

ORIENTALISING THE OCCIDENT? PORTRAYALS OF THE WELSH IN ‘THE INDIAN DOCTOR’

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***Abstract:** This paper seeks to analyse the portrayal of the Welsh characters in the popular 2010 BBC television comedy drama *The Indian Doctor**

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1. Introduction

This paper seeks to analyse the portrayal of the Welsh characters in the popular 2010 BBC television comedy drama *The Indian Doctor*. The series, which is set in the 1960s focuses on the experiences of an Indian doctor and his wife in the Welsh mining village of Trefelin. It is argued here that, perhaps surprisingly, it is the Welsh, rather than the Indian characters, who are primarily Orientalised in the series.

Orientalist-type attitudes to the Welsh have, however, a long history, with roots stretching at least as deep as the twelfth century, and can best be understood in the context of a broader Celtic Orientalism, or Celticism, focused on the countries of the so-called ‘Celtic Fringe’ of the Western British Isles, encompassing Ireland and Scotland as well as Wales.

Such attitudes both villainised and romanticised the Welsh, portraying them as rural, backward, passionate and depraved, in contrast to the supposedly urban, modern, rational and sophisticated English. These stereotypes, as this paper aims to emphasise in the case of *The Indian Doctor*, have survived into the twenty-first century in film and television portrayals of Welsh characters.

2. The Welsh as ‘Other’: Quasi-Orientalist Images of a (Supposedly) Celtic People

The application of Orientalist-type discourse to the Welsh, one of the geographically most Occidental of European peoples may, at first sight, seem strange. The issue of whether the Welsh were ever colonised, and thus the debate over if they are a postcolonial people, is a controversial one, not least within Wales itself (ap Gareth 2009). While many academics argue that Wales was never colonised as such and thus cannot be considered postcolonial, others argue that it was indeed a colony. As postcolonial scholar Raymond Williams, himself a decisive influence on Said, argues, “To the extent that we are a people, we have been defeated, colonised, penetrated, incorporated” (Williams, 2003:9).

In spite of the ambiguity over Wales' postcolonial nature, it can be argued that attitudes similar to Orientalist ones have been, and perhaps continue to be widespread within Europe itself. As Lilley, for instance, argues, 'Othered' relations have also existed within Europe, and over a much longer period of time than Orientalism (2002:21). In the case of Britain, such attitudes have been focused on the so-called 'Celtic fringe' of the Western British Isles, namely Wales, Ireland and Scotland.

Regarding Orientalism, Said points out that: 'The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences' (1978:1). In Said's view, then, Orientalism is a Western discourse for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient (1995:3). As Jones argues, 'the sub-humanising of indigenous populations is, of course, a classic tactic of the coloniser' (2009:37). As Orientalism essentially originates out of the need to establish the Other, then the Oriental can also be defined in opposition to the European: if the European is powerful, masculine, rational, virtuous and mature the Oriental is by necessity powerless, feminine, depraved and childlike (Yeh 2000). Thus, the depiction of the Oriental as inferior, as well as solidifying the self-image of the European colonisers, served as a pretext for their colonisation

Similarly, the 'Celticist' view of the Celt was as 'pre-modern, pre-Enlightenment, superstitious, supernatural, magical, occult, irrational or pre-rational' (Jones 2009:35). Like the 'Orientals', then, the Welsh, along with the other so-called 'Celts' of the UK, have been both villified and romanticised. Such attitudes have deep roots. In fact, according to Lilley (2002), twelfth-century Anglo-Norman English writers perceived the Welsh, together with the Irish, as inferior and peripheral, and lacking the civility of the Anglo-Normans themselves. Indeed Orientalist-type views of the Celts may date back to Classical accounts, according to which the Celts 'are always cast in opposition to the dominant cultural personae of Greece and Rome' (Piccini 1996:86).

By the nineteenth century, the supposedly primitive, rural 'Celtic fringe' had come to stand for the antithesis of Anglo-Saxon civilisation, with its masculine qualities of imperial vigour, industry and progress. By contrast, the Celts were depicted as 'timeless', barbaric, inferior and backward. Moreover, such differences, according to the theories of the time were thought to be inherent racial, rather than merely cultural, characteristics (James 1999:54-55).

According to the theories of the time, it was popular to link language with 'racial' characteristics. Said, for instance, notes that in the 19th century Orientalist view, language was thought to be intimately connected with racial and behavioural features. Thus, "it was assumed that if languages were as distinct from each other as the linguists said they were, then too the language users – their minds, cultures, and even their bodies – were different in similar ways" (1995:231- 233). In this way, then, the development of the Arab, for instance, was considered to have been held back by his language. According to a 1952 essay by the psychologist Shouby, 'The Influence of the Arabic Language on the Psychology of the Arabs' Arabic is characterised by 'General Vagueness of Thought', an 'Overemphasis on Linguistic Signs' and 'Overassertion and Exaggeration', with devastating consequences for its speakers (Said 1978:320).

Again, similar to the depiction of 'Orientals' the Welsh have, over the centuries, been depicted as depraved and immoral; this has also often been construed as an effect of their language, and put forward as a reason for imposing English on them. A particularly notable incidence of this was the 1847 Report on Education in Wales, which saw the Welsh language itself as a vehicle of immorality, backwardness and obscurintasm (Williams 1985:208). This provoked a series of articles in the London press calling for the extinction of Welsh, which was seen as. According to a *Times* editorial on the Welsh language, quoted by Matthew Arnold in 1867;

The Welsh language is the curse of Wales. Its prevalence, and the ignorance of English have excluded, and even now exclude, the Welsh people from the civilisation of their English neighbours... If it is desirable that the Welsh should talk English, it is monstrous folly to encourage them in a loving fondness for their own language. Not only the energy and power, but the intelligence and music of Europe have come mainly from Teutonic sources, and this glorification of everything Celtic, if it were not pedantry would be sheer ignorance. The sooner all Welsh specialists disappear from the face of the earth, the better (qtd. in Sykes 2006: 41).

In addition, just as, in Said's view, the Orient participates in its own Orientalising (1995:325) it is interesting that similar attitudes to the Welsh language were, indeed, adopted by many of the Welsh themselves, particularly in education, where a form of cultural genocide was carried out (Williams 1985:246). As Williams points out, in early twentieth century Wales;

A significant number of Welsh school teachers, presumably suffering from a tribal self-contempt and a species of shame, saw it their duty not simply to introduce their students to the world of the English language, but to eradicate any trace of Welshness they could get their self-justifying hands on (1985:246).

However, the Celtic fringe was also an important inspiration for the nineteenth century Romantic movement. As Said argues, the roots of Orientalism can be found in Romanticism (1995:30). Simultaneously, Wales, and the other countries of the so-called 'Celtic twilight' fed the Romantic imagination in a manner similar to that of the Orient. This is also closely related to Matthew Arnold's idea of the 'passionate Celt'. The 'discovery' of the poems of 'Ossian' in 1760, allegedly an early Highland bard but actually modern pastiches by James McPherson, sparked a hunger for 'romantic Celtic antiquity' (James 1999:49). A comparable Welsh example was that of the nineteenth century poet Iolo Morgannwg, an eccentric though talented character who passed off his own poetry as newly discovered works of the medieval bard Dafydd ap Gwilym. As Gwyn Williams points out, Morgannwg was received enthusiastically by the English Romantic poets of the day who considered him an 'original bard out of their Celtic Twilight' (1985:104-5).

A connected idea was that of the Passionate Celt, as proposed by Matthew Arnold. As Arnold argued,

... no doubt the sensibility of the Celtic nature, its nervous exaltation, having something feminine in them, and the Celt is peculiarly disposed to feeling the spell of the feminine idiosyncrasy; he has an affinity to it; he is not far from his secret (1962, 311, qtd. in Cairns and Richards 1998:48).

However, the writings of Gerald of Wales, for instance, suggest that stereotypes of the Celt as emotional and highly strung may have much older roots. Writing in the twelfth century, Gerald suggests the following differences between the English and the Welsh (British) characters. In this case, Gerald uses the myth of Welsh descent from the Trojans to support his argument (1978: 245);

The Saxons and Germans derive their cold nature from the frozen polar regions which lie adjacent to them. In the same way the English, though they now live elsewhere, still retain their outward fairness of complexion and their inward coldness of disposition from what nature had given them earlier on. The Britons, on the contrary, transplanted from the hot and arid regions of the Trojan plain, keep their dark colouring, which reminds one of the earth itself, their natural warmth of personality and their hot temper...

While such Romantic ideas of the Celt may appear to be relatively sympathetic they also reinforced the idea that Celts were inferior by depicting them as feminine and emotional, rather than masculine and rational. In this way, then, while Arnold was a frequent visitor to the National Eisteddfod, an annual series of poetry and music competitions which celebrate Welsh culture, he was also able to wish for that culture's extinction (Jones 2009:37). As Arnold argued in 1867, 'The sooner the Welsh language disappears as an instrument of the practical, political, social life of Wales, the better; the better for England, the better for Wales itself' (1867:12).

Thus, as Terence Brown points out, the Welsh, like the rest of the Celtic fringe were 'habitually seen as 'a culture of the past', one without a future, one with a mystical other worldliness exiled from the mainstream of historical processes' (8). Such attitudes persisted, for instance, among travel writing on Wales into the 20th century, which tended to depict Wales as fundamentally 'different'; as a country romantically rooted in the past, and its people as emotional rather than rational, thus rather feminine (Gruffudd *et al*, 2000:598) in contrast to the industrial, modern, logical English. Writing in the 1930s, travel writer H.V. Morton, for instance, exemplifies this view;

Wales is a beautiful and romantic land ... Its people, like all Celts, are a queer, extreme mixture of idealism and materialism, of recklessness and caution, of vanity and humility. They are quick and sensitive, with a passion that is almost Latin (Morton, 1932: 268, qtd. in Gruffudd *et al*, 2000:598)

In this context, then, the romanticisation and simultaneous vilification of the Welsh and their language from the nineteenth century can be seen as an example of the Enlightenment 'doomed races' theory which, as Jones argues, "simultaneously sentimentalises the colonised or disenfranchised while at the same time willing their extinction by figuring them as the

regrettable but inevitable losers in the dispassionate dialectics of historical progress” (2009:37).

3. Images of Wales on Screen: The Case of *The Indian Doctor*

It has been argued that, like Orientalism itself (Said 1995: 286-287), ‘Celtic Orientalist’ attitudes have been reproduced in the world of film and television starting from the twentieth century. Jones (2009) argues that in early Hollywood horror films, including *The Wolf Man* (1941) and *The Old Dark House* (1932) Wales, like Ireland, was deployed as ‘a locus of Gothic weirdness’ in which the native Welsh were bestialised. These films represent the ‘Celtic fringe’ as ‘a world of colonial outposts, remote from one another, crumbling and falling in on themselves, under perpetual threat from the savage natives’ (Jones 2009:37-38).

Other films by English and American directors from the mid-20th century, including, among others, *How Green Was My Valley* (1941), *Proud Valley* (1940), *Valley of Song* (1953) and *A Run for your Money* (1949) also ‘Orientalised’ Wales. As Woodward argues, some of the images from these early films continue to fuel stereotypes of Wales and the Welsh today. *How Green Was My Valley* was ‘the film that spawned a million clichés about terraced streets and black faced miners, singing on their way home from the pit’ (Woodward 2006:54). As Woodward points out, although films such as *Twin Town* (1997) and *House of America* (1997) challenged these stereotypes in the 1990s other films, including some by Welsh directors including *An Englishman Who Went Up a Hill and Came Down a Mountain* (1995), *House!* (2000) and *Very Annie Mary* (2001) ‘continue a tradition of presenting an orientalised view of Wales’ by presenting Wales as a ‘geographically exoticised Other’ and the locals as ‘total buffoons’ or ‘innocent idiots’ (2006:57-58). As broadcaster John Humphreys complained in 1996;

We are defined in the English mind by our national caricature. The daftest caricature in the film director’s manual – coal dust covered men singing in perfect harmony as they trudge back to the cottages from the pit – may fade away now the pits have closed. But don’t bank on it ...And why must they all have IQs of 10 but be very very cunning? And why must half the characters sound as though they’re Peter Sellers imitating a doctor from Madras? (qtd. in Woodward 2006:56)

It is argued here that *The Indian Doctor* can be firmly placed within this tradition. At first sight, *The Indian Doctor* appears to represent a role-reversal in terms of Orientalist images in that, while the Indian characters are viewed as civilised and sophisticated, it is the European – in this case Welsh - characters who are depicted as uncivilised, weak and depraved. However, as has been argued above, the Orientalisation of the Welsh in cinema is nothing new, and can itself be understood in the broader context of ‘Celtic Orientalism’ or ‘Celticism’ discussed in the first part of this paper.

The Indian Doctor focuses on the experiences of Dr. Prem Sharma and his wife Kamini, an Indian couple from a wealthy, urban background. Kamini in particular is from a well-to-do family, with connections to the British ruling class, including such figures as Lord Mountbatten, Lord Baden-Powell and Conservative politician Enoch Powell (episode 1). Following a family tragedy – the death of their daughter from meningitis – the couple seek to

make a fresh start in Britain. Prem is recruited as one of the first wave of Indian doctors invited to Britain in the 1960s as part of Enoch Powell's programme to make up the shortage of British doctors working for the National Health Service (NHS) at the time. While Kamini in particular had been hoping to settle in London, however, the couple find that they have been sent to the small Welsh mining village of Trefelin to replace the recently deceased Dr. Elwyn. The series, then, is based on the often comic, sometimes dramatic encounters between the Indian couple, the local Welsh villagers and the English mine manager, Mr. Sharpe and his local wife Sylvia.

It has been noted that the Welsh have, for centuries, been seen as an unsophisticated and rural people, and thus inferior to the urban, civilised English.. As early as the twelfth century, Gerald of Wales noted that the Welsh did not live in towns or villages like the Anglo-Normans, but instead lived '... a solitary existence, deep in the woods' (qtd. in Lilley 2002). Moreover, their pastoral lifestyle was used to portray them as somewhat animal-like themselves. As Jones argues, the Welsh, like the Irish, have been repeatedly represented as animalistic or monstrous (2009:37).

Following in this tradition films including *The Wolf Man*, *A Run for Your Money* and *Very Annie Mary* have used the exceptionally long train ride/drive to the village to underscore the idea that Wales is 'remote and far away from civilisation' (Woodward 2006:58). Similarly, the protagonists of *The Indian Doctor* arrive in Trefelin after a seemingly interminable train ride. As they finally draw into the village, Kamini remarks: 'What next? An ox-cart? A dog sled over the mountains?' (episode 1) .

Throughout the series, Trefelin is consistently depicted as a rural, underdeveloped backwater in the eyes of the sophisticated, urban Indian protagonists. In the first episode, Kamini tells Prem that she wants to leave Trefelin 'Because it's disgusting. Because the people are appalling. Because you're too good a doctor to bury yourself in this backwater'. Similarly, she argues that, 'It was my idea to go to London. Manchester even. Somewhere with at least a passing acquaintance with civilisation' (episode 1).

Wales is also represented as uncivilised in a scene when a bored Kamini asks Mrs. Davies, a local shopkeeper where the local women go for entertainment (episode 3);

Kamini: Where do they go to get their minds off things?

Mrs. Davies: Pontypridd.

Kamini: Is that a big place?

Mrs. Davies: Yes

Kamini: So they've got theatres, opera, that sort of thing?

Mrs Davies: No. They've got bingo ...

The rural backwardness of Trefelin is also emphasised in a comic scene when a local farmer urges Prem to hurry to his farm as Gwyneth, presumed by Prem to be a relative, has gone into labour. After running over hill and dale, the exhausted Prem arrives at the farm to discover that Gwyneth is the farmer's prize cow. Breaking the stereotype of the 'cow-worshipping' Indian, the doctor, having never treated animals is confused and rather disgusted

by Gwyneth and her bodily fluids. In contrast, for the farmer Gwyneth is 'like family' (episode 2).

Similarly, the Welsh miners, generally shown *en masse* as in earlier films such as *How Green was my Valley* (Woodward 2006:54), resemble a herd or flock in that they seem to be incapable of acting independently or making their own decisions. Interestingly, the seemingly 'macho' miners are also feminised in that they are easily dominated by women; it is only a woman, Megan, the wife of a dying miner, who appears to be able to control the flock of miners.

In addition, the Welsh characters, particularly the men, are also often portrayed as ignorant, lazy, depraved and/or drunk. The stereotype of the alcoholic Celt is as old as ancient Roman attitudes to the Gauls; Tacitus, for example, notes that they are so fond of wine that they 'drink it greedily and when they become drunk they fall into a stupor or into a maniacal disposition' (qtd. in Piccini 1996:88). In *The Indian Doctor*, the miner's leader, Owen Griffiths, for instance, is an alcoholic mess who 'borrowed' from the miners' union fund in order to pay his gambling debts, a single father who neglects Dan, his delinquent, dyslexic young son. Griffiths himself notes that his heavy drinking is a national characteristic. Invited to have a drink with him in the local pub, Prem remarks that, 'I've never seen anyone drink so fast ... or so much' while Griffiths responds that 'You're in Wales. I'm a lightweight compared to some' (episode 1).

Moreover, the villagers in *The Indian Doctor* are portrayed as naive, helpless victims of the calculating English mineowner, Mr. Sharpe. Thus, *The Indian Doctor* reiterates the theme of the contrast between the 'innocent, dim miners' and the 'cold, cunning Londoners' seen in films such as the 1949 Ealing comedy *A Run for your Money* (Woodward 2006:56). By neglecting safety regulations at the mine and exposing the miners to lung disease, Sharpe literally has the power of life or death over the miners. In addition, the miners are portrayed as rather dim and easily fooled.

As the Indian protagonists gradually settle into life in the village, they each embark on a project to rescue the villagers from their oppression, perhaps in an attempt at atonement for their feelings of guilt about the death of their daughter. Prem aims, by submitting the miners to chest X-rays, to prove Sharpe's corruption and save them from crippling lung disease. Even Mrs. Sharma, who has a particularly negative view of the villagers, acts as a protector-figure towards Dan. By claiming to give him private lessons she protects him from the truant officer, or 'whipper-in', and acts as the mother-figure he desperately needs.

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