

Dear Prof Lo,

My chosen text was a video entitled “The Maharani of Manhattan”, a promotional video launched by the Tourism Ministry of India. My motive for dealing with the text was to highlight underlying nuances in it, and to address claims I felt were valid on the surface, but did not hold up to scrutiny. My thesis involved a debunking of these claims, and my central claim that the video is successful in portraying a genuine version of India.

I structured the essay in a straightforward “They Say, I Say” format not only for the motive, but throughout the essay. While this approach helped me in offering opposing viewpoints within subsections and in coaxing out evidence(s) in response to them, it was difficult to structure the subsections to ensure I wasn’t arguing against “straw dummies”. I felt it was thus essential to clearly point out which elements in the video might lead someone to harbour the view I opposed as well.

I believe that the strengths of my essay lie in the literary analysis and unpacking of the evidence I do have. I tried to ensure that I abstracted mere descriptions of scenes away, and focussed only on how the evidence is relevant to my point.

The essay’s weakness lies in the fact that it lacks a definitive “they-say” to argue against, and this is one of the main challenges I faced in trying to analyse this text. The absence of both demurring or opposing voices to challenge perhaps made my essay too open-ended.

I revised primarily the first half of my first draft, and edited the orientation, thesis statement, motive and my initial arguments. I addressed the fact that the orientation was too redundant and uninformative by condensing it to only essentials. I built upon the conference by adopting the “more arguable” stance of standing in support of the video’s portrayal of India. I felt that this resulted in making for a more compelling read, and made me understand the true meaning of a “value-add” to an argument. Finally, I revised my structure to make it consistent, and non-oscillating. I edited my conclusion such that it consolidated my thesis, which was better than its counterpart in Draft 1, where I tended to make fresh, unsubstantiated claims to lend more “importance” to my thesis.

If I had more time in developing my thesis, I would start from bare-bones definitions of the “problem” terms I used, such as exoticism, cultural appropriation, and the like. I would provide concrete examples of texts that clearly embody these characteristics, and then compare them. Finally, I would also investigate the value-addition of discussing luxury in the context of cultural consciousness in the video.

Mayank Keoliya

A0200908M

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A/P Lo Mun Hou

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A Journey of One, a Meeting of Two

This is a paper on a promotional video titled “The Maharani of Manhattan”. It was released in 2018 as part of an award-winning advertisement campaign launched by the Ministry of Tourism of India. It was marketed using the hashtag “#FindTheIncredibleYou”. As the hashtag suggests, the video pitches to tourists a cathartic experience in India through which they can discover an enhanced version of themselves. The video shows Rajasthan, a northern province in India, as the backdrop for the Maharani’s travels. This is evident from the fort-towns, lakes, luxury trains, dance forms and architecture shown in the text. The province’s historic link with luxury, royalty, *Maharajas* (kings) and *Maharanis* (queens) can be encapsulated in its very name, which means “king’s seat” in Hindi.

At first glance, the video might come off as exoticizing the Orient, as classist or as culturally inappropriate. The video shows the Maharani as insulated and disconnected from the Indian people. This might be a result of the video’s targeted focus on the traveler’s journey of self-discovery, and the indulgent theme of luxury. Thus, the video might come off as wholly tourist-centric, and seems to assign only a token importance to India’s culture and people. An adversarial opinion of the video would even label the depiction of a Caucasian Maharani as neo-colonialist and ignorant of India’s colonial past.

But this reductive interpretation of the video would be papering over its delicate touch in showcasing Indian culture and people in a meaningful way. I will argue that the video is successful in portraying a complete Indian experience by incorporating elements of cultural fusion and sensitivity in its body. These include the choice of locations shown, the Maharani's interaction with local artists, the peacock dress, and the background music track of the video. I will deal with the three claims of the video exoticizing the Orient, of being classist and hierarchical, and of cultural misappropriation in turn.

Firstly, I will deal with the Orientalist or exotic reading of the video. One might say that the flashback device (0:02), the empty palaces (0:25), and the fact that all the natives are shown in ethnic gear, breed an image of a modern woman time-travelling to medieval India. There seems to be an abject lack of modernity, and a temporal disconnect between the traveler and his destination – the hallmarks of exoticism.

Cognizant of this, the video's choice of Rajasthan is subtly layered to ensure that India is not shown as a static relic or a museum meant for the wonder of the arriving tourists. I argue that the video does not pick Rajasthan as a location merely for its luxurious offerings or heritage—any province would have sufficed here, from Kerala (often called “God's Own Country”) to Uttar Pradesh (the home of the Taj Mahal). It chooses Rajasthan because of its history as a frontier land that has undergone syncretism, as one that actually changes with time. The video portrays this with aerial shots of Rajasthan's forts and palaces (0:12 and 0:16), which combine aspects of Mughal and Hindu architecture. It also includes depictions of Rajasthani miniature paintings, which incorporate both Persian and Gujarati styles, in palaces (0:28) and

in small studios (0:31). Even the loan word “Maharani” has its origins in this region, and implies a sense of linguistic exchange.

Additionally, the video does explicitly include signs of modernity and change as well, through the luxury train (0:06 - perhaps the ‘Palace of Wheels’ of fame) and the expensive car (0:13) that the Maharani reclines in. However, this in itself is not enough to convince the skeptic of the video’s genuine nature. The video highlights that the portrayal of Indian elements in the rustic setting of Rajasthan is meant as a celebration of India’s heritage and its culture, and not as a warped caricature or perversion of Indianness. The video brings out this festive atmosphere through the music track (as I will explain later) and the closing scene at dusk (0:55). I must stress that the video tries to show its genuine intentions subtly yet precisely because it doesn’t have much bandwidth as a sixty-second tourist advertisement to depict a complete picture of “average” life in India, whatever that may entail. Nevertheless, these elements portray a positive image to dispel India’s image as an ossified place that the tourist is meant to observe and reflect on, rather than a fluid place that is meant to be experienced.

Secondly, I will deal with the argument that the video is classist, and that it imposes a hierarchical distance between the Maharani and the Indian people. This argument might mainly be considered due to the connotations of the Maharani’s title (meaning “great queen”) and that all Indians seem to be at her service and, whether as chauffeurs, performers, painters or artists. Her regal air appears to preclude any encounter where she meets an “equal”.

However, this is not the case, and the video makes a deliberate and nuanced attempt to ensure that the Maharani’s title and opulence do not get in the way of her interaction with natives.

The first of these is her meeting with the Tailor. While not immediately apparent, this meeting is less a commissioning of a dress by a queen, and more a celebration of the Indian artist. The Maharani and the Tailor's exchange is quite literally just that – an exchange, of ideas, cultures and aesthetics. By cutting shots to make the camera focus on both the Tailor (0:21) and the Maharani (0:22) explaining their viewpoints, the video shows that both the Maharani and the Tailor are connoisseurs of cloth in their own fashion, and both have a say in the creation of the dress. The video doesn't just stop here though. It shows the Tailor with his final input (0:23) as he points to possibly an artwork on the wall, and the Maharani's acquiescing smile. The fact that the Tailor personally delivers the dress beyond the call of duty underscores the non-transactional nature of the duo's meeting. Additionally, the use of the peacock sculpture as inspiration for the dress speaks volumes about the modern Indian artist's ability to replicate and internalize something an Indian craftsman created hundreds of years ago.

Any criticism of the Maharani's insulating title is further undercut by the fact that the video shows the Maharani as venturing forth into narrow streets (0:37) and artists' studios alone, and with a genuine interest in the artwork of Indian craftsmen. This is a far cry from the typical pomp and show of an empress's entourage, and might even lead one to wonder at such a stark contrast in the expected and actual behaviors of a foreign Maharani. However, this quandary is answered almost immediately by the Maharani when she emphasizes that like luxury, being a Maharani is "a feeling" that one cherishes. This puts to paid classist interpretations of the video, as it proves that the video doesn't depict the position of the Maharani to be institutional or materialistic – but deeply personal and free from hierarchy.

Finally, I will deal with the claim that the video appears to be engaging in cultural appropriation. On the surface, this seems tenable since the video follows a privileged Caucasian woman on a luxurious visit to India. The dialogue of the video seems problematic, with statements such as “all the music is yours, all the beauty is yours” and “the feeling that everything is designed around you”. The “thing” designed around the Maharani appears to be the peacock dress, and in this context it seems that the video uses the dress as a token Indian souvenir brought back by a foreign tourist. I beg to differ.

The peacock dress is tangible proof of the video’s reconciliation of two vastly different cultures (Western and Indian), and of its cultural sensitivity. The dress takes precedence especially because fashion is so important to the protagonist. She is clearly a woman of panache, perhaps the quintessence of New York fashion, and certainly an aesthete. We can see an initial dichotomy in her Western dresses and her Indian wear – the former are monochrome, while the latter appear to be myriad-coloured. The peacock dress serves to reel our protagonist back from her (apparent) hierarchical superiority. While its form and shape is contemporary Western, it is embroidered in typically bright Indian colours of turquoise blue and red. The peacock, being the national bird of India, takes centre stage in the embellishment of the piece. Overall, the creation of the dress, with Indian embroidery filling up a Western canvas, seems to also represent the ideal tourist experience in India, according to the video’s closing caption “Find the Incredible You”. The degrees of separation between the Tailor’s small studio and the Maharani’s window office in Manhattan, as well as the parallels in the unboxing of the dress (0:46) and the Tailor and Maharani walking up to present it, (0:45 and 0:48) make its journey seem even more impressive. The fact that the dress is worn with aplomb and appreciated in Manhattan as well (0:52), and that the

Maharani chooses to include the dress in her magazine's Festive Issue¹, reflects the appreciation of Indian craftsmanship and culture in the West.

Additionally, the video also demonstrates its consciousness of cultural differences by softening them through the music track. Keeping in step with the global viewer, the track starts off with mild European classical music, familiar to the ear. The track is punctuated by characteristic sounds such as the luxury train's whistle (0:05), the ringing of little bells (0:08), and a peacock's cry (0:17) when the Maharani is seen appreciating the sculpture's beauty in the palace. This is sustained until the Maharani finally meets and engages with the Tailor, when the *tabla* (a classical Indian percussion instrument) merges into the soundtrack, beginning with a soft beat. The montage of the Tailor weaving the dress is accompanied by the *tabla* and violin harmony rising to a crescendo, to emphasize the coming together of different cultural identities into one cloth.

Through the preceding paragraphs, I hope I have illustrated how the video addresses the potential issues of Oriental exoticism, classist hierarchy, and cultural insensitivity. It does so by navigating through the story arc carefully, and by balancing its twin objectives of attracting tourists and portraying a genuine version of India. These claims did not hold up to scrutiny when all of the underlying complexities and motivations in the video were explored and contextualized. The video handles the subject with great nuance and poise, and this might hint at why it has emerged as a popular, award-winning and successful promotion for Incredible India.

¹ one of the most important, and flamboyant issues in the fashion magazine calendar