A Warning Against Orientalism in Korea:
Review of *An Orientalism of the Mind* (Uri an üi orient’allijüm)

Recently, trips to India have become popular among young people in Korea, and quite a number of Korean poets and travelers have published travelogues on the Indian subcontinent. *An Orientalism of the Mind*, by Yi Ok-sun, however, is somewhat different from these other writings. Yi analyzes the literature of Korea concerning India based on Edward W. Said's concept of Orientalism. According to Said, “Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between “the Orient” and “the Occident” that allows the West to imagine “dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (Said 2-3). Said indicates that these distorted images of the Orient have been reproduced in many works of English literature and claims that recent Korean literary works can also be analyzed using Said's theory.

Yi studied Modern Indian History in India, earning her M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of Delhi. Based on her own Indian experience and study, she has endeavored

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to provide a more accurate and detailed representation of India in her books, which include *No Curry in India* (*Indo enū k’are ka ŏpta*) and *When Feminine Orient Meets Masculine Occident*. (*Yŏsŏngjŏgin toyang i namsŏjŏgin sŏyang ŭl mannassŭl ttae*) An *Orientalism of the Mind* is significant because of its negative criticism of several commercially successful Korean literary works that have included descriptions of India. Yi argues that those books reproduce a distorted or fabricated ŏimage of India.

Yi begins her narrative by examining the twisted, negative images that the British used to justify their domination of India from the time that they first established a trading office in Surat in India in 1612. British colonialists expressed their superiority by distinguishing themselves from the native Indians and describing India as an inferior country. To the British, it seemed natural that their superior nation should dominate the inferior India and that the mission of the civilized British was to enlighten the ignorant Indians. Numerous English literary and filmic works—including “The Ballad of East and West” by Rudyard Kipling, *A Passage to India* by E.M. Forster, and Roland Joffè's film *City of Joy*—have reinforced this ideology. Lee suggests that “Kipling represents India's images most negatively in his works as an imperialist and helps spread widely the fabricated images” (Yi 45). These fabricated images include the idea of India as a mysterious country, an unknown place, a savage, immoral and ignorant society with immature people, and as a country with numerous contagious diseases, confusion, and madness.

Yi's book suggests that some of the Korean travelogues and novels bear the mark of these distorted colonial images, importing them to Korean society, even though Korea
itself does not need to justify British colonialization. For example, Lee interprets Kang Sok-kyong (Kang Sŏk-kyŏng) Kang's novel *All the Stars of the World Rise in Lhasa* (*Sesang ŭi modŭn pyŏl ŭn ta rasa e ttŭnda*) as a work that depicts the Indian people as both savage and as passive feminine beings. The main character of the novel, Sung-Ja, sees Asians as inferior to Westerners even though she herself is an Asian. For Yi, Song Ki-wŏn's novel *The Journey Inside* (*An ŭiro ŭi yŏhaeng*) also displays an Orientalist viewpoint. Yi claims that the representations in these novels are reminiscent of the views of Western imperialism and its colonialists and goes on to provide several quotations in support of her view. For instance, Song associates the poor Indian people with “famished devils”, implying their primitiveness and animal-like nature. As Yi notes, emphasizing these attributes was a typical strategy that the British adopted in order to justify their domination.

One of the most famous poets in Korea, Ryu Si-hwa has also published a book, *Journey to the Lake of the Sky* (*Hanŭl hosu ro ttŏnan yŏhaeng*) which became a million-seller hit, about India. In the book, Ryu wrote about the people he met during his Indian journey, commenting on the insights and meditative realization he acquired during his short encounter with Indian people. Ryu's work provides opportunities for the reflection of ourselves and for our increased consciousness about our life. For Yi, however, the perspective of Ryu's book, “is not different from the perspective of western civilized people” (148). In spite of the fact that Ryu's book includes Indians as leading characters and contains the voices of marginalized others, his representation still follows the ideological discourse of imperialism and colonialism. Yi provides instances that demonstrate the similarity of Ryu's descriptions to those of British authors such as
Kipling. Ryu highlights the poverty of India and characterize Indians as “poor but happy” (Lee 148).

Not only do these works reproduce negative images of India in this country, they also may cause readers to accept the western ideology of Orientalism in India itself. In this way, both authors and readers may come to see Indians as an immature people, even though they are also Asians like us. By distinguishing themselves from these poor Indians, readers too may come to feel a kind of superiority over India in the manner of British colonialists. Yi calls this way of thinking “reproduced Orientalism” and cogently explains how Korean thinking about India relates to “the process of self-colonialization”:

> Although we are no different from India in that we are also a part of the Orient as seen by the Occident, we identify ourselves with the Occident and try to diminish our otherness by distinguishing ourselves from the Indians. This is how we come to deny our identity as a part of the Orient and how we may end up colonializing ourselves by following the Western style of thinking (Yi 200).

The lesson here is that Korean readers should be cautious about thoughtlessly reproducing these distorted images of India in our literature and culture. We need to do this in order to avoid the risk of our subordination to Western ideological discourse and the subsequent colonialization of our own identities.

Yi’s arguments warn us that the concept of “the reproduced Orientalism” might actually be more serious and more problematic than Western Orientalism itself. This is because it is accompanied with a form of self-denial that can lead to a kind of self-colonization. As
Yi emphasizes, we need a more balanced perspective on the matter of Orientalism in India. Her cogent analysis concerning Korean literary works and Orientalism allows for a new illumination of India. Her book helps us to reflect upon the arrogant attitude of marginalizing Indians, an attitude that implies the idea of total racial otherness. It is up to us to criticize our own thoughts on India and other Asian countries through the distorting lens of western Orientalism and imperialism, these theories that have contributed to marginalizing most Asian countries by representing the Orient as the image of the Other.
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