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BIS 372: Issues in Global Cultural Studies: Representation, Colonialism, and the Tropical World

Short Paper 1: Representations of the Tropics in “The Letter”

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How Racial Hierarchy is Challenged in *The Letter*

In his book of the same name, Edward Said defines Orientalism as “a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient’s special place in European Western experience” (1). The key phrase here is *European Western experience*. The Orient has nothing to do with the actual qualities of its people, rather, it is “one of [Europe’s] deepest and most recurring images of the Other” (1). Westerners have conjured up their own opinions and beliefs about “Orientals” that still run rampant today. Opinions that build up Westerners and tear down anyone that looks or sounds different, beliefs that Westerners are superior, smarter, “right” and Others are “wrong”, lazy, less than. These practices are showcased in William Wyler’s film, *The Letter*, and this paper will examine how two scenarios challenge those typical forms of racial hierarchy.

The Letter is a black and white film set in 1940s Southeast Asia, somewhere within driving distance to Singapore, although the exact location of the Crosbie’s residence is not revealed. Leslie Crosbie, portrayed by Bette Davis, is the imagery of the quintessential Western woman. She has big doe eyes, perfectly coiffed hair, and a sense of superiority not only among locals, but among the White community as well. Her opening scene plainly reveals her committing murder, killing her lover Geoff Hammond. Throughout the film she lies about her motivation and believes her Whiteness will eventually exonerate her. Family friend Howard

Joyce takes on her case but questions his own credibility based on actions taken by his assistant, Ong Chi Seng. Leslie is later blackmailed by Mrs. Hammond and is found innocent at her trial, yet ultimately is murdered by no other than Mrs. Hammond herself.

Scene One

When Ong Chi Seng alerted Howard Joyce of the existence of a letter Leslie had written to Geoff Hammond, asking him to see her the night he was killed, he did so with a very delicate touch. He knew that as an Asian man speaking to a Westerner, he could not overstep his boundaries, must be polite, and needed to appear both subservient and less intelligent than Howard Joyce. His voice, posture, and mannerisms could even be considered to have a feminine quality. Ong Chi Seng consistently startles Howard Joyce with his intelligence, many times thinking one step ahead of him yet respectfully stating his suggestions so as Howard Joyce might be allowed to take them as his own. He is quietly persistent when needed and eases Howard Joyce into adhering to his line of thinking. Orientalist tropes are challenged by Ong Chi Seng's character in many ways. He has a sense of power over Howard Joyce in that he understands that he is more knowledgeable than him and is experienced in communicating that knowledge in a non-confrontational manner. He is thoughtful, educated, well-spoken, well-mannered, well-dressed. It could even be considered that he is molding Howard Joyce, until the opportunity arises when he can one day take his place.

Scene Two

When Leslie learns that Mrs. Hammond is in possession of the letter, she agrees to travel to the Chinese Quarter to retrieve it, even though she had heard it was “rather creepy”. The music plays an important role here in confirming Orientalist stereotypes: changing quickly from soft, melodic, contemplative music at Leslie’s residence, to sharp, loud, “Asian”-inspired ominous music upon their arrival at the Chinese Quarter; to tinkling, mysterious music when awaiting Mrs. Hammond’s arrival to dark and ominous again when Mrs. Hammond appears, parting the beaded curtain, her face in darkness, crescendoing until her face is fully exposed. The reflection from the beaded curtains appear above her head, making her seem otherworldly. This is the point where she diverges from standard Orientalist tropes. The camera is angled toward the ceiling, making her appear domineering and in control. She stands on a surface two steps higher than where Leslie stands, looking down on Leslie and in return, forcing Leslie to look up at her. Ong Chi Seng mentions that she speaks only Malay and Chinese, further requiring that Leslie adjust to her conditions. Without speaking, she insists on being paid prior to presenting the letter, and imposes her authority a step further by requiring Leslie remove the lace shawl from her head. Leslie does so in dramatic fashion, their eyes intent on each other. Mrs. Hammond once again showcases her power over Leslie by insisting she walk over to her, where the music swells to what seems to be Leslie’s theme music, abruptly changing when she is in front of Mrs. Hammond. At last, Leslie appears intimidated. Mrs. Hammond pulls the folded letter from her sleeve, holds it taut, and throws it to the floor. Leslie, in essence, bows at her feet to pick up the letter, with Mrs. Hammond purposely retracting as she draws near. Upon confirming it was indeed the letter she had written to Geoff Hammond, Leslie

acknowledges Mrs. Hammond and actually thanks her. A look of surprise appears on Mrs. Hammond's face as Leslie and Howard Joyce leave the room. She indicates that she doesn't even want to touch the money, telling Ong Chi Seng to settle it with Chung Hi. Mrs. Hammond's use of power and authority toward Leslie is remarkable in this situation, and not typically witnessed in the presence of a colonizer.

Conclusion

It was surprising to witness Asians contradict racial hierarchies, especially given the time period of this film. While Ong Chi Seng and Mrs. Hammond are not free of Orientalist tropes, their characters are surprisingly rich, purposeful, powerful. In his book *Tristes Tropiques*, Claude Lévi-Strauss states in the chapter *Crowds*, "If one tried to treat these unfortunate wretches as equals, they would protest against the injustice of one's doing so; they do not want to be equal…they entreat you to crush them with your pride…" (136). Although *Tristes Tropiques* was published in 1955, I think it's fair to assume Claude Lévi-Strauss had yet to be introduced to the formidable characters of Ong Chi Seng and Mrs. Hammond.

Works Cited

Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *Tristes Tropiques*. Jonathan Cape, 1973.

Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. Vintage Books, 1978.