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Nietzsche's Orientalist Appropriation of Buddhism

1. "Orientalism can be discussed…as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient," writes postcolonial theorist Edward Said (Said 3). Although Said's seminal work *Orientalism* was published 91 years after Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals*, analyzing Nietzsche's appropriation of Buddhism using the lens of Orientalism is pivotal to understanding Nietzsche's arguments on the fate of Europe. In particular, according to Said, European culture strengthened its identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of "surrogate" and even "underground self" (3).[1] This concept is fundamental in shedding light on Nietzsche's appropriation of the religions of the Orient: the Indian civilization under the Brahmins and Buddhism is constructed in *On the Genealogy of Morals* through essentializing statements, defined only based on the parallels it shares with the state of Europe during Nietzsche's lifetime. While Nietzsche aims to use such parallels to characterize his condemnation of Christianity and its ascetic ideal—under Christianity, a weary Europe will succumb to nihilism akin to that of the Indian civilization when Buddhism emerged—the Orientalist nature of his claims exposes his intentional obscuring of crucial distinctions between Buddhism and Christianity to privilege universality in his arguments.

[1] According to Said, by projecting its self-image based on an idea of the Orient, Europe is engaging in an act of self-definition in a paradigm of practice, which includes rhetoric, a set of occasions, and situational authority.

2. Is *On the Genealogy of Morals* Orientalist? On the surface, as it is a sustained critique of Europe's moral degeneration, it may appear to run counter to what Said delineates as one of Orientalism's agendas: to reiterate "European superiority over Oriental backwardness" (7). In fact, some could argue that *On the Genealogy of Morals* does the exact opposite; instead of emphasizing the ineradicable distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority, Nietzsche seems to focus on the similarities between the West and the Orient—"the instincts of pity, self-denial and self-sacrifice" in their moral systems fostering the succumbing of both civilizations to "oblivion" (7). Yet, in order to interpret what Nietzsche really means, to glibly deem his use of the Orient in his argument as intended to solely invert the cultural superiority of Europe and positively appraise the commonalities is to ignore the sheer amount of rhetorical strategy and subtext undergirding his central claims. What is at the core of Said's *Orientalism*, what he terms as his "real argument", is that Orientalism has less to do with the Orient than it does with the West (12). Understanding Nietzsche's arguments through the Orientalist lens means to first recognize that the portrayals of Buddhism and Vedanta are not "truth" but representations. Such representations never veer far from the very idea of Europe, "a collective notion identifying "us" Europeans as against all "those" non-Europeans" (Said 7). In the same vein, Oriental philosophies in *On the Genealogy of Morals* serve the function of "the other", used to reflect and clarify the identity of Europe. To probe it further, does Europe possess no superiority over the Orient in *On the Genealogy of Morals*? The superiority of Europe in Nietzsche's text lies not in whether Christianity has more merits than Buddhism (according to Nietzsche, it certainly does not), but in its flexible positional superiority. Europe's struggle predicates on its dynamism, a capacity for "self-conquest" (Nietzsche 143) while the Orient serves as a static, essentialized "other". Therein lies the fundamental asymmetry.

3. Nietzsche interlaces the constitutive otherness and essential characteristics of Buddhism and Vedanta with his arguments against Christianity. In the Preface of *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche identifies the burgeoning morality of pity as "the most sinister symptom of our European culture", a sign of the European culture wending "its way to – a new Buddhism? – a European Buddhism? – Nihilism?" (8). By the Third Essay, he attributes pity and other Christian values to the ascetic ideal, which he argues will culminate in Christianity's act of self-destruction. Here, Nietzsche uses Buddhism in a functional capacity. He brings in evidence in the form of an Oriental occurrence "of demonstrative value", namely a similar unfolding in India five hundred years before the European era—the ascetic ideal started in the Sankhya philosophy, which led to the emergence of the Buddha and a codified religion (Buddhism) that did away with the belief in self (143). In setting the stage for this "great hundred-act play"—the ascetic ideal will ultimately destroy morality itself, ushering in a new age of nihilism—Nietzsche uses the Orient to foreshadow Europe's fate and to support his claims (144). In *The Antichrist*, completed a year after the publication of *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche states outright: "Buddhism is a religion for the end and fatigue of a civilization" (22). It would seem that Nietzsche sees in Europe a culture suffering from reduced vitality and weariness with life to the extent that it is bordering on the precipice of nihilism. As Said calls it, psychologically, Orientalism is a form of paranoia, a fear of the erosion of European culture—similarly, by drawing parallels between Christianity and Buddhism, and then establishing definitively Buddhism's pessimism and nihilistic tendencies, Nietzsche is trying to entrench in the minds of his readers the direness of Europe's moral degeneration.

4. Some may argue that this functional quality of Buddhism does not deprive it of its agency in *On the Genealogy of Morals*. In his essay "Nietzsche's Orientalism", Duncan Large argues

that although the Asiatic is reduced to a function in Nietzsche's texts, Nietzsche takes up the position of "re-orientalization", with the Orient leading Europe out of its moral quagmire (178). Such a "re-orientalizing" of the West effectively renders the West as the object, with Buddhism as an active subject in the moment of Europe's "Selbstaufhebung" (self-overcoming) (190). This is an anti-Hegelian idea, with Large positing that the "Aufhebung" in *On the Genealogy of Morals*—the process by which the struggle between aristocratic and slave morality is resolved by the emergence of Buddhism—runs counter to Hegel's belief in the East-West unidirectionality of world-historical cultural progress. Instead of Hegel's stance that world history travels linearly from East to West, with Europe as the absolute end of history and Asia as the beginning, Large argues that Nietzsche is engaging the East and the West in a non-teleological "rhythmic play"—a to and fro that puts the Orient on an equal footing as Europe (190). This is a dangerous assertion. Since Large does not specifically look at *On the Genealogy of Morals*, his hypothesis may hold true in Nietzsche's later works. However, in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, the Orient remains a passive object in the functional role Buddhism plays for Nietzsche. Although Nietzsche establishes Buddhism as a precedent for Europe under Christianity, he never goes as far as to attribute Buddhism a dynamic capacity to convert the West in the image of the Orient. In what is arguably a myopic and far too Eurocentric vision, Nietzsche reduces the Orient to an essentialized caricature in his polemic, showing it to be synonymous with unchanging eternality. The Brahmins and the Buddhists are presented in the imagery of static, almost ideal types—he acknowledges that himself, terming Brahminism as "a crystal ball and *idee fixe* (fixed idea)" (21) and their religion in derogatory terms such as a "self-hypnotism" (21) and the "ultimate hypnosis" (118). Neither is shown as people in the process of being realized nor is the Indian civilization shown as a place where history is still being made. Nietzsche's conception of the Orient remains

rooted in what took place centuries ago—his India is still the India of the Vedas and the Buddha. This deliberate omission of the Orient's capacity for progress robs it of any agency of its own, not least its ability to even influence the trajectory of Europe. Large fails to see the emphasis on "self" in Europe's "Aufhebung"—this is Europe's own moment of reckoning; the continent possesses the agency to choose, or to *will*, its path forward. In an Orientalist appropriation of Buddhism, Nietzsche does not intend in *On the Genealogy of Morals* to confer upon Buddhism the agency to re-orientalize Europe, but instead to problematize Europe's unwitting embrace of Christianity by using Buddhism as a passive foil.

5. Despite this fundamental asymmetry in position between Buddhism and Christianity, Nietzsche takes great pains to emphasize the symmetry between the two religions. In Andrew P. Tuck's "On Nietzsche and Orientalism: A Response to Faber", he points to Nietzsche's oversimplification of Buddhism and the immense diversity and doctrinal differences in philosophical schools and religious sects under the teachings of the Buddha—between the Mahasanghikas and Sthaviras, Sarvastivadins and Theravadins, Sautrantikas and Madhyamikas, etc., there are philosophically distinct views on the concept of nirvana (for instance, freedom for this world). Drawing from his contemporaries' views of nirvana as "extinction" and "utter annihilation"—Tuck names Eugène Burnouf as one scholar who Nietzsche must have read—Nietzsche goes a step further to characterize the development of the ascetic ideal as a universal phenomenon and as a prelude to nihilism across societies (286). Nietzsche's suppositions about the historical rise of the sacerdotal society rely on the universalizing concepts of Buddhist-Christian symmetry:

> Let us consider how regularly the ascetic priest appears almost everywhere throughout history; he is not a member of any particular race; he thrives everywhere; he arises in every social class. (103-104)

Nietzsche supports his claims of the universal ascetic priest with a characterization of "the old Brahmans" who engaged in "self-abuse" and "ingenious means of self-mortification", a homogenous development across all sacerdotal forms of human society (101). Likewise, he also draws parallels between the self-abnegating pessimism in Christian and Indian (Buddhist and Brahminist) notions of 'redemption' and 'salvation'. Nietzsche describes nirvana as a "deep sleep" (118) for "exhausted pessimists" (118) that is unattainable by moral improvements, just as Christian salvation is "the attainment of the unio mystica with God" (117) that is "beyond Good and Evil" (118). Nietzsche intentionally obscures Eastern variance in order to accentuate universality in his ambitious claim, as declared at the onset of his polemic, that all of "humanity itself" is afflicted by this "priestly 'cure'" (20). Such a claim would collapse were the ascetic ideal not universal. His diagnosis therefore relies largely on establishing symmetry between Buddhism and Christianity in order to shed light on Christianity's own nihilistic and pessimistic tendencies.

6. Having established that Nietzsche's representation of Buddhism (and to a smaller extent, the Vedanta) in *On the Genealogy of Morals* is Orientalist in nature, it is important to reconsider Nietzsche's intentions behind his programmatic emphasis on the symmetry between Buddhism and Christianity. More insidiously, Nietzsche is in fact rhetorically obscuring aspects of the Buddhist doctrine that diverge significantly from his arguments, inadvertently reducing Buddhism to its nihilistic tendencies to adhere to his own ideology. The Orient is made to look like the picture of Europe's future that Nietzsche describes, with "the same course of development" in India of the destruction of the belief in God (143). His description of the fate that is to befall Europe—a European nihilism with the characteristics of Buddhism that will precipitate Christianity's ruin—hence gains veridicality with such an appropriation of Buddhism.

Nietzsche's emphasis on the symmetry between Christianity and the Oriental philosophies also acts as the main basis for his underlying argument for the teleology and linearity of theism and the inevitability of nihilism. While on the surface Nietzsche appears to be upending a *moral* teleology, he subtly advances an argument for a universal theistic development across societies in the background:

> "Progress towards universal empires invariably means progress towards universal deities; despotism, with its subjugation of the independent nobility, always paves the way for some sort of monotheism or other." (76)

Such monotheism, founded upon the ascetic ideal, would, in its "final phases of its evolution" (142), find in itself "the lie implicit in the belief in God" (143)—a finals stage of nihilism. The immense reliance Nietzsche places on the universality of religious development is nowhere more apparent than in this theistic narrative. Indeed, according to A. M. Frazier, Nietzsche viewed himself as living in this final phase of evolution—"the waning moments of the Christian era" where he would witness "the gathering darkness of a pervasive nihilism that would sweep over the post-Christian world" (145). As Nietzsche himself states outright, he viewed the impending nihilism as an "European Buddhism" (8). Interestingly, Frazier argues that this "European Buddhism" is inherently self-contradictory. Frazier posits that Nietzsche advocates for an actively nihilistic *self-willed* destruction of the structures in one's life—"the only possible remedy for an European man who stood transfixed between either doing away with his idols or with himself"—instead of a passive nihilism that succumbs to its suffering and drifts into oblivion (Frazier 158-159); yet, even when he has negatively portrayed Buddhism throughout the rest of his polemic, Nietzsche still appropriates the label of 'Buddhism' for this brand of active nihilism. Since Nietzsche only uses 'European Buddhism' once in the entire *On the Genealogy of Morals*, it seems likely that he only terms it as such so as to foreground the symmetry between

Christianity and Buddhism, and thereby endow his prediction of Europe's future with universal implications. Even if we were to set aside his other intentional obscuring of Oriental variance in his appropriation of Buddhism, Nietzsche's use of the term 'European Buddhism' is an exceptionally revealing instance of how he ignores the internal contradiction within his own argument so as to prioritize universality in his claims.

8. Given how canonical Nietzschean thought has become in Western moral philosophy, it is of great imperative to examine his representations of Buddhism and other Oriental philosophies. While this paper does not seek to completely negate Nietzsche's historical narrative on the origins and development of morality, it is meant to explore the limitations of his subjectivity using the analytical lens of Orientalism and to problematize the extent to which Nietzsche's arguments rely on universalizing, Orientalizing concepts. More importantly, such an approach reconsiders Nietzsche's intentions behind his strategic use of the Orient in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, qualifying and correcting critics who have written about Nietzsche and Orientalism to show places where they miss contradictions in his programmatic, rhetorical appropriation. As Nietzsche himself was extremely cognizant of, epistemology is a moral issue. Inspecting the framework which Nietzsche himself uses thus limits the universal implications of Nietzsche's claims, exposes his interpretation as culture-specific rather than universal, and draws attention to his undeniable Eurocentrism. For a philosopher who was as concerned as Nietzsche was with the fate of the European man, it is fascinating how often he incorporates "the other" at crucial points in his argument to establish the characterization of Europe itself. More than showing how Indian philosophy is a major parallel to European philosophy, reading *On the Genealogy of Morals* with an Orientalist lens is to more acutely experience Nietzsche's own ambivalence and ambiguity when confronted with the prospect of nihilism. In the incredibly subtle calibration of his attitude

towards Buddhism beneath his rhetorical pyrotechnics and acerbic wit, Nietzsche is in fact coming to terms with his own aspiration of becoming Zarathustra—that is, to answer not only the question, 'Why do we suffer?' but also 'What is the purpose of man at all?'

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