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## *Oriental Phantoms*

### F. Dostoevsky's views on the East

"The great eagle of the Orient will revolt and the Western islanders will start weeping. It will sieze three kingdoms . . . and fly to the south in order to retrieve that which has been lost. And God will shower love and mercy on the Oriental eagle for its task is difficult. Its two wings will glitter over the heights of Christianity."<sup>1</sup>

THIS quotation from Dostoevsky's *Diary of a Writer* is remarkable in more ways than one. In the first place it is an excellent example for research scholars on how not to quote! Dostoevsky took this quotation from a sixteenth century book of Prognostics by Johannis Lichtenberger, a German. The Russian writer decided that the great eagle had to be from the Orient—so he decided, on his own, to incorporate the words "of the Orient" in the first sentence. The other sentences were taken from different parts of the book and made to seem one coherent whole! And not just that. In this long quotation (parts of which I have left out) Dostoevsky decided to correct Lichtenberger's prophesies.<sup>2</sup>

The other, far more important aspect of this quotation for us is in that it reveals Dostoevsky's religious and political views in the last decade of his life. Expressions like "love" and "mercy" stand alongside "sieze" and "revolt". He sees Russia's mission (for that is the great eagle of the Orient) in the name of Christianity, as a saviour and simultaneously a conquerer. The conquest that is being implied is that of Constantinopol at the time of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877.

But why does Dostoevsky make it a point to equate Russia with "the Orient"? Only by clarifying this term in its historical context can we understand the writer's stand and the influences that moulded it.

The East-West division was brought about in the 5th century A.D. and pertained to the division of the church, the East being the Orthodox church and the West—the Catholic. By the 17th century this split had widened. The west was the Greco-Roman Christian world as opposed to the East which included countries from Turkey to China. (Today we are seeing

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yet another questionable division made by the West—the First, Second and Third World Countries). Thus, when Johannis Lichtenberger's book appeared the Orient, or the East, still related primarily to those nations which had adopted the Orthodox church—and Russia was one of them. This outlook remained in the European consciousness even at the time of Dostoevsky.

The connotation of 'Oriental' gradually changed and became applicable to the Asian colonies of the European nations. The vast body of 'research' into any and every aspect of the East became known as Orientalism. And because this field developed side by side with the expansion of colonialism, no aspect of Orientalist studies is devoid of political undertones for it is "a formidable structure of cultural domination."<sup>3</sup> Needless to say, the English and the French were the pioneers in this field. Although the colonisers could not shut their eyes to the East's enormous cultural heritage, it was the European yardstick that was used to measure it and pronounce judgements on it. Orientalism became "a method of controlling what seems to be a threat to some established view of things."<sup>4</sup> Armed as they were with a monotheistic religion, a Cartesian logic and the Renaissance concept of man's supremacy over nature the European colonisers could not comprehend India's polytheism of over 3000 gods, a holistic view of man and nature, all of which dictated the aesthetics, art and philosophy of this country. India had to have one holy book akin to the Bible. Frantic efforts in this direction ultimately led to the translation of one chapter from the Indian epic, *the Mahabharata*, *the Bhagawata Gita* and pass it off to the West as the Indian Bible—a belief held to this day by many in Europe (Imagine a chapter of the *Iliad* or *The Odyssey* being used for similar purposes). What could not be understood had to be explained—and not just explained but expounded with a feeling of condescension and superiority, i.e. from a position of strength.

"The West is the actor the Orient a passive reactor. The West is the spectator, the judge and jury, of every facet of Oriental behaviour."<sup>5</sup> The attitude of England and France towards the Middle and Near East, though fundamentally the same, was of a slightly different nature. For one thing Islam was geographically adjacent to Europe and always stood as a more direct challenge, whether militarily, politically or intellectually. Islam, a syncretic religion incorporating elements of Judaism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism, was monotheistic. The religious war of *jehad* launched by Islam was comparable to the Crusades. The Europeans could not come to terms with the territorial expansion of 'this heretic faith', Islam, in the middle ages. (A century after Mohammed's death the Islamic empire extended from Spain to China). Thus, both fear and denigration of Eastern barbarity and cruelty<sup>6</sup> intermingled in European works pertaining to the Middle East whereas one's own were glossed over.<sup>7</sup>

We now turn our attention to nineteenth century Russia. Peter the Great's "window to Europe" ushers in a century of European culture, including philosophy, literature and art into Russia. Russia gets rapidly

Europeanized. Aristotelian poetics, Cartesian logic and Hegelian dialectics become an integral part of Russian thinking just as the writings of Rousseau, Goethe or Byron. "Oriental themes" with their flavour of the exotic, the unknown and the 'primitive' find their way into the works of the Romantics in an attempt to rid themselves of the rigidity of Neo-classicist rules. Pushkin follows in the footsteps of his mentor, Byron, by turning to the Orient (the Circassians in *The Prisoner of Caucasus*, *The Gypsies*, *The Fountain of Bakhchisarai*). The Caucasus and its people are depicted by Lermontov. Zhukovsky's search into the nature of ideal love leads him to translate *Nala and Damayanti*, one story from the *Mahabharata*, in 1844.

The Russian intelligentsia had access to the English, French and German works in the original. A point worth noting here is that most works on Orientalism to be initially translated into Russian were from the above mentioned languages. The first translation of the *Bhagawata Gita* and *the Koran* into Russian in the 18th century was done from English and French respectively. Washington Irving's English rendering of *the Koran* was translated into Russian in 1857. Russian Orientalist studies came up much later, i.e. in the latter half of the 19th century. Thus, initial Russian attitudes to the Orient were, to a large extent, predetermined by those of the French and English and later, German. "This examination of things Oriental", so succinctly put forward by Edward Said, "was based more or less exclusively upon a sovereign western consciousness."<sup>8</sup>

European nationalism and a supercilious attitude towards the Eastern cultural heritage mark V. Belinsky's review of Zhukovsky's translation of the Indian tale, *Nala and Damayanti*. European yardsticks of aesthetics are applied to an alien culture about which the Russian critic is misinformed. While acknowledging the need for such translations, Belinsky adds: "For us Europeans this poetry is interesting as a fact of the primitive world, but we cannot sympathize with its superstition and ugly poetics."<sup>9</sup> He further maintains: "The individual is the base of the European spirit for whom, therefore, man is above nature."<sup>10</sup> There is an ironical twist here. The Russian intellectual thinks like a European, sees himself as one and yet is not a European for the Europeans. The Russian critic was misinformed about India and Indians who, for him, were "a great tribe", believing in an amorphous matter which destroys man's individuality.<sup>11</sup> It was more natural for Belinsky, given his background, to look upon *The Iliad* as the cradle song of civilization.

More than ten years later another Russian critic, N. Dobrolyubov, in his article on *The East India Company* shares many of the English and French attitudes to India. Attempts at objective appraisals (as in the above case and in Dobrolyubov's review of *the Koran*) end up with the repetition of a colonial mentality.<sup>12</sup>

European attitudes towards the Orient were also more readily acceptable to the Russians because of their close encounter with the

Mongol Tartars who ruled over Russia for over two and a half centuries (13th—15th A.D.). Fear and hatred intermingle in the Russian mind towards the conquerers. With time this feeling encompasses Islam which the Mongol-Tartars adopt. Nowhere are these sentiments more in evidence than in the Russian language. Given below are some examples of it from Dal's dictionary :

Tartar—dishonest, cunning, sly  
 Poganyi (rascal)—infidel, Jew, Muslim etc.  
 Poganit' (verb)—to pollute  
 Asian—inhabitant of Asia (a swear word , rude, uneducated person  
 Asiatic—savage, crude  
 Mohammed—(a swear word in the Don region), a thief, swindler, scoundrel.

With the gradual rise of the Russian Empire and the simultaneous weakening of various Asian countries this feeling of might and disdain became more and more ingrained. If 15th century Russia still bowed before the might of the Ottoman Empire and sought permission to use the Black Sea for navigational purposes and trade, 18th century Russia wrenched the Crimean peninsula from the Turks and felt it was its right to do so. The expansionist policy, primarily eastwards and southwards, initiated by Ivan III, was successfully pursued by all subsequent rulers. By the end of the 19th century Russian rule extended to Siberia, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kirghizia and Turkmenia in Central Asia ; Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan in the South, Poland, Finland and Lithuania in the West. Russia became a formidable colonial power to be reckoned with. Its colonial interests were to constantly clash with those of France and England. In the 19th century this bone of contention was primarily centred round the Dardanelles. Russia's repeated attempts at gaining an outlet into the Mediterranean met with a strong resistance from France and England. The scene of the war was Turkey and its domains, a weak Turkey and which had been turned into an economic vassal of France and England, both intent on dismembering it.

It is against this backdrop that one should approach Dostoevsky's views on the East, which, in the latter years, were concerned primarily with Turkey and the Russo-Turkish War. The quotation cited at the beginning of the paper highlights the contradictions which Dostoevsky shared with some of the leading Russian intellectuals of the 19th century.

Prior to his arrest in 1849 Dostoevsky's references to the East are confined to a few stray remarks neutral in character. That is because the writer shows no particular interest in the Orient. In the story, *The Double* :

Golyadkin recalls the Arab emirs, their green turbans, which they wear as a sign of their relationship to Mohammed, the Prophet . . . from there his thoughts shifted to the Turks and Turkish sandals<sup>13</sup>.

In another place in the same story :

Golyadkin-senior noted that in some way the Turks are correct when they call out to God even in their sleep. Later, disagreeing with the slander of various erudite men against the Turkish Prophet, Mohammed, he recognises him to be, in his own way, a great politician.<sup>14</sup>

Dostoevsky, in passing, mentions the Indian boa constrictor (*The Double*) and the Arabian Thousand and one Nights Tales (*A Foul Joke*). It is only after his release from penal servitude that references to Turkey and to the Prophet Mohammed start occupying a more prominent place in the writer's works. Dostoevsky was familiar with the French version of *the Koran* which he read in Semiplatinsk (where he served after his release from the Omsk prison, from 1855—1856). References to Mohammed are made in *Crime and Punishment* where the Prophet is equated with Napoleon and Caesar—the super men, who stop at nothing to achieve their aims. Mohammed's epileptic fits feature in the novels *Idiot*, *The Possessed*, *The Raw Youth*. However, nowhere more forcefully are Dostoevsky's views on Islam, Turkey and the Orient expressed as in his *Diaries of a Writer of 1876, 1877, 1881* and in his last novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*.

What a change in the tone ! Gone is the neutrality that characterises his earlier works. Pages devoted to "The Eastern Question", to Turkey, its people and religion exude an intense feeling of hatred. For Dostoevsky now the Turks are "profane Hagarite Mohammedans" (*Diary of a Writer*, 1877) or else "this savage, vile Muslim horde, a sworn sworn enemy of civilization." There is even a wish "that these blood-sucker Turks break their necks" As though such adjectives were insufficient the writer goes into minute details on the sadistic tortures the Bulgarians were subjected to by the Turks. These scenes seem to haunt Dostoevsky so much that he keeps reverting back to them. They finally culminate in the *Pro and Contra* chapters of *The Brothers Karamazov*. In the most poignant passage of the novel where Ivan Karamazov puts the question whether universal harmony should be achieved at the price of a single child's tears—Dostoevsky enumerates an entire range of atrocities perpetrated by adults against children. Children are shown being tortured by their own parents, by feudal landlords, by society. Amongst these are pages devoted to Turkish soldiers fondling a babe in arms, throwing the laughing child into the air and then, in the presence of the mother, catching the falling baby on the edge of a razor thin bayonet. And Alyosha, who epitomises the Christian ideal of love and mercy, on hearing all this, is compelled to call for revenge. One might have not taken note of the scenes on Turkish atrocities had it been confined to this novel. One can also argue that Dostoevsky attempted to show different types of torture and this was only one of them. True. But there are questions which continue to bother. How is it that in this very novel in which a whole chapter is devoted to the Spanish Inquisition which was no less barbaric—there is

no mention of its heinous crimes. If this question is considered inappropriate for it attempts to intrude into a creative writer's laboratory of work, then one must revert back to his *Diaries* where Dostoevsky, like a man possessed, is propagating aggression against Turkey. He is confident that Constantinopol is going to be captured by Russia and the Turks taught a lesson.

How is one to approach this radical change in Dostoevsky's outlook to that of the earlier years? The seeds of this change are to be found in one of the few poems written by the writer, *On the European Events of 1854*.

The Russo-Turkish war of 1854 in which Britain and France sided with Turkey was viewed by Dostoevsky as a betrayal of the civilized nations.

The Christian siding with the Turk against Christ.  
The Christian—a defender of Mohammed.  
Shame on you—apostates of the cross.<sup>15</sup>

It is here that Dostoevsky, for the first time clearly states that the East (the Orient) will be taken over by Russia.

It is not for you to decide Russia's fate.....  
The East—is hers! To her are hands outstretched  
Untiringly by a million generations.  
And ruling over the ancient Asia  
She gives to all a new life.  
And renaissance to the ancient Orient. . . .<sup>16</sup>

Russia's expansionist policy is justified. The messianic role of Russia guided by "the cross, the faith and the throne" is also put forward for the first time. Over the years these ideas get crystallised in Dostoevsky's works.

Simultaneously, they are closely linked with the writer's private search for answers that were tormenting him. While in prison Dostoevsky realised the enormous abyss lying between the intellectuals and the masses. He began to question his utopian-socialist past. The onslaught of capitalism in Russia with all the socio-economic contradictions ensuing thereafter such as the moral depravity of the 'haves' and the poverty, misery and humiliation suffered by the 'have nots' forced Dostoevsky to seek fresh answers to social, ethical and philosophical problems. He attempted to rid himself of his youthful radicalism and Western ideas and find salvation in the Russian Orthodox church and the simple Russian folk. He starts believing in absolute monarchy and nationalism. But it is one thing to turn one's back on one's past and quite another to be rid of it when it has become so much a part of one's being. Speaking about one's beliefs the narrator in *Memories from the House of the Dead* says that one "has suffered so much in life for them and paid such a heavy price to attain

them ... that it is practically impossible to break away from them."<sup>17</sup> Thus, this inner contradiction between his earlier beliefs and those of the later period (portrayed and voiced so brilliantly through his characters in his novels) will run parallel in the writer's fiction of this period. The Christian concept of love, compassion, mercy and suffering are counterposed to violence and a revolutionary overthrow of power. A European sensibility clashes with Russian nationalism. But if in his novels Dostoevsky, one of the most honest writers, identifies with most of his heroes and allows for a polyphonic discourse that shows different paths to salvation, in his political writings, Dostoevsky the arch nationalist takes over.

Religion so totally engulfs him that the writer ceases to objectively view reality. And it is here that all the latent views of the Orient emerge. Russia in the war against Turkey in 1877 is seen as a saviour of the Slav people still under the yoke of Turkey. The war assumes the proportions of a crusade. Dostoevsky becomes more and more intolerant of non-Christian peoples and nations. The decision by the Russian Government to forcibly evict the Crimean Tartars is fully approved by the writer, who fears that if the Russians do not move in it will be the Jews.<sup>18</sup> (his antisemitic leanings are well known).

There is another paradox. A constant feeling of condescension is apparent when the writer speaks of liberating the Bulgarians and uniting all the Slavs into one brotherhood. Dostoevsky imagines that "for the Slavs . . . Russia is still the sun, the hope, their friend, mother, protectress and their future liberator."<sup>19</sup> He sees Russia heading the Pan Slav movement.

The role for which Russia was destined from the time of Ivan III when he chose the . . . two headed eagle\* as the coat-of-arms, was that of the leader of Orthodox Christianity—its guardian and protector.<sup>20</sup>

All the Slavs will be united "under the wings of Russia." Edward Said has very aptly pointed out that "nearly every nineteenth century writer was extraordinarily well aware of the fact of the empire."<sup>21</sup> Although this quotation is applied to the French and English experience it is just as relevant for the Russian writers. The feeling of supremacy towards smaller nations, the fight for more democratization and freedom at home and its inapplicability to those nations seeking independence from Russian subjugation—these attitudes exist not just in Dostoevsky but in his predecessors as well, like Pushkin and Lermontov.<sup>22</sup> The annexation policy of the czarist government is justified by these writers.

In 1881 after fierce resistance Turkmenia, along with the town of Ashkhabad, fell to the Russians. Dostoevsky enters into polemics with those who are decrying the Government's Asiatic policy and feel that

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\*It is doubtful that Dostoevsky was aware of the fact that the symbol of the two-headed eagle used widely as the coat of arms of both European and Russian kings is an ancient Sumerian symbol. The Europeans adopted it from the Arabs at the time of the Crusades.

those very funds should be utilised for the improvement of one's own economy. The writer is jubilant at the success of the Russian expedition. In fact, Dostoevsky feels that Russia should have moved Eastwards much earlier, after the Napoleonic War. In the colonization of the East lies Russia's future, according to him.

Let the conviction grow in the minds of these millions of people right up to India, in fact, even in India, of the white Czar's invincibility and his unconquerable sword . . . These people might have their own Khans and Emirs. England's power might astound them . . . but the white Czar must stand above the Khans, the emirs, the Indian Empress and even above that of the Caliph's. Let him be the Caliph but the white Czar is the Czar to the Caliph as well. This type of conviction must be ingrained in them! And it is being ingrained and growing with every passing year. This is necessary for us because it prepares them for the future.<sup>23</sup>

For the writer Russia's colonization of the Orient is seen as a mission which carries civilization to those countries and "By capturing Asia our spirits and strength will lift . . . In Europe we were hangers on whereas in Asia we will arrive as masters."<sup>24</sup>

There were moments when the writer seemed to understand objective realities<sup>25</sup> but they were far overshadowed by his religious fanaticism, chauvinistic nationalism and an unfounded hatred of the Orient. Without perhaps realising it Dostoevsky became the staunchest supporter of the Russian government's expansionist policy of the Orient and, like many before him, sniggered at the culture and civilizations of these nations. What a contrast this is to the stand taken by a contemporary of his, Lev Tolstoy! In fact, Dostoevsky vehemently criticised the epilogue of *Anna Karenina* in which Tolstoy ridicules and questions the zeal displayed by volunteers of the Russo-Turkish War "to free the Slavs".

Tolstoy's search, similar in many ways to that of Dostoevsky's, about the meaning of life led him to a broader understanding of reality. The study of Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, the teachings of Confucius and Lao Tse made him more tolerant towards other nations and peoples. If Dostoevsky's political writings made him turn more and more nationalistic, those of Tolstoy opened his eyes to the common features inherent in every despotic and oppressive regime. For Dostoevsky the czar was the saviour, for Tolstoy he was "the Chingiz Khan with telegraphs, a constitution, a press and political parties. This "Chingiz Khan along with his well-mannered, courteous and clean murderers",<sup>26</sup> in the name of Christianity, was engaged in plunder, wars and crimes which he was justifying. Tolstoy realised that there was no difference between any of the Russian czars, of Napoleon, Gladstone or Palmerston. "The forms of oppression had changed but not disappeared". A despotic rule, its cruelty was the same everywhere—be it in the torture of innocent Poles by Russian soliders or that of Chingiz Khan.

Countries and Governments carry out intrigues and wars because

of property : the shores of the Rheine, land in Africa, China and in the Balkan Peninsula.<sup>27</sup>

If Dostoevsky was urging the government to conquer Asia, Tolstoy was decrying the heinous crime being committed by the invasion of China in 1900 by eight countries (England, France, USA, Russia, Japan, Austro-Hungary, Germany, Italy.) Tolstoy's pain for the oppressed colonial nations and his sympathies with their struggle was not shared by Dostoevsky. And for this reason one can say that if Tolstoy was successful in overcoming the prevalent Orientalist approach of his times Dostoevsky turned a prey to "Oriental Phantoms".

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1. F.M. Dostoevskii, *Dnevnik pisatelya za 1877 god, Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, Nauka, Leningrad, Vol. 25, pp. 122-123.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 412.
3. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1978, p. 25.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 109.
6. Voltaire : "One Latin and one Greek priest informed that Mohammed II allowed the whole of Constantinopol to be ransacked, that he personally broke the image of Jesus Christ and converted all the churches into Mosques. In order to make the conqueror seem even more repulsive they added that the Sultan . . . beheaded his mistress and ordered the stomachs of fourteen of his pashas to be slit open in order to ascertain which one of them had eaten a water-melon. Hundreds of historians are repeating these pathetic untruths. Turn to the Turkish chronicles which merit trust . . . and you will see how ridiculous are all these fairy tales" In : F. Ya. Priima, *Russkaya literatura na Zapade*. Nauka, Lenin-grad, 1970, p. 27.
7. Philip K. Hitti quotes Arabic sources on the Crusades and their attack on Jerusalem in 1099. "The besiegers stormed the city and perpetrated an indiscriminate massacre involving all ages and both sexes. 'Heaps of heads and hands and feet were to be seen throughout the streets and squares of the city'" (Agiles, p. 659) In the book : Philip K. Hitti. *History of the Arabs*. Macmillan, 1985. p. 639.
8. Edward W. Said. *op. cit.* p. 8.
9. V.G. Belinskii. *Retsenzii i zametki, yanvar'-mart 1844. Nal'i Damayanti*. *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, Akademii Nauk, Moscow 1955, vol. 8. p. 113.
10. *Ibid.* p. 113.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Dobrolyubov attempts an objective appraisal of the reasons for the 1157 revolt in India but because his thinking is conditioned along European lines and most of his source material is French, he falls a prey to oriental attitudes. "India has not changed since the time of Alexander . . ." (P. 9) He praises English enlightenment and its efforts to educate the masses who, by their very nature are "lazy." Indians are not ready for English humaneness nor for adopting Christianity etc. In : N.A. Dobrolyubov. *Vzglyad na istoriyu i sovremennoe sostoyanie ost-Indii. Sobranie sochinenii. Khudozhestvennaya literatura*. Moscow, 1962, vol. 2. This concept of the lazy Oriental is once again repeated in Dobrolyubov's article. *Zhizn' Magometa*. *Ibid.*

13. F.M. Dostoevskii, Dvoinik, *op. cit.* vol. 1 p. 135.
14. *Ibid.* p. 158.
15. Na Evropeiskie sobytiya v 1854 godu. *Ibid.* vol. 2. p. 405.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Zapiski iz mertvogo doma. *Ibid.* vol. 4, p. 216.
18. Dnevnik pisatelya za 1876 god. *Ibid.* vol. 23, p. 54-55.
19. *Ibid.* p. 115.
20. *Ibid.* p. 49.
21. Edward W. Said. *op. cit.* p. 14.
22. Pushkin opposed the Polish revolt of 1831 in his poem. *Reply to the Slanderers of Russia* (Klevetnikam Rossii), *Anniversary of Borodino. and in his letters of 1830-31.* Lermontov, in his poem *Mtsyry*, while glorifying the freedom loving Georgians, simultaneously adds that the Russian take over of Georgia was God sent. See also his poems *Opyat' narodnye vitji.*
23. F. Dostoevskii, Dnevnik pisatelya za 1881 god. *op. cit.* vol. 27 pp. 32-33.
24. *Ibid.* p. 36.
25. Dostoevsky sees the "Eastern question" as a game between nations-five wolves on their haunches each ready to pounce on the bone of connection, Constantino-pol. (Dnevnik pisatelya za 1876 god.) In 1854 the writer had wholeheartedly agreed, as he himself admits, with Granovsky's article on the Russo-Turkish War of 1855. Granovsky had pointed out that Russia's politics towards the Slav nations had been one of capture and subjugation. In 1876 Dostoevsky refutes these charges and feels that Russia's aims are fair. Dnevnik pisatelya za 1876 god.
26. L.N. Tolstoi. Pora ponyat' . . . In : *Sobranie sochinenii. v. 20 tomakh. Khudozhestvennaya literatura*, Moscow. 1964. vol. 16, p. 569.
27. L.N. Tolstoi. *Rabstvo nashego vremeni.* vol. 16. p. 399.