

THE EAST WITHIN THE UMBRELLA OF WESTERN HEGEMONY AS SEEN IN *VICTORIA AND ABDUL* FILM (2017)

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Abstract

This research aims to analyze the portrayal of the West and the East through the characters of Victoria and Abdul. This issue is important because Hollywood film spreads Western superiority but In *Victoria and Abdul*, Abdul who represents the East is depicted as 'superior' since he gains positions, facilities, and all things that he wants. Although the portrayal shows that the East is superior, it is not what it looks like. The research applies qualitative method. Besides, Orientalism by Edward Said and film theory by Barsam are used to analyze the portrayal of the West and the East. This study finds that the structure and pattern of *Victoria and Abdul* film are still the same because of the Western superiority. It is shown by the portrayal of the West and the East such as uncivilized East and civilized West, powerless East and powerful West, opportunistic East and sincere West, naive East and logic West.

Keyword: *West, East, Orientalism, Western superiority*

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis gambaran Barat dan Timur melalui karakter Victoria dan Abdul. Masalah ini penting karena film Hollywood menyebarkan superioritas Barat namun dalam film ini, Abdul yang merepresentasikan Timur justru digambarkan sebagai 'yang superior' karena ia mendapatkan posisi, fasilitas, dan semua hal yang ia inginkan. Meskipun penggambaran tersebut menunjukkan bahwa Timur superior, hal tersebut tidak seperti yang terlihat. Penelitian ini menerapkan metode kualitatif. Selain itu, peneliti juga menggunakan teori Orientalisme oleh Edward Said dan teori film oleh Barsam untuk menganalisis gambaran Barat dan Timur. Dalam studi ini, peneliti menemukan bahwa ternyata struktur dan pola film ini tetap sama karena superioritas Barat. Hal itu ditunjukkan oleh gambaran Barat dan Timur seperti; Timur yang tidak berperadaban dan Barat yang berperadaban, Timur yang tidak berdaya dan Barat yang berdaya, Timur yang oportunistik dan Barat yang tulus, Timur yang naif dan Barat yang logis.

Kata kunci: *Barat, Timur, Orientalisme, Superioritas Barat*

INTRODUCTION

During this time, West uses media to perpetuate its domination over East. One of the media is Hollywood film. Thus, Hollywood film often spreads the portrayal of Western superiority and Eastern inferiority. Unlike other film, *Victoria and Abdul* film (2017) shows that Abdul, an Indian Muslim servant who represents the East is superior. He is elevated to some strategic positions and gains facilities. Besides, he also gets Queen Victoria's attention so that he gains all things that he wants. Victoria even opposes her family who hate Abdul. According to Edward Said (2003), Orientalism is examined as a discourse by which European culture is able to manage and even produce the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively (p.3). Thus, this study is concerned on the portrayal of West and East to know the power structure in *Victoria and Abdul* film (2017).

The same film has also been studied by Silviana Chintya Putri (2015) entitled *Cooperative Principle Reflecting The Power Relation in "Victoria and Abdul" Movie*. She finds that Victoria who has higher social class than Abdul produces flouting maxim of relation to show her power. On the other hand, Abdul produces view violating or flouting maxim because he has lack of power.

This paper is a foremost endeavor to examine Western superiority by analyzing the portrayal of West and East that are represented by characters of Victoria and Abdul. This is an

important issue since film is a means of message. Thus, portrayals in films unconsciously influence and shape society.

RESEARCH METHOD

Method that is used in this research is qualitative method and the source of data is *Victoria and Abdul* film (2017). The collections of the data are through close reading to understand the film by identifying the theme, characters and characterizations, summary, plot, and setting. The data collected relate to the characters of Victoria and Abdul. After the data collection has finished, some categories such as scene, sign, action, and dialogue are made. The data that contain variables of different background, different attitude, different personality, and unequal power are also selected. Different aspects in the film are compared. Then, the findings of this study are the superiority of the West and Inferiority of the East. In this study, power and hegemony relation between the West and the East by using Orientalism theory are analysed.

DISCUSSION

1. UNCIVILIZED EAST AND CIVILIZED WEST

1.1. Uncivilized East

1.1.1. Degrading Intellectual Capacity of Eastern

Abdul is a servant that is commanded to be a part of Golden Jubilee. Since his elevation makes the royal family and household resentful, they try to get rid of Abdul. One of their attempts is looking for Abdul's true background and tell it to the queen.

PONSOBY. "No, I'm afraid he was a mere clerk in a common jail. My own son has sent word from India and has actually spoken to his immediate superior."

DR. REID. "His family are completely uneducated. His father is a lowly apothecary."

BERTIE. "The *Munshi* didn't even go to school, Mother. The man's a complete fraud. There he is, overseeing the boxes." (*Victoria and Abdul* 01:14:41 → 01:15:07)

They tell Victoria that Abdul has really poor background. Because of his background, people consider that he does not deserve to be there. He and his family have low social class and seem so lowly. He is just a mere clerk in a jail, he has never gone to school, and his family is also uneducated. Moreover, his father is just an apothecary. He and his family are described as people who are uneducated. Furthermore, uneducated Eastern implies that they have not reached advanced science yet. The portrayal of uneducated East is constructed by the West to degrade intellectual capacity of Eastern. Another portrayal of uneducated portrayal of Eastern is also shown when Abdul is asked to serve a big-sized jelly.

BIGGE. "You must not talk to any guests. Nod or bow but please do not interact with anybody other than the serving staff. I will come to you when the Queen is seated and you will present the pudding, as requested."

ABDUL. "Excuse me, but what is it?"

BIGGE. "That is a jelly. A pudding made from the liquor of fruit."

ABDUL. "How do they get it so stiff?"

BIGGE. "Gelatin: a by-product of cow bone." (*Victoria and Abdul* 00:17:46 → 00:18:15)

Most of people know jelly as common kind of food, but he does not know what jelly is. Because he has never known this kind of food so he asks Bigge. He looks at the jelly curiously. Then, Bigge immediately explains him about the jelly. Those portrayals show how lack of knowledge become a hegemonic idea to degrade intellectual capacity of Eastern.

1.1.2. Degrading Traditional Culture of East

ABDUL. "You do know a sash is not traditional, sir?"

TAILOR. "The Indian drawings didn't seem very Indian – so we made some innovations. The important thing is to look authentic." (*Victoria and Abdul*, 00:06:17 → 00:06:28)

When the tailor puts a sash on Abdul's waist, Abdul asks the tailor whether he knows that a sash is traditional or not. Abdul's question actually implies his refusal to use the sash because it is not traditional culture of India. Then, the tailor explains that he makes innovations.

It implies that Indian clothes are not worthy enough, so it must have some innovation to make it better. Furthermore, it implies that the Indian culture is not advanced. Even though it has been modified from the original one, the tailor says that it is still authentic. The West owns certain standard to state whether a culture is worthy enough or not so that Eastern culture can be judged. The standard is used to exalt Western culture and influence the Eastern culture.

1.2. Civilized West

1.2.1. Exalting Intellectual Capacity of West

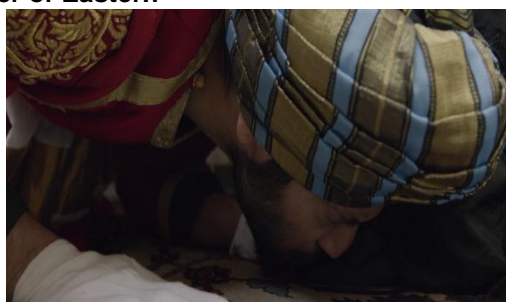


The scene above is when Abdul teaches Queen Victoria the language of Urdu in Victoria's private room as requested by her. It shows Victoria likes to learn new knowledge including Urdu language. The picture is shown by using medium shot since the characters are filmed from the waist up. It is used to show both the characters and the background closer. The background of that scene also shows that she has a lot of books in her private room. Since books are associated with knowledge, it indicates that Queen Victoria is a knowledgeable woman. The portrayal of knowledgeable woman is used to exal intellectual capacity of Western.

2. POWERLESS EAST AND POWERFUL WEST

2.1. Powerless East

2.1.1. Degrading Power of Eastern



After presenting the big-sized jelly to the queen, Abdul suddenly bows and then kisses the queen's foot. It is shown by the picture that uses medium close-up. Abdul is filmed slightly closer to show what he is doing. The scene when Abdul bows and kisses Victoria's foot is a subjugation. It is constructed to show that Eastern is powerless so that it subjects to Western that is powerful.

2.2. Powerful West

2.2.1. Exalting Power of Western

Since the position of Abdul is elevated, the royal household tries to get rid of Abdul. One of the ways to get rid of Abdul is looking for Abdul's background and telling it to the queen. Although the royal family and staffs tell the truth about Abdul, Queen Victoria still protects Abdul and gets angry with what they have done to Abdul. The conversation shows that Queen Victoria who represents Western is portrayed as powerful person because she has power to protect Abdul.

QUEEN VICTORIA. "You despicable toads. Racialists! Spying?! Dossiers?! Picking on a poor defenseless Indian. Of course they don't have qualifications. It's completely different out there."

BERTIE. "But don't you see, Mother, he's using his position for his own gain."

QUEEN VICTORIA. "And how does that make him any different to any one of you? How dare you look down on Abdul? How dare you defame his poor father? Bertie, I am ashamed that you are part of this. Abdul is a loyal, wise, sympathetic human being who has risen on his own merits. Not by endless backstabbing or family connections. I will not have this. Now. Repeat after me. I will be courteous to the *Munshi*."

PONSOBY. "I will be courteous to the *Munshi*." (*Victoria and Abdul* 01:15:18 → 01:15:57)

3. OPPORTUNISTIC EAST AND SINCERE WEST

3.1. Opportunistic East

3.1.1. Emphasizing Greed of Eastern

The opportunistic side of Abdul is seen when he lies Queen Victoria about a Mutiny against England. He does not tell it fully. Actually, the Mutiny is done by both Muslims and Hindus but he only tells that Hindus are behind the Mutiny and does not mention that Muslims are also involved. Moreover, the Mutiny is led by a Muslim as well. Abdul also convinces Victoria that Muslims stand for her by saying that Muslims are her friends at that time. In this case, he keeps information that is not 'profitable' and only tells the part that is 'profitable' for him to attract Victoria's attention. Besides lying about the Mutiny, he also covers up a fatwa against Victoria.

QUEEN VICTORIA. "I have opened my heart to you. I have brought your family from India, promoted you in the teeth of very considerable opposition and disquiet from the Household. I even turned a blind eye when you failed to tell me you were married, which came, as you know, as quite a surprise. How could you let me humiliate myself in front of the entire Household?"

ABDUL. "I am deeply sorry, Your Majesty."

QUEEN VICTORIA. "You said the Hindus were behind the Mutiny!"

ABDUL. "I didn't say it was only the Hindus, Your Majesty."

QUEEN VICTORIA. "You told me categorically that the Muslims were my friends."

ABDUL. "But we are your friends, Your Majesty."

QUEEN VICTORIA. "Abdul, there is a fatwa against me. It was Muslims who started the whole thing! This is completely unacceptable. Abdul, I thought you were outstanding as the Sultan of Persia, but I'm afraid you will have to go home." (*Victoria and Abdul* 01:01:56 → 01:02:36)

3.2. Sincere West

3.2.1. Emphasizing Heartfelt Western

When Queen Victoria tells about her sadness, Abdul advises her with a verse of Qur'an. Queen Victoria is astonished knowing that Abdul is a Muslim as well as a *hafiz* because she thinks Abdul is a Hindu. After that, Queen Victoria asks Abdul to be her *Munshi* or spiritual teacher and advisor. She also says that Abdul is no longer a servant. This is an evidence of sincere Western. She does something good to Abdul without taking advantage of it. It is different from the portrayal of the East that is represented by Abdul. He takes advantages of Victoria's kindness.

ABDUL. "In the Koran it says: we are here for the good of others."

QUEEN VICTORIA. "The Koran?"

ABDUL. "Oh yes, I am a Hafiz. I know the Koran by heart."

QUEEN VICTORIA. "By heart. Isn't it very long?"

ABDUL. "There are 114 Surahs containing 6,236 verses."

QUEEN VICTORIA. "And you know every word?"

ABDUL. "Many Muslim people know the Koran."

QUEEN VICTORIA. "I thought you were a Hindu."

ABDUL. "I am a Muslim, Your Majesty. I learnt the Koran from my father. And he taught me all the great poets: Kabir, Rumi. He is my *Munshi*."

QUEEN VICTORIA. "Munshi?"

ABDUL. "Yes, Munshi. My teacher."

QUEEN VICTORIA. "Then we would like you to be the Queen's Munshi."

ABDUL. "But I am a servant. A servant cannot be a Munshi?"

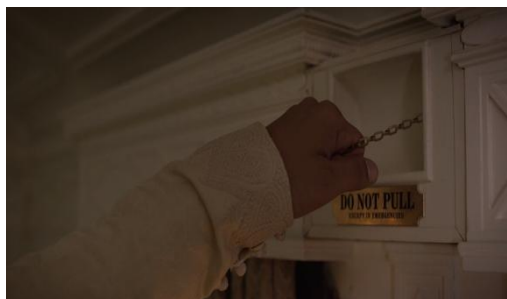
QUEEN VICTORIA. "Well, you are a servant no longer. You are my teacher. You shall teach me Urdu and the Koran and anything else you think of." (*Victoria and Abdul* 00:39:00 → 00:39:37)

4. NAIVE EAST AND LOGIC WEST

4.1. Naive East

4.1.1. Emphasizing Naivety of Eastern

Queen Victoria and Abdul have similarity. Both of the characters are stubborn. The difference of them is that Queen Victoria is a stubborn because she always stands for her principles while Abdul is a stubborn because he always disobeys rules for no apparent reason.



ABDUL. "Do Not Pull." (*Victoria & Abdul* 00:41:56 → 00:41:58)

On the way to Florence, Abdul sees a rope of emergency brake. He reads "Do Not Pull" sign beside it. What Abdul does is captured in the picture above. It uses close-up to show what he is doing with his hand. It shows Abdul is pulling the emergency brake although he knows that it is prohibited. What Abdul does shows that he is a man who is childish since he disobeys for no clear reason. It shows the naivety of the Eastern. Being naive means not to think enough. A person who is naive often shows a certain ignorance or simplicity when thinking about something. It could be due to lack of experience, information or ability to make judgments. In *Victoria and Abdul*, Abdul is depicted as a person who always does something that is forbidden and disobeys rules.

4.2. Logic East

4.2.1 Emphasizing Logic of Western

Abdul has done a mistake that makes the queen disappointed. He lies to the queen about a Mutiny. Based on what the queen says above, she is a logic person that she thinks she forgives Abdul because of his considerable kindness and devotion. It implies that the queen has principle that devotion is something that must be respected. She also thinks devotion is more important and valuable and cannot be compared to Abdul's mistakes.

QUEEN VICTORIA. "Abdul, you have been an utter fool and I am absolutely furious with you. It is unconscionable that as my *Munshi* you should have lied to me in any way. But also it would be completely churlish not to recognize the considerable kindness and devotion you've shown. And after all, I am sure you thought in some way you were protecting me. But as the monarch, I do realize nothing can really protect me. And in that light I have decided, even though I am very disappointed, I would like you to stay. But it must never happen again." (*Victoria & Abdul* 01:05:45 → 01:06:32)

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the pattern and power structure in this film are same as the other Hollywood films. Although Abdul gains facilities, positions, and all things that he wants, the West is still superior and the East is still inferior. It is shown by the portrayal of the West and the East such as uncivilized East and civilized West, powerless East and powerful West, opportunistic East and sincere West, naive East and logic West.

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