

Re-Orienting the Novel

Farzad Boobani

Abstract:

As a critical intervention in the history of the novel (and the history of ideas), Srinivas Aravamudan's *Enlightenment Orientalism* aims to provide an alternative account of the emergence of the novel. To Aravamudan, the majority of the dominant accounts have ignored the role played by less favoured genres such as the Oriental tale in the gestation and development of the novel. Aravamudan's sophisticated readings of a remarkable number of eighteenth-century English and French prose fictions challenge and redress this negligence by demonstrating the different ways in which the Oriental tale, as a vehicle for Enlightenment thought, not only fertilized fiction but, more importantly, disseminated xenophilia and cosmopolitanism in eighteenth-century Europe.

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Srinivas Aravamudan's *Enlightenment Orientalism: Resisting the Rise of the Novel* is the culmination of a project he has been pursuing in a number of book chapters and scholarly articles (see, for instance, "In the Wake of the Novel: The Oriental Tale as National Allegory," in: *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 33:1, 1999). At the heart of this project is the attempt to rewrite the history of the novel by defying the prevailing accounts which consider the novel to be an autochthonous literary type, sprung out of domestic soil tilled by a group of authors now canonized as exemplary practitioners of realism. In fact, Aravamudan condemns the novelistic histories that have prioritized and institutionalized one fictional mode (i.e., domestic realism) at the cost of marginalizing other modes such as Oriental fantasies. As a result of such hierarchical orthodoxies, the novel's emergence, its ascendancy and its preoccupations have been attributed merely to a single nation (in particular, the British) deemed to be in the vanguard of modernity.

As the subtitle of his book clearly indicates, Aravamudan takes issue with a tradition represented most prominently by Ian Watt's seminal *The Rise of the Novel* (1957), which, according to Aravamudan, was instrumental in pinning down national (and psychological) realism as the telos of the novel (p. 59). Arguing against this dominant paradigm and its implications, Aravamudan offers alternatives to two interlocking tendencies in literary and cultural historiography: normative histories of the novel as well as Eurocentric accounts of modernity.

To resist and rethink such reductive histories, Aravamudan calls for a thorough reassessment of the impact of Orientalism on Enlightenment thought and aesthetics. Orientalism, in the wake of Edward Said, has largely been repudiated as an ideological discourse consolidating colonial rule. A highly important aspect of Aravamudan's monograph is that it provides a corrective to such a homogenizing view of Orientalism by stressing the culturally felicitous impact of the turn to the Orient in eighteenth-century Europe.

Enlightenment thought, as Aravamudan envisages it, was not hedged in by the tight boundaries of a single national space; rather, it adopted a universalist attitude to the human condition and valued interactions among cultures. Such transculturalism and cosmopolitanism, to Aravamudan, are in sharp contrast to the cultural ethos of the nineteenth century, a period marked by nation-centred xenophobia rooted, partly, in an increasingly myopic Orientalism.

Eighteenth-century Orientalism, Aravamudan insists, ought to be distinguished from its nineteenth-century counterpart: while the latter was by and large affected by the demands of the empire, the former was a vehicle for contemplating and interrogating the (European) Self by contrasting it with a desirable (Oriental) Other. Rather than forming a rigid and irreconcilable polarity (as conceptualized by the Saidian tradition), the Self/Other relationship in the eighteenth century is, Aravamudan amply demonstrates, reciprocal and fluid. In a word, Aravamudan champions a "positive" Orientalism (p. 253) respectful of Oriental cultures regardless of their seemingly radical alterity. Thus, attempting to refine the 'Saidian' paradigm by adopting a pluralistic approach, Aravamudan also succeeds in salvaging Orientalism (or a certain brand of it, at least).

After laying down the theoretical ground for his arguments in the "Introduction," Aravamudan proceeds to demonstrate how eighteenth-century's 'enlightened' awareness of the East acted as the driving force behind "Enlightenment Orientalism," a term he proposes for a form of transgeneric fiction that, instead of parochial nationalism, promulgated humanist plurality by virtue of its openness to Eastern cultures (p. 4).

In Part One on "Pseudoethnographies," Aravamudan starts with Giovanni Paolo Marana's *L'espion turc 1684* (*The Turkish Spy 1687*), as a founding text of "Enlightenment Orientalism" and a major influence on essayists such as Joseph Addison and novelists like Behn and Defoe. By "advertising Ottoman cosmopolitanism" (p. 44), Marana's defamiliarizing Oriental tale clears a space for the critical observation of the European self from an Eastern vantage point. This self-reflexivity reaches its acme in Montesquieu's acclaimed *Persian Letters* (1721), singled out for its astute critique of Eurocentric norms and mores. Equally important is Galland's phenomenal translation of *The Arabian Nights* (1704-1717), regarded by Aravamudan as the cross-cultural text par excellence. *The Nights* occupies the centre stage in Aravamudan's "Enlightenment Orientalism" because, in addition to its unbridled imaginative power, it ushered a host of formal innovations such as "nested narratives" and "metafiction" into the European fiction-writing tradition (p. 55).

Part Two on "Transcultural Allegories" endorses satire as the means by which "Enlightenment Orientalism" achieves critical and multicultural ends. Dwelling at length on cosmological tales, beast fables, and erotic narratives, as exemplified by the works of Fontenelle, Swift, Voltaire, Sheridan, and Diderot, among others, Aravamudan valorizes fantasy and imagination over plausibility and realism. This allows for the interrogation and subversion of a bourgeois frame of mind which prefers fictions that mirror the rational values and home-evoking communities it identifies with (p. 243). In contrast, "Enlightenment Orientalism" broadens the scope in order to allow for the inclusion of the generatively unfamiliar and the wisely irrational.

Gliding from the eighteenth century to the twentieth in the "Conclusion," Aravamudan brings *The Arabian Nights* into the context of modernism to show how our understanding of a highly canonical author such as Joyce can be deepened if genres like the Oriental tale are not summarily dismissed as irrevocably primitive. Employing a playfully laconic prose style throughout

the book, Aravamudan magisterially drives home his most significant point: the literary canon is an ideological construct that needs to be constantly exposed, dismantled, and reorganized if we wish to resist monologic historiographies.