

## **Representations of East Asians in contemporary Swedish popular culture – intersections of race, gender and sexuality**

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Ethnic stereotyping of East Asians in Western culture has a long tradition going back to the golden days of European imperialism in the 19th century, while its modern version has been heavily influenced by incessant 20th century American warfare in the region. This paper deals with the representations of East Asians in three Swedish popular cultural texts; Kjell Sundvall's feature film *Jägarna* (1996), Harry Steven's travelogue *På resa med Mr M* (2003) and one episode of Kanal 5's entertainment program *Oumi* (2003-09-20). The purpose is to examine the racialised, gendered and sexualised images of East Asians in contemporary Swedish popular culture as presented in these texts. The study is carried out by the use of Stuart Hall's reading of ethnic stereotyping in media texts, and with the background of postcolonial theory and Edward Said's understanding of the myth of the "Orient", and feminist analyses of discourses on East Asians.

### **Ethnic representation and stereotyping**

The leading British cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1997a) has developed a methodology of understanding and reading ethnic representation and stereotyping in media texts. Hall starts by distancing himself from the reflective or mimetic and intentional approaches saying that language mirrors true meaning or at least conveys what the author intends it to mean. Instead, Hall adheres to a poststructuralist and social constructionist approach where meaning is produced within language by the work of representation. Reality in a meaningful sense does not even exist outside language, as it is the process of representation that gives concepts and practices meaning and function.

Representation denotes the production of meaning through language. Language is used in a broader sense embracing every social interaction and expression of communication from words, sounds and gestures, to things, clothes or colours, known as texts. There are two systems of representation involved in meaning-production where the first one consists of the concepts formed in the mind by which we classify the world into meaningful categories, while the second one is language communicating and exchanging these ideas. The mental representation is made up of signs, words and images carrying meaning and organised into various relationships, while language is governed by shared codes, the linguistic rules and social conventions unconsciously internalised by members of a culture.

Signs can be divided into two elements, the actual word or image, the signifier, and the corresponding concept or idea, the signified. It is the relation between these two elements, ruled by linguistic and cultural codes, which sustains representation and produces meaning. These signs can only be defined and understood in relation to each other, conceptualised as binary oppositions and establishing difference or sameness. Furthermore, as the link between the signifier and the signified is completely arbitrary, meanings are never fixed but constantly slipping and sliding and apt to new interpretations and readings making universal and final truths impossible to exist.

Culture is for Hall a set of shared meanings and conceptual maps for its members, and is considered as important as the material base in shaping social movements and creating historical events as texts are viewed as socially grounded frameworks based in specific situations and institutions. Thus, it is the participants in a given culture or context who give meaning to people, things and events through representations by naming and defining, categorising and classifying, including and excluding using unwritten but shared regulations, presuppositions and assumptions. In this way, meaning is constantly being produced, negotiated and exchanged in a culture, and Hall calls this process the circuit of culture.

Hall suggests a twofold methodological approach to the study of representations. The first one is the semiotic approach concerned with how representations are constructed and focusing on the signs and the meanings they convey. In semiotic analysis, the descriptive aspect is known as the level of denotation and the mental aspect the level of connotation. Culture is then seen as a semantic field of clusters of ideas and concepts or myths. The second approach is the discursive perspective focusing on the production of knowledge and meaning, and the effects and consequences of representations seen as formations of discourses. A discourse is the way of representing the knowledge about a particular topic at a specific historical moment. These discursive formations are hegemonising by nature and sustain a regime of truths as they always involve power. While semiotic analysis aims at studying the poetics of representation at work seen as the bricks of meaning in culture, discourse analysis studies the politics of representation examining what is possible to say or not to say on a certain topic.

The privileged medium of mass communication is for Hall arguably one of the most important and influential representational systems in modern societies in its mass production and circulation of images of the world. As an example of his method of analysis, Hall (1997b) examines what he calls the spectacle of the Other in British media and popular culture, namely how ethnic Otherness is represented through stereotyping images. Hall focuses on the process of differentiation, the essentialising of Otherness by marking difference, and how these representations relate to each other through intertextuality. Intertextuality is a reflection of what Hall calls the regime of representation, the way by which these images speak to each other at any historical moment using a whole repertoire of reiterations and common references. These mediated representations with all their fantasies and desires effectively naturalise and fix the boundary between Self (Us) and Other (Them). However, as representations are never fixed, Hall calls for a politics of representation to be able to transcode negative images with new self-appropriated meanings.

## **The Orientalist imagery**

Postcolonial theory offers the perspective of the conquered and the colonized instead of the hegemonic master narratives of metropolitan West (Chambers & Curti, 1996). The field is influenced by Marxism, Feminism and Post-Structuralism, and has evolved since the 1960s as a consequence of de-colonization, globalisation and postmodernism. Postcolonialism has been defined by its Swedish introducer Stefan Jonsson (1995: 117-158) as the time after colonialism and the situation in the former colonies, as a global condition after the colonial period, as a term denoting the relationship between culture and imperialism and as a theory investigating the postcolonial society and its dual attitude towards itself and the West. However, the very concept of postcoloniality and its ambivalent association as a state of an infinite aftermath has also been questioned by Childs and Williams (1997: 1-25) as the West still wields the political and economic power, pointing to the persistence of colonial thinking and reflecting global racial hierarchies.

In their studies of Asia in Western fiction, Steadman (1970) and Winks and Rush (1990) have shown how the West's image of Asia has been characterized by myths and stereotypes. Historically the geographical concept of Asia is very difficult to define, and it has never been possible to draw a clear line between Europe and Asia. Among myths, worth mentioning are "Oriental despotism", the "Asiatic way of production" as well as everything that can be associated with cruelty and decadence in contrast to Western rationality, liberal democracy, human rights and market economy. From ancient times the "Orient" has been the continent for the feared Other – the barbarians, the heathen and the primitive, and the "Yellow" (Confucianism), "Red" (Communism) or "Green" (Islamism) perils. The "Orient" is vaguely defined as extending from Morocco to Japan, and has sometimes even included Southern Spain and Italy, the Balkans, Russia and Greece. Thus, the borders of Asia have fluctuated, but Western images of Asia remain fixed and fossilized.

This Western way of conceptualising Asia and Asians has been coined Orientalism. *Orientalism* is the term used for the subject and the works of the Orientalists, Western scholars versed in the cultures, histories, languages and religions of Asia since the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century when the field was born. In Germany and Scandinavia *orientalistik* has been the equivalent term, and this linguistic difference sometimes causes confusion when discussing the matter of Orientalism. The first criticism of Orientalism and the Orientalists emerged during the years of de-colonization in the early 1960s, and was mounted by Asians educated in the West. Through this critique and the following debate, Orientalism as a term was transformed from a fully accepted name of an academic subject in the humanities to one of the most charged and contested words in modern scholarship, making it almost impossible to utilize expressions like the “Orient” and “Orientals” without using quotation marks. The assault on Orientalism was launched on three different fronts.

The most influential and complete critique of Orientalism has been mounted by the Palestinian literary historian Edward Said (1978). Said managed to wage a frontal attack on Orientalism as a cumulative and hegemonic discourse in his pioneering and groundbreaking work *Orientalism*. The Orient is for Said the West’s eternal other, and Orientalism is a discourse that has survived and been able to reproduce itself for centuries, resulting in catastrophic consequences for the victims, the Asians themselves. This discourse says that the West stands for rationality and modernity, while the “Orient” stands for religiousness and tradition. Following the logic of developmental thinking, the West therefore possessed the right to conquer, suppress and rule over Asia. Orientalism is a way of thinking about Asia and Asians as strange, servile, exotic, dark, mysterious, erotic and dangerous, and has helped the West to define itself through this contrasting and dichotomous image. Orientalism means the absolute need for an eternal non-West to justify the politics and cultural hegemony of a superior and endlessly progressive West. Thus, Asian cultures are essentially and by definition primitive and anach-

ronistic, and the modern versions such as modernized Japan or Korea are therefore pathetic imitations.

It is important to remember that the relationship between the West and Asia has never been equal, as the West conquered, colonized, and exploited the peoples of Asia. To rationalize the conquest, it defined Asia and the Asians as despotic or stagnant and in need of Christianising, civilizing or control. After Said, numerous studies have been published on the different Orientalisms of the West that various countries and cultures in Asia have suffered. Among many Orientalists, Said's book provoked angry and sometimes even hateful responses, while others declared themselves ready for a fundamental change of attitude towards Asia and the Asians, their objects of study. Said's theory of Orientalism has also provided feminists and anti-racists with a general method of understanding the nature of oppression.

### **Swedish encounters with the “Orientals”**

Following in the footsteps of Said, cultural studies scholars have analysed particularly Anglo-Saxon media and popular culture showing how Orientalist myths and stereotypes still dominate the way of representing East Asians (Ho 1999; Lee 1999; Lim 1994; Marchetti 1993; Singh, Chirgwin & Elliott 1998). However, in Swedish postcolonial and cultural studies there are just a few works on mediated Orientalism (Andersson, Berg & Natland 2001; Berg 1998). The absolute majority of these works deal with West Asia, and there are no studies at all of representations of East Asians in Swedish popular culture.

Academics with a feminist theoretical perspective have identified the twofold discourses of racialised, gendered and sexualised stereotyping whereby East Asian women are eroticised and fetishised, while East Asian men are emasculated and effeminised (Chua & Fujino 1999; Eng 2001; Espiritu 1997; Kang 1993; Kee 1998; Ling 1999; Morris 2002; Uchida 1998). These mirroring images are underpinned by a combination of nostalgic roman-

ticism and memories of glorious mass extermination and raping in the colonies, brutal American Cold War politics and military prostitution, and contemporary sex tourism and trafficking, and are today arguably the two most common ethnic stereotypes of East Asians in Western culture. The representations of East Asian women as eroticised and fetishised, and of East Asian men as emasculated and effeminised are also the images I rely on in my examination of the representations of East Asians in the feature film *Jägarna*, in the travelogue *På resa med Mr M* and in the entertainment program *Oumi*, trying to identify the myths and discourses at work. The three works have been chosen for their recent appearance and wide audience.

Kjell Sundvall's film thriller *Jägarna* was released in 1996, and was immediately tuned into both a commercial and an artistic success as it was seen by close to 800,000 spectators and praised by critics (Amcoff, Carlström & Hansson 1996; Hedling 1998). This second most popular feature film in Sweden that year was perceived as a celebration of Swedishness in general and Swedish masculinity in particular in its Northern version, set in the countryside in the village of Älvsbyn in the region of Norrland, even if a discussion followed on the problem of ethnic self-stereotyping. The film tells the story of how a policeman, Erik, returns from Stockholm to the place where he grew up, a small homestead in Älvsbyn inhabited by his brother Leif. The plot is made up of a male gang of "settlers", ethnic Swedes including Leif himself, who lives on the illegal killing, slaughtering and bartering of reindeers belonging to the local Saami, the indigenous population of Norrland. During the course of Eriks' dramatic hunt for and exposure of these illegal hunters, numerous people are threatened, beaten up and even killed before justice can prevail.

One of the characters and the only East Asian in *Jägarna* is a Philippine woman called Nena, played by the Philippine immigrant and amateur actress Editha Domingo, who has a role as a waitress at the local restaurant in the village of Älvsbyn. According to Amcoff's et al. (1998: 147-49) book about the film itself, Editha answered to an ad in the tabloid

*Aftonbladet* looking for a “Thai or Philippine woman in her 30s for a serious film project”. Nena is portrayed after another authentic Philippine immigrant woman, Precie Nilsson, married to a Swedish man and living and working at a restaurant in Överkalix, another small town in Norrland. This authentic background firmly frames the character of Nena into the myth of the East Asian woman being trafficked to the West as a spouse to a white man, and from then on dependent on him. The text of the ad also conveys the message that many East Asian women are prostitutes living here in the West as “unserious” immigrants. Finally, the use of two nationalities connotes the myth of East Asians as all looking physically alike.

In the film, Nena is subjected to permanent racist and sexist harassment coming from the male characters, and especially from Leif’s friends, the gang of illegal hunters. In the beginning, Leif wants to introduce his homecoming brother to the daily life of Älvsbyn, and exclaims “let’s go and look at the Philippine woman”, signifying her as an exoticised trope of desire. Nena is married to the owner of the restaurant, who jokingly tells the customer that he bought her for a paraffin lamp. Leif’s friends openly treat her violently and disparagingly and call her a “Philippine hooker”, while at the same time Erik and Nena’s husband refuse to intervene and both choose male loyalty. It is easy to identify with Nena’s complete loneliness, vulnerability and hardships, and in the film the male characters become Aryan monsters arrogantly showing off their physical superiority over a minuscule East Asian woman.

However, later in the film, to the dismay of his brother Erik initiates a relationship with Nena, the “Chinese whore” who according to him should “go back to the jungle and the monkeys”. It turns out that Nena is tired of her life in Sweden and wants to return to the Philippines. Even if Nena is treated as one of the a main characters of the film, her uncanny appearance and even more her mysterious disappearance after a brutal gang rape committed by Leif and his friends, create the feeling of her as being totally passive and submissive. Even if we get to know that Nena has been put on a plane back to the Philippines by a corrupt po-

liceman, there is no talk at all about the criminal and moral guilt for the gang rape. To sum up, for me the representation of the Philippine woman Nena in *Jägarna* is nothing else but a reproduction of the discourse of East Asian women as wholly sexualised and easily disposable, now and then used by Western directors as an exotic fetish.

The travel account *På resa med Mr M* came out in 2003, and is according to the publishing house Zoot Förlag written in the style of “liberating unscrupulousness” by a Swedish journalist who makes use of the pen name Harry Stevens. Like *Jägarna*, *På resa med Mr M* mainly portrays East Asian women. Stevens deliberately writes himself into a long tradition of male Western travellers to Asian countries, behaving like the master race, partying and making a mess, and above all buying and raping natives to collect exotic experiences of the racialised Other and be able to write about, categorise and review and rate them. *På resa med Mr M* is specifically written by and for laid-back middle-class backpackers in their 30s in true Lonely Planet-style, tired of the “feminist” women of the West and longing for a combination of brutal animalistic sex and exotic colonial-style romance in the “Orient”.

Stevens travels together with his childhood friend Mr M from Sweden by train through Siberia to Mongolia, China, Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, Vietnam and Thailand. Their only sexual experience with East Asian women before the trip is “an adopted Korean who circulated among us a long time ago”. Together, the “lads” take the opportunity to try the local women wherever they end up, and whether they are married or prostitutes, children or middle-aged. Every chapter tells the story of a new country and its women, and ends with a complete sexual review according to racial divides. The travelogue is literally filled with classical Orientalist fantasies and dreams. The two Swedish men are openly joking about the physical appearance of East Asians and their behaviour, and in China they laugh at the phrase “You must obey the Chinese society!”.

Consciously tramping in the footsteps of the colonisers of the glory days of European empires and contemporary American Cold War soldiers who raped and killed for centuries in the region, Stevens and Mr M sense a secure feeling of recognition among the numerous willing prostitutes shouting “fucki fucki” in stupid Pidgin English. East Asian women are short-legged, knock-kneed and slant-eyed, lacking waists and looking stupid and even ugly, while at the same time provoking uncontrollable paedophilic and sadomasochistic sexual excitement with their childish, innocent and androgynous looks and small stature. If the Mongolian women are like countryside girls in the bed, the Chinese are raw and carnal, the Koreans are simply horny, and the Japanese women stand out in their advanced sexual habits and games, preferring to be dominated. This way of rating East Asian women is also what the Orientalist and Japanologist Boye De Mente does in his extremely popular bestseller *Women of the Orient* (1992) with the subtitle *Intimate profiles of the world's most feminine women*.

Finally, after having travelled through all these East Asian countries the two Swedish men end up in a discussion about East Asians as sexual partners in general: “Women in Asia are in some respects more beautiful than our sluts...more feminine, and maybe more motherly. Not as masculine as in Europe.” Stevens and Mr M continue by pitying themselves and the loss of primitive manhood in the West: “It is not strange that women above the 40s go to Gambia to find real men”. Coming back to the East Asian women, Mr M however comments that it is sad that they have “flat bottoms and breasts”, and that they are in need of silicon both here and there. East Asian men on the other hand are “not like real men at all, tiny and flat-faced”. In this way, *På resa med Mr M* becomes nothing else more but a veritable sex guide for Swedish men who in the hundreds of thousands travel to East Asia every year, while thousands of East Asian women are brought back to Sweden as wives annually.

Finally to end with a television series where a supposed East Asian woman plays the main role, the entertainment program *Oumi* was screened on the television channel Kanal 5 in

the course of the autumn of 2003, and received both positive appreciation and criticism in the media. The very blonde and Swedish actress Mi Ridell plays a Japanese journalist called Oumi hiding behind heavy make-up who together with her boss Mr Nakamura, played by the real Japanese immigrant man Mamoru Nakamura, former librarian of the Swedish Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, meet with and interview Swedish celebrities asking stupid and embarrassing questions and in the end revealing herself as Mi herself. This documentary-like game is wholly dependent on what is considered stereotypical Japanese as Mi Ridell has to use all her skills to hide herself behind the fake Japanese female journalist.

In the episode from September 20, Oumi meets with the politician Tove Lifvendahl, an adopted Korean woman in her early 30s. I have deliberately chosen this episode, as all three persons in the program, Oumi, Tove and Nakamura, at least on the surface must be considered as ethnic East Asians. During the 30 minutes long screening, Oumi asks several questions about Tove's political career and her opinions, speaking in extremely broken English pronounced in a perceived East Asian style such as the inability to differ between "r" and "l". Now and then, Oumi turns to the almost completely mute Nakamura sitting in the sofa beside her, talking to him in a fake gibberish Japanese. Mi Ridell's make up is made up of strongly marked slanted eyes and protruding teeth, and her fake East Asian appearance at least for me as an ethnic East Asian myself becomes even more obvious and apparent in the company of Tove and Nakamura. However, this strange situation is never addressed at all in the episode as if it was a coincidence that three East Asians meet with each other in the same television program, conveying a sense of deliberate "multicultural" colour blindness. Nakamura who bears his authentic name plays the typical stiff, modest and totally emasculated and desexualised East Asian man.

At the end of the program when Oumi disappears for a moment, that Nakamura suddenly wakes up and starts to speak in Korean to Tove in an extremely superior and demeaning

style reflecting the authentic contempt Japanese people often harbour towards Koreans. Being adopted to Sweden, Tove of course does not understand a word of what is said, and this unpleasant and humiliating scene which goes on for half a minute is suddenly interrupted by Oumi coming back as the real Mi Ridell, and the end of the program itself. Thus, the comic aspect of this episode must be the fact that Tove herself is an ethnic East Asian both unable to reveal the identity of Mi Ridell and unable to understand Korean and socialise with “real” East Asians – a grim mockery with her plight as an adopted Korean in Sweden openly played out in the public. Oumi herself with a body language connoting sexuality and clumsiness at the same time, is simultaneously desired and disgusting as she is as excessive a stereotype of East Asians as the producers could come up with.

### **Images of East Asians in Sweden**

After having examined three contemporary Swedish popular cultural works and their representations of East Asians, it becomes obvious that the myths and discourses of East Asian women as eroticised and fetishised, and East Asian men as emasculated and effeminised are very much alive in the culture and psyche of today’s Swedes. East Asians are constructed as different and readily inscribed with Orientalist signs easily coded, intertextualised and perfectly recognisable for the Swedish audience. This way of representing East Asians is in other words not at all different from Anglo-Saxon countries which contrary to Sweden have hundreds of years of direct experience of East Asians. Even if Sweden lacks any traces of or even attempts in history of having colonies in the region, exactly the same kind of myths dominate and make themselves heard in these mediated representations.

This disturbing and sad fact may have to do with the general unwillingness in Sweden of identifying with the colonial period even if the country both materially and mentally was a fully integrated part of imperialist Europe. A related explanation is the hostile reception of

Edward Said and postcolonial theory in Swedish academia, and particularly in Asian Studies which clings to the opinion that Swedish orientalists are free from the worst expressions of Orientalism. Instead, Sweden is perceived by the Swedes as the world's most multi-cultural, anti-colonial and anti-racist country, and a paradise for democracy, human rights, equality and social justice. I would at this point like to recommend an excellent and thought provoking study of the fact that Sweden has developed to the most destructive country in the West in its treatment of non-White immigrants including East Asians. I am here speaking of Alan Pred's study *Even in Sweden* (2000). Pred, a professor in cultural geography at the University of California, shows in a persuasive way how their self-image has stopped the Swedes from being self-critical and has resulted in a self-righteousness which today is going through a painful process as Sweden has suddenly become the most racist country in the West in terms of racial discrimination and segregation and with the most dynamic Neo-Nazi movement in the world.

Finally, and last but not least another important aspect in the context is that the majority of Swedes' memories and experiences with East Asia and East Asians come a combination of sex tourism, trafficking and international adoption. According to Statistics Sweden (SCB), in 2001 there were barely 50,000 East Asians in Sweden with China, Vietnam, Korea, Thailand, the Philippines and Indonesia as countries of origin, and among those more than two thirds are female; 15,000 married to white Swedish men and 15,000 adopted by white Swedish adoptive parents.

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