

Contradictions in viewing *Code Geass: Lelouch of the Rebellion* as an Orientalist text

NIDHIN SHIBU

STUDENT

ENGLISH DEPARTMENT

CHRIST UNIVERSITY, BANGALORE, INDIA

Abstract : *Code Geass: Lelouch of the Rebellion*, a Japanese Anime is unparalleled in terms of its storyline, legendary characters and the power of Geass. The fact of the matter that goes unseen is the level of ideologies blended in the storyline. While they do try to say that colonialism is bad towards the end, they really hit the brick wall in the initial stages in putting forth the concept. The brutal state of colonialism portrayed came at the cost of devastating orientalist views on the natives which renders the text as perfect for postcolonial studies. The paper looks into whether the text can be termed as an Orientalist text for such representation, if not what is the reason for such a representation.

Keywords: *Code Geass: Lelouch of the Rebellion*, Postcolonialism, Orientalism, Representation.

I. INTRODUCTION

Code Geass: Lelouch of the Rebellion, a Japanese anime depicts the thirst for power by the Superpowers of our current times in an alternate universe. The world is divided into mainly three regions, Holy Britannian Empire, that is North and South America but the USA to be precise who has taken control over the entire region. Chinese Federation is another superpower who has colonized the whole of Asia and the final superpower being the European Federation who represents the entire Europe and all of Africa. The anime has controversial takes on certain concepts such as equity, colonialism, and imperialism but what strikes the most is the extent of Orientalism in the anime. The confusing aspect of the audio-visual text is whether the audio-visual text can be coined as Orientalist, going along what Edward Said has described in his book.

Japan was never colonized but was a colonizer. The depiction of orientalism is a problematic instance that leads us to the question, can it be characterized as an oriental text? As stated before, *Code Geass* is a Japanese anime, it has thereby justified the concept of White Man's Burden having a Britannian (American character) to be the protagonist, very unusual as it is reserved for only Japanese characters for the most parts. It suppresses the notion of independence and individual freedom based on the fact that man is not born equal and thereby a need to rectify the world is necessary. The anime glorifies the protagonist's vigilantisms which are considered to be an act of terrorism for imperialists whereas struggles for their freedom in the case of colonized. It is ironic to see that a fan favorite Anime, considered to be one of the greatest anime of all time is riddled with the glorification of Imperialist and Orientalist views though it addresses the psyche of the colonized, voices of the 'other', and the destructive quality of power. The instances of the portrayal of native characters of the colonized area have an orientalist take on the matter. This depiction is a controversial take indeed as the colonized are the Japanese and the producers and writers of the anime are Japanese too. It is thereby not a production of the west, so can it be considered an Orientalist text?

The objective of the paper is to analyze the portrayal of the characters and their ideologies to determine whether the text can be termed as an oriental text. The paper also looks into the contradictions of such representation and the idea behind the portrayal in such a manner. As the study looks into the Orientalist approaches prevalent in the anime, the analyses of the paper fit best into the Postcolonial framework. Thus, the audio-visual text, *Code Geass: Lelouch of the Rebellion* cannot be termed as an Orientalist text even though the representation of various nations to attain global recognition is deeply rooted in colonial and orientalist ideologies.

II. ANALYSIS

The anime storyline focusses on the aftermath of the Britannian invasion of Japan that resulted in the defeat of Japan, becoming a colony of the Britannian Empire and thereby losing all of its heritage, culture, and name. Japan was then reconstructed as Area 11, signifying the eleventh area colonized by the Britannian empire. The reconstructed land after the war and has been occupied by Britannians who live in the areas reconstructed parts by themselves enjoying all luxuries and facilities whereas the natives have been displaced to the side-lines especially in lower spheres of the society with less than satisfactory facilities. The natives themselves are divided in their approach to the tyrannical rule of the imperialists, half of them complying with the brutal treatment of the empire and other Britannians, whereas the other halves fighting to overthrow the imperialists from their homeland. They even go to extreme measures to ensure the freedom of their homeland. The identity of the Japanese people has been taken away from them and has been given the identity of 'Eleven' with the entire history of Japan living only among the natives. All of this adds to the dehumanization of the natives by the colonizers. Frantz Fanon, French intellectual in his 1952 book *Black Skin, White Masks* says that 'the subjectivity of ontology does not allow in understanding the being of a black man since it ignores his lived experience as he must be with that of the white man' (Fanon 91). Fanon in his book is speaking his experiences under the colonial regime. At the same time, it is applicable in this scenario where the Japanese people in the anime has been compared to the Britannians, rendering whatever lived experiences they have had before as non-existent. Furthermore, they are labelled as Elevens, thereby completely ridding of their experiences as Japanese. The rest of the world sees the place as Area Eleven of the Britannian Empire, an identity created by the colonizers. The concept of the Eleven has been heavily mythicized with the Japanese people not being considered as a fellow human being. The Britannian Empire's emperor Charles VI Britannia who has taken a backseat to politics of his nation has given control to his children, all 15 of them. It is from the eyes of these children who have been given various administrative positions in the empire that influences the ideologies and perceptions of the Japanese across the world. In simpler terms, the rulers determine this identity

and perception of the colonized. The children of the present generation's dislike towards the Japanese is based on the fact that fellow Britanniens lose their lives trying to repel the attack of the so-called Japanese terrorist. This is the reason behind their unfair treatment towards the Japanese. This is very evident in the first episode where Prince Clovis's cruel attitude towards the Japanese gets the better of him and his emotional thinking leading to his defeat and death. Clovis's peacekeeping squad shares the same sentiments as him which results in their never-ending hatred towards the Japanese. The attitude towards the colonized by the children differs from each individual with some disliking, others looking down upon them as the other and only one as a fellow human being. The writing of the series catches a clear picture of what happens in a colonised land. The group of Japanese people who have been fighting to overthrow the empire is branded as terrorists and their actions have a disastrous consequence, the whole concept of Japanese as Eleven has been lowered into that of a terrorist with the rest of the Britanniens settled in the country being reserved in their feelings of the natives. Hence the ideologies and perception of the ruling class lead to the homogenization of the identity of the Japanese as Elevens. The entire history of Japan has been rewritten with the new history starting from the day after its colonization from the minds of the colonizer. Roland Barthes in his essay *Myths Today*, 'talks about the myths that denote in naturalizing all forms of oppression and ideologies into what people think of as 'common sense'. This is achieved through the removal of history that evaporates the history to enjoy without wondering where it came from and statement of facts without explanation' (Barthes 20-22) making the phenomenon to simply exist without any factual shreds of evidence and not enabling common sense to question the matter further, as such violent, terror activities of a portion of the natives has been attributed to the every one of them, thereby naturalizing the Japanese as low-life and terrorists. This is an example of reconstruction of the identity of the Japanese as 'Elevens' in the anime. Analyzing the same, the reconstructed identity of the Japanese as Elevens is part of the homogenizing process done by the imperial power, just as they have done for areas they have taken over. Gayatri Spivak in her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* critiques the crucial foundation of the Subaltern Studies, where the subject is defined by his/her differences from the so-called elites. She further asserts the heterogeneity of the subaltern subjects. By othering the colonized natives, the reconstructed identity not only portrayed them as low-life good for nothing but the portion of Japanese people who led peaceful lives were considered to be the same as the portion of the Japanese who fought for the freedom, thereby making them responsible for the actions of other Japanese factions as well. The subaltern subjects have not only lost their identity but their representation thereby since they lost their independence have been all but based on the colonizer's point of view.

The characters of the anime don't move much away from the ideologies as mentioned in the paper. The lead character, Lelouch vi Britannia, the son of the Britannian Emperor who is thought to be dead following Britannia's invasion of Japan where Lelouch and his younger sister Nunnally have been sent as ambassadors under the care of the Japanese Prime Minister. This is where he befriends Suzaku Kururugi, the son of the Prime Minister who later becomes an honorary Britannian serving the Britannian forces. Lelouch has then faked his death and that of his sister, changing their surname to Lamperouge under the care of their school principal. Lelouch feels betrayed that his father didn't do anything for his mother, who was killed via gunshots while holding his sister that has rendered her blind and crippled. The entire anime is about Lelouch exacting his revenge and building a new world where his sister can feel safe. All of this backstory and build-up of the character signals to Lelouch as 'white savior' in a foreign land. The only reason for helping the Japanese people is to exact his revenge on his father. This goes along with the Orientalist views of the West that constructs the East as primitive, underdeveloped and needing reform as Edward Said states in his book *Orientalism*. These qualities attributed to the East are very much present in the anime. The Japanese rebel forces are labeled as primitive and their deeds considered to be illogical, acting on impulse rather than a conscious decision. This is evident in all of the approaches of Japanese rebel forces before being led by Lelouch in their quest for freedom. The rebel forces take Britannian civilians living Japan hostage to negotiate their freedom and didn't refuse to kill the hostages when their demands were not met, one among them was Princess Euphemia, daughter of the Emperor, half-sister of Lelouch who revealed her identity to the rebel forces, risking her life in the process. They even went as far as to try and kill Euphemia rather than using her as a bargaining chip until Lelouch helped save the day. The process of decolonization is a key concept in postcolonialism. In the anime, the portion of the Japanese rebels is the only one wanting to decolonize. Other portions of the Japanese remain neutral to everything that happens. But for the Japanese to unite against the imperial forces, it took an inspirational figure in Lelouch to finally rise, further exerting the concept of white savior and extending the views of Orientalism is yet another instance. Not only did the West was shown to be selfless and wise but the representation of the East, in this case, Japan was the pitch-perfect equivalent to the prejudices, myths and half-baked researches that were promoted by the Orientalist view of understanding.

Then there are the characters of Kallen Kouzuki and Suzaku Kururugi. Kallen is a half Japanese and half Britannian student of the school Lelouch studies in. Daytime she is a student, night time she fights for the freedom of Japan along with the rebel forces that later becomes the Black Knights, the army of Lelouch. Suzaku, on the other hand, is an honorary Britannian enjoying the facilities as experienced by Britannian civilians. He doesn't fight for the freedom of his homeland and believes that the current system of administration necessary for maintaining peace. He also believes to achieve the position of a high ranking Britannian officer to bring stability to his homeland and more opportunities for the people of Japan. This is yet another instance of orientalist view on characters, one who is half Japanese and Britannian feels indebted to fight for the freedom of her people and homeland. This is an indication that since she is half-Britannian, her actions are conscious, well thought of and wise. Suzaku, on the other hand, believes in the system is a glorification of colonialism through the mind of the native. His belief in the system attributes to the fact that once so-called primitive man who has now undergone education under the guidance of the west is now wise and conscious enough to understand that Britannia is best for Japan. On a closer look at Suzaku's character, him as a colonized subject as Homi Bhabha states 'is being reproduced as almost the same but not quite. The copying of the colonizer's culture by the colonized contains mockery and menace, so that mimicry is at once resemblance and menace. The menace of mimicry does not lie in the concealment of real identity behind the transformed identity but comes from its double vision which discloses the ambivalence of the subject that can disrupt the colonial power' (Bhabha 86-88) This is one insight to the character of Suzaku as to why he is a loyal subject to the Empire as well as hoping to bring changes to his homeland by changing the approach in the system. This is how mimicry becomes a menace.

III. CONCLUSION

Thus, through the instances from the audio-visual text, colonial and orientalist ideologies prevalent in the anime *Code Geass: Lelouch of the Rebellion* is justified. At the same time, the orientalist views seen in the audio-visual text are a trope that enables in portraying the mindset of the western colonisers, after all the lead character is from West. In the case of the Japanese, they are not shown to be

inferior throughout the series. They are shown as inferior through the eyes of the colonizers. This is yet another critique of Edward Said, where he acknowledges the fact that the west doesn't acknowledge their flaws such as impulsive decision making, cruelty and so on. Two portions of the Japanese are shown, one fighting for their freedom and the other surviving their oppression. The case of Suzaku is another trope to further the story and his status as a heroic character to ensure a safe future for his country. Even with the instances of orientalism, the audio-visual text cannot be termed as an Orientalist text because it is work where the West has made on East, it is a work made by Japanese. The anime was their attempt to reach the audiences in the west as other anime has over in the past. Hence all of the instances of orientalism, colonialism are all tropes that reside beyond the surface. As the paper looks into the postcolonial study of the anime, further researches could look into the symbols prevalent in the anime and its meaning, cultural studies analysis in terms of the ruling class and the subordinate class fuels further research.

REFERENCES

Code Geass: Lelouch of the Rebellion, Directed by Goro Taniguchi, Created by Sunrise, 2006-08.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty (1988). Can the Subaltern Speak? *_Die Philosophin_* 14 (27):42-58.

Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978. Print.

Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press, 1994

