

*For reading purposes only*

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Assignment (max. 1,100 words)

### **Response to Rasheed Araeen's *The Art of Benevolent Racism***

In this essay published in 2000, artist, curator, and critic Rasheed Araeen explores the role of institutions in maintaining racism within the global art world. He argues that art world institutions, specifically academia and higher education, continue to display racial bias. Crucially, this bias is often disguised as a well-intentioned act. Thus, this conundrum is difficult to end or even be aware of. Araeen focuses his analysis on creatives from Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean, and their experience in the UK. Based on Araeen's article, my short response engages with broader issues surrounding art historiography as well as rhetorics of multiculturalism and cultural representation.

Araeen contends that European institutions have traditionally shut artists of non-Western origins out of the Western art historical canon, while at the same time establishing this canon as the exclusively authoritative art historical narrative of modernism. This stands in contrast to the significant contributions to modern and contemporary art these artists have made in reality. Essentially, Araeen's argument is one of power and privilege, and the dynamics thereof: Not only does power control access, but it also provides the right to define many aspects of identity and a successful artistic career. Araeen explains that it is through institutions that art is legitimised as such. Consequently, it is also institutions that can deny this status if they feel challenged.

In this role as purveyor of exclusion, European academia has created a hierarchy with white Europeans at the top, pushing a conceptual raft between a historical centre and its supposed peripheries. This system cannot be challenged, as everyone else may only operate in a supplemental function, dependent on the top's benevolent decisions. Hence, consciously or subconsciously, by exercising power to decide who should be considered as "other", the top of the hierarchy ensures the perpetuation of this very system and reinforcement of Eurocentric ideology. Here, the author maintains, a neocolonial structure becomes visible.

According to Araeen, this cycle remains endemic across all art world infrastructure. Importantly, in light of incessant globalisation, processes of othering have become entrenched but blurred. This explicitly extends to the question of assessment. Araeen explores how instances of racism hide behind international awards and prizes, art fairs, scholarships, curricula. Here, they manifest in the creation of different criteria applied to the evaluation of white vs non-white creatives' work.<sup>1</sup> Artists of African or Asian descent are

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<sup>1</sup> Araeen, 2000, p. 60

shown by these institutions that they can achieve merit in the West primarily by emphasising their non-European roots and identities, i.e. by othering themselves and conforming to the stereotypical classification laid out for them by white leaders. Ethnicity rather than individuality becomes the decisive factor for setting themselves apart (from white artists) and developing successful careers – even if the artist may not relate to the culture or tradition assigned to her. Crucially, the author argues, by promoting works based on “*a priori* assumptions which differentiate the intellectual capabilities of artists on the basis of racial or cultural differences”<sup>2</sup>, institutions manage to be unaffected by racism.

At its core, the process of othering this constitutes a lingering form of racism, highlights distance, and inevitably leads to the construction of rifts and perceived difference. This is Araeen’s central argument, and it remains relevant in the art world twenty years onwards. We have addressed related themes throughout our class.

Controlling education constitutes power. Through education, ideas and ideals can be transmitted, pushed, sustained, curtailed, or broken. A curriculum’s content will determine which aspects of history and thought students will be exposed to – or not. In this context, institutions such as the Mayo School in Lahore (today’s National College of the Arts) or the French-administered School of Cambodian Arts, which were discussed in class, come to mind. These educational institutions were built by colonial administrators with the idea of teaching and preserving local craft techniques. Students would learn the traditional crafts of their specific geography, whereby the decision-makers who determined what counted as “traditional” were Europeans. Creative self-expression and the teaching of contemporary European art school curricula was discouraged.

The process of othering as located in institutional and educational structures thus has a long colonial history. Yet even today, while no longer a colonial subject, benevolent racism relegates the authentic position of many non-Eurocentric artists to his/ her culture of origin, denying them the option of choosing a place elsewhere in the Western art historical canon. This is of vital importance, as it implies an automatic limitation and predetermination of the artist’s voice. Araeen phrases this as a question of personal freedom. He further links his comments to the British art education system, which, he contends in a similar line of argumentation, actively encourages students of African and Asian heritage “to produce work which is *different* from white students.”<sup>3</sup>

Another notion – closely related to racism – that occurred in Araeen’s writing is the concept of multiculturalism, which the author claims has contributed to the institutionalisation of culturally relativist approaches to artistic production. Multiculturalism and racism are frequently discussed within similar frameworks and discursive fields in politics and academia. However, while racism has a negative connotation, multiculturalism has often been portrayed as something positive and inclusive across Europe. Yet the concept is usually limited to Europe. Ideas and identities originating in other cultural contexts are welcomed as adding to the European experience, rather than as ideas or

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 60

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 63

identities in their own right. A person born in the UK to parents from India, for example, often experiences a continued emphasis on her Indian identity. According to Araeen, multiculturalism, then, has been constructed in order to disguise protracted institutional racism. In this, multiculturalism is helped by aspects of postcolonial theory, ultimately aiding neoliberal agendas. In order to push back against these processes, awareness is paramount, not only of how racism entered but especially of how it implicitly remains and continues to be protected within institutional structures and ideologies.

In conclusion, benevolent racism refers to a system of determinant, hierarchical discrimination through which differences are constructed and the status quo of art history as a discipline informed by a primarily Western canon is maintained. Araeen's argument retains its valence today and often still lies at the heart of academic and curatorial discussions underpinning the contemporary art world.

### **Bibliography**

Araeen, Rasheed. "The Art of Benevolent Racism." *Third Text: Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Art and Culture*, vol. 51, 2000, pp. 57-64.