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Can the West Read?

Western Readers, Orientalist Stereotypes, and the Sensational

Response to *The Kite Runner*

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Khaled Hosseini's 2003 novel *The Kite Runner* presents itself as a powerful depiction of the formation of a complex Afghan-American cultural identity against the backdrop of the turbulence of modern Afghanistan. The novel was received surprisingly well by Western literary audiences and held a steady spot on the *New York Times* best-seller list for over one hundred weeks, despite its coming from a foreign, relatively unknown Afghan author and its level of significant national publicity being little to none. What made the success of the novel even more remarkable was how it managed to overcome all these anticipated obstacles, turn itself into a literary phenomenon, and even inspire the production of an Academy Award-nominated film of the same name essentially by word-of-mouth recommendations. It was clear that Hosseini's Afghan-American coming of age tale had struck an emotional nerve within readers, instigating powerful connections between themselves and the world that Hosseini describes with such blunt honesty. Yet it is this sensational response to *The Kite Runner* that begs further critical analysis: what *is* it about *The Kite Runner* that made it such an approachable and acceptable work of fiction among American readers?

The immediate, most obvious answer is that the novel had a historical relevance that resonated with a post-9/11 society. As noted by *Slate* magazine's culture critic Meghan O'Rourke, "The initial interest in the book clearly lay in the promise that it might deliver topical information in an accessible manner—humanizing the newspaper accounts of a place that suddenly became a U.S. preoccupation again after 9/11" (O'Rourke 1). The events of 9/11/2001 had resulted in a "bringing home" of images of a violent, demonic Middle East in need of humanizing, and Hosseini's novel seemed to be one of the answers to that call. As state and media discourses in the United States deployed useful binary paradigms for understanding complicated Western relations with the Middle East, *The Kite Runner* apparently challenged this

binary by crossing ethnic boundaries and bringing together in friendship the most unlikely of characters. With an understanding of the post-9/11 climate, it is clear as to why American popular audiences sought this “bridge of understanding” between themselves and the culture of the Middle East. However, in “Selling American Diversity and Muslim American Identity through Nonprofit Advertising Post-9/11,” Evelyn Alsultany elaborates on the notion that “In addition to government practices that defined Americans and Arabs/Muslims as binary opposites, government and media discourses relied on old Orientalist tropes that positioned American national identity as democratic, modern, and free and the Middle East as primitive, barbaric, and oppressive” (Alsultany 594). I will make the point that the same occurs within Hosseini’s novel: that despite its attempts to challenge these stereotypic binaries, the novel only ends up reinforcing them.

When the historically relevant interest in the novel is put aside, it is most often Hosseini’s powerful and approachable characterization of Afghan cultural identity that continues to attract Western readers. Hosseini’s portrayal of his protagonist Amir is what initially piqued my own interest and led me to question the connection that Western readers intended to discover between themselves and Afghanistan. In order to address these concerns of characterization, I turned to Edward Said’s widely known work *Orientalism*, which has been infinitely useful in approaching problems of representation within Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner*. The term “orientalism” as Said defines it in his 1978 introduction, is “a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient’s special place in European Western experience” (Said 1). It is important to note that the concept of Orientalism is an *ideological creation* that, in Said’s words again, is “based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and (most of the time)

‘the Occident’” (2). This ideological creation of the Orient essentially allows the West to begin to approach and deal with the “otherness” of the Orient and their culture, customs, and beliefs.

With this in mind, I then intended to find the ways in which Western readers sought to deal with this supposed “otherness” of the characters within *The Kite Runner*. As previously mentioned, I found the portrayal of the protagonist Amir to be of particular interest, so I began by identifying significant components of this character’s cultural identity and observed their evolution over the course of the novel. The results were intriguing. I found that in many instances as Amir’s cultural identity evolves over the course of the novel, the functions of the modern American West and a traditional Muslim world are simplified and juxtaposed. In fact, the Orient is often used as a cultural backdrop against which to create and celebrate Western identity: a representation that clearly echoes the broad Orientalist stereotypes defined by Edward Said a generation ago. Therefore, it becomes clear why I see the identification that Western readers make with Hosseini’s Afghan protagonist as particularly problematic. Whereas the novel encourages Western readers to believe they are creating a “bridge of understanding” between themselves and Afghan culture, they are actually identifying with a stereotypical, or perhaps “orientalist,” way of understanding the relationship between the East and the West. As Western readers understand these stereotypes of developmental and hierarchal differences between the East and the West to be both normative and commendable, the historic problem of Orientalist stereotyping is sustained by means of the literary process of characterization.

Additionally, by recognizing and identifying the Western self within this “othered” character, it becomes clear that despite a foreign background, Amir isn’t actually foreign or othered at all; he has been constructed of the same cultural and political materials as Western readers themselves. Therefore, in the case of *The Kite Runner*, Hosseini’s foreigner-as-

protagonist Amir actually becomes less and less “foreign” to the Western reader over the course of the novel, and begins to function as a sort of extension of the imperial self by using the East, in all its forms, for his own Westernized benefit.

On a side note, readers who are familiar with Rudyard Kipling’s 1901 novel *Kim* may have already begun to recognize similarities between Kipling’s novel and *The Kite Runner* when it comes to the use of a foreigner-as-protagonist. This association between the two novels may prove to be a useful point of reference as to how so-called “foreign” protagonists work: their function as internal Orientalists assists the reader by providing a familiar lens through which the East can be seen. In Kipling’s novel, the protagonist Kim is living in India as the orphan son of an Irish soldier. Although he is marked by his dark skin and described as “burned black as any native,” Kipling reinforces the fact that Kim is “white – a poor white of the very poorest” (Kipling 49). His occupation of both Eastern and Western spheres grants him access to both cultures, and Kipling makes it a point to show how Kim can, with “chameleon-like” dexterity, switch between the two. This hybrid aspect of Kim actually enables him to work as a powerful internal Orientalist. However, one important difference between *Kim* and *The Kite Runner* is that even though both characters show a movement along a spectrum from East towards West, Hosseini’s Amir retains part of his Afghan identity even at the very end of the novel. Meanwhile, Kipling insists on keeping Kim genetically and culturally “white” even after he reaches a point of maturation at the end of *Kim*.

Another point of similarity between *Kim* and *The Kite Runner* is their use of the structure of the coming-of-age story: the bildungsroman. Once again, it may be useful to think of the ways in which both authors use this familiar structure in their development of character. The bildungsroman involves the maturation from child to adult by means of a journey. This journey

is typically defined by an acquisition of education, which leads to a confrontation of one's past, recognition of familial guilt and burdens, and finally a fuller awareness of one's self and eventual accommodation into society. However, the presence of the bildungsroman structure is in itself significant, since it is widely known as a novelistic genre present in many English novels. Its function in both *Kim* and *The Kite Runner*, therefore, can be seen as one that connects these "foreign" tales with the structure of a familiar one in order to assist a Western reader in understanding the Orient. In terms of *The Kite Runner*, this is yet another reason why the novel resonates so strongly with Western readers: its basic plot structure follows a pattern that has historically been used in a multitude of English novels, which makes it both familiar to and acceptable with Western audiences.

To return to *The Kite Runner*, the Orientalist stereotyping that is used in the formation of Amir's identity is also quite present in the characterization of Assef, the antagonist of the novel. While Western readers attempt to deal with the "otherness" of Amir through self-recognition, they experience a converse type of identification with Assef. Instead of finding a reflection of themselves within Assef, they come to find a character that is, to use Alsultany's words, "primitive, barbaric, and oppressive": an antithesis to liberal Western ideologies. Therefore, by identifying Assef as a foreign character who also happens to represent the opposite of everything they know themselves to be, Western readers are likely to rely on reassuring Orientalist stereotypes to cast Assef into a position of Oriental inferiority. The Orientalist stereotypes involved here, which associate Oriental characters as always already inferior to their Western counterparts, allows the Orient to be used as a "subject" for an overall Western benefit. In this case, the characterization of Assef is *used* as a backdrop for Amir's westernization, and serves as a point of reference as to how far Amir's Western identity progresses and develops throughout

the course of the novel. Additionally, whereas Amir becomes a more modern, liberal, Western character within the structure of the bildungsroman, Assef only develops by becoming an increasingly cartoonish and villainous “Oriental” character. The pitting of Amir and Assef against one another ultimately creates a system of binary opposition, which inflames the differences between the two opposites and ultimately sustains the dominance of Western power structures over the East.

A visualization provided by Said helps to clarify these various forms of Orientalist stereotypes as well as the idea of how the foreigner-as-protagonist functions. In the following quotation, Said shows how viewing the Orient as a backdrop for the needs of the West is both a Western stereotype of the Orient, and representative of the West using the East for a Western benefit. He begins with an image provided by Evelyn Baring, Lord Cromer; England’s representative in Egypt between the years 1882 and 1907:

Cromer¹ envisions a seat of power in the West, and radiating out from it towards the East a great embracing machine, sustaining the central authority yet commanded by it. What the machine’s branches feed into it in the East—human material, material wealth, knowledge, what have you—is processed by the machine, then converted into more power. The specialist does the immediate translation of mere Oriental matter into useful substance: the Oriental becomes, for example, a subject race, an example of an ‘Oriental’ mentality, all for the enhancement of the ‘authority’ at home. ‘Local interests’ are Orientalist special interests, the ‘central authority’ is the general interest of the imperial society as a whole (Said 44).

¹ Evelyn Baring, Lord Cromer; England’s representative in Egypt between the years 1882 and 1907. He is described by Said as “Egypt’s master” and “an accomplished technician of empire but also a beneficiary of Orientalism,” referencing the work that Cromer accomplished in bringing Egypt up to a Western standard (Said 35, 44).

If Said's description is not entirely clear, I will attempt to clarify: Westerners have historically used their encounters with the Orient to increase their own knowledge, which increases their own power. The acquisition of this knowledge is done in part by what Said calls a "specialist," who in this case appears to be both Hosseini and his protagonist Amir. Both the author and his fictional character are able to translate the experience of Afghanistan into a palatable idea and deliver it to the Western reader, therefore using the Orient and all those who belong to it for their own benefit, as well as for the celebration of the Western identity. Therefore, I see the function of "specialist" as not being limited to obvious Westerners or Imperialists: even those with an inherent connection to the Orient can be viewed as assisting the imperial machine for a Western benefit. Specific examples of how using the Orient as a backdrop for the needs of the West functions as a method of Orientalism within *The Kite Runner* will be discussed later on.

Another pertinent concept of Orientalism is elaborated upon in the following excerpt. Here, we see how Said distinguishes the functions of the West and the East in their relations with one another:

For a number of evident reasons the Orient was always in the position both of outsider and of incorporated weak partner for the West. To the extent that Western scholars were aware of contemporary Orientals or Oriental movements of thought and culture, these were perceived either as silent shadows to be animated by the Orientalist, brought into reality by him, or as a kind of cultural and intellectual proletariat useful for the Orientalist's grander interpretative activity, necessary for his performance as superior judge, learned man, powerful cultural will (Said 208).

This passage makes it clear that in order for the West to use its encounters with the Orient for their own "powerful cultural will," the Orient can only exist in relation to the West as an "incorporated weak partner." Therefore, when observing these kinds of relationships between

characters within Hosseini's text, such as that between Amir and Hassan, it is clear that Hosseini is delivering to his readers an "Orientalized" Afghan culture that uses an internal Orientalist to reflect specifically American political and psychological needs.

At this time I want to make clear that by no means do I want to classify Hosseini as a "true" Orientalist by Said's terms. Said defines an Orientalist early on in his introduction as "Anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient—and this applies whether the person is an anthropologist, sociologist, historian, or philologist—either in its specific or general aspects" and that "what he or she does is Orientalism" (Said 2). However, since Hosseini as an Afghan-American is occupying a hybrid position of being comprised of both East and West, his work resists being classified as Orientalist. Hosseini only *assists* the imperial machine; he is not the imperial machine itself (to return to the image provided by Cromer). In other words, although *The Kite Runner* may not have been intended to so neatly satisfy the Western structure of the bildungsroman, the Western reader interprets it as such, regardless of the intention of the author.

With this framework in mind, I now intend to discuss and analyze the specific ways in which the components of both Amir and Assef's cultural identity function in *The Kite Runner*. The major markers of cultural identity that are confronted throughout their journeys of cultural formation are ethnic divisions and tensions, friendship and loyalty, and religion and redemption. Each of these markers is individually important, yet they are at times intricately interwoven; I will begin by discussing the importance of ethnic divisions and tensions in the novel and its link to friendship and loyalty. These particular aspects of cultural identity profoundly affect the two characters and can be depicted as reinforcing a "West versus East" binary, therefore relying upon and sustaining Orientalist stereotypes.

The relationship between Amir and his best friend (and half-brother) Hassan represents one occurrence of ethnic division and tension within *The Kite Runner*. Amir is designated as being Pashtun, while Hassan is Hazara. The historical relationship between Pashtuns and Hazaras is briefly summarized towards the beginning of the novel when Amir discovers a history book in his father's study:

[I] was stunned to find an entire chapter on Hazara history. An entire chapter dedicated to Hassan's people! In it, I read that my people, the Pashtuns, had persecuted and oppressed the Hazaras. It said that the Hazaras had tried to rise against the Pashtuns in the nineteenth century, but the Pashtuns had "quelled them with unspeakable violence." The book said that my people had killed the Hazaras, driven them from their lands, burned their homes, and sold their women. The book said that part of the reason Pashtuns had oppressed the Hazaras was that Pashtuns were Sunni Muslims, while Hazaras were Shi'a. The book said a lot of things I didn't know, things my teachers hadn't mentioned. Things Baba hadn't mentioned either (Hosseini 9).

This ethnic and social distinction plays an important role in the plot of the novel, yet it is also easily translatable into a binary between the stereotypical "East" and "West." The boys' general characteristics can be described as such: Hassan embodies the ethnic minority, physically blemished, and less fortunate companion of Amir, yet he also happens to be the more spiritual, traditional, and wholesome of the two boys. Amir, on the other hand, belongs to the privileged class and is of dominant and preferred ethnicity, yet he is weak in spirit and takes advantage of Hassan's less privileged status for his own benefit. In their later lives, Hassan will continue to live an impoverished, though spiritually fulfilling, life in Afghanistan; meanwhile Amir will eventually move to America, get an education, and settle down in San Francisco, California. It is apparent that the relationship between Amir and Hassan isn't anything that the Western reader

has not seen before. From a Western reader's perspective, the boys' characteristics are formulated to resonate with a familiar and easily identifiable Western framework of characterization. As previously discussed, this identification with a foreign character can occur in one of two ways: the character can either become an internal Orientalist that assists the imperial machine, or the character is the Oriental subject who is used for the benefit of both the internal Orientalist as well as the West. Because of the fact that Amir's dominant ethnicity and Hassan's inferior one are always quite present in their relationship, Amir undoubtedly becomes the internal Orientalist and Hassan the Oriental subject for the purposes of a Western audience. This observation also brings us back to the passage from Said, which made it clear that the Orient only exists in relation to the West as an "incorporated weak partner," therefore sustaining the notion that the ethnic and social distinctions between Amir and Hassan function to create a binary between the "East" and the "West" and portray an Orientalized Afghan culture.

Amir aligns himself with Hassan for the benefits of companionship and protection, yet the combination of tension created by Amir and Hassan's opposing ethnic groups and Amir's struggle to live up to his father's expectations severely strains their friendship. One of the scenes leading up to a pivotal point in the novel exemplifies both Hassan's unwavering defense of Amir, and Amir's inner conflict over accepting Hassan as an equal. When three older Pashtun boys confront and threaten to beat up Amir, the ringleader of the pack and antagonist of the novel, Assef, taunts Amir by asking how he can call Hassan a "friend" considering that he is a Hazara. "Afghanistan is the land of Pashtuns," Assef claims. "It always has been, always will be. We are the true Afghans, the pure Afghans, not this Flat-Nose here. His people pollute our homeland, our *watan*. They dirty our blood" (Hosseini 40). Amir nearly retorts by blurting out, "He's not my friend! ... He's my servant!" but holds his tongue instead (41). Hassan comes to

the rescue by standing up to Assef and his crew, which will later come back to haunt him, but for the time being leaves both Amir and Hassan unscathed. Once again we see how from the beginning, ethnic tensions play an important role in characterization and the friendship between Amir and Hassan, yet it also leads to the formation of binary paradigms which oversimplify and stereotype the characteristics of both East and West.

The above scene also illustrates the demonic portrayal of Assef through his support of racial hygiene, which is a recurring motif of characterization for Assef. Since Assef serves as a foil for Amir's Western development, it is important to track the progression of his characterization alongside that of Amir's. Assef's claim that Hazaras are "polluting our homeland" and "dirtying our blood" draws strong parallels to the ideologies of Nazi Germany and the historic figure of Adolph Hitler, who is referenced by name multiple times throughout the novel. "Too late for Hitler... but not for us," Assef warns Amir right before Hassan steps in to defend his ethnic superior (Hosseini 40). This alignment of Assef and Hitler periodically resurfaces within the text, and becomes a particularly powerful image that is, quite interestingly, useful for the Western reader to better understand the character of Assef. Many Western readers will recognize Hosseini's association of Assef and Hitler as an attempt to underscore the "backwards" mentality that Assef represents, while turning what initially appeared to be a childhood rivalry into an ideological and moral battle between good and evil. The connection between Assef and Hitler only becomes more apparent as the novel progresses, and plays an important role in creating binary paradigms that distinguish the West from the East in the violent last encounter between Amir and Assef. This particular encounter between the two rivals will be discussed in more detail later on.

To continue with the dynamics of Amir and Hassan's relationship, I find that Amir becomes more resentful of Hassan as he becomes more aware of his own racial superiority, despite Hassan's unpretentious obedience and undying respect for Amir. This awareness leads to Amir using Hassan's ethnic inferiority in devastating ways to win his father's affection. Amir's inner conflict culminates in another encounter with the three older Pashtun boys when, after a kite-fighting tournament, Hassan is cornered and raped by Assef. When Amir accidentally stumbles upon the scene and has the chance to prevent the assault, he instead runs away for fear of losing the winning kite and subsequently the long-awaited approval of his father. This fated decision, a combination of Amir's longing to win the affection of his father along with his belief in his own ethnic superiority, shapes Amir's identity indefinitely. Amir rationalizes, "Maybe Hassan was the price I had to pay, the lamb I had to slay, to win Baba. Was it a fair price? The answer floated to my conscious mind before I could thwart it: He was just a Hazara, wasn't he?" (Hosseini 77) This scene is a pivotal moment in the novel since it sets off Amir's feelings of guilt and betrayal throughout the rest of the story, and serves as an overt example of how Hassan as an Oriental figure is exploited for the benefit of what is becoming the Westernized subject of Amir.

After Amir returns home with the winning kite, Amir's relationship with his father temporarily improves, while his relationship with Hassan steadily diminishes and becomes increasingly strained and uncomfortable. That summer, Amir's father throws a birthday party for Amir's thirteenth birthday and invites over four hundred guests – including Assef and his family. At the party, Assef's characterization is once again closely linked to Hitler, which, as previously mentioned, assists the Western reader by simplifying and flattening any cultural markers of identification. The explicit association between Assef and Hitler works to demonize the Eastern identity of Assef: Assef's charisma is sickening to Amir, who thinks that "it was creepy how

genuinely sweet he made [his smile] look,” but endearing to Amir’s father, who comments, “I see your father has taught you his world-famous flattering ways,” while winking at Assef (Hosseini 95, 96). In addition, Assef’s birthday gift to Amir, prefaced by a confession that it’s “one of [his] favorites” is a biography of Hitler (97). These historical connections demonize the character of Assef and further widen the gap between the “Eastern” and “Western” identities at play.

Decades later, Amir’s settled, established life is turned upside-down when he is forced to confront his past and reconcile his guilt of betraying Hassan. After receiving a phone call from one of his father’s old business partners, Amir returns to Afghanistan and learns about Hassan’s fate at the hands of the Taliban. Even more devastating, he discovers the true link between himself and Hassan: that Hassan is actually Amir’s half-brother. Amir is also informed of Hassan’s only son, Sohrab, and is asked to rescue Sohrab from an orphanage somewhere in Kabul. This quest becomes Amir’s penance for his past sins, while also fitting into the familiar structure of the bildungsroman. As we recall, the bildungsroman marks the presence of a historically English novelistic genre and provides the Western reader with a familiar and acceptable structure that assists them in understanding the “otherness” of the Orient. In other words, the very presence of the bildungsroman structure functions as a sort of gateway that makes it easy for the Western reader to begin to impose Orientalist stereotypes on the text.

Amir’s pilgrimage back to Afghanistan does not leave him unscathed; instead he must be “completely surrounded and physically beaten by the literal ruins of the past” before returning to America with Sohrab, as exemplified by his violent encounter with his childhood nemesis Assef (Loyal Miles 1). By this time, Assef has joined the Taliban and resembles every bit of a demonic Taliban warlord as American popular audiences imagine them to be. Cruel and sadistic in nature,

yet justified by religious fanaticism and extremism, Assef has become the ultimate antithesis to Amir's Western identity. He recalls the 1998 Hazara massacre in Mazar with pride: "You don't know the meaning of the word 'liberating' until you've done that, stood in a roomful of targets, let the bullets fly, free of guilt and remorse, knowing you are virtuous, good, and decent. Knowing you're doing God's work. It's breathtaking.' He kissed the prayer beads, tilted his head" (Hosseini 277). This stereotypical combination of Assef's character traits makes him an easily accessible and compatible figure with American audiences, since he fits quite neatly into the reassuring Orientalized model of characterization that celebrates Western ideologies over Eastern ones. In addition, we see how he has already carried out part of his dream to "cleanse" Afghanistan of its ethnic minorities, which acts as a thematic reverberation to signify just how far Assef and his brothers have degenerated.

In the exchange leading up to the actual physical fight between Assef and Amir for the Hazara boy Sohrab, we see how Amir's cultural identity is shaped by the ways in which he uses the modernity of the present to confront the issues of his traditional past. The following passage exemplifies this collision of ideologies:

"But there are things traitors like you don't understand" [said Assef].

"Like what?"

Assef's brow twitched. "Like pride in your people, your customs, your language. Afghanistan is like a beautiful mansion littered with garbage, and someone has to take out the garbage."

"That's what you were doing in Mazar, going door-to-door? Taking out the garbage?"

"Precisely."

"In the west, they have an expression for that," I said. "They call it ethnic cleansing" (Hosseini 284).

I see the way in which Amir uses his Western education against this “backward” ideology of Assef as both intriguing and of great importance. Even though Assef represents a childhood enemy for Amir, the politics of his ethnicity and political beliefs cannot be ignored. His Islamic fundamentalist and pro-Nazi ideologies represent the antithesis of Western liberal ideologies, and are portrayed as being rooted in primitive and outdated thought. In addition, we can read this passage as Amir representing the progressive, modern Pashtun who travels to the West to physically escape the fanaticism of his counterparts. In order to fully come into his own identity, however, he has traveled back into the literal ruins of his past and confronted this archaic mentality of his enemy with Western liberal ideas. The political implications of this passage are also stunning: it reminds the reader that a Western presence in Afghanistan is *necessary* in order to bring renegades like Assef up to par with modernity. This binary opposition, the pitting of the stereotypical “West” versus the “East,” once again evokes the idea that Afghanistan and all those who belong to it have become a mere backdrop against which Amir’s Western identity is compared and celebrated.

In conclusion, although Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner* represents a powerful and compelling work of fiction, I find the development of both Amir and Assef’s Afghan cultural identities to be misleading and problematic because of its heavy reliance on Orientalist stereotypes. While Western readers of Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner* are led to believe that they are creating a “bridge of understanding” between themselves and Afghan culture, they are actually identifying with a stereotypical way of understanding the relationship between the East and the West. This is in part assisted by the fact that these “foreign” characters with which the Western reader identifies are in reality not “foreign” at all: despite their background, they have been constructed in accordance with Western political and psychological needs. Additionally, the

novelistic genre of the bildungsroman also addresses these Western needs in two ways: by providing Western readers with a familiar structure that assists them in understanding the “otherness” of the Orient, and providing a gateway that makes it easy to impose Orientalist stereotypes on the characters. Therefore it becomes clear why Western readers connect so readily to this novel. Both the political and psychological needs of the West are fulfilled by Hosseini’s use of Orientalist stereotypes and binary opposition, and the literary vessel in which they are delivered is familiar, humanizing, and palatable. Yet this imposition of Western needs on Hosseini’s text raises a central question for all readers of apparently “non-Western” texts: can the West *ever* read the non-West, or must it only read itself and its reflections?

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