as subservient and silent workers” (7). Furthermore, the representation of Asian Americans in advertisements is often limited to professional contexts, as found by Taylor and Lee (qtd in Balaji and Worawongs 228). The trope of the subservient employee is reflected in the character Puro, who is supposed to take over the call center once trained by Todd. In one scene, Todd listens to the chaotic conversations in the call center, marked by cultural clashes and misunderstandings. Frustrated, Todd removes his headphones and sighs. When Puro enters the room, Todd exclaims: “Puro, where have you been? These are going crazy in here. I can’t have you wondering off. You are supposed to be coaching these people. Maduro is having a nervous breakdown. Manmeet hits on every woman who calls and where is the glass in this goddamn office?”. Puro, who has just brought Todd breakfast, apologizes several times and reassures him that “the glass is coming presently” (*Outsourced* 00:37:42-00:38:05). Although Todd eventually apologizes, the scene reinforces the cinematic trope of the silent, diligent worker.

The representation of the female character, Asha, partly aligns with the trope of the compliant and diligent employee. She is represented as hardworking and highly competent. Todd even acknowledges this when he says: “You’re the best we have and I have seen you giving advice to the others”, asking her to assist Puro and himself in lowering the MPI (Minutes Per Incident). When Puro hesitantly asks if Todd believes Asha can do it, Todd confidently responds: “I think Asha can do anything” (*Outsourced* 00:50:22-00:50:48). However, Asha is not a silent figure. As discussed in the previous chapter, she is unafraid to address unfairness or problems within the company. For instance, she tells Todd that she refuses to lie to the customers (*Outsourced* 00:23:58). Despite this, she ends up doing so in a scene where a customer complains about outsourcing. Asha suggests that the customer can buy a similar American-made product, however, at a much higher price (*Outsourced* 01:24:35). This moment highlights her ability to solve difficult situations, reinforcing her role as a competent worker.

Not only Puro and Asha are portrayed as diligent workers, but the entire staff is as well. However, at the beginning, they are depicted as inefficient, with a high MPI indicating that they are too slow and unfamiliar with the Western standards expected of them (*Outsourced*). This reinforces the idea that American corporate practices are superior to Eastern ones. Nevertheless, throughout the movie, the employees develop and are eventually portrayed as being diligent and capable workers. This transformation parallels Todd's own growth: as his expectations shift and he starts to appreciate the workers' strengths, their competence becomes apparent. Moreover, this change is supported by training and adaptation. For example, when the whole office is flooded Todd decides to set up the workstations on the roof. When Todd's boss, visiting from the U.S., expresses doubt and claims that it is not impossible, Todd responds: "Maybe back in the states it is" (*Outsourced* 01:21:54). This contradicts the Orientalist claim that the Oriental is depicted as backward and inferior to Western societies (Said, *Orientalism* 7). Additionally, it challenges the common portrayal of Eastern societies as needing Western intervention, with the assumption that the West knows what is best for them (Said, *Orientalism* 35).

4.4. Neo-colonialism

While power dynamics at character level in the movie *Outsourced* are multifaceted and ambiguous, they extend throughout the narrative through the theme of neo-colonialism. Neo-colonialism refers to the method of private entities, financial institutions, and corporations assuming domination over a country. In neo-colonialism, the country appears to be independent and has the official symbols of sovereignty. However, it is indirectly controlled through economic, political, religious, ideological, and cultural influences with the backing of large multinational corporations who monopolize property, labor, resources, and trade. This kind of influence keeps the country in a state of dependence and underdevelopment, allowing external entities to continue their exploitation and maintain their influence without overtly governing the country (Nkrumah 4). For example, Nagesh Rao claims that neo-colonialism is closely linked to the dependency theory, which suggests that capitalism leads to the "development of underdevelopment" of developing nations (169). This means that capitalist systems exploit labor and resources from these countries, fostering economic growth in industrialized countries, while hindering the development of poorer nations.

4.4.1. Neo-colonial power dynamics

In the film *Outsourced*, the power dynamics are portrayed through the hierarchical labor structures, where Todd, the American manager, embodies a neocolonial figure. His position of authority over the Indian employees, especially in the first part of the film, emphasizes a significant power imbalance, with Todd representing Western authority and influence in a foreign country.

Western companies frequently outsource their operations to developing countries with lower labor costs and fewer regulations to increase profits (Hansen et al. 3), as depicted in *Outsourced* (00:01:40). While labor of “low value” is typically outsourced to these countries, “high value” tasks, such as design or marketing, usually remain in the developed nations (Mudambi 2007 qtd in Hansen et al. 216). According to Hansen and Schaumburg-Müller (2006 qtd in Hansen et al. 10), multinational corporations establish connections with local companies in developing countries, which can disrupt local economies, create a dependency on foreign markets, cause negative environmental effects and weaken regulations to remain competitive and attractive for multinational companies (Hansen et al. 219). While NAFTA (The North American Free Trade Agreement) provides rights for companies relocating jobs to developing countries, it does not impose any obligations on them. NAFTA ensures that products can be easily imported into the U.S. and that companies are granted “legal protection” in the country they outsource operations to (Lee 6). However, it does not enforce regulations regarding workers’ rights or environmental protection. Additionally, institutions such as the IMF (International Monetary Fund) “press for deregulation, privatization, liberalization of trade and financial markets, and rolling back labor market regulations” (Lee 103), arguing that these measures are necessary to encourage foreign investment and economic growth. In reality, they also lead to diminished labor rights as well as diminished environmental protection (Lee 101-103). These practices align with the dynamics of neo-colonialism, where the economic interests of the neo-colonizing countries dominate, reinforcing a system that exploits “foreign capital” for their own benefit rather than fostering genuine development (Nkrumah 4-8).

The concept of racialization plays a crucial role in neo-colonialist contexts, especially in power dynamics. The term racialization is defined as “the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice, or group” (Omi and Winant 111). Therefore, it describes assigning racial characteristics to contexts that were not associated with race before.

The concept is based on “racial categories, and the meanings attached to them” (Omi and Winant 111), such as the binary categories of the Orient and the Occident, with the attached meanings of the inferior and the superior (Said, *Orientalism* 72). One reason for racialization is the exploitation of labor from those deemed inferior. In the workplace, racialization considers not only race but also class and gender. Thus, women of color are particularly vulnerable to exploitation in employment settings (Alimahomed et al. 343). According to Michael Omi and Howard Winant, throughout history racial comparisons have had a significant influence on how gender roles are defined and understood. During slavery, both women and enslaved people were seen as inferior. Therefore, the way race has been viewed and treated in society has affected the role and status of women, often supporting oppression (107-108).

These intersecting dynamics of race, class and gender are crucial in shaping individual realities, as Spivak argues (*Can the Subaltern Speak?* 90); however, the experiences of people in postcolonial settings can differ significantly from those of people of color in first-world contexts. As an Indian woman, Asha is “intersectionally-marginalized” (Mazur 195), meaning that her experiences are shaped by the combined effects of her gender and postcolonial identity. Despite that, Asha demonstrates resilience and competence in her role. When Todd and Puro arrive late to the call center, Asha steps up to take on a leadership role, showing initiative and capability in managing the team effectively (*Outsourced* 00:44:20). This scene emphasizes her reliability and competence within the workplace, despite the underlying structures that might limit her. Later Todd acknowledges Asha’s skills and promotes her: “You’re the best we have. And I have seen you giving advice to the others. And after I leave, Puro is going to need an assistant manager. Now, we have to get the MPI down to 6.0. Can you help us?” (*Outsourced* 00:50:10-00:50:36). Nevertheless, as already outlined in a previous chapter, Asha’s competence is only acknowledged by Todd and even questioned by another character, Puro (*Outsourced* 00:50:44). This underlines that her competence is filtered through the lens of Todd, who represents the West and also has a higher-ranking position within the company. This exemplifies the pattern in which marginalized people demonstrate skill and competence, while recognition still depends on those in privileged positions (Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* 90).

In *Outsourced*, the hierarchical labor structures emphasize Todd’s early role as a neocolonial figure. His initial ignorance and indifference toward Indian culture becomes apparent in a scene in which he apologizes to the workforce: “Uh before everyone takes off, I’d like to call a little

meeting. I want to apologize to all of you, especially Asha. She was right; I need to learn about India. [...] Our first mistake has been trying to run this like an American office. [...] How can we do things differently? What would make your workday a more positive experience?” (*Outsourced* 00:45:00-00:45:24). In this moment, he not only admits that he was wrong in imposing Western culture on them but also actively seeks their suggestions for improvement. By using the pronoun “we”, Todd cultivates a sense of unity with the employees. While this scene highlights Todd's transition from ignorance to a more understanding perspective, it simultaneously illustrates the dynamics of Western benevolence (Said, *Orientalism* 37). Although he is portrayed as kind, the employees' requests only pertain to minor adjustments, such as wearing traditional Indian clothing or bringing family photos. By focusing on these small changes rather than addressing deeper, systemic issues Todd's benevolent gestures exemplify the superficiality that is often seen in neocolonial relationships (Nkrumah 8). Said argues that Orientalists have historically depicted the West as benevolent, while portraying the East as inferior and incapable of self-governance, thereby justifying colonial rule (*Orientalism* 37). As scholars have elaborated on the framework of their predecessors, this framework persists in contemporary discourse (202-203). Although Todd's gestures reflect kindness, they ultimately overshadow the underlying issue of neocolonialism.

4.4.2. Portrayal of labor exploitation

Globalization enabled the production of goods “independently of national boundaries”, decreasing the fixedness of these borders (Rao 173). While the terms, neo-colonialism and globalization, are closely related, they have contrasting emphases: neo-colonialism emphasizes the relevance of the “nation-state” to address exploitation and inequality, whereas globalization envisions a more interconnected, borderless world (Rao 176). Though Craig Lair and George Ritzer describe outsourcing as a “key aspect of globalization” (307), I argue that neo-colonialism better explains the power dynamics in the movie *Outsourced*.

Capitalist powers, such as the United States of America, sustain and expand their economic dominance through neo-colonialism (Nkrumah 52-53). They often disguise exploitation and taking advantage of vulnerable situations, branding their efforts as aid (8). Similar to neo-Orientalism, the priority has shifted from attempting to “civilize” the Oriental, to securing the wealth of Western nations – wealth extracted largely from colonial exploitation (Sa'di 2512). According to Kwame Nkrumah, neo-colonialism operates by creating an illusion that aid

benefits developing countries and enhances their living conditions. Nevertheless, this “aid” aligns with the interests of the neo-colonial powers, whose aim is to keep the developing countries dependent and economically subordinate. Nkrumah explains that “only when this contradiction is understood that the failure of innumerable ‘aid’ programmes [...] can be explained” (8). Aid initially benefits the neo-colonial country, but the profits and economic gain ultimately return to the “neo-colonial master”, perpetuating the cycle of dependency (Nkrumah 8, 189).

While the TV series *Outsourced* portrays global capitalism as a force of progress (Oh and Banjo 459), the film offers a different perspective. However, rather than critically addressing neo-colonialism or examining how capitalism intersects with neocolonial dynamics, the film perpetuates these structures through the apparent generosity of the colonizer, represented by Todd and the company “Western novelty”. Even with the jobs outsourced to China again at the film's end, it reinforces the portrayal of the West as benevolent. The Indian workers are portrayed as being equipped with 'Western knowledge' imparted by the colonizing company, giving them the opportunity to enter the global labor market. The workers, trained to meet the expectations of the Western company, are ultimately dismissed because it becomes even cheaper to produce goods in China. “China is the new India”, asserts the head of the company, further reinforcing his argument for outsourcing again: “Twenty heads for the price of one” (*Outsourced* 01:26:20). By depersonalizing the workforce, the movie contrasts this dehumanization with the portrayed benevolence of the company, illustrating how outsourcing, within a neo-colonial framework, allows companies to exploit labor while maintaining the illusion of a good deed. The worker's contentment in receiving one month's severance pay, which symbolizes a small recognition of their work, symbolizes an insufficient and superficial reward within the broader neo-colonial structure (*Outsourced* 01:27:15-01:28:40). This mirrors how outsourcing operates in neo-colonial systems that serve the economic interests of multinational companies, while disregarding workers' rights. Thus, *Outsourced* perpetuates a neo-colonial narrative, presenting Western actions as benevolent without critically engaging with the consequences of economic exploitation, overlooking underlying structural inequalities.

Puro's salary also serves as a key detail that underscores the neocolonial theme of economic disparity and cultural superiority. In an early scene, Todd's boss reveals Puro's salary with a laugh: “Half a million... rupees”, elaborating: “That's eleven thousand dollars a year doing your job. That's eight heads for the price of one” (*Outsourced* 00:03:15-00:03:30), underscoring

that the Indian employees' wages are a fraction of what Americans would earn for the same work. His laughter and tone emphasize his sense of superiority, portraying the West as particularly clever and strategic for taking advantage of lower wages in developing countries. In another scene, Puro expresses his pride in his future income and his engagement resulting from this: "Is it true that when I am manager, I am going to earn 500 000 rupees a year? [...]" "I could never think of marrying her until Western novelty hired me" (*Outsourced* 00:18:22-00:18:58). This scene highlights how Western companies exploit the workforce while presenting their actions as generous. As Nkrumah demonstrates, aid - represented in the form of increased wages for Indian workers in the film - only provides temporary benefits to neo-colonial states, ultimately serving developed nations in the long term (8). This dynamic appears in *Outsourced*, where the American company's motives are clear from the start, and Puro is portrayed as backward in his response to his wage, highlighting the persistent power imbalances and economic exploitation in this neo-colonial context.

4. *The Man who Knew Infinity* (2015)

The movie *The Man who Knew Infinity* (Dir. Brown, 2015) is a biographical drama about the Indian mathematician Srinivasa Ramanujan, based on the eponymous novel (Kanigel, 1991). Shortly before WWI, the gifted Indian mathematician Ramanujan is invited to Cambridge to work on mathematical theory under the mentorship of Hardy, a British mathematician at Cambridge University. Ramanujan's story reflects the challenge of adjusting to Western culture, personal sacrifices, and the difficulty of gaining recognition for one's work within the Western academic world. The movie also explores the binary relationship between Ramanujan and Hardy. Their contrasting approaches toward research shape the structure of their relationship, serving as metaphors for the broader differences between the East and the West.

5.1. Western production for Western consumption

In contrast to the biographical novel, the film *The Man who Knew Infinity* centers on the dynamic between Ramanujan and Hardy, which is primarily shaped by their differing perspectives on mathematics and culture. While the film is seemingly about Ramanujan and his mathematical abilities, these are not its central focus. Instead, the narrative emphasizes his interactions with his mentor Hardy, demonstrating a power imbalance that I will elaborate on in a later chapter. This focus on their relationship rather than Ramanujan's personal development or work itself, reflects the movie's aim toward a Western audience.

While the audience of *The Man who Knew Infinity* does not necessarily view the Indian protagonist and his culture through the eyes of the Western protagonist (as it is the case in *Outsourced*), the cultural perspective remains predominantly Western. In *Outsourced*, the portrayal of India and its culture is filtered through the eyes of the Western protagonist, with the narrative focusing less on India itself and more on his personal development - a common theme in cross-cultural encounters (Strain qtd in Tzanelli 6). Nevertheless, this dynamic is not present in *The Man who Knew Infinity*. Although Ramanujan travels to England, the audience does not perceive the country and its culture through his perspective. Instead, he is framed as the foreigner who must adapt. The Western cultural perspective is reflected in surrounding norms, ideals, and beliefs. For instance, when Ramanujan arrives at Cambridge, he bows as a form of greeting, while the scholar John Littlewood, welcoming him, extends his hand for a handshake. Ramanujan quietly apologizes for the confusion and they proceed to shake hands.

Although Littlewood chuckles at the cultural misunderstanding and even remarks “such a pleasure” (*The Man who Knew Infinity* 00:23:18), this moment also subtly reinforces the idea of the Western custom being superior to the Eastern one. While it may be polite to adapt to local customs when one travels to a foreign country, the scene also exemplifies how Western norms are depicted as *the* uncontested norm.

Ramanujan’s efforts to adapt to Western culture, as portrayed in the movie, can be seen in his physical transformation. For instance, he cuts his long hair and swaps his traditional Indian clothing for a Western suit (*The Man who Knew Infinity* 00:19:48, 00:20:44). These actions symbolize him leaving parts of his identity behind to fit into the Western world, especially the Western academic world. When his mother sees him with short hair, she reacts negatively. This moment coincides with his announcement that he is leaving for England, further reinforcing the haircut as a symbol of his departure and the sacrifices involved (00:20:12). Particularly his change to a suit could be seen as a symbol of the desire to be recognized as a legitimate and respectable mathematician in the Western world. As Bhabha highlights, colonized individuals adopted elements of the colonizer’s culture, but this tendency is marked by a “double articulation”, where the adoption of norms and values imposed by the colonizer carries an element of resistance (“Of Mimicry and Man” 126). Mimicry, in this sense, exposes hidden contradictions and weaknesses in the colonizer’s system. However, Ramanujan’s assimilation into Western culture in *The Man who Knew Infinity*, is not characterized by mimicry. Although he only partially adopts to Western culture – for example, when he refrains from eating traditional British cuisine in observation of his religious practices (00:32:00, 00:40:40) - these choices do not appear as acts of resistance. Instead, they seem to reflect his personal identity and priorities. Ramanujan’s partial assimilation appears to stem from an effort to conform to the unspoken expectations of the Western academic world. As Said argues, the Orient and the Occident are historically framed as fundamentally different, with the Oriental constructed as inferior in order to reinforce the Occident’s superiority (Said, *Orientalism* 7). Although Ramanujan attempts to adapt to Western culture, the movie still portrays the Orient and the Occident as contrasting, with Western norms and beliefs presented as superior.

Other scenes and elements in *The Man who Knew Infinity* further underscore how Western culture, with its norms and beliefs, are presented as the standard. For instance, the film presents a close-up of Ramanujan’s sandals alongside Hardy’s contempt-filled facial expression (00:27:35). Ramanujan also feels the need to justify himself: “The shoes, they hurt my feet”

(00:27:42). This scene illustrates how the Orient and the Oriental are interpreted through a Western lens. According to Said, “Orientalism, as a system of knowledge about the Orient,” serves as an “accepted grid for filtering through the Orient into Western consciousness” (*Orientalism* 6). From the late 1840s onward, the influence of this framework grew stronger, as Western interest in the Orient expanded. This not only led to the generation of more ideas and theories about the Orient, but also to the wider spread of these views, making them even more pervasive. The moment in *The Man who Knew Infinity* underscores the tension between Ramanujan’s cultural background and Western expectations, particularly as he no longer wears the sandals after this scene and instead wears dress shoes. The dominance of Western cultural norms is also evident in a scene where Hardy insists on the necessity of a common language, making clear that it is not going to be Tamil: “You wouldn’t expect us to converse with you in Tamil?”. By chuckling after this rhetorical question, Hardy implies that this would be absurd. Additionally, his emphasis on the pronoun ‘us’ highlights the separation between the Western scholars and Ramanujan, reinforcing their perceived superiority (*The Man who Knew Infinity* 00:28:30). Ramanujan then responds: “No, but you expect me to speak English”. While it is evident to Ramanujan (and presumably the audience) that the communication in Tamil is not a realistic option, as Ramanujan speaks English, but Hardy does not speak Tamil, Hardy’s tone underscores his perceived superiority and the imposition of Western standards.

5.2. Essentialization and stereotypes

As outlined in the previous chapters, essentialization and negative stereotyping are central elements of Orientalism, used to portray the Orient and the Oriental as inferior. Orientalism, described as “a created body of theory and practice” aimed to create a model of the ‘typical Oriental’ (Said, *Orientalism* 40, 6). Even as Orientalism expanded beyond written texts and theories, and Orientalists travelled to the regions they specialized in, their preconceived notions about the Orient remained fixed. Academic communities and media institutions disregarded knowledge that deviated from these established models. When the Orientalists attempted to apply their theories to the Orient, they often failed, which reinforced the characterization of the Oriental as “uncomprehending, hence degenerate natives” (Said, *Orientalism* 52). While the film *The Man Who Knew Infinity* portrays elements of Indian culture in an essentialist manner, it also simplifies Indian characters (Dir. Brown). For instance, the emotional depth of Ramanujan’s relationships - with his wife, his mother and Hardy - is briefly touched upon, but it lacks the complexity provided in the novel. Although these relationships highlight

Ramanujan's struggles and emotions, providing some depth that counters essentialization, they remain overly simplified. This contrasts with the eponymous biographical novel on which the film is based, which provides a more comprehensive understanding of diverse traditions and his relationships (Kanigel).

5.2.1. Culture

The Man who Knew Infinity tends to essentialize aspects of Indian culture by reducing it to a few symbolic elements (Dir. Brown). The film begins in India, depicting the early stages of Ramanujan's career and his invitation to England, but the majority of the film unfolds in England, with only brief scenes set in India, showing his wife and mother. These scenes offer limited insight into Indian culture, as it is portrayed primarily through simplified tropes, such as traditional clothing, food, music, and spiritual practices.

While the film highlights Ramanujan's spirituality, it fails to explore the deeper cultural background of these traditions. For example, in the beginning of the film, Ramanujan is shown kneeling and writing on the floor in front of a small figurine (Dir. Brown, *The Man who Knew Infinity* 00:02:30), possibly representing the goddess of Namagiri, whom Ramanujan worships. While in England, Ramanujan continues his religious practices, as depicted by his lighting of incense sticks, drawing patterns on a board with dust, and praying to his goddess (Dir. Brown, *The Man who Knew Infinity* 00:40:35–00:41:10). Meanwhile, his wife is shown visiting a temple in India (00:49:58). These portrayals of religious practices are often accompanied by Indian spiritual music. At the end of the film, when Ramanujan dies, the film shows a spiritual ritual, with people in traditional clothing surrounding wooden sticks arranged in a circular shape and set on fire, likely representing a funeral rite (01:37:35). While these scenes highlight Ramanujan's religious faith and offer some insight into Indian culture, they remain simplified and do not delve into the richness or complexity of the traditions they depict. In contrast, the biographical novel explains the religious practices and the beliefs of Brahmins, to which Ramanujan belonged, in more detail (Kanigel, *The Man who Knew Infinity* 21).

The Man who Knew Infinity does not entirely essentialize Indian culture (Dir. Brown), however, it leaves out important references, for instance, to caste. Nicole Boivin notes that “caste today is an important feature of social and political life in India” (226), and is often described as “the basic form of Indian society” (Dirks 3). Nicholas Dirks even claims that

understanding caste is essential to understand India (3). Traditionally, caste is defined as “hereditary, endogamous, hierarchically-ranked and sometimes occupationally specific groups to which all Hindus belong” (Boivin 226-227). It is something one is born into, shaping relationships with those from other castes. Each group has specific roles, duties, and societal status, influencing social relationships, career opportunities, and marriage. Caste groups are hierarchically ranked “by notions of ritual purity, according to which some activities, and hence occupations, are more pure than others”, as described by Boivin (228). However, the dynamics of caste are more complex and flexible in reality than this framework implies (Boivin 228). There are also different views on the origins of the caste system: While Dirks claims that the caste system, as we understand it today, can be traced back to the colonial era (5), Chakraborty highlights that colonial rule also brought certain rights to lower caste groups, such as access to education and public services (160). Nevertheless, this does not diminish the oppression and violence of colonialism.

Although the accuracy of information may be less important than the overall representation in movies (Stam and Spence 11-12), I nevertheless argue that omitting key aspects that are crucial for understanding Indian culture contributes to the simplification and partial essentialization of it (Dirks 3). In contrast, the biographical novel about Ramanujan provides more detailed insights into the caste system and Ramanujan’s background, as he belonged to the Brahmin caste, which held “the most exalted niche in the Indian caste system” (Kanigel, *The Man who Knew Infinity* 20). Thus, Ramanujan was part of a higher caste. As Chakraborty notes, “the majoritarian caste-Hindus appropriated the category of ‘the colonized’ in India even when they readily shared structures of oppression with the colonizers” (161). This suggests that while higher caste groups are often regarded as “the colonized” today, it was actually the lower caste groups that faced the greatest extent of colonial oppression. As a result, “caste as a category challenges nationalism” (Chakraborty 161), highlighting how caste is frequently neglected in discussions about colonialism and nationalism. These discussions tend to focus solely on the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, overlooking the internal hierarchies and power dynamics within Indian society itself.

Although Ramanujan belonged to the Brahmin caste in real life, considered as the highest caste in Indian society (Kanigel, *The Man who Knew Infinity* 20), a fact also mentioned in the movie (Dir. Brown, *The Man who Knew Infinity* 00:12:17), India is depicted using negative stereotypical imagery. For instance, before Ramanujan finds a place to live for his wife and his

mother, he is shown sleeping on the floor in a crowded room with several other people. The wall appears dirty, even looks moldy and the space is only covered from the outside with linen. He washes himself using only a bucket of water, highlighting the impoverished conditions (00:03:58). In contrast, when he visits a colonial institution in India to apply for a job, the building is depicted as pristine and well-maintained (00:04:28). While the portrayal of his living situation reflects the reality Ramanujan faced at that time (Kanigel, *The Man who Knew Infinity* 73), I argue that the visual contrast between the West and the East, without sufficient context, reinforces a perception of Western superiority. Rather than fostering a deeper understanding of colonial rule, these portrayals risk perpetuating Western dominance over the East (Said, *Orientalism* 7).

While the film omits relevant information, simplifying the narrative and contributing to an essentialized portrayal that reinforces an Orientalist ideology, it also features scenes that highlight both cultural and personal struggles. For instance, when Ramanujan informs his mother about his invitation to Cambridge, she reminds him that they “are Brahmins, it is forbidden to cross the seas” (*The Man who Knew Infinity* 00:12:17), highlighting the restrictions connected to caste. In another scene, Ramanujan performs a spiritual practice, setting up small figurines and washing them in a bowl (00:26:45). When he rushes to Hardy after that, a scholar from Trinity College points out that he has “something on your [his] forehead”, pointing to a white U. (Dir. Brown, *The Man who Knew Infinity* 00:12:50), which the film does not elaborate on. The “U” is a caste mark, known as the ‘namam’ associated with Ramanujan’s religious identity, as the novel explains (Kanigel, *The Man who Knew Infinity*, 21). While the film frequently shows glimpses of Indian religious practices and traditions, it does so without exploring their deeper meanings or cultural significance.

5.2.2. Identity and relationships

Although the film simplifies culture and part of identity, it provides insights into personal struggles and the values that shape individuals. For instance, the audience gains a deeper understanding of Ramanujan’s inner thoughts during a conversation with his wife, when Ramanujan reflects: “I used to come here and watch the boats leaving. I always wondered what it would be like to be on one of them.” This shows his desire to leave India, even though doing so is forbidden by his caste. In response, his wife expresses her fears and concerns: “I am finally here and you talk of crossing the sea? It is forbidden for us. I don’t understand. If you go, it will never be the same. This is not Kolkata or Bombay. No one will marry our children. No one will

even talk to us” (*The Man Who Knew Infinity* 00:18:16–00:18:55). This exchange underscores their conflicting desires, fears, and the struggles they face because of their caste. However, the film only briefly mentions caste, an aspect that is both a strength and a limitation in its representative scope. On the one hand, by not emphasizing caste too much, the movie avoids oversimplifying Indian identity as a society defined solely by this system and neglecting other factors of social identity (Boivin 234). On the other hand, by not fully addressing caste, the film overlooks the significant influence of caste on identity - an aspect that neglects a deeper understanding of its impact.

While the character of Janaki, Ramanujan's wife, is rendered less significant due to the film's primary focus on the binary relationship between Ramanujan and Hardy, she is not entirely reduced to a stereotypical representation. For instance, both Janaki's and Ramanujan's mother's names are never mentioned in the movie, however, this also applies to several British scholars at Trinity College. Janaki is depicted as submissive and obedient, particularly toward Ramanujan's mother, aligning her with the stereotypical portrayal of Oriental women (Uchida 162). However, she is not portrayed as "alluring, inexplicable, and desirable", as often the case in Hollywood films (Singh 43). She also does not conform to Flaubert's model of the Oriental woman, in the way that Said critiqued: "she never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence or history" (*Orientalism* 6). Although Janaki is a side character, she still conveys her fears and emotions. For instance, when Ramanujan leaves for England, she cries and asks him not to forget her (*The Man Who Knew Infinity* 00:21:10–00:22:05). Thus, while Janaki lacks agency and is presented as a passive character, her emotions in the film challenge a completely stereotypical representation, as she does convey her feelings, even if they are not deeply explored. Ramanujan's character will be examined in the chapter after the next, with a focus on power dynamics.

As noted before, Ramanujan's relationship with Hardy is central to the film's narrative. While their bond strengthens throughout the film and they even refer to each other as friends toward the end (*The Man Who Knew Infinity* 01:21:16), their relationship is not explored in depth beyond its professional and intellectual dimension. Moreover, the film often emphasizes their differences through a perspective shaped by power imbalance. Notably, the simplification is not restricted to the Indian individuals, as it is often the case, in order to emphasize the portrayal of the Western characters as superior (Said, *Orientalism* 6-7). Western individuals, such as Hardy, are also portrayed in a similarly simplified way. Ramanujan himself critiques Hardy: "I don't see pictures of anyone in here. Not even family. Who are you, Mister Hardy?" (*The Man*

Who Knew Infinity 00:59:00). This highlights Hardy's portrayal as an emotionally unavailable character, with little insight provided into his personality.

Ramanujan's relationships with his wife and his mother play a secondary role in the film and are, therefore, not explored in detail. The character of Ramanujan's mother serves primarily as a representation of his cultural background and the expectations placed upon him, without an in-depth examination. In contrast, the eponymous biographical novel delves much deeper into these relationships, while also giving insight into Indian traditions (Kanigel, *The Man Who Knew Infinity* 272–276).

Conclusively, the film *The Man who Knew Infinity* simplifies aspects of both culture and identity but avoids fully essentializing them. It touches upon elements of Indian culture, such as religious practices, music, traditional food and caste, but presents these in a superficial way. Nevertheless, the simplification is not limited to the Indian characters, as the British characters are also depicted in a way that lacks depth. While they lack complexity, they are not fully reduced to stereotypes. The stereotypical portrayal of India, however, especially the impoverished conditions in contrast to the colonial institution without context may contribute to a perception of Western superiority.

5.3. Portrayal of racism and colonialism

The Man who Knew Infinity includes scenes of both physical violence and verbal racism toward Ramanujan. Rather than promoting racism, these moments serve to highlight the experiences and challenges he faces. Despite this, these portrayals remain superficial, presenting racist acts without providing sufficient historical or social context. Furthermore, the emphasis is placed on overt forms of racism, overlooking the underlying structural racism. This creates the impression that racism consists of a series of individual acts, suggesting it is not particularly difficult to resolve, rather than recognizing it as a complex system of oppression.

5.3.1 Racism

The Man who Knew Infinity portrays several scenes that shed light on racism and marginalization without perpetuating racism, as Ramanujan's skill and knowledge are highlighted in some of them. However, I argue that the film ultimately does not achieve dismantling Orientalist tropes. This stems from the lack of depth in its portrayal of racism as

well as the depiction of the Eastern character needing validation from a Western character for others to overcome racist stereotypes.

Siti Ayu Wulandari et al. recognize the way the movie sheds a spotlight on social problems, like racism in England during WWI. While they argue that it portrays negative stereotypes, it is unclear whether they believe that the movie itself perpetuates negative stereotypes. However, they argue that “those who consider themselves as ‘the one’” construct certain discourses that make it easier to accept racism (Wulandari et al. 63). This perspective aligns with Chatterjee’s argument, referring to Foucault, that it is the discourse of the “superior” in the case of a power relationship that will prevail: “if the social situation is underlined by a power imbalance, it is the institutions of the more powerful that control and regulate knowledge and its discursive manifestation” (202). The implicit regularities of these institutions dictate who is allowed to speak and what can be said (Foucault 64-69), hence, also have the power to decide which voices are heard.

Spivak argues that the voices of the subaltern can never truly be heard because they are constrained by existing structures, and any attempt to amplify these voices merely replicates the same dynamics and risks perpetuating those very structures (*Can the Subaltern Speak?* 90-92). Nevertheless, I contend that it is crucial to include scenes depicting racist actions to provide insight into the struggles Ramanujan faces due to his heritage. For example, during WWI, Ramanujan steps out of the post office and is confronted by three soldiers who follow him, insult and assault him: “Look who it is, the genius walk, can you believe this? They send us off, while he keeps here in luxury. Freeloading little blackie”. The soldiers kick him as he lies on the ground and scatter the vegetables from his bag over him. Then one soldier declares: “This is our home; don’t you forget it” (*The Man who Knew Infinity* 00:52:26-00:53:00). The scene ends with a close-up shot of Ramanujan’s face, distorted by pain, likely evoking empathy from the audience. While this moment highlights the racism Ramanujan faces, it offers only a brief glimpse into the systemic oppression those labeled as “Other” endure. By limiting its focus to physical and verbal assaults, the scene simplifies the broader structures of colonial and institutional racism. Although it briefly sheds light on the marginalization of Indians during that time, it neglects the deeper colonial historical context that shaped such oppression (Said, *Orientalism* 33-37). This omission frames the process of overcoming racism as relatively straightforward. Therefore, I contend that the film’s representation of the racist challenges

Indians in England faced during that era only scratches the surface of the issue. This superficial portrayal ultimately fails to challenge the Orientalist narrative.

Besides the explicit physical and verbal racism depicted in the scene mentioned above, the movie also portrays more covert and discrete forms of discrimination. For instance, when Hardy asks Ramanujan why everyone wants them to fail, Ramanujan responds that the reason is that he is Indian (*The Man who Knew Infinity* 00:37:05). While he does not elaborate on this statement further, it reveals his awareness of the disadvantages that he has to face because of his ethnicity. The viewer experiences this through his perspective rather than through the lens of a Western character, as is often the case. Nevertheless, in a later scene, the scholar Mr. Howard states that “it is only the good will of the college that allows Ramanujan here” (*The Man who Knew Infinity* 00:55:20). This aligns with Said’s notion that the West often depicted itself and its actions as benevolent, framing them as assistance, thereby justifying exploitation and colonial brutality (*Orientalism* 33-34). Mr. Howard, by describing the college’s decision to invite Ramanujan as an act of generosity, mirrors Said’s argument. This same scholar speaks to Ramanujan in a degrading manner in a previous scene. When Ramanujan continues his mathematical equation on the board, Mr. Howard does not praise his contribution but instead harshly reprimands him: “You don’t pull a stunt like that in my class. You don’t belong here and you can tell your master Hardy I said as much. Now get out” (*The Man who Knew Infinity* 00:34:00-00:34:40). The combination of Howard raising his voice, his dismissive words, slapping Ramanujan on the chest and Ramanujan’s shocked facial expression serves to strengthen the audience’s empathy for Ramanujan and the antipathy for the condescending scholar. Moreover, these moments highlight Ramanujan’s skill and knowledge while still depicting him as marginalized. Therefore, these scenes effectively shed light on racism, rather than perpetuating it.

The film also shows scenes that reveal the presence of negative prejudice toward Indians. Just before Ramanujan meets the scholars of Trinity College, they are gathered in a hall and a conversation unfolds. One scholar argues: “I think it’s criminal. I mean we bring these Indians over at great expense and look what happens. [...] After all we do have Indian students here. (*The Man who Knew Infinity* 00:24:06-00:24:24). Another scholar, MacMahon, adds that they have “just not ones with no education to speak of. It’s a disgrace”. This dialogue highlights the general bias and racial stereotyping directed at Indian students. Even before Ramanujan is introduced to them, they already convey their negative attitudes toward him. The statement of

the first scholar, even expresses frustration over the “waste” of resources spent on the foreign, particularly the Indian, students. MacMahon’s comment further emphasizes this prejudice, specifically referring to Ramanujan’s lack of education. In a later scene, Ramanujan and Hardy are in MacMahon’s office having an argument, where MacMahon shouts: “You fail on primes and you think you can just turn around and crack partitions. Can’t be done, I am telling you. Especially not by you” (*The Man who Knew Infinity* 01:06:28), pointing to Ramanujan. This comment not only shows MacMahon’s personal bias against Ramanujan but also the broader academic environment of the time. The early 20th century was shaped by an evolving role of research in British academia (Rice and Wilson 188). While the London Mathematical Society, founded in 1865, had gained prominence by 1900 (Rice and Wilson 174-175), research was not yet considered an obligation for the professors at British universities. This began to change in the early 20th century, and by 1940 research had become an integral part of their academic roles (Rice and Wilson 188). Hardy played a pivotal role in advancing research throughout this period. During the years of WWI, he made groundbreaking contributions, particularly in collaboration with Ramanujan and the British mathematician Littlewood, especially in “analytic number theory and the theory of partitions” (Rice and Wilson 180). Hardy’s and Ramanujan’s formula for partitions, known as the Hardy-Ramanujan Asymptotic Formula was published in 1918 in their paper “Asymptotic Formulae in Combinatory Analysis”.

When Ramanujan confidently expresses his belief that he will succeed in the aforementioned scene, MacMahon retorts that he is the one who will do it and that Ramanujan “can crawl back under whatever rock you [he] came from in India and we [they] can put to bed this charade” (*The Man who Knew Infinity* 01:06:55). MacMahon’s derogatory language underlines the racial stereotypes he holds of the Oriental and his dehumanizing views of Ramanujan. However, a later scene shows the shift of MacMahon’s perspective when he claims that Ramanujan is “the finest mind” he has ever seen and even defends him from another scholar (01:29:48- 01:30:09). Denisha Shah argues that Ramanujan’s mentor Hardy “succeeds in resolving the conflict of racial bias by demonstrating the young man’s amazing, gifted talent and remarkable validation of genius to a mathematical society that is snobbish” (4). She further claims that Matt Brown, the director of *The Man Who Knew Infinity*, shows that racism “on a more global level” can be overcome “with the help and collaboration of a middle level of leadership” (Shah 4-5), referring to Hardy. However, I argue that while the scenes analyzed above emphasize the racial prejudices Ramanujan faces, they also illustrate how he is constantly required to prove himself

and seek validation from a Western character before his talents are recognized. This dynamic ultimately strengthens, rather than dismantles, Orientalist tropes.

Nevertheless, I argue that most scenes depicting racism in *The Man who Knew Infinity* neither challenge nor reinforce the Orientalist narrative. The representation of racism in the movie differs significantly from the explicit racism and dehumanization often seen in colonial literature, such as *Heart of Darkness*. The literary critic Chinua Achebe, for example, criticizes how the colonial novel dehumanizes Africa and Africans, thereby perpetuating racist stereotypes (21). In contrast, the rare scenes portraying explicit racism in *The Man Who Knew Infinity* rather evoke empathy from the audience than reinforcing negative stereotypes. This can be seen in the aforementioned scene when the soldiers attack Ramanujan. It shows Ramanujan's face contorted in pain, rather than moving on with showing the soldiers. Nevertheless, as argued above, the movie only superficially displays the cruelty at that time. As Garg and Pawar argue, representations of racism require more than simply "pushing a racial group to the forefront"; but popular media holds great potential as it has significant influence in perpetuating or challenging racist stereotypes, ultimately shaping opinions (192-193). Due to the superficial treatment of explicit racism in *The Man Who Knew Infinity*, these scenes fail to deconstruct the Orientalist narrative. However, they also do not directly reinforce power dynamics; rather, a more subtle form of Orientalism does.

5.3.2. Colonialism

Similarly to its treatment of caste, *The Man who Knew Infinity* omits significant information about colonialism. During the time in which the movie is set, India was under British colonial rule, a system which lasted almost 200 years until 1947 (Iyer 693-694). Colonial India was divided between territories directly governed by the British Crown and those under indirect rule by Indian kings, known as "native states" or "princely states" (Iyer 694). Colonialism is a key factor for the close relationship between Great Britain and India in the movie, with several scenes suggesting a colonial context as a backdrop. Ramanujan applies for a job at colonial institutions, which are never explicitly identified, but are suggested as such through subtle details. For instance, the Western scholars are dressed in formal Western attire and speak with British accents (00:03:00, 00:05:00). The British scholar, seemingly the head of the institution says: "You people are all the same. Now get out" (*The Man who Knew Infinity* 00:03:03), referring to Indians. Additionally, an Indian man, working in a colonial institution introduces

Ramanujan as “the new clerk” to his British supervisor. The man responds: “Narayana, how long have you worked for me?” (00:05:06). His question implies that he expects Narayana to understand his disinterest in someone like Ramanujan, especially when he remarks that Ramanujan “looks like someone who lives on the streets” (00:05:15). Narayana’s response, “since I helped you design the bridge of Godavari, which now requires me to call you sir. Sir Francis” (*The Man who Knew Infinity* 00:05:10), underscores the colonial power dynamics at play. The construction of the first Godavari bridge, also referred to as “The Havelock Bridge” started in 1897 (“Engineering Tourism”). Following the Indian rebellion of 1857, direct British colonial rule was established in 1858 (Iyer 696). The fact that the Indian character had to refer to his supervisor as “sir” after that highlights the colonial hierarchy. Furthermore, when an Indian scholar asks whom Ramanujan has shown his notes to, he replies: “Everyone. The British. The Indians. They all send me to someone else” (*The Man who Knew Infinity* 00:04:35). Although these scenes hint at colonial rule, the narrative is never situated within the broader framework of colonial power dynamics. As Said states: “The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe’s greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other” (*Orientalism* 1), highlighting the influence of colonialism on culture and academics. Although the movie does not entirely neglect colonialism, it fails to represent the broader implications of it, including how colonial power structures influence Ramanujan’s life and the power dynamics depicted in the movie.

While I argue that scenes depicting racist physical or verbal violence have the potential to shed light on the experiences of marginalized individuals, I contend that the way these scenes are portrayed in *The Man who Knew Infinity* ultimately fails to achieve this. Although some scenes presumably evoke empathy for Ramanujan, raising awareness among the audience, their superficial portrayal and lack of context prevent them from challenging the power dynamics between the West and the East.

5.4. Representation of power dynamics

The Man who Knew Infinity does not explicitly promote or endorse racism, but it establishes a discourse that rationalizes the power dynamics between Western and Eastern cultures. At the very beginning of the movie, Hardy’s voice recounts: “I suppose it is always a little difficult for an English man and an Indian to understand one another” (*The Man who Knew Infinity*

00:01:50). This sentence simplifies the complexities of cross-cultural communication, ignoring the impact of power dynamics and framing differences as if they are inherent. Throughout the film, most scenes that portray power dynamics emphasize Ramanujan's mathematical approach as lacking proof, compared to the logical and rational thinking of the West, embodied by the protagonist Hardy. Therefore, these scenes perpetuate a binary power dynamic.

5.4.1. Character level

The West aims to forge its identity as superior, thereby framing the Orient's and Oriental's identity as inferior, as Said states (*Orientalism* 7). Although Ramanujan is not depicted as intellectually inferior in *The Man who Knew Infinity*, given his advanced mathematical skills, he is portrayed as needing guidance from the West. This power dynamic between the West and the East is particularly evident in the beginning of the movie.

For instance, in an early scene, Hardy dismisses Ramanujan's application as absurd when he says to Littlewood: "This year alone I have received correspondence from those who profess to prove the prophetic wisdom of the pyramids, the revelations of the elders of Zion and the cryptograms which Bacon supposedly buried within the plays of Shakespeare. But a letter from an ill-educated Indian clerk in Madras challenging assertions I made in the track theories really takes the biscuit" (*The Man who Knew Infinity* 00:15:05-00:15:40). By comparing Ramanujan's application to other "absurd" ideas and conspiracy theories, he frames it as ridiculous and portrays Ramanujan as someone whose claim lacks credibility. Furthermore, his reference to Ramanujan as "an ill-educated clerk in Madras" emphasizes his sense of dominance in a racial and cultural hierarchy, implying that someone from Ramanujan's background would not be able to contribute anything meaningful, while highlighting the lack of formal education.

The power dynamics in *The Man who Knew Infinity* between the West and the East are not solely depicted through Western characters. For instance, the Indian scholar working at the colonial institution Ramanujan applied to claims that they "need to seek an audience with someone who really understands all of this". Ramanujan responds that he has approached everyone in Madras. The scholar then chuckles: "Madras... did you know that the name derives from Mandaraja? The realm of the stupid". There's a whole world out there. And there is England" (*The Man who Knew Infinity* 00:08:13-00:08:38). In another scene, when Ramanujan's mother announces in India that Ramanujan's work has been published, she

describes the “London mathematical society”, as “a very prestigious society” (*The Man who Knew Infinity* 00:47:10). This statement from the Indian scholar strengthens the Orientalist narrative, as it is not a Western character who depicts the East as inferior (Said, *Orientalism* 7). Instead, an Eastern character expresses this view. Said explains the relationship between the East and the West as one that is rooted in inequality, marked by dominance and “complex hegemony” (*Orientalism* 5). Hegemony, a concept developed by Gramsci, refers to “the process of moral, philosophical and political leadership that a social group attains only with the active consent of other important social groups” (Artz and Murphy 1). This power is maintained not through violent coercion, but through consent and acceptance (Artz and Murphy 3). In the aforementioned scene in *The Man who Knew Infinity*, an Eastern character, hence, belonging to a subordinate group according to Orientalist theory (Said, *Orientalism* 7), accepts and reinforces the notion of Western superiority. This act of accepted inferiority reinforces the Orientalist portrayal, as it suggests that even Eastern individuals perceive Western culture, and by extension, its identity, as superior.

Nevertheless, I argue that the scenes that portray the perceived superiority of Western characters do not fully reinforce the Orientalist narrative. When Ramanujan is still in India and frustrated by his job rejections, he states: “The British think I am a raving lunatic (*The Man who Knew Infinity* 00:03:36). This line offers insight into Ramanujan’s perspective, portraying him as aware of how he is perceived by the British, and by extension by the West, contrasting with the Orientalist depiction of the East as “irrational” and “backward” (Said, *Orientalism* 40, 7). Rather than a “passive” “object” of study” (Said, *Orientalism* 97), his statement demonstrates an understanding of the prevailing power structures, also highlighting his agency and intellect.

Similarly to the scene depicting a physical form of racist violence, another moment in *The Man who Knew Infinity* portrays a scholar's belief in his superiority over Ramanujan. However, both do not reinforce Orientalist power hierarchies between the Western and the Eastern characters. During a lecture, Ramanujan does not take notes as expected; the scholar, therefore, asks if he would like to contribute something. In response, Ramanujan finishes his equation on the board. Enraged, the scholar remarks: “Let me tell you something. You don’t pull a stunt like that in my class. You don’t belong here and you can tell your master Hardy I said as much. Now get out” (*The Man who Knew Infinity* 00:33:15-00:34:40). Although the scholar belittles Ramanujan and insists that he does not belong at Trinity College, this scene ultimately challenges, rather than supports, the Orientalist narrative. Ramanujan is not portrayed as lacking

knowledge, being “lethargic”, “childlike” or “irrational”, as often the case in Orientalist representations (Said, *Orientalism* 38-40). On the contrary, his mathematical skill and passion are highlighted when he claims that he is following the lecture “most excitedly” (*The Man who Knew Infinity* 00:33:18). Therefore, the scene rather sheds light on the perceived superiority of the scholar and the threat Ramanujan poses to this authority. This reflects Said’s assertion that Orientalism is “not an inert fact of nature” (*Orientalism* 4), but a constructed power dynamic, that the scholar feels is challenged by Ramanujan in this situation.

5.4.1.1. Logic vs Myth

As outlined above, most scenes depicting racist actions, racist prejudice and explicit power dynamics in *The Man who Knew Infinity* do not, by themselves, necessarily perpetuate an Orientalist narrative. This pattern is shown, for instance, when Ramanujan is belittled or his heritage disparaged. Instead, the movie constructs a framework that strengthens this narrative more subtly. Ramanujan is portrayed within a binary relationship, constantly being compared to his mentor Hardy, with his mathematical methods depicted as inferior.

Ramanujan’s mathematical abilities are continuously compared to Hardy’s, reinforcing the power dynamics between them. Ramanujan’s approach to mathematics, which is based on intuition, is contrasted with the Western emphasis on formal proof, portrayed as the standard. When Ramanujan arrives at Trinity with the intention of publishing his work, Hardy insists that he must attend lectures at the college. Ramanujan, frustrated, responds that he came to Trinity to publish, to which Hardy responds: “Yes, one at a time, I hope. But first we need *proofs* of your work”, emphasizing the word ‘proofs’. Littlewood then steps in and argues that it “is simply a question of acquainting you with the more formal methods that will benefit our future work together”, stressing the word ‘formal’ (*The Man who Knew Infinity* 00:27-58-00:28:27). In a later scene Littlewood assumes that “there’s a reason he doesn’t like proofs [...] they may be disagreeable to his formulas” (*The Man who Knew Infinity* 00:48:47). These exchanges highlight not only the Western view of formal mathematics, they also continuously contrast Ramanujan’s approach with the Western one. The emphasis on formal methods underscores that Ramanujan needs to conform to these methods in order to be successful.

The film not only portrays Ramanujan’s reliance on intuition as inferior to the Western emphasis on formal proof, but also mythicizes his approach. For example, Ramanujan tells

Hardy that his mathematical insights are given to him by the goddess Namagiri: “She speaks to me; puts formulas on my tongue when I sleep. Sometimes when I pray” (*The Man who Knew Infinity* 01:21:50-01:23:30). This mystical portrayal of his abilities aligns with Said’s argument that Orientalists produced not only factual “knowledge” about the East, but also “second-order knowledge” - included myths and stereotypes - like the “mysterious East” (*Orientalism* 52). According to the eponymous biographical novel *The Man who Knew Infinity*, Ramanujan genuinely believed in Namagiri and was convinced that he received his mathematical abilities through her. The novel explores this in more detail and explains that these aspects were fundamental in Ramanujan’s world, without disregarding “practical matters” (Kanigel, *The Man who Knew Infinity* 30). At the same time the novel refrains from portraying this approach as inferior to a traditional Western one: “It was a world in which the spiritual, the mystical, and the metaphysical weren’t consigned to the fringes of life, but lay near its center” (Kanigel, *The Man who Knew Infinity* 30). Unlike the novel, the film highlights the contrast of Ramanujan’s mysticism and the Western focus on logic and proof, framing his intuition as insufficient. Hardy’s response reinforces this dichotomy when he tells Ramanujan that he does not believe in God and anything he cannot prove. Ramanujan responds that Hardy’s lack of faith makes it impossible for him to believe in Ramanujan (Brown, *The Man who Knew Infinity* 01:23:05-01:23:30). This exchange further highlights the binary opposition between proof and mysticism, embodied in Hardy and Ramanujan.

As I showed above, Ramanujan is never portrayed as backward or intellectually inferior, as the Orientalist narrative would suggest (Said, *Orientalism* 7); in fact, the opposite is the case. Nevertheless, as formal methods of mathematics, including proofs, are portrayed as superior to Ramanujan’s intuitional approach, the Western scholars insist that he must adopt them. Ramanujan, however, is depicted as unable to understand their importance, referring to them as a “waste of time”. This leads Hardy to raise his voice: “I’m not sure that you know how you got there [...] Intuition is not enough. It has to be held accountable” (*The Man who Knew Infinity* 00:35:50-00:36:55). Despite Hardy’s comparison of Ramanujan to Newton (00:39:15-00:39:38), which emphasizes his intellectual brilliance, Ramanujan is still portrayed as lacking an understanding of the norms and expectations of Western scholarship.

While Hardy’s tribute to Ramanujan at the film’s end emphasizes his exceptional talent and the inspiration Hardy drew from him, it ultimately cannot challenge the underlying power relationship (*The Man who Knew Infinity* 01:36:08-01:37:02). The statement “His originality

has been a constant source of suggestion to me ever since I first met him”, suggests that, despite their differing approaches shaped by their cultural backgrounds, the relationship was both intellectually and personally significant for Hardy. He further remarks that whenever he is “forced to listen to tiresome and pompous people” he reminds himself that he collaborated with both Littlewood and Ramanujan. This statement conveys Hardy’s gratitude for having had the privilege of working with Ramanujan. While this scene does not support the Orientalist narrative, it neither fully dismantles it. The traditional Orientalist narrative reinforces the power relationship between the East and the West (Said, *Orientalism* 5); but this is not the case in this scene. Instead, Hardy highlights Ramanujan’s brilliance and intellectual contribution, positioning him as an equal. Nevertheless, the scene does not fully deconstruct the Orientalist narrative either, considering it occurs after Ramanujan’s death. By praising his astounding mathematical knowledge without criticizing his intuitive approach only posthumously, it creates the impression that Hardy refrains from criticizing Ramanujan’s methods solely because he is no longer alive or in a weakened, defenseless state, as outlined in the following paragraph. This could stem from feelings of guilt, not only over the systemic barriers and racism Ramanujan faced but also the divide between Western proofs and Eastern intuition that Hardy reinforced. It may also reflect the social norm of refraining from speaking ill of the dead. Thus, Hardy’s tribute and the positive comments, when arguing for his fellowship, could be shaped by either guilt or social conventions, rather than fully representing his genuine feelings. For these reasons, I argue that, although Hardy praises Ramanujan and portrays him as an equal, the scene cannot dismantle the ongoing power relationship.

In a later scene, Hardy and other scholars discuss Ramanujan’s potential fellowship at Trinity College. During the conversation, Hardy explains that for Ramanujan, “an equation [...] had no meaning unless it expressed the thought of God (*The Man who Knew Infinity* 01:28:27). While Hardy does not believe in God, he represents Ramanujan’s perspective, aligning with what Spivak refers to as “speaking for” someone (*Can the Subaltern Speak?* 70). Hardy repeatedly criticizes Ramanujan’s reliance on intuition and mysticism. Therefore, his attempt to advocate for his standpoint seems contradictory. Furthermore, Ramanujan himself defends his position throughout the film. For instance, when Hardy insists that intuition is not enough, Ramanujan argues: “I can’t hear this anymore. Intuition? You say it if this word is nothing”. (*The Man who Knew Infinity* 00:58:40). While Hardy does not act as a representative of a class in the Marxist sense: “They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented” (Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* 71) - he holds a position of authority, representing and mediating

Ramanujan's position. According to Marx, a class is formed based on shared economic conditions and interests, rather than a "class instinct" (qtd in Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* 71). He explains that "the economic agency or *interest* is impersonal because it is systematic and heterogeneous" (Marx qtd in Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* 71). A class, such as the peasants, lack unity and shared beliefs, thus their interests are instead represented by someone who appears to act on their behalf. However, this representation does not truly reflect the interests of the class, as there is "no unified class subject" (Marx qtd in Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* 71). Instead, this representation reflects power dynamics. Similarly, in this scene, Ramanujan, is portrayed as lacking agency and requiring someone to speak for him. However, on the one hand, this dynamic also differs from Marx's critique, as Ramanujan and Hardy's relationship is also collaborative rather than solely one of domination (Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* 71). On the other hand, Hardy's statement to the scholars, given the constant criticism of Ramanujan's mathematical approach, appears inconsistent and attributed to Ramanujan's deteriorating health condition.

Hardy continuously emphasizes his belief in the importance of proof in mathematics, describing it as "the only truth" he knows and his sanctuary: "It's my church" (*The Man who Knew Infinity* 00:38:05). He also praises Ramanujan when he is able to provide proofs: "Those proofs you left – wonderful" (01:01:50). However, in the scene mentioned in the previous paragraph, Hardy not only portrays Ramanujan's standpoint and worldview, he also questions his own: "Despite everything in my being said to the contrary, perhaps he is right. [...] We are merely explorers of infinity in the pursuit of absolute perfection. In the end I have been forced to consider, who are we to question Ramanujan? Let alone god?" (01:28:35-01:28:28). Similarly, to the previous statement, it seems that Hardy's newfound respect for Ramanujan's worldview and intuition does not stem from a genuine shift in perspective but is more about Hardy's desire for Ramanujan to become a fellow of Trinity College. Overall, the respective scene is shallow and contradictory to the earlier parts of the movie.

5.4.1.2. *Genius needing guidance*

Throughout the film *The Man who Knew Infinity* Ramanujan and Hardy are represented as being in an unequal power relationship, with Hardy in the superior position. While Ramanujan's knowledge is not questioned and portrayed as extraordinary, he is consistently framed as needing guidance, particularly from Hardy.

According to Said, the Oriental has historically been portrayed as inferior and in need of control, with colonizers viewing themselves as the authority on what is best for “the subject race” (*Orientalism* 37). Referring to Cromer, he explains that it was not about imposing rigid, “ultrascientific measures”, one should rather “understand his [the Orientals] limitations” (*Orientalism* 36). This idea is subtly reflected in the movie, where Ramanujan’s lack of ability to prove his theorems is portrayed as a crucial limitation, implying that he needs Hardy and his “superior Western knowledge” to complete his work. It is not that Hardy lacks belief in Ramanujan’s abilities, but rather that Ramanujan himself believes he cannot meet the expectations: “You don’t understand this. I don’t think about this the same way you do. These steps you want ... what you want I do not know how to do”. Hardy’s belief in Ramanujan is reflected in his response: “Well, you can just begin by trying your best” (*The Man who Knew Infinity* 00:45:20-00:47:00). Nevertheless, Hardy ultimately publishes Ramanujan’s theorems with his own proofs, implying that Ramanujan needs Western assistance to complete his work. After the publication, Hardy proudly states: “I took the liberty of doing some of your proofs myself, just to show you what together we can achieve” (00:46:36). While this statement suggests that they worked together effectively, it also emphasizes their imbalanced relationship, highlighting that Ramanujan needed Hardy’s proofs.

While Ramanujan is portrayed as needing guidance from the West, he is not reduced to a mere representative of the East within the power dynamic. Although I argue that the narrative of *The Man who Knew Infinity* focuses on the binary relationship between Ramanujan and Hardy, symbolizing the East and the West, Ramanujan does not function as a representative for the entire Indian population. This accounts for both forms of representation; representation as “speaking for someone”, and “re-presentation” (Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* 70). As Spivak highlights, no individual could truly represent the subaltern, as doing so would result in essentialization and a replication of uneven power-relations, since one person could never capture the diversity and complexity of the subaltern’s experiences (*Can the Subaltern Speak?* 70-71). While aspects of Indian culture are at times essentialized in the movie, Ramanujan’s personal identity is not. For instance, Littlewood describes Ramanujan to Hardy as “nothing short of a miracle. The man exceeds any notion of brilliance that I have ever understood [...] You can compare him with Newton. I have come to believe that for Ramanujan every single positive integer is one of his personal friends” (*The Man who Knew Infinity* 00:56:56-00:57:45). The portrayal of Ramanujan as a miraculous, brilliant individual stands in contrast to the

essentialist Oriental narrative, which generalizes and homogenizes the Oriental, disregarding any information conflicting with this narrative (Said, *Orientalism* 72, 52). Moreover, the description of Ramanujan's relationship with mathematics emphasizes not only his brilliance in this regard but also his passion, which further contributes to his portrayal as a multifaceted individual instead of an essentialized representative of Indian culture.

5.4.1.3. Intellectual exchange and agency

Within Orientalist discourse, the Orient and the Oriental are considered passive objects of study, shaped and controlled by others, especially the West. This discourse also relies upon exaggerating their distinct otherness in contrast to the Occident (Said, *Orientalism* 97). Similarly, colonial novels like *Heart of Darkness*, for example, portray subaltern groups as passive, inferior objects and entirely subject to Western authority. However, in *The Man who Knew Infinity* the protagonist Ramanujan is given some degree of agency. For instance, he actively applies for jobs, seeks to publish his mathematical work, and challenges Hardy directly, accusing him of failing to understand or truly see him for who he is (00:58-40-00:59:44). These moments portray Ramanujan asserting himself and resisting the traditional Orientalist narrative. Nevertheless, his identity in the movie is largely shaped by his relationship with Hardy, who occupies a position of power. This dynamic reflects a subtler form of Orientalism, where Ramanujan is not entirely passive but still defined in relation to Western authority.

5.4.2. Structural inequality

The Man who Knew Infinity reflects Western authority not only through Hardy, but also through the representation of broader structural inequalities. These dynamics include the legacy and impact of colonial rule in India, which, although not directly addressed in the film (as I critiqued above), plays a crucial role in shaping the historical and social context of the narrative. As I noted earlier, the film also omits key aspects of Ramanujan's real life, such as belonging to the Brahmin caste, the highest caste in India (Kanigel, *The Man who Knew Infinity* 20). This privilege might have played a role in his journey to Great Britain, an opportunity unavailable to those from lower castes.

Although the movie centers on the relationship between Hardy and Ramanujan, Hardy is portrayed as having the support of his peers, even though they do not always agree with his

views on Ramanujan. Many express racist stereotypes and prejudices, but these views reflect the same preconceived notions Hardy himself seems to have overcome by the end of the film, particularly the idea that Ramanujan's approach is inferior to Western logic. For instance, when Hardy advocates for Ramanujan's fellowship, one scholar states: "If you think I am going to have that charlatan for a fellow, you are very much mistaken", while another scholar remarks: "An FRS? He is Indian" (*The Man who Knew Infinity* 01:12:57). Despite the differing perspectives among the scholars, they collectively serve as an extension of Hardy's authority. This dynamic is especially evident when Hardy wants to secure Ramanujan's fellowship. Hardy has the power to influence the system, whereas Ramanujan faces both social and structural barriers. Thus, I argue that, while the film portrays Hardy as supportive, particularly toward the end, the broader system around him amplifies the existing power structures between him and Ramanujan.

Despite being portrayed as brilliant, Ramanujan not only has to face the structural inequalities linked to his cultural background, but also the challenge of adapting to the formal methods of Western academia. Furthermore, he must prove both his mathematical theorems and his own value. Ramanujan's reliance on intuition is depicted as being rooted not only in his religious beliefs, but - especially in the beginning of the film - in his lack of formal education (Dir. Brown, *The Man who Knew Infinity*). However, according to the biographical novel, Ramanujan completed his high school with brilliance, leading him to receiving a scholarship in real life. He ultimately lost the college scholarship due to his focus on mathematics at the expense of other subjects; and without the scholarship, he could not afford to continue his studies (Kanigel, *The Man who Knew Infinity*, 45-47). While the film highlights his lack of formal education, it does not elaborate on the details. As a result, these elements are deployed in a manner that reinforces his dependency on Hardy, failing to address the structural barriers he encounters.

In summary, *The Man who Knew Infinity*, in its portrayal of the power dynamics between Ramanujan and Hardy, and by extension, the West and the East, falls short of ultimately dismantling them. The film demonstrates that Ramanujan is aware of the power hierarchies and not intellectually inferior to his peers; and through a few key scenes, it challenges power dynamics and stereotypes. Nevertheless, the primary focus of the narrative remains the contrast between Ramanujan's supposed inferior approach and Hardy's "superior" one. Moreover,

Hardy's attempts to praise Ramanujan's methods at the end of the movie contradict the previous narrative.

5. Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, I identify Orientalist ideologies in the two contemporary films *The Man who Knew Infinity* and *Outsourced*. Through a detailed analysis of the films, based on theoretical insights derived from Said's *Orientalism*, I argue that both films contain elements that reinforce the Orientalist narrative, on the one hand, and others that deconstruct it, on the other. Ultimately, however, I argue that the films predominantly reinforce an Orientalist perspective, thereby perpetuating the notion of Western superiority.

This research demonstrates that, while films may incorporate elements that seek to challenge Orientalist narratives, the method of representation can still reinforce them. This reinforcement primarily stems from the Western gaze and perspective present in both films. In *Outsourced*, the audience experiences the narrative, and consequently, the Indian world through the lens of the Western protagonist Todd. India and its people are, therefore, framed as "objects" of observation (Said, *Orientalism* 97). This aligns with Spivak's concept of epistemic violence (*Can the Subaltern Speak?* 76). Even, after the film's turning point, where Todd becomes more open to India and its culture, the audience continues to perceive it through his perspective. Nevertheless, the focus shifts not to India itself, but rather to Todd's personal development. This framing sidelines the narratives of the Indian characters, rendering them secondary to the Western character's growth. The Western perspective in *Outsourced* is further emphasized through the humor it employs, which is tailored to a Western audience. Furthermore, its means of constructing and shaping the romantic relationship and centering Todd's personal growth throughout the film each limit the film's representation to being fixed to Western tropes. In *the Man who Knew Infinity*, the viewer does not experience the narrative through the lens of a Western character, as they do in *Outsourced*. Nevertheless, the film still presents a Western perspective by portraying Western values, perspectives, and norms as the standard within the film's social system. The film depicts the Indian protagonist Ramanujan as someone needing to adapt to these Western norms to achieve success and recognition. This portrayal frames Western culture as central and superior, while implicitly marginalizing Eastern culture.

While *Outsourced* portrays diverse Indian traditions in a way that avoids essentializing or portraying them as inferior to Western ones, these traditions remain secondary, serving primarily as a backdrop for the protagonist Todd's personal development. Some moments in *Outsourced* effectively challenge Western stereotypes about the East, shedding light on their limitations, but others function to reinforce Western superiority. In contrast, while *The Man who Knew Infinity* attempts to provide insight into Indian culture without fully essentializing it, the film simplifies some aspects by omitting the underlying significance of certain elements. Nevertheless, the film does not reduce Ramanujan's identity to a mere representation of the East. While Ramanujan symbolizes the East and Hardy the West, he is portrayed as an exceptional and miraculous individual, rather than a representative of all Indians. Furthermore, *The Man Who Knew Infinity*, though containing elements of racist and Orientalist ideologies, seeks to critique rather than reinforce them. While this is successful in some parts of the film, it falters in others, inadvertently strengthening aspects of an Orientalist narrative. For instance, the film sustains the established power dynamic, reinforced by the repeated contrast between the portrayed inferiority of Ramanujan's intuitive approach, on the one hand, and the Western emphasis on formal proof, on the other. Hardy's praise of Ramanujan and his methods at the film's end fails to dismantle this power dynamic; it is portrayed not as a genuine recognition, but as being motivated by external factors, such as securing Ramanujan's fellowship at Trinity or honoring him posthumously.

The power dynamics in *Outsourced* are reinforced through its portrayal of neo-colonialism. The Western protagonist and the Western company are depicted as benevolent, while the Indian workforce is shown as grateful and benefitting from this labor dynamic. However, this framing obscures the underlying exploitation of labor, ultimately reinforcing an Orientalist perspective that legitimizes the unequal power structures. While *Outsourced* raises awareness of certain narrow-minded Western stereotypes about the East, it simultaneously bolsters others. The film's predominantly Western perspective, combined with its positive portrayal of neo-colonialism, reinforces the power dynamic between the West and the East, thereby perpetuating the Orientalist narrative. As a result, despite some attempts to challenge certain stereotypes and portray Eastern characters in a more multifaceted way, both films fail to fully dismantle the Orientalist perspective, instead reinforcing it to some extent.

While this research focuses on two films from different genres, future studies could expand the analysis to explore how Orientalist portrayals appear across various types of media and how

these depictions have evolved over time. Including other forms of media, such as documentaries and news, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how Orientalist ideologies are reinforced and represented across different platforms.

This research demonstrates that Orientalist ideologies span across genres, even in contemporary media. It also highlights how, particularly in the case of *The Man who Knew Infinity*, works that seek to dismantle power dynamics can end up inadvertently reinforcing them. As such, this study offers valuable insights into the ways in which media can shape our perceptions of other cultures. Thus, I argue that recognizing and critiquing Orientalist portrayals in media is a crucial first step towards shifting the Orientalist narrative and reducing harmful stereotypes.

6. Impact of Orientalist depictions on audience perception

Films have significant potential to shape audience's beliefs, as Tzanelli notes (12-13). By exposing viewers to diverse cultures and traditions, films could potentially challenge and even change the prejudices and stereotypes they may uphold. However, Orientalist narratives have historically been shaped and constructed for various purposes, often serving to reinforce stereotypes. For instance, Orientalism has been used to justify colonization (Said, *Orientalism* 37). In more recent years, these narratives have also been tied to security concerns regarding immigration and terrorism, and in the service of economic interests (Sa'di 2512-2513). However, I argue that it is also possible that Orientalist portrayals arise not out of intent, but rather as a result of filmmakers themselves being influenced by Orientalist discourses. Thus, even when filmmakers do not consciously aim to create essentialized depictions, they may also inadvertently reproduce stereotypes.

The impact of such portrayals is largely shaped by the cultural context the audience inhabits and the manner by which culture is represented. While I agree with Spivak's argument that attempts to represent experiences of subaltern individuals can reinforce power structures ("Can the Subaltern Speak?" 71), I believe that these portrayals also have the potential to challenge and deconstruct such dynamics. This can be accomplished, for instance, through the use of subversive humor (Boskin and Dorinson 97) and challenging Western stereotypes about the East.

As already mentioned, the perception of a film is heavily influenced by the audience itself. Stam and Spence explain: “Although fiction films are persuasive machines designed to produce specific impressions and emotions, they are not all-powerful; they may be read differently by different audiences” (19). For instance, efforts to use “positive images” to counteract racist representations have evoked divergent responses from black and white audiences. Stam and Spence note that these images “characterized by a bending-over - backwards-not-to-be-racist attitude”, were not well received by black viewers, who felt they were overly simplistic, while white audiences found them more favorable (19). In the case of Orientalist portrayals, a similar difference in audience perception may occur. In *Outsourced* and *The Man who Knew Infinity* a Western audience might not recognize an essentialized portrayal of Indian culture and its people, while an Indian audience might notice or perceive it more readily. Thus, the “cultural and ideological assumptions” of the audience, play a crucial role in shaping how such narratives are perceived (Stam and Spence 19). If an audience is aware of the stereotypes being portrayed, I argue that these can be deconstructed; however, if they are unaware, there is a danger that they are reinforced. A lack of awareness is particularly dangerous in the case of subtler forms of Orientalism, such as neo-Orientalism, where Eastern individuals and cultures are portrayed as inferior in more implicit ways than in the traditional Orientalist narrative. Keskin argues that this subtler form of Orientalism is especially harmful in shaping Western audiences’ perception of their own superiority (5).

Ultimately, the impact of Orientalist narratives is determined by the audience’s cultural awareness and expectations (Stam and Spence 19), the portrayal itself, and the broader societal discourse (Said, *Orientalism* 7). While films can often reinforce prejudices and power dynamics, they also have the potential to challenge and subvert them. By raising awareness of Orientalist portrayals in media, we can actively counteract these narratives and challenge harmful stereotypes.

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