

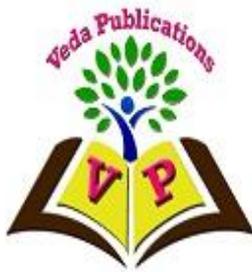


## EASTWARD BIAS IN THE OPENING SEQUENCES OF BRAM STOKER'S 'DRACULA'

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### ABSTRACT

When we think of Bram Stoker's classic novel *Dracula*, we conjure in our minds images of blood-thirsty vampires, Gothic structures, dimly-lit hallways and shrieking banshees. Yet, for all its elements of horror, *Dracula* contains many controversial aspects that may be of interest to a post-colonial literary critic. The opening pages of the novel are laced with racist connotations, English supremacist ideas and blatant stereotypes against the East. This paper attempts to highlight some of these biases, and assess the role it played in shaping Western notions of the East. However, what makes *Dracula's* case unique is that its supremacist tendencies are not only aimed at the Orient, but also on the eastern parts of the Occident, namely Transylvania. Since the focus of the paper is only on the opening pages of the novel, the current study is expected to be brief and precise.

**keywords:** *East as backward, Idolatrous Christianity, Eastern Europe, Negative stereotyping.*

**INTRODUCTION**

Bram Stoker's *Dracula* is one of the most widely read novels of all time. Ever since its first publication, the novel proved to be so popular that it spawned countless imitations, but no equals. The Stoker family had great difficulty in managing the copyright of the work. Even today, the novel spawns film adaptations, besides serving as the inspiration behind animation movies, novels, web series and even commercials. The legend of Dracula has spread far and wide so that the very word Dracula has come to mean Vampire, even if those who have really read the novel would know that it is actually the name of a middle-aged, despondent Count, who was also a vampire. To put it simply, one does not need to read the novel *Dracula* to know of its vampiric connotations. People may not have heard about its author, but they have most certainly heard about Dracula, the Vampire. The novel was published in 1897, at a time when Europe was digging far and deep for Imperial purposes. Throughout the novel, the narrator, Jonathan Harker, a young English solicitor on his way to Transylvania, makes many remarks and observations that may seem startling to a non-Western reader for its blatant insensitivity and bias. It is important to look at other aspects of the novel, apart from its horror-driven narrative, because of the novel's immense popularity and widespread dissemination among readers. The inherent supremacist tendencies and cultural bias in the novel are also read and internalised by readers, which only strengthens their negative notions about Transylvania, and everything East. The present paper aims to highlight some of the bigoted and prejudiced remarks of the narrator Jonathan Harker in the novel and offer solutions to looking at the situation with new perspectives.

**HARKER'S REMARKS**

One of the earliest of startling remarks that the narrator Jonathan Harker makes is in the first paragraph of Chapter 1 in the novel. In his journal entry of May 3, Harker observes

The impression I had was that we were leaving the West and entering the East. (Stoker 9)

From the very beginning, the narrator shows a marked perception about what constitutes the West and how it is separated from the East. There is nothing inherently wrong or prejudiced about the comment, until one considers his remarks on eastern Europe during his visit to the British Museum. During his spare time while in London, Harker had gone to the British Museum to learn more about Transylvania since he believed it would be wise to educate himself more about the country where his business lay. Any geographical location which had not yet been mapped by English cartographers was deemed to be a backward and savage place. The same mentality can be seen in case of *Dracula's* narrator Jonathan Harker. Upon finding about the location he was to travel, Harker observes:

I find that the district he named is in the *extreme east of the country*, just on the borders of three states, Transylvania, Moldavia and Bukovina... *one of the wildest and least known portions of Europe*. [italics mine] (Stoker 9)

In other words, the fact that the location he was to travel was on the 'extreme east' was particularly bothersome to him because it was one of the 'wildest' and least known portions of Europe. By implication, any geographical location that the English had not yet 'discovered' was primitive, backward and savage. This is the idea that Harker gives when he says:

I was not able to light on any map or work giving the exact locality of the Castle Dracula, *as there are no maps of this country as yet to compare with our own Ordnance Survey maps* [italics mine] (Stoker 9)

Jonathan Harker next gives us a racial dissection of the population of Transylvania, but what is disturbing is that he ends this section with the observation:

I read that every known superstition in the world is gathered into the horseshoe of the Carpathians, as if it were the centre of some sort of imaginative whirlpool. (Stoker 10)

Thus, these eastern parts of Europe are laced with all forms of superstitions, which makes it markedly



different, in the eyes of Harker, from England, which is Europe-proper. The ultimate implication is that anything concerning the East is essentially backward, dubious and primitive. Harker then makes a striking comparison between the railway systems of England and Transylvania. Harker's main complaint is that the train in which he was supposed to go began its journey a little behind schedule, in fact an hour behind schedule. However, Harker uses this opportunity to criticise the East in general:

It seems to me that the further east you go the more unpunctual are the trains. What ought they to be in China? (Stoker 10)

This is nothing but a blatant instance of negative stereotyping against the East. What is interesting here is that the narrator says that it 'seems to [him]' that the trains become slower towards the east, and therefore it is his personal opinion, and does not have a firm basis in reality. What is also noticeable is that there exists a certain prejudice in him for everything geographically eastwards, a sense that everything nearer the West-English-Europe-proper is good and the benchmark of high standards, while the further one moves away from this 'proper' version of Europe, things start becoming gradually 'negative'. In Harker's spectrum of 'proper' civilisations, England is the best of the West, the yardstick of quality, while China, an Asian nation, falls on the lower end of the spectrum, the complete antithesis of the progressive Centre-West-England.

The narrator's prejudice is not simply restricted to train timings and geographical locations, but it also extends to the people of Transylvania. This is what Harker says about the women there:

The women looked pretty, except when you got near them... (Stoker 10)

The women of Transylvania were only pretty from afar, but looked ugly upon closer inspection because 'they were very clumsy about the waist' (Stoker 10). The narrator also shows his racist attitude against the Slovakian people, with the following words:

The strangest figures we saw were the Slovaks, who were more barbarian than the

rest...[They] *had long black hair and heavy black moustaches.* [italics mine] (Stoker 10)

So evidently, having long black hair and heavy black moustache makes people barbarous according to Harker's reckoning. But even the Slovaks were not to be the worst barbarian of them all: that distinction would belong to the Oriental people. Comparing the two, Harker observes:

On the stage [the Slovaks] would be set down at once as some old Oriental band of brigands. (Stoker 11)

Therefore, one could excuse someone for thinking the Slovaks to be distant cousins of Oriental robbers.

The narrator also makes a distinction between the Christianity of England and that of Transylvania. Upon learning that Harker was to visit the castle of Count Dracula, especially on the Eve of St. George's Day when evil spirits roam freely, the landlady of the hotel in which he was staying wanted him to delay his journey or accept the crucifix as a token of protection. Here, Harker's haughtiness is on full display, as he observes:

Finally, she went down on her knees and implored me not to go; at least wait a day or two before starting. It was all very ridiculous but I did not feel comfortable. (Stoker 12)

It is now that Harker displays his prejudice against Transylvanian Christianity. He tells the old lady 'as gravely as [he] could that [he] thanked her' but he must go on. He continues:

She then rose and dried her eyes, and taking a crucifix from her neck offered it to me. I did not know what to do, *for, as an English Churchman, I have been taught to regard such things as in some measure idolatrous.*' (Stoker 12)

Yet, Harker does accept the crucifix, but with an attitude as if he is doing the old lady a massive favour by taking the locket for his own apparent protection.

#### ANALYSIS

Edward Said, the postcolonial theorist, remarked: 'The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic



beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences' (Said 1). He continues a little later that 'The Orient was Orientalized not only because it was discovered to be "Oriental" in all those ways considered commonplace by an average nineteenth-century European, but also because it *could be* - that is, submitted to being - *made* Oriental' (Said 6).

So far as *Dracula* is concerned, Said's observations sit remarkably well with the novel. Stoker presents Transylvania as a pseudo-European Orient, a place of the Saidian 'exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences.' Every author of horror and mystery has to create what is called 'objective correlatives', a special sequence of external signifiers that metaphorically create a feeling of tension and suspense in the readers' psyche. In order to create an atmosphere of tension and suspense to build up his novel, Stoker uses the Oriental technique whereby he introduces seemingly unknown, odd and dubious people, customs and landscapes right at the outset of the novel. It is also worth mentioning that the novel's epistolary format makes it read like a memoir, instead of a traditional novel. What it does is make the novel a travelogue, a reportage of places and people from distant lands. Even when the narrator Harker 'represents' the natives, they are always either barbarous, superstitious, helpless or meek. He even questions the purity of their Christian faith, blaming them, albeit indirectly, of idolatry during the crucifixion scene. Stoker creates a situation at the beginning of the novel where the reader cannot help but feel a sense of foreboding for Harker. Stoker ensures that the readers always sympathise with Harker, and the author evokes this sentiment by bringing the common antithesis of Europe, the Orient, into the picture quite early in the novel. It is human nature to fear and mistrust anything that he or she does not know much about. Back in 1897, Europe didn't have the most positive of vibes about the East, and Stoker plays on this majoritarian doubt and fear by taking his narrator into the midst of Eastern Europe, a semi-Oriental space, at least according to the novel's narrator. We must take this Oriental approach seriously because although the work is essentially a horror novel meant for pleasure

and enjoyment, deep down however, very covertly, the seeds of negative stereotyping have been sown. Readers for generations have read the novel's implicit racist connotations and have imbibed and internalised them, which has further shaped their perceptions about Eastern Europe and the Orient.

### POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Today, a random YouTube search on 'Transylvania' yields numerous results showing its connection to Stoker's *Dracula*. Transylvania has become Draculand, and there is no way to shake off this stereotype. Of course, one silver lining of this is that Transylvania attracts numerous tourists due to its association with the legend of Dracula. Yet there are great dangers of a single stereotype. A story gets stuck to a community, nation, or people, and that story never evades these communities. For example, no matter how progressive Africa becomes, it will still be a continent of elephants and jungles for many. Similarly, India has reached the moon and Mars, but yet people consider it to be a nation of 'caste, curry and cows.' Transylvania too must surely have other aspects to it than the legend of Dracula, and so it must also represent those aspects of it. Stereotypes can be harmful, and negative stereotypes especially so. It is important for us to look at all sides of the picture before coming to a conclusion.

As readers of *Dracula*, we must ensure that we consciously take note of the aforementioned supremacist biases and read the novel without imbibing the negative connotations ascribed to the people, places and customs of the Transylvanian people. Furthermore, it may be suggested that readers inform and educate themselves about other aspects of Romania and the east, particularly Asia and Africa. Western readers must be encouraged to conduct independent research and investigation about the colonial history of many Asian and African nations since Western school textbooks often never teach their children about their colonial legacy. Also, since Harker takes a jibe at the railway system in China, the readers of *Dracula* should also be made aware of China's strained relationship with Britain in the nineteenth century, and the latter's failed attempts to ignite the opium trade there.



Furthermore, it is the responsibility of the publishers of *Dracula* to include a Foreword to sensitize new, malleable and impressionable readers about the aforementioned remarks since they are located right at the beginning of the novel. Even if a reader does not read *Dracula* in full, chances are he or she would read at least the opening sequences of it. This is enough to make the reader form a negative stereotype about the East and by implication about everything non- 'proper' Western. As shown by the history of our world, literature is a potent weapon to brainwash and manipulate people on a mass-scale with certain ideological standpoints. Religious texts such as the Bible have been used in the past in the United States to justify slavery and establish White supremacy. Books can be incredibly powerful tools that can permanently shape people's perceptions. The aim should now be to ameliorate the wrongs of the past, and undo a deep wedge that had been created through the medium of institutionalised divisions, mainly through texts. Therefore, a celebrated, cherished and bestselling novel like *Dracula* must include a Foreword, explaining the context of the novel and the narrator's evident position of superiority and narrative bias while describing his surroundings and the people.

### CONCLUSION

One cannot call this paper a post-colonial analysis of *Dracula* because Transylvania, or Romania for that matter, was never a colony of any European empire. Therefore, this paper is not really a postcolonial criticism of Stoker's novel. Yet, it cannot be denied that the lens through which the narrator Jonathan Harker looks at his Transylvanian surroundings, is through a skewed, English supremacist framework; a lens that European colonisers often put in describing the Orient. However, what makes *Dracula's* position unique is that a supremacist lens and attitude is used to project one Europe against another- a more Western, and by default, better Europe of Harker against a more Orientalised Europe, with its primitive people, customs and even an imperfect, idolatrous Christianity. Therefore, it becomes very problematic to locate the paper within a specific framework. Owing to the nature of the discussion presented, the paper therefore should be viewed as an anti-racist,

anti-supremacist analysis of *Dracula*. It is sincerely hoped and desired that future readers of Stoker's great novel become aware of the novel's inherent bias, while simultaneously enjoying the myriad range of thrilling emotions it has to offer.

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