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# **ORIENTALISM TO DIGITAL ARCHITECTURES: ENGINEERING THE EQUATION OF WESTERNIZATION AND MODERNISATION IN GLOBAL MEDIA**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This essay focuses on how the global media systems create a construction and normalization of the equation between Westernization and modernization within the postcolonial societies. It states that media is not an inactive reflection of reality but a moving influence that creates the ideas of progress, identity and development. Media establish cultural hierarchies where the Western way of life and aesthetic is projected as the universal modernity and non-western aesthetics are pushed to the periphery or depicted as retrogressive through representation, repetition and algorithmic amplification.

The paper is based on the major theoretical frameworks to describe this process. The theory of representation developed by Stuart Hall demonstrates how representations are formed via the media, discourse-power nexus created by Michel Foucault reveals how repetitive discourse is normalized as truth, the concept of symbolic capital introduced by Pierre Bourdieu reflects how some cultural signifiers are admired, and the Orientalism theory developed by Edward Said places these processes into a historical perspective of colonial binaries.

The paper employs a critical discourse analysis, visual semiotics and institutional analysis methodology in areas of media like cinema, advertising, fashion, and online media. It highlights how algorithms are used to advance globally marketable and western coded content and thus facilitates the maintenance of existing hierarchies. Socio-cultural and legal implications are also analyzed in the paper since, according to the author, such representations perpetuate inequality, influence the attitudes of people, and normalize stereotypes. It is a critique of existing legal systems as dealing with explicit harms only, and neglecting symbolic inequalities of a subtle kind.

Finally, it proposes a constitutionally adequate regulatory framework balancing freedom of expression with equality of representation, which rests on the principles of pluralism, inclusiveness, and transparency of media practices, and enhances accountability, pluralism of voice, and a sense of dignity and equality in the representation of marginalized identities.

## Introduction

Modernity is traditionally thought of as a process of change linked to industrialization, rational rule, technological development and the growth of civil and political liberties. This classical conceptualization places modernity in structural change that alters institutions and social relations. But in the new global media contexts modernity is being redefined in terms of lifestyle, aesthetic performance, and consumption. This has created an intensive and extensive conflation of Westernization and modernization, especially in postcolonial societies whose historical power imbalance still lingers in the cultural discourses and visions<sup>1</sup>.

Media is a key driver to this change. It is not just a mirror of social realities but a creation of them, a system of symbols, narrative, visual codes. By repeatedly being subjected to specific types of representation, audiences are socialised into a view of Western ways of life, language use and gender practices being inherently progressive and non-Western ways of being are either moved to the peripheries or represented as incomplete and in transition<sup>2</sup>.

This phenomenon is enhanced by the modern media environment, which is digital and relies on algorithms to deliver content. The aesthetic forms are becoming more and more controlled by measures of participation and profitability, and aesthetics that are globally marketable are being privileged. Consequently, there is not only a cultural dominance of Western-coded images, but also an economic incentive to reinforce that dominance, with a self-reinforcing cycle of power that only strengthens their dominance.

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this paper is based on various intellectual traditions, which shed light on the interconnection of media, power, and representation. The representation theory, as presented by Stuart Hall, offers a critical point of departure. Hall suggests that the process of making meaning is an active process rather than a passive reflection of reality in the sense that media creates reality by selecting, organizing, and presenting specific images and narratives in an attempt to determine how audiences comprehend things like modernity<sup>3</sup>. In this regard the

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* 1–3 (1990).

<sup>2</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* 85–87 (1989).

<sup>3</sup> Stuart Hall, Representation, in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* 13, 15–18 (Stuart Hall ed., 1997).

Western aesthetic and practices are coded as both normal and desirable and other forms of cultural expression are either pushed to the periphery or distorted.

This analysis is further enhanced by the discourse-power nexus elaborated by Michel Foucault. Foucault focuses on the fact that power works through discourse to create regimes of truth that define what is legitimate knowledge<sup>4</sup>. Media is a discursive apparatus that has made Westernization a viable and desirable form of modernity. This association is normalized or naturalized through repetition and normalization, and thus it becomes obscured as to its constructedness. The theory of symbolic capital suggested by Pierre Bourdieu gives a significant connection between cultural representation and social stratification. The symbolic capital is defined as the value of some cultural forms that can be transformed into social power and legitimacy<sup>5</sup>. The Western-coded values of English fluency, cosmopolitan lifestyles, and global fashion trends are accumulated as symbolic capital in the media representations, which strengthens their position as markers of modernity.

Lastly, the postcolonial criticism as developed by Edward Said presents a historical explanation of these dynamics. With the development of Orientalism, Said shows how colonialism shaped the West to perceive the East as backward, irrational and inferior and thus has a need to dominate it not necessarily in overt ways but in more subtle and diffuse ways<sup>6</sup>.

### **Digital Capitalism, Media, and the Production of Modernity.**

The media industries are in the vanguard of the creation and distribution of cultural meanings. The creation of modernity as a visual and consumable identity is the result of cinema, advertising, fashion media, streaming platforms, and influencer economies. These industries always favor western coded aesthetics such as urban cosmopolitanism, individualism, consumer choice, and global mobility.

It is not an accident that this privileging is organized according to repetition and reinforcement patterns. The perpetuation of similar images and narratives produces a coherent discourse where the Westernization is synonymous with progress. With time, such representations are

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<sup>4</sup> Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977* 131–33 (1980).

<sup>5</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* 56–58 (1984).

<sup>6</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* 1–5 (1978).

internalized by viewers and influence their dreams and self-images<sup>7</sup>.

The emergence of digital platforms has also reshaped the politics of representation. The visibility of content is set by algorithmic systems according to the engagement metrics and commercial viability<sup>8</sup>. Because western-coded imagery tends to attract wider audiences globally, it is more likely to be reinforced by these systems, further reinforcing their status as being associated with modernity and excluding other forms of cultural expression.

Digital capitalism has an economic rationality that is very central to this process. Media content is a cultural artifact as well as a commodity aimed at earning money. Images that conform to the aesthetics that are marketable globally will be more likely to attract advertising collaborations and viewers. Consequently, the preeminence of Western-coded images is perpetuated by the influence of ideology as well as economic motives.

### **Semiotics of clothing, Gender and Representation.**

The representational politics of clothing can be considered as one of the most obvious examples of the equation between Westernization and modernization. The media images often connect the western clothing to empowerment, independence and self realization. Women in business suits, short dresses or international fashion dress are usually shown as self-assured and independent people who reflect the contemporary values<sup>9</sup>.

As a contrast, women in traditional or religious attire like a saree or hijab are usually put into a story of conservatism, limits or cultural backwardness. This dichotomy does not absolutely exclude the possibility of empowerment in the non-Western environment, but it leads to a predominant visual language where autonomy is closely associated with Western cultural indicators<sup>10</sup>.

This interaction may be interpreted as a semiotic economy whereby the symbolic value of various types of cultural expressions is different. The accumulation of what can be termed as modernity capital is in the bodies coded to the West, whereas non-Western identity is undermined or made invisible. It is not the way the western clothing is represented as

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<sup>7</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* 32–35 (1996).

<sup>8</sup> Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* 93–95 (2019).

<sup>9</sup> Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism* 25–27 (2009).

<sup>10</sup> Rosalind Gill, Empowerment/Sexism, 15 *Feminist Media Stud.* 909, 910–12 (2016).

empowering but the monopoly of the empowerment which is coded by the image.

Lack of heterogeneity in the representation restricts the conceptual domain of seeing autonomy and modernity in the culturally plural ways. It simplifies the complex social realities into simplified visual binaries, thus strengthening the hierarchies.

This is further increased by digital globalization. Media flows between countries coupled with the platform-based distribution systems facilitate the quick spread of standardized cultural formats to a variety of different contexts, which, in turn, causes the homogenization of the cultural representation.

### **Aestheticization and Commodification of Modernity**

One of the key changes in modern media is the gradual substitution of structural conceptions of modernity with aesthetic and performative conceptions. Modernity According to classical sociological conceptions, modernity involved systemic changes, such as industrialization, bureaucratic rationalization, political participation in democracy, and the spread of civil liberties. These processes were comprehended as material and institutional transformations which changed the circumstances of life substantially. But within the media culture of the present day, these structural cues have been eclipsed by the more easily transmitted, consumed, and reproduced visual and symbolic cues.

This shift can be explained in terms of the representation theory developed by Stuart Hall according to which meaning is not an inherent one but rather created as a result of cultural practices. In the present media environment, modernity is not necessarily being conveyed by the stories of political change or economic restructuring; the images of lifestyle such as urban space, fashion sense, leisure activities, and consumption patterns encapsulate the contemporary modernity. The modern subject is therefore not characterized by those who are absorbed in the institutions of democracy or enjoy their rights, but can do a certain visual identity that conforms to globally familiar aesthetics.

It is also greatly exaggerated in a process that Jean Baudrillard refers to as the logic of consumer society wherein the material realities are substituted by signs and symbols. With such a system commodities are not valued based on their utility but based on their symbolic meanings. Brands of fashion, traveling and other lifestyle products turn into symbols of identity, and they enable

people to buy an image of modernity. Empowerment is thus given not as a structural situation, which is attained through social change, but as an experience that can be consumed by taking part in the market.

Media representation of gender is one of the areas where commodification of empowerment is more apparent. Stories about liberation have been associated with consumption patterns such as purchase of particular garments, global standards of beauty or cosmopolitan ways of life. Although these practices can certainly provide agency of sorts, representations in the media have a tendency to make these practices the main or only avenues toward empowerment. This simplifies intricate socio-political conflicts to individualized consumption acts, thus depoliticizing the term modernity itself. Modern media culture, as noted by Rosalind Gill, often combines feminist ideas with consumerism to create what she describes as a postfeminist sensibility where choice is conflated with empowerment, but which is defined by a very limited set of market logics.

The digital capitalism plays a pivotal role in this change. Digital operations are based on attention economies in which visibility is directly correlated with monetization. Visual content, content that can be easily relatable, and content that has been globalized is likely to do better in regards to metrics of engagement, likes, shares, and views. This fosters the motivation of creators and institutions to create content which fits into prevailing aesthetic criteria. Such standards have a tendency to be based on the Western cultural models because of their past international supremacy and market penetration.

In this case, the observations of Shoshana Zuboff come in especially handy. Zuboff asserts that online sites harvest behavioral information and apply it to predict and influence user behavior to make a profit. Here, modernity representations are not disinterested, but rather, strategically edited to ensure that they are as engaging and revenue-generating as possible. The Western-coded visuals such as clean cityscapes, minimalist fashion, English-speaking influencers, and individualism lifestyles have higher chances of being amplified by the algorithms as they are universally aspirational and can be monetized.

This forms a feedback loop whereby aesthetic forms of modernity are constantly reaffirmed. The more representations are spread the more normalized they become as the norm of progress. In the long run, the result of this could be what can be termed as aesthetical hegemony where particular codes of visuality take up the cultural imagination at the expense of other

manifestations of identity. The other forms of life that are not Western or traditional are either not visible or are being integrated in a manner that makes them exotic, backward or requiring a transformation.

This dynamic brings about the idea of the stylized modernity. The concept of identity is made to be performance based on visible signs: dress, language, way of life, etc. as opposed to being based on substantive social circumstances like economic security or political involvement. This act is not only a personal one but it is organized by systems of production and distribution on a larger scale. The parameters that become available to express modernity and identify it is influenced by the media industry, advertising networks, and digital platforms together.

In addition, this aestheticization also carries a big implication on how people perceive themselves and others. Once modernity is condensed to a range of visual indicators, it puts a strain on the need to live up to certain standards in order to be seen as progressive or successful. It may result in cultural alienation of some kind, especially in postcolonial societies where local identities might not be in line with mainstream aesthetics of the world. People can be pressed to change their look, conduct, or aspirations to conform to a strictly-established paradigm of modernity.

Meanwhile, commodification of modernity blurs structural inequalities. By putting the issue of empowerment as a personal choice and a consumption, media discourse has been able to take the focus out of the structural problems like economic inequality, gender inequality, and political marginalization. The emphasis is not on common struggles but on individual ways of life and it becomes harder to tackle the realities of social conditions that form the basis of social realities.

Aestheticization of modernity in this regard is not only a cultural event but also a political event. It re-brands the conditions in which progress is perceived and sought. It supports the status quo by making some forms of visibility more dominant than others as normal and unavoidable.

After all, the way modernity turns into an aesthetic that can be consumed implies the interrelation of cultural representation and economic rationality in the era of digital capitalism. It shows how the systems of media do not passively reflect the world but actively form the systems according to which the world is perceived. To upset this process, there is a need to

rebuild a wider concept of modernity--a concept that acknowledges the significance of structural change, social justice, and cultural plurality and not secondary to aesthetic expression.

### **Social, Cultural, Legal and Constitutional Dimensions**

There are social implications of the representational hierarchies that the media has created. Media helps to create a sense of cultural superiority and inferiority by continually equating Westernization with progress. The non-Western identities can be considered as being incomplete or insufficient and as a result, they cause marginalization and exclusion<sup>11</sup>.

The oppression or backwardness of Muslim women in hijabs, such as the example of the exoticization or trivialization of the Asian and Indian cultural elements, reinforce Islamophobic discourses and lead to the stigmatization of religious identity<sup>12</sup>. Although the media depictions do not directly lead to the occurrence of the act of discrimination or violence, they have a significant influence about how the cultural environment within which the said acts take place is created. Media normalizes some of the stereotypes and binaries, thus creating an environment that legitimizes prejudice<sup>13</sup>. The role of media in shaping cultural perceptions makes the issue of media and law and the Constitutional issues to be raised. Current regulatory systems are mostly concerned with explicit types of harmful materials like hate speech, defamation, and misinformation. But they are less prepared to address subtle and cumulative types of symbolic inequality.<sup>14</sup>

Freedom of expression is one of the core values in constitutional democracies. Meanwhile, this freedom should be accompanied by the principles of equality, dignity, and non-discrimination. The difficulty is in coming up with regulatory structures that take into consideration representational hierarchies without compromising on creative freedom. The regulation of the media needs a more sophisticated approach that takes into account the influence of the algorithmic system and the market dynamics on cultural representation<sup>15</sup>. Interventions like encouraging diversity in media content, making the algorithms more transparent, and

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<sup>11</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *supra* note 5, at 170–72.

<sup>12</sup> Lila Abu-Lughod, Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?, 104 *Am. Anthropologist* 783, 784–85 (2002).

<sup>13</sup> Teun A. van Dijk, *Discourse and Power*, 4 Palgrave Macmillan 23–25 (2008).

<sup>14</sup> Jack M. Balkin, Free Speech in the Algorithmic Society, 51 *U.C. Davis L. Rev.* 1149, 1153–55 (2018).

<sup>15</sup> Tarleton Gillespie, *Custodians of the Internet* 8–10 (2018).

encouraging more inclusive stories can be remedial, instead of censorship tools.

## **Conclusion**

Westernization is not a necessary and natural process and has been attached to modernization by creating a narrative that is perpetuated through modern media systems. Media creates cultural forms of the West as the universal indicators of progress through representation, repetition, and economic incentives. This replicates the hierarchies of the past that are based on the colonial discourse but modified to the terms of the digital globalization.

To be able to challenge this narrative, it is necessary to be aware and intervene at the institutional level. Modernity has to be redefined as plural, and context-specific whereby various forms of identity and advancements are possible. Media being a strong location of cultural production has a role to play in mirroring such diversity instead of perpetuating the exclusivist and restrictive norms. In re-conceptualizing modernity beyond Westernization, society is able to shift to a more inclusive conceptualization of progress that is compatible with constitutional principles of dignity, equality, and pluralism.

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