

## THE EMPIRE OF CUSTOM: INDIAN & CENTRAL ASIA IN 18TH & 19TH CENTURY FRENCH LANGUAGE LITERATURES

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### INTRODUCTION.

South and Central Asia have tantalized the minds of European writers for centuries, fermenting in their imaginations as exotic locales populated with foreign peoples and cultural practices, unknown lands and untold riches. From the 15th century to the present, these Western imaginings and representations of Asia have played out in theatre, the multi-media format par excellence of those centuries, and in literature as well. To better understand how these cultural representations and misrepresentations of South and Central Asia became canonical to the West's institutional knowledge of these foreign lands, I intend to conduct research, and publish articles and one to two books on this topic. While I use the terms Central and South Asia, I will more specifically be looking for French language materials which concern India firstly, and following this research Central Asia.

### CONCEPTS AND METHODS.

Since the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978, save for a notable amount of research also conducted in Russian language sources, the primary area of research in Orientalism has focused on English language sources. Relatively fewer studies have focused on French literature and the representation of the Orient. The aim of my seed grant research, outcome-wise, is the publication of articles and first, a book on the representation of India in French 18th- and 19th-century theatre, and eventually a book on the representation of Central Asia in French language literature, from 1700 – 1900. I focus on several branches of inquiry into the nature of French Orientalism in theatre, and their implications. Firstly, how the French historically conceptualized and represented India, and Central Asia in theater and literature has broader ramifications for how we today construct “the other,” those who are not of our own identity group, be it in terms of gender, nationality, or religion. Secondly, by learning how media and literature shape national identity, we can better understand the how mimetic practices functioned then, and now. Thirdly, while South and Central Asian countries come to the forefront of international politics and culture in the 21st century, it is more imperative than ever to look to the past for lessons and examples on how literature and media play roles in nation building, and the repercussions of the representations that they create and circulate through media. In the interconnected, globalized world we live in, interest in Orientalism and related subjects remains of high interest.

### CONCLUSIONS.

My thesis in this paper is that Orientalism in South and Central Asia is not and has not been a strictly homogeneous phenomenon: instead it has reflected different Western ideas and perceptions on these areas, some which display an acute understanding of the area, and some less so, although certain trends have dominated, resulting in a complex exchange of ideas, one that continues in the 21st century.

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