

INDO-CHIC: THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF CONSUMPTION IN POST-LIBERALIZATION INDIA

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‘Canned Culture!’, screams a cover headline from one of India’s leading weeklies. ‘After burgers, Cielos and cellualars, it’s time for cultural consumerism’ (*Outlook*, April 9, 1997). If one needed any more testimony to India’s coming-of-age as a late capitalist society, the emergence of a nascent culture industry as reflected by this headline and others like it — the cover story is entitled ‘The Merchandising of Culture’ — is an important indicator that India has ‘arrived’ on the international economic-political scene; and none the worse for wear after its almost half a century of Nehruvian ‘socialism’, either. Under the watchful eye of the IMF/World Bank, India began to liberalize and ‘reintegrate’ into the world economy in 1991–92, but it is only recently that the ideology of global-local capitalism has managed to construct the level of hegemony¹ that allows a globally-oriented capitalist consumer culture to truly manifest itself in Indian society.

This cultural consumerism has resulted in a curious phenomenon: whereas formerly India was integrated into the global culture² industry as a ‘producer/exporter’ of cultural commodities — or the raw material for what became cultural commodities in the West³ — in the form of exotica, it is also increasingly their consumer — or at least a certain class of emerging capitalist elites is: ‘yuppies’ with disposable incomes unlike any experienced by previous generations of largely austere socialist India. This is heralded by a change in how India and its inhabitants are now ‘imagined’ or represented on the world stage, but one which includes vestiges of past

representations refashioned into what I will call the New — one is tempted to say *ersatz* — Orientalism⁴ and what the *New York Times* has recently referred to as ‘the new Indo-chic’ (August 30, 1997).

Let me introduce a note of caution. Although my argument may seem to assume that liberalization in India began in 1991–92, and that prior to this date India was (1) a socialist country, and (2) not integrated into a world capitalist system, this is not, of course, the case. Nehruvian ‘socialism’ was actually no more than import-substitution pursued within the format of a welfare state. Liberalization in India actually began tentatively under Rajiv Gandhi’s moderate tenure in the late 1980s, but proceeded only cautiously due to criticism and active resistance from various quarters (Kohli 1994). However, it is still possible to speak of 1991–92 as a definite break rather than a point on a continuum because it is at this time that an explicit shift in rhetoric occurs and liberalization is presented as the only way out of a fiscal and monetary crisis of the Indian state. India has thus been a predominantly capitalist social formation since 1947, and has actually been an active participant in the global economy all along. It is thus my contention that whether 1991–92 can be argued as a true moment of disjunction in Indian history, the contemporary landscape of Indian economic, social and cultural life speaks to the creation of a new conjuncture of economic, political and social forces in India — a new *historic bloc* in Gramscian terms — which is related in complex and dialectical ways to a global process of late capitalism.⁵

To say that the world is an increasingly integrated system of conjunctures and disjunctures is not to make a new point; scholars of world systems have been claiming that it has existed for several centuries (Wallerstein 1988).⁶ However, there is something new about the state in

which we find the world today and whether that is simply an acceleration of earlier conditions through an increasing penetration of capital and improved technologies of communication and travel (Harvey 1989; Appadurai 1990), or something radically different, remains to be conclusively theorized. What most agree on, however, is that there is a definite and ‘extraordinary cultural transformation of planetary society’ because ‘never before have human cultures been exposed to such a massive reciprocal confrontation, and never has the cultural dimension of human action been directly addressed as the core resource for production and consumption’ (Melucci 1995).

This, then, is the premise with which I begin this paper, and it is what informs my use of the concept of ‘culture industry’. The term as a descriptive concept and an object of analysis can be traced back to Adorno and Horkheimer (1972), but with the crucial shift noted in Melucci’s formulation: the ‘industry’ is now much more global than ever before. To postulate the ‘industry’ as a global system is not to make a simplistic statement about hegemony and homogenization that seem attendant on current uses of the term ‘globalization’ with regard to culture; rather it is a recognition that although its local manifestations are heterogeneous, they are nodes in an ever-more complex economy of desire which is global in its orientation and effects (Appadurai 1990).

The *New York Times* article cited above brings up many of the issues I will attempt to address within this paper, including the importance of India as an ‘emerging market’ and the increasing role of the diaspora in fashioning ‘Indian’ identities both at home and abroad. Indeed, the proliferation and circulation of these cultural artefacts points out that the new ‘Imagined India’ (Inden 1990)⁷ is ‘indisputably chic’, both at home and abroad. What

is happening here? How can we explain this metamorphosis which retains vestiges — and which plays on important aspects of — the older Orientalist representations of India as the exotic Other, particularly since the most avid consumers are a certain class of Indians themselves? Part of the answer of course lies in the vagaries of the global cultural industry and Indo-chic can be seen as only the latest trend in an economy of planned obsolescence characteristic of late capitalism. Another part of it lies, as I have hinted, at the new role of India as a significant emerging market on the global scene — and this, in fact, is what the *Times* article concludes.

The aspect that I find most fascinating is the importance of this New Orientalism to the identity formation of the new young urban class in India,⁸ particularly the relationship between class habitus and taste as it explains the construction of a new aesthete within and by this class (Bourdieu 1984). Note that I am talking about a *new* class (or, it can be argued, class fragment/faction) which does not exactly map on to the generic ‘middle class’ which researchers on modern India are so fond of evoking and which is the darling of everyone from political scientists explaining the stability of ‘Indian democracy’ to market researchers interested in emerging markets. This class of young professionals is very different from the generic Indian middle class because it is a new phenomenon (definitely a product of liberalization), both demographically young and urban in location, self-consciously cosmopolitan in orientation

The arguments made in this paper are thus not able to be generalized *in toto* for other social groups even within India, although I will argue that the prominence of this group in Indian cultural and economic life signals the construction of a new hegemony in India. However, insofar as hegemony implies that the idea(l)s and values of the hegemonic class or historical bloc

trickle into people's everyday lives and come to structure their *common sense*, I would argue that an analysis like mine has implications beyond its immediate focus. If there is a politics of identity that is played out in the arena of consumption by this social class, it is a very conspicuous one.

However, what characterizes consumption as a mode of signification is that commodities no longer exist in and of themselves, but circulate as signs within a system of differences: 'the object is no longer referred to in relation to a specific utility, but as a collection of objects in their total meaning' (Baudrillard 1988b: 31).⁹ It is within this differential sign-system that the commodity in question has any meaning at all. Thus I will refer periodically to other cultural commodities that structure meaning for the consumer in this context, and/or constitute the horizon of possibilities within which the consumer can structure meaning for herself.

In order to trace this new politics of identity through the circulation of cultural commodities, I will refer primarily to the marketing hype surrounding Arundhati Roy, an Indian writer, and her first novel, *The God of Small Things* (henceforth *GOST*). I will also draw upon the recent release of two 'Indian' films in order to argue my case for a New Orientalism: *Kamasutra*, directed by Mira Nair of *Salaam Bombay* and *Mississippi Masaala* fame and *Fire*, directed by up-and-coming Indian-Canadian Deepa Mehta. My analysis of these three cultural artefacts amounts to tracing what Arjun Appadurai has described as the 'social life of things': the meanings that commodities come to embody and signify in the course of their circulation and consumption, a process which is intrinsically political (Appadurai 1986). I will concentrate largely on the politics of circulation and consumption, which Adorno, Baudrillard, and Bourdieu, among others,

have argued lies at the heart of an understanding of the culture industry, and of the current phase of capitalism as a whole.

Although it can be argued that the disproportionate emphasis placed on consumption in much of current 'culture studies' is actually a 'fetishism of commodities' rehearsed at the level of theory, I believe these theorists actually present a persuasive case for privileging the sphere of consumption. I also believe that they do not ignore the sphere of production, but show how the latter is increasingly tied to the former. The argument is, of course, that the historic bloc of Keynesianism-Fordism inaugurated a crisis of realization. Mass production required that 'technologies of persuasion' be refined to increase and, in fact, *create* demand(s). The current change towards flexible accumulation allows for a quicker turnover of products and trends, intensifying commodification and creating a false sense of consumer choice. Baudrillard argues, in fact, that

the current indoctrination into systematic and organized consumption is *the equivalent and the extension, in the twentieth century, of the great indoctrination of rural populations into industrial labor, which occurred throughout the nineteenth century*. The same process of rationalization of productive forces, which took place in the nineteenth century in the sector of *production* is accomplished, in the twentieth century, in the sector of *consumption* [...] The ideology of consumption would have us believe that we have entered a new era [...] where justice has finally been restored to Man and to his desires. But [...] Production and Consumption are *one and the same grand logical process in the expanded reproduction of the productive forces and of their control* [emphasis in original] (Baudrillard, 1988a: 50).

Thus, a focus on consumption does not elide the fact that there is a politics of production as well; in fact, it actually implies it. Concentrating on consumption makes it possible to analyse how commodities increasingly circulate as signifiers within a chain, and are consumed not just for the prestige they confer — a trend noted by Thorstein Veblen as far back as 1899 — but for their symbolic value as tools in the construction of collective and individual identities. It thus becomes possible to approach culture as Baudrillard and Roland Barthes (1967; 1972), among others, define it — as the system of the production and consumption of signs — in order to then examine what commodities are being produced/consumed, what signification they come to embody and who consumes them to what purpose. This process can never be reduced to the level of an individual. Baudrillard argues against a hypothesis that explains consumption as a function of autonomous individual pleasure, postulating rather that it is a deeply *social* activity:

Although we experience pleasure for ourselves, when we consume we never do it on our own (the isolated consumer is the carefully maintained illusion of the *ideological* discourse on consumption). Consumers are mutually implicated, despite themselves, in a general system of exchange and in the production of coded values (ibid. 48).

In fact, '[c]onsumption is a system which assures the regulation of signs and the integration of the group [...]' (ibid.) and it does so in part by the significations created by the advertising system which 'has the simplicity and effectiveness of a code [...]' It does not structure social relations: it demarcates them in a hierarchical repertoire. It is formalized in a universal

system of recognition of social statuses: a code of “social standing” (ibid. 18). Bourdieu implies the same logic in his argument for the social construction of ‘taste’, and the role of habitus in structuring the patterns of consumption between social classes (Bourdieu, op. cit.). My paper examines one such process in contemporary India, where members of a new class (fragment) are in the process of creating their collective identity as Indians within the context of a new world economic order. As such, I invert Bourdieu’s conceptual scheme whereby habitus structures the behaviour of members of a social group, because this is a case in which the habitus itself is actively under construction.¹⁰

It is interesting to begin with an idea of what is actually happening in India: ‘Swelling, upwardly mobile audiences, drawn by the strong urge to acquire the trappings of good taste, are streaming into art galleries and concert halls’, proclaims the cover story from *Outlook* (op. cit. 57–8). And who exactly are these people with such ‘pretensions to taste’ but none other than the ‘burgeoning Indian middle class that has the cash to shower on activities that serve to separate them from the hoi polloi’ (ibid. 58). And what are they dying to be seen at/with? ‘English language theatre [...] And books authored by Indians writing in the English language’ (ibid. 59). In fact, it is impossible to talk about the significance of the recent hype over Roy’s book without addressing the politics of English in postcolonial India. English and the ability to traffic in it with ease are the hallmarks of upper-middle class urban India, no doubt a hangover of the Raj when it signified ‘Culture’ in the Arnoldian sense.¹¹

It is interesting to note that unlike previously, when it was the space of the exotic Other and cultural commodities which signified this space were consumed mainly in the Western hemisphere, India is no longer a passive

node in this political economy of desire. If Orientalism past was a manifestation of the ‘Occident’s’ will to power over ‘the Orient’, the *New Orientalism* rehearses the same relationship but with a crucial difference: today the production-circulation-consumption circuit in the case of these cultural commodities originates *and* culminates *in India*. There is, however, a crucial period of mediation by the ‘West’, where the commodities are circulated, and then sanctioned by cultural critics as authentically ‘Indo-chic’. The diaspora features prominently in this process; the critics validating this authenticity are usually intellectuals of Indian origin. Arjun Appadurai figures prominently in the *Times* piece; Salman Rushdie is another classic example.¹² Or else they are specialists in ‘South Asia’ as an academic discipline: Nicholas Dirks, head of the South Asia Program at Columbia, is the other authority cited by the *Times*. Without this ‘seal of approval’, I would argue that the fate of these cultural commodities and hence their ‘biography’ (Appadurai 1986) would be remarkably different. That is, they would not signify the right blend of exotic modernity to Indian consumers, and their consumption would not confer the right amount of prestige. However, this process of signification has not gone uncontested, as ‘Indian-ness’ becomes embattled territory and the debates heat up over what constitutes an ‘authentic’ Indian identity.

Part of the demand for Indian cultural artefacts comes from the Indian diaspora, particularly in the UK and North America. The new generation of hyphenated Indians is increasingly looking toward the home country in its quest for identity, and is also partly responsible for shaping the Indo-chic aesthetic. Many young second- or third-generation Indians are moving back to India to join the entertainment industry — particularly the new youth-oriented satellite music channels like MTV, and Star TV’s Channel V — and

even heading towards Bollywood, India's film capital and home to the world's largest film industry. Liberalization is at least in part responsible for this increasing presence and influence of Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) on the urban Indian aesthete. *India Today International* (henceforth *ITI*) links the recent increase in Hindi film with urban rather than rural themes with the increasing importance of the overseas market and the urbanity 'both in looks and opinion' of the 'stars, who shape Bollywood trends': the overseas market can account for almost 25% of returns on the film (*ITI*, December 1, 1997: 54).¹³

With liberalization came the need for foreign investment, and the Indian government realized the rich (in both senses of the word) resource which NRIs provided. Like other diasporic communities, NRIs also rehearse a nostalgia for the home country and a patriotism which now fuels much of the foreign investment in India. Whereas before, dual citizenship was not allowed and there were severe restrictions on the extent to which NRIs could participate in Indian politics, now the government of India is anxious to provide them with all amenities.¹⁴ The NRI is also the 'new aspirational model [...] who has succeeded in terms of material wealth but still retains his [*sic*] Indian values. It's the best of both worlds' (*ITI* December 1, 1997: 54) This undoubtedly accounts for the fact that 'what is emerging is a hybrid aesthetic which combines the glitz of an urbanised lifestyle with family values. Films are reflecting the confusion of a society in transition' (*ibid.*). It is this 'emerging hybrid aesthetic' which fuels the New Orientalism, and makes contemporary India chic in the Western *imaginaire*, with its penchant for pastiche and cultural syncretism.

As signifiers of this India chic, the three cultural commodities or artefacts which figure in this paper are embedded together in a particular

field of meaning(s) prefigured by an Orientalist discourse which demarcates the horizon of possible decodings on the part of consumers. Perhaps it would be illustrative at this point to bring in the analysis of a movie which, almost too obviously, plays on this Orientalist discourse and its attendant stereotypes of India, but for a specific audience which is no longer purely a Western one.

Kamasutra was released in the early part of 1997, and the review in the *New York Times* described it as

a visually lovely film that summons an alluring impression of her native India [...] Ms. Nair concentrates so deeply on sensual detail that the audience can almost smell the incense wafting from the screen [...] Shining silks, brilliant colours, Sufi music, intricately adorned bodies and languid movements all conspire to create a seductive mood (*NYT*, February 28, 1997).

It is significant that the reviewer also thinks it best ‘not to wonder too closely’ about the actual hows and whys of the plot (*ibid.*). A review in *India Currents*, a magazine catering to the Indian diaspora in the US, called the movie ‘an unabashed celebration of female sexuality’ (*India Currents*, February 1997: 34). And no wonder: Mira Nair, in various interviews with Indian and diasporic magazines after the film was released in the West, described the film variously as ‘an ancient modern love story’, as ‘feminist’ in its depiction of sexual politics, and claimed that she had made it a contractual condition to have special ‘women-only’ screenings in India (*NYT*, *op. cit.*; *India Currents*, *op. cit.*).¹⁵ Considering that the organizing theme of the plot is the intense rivalry between two women, one is hard put to find the feminism unless it is of the new ‘postfeminist’ variety which is

the mainstay of glossy women's magazines and television shows such as Ally McBeal.

The movie itself is an example of the postmodern pastiche that Jameson has pointed to as a marker of the 'cultural logic of late capitalism': it is set in sixteenth-century India, almost ten centuries after the writing of the text from which it takes its name, testifying to the way in which the very word *kamasutra* has become a floating signifier for exotic sex and India in the Western *imaginaire*, and by extension, among Indians themselves. Nair admits to deliberately juxtaposing this sixth-century textual reference with nineteenth-century poetry and the backdrop of the erotic sculptures of the Khajuraho temples 'because it's not really about being museum correct' (*India Currents*, February 1997: 31). Replying to a direct question from her interviewer, Roy-Chowdhury, Nair admits laughingly that 'I was quite aware of the burden of the title. But as much as I wanted to get away from it, I kept coming back to it because in an essential way it was the true title [...] because Kama Sutra means lessons of love' (ibid. 32). Of course, the 'burden of the title' is the currency it has both within India and outside it, and that its signification of exotic sex guarantees sales. The film's positive reception by the diaspora is evidenced at least in part by its screening at Cornell University under the aegis of the Cornell India Association, a student organization comprised of students of Indian origin (personal observation). Why would a film which essentializes India and plays with Orientalist stereotypes be made by a director of Indian origin and patronized by a clientele with a similar demographic profile? I would argue that it is because NRIs have a curious relationship with India in which romanticized nostalgia and an attendant self-exoticization play significant roles. This kind

of self-objectification is also characteristic of the social group in India which features in the analysis in this paper: cosmopolitan yuppies.

The interplay between global/local forces both in the sense of economics, and in terms of a politics of identity is strongly evidenced by the hype surrounding Arundhati Roy. In fact, it exemplifies the ways in which the New Orientalism is articulated and used within the global cultural industry, and most importantly, how Indians themselves are turning the Orientalist gaze back upon themselves.

Since Roy was signed on by Random House, it has been virtually impossible to escape the hard-sell for her first novel, *The God of Small Things*, freely hailed as the best Indian novel — and possibly even the best English novel ever written — by the press in India and abroad. The award of the 1997 Booker Prize just added some more sparkle to the Arundhati sensation. Marketing for the book has been dominated by glossy photographs of a very photogenic Roy, wispy tendrils of hair framing eyes that stare dreamily out. One publicity poster for the book has a four-foot image of Roy's face, beneath which is the caption 'Set to be the publishing sensation of the year', leaving much ambiguity as to whether the referent is Roy or her book, which is not mentioned even by name. The strategy is clearly one which plays into the Indian beauty myth, recently bolstered by the simultaneous success of two Indian women on the international beauty scene as Ms World and Ms Universe, 1996, followed by another title in 1997.¹⁶

Moreover, Roy crosses over into the world of academic chic as well, being the postcolonial 'subaltern' subject *par excellence* — brown and female — exemplifying postcolonial resistance by writing back in the language of the colonizer himself. It is in this avatar of the vanquishing

heroine that she is hailed in India as well; and given the fact that this year was the 50th anniversary of Indian independence, it was considered highly appropriate that a ‘daughter of India’ should put India on the map of contemporary English literature.

Roy’s photographs and her lifestyle also made good copy in the Indian press, as did the ‘story’ behind how the book happened to command only the biggest advance for a first novel in the history of publishing. *India Today* published its first interview with Roy right after the release of her book, and included excerpts from it. From the title — ‘Flowering of a Rebel: The woman who never obeyed the rules, scoffed at convention and was chased by controversy, now finds herself on the edge of literary stardom’ (*ITI*, March 15, 1997: 72) to the tone in which the article itself is written (in the genre of a thriller, complete with details of how she got to the edge of this stardom) — one can see the construction of a star personality:

It is better if we first get this out of the way, that she is truly beautiful. How beautiful? Here’s a story. The brother of her friend met his friend who said publishers were paying all this money to an unknown girl for a first book not because she is bright (mind as sharp as a gutting knife) but because she is beautiful. That beautiful (*ibid.*).

The article continues in this tone of hushed awe and mystery to talk about just how much of a storm of a book it was — which is all about who called whom to set up the publishing deal. *Frontline*’s London correspondent summed up the ‘story-line’ thus: ‘A feisty, independent woman receives a mind-boggling amount of money for a first novel and is catapulted into instant stardom’ (August 8, 1997). *Frontline*, a weekly

which, unlike *India Today*, for example, is not self-consciously a part of the ‘yuppie press’ in India and takes itself very seriously as a rule, mentions that ‘[m]ost of the profiles [of Roy in the British press] portray Roy as an outcast who had lived in slums all her life, until emerging to produce a perfect first novel’ (ibid. 102). Of course, it is also important in this rags-to-riches tale of stardom for her to have been ‘a rebel who once lived in a squatter’s colony’, and who had women weightlifters for friends. We are told that she is happier in the company of such select friends ‘than sipping wine demurely over cocktail chatter’, that she is ‘unconventional (drinks, swears, wears what she wants)’ (*ITI* March 15, 1997: 73); in fact, she is everything that the new generation of young urbanites would want to be.

After she won the Booker prize, *India Today* featured Roy on its cover with the title ‘Princess of Prose: by winning the Booker Prize, Arundhati Roy gives Indian writing in English global acceptance’. The cover story was more revealing: ‘Arundhati Roy brings recognition to, and opens up a global market for, Indian writing in English’ (*ITI*, October 27, 1997). And in fact, that is what it is all about: the marketing of postcolonial fiction in the West (within the academy as well as the general readership) as the new publishing ‘trend’, as representative of an ‘authentic’ third world experience, and hence more ‘vibrant’, more ‘lush’, more ‘multicultural’ than the ‘more prosaic, although undoubtedly worthy, novels the other authors [shortlisted for the Booker] had produced’ (*Frontline*, November 14, 1997).

In India, while the Booker Prize was seen as a way for India to wag its thumb at the ‘West’, Indian writing in English was itself the subject of much controversy, sparked off in no small way by writer/literary critic Salman Rushdie’s declaration that work by Indian writers in English was ‘the most valuable contribution India has made to the world of books’ (Rushdie 1997a:

60), exemplified by the fact that the anthology of Indian writing co-edited by Rushdie (1997b), includes only one writer whose original work was in an Indian language. In his introduction to this anthology, Rushdie asserts that ‘the prose writing — both fiction and non-fiction — created in this period by Indian writers *writing in English* is proving to be a stronger and more important body of work than most of what has been produced in the 16 “official languages” of India; the so-called “vernacular languages,” during the same time’ (ibid.). To an older generation of Indians, this was a preposterous claim which completely elided the depth and range of Indian writing.

I argue that this claim is part of a reconstitution of ‘hegemony’, in the Gramscian sense, by a new elite and its organic intellectuals like Rushdie which is urban, cosmopolitan, and more integrated into the international capitalist system than any previous generation of Indians.¹⁷ Rushdie defended his earlier statement by claiming that the ‘cosmopolitan experience in India, in the way that is connected to the wider experience of the planet in this half century, has been the most interesting aspect [of post-Independence India]’ (ibid. 61). This is not a new assertion from a postcolonial critic: other prominent intellectuals such as Edward Said and Homi Bhabha have made similar claims to an ‘exile’ status, or a hybrid one which they see as the privileged site of the postcolonial subject. However, this privileging can be read as a moment of diasporic anxiety, which comes out most tellingly below, in Rushdie’s desire to see India as extra-ordinary.

The fact that Rushdie is not just an acclaimed (postcolonial) writer himself but a literary and cultural critic to boot, lends his statements even more weight both within Western academic and social circles but also, by implication, in Indian ones as well. He is a good example of what

Appadurai refers to as the ‘expert’, and who Adorno would call a ‘style-maker’ (Horkheimer and Adorno, op. cit. 127), whose function in the increasingly open global marketplace is to legitimate artefacts aesthetic and cultural with the stamp of authenticity, much like Appadurai in the article on Indo-chic. Rushdie’s opinion that Roy’s *GOST* was ‘possibly the best English novel ever written’ (Rushdie 1997a, op. cit.) thus gave her the equivalent of the Good Housekeeping seal of approval, adding to its saleability, and encoding it accordingly as an authentic Indian artefact, albeit one which luckily requires no translation. It is interesting to note to what extent Rushdie took this interpellation of India and Roy as the exotic and the ‘Other’, despite claiming that she had written — not only the best English novel ever written by an *Indian* — but the best English novel *ever written*. Roy talks about her encounters with Rushdie on television programmes in the US where they appeared together as part of the publicity for her book. Rushdie is said to have complained that ‘The trouble with Arundhati is that she insists that India is an ordinary place’, to which she responds, ‘Well, I ask, “Why the hell not? It’s my ordinary life [...] I don’t want brownie points because I’m from India.”’¹⁸ Rushdie is ‘disappointed by her refusal to describe India as exotic.’¹⁸ But the novel itself, and its attendant publicity, belies this refusal. The literary editor of a New York weekly claims that ‘The book has proved that Americans could be persuaded in millions to buy and read books by exotic novelists other than Garcia Marquez and Amy Tan’ (*ITI* October 27, 1997: 20). *GOST* continues to be on the *New York Times* bestseller list, even beyond the expectations of ‘industry insiders’ (ibid.).

The structure and content of the novel itself are interesting to deconstruct, because of how well they exemplify the qualities Adorno

isolated as characteristic of the culture industry, in particular the ‘predominance of the effect’ (Horkheimer and Adorno, op. cit. 125): the almost obsessive use of stylistic features like randomly capitalized words — what one critic has called the prose’s ‘tweeness’ — the self-conscious coining of catchy ‘turns of phrase’ — what Adorno would dismiss as ‘well-planned originality’ — the cleverly disguised but ubiquitous stereotype. The intertextuality disparagingly referred to by Adorno as characteristic of the culture industry is reflected in the way the narrative uses filmic devices (Roy is also a screenwriter). The writing zooms in and out of scenarios, and the descriptions of the scenes are also heavily filmic in quality. This presents a slightly different issue from the one criticized by Adorno, where novels are ‘shaped with an eye to the film’; here, the novel incorporates the camera’s eye.

Also, in terms of content, the book makes use of the metonymic slide between India and a certain forbidden sexuality, which has its precedents in such canonical English novels as E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* (1924), and ‘Raj’ bestsellers such as M.M. Kaye’s *The Far Pavilions* (1978). It is the same metonym which ensures the appropriate encoding of other cultural artefacts, for example the films *Fire* and *Kamasutra*. In *Fire*, the foregrounding of lesbian sexuality in the context of an ‘ordinary’ urban Indian family has made the film popular within certain circles within and outside India: in India, its audience has included the English-speaking social class whose habitus-in-process incorporates the consumption of such parallel cinema as part of a chic cosmopolitan culture, while in the US, it has been appropriated, to some extent, by the South Asian gay and lesbian community. However, the forbidden nature of lesbian desire seems to require a displacement onto a group other than the audience. It is no

accident, I would suggest, that the family is working class; this allows the patrons of this film both to take part in the Indo-chic it signifies, as well as to avoid ‘cognitive dissonance’ by displacing the aberrant sexuality on to (a self-consolidating) Other. I would also argue that this is a *New Orientalism* because, although the film was clearly channeled into a global cultural economy through international film festivals — and hence meant for consumption outside India — it is produced by an Indian and consumed by Indians living both at home and abroad. The reviews for this film capture this dialectic of old and new well, declaring it to be ‘both epic and feminist, from India’, allowing the desire for the exotic/erotic to continue to be projected towards an obviously modern art/entertainment form such as film.

In *GOST*, the forbidden occurs at two levels: one is in the form of an inter-caste affair, the other is the incestuous love of the twin protagonists. The displacement in this case is geographic/cultural: *GOST* is set in Kerala, a state whose multi-layered cultural heritage — a result of centuries of interaction with Arab and Chinese tradesman, Jews, Syrian Christians, Dutch and British colonizers — its tropical climate, and its as-yet-unspoilt natural beauty, is ‘Other’ even for most Indians. As a testimony to its potential as a marketable commodity within India, it should be noted that, over the past couple of years, it has featured on tourism shows made by and for Indians,¹⁹ broadcast over satellite television, and it has been the chosen locale for an Indian remake of Laura Esquivel’s *Like Water for Chocolate*, telecast as a serial over the India-based but Rupert Murdoch owned satellite television network Star TV.

It is also worth pointing out, even if just as an aside, that one of the pivotal moments in the plot of *GOST* revolves around a Communist demonstration, and that the Communist Party is derided at various points

throughout the novel.²⁰ Aijaz Ahmad notes in an otherwise favourable review of the book that this is only possible given the hegemony of neo-liberalism in India at this historical juncture (*Frontline*, August 8, 1997: 103–4). This hegemony is so extensive that political parties at both ends of the spectrum often find themselves in consensus and grappling with similar economic agendas when in power.²¹

Even if one admits that Roy may not be using these metaphors as a conscious attempt to play the market, the question of authorial intent becomes moot when there is a field of meaning already constructed for Indian cultural artefacts in the global cultural economy. The ‘disjunctures’ in this global cultural economy (Appadurai 1990) are evident in the fact that this field of meaning, which encodes Indian artefacts as exotic and hence desirable, is not limited to ‘the West’ anymore. Indians (both within and outside of India) are increasingly the ones turning the Orientalist gaze back upon India, almost as if looking at themselves through ‘Western Eyes’, leading to a cultural cannibalism of sorts.

Back in the host countries, the NRI nostalgia for India is played out in the consumption of things Indian such as formula Indian (Hindi) movies, which are now increasingly incorporating themes of immigration and issues pertinent to the diaspora. Increasingly, it is diasporic Indians who are writing or making movies about India (Deepa Mehta, the director of *Fire* identifies herself as Indian Canadian), even as the authentic voice remains that of an Indian living and writing in India. Thus it is claimed that Roy is the first ‘entirely home-grown’ Indian to have won the Booker although authors ‘of Indian origin’ such as Naipaul, Rushdie and Ruth Praver Jhabwala have actually won the prize before (*Frontline*, November 14, 1997: 34).

It is also instructive to examine the social biography (Appadurai 1986) of *GOST* in the period since its ‘conception’/production. As Appadurai puts it: ‘For [the illumination of the concrete, historical circulation of things] we have to follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses and their trajectories’ (ibid.). Thus humans encode things with value and meaning, but it is only in their circulation and consumption that it is possible to see the ‘politics of value’ at play. Although at some level *GOST* and Roy — signifiers of Indo-chic — circulate as signs independent of social and historical context in the system of signs (as per Baudrillard’s analysis) that is the culture industry, at another level, their decoding by various people is very politically and historically contextual.

On the one hand, *GOST* is one among many commodities over which ‘tournaments of value’ are contested in the urban Indian milieu. It has also become part of a debate on the status of English in India sparked off in no small part by Rushdie’s statements on its behalf, where it is either the language of necessity in an increasingly global economy and a polyglot country, the marker of status (a hangover from its colonial history), or India’s way of asserting its presence in the new world order. The response to Roy’s winning of the Booker Prize, as presented in Indian magazines and weeklies, revolves around the postcolonial moment of success — like beating the English at cricket. ‘The Empire writes back’, as that seminal book on postcolonial theory declares. In fact, leading Indian weeklies (in English) declared Roy’s success nothing short of a victory for India. All this has fed a certain nationalist pride, even though Rushdie tries hard to disclaim it when asked what constitutes ‘Indian’ literature: ‘one must separate Indian in the literary sense from Indian in the nationalistic sense because a literature

that becomes subservient to nationalism gains all kinds of problems as a result' (Rushdie 1997a, op. cit.). Shades of the Lukács-Brecht debate over art and politics (Bloch 1977)? Perhaps. But what does Rushdie mean by this statement, and later, when he talks of a 'particular kind of Indian experience' (ibid.)? It is the experience of urban, middle and upper-middle class India, united by its cosmopolitanism and its familiarity with English.

It may seem paradoxical at best or contradictory at worst to assert that both a cultivated cosmopolitanism and a self-exoticism define the new urban elite in India today. In fact, the two are dialectically related in the sense that the cosmopolitan identity requires both the status markers associated with the 'West' (e.g., fluency in English, to the extent that the latter can be seen as a luxury good), and the East (e.g., expensive 'ethnic' jewelry or clothes) because both provide important cultural capital. Also, the reappropriation of the identity of the exotic Indian is only possible because such encoding existed within Orientalist discourse to begin with. Thus 'ethnic' Indian artefacts are valuable for the Indian elite precisely because of the signification they embody in the 'Western' *imaginaire*. I would suggest that this not be read as a totalizing assertion about the new 'Indian' aesthete, one which gives all agency only to the 'West'. In fact, I am claiming that the nodes in this signification are complex and play off each other in significant ways: thus NRIs seem increasingly to be the mediators of authentic India for the 'West' — as intellectuals, film-makers, and even simply by virtue of being an increasingly visible presence in the cultural landscape of their host countries — as well as active participants in the creation of a new aesthete, one which holds an appeal for an increasingly cosmopolitan young urban professional class in India. I believe this is an interesting case study of the construction of taste such as that elucidated by Bourdieu (op. cit.), although

it is one which is much more dynamic because it is still under construction. Although Bourdieu (like Baudrillard) provides an important way to link social class to a class culture or group identity through patterns of consumption, his analysis is limited to a single social formation: France.²² In this paper I am attempting to open it up to an analysis of social classes which are much more international in location and, hence, in cultural milieu as well as in orientation.

Bourdieu plays on both accepted senses of the word ‘taste’ in his analysis of class-specific aesthetics in order to show that ‘taste in the sense of the “faculty of immediately and intuitively judging aesthetic values” is inseparable from taste in the sense of the capacity to discern the flavours of foods which implies preference for some of them’ (Bourdieu, *op. cit.* 99). Both are, to some degree, ‘cultivated’ (or constructed) even as they seem to signal an immanent faculty or sense with which one is either born or not. Such a definition helps deconstruct the ‘naturalized’ privilege that cultural elites tend to allot themselves as their cultural capital. More importantly, it allows us to link various aspects of consumption into a pattern which can be linked to a class habitus where they would otherwise seem to be random choices:

One has only to remove the magical barrier which makes legitimate culture into a separate universe, in order to see intelligible relationships between choices as seemingly incommensurable as preferences in music and cooking, sport or politics, literature or hairstyle (*ibid.* 99).

It thus becomes possible to talk meaningfully about the new elites’ preference for English as part of the same cultural and political context that

gives them a ‘taste’ for foreign cars, American franchises and fashionably cosmopolitan Indo-chic.

The political implications of this consumption cannot be ignored: as Bourdieu notes, ‘the consumption of the most legitimate cultural goods is a particular case of competition for rare goods and practices’, or as Baudrillard puts it:

it is as if the differential system of consumption significantly helped to distinguish [...] [w]ithin society, categories or ‘status groups’, recognizable in a specific collection of objects. The hierarchized gamuts of objects and products play exactly the same role as the set of distinguishing values played in previous times (Baudrillard 1988b: 16).

And, furthermore, that ‘[o]bjects do not only facilitate material existence through their proliferation as commodities, but, generalized into signs of recognition, they facilitate the reciprocation of status among people’ (ibid. 20).

However, Bourdieu believes that the particularity of these rare goods and practices ‘no doubt owes more to the logic of supply, i.e., the specific form of competition between the producers, than to the logic of demand and tastes, i.e., the logic of competition between the consumers’. Here I would tend to disagree, because the particularity of the goods/practices I am analyzing comes not so much from ‘the logic of supply’ but from the *cultural meanings* they have come to embody:

Consumption is not a passive mode of assimilation (*absorption*), and appropriation which we can oppose to an active mode of production [...] [it] is an active mode of relations

(not only to objects, but to the collectivity and to the world), a systematic mode of activity and a global response on which our whole global structure is founded (ibid. 21).

At the very least, supply and demand appear to be dialectically related, because marketing strategy (overtly as in advertising, and more implicitly, as favourable reviews by acknowledged ‘taste-makers’) is also important in the creation of this demand: ‘the consumption of goods no doubt presupposes a labour of appropriation [...] the consumer helps to produce the product he consumes, by a labour of identification and decoding’(ibid.).

However, this ‘decoding’ does not and *cannot* occur in a vacuum. There are ways in which consumers are skewed, by the media in particular, towards ‘preferred readings’ even as counter-hegemonic ones remain a possibility. Stuart Hall reminds us that the ideological work of the media ‘depends on the underwiring and underpinning of the structured ideological field in which the positions [within the dominant ideologies] play, and over which [...] they “contend”’ (Hall 1979).

Following the social biography of a commodity like *GOST*, *Kamasutra* or *Fire* also makes it possible to argue that commodities, particularly cultural ones, become sites of struggle over prestige and identity, both of which are deeply political. It is no longer the commodities themselves which matter, but the meaning(s) attached to them. The long-standing question of whether art should or should not be political is thus replaced by whether art can ever help but be political given the fields of meaning within which it is produced, circulated and consumed. Even if the ‘artist’ (in this case as ‘writer’ and ‘film-maker’) can be said to be more

autonomous of, or be allowed more agency *vis-à-vis* the market, s/he is not immune to it, especially when so-called high art, such as literature, becomes drawn into the commodity stream as is the case now. It is also possible to concur with Ryan (1992) that despite this pull of the market, 'capital is unable to make the artist completely subservient to its drive for accumulation [...] [because] artistic objects must appear as the product of concrete identifiable persons' (Ryan, op. cit. 41–2).

However, what do we do when the 'concrete, identifiable' artist herself becomes a commodity, such as Roy has become? It is impossible to abstract the sale of *GOST* from the publicity posters of Roy; it is Roy that carries the 'aura' (Benjamin 1968) in this case, not so much her artistic production. In fact, one could argue that the cultural commodity being produced, circulated and 'consumed' is also not *GOST* but Roy as the authentic postcolonial female subject, embodying the (post)modern pastiche that makes Indo-chic simultaneously 'new' and 'Orientalist'.

I would also argue against looking at these cultural commodities as autonomous objects: as Baudrillard says, we do not just consume objects as signs, we consume *relations between* objects. Thus these various objects constitute part of a larger system of meaning, a code of signification which takes its cue from the complex relationship that India's middle class has with 'the West', and which 'the West' has had historically with India. Raymond Williams similarly makes the case that we look at the products of cultural practice not as objects to be analysed in isolation, but as parts of a 'collective mode'. This makes it possible to theorize both the individual project and its relationship to a 'community' as 'two forms of the same process, both its active composition and its conditions of composition' (Williams 1980: 48).

It is not my intention to present an argument which links the change in the 'superstructure' of cultural effects in India unproblematically with the change in its 'economic base', as it may appear from my references to the shift towards economic liberalization. Liberalization in India was less a change in mode of production (as I explained earlier) and more the beginning of a new way of relating to the rest of the world. Economic liberalization also meant the creation of a new class of capitalist elites: the young urban professionals whose styles, desires and outlook on the world are increasingly becoming hegemonic in India. How can I justify limiting my analysis to an urban class in a predominantly rural country like India? Because if not in terms of percentages, then in terms of absolute numbers, 'urban India is in fact the world's third largest country' (Bullis, *op. cit.* 5), and urbanization in literal and cultural terms is an increasing reality in India.

What I have hoped to show by using Bourdieu and Hall/Williams's reading of Gramsci is the emergence of a new horizon of possibilities in India: what Raymond Williams calls a 'setting of limits' in which one does not need to eschew all efforts at explanatory analysis out of fear of being labeled 'determinist'. Key to Williams's reading of Gramsci is his appropriation of Lukács's idea of 'totality', a concept which gets away from vulgar base-superstructure models by approaching society as a social whole. This appropriation becomes an important backdrop for his application of the Gramscian concepts of hegemony and consensus in the cultural sphere, and it becomes possible to argue that cultural production (and in our case, cultural commodities) somehow embodies the logic of the particular form of capitalism operative in a social formation.

The materialist framework proposed by Williams for analysing culture is particularly useful for understanding the problematic of this paper: the

dynamics of a rising class in post-liberalization India which is increasingly implicated in the international economy and hence the global culture industry, even as its focus on particular ‘social formations’ (read nation-states) does not capture the importance of the diaspora in shaping tastes and identities in India. However, it allows us to propose that the relative ease with which liberalization has been accepted,²³ and the concomitant change in public opinion and culture, signals the construction of a new hegemony in India. Crucially, of course, this new hegemony is not about the wholesale rejection of the past, but a synthesis of selective aspects of both the old and the new, ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’, ‘residual’ and ‘emergent’ cultures (Williams, op. cit. 41), which is the reason for its efficacy. Thus for the yuppies, India has always been a heady mix of exotic antiquity and cutting-edge modernity, making their own hybrid lifestyles — their habitus — only a natural manifestation of this ‘essential’ character of Indian culture.

¹ Here I am working with Gramsci’s use of the term ‘hegemony’. As Stuart Hall notes, “‘hegemony’ exists when [...] an alliance of ruling class factions, a “historical bloc” [...] is able not only to coerce a subordinate class to conform to its interests, but exerts a “total social authority” over those classes and the social formation’. Note that the cultural sphere (the sphere of the ‘superstructure’) is, for Gramsci, ‘the terrain on which hegemony is accomplished’. Stuart Hall, ‘Culture, the Media and the Ideology Effect’ in Curran (ed.), *Mass Communication and Society* (1979), p. 332.

² Since ‘culture’ is a contested term within academic circles, I would like to clarify that in this paper I am working with Baudrillard’s definition of culture as the production and consumption of signs.

³ See Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things* (1986) for an elaboration of this ‘process’.

⁴ Much like Stuart Hall’s analysis of the New Conservatism of Thatcherite Britain which retained many vestiges of earlier ideologies in order to come up with a compelling and ‘hegemonic’ ideology. See ‘The Toad in the Garden: Thatcherism among the Theorists’ in Grossman, *et al.* (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (1988).

⁵ ‘Late Capitalism’ is Ernest Mandel’s term, and has now entered the lexicon of Marxist and neo-Marxist theory, particularly critical theory and certain strains of cultural studies which see it as variously characterized by flexible accumulation, intensification and deepening of commodification, and a new aesthetic. See Mandel, *Late Capitalism*

(1975); Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991); David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989).

⁶ Immanuel Wallerstein and Janet Abu Lughod, among others, have articulated such a stand within a body of work known as world systems theory.

⁷ This term is an obvious reference to Ronald Inden's exploration of an Indologist construction and reification of the concept of 'India'.

⁸ See Douglas Bullis, *Selling to India's Consumer Market* (1997). Bullis notes that members of the young urban professional class are 'cheerfully material and Western in their material outlooks, but [...] are the largest purchasers of ethnic art and artefacts [...]', pp. 147–8.

⁹ It must be remembered that this is a radically different understanding — indeed, deconstruction — of the concept of commodity value from the old Marxist one which differentiates between use value — an object's intrinsic value — and exchange value. There is some debate in the literature over whether this deconstruction is only valid for the hyper-commodified nature of late capitalist consumption or whether there ever is such a thing as 'pure' use value unmediated by social and cultural meaning.

¹⁰ Of course Bourdieu hedges his bets by defining habitus as a 'structured structure and a structuring structure', but he doesn't really provide a way to resolve the agent-structure, or perhaps more appropriately, chicken-and-egg dilemma. Thus there is no space for understanding how a habitus comes about, making his argument overly structural.

¹¹ In his influential *Culture and Anarchy*, Matthew Arnold argued that it was culture — understood here as High Culture — which separated civilized Englishmen from barbaric Others such as the English working class. For an exploration of how English language teaching came to be understood as the best medium for the transfer of the values of 'English Culture and Civilization' to the 'barbaric' natives, see Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (1989) and Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan, *The Lie of the Land: English Literary Studies in India* (1992).

¹² I am tempted to propose, in keeping with a Gramscian analysis, that they may be the organic intellectuals of the new class of cosmopolitan Indians, actively engaged in the construction of the new 'hegemony' in India.

¹³ 'Bollywood' is a play on Hollywood, and refers to India's Bombay-based Hindi film industry.

¹⁴ Even a cursory glance at the classified/advertising sections in North American editions of Indian weeklies like *India Today International* will show this to be the case.

¹⁵ See, for instance, the review in *India Currents*, February 1997, p. 34.

¹⁶ Subsequently, of course, at least two more Indian women have taken these titles. The politics of these beauty contests, of course, have been the subject of cultural critiques in themselves.

¹⁷ The Gramscian concept of hegemony and hegemonic bloc does not, of course, preclude the existence of counter-hegemonic practices and beliefs. Thus it is important to realize that this new consensus in India is being contested even as it being constructed. For instance, Indians are simultaneously engaged in critiques of the market system and the commodification of Culture. The decision to host the Ms Universe contest in India was, in fact, hotly contested by both feminist and religious fundamentalist groups.

¹⁸ Jason Cowley, 'Guest Column', *India Today International*, October 27, 1997, p. 23. Cowley, a literary journalist and critic, was one of the five judges for the Booker Prize.

¹⁹ Domestic tourism is on the rise in India, another manifestation of rising middle class consumerism, a trend noted by a recent national survey. See Bullis, op. cit., p. 12.

²⁰ Kerala is one of only two states in India which has had an elected communist government; the other is Bengal.

²¹ Adorno noted that '[e]ven the aesthetic activities of political opponents are one in their enthusiastic obedience to the rhythm of the iron system', Adorno/Horkheimer, op. cit., p. 120.

²² It can also, of course, be argued that this makes Bourdieu's analysis sometimes economically determinist.

²³ I say *relative* ease because it is, of course, true that there has been resistance from various groups to the dismantling of the welfare state apparatus and the shift towards the private sector.

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