

Criticism on Edward Said's Orientalism

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Abstract: Orient was a system of ideological fictions whose purpose was and is to legitimize Western cultural and political superiority; furthermore, the Western understanding of the East has grown out of a relationship of power, of dominance, of varying degrees of complex hegemony. The Orient signifies a system of representations framed by political forces that brought the Orient into Western learning, Western consciousness, and Western empire. The Orient exists for the West, and is constructed by and in relation to the West. It is a mirror image of what is inferior and alien ("Other") to the West. Orientalism is "a manner of regularized (or Orientalized) writing, vision, and study, dominated by imperatives, perspectives, and ideological biases ostensibly suited to the Orient." It is the image of the 'Orient' expressed as an entire system of thought and scholarship. The Oriental is the person represented by such thinking. The Oriental is a single image, a sweeping generalization, a stereotype that crosses countless cultural and national boundaries. The term Orient particularly included regions that used to be known as Persia, Mesopotamia, Asia Minor, and Egypt. As awareness of other Asian countries grew in European consciousness, the term often came to mean South Asia, Southeast Asia or East Asia. By the late 19th century, the term usually referred to China, Japan, Korea and surrounding nations while the British colonists frequently used it when speaking of India.

Key Words: Orient, Oriental, Other, Occident

Introduction

Orientalism is the imitation or depiction of aspects of Eastern cultures in the West by writers, designers and artists. Orientalism was more widely used in art history referring mostly to the works of French artists in the 19th century, whose subject matter, color and style used elements from their travel to the Mediterranean countries of North Africa and Western Asia. Orientalism refers to the way in which non-Western specifically Asian cultures are perceived in the West, by scholars, writers, thinkers, politicians and society at large. Orientalism first appeared during the 19th century, when many scholars felt that a better knowledge of Asia was necessary to further the West's colonial aspirations.

Edward Said argued in his highly influential book *Orientalism* (1978) that western scholars were so contaminated by their European ideas and preconceptions that they could not deal honestly and fairly with Asian topics. Said focused on the discipline of Oriental Studies in Europe, including philology, linguistics, ethnography, and the interpretation of culture through the discovery and translation of Oriental texts. Said stressed that they regarded their subjects as inferior to Westerners, and in general backward and in need of European authority and guidance. He repeatedly complained the Orientalists saw the Orient as unchanging and without an internal dynamic; it lacked internal potential for growth, unless it westernized. Edward Said

developed the notion of Orientalism and argued that this form of thought tells more about the values and biases of western society than about the far East. Said is best known for describing and critiquing "Orientalism", which he perceived as a constellation of false assumptions underlying Western attitudes toward the East. In Orientalism, Said claimed a "subtle and persistent Eurocentric prejudice against Arabo-Islamic peoples and their culture. He argued that a long tradition of false and romanticized images of Asia and the Middle East in Western culture had served as an implicit justification for Europe and the US' colonial and imperial ambitions. Just as fiercely, he denounced the practice of Arab elites who internalized the US and British Orientalists' ideas of Arabic culture. Said argued that the West had dominated the East for more than 2,000 years, since the composition of The Persians by Aeschylus. Europe had dominated Asia politically so completely for so long that even the most outwardly objective Western texts on the East were permeated with a bias that even most Western scholars could not recognize. His contention was not only that the West has conquered the East politically but also that Western scholars have appropriated the exploration and interpretation of the Orient's languages, history and culture for themselves. They have written Asia's past and constructed its modern identities from a perspective that takes Europe as the norm, from which the "exotic", "inscrutable" Orient deviates.

Edward Said argues that the Europeans divided the world into two parts; the east and the west or the occident and the orient or the civilized and the uncivilized. This was totally an artificial boundary; and it was laid on the basis of the concept of them and us or theirs and ours. The Europeans used Orientalism to define themselves. Some particular attributes were associated with the Orientals, and whatever the Orientals weren't the Occidentals were. The Europeans defined themselves as the superior race compared to the Orientals; and they justified their colonization by this concept. They said that it was their duty towards the world to civilize the uncivilized world. The main problem, however, arose when the Europeans started generalizing the attributes they associated with Orientals, and started portraying these artificial characteristics associated with Orientals in their western world through their scientific reports, literary work, and other media sources. What happened was that it created a certain image about the Orientals in the European mind and in doing that infused a bias in the European attitude towards the Orientals. This prejudice was also found in the Orientalists (scientist studying the Orientals); and all their scientific research and reports were under the influence of this (Orientalism 1978).

Said puts forward several definitions of 'Orientalism' in the introduction to *Orientalism* (the quotations coming directly from Said) :

- "A way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western experience." (p.1)
- "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident'." (p.2)
- "A Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient."
- "...particularly valuable as a sign of European-Atlantic power over the Orient than it is as a veridical discourse about the Orient." (p.3)
- "A distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts." (p.12)
- "The classical tradition of studying a region by means of its languages and writings: thus anyone who teaches, researches or writes about the Orient is an orientalist."
- "A library or archive of information commonly and, in some of its aspects, unanimously held ... a family of ideas and a unifying set of values ... These ideas explained the behavior of Orientals; they supplied the Orientals with a mentality, a genealogy, an atmosphere; most important, they allowed Europeans to deal with and even to see Orientals as a phenomenon possessing regular characteristics."

Said summarized his work in these terms:

My contention is that Orientalism is fundamentally a political doctrine willed over the Orient because the Orient was weaker than the West, which elided the Orient's difference with its weakness. As a cultural apparatus Orientalism is all aggression, activity, judgment, will-to-truth, and knowledge.

(Orientalism 1978)

Criticism on Edward Said's Orientalism

Orientalism is a study of the genesis, evolution, and reproduction of a specific Western tradition of knowledge concerned with the Mashreq, or the eastern part of the Arabo-Islamic world. This tradition, however, is not one of pure and objective knowledge; rather it is the elaboration of a set of fantasies and beliefs that is subsequently used as the basis for Western colonial enterprise. Thus, Said's book is about aggression both symbolic and real; it is about the politics of knowledge, or rather about knowledge as a form of politics (Rassam 1980: 505).

Said's radical thesis is set: the easy and logical convergence between Orientalism and Imperialism; the Orientalists as a conscious or unconscious collaborator in the colonial takeover of the Orient (Rassam 1980: 506).

Said in *Orientalism* never really tackles the problem of the proper approach to "other" cultures and a sense of ambiguity and unresolved dilemma persists with the reader. Said sidesteps the issue by saying that his purpose is not to displace the old system of representations with a new one but simply to describe the context for the rise and development of Orientalism and its consequences. At one point, however, Said writes that "human societies, or at least the most advanced cultures, have rarely offered the individual anything but imperialism, racism, and ethnocentrism in dealing with 'other' cultures." Now, if all "advanced cultures" (including the developing Oriental ones) share this basic tendency, why single out Europe's failure to rise above it unless one assumes that because of its intellectual superiority and cultural achievement the West should have been able to overcome this natural human tendency. Said never says so outright, but one gets the feeling that he is judging Europe not in terms of its own historical reality and intellectual development, but in terms of the claims it makes for itself as the arbiter and guardian of humanity's highest values. And that is perhaps fair enough, since within the Western intellectual tradition, modern Orientalism in a sense represents a dinosaur, an outdated, fossilized theoretical edifice using language and concepts better suited to the nineteenth century (Rassam 1980: 508).

If you study a culture or group of cultures having the character of the "Oriental," your study, as Edward Said's book points out, is itself open to analysis as a manifestation of "Western" culture. A book which indicates, as his does, that "Western" representations of the East (beginning with the notion of the East itself) have purposes which relate to purely Western needs and projects can be seen in its turn as a representation of Orientalism having purposes of its own, such as the furtherance of Arab political causes. A review which points these things out is itself asking to be reviewed in terms of its own representations and purposes (Chambers 1980: 509).

Said's work can be seen as coming at the end of and to a considerable degree negating an earlier body of debate and work, much of it stimulated by the war in Vietnam and the broader upheavals of the Third World at the time. Said's work both subsumed that earlier debate and started a new one because while much of the other work was framed in broadly Marxist terms and was a universalist critique, Said, eschewing materialist analysis, sought to apply literary critical methodology and to offer an analysis specific to something called 'the Orient'; the result is that the issue of Orientalism, as debated in the Anglo-Saxon world over the past decade and a half, has had relatively clear battle lines, familiar to you all. On the one hand, the book of Edward Said advanced a comprehensive critique of Western, particularly English, French and American, writing on the Middle East, ranging from the eighteenth century to the present day, and encompassing literature, history, political and other sciences. Under the influence of Said's critique a range of work has been produced, criticizing academic and other writing on the region as, in various terms, Eurocentric, imperialist, racist, essentialist, and so forth. On the other hand, a range of writers on the region, most notably Bernard Lewis, have rebutted Said's charge and argued for an approach which falls, to a greater or lesser extent, into the 'Orientalist' category (Halliday 1983: 148).

Said would seem to engage in an injudicious elision namely, that treatment of texts produced within the social sciences and in related activities such as journalism or travel writing, and literature. Of course, there are similarities and mutual influences; but while one is a necessarily fictional activity, without controls in reality or direct links to the acts of administration, domination, exploitation, the former is so controlled. To assume that the same critique of discourses within literature can be made of those within social science is questionable; it may indeed reflect the hubris, rather too diffuse at the moment, of theorists deriving their validation from cultural studies. This brings an area of difficulty with the critique of Orientalism, namely its analysis, or rather absence thereof, of the ideas and ideologies of the Middle East itself. Said himself has, in his other writings, been a trenchant critic of the myths of the Middle East and of its politicians, and nowhere more so than in his critique of the poverty of the intellectual life of the Arab world: while the rulers have constructed numerous international airports, he once pointed out, they have failed to construct one good library. But the absence of such a critique in his *Orientalism* does allow for a more incautious silence, since it prevents us from addressing how the issues discussed by the Orientalists and the relations between East and West are presented in the region itself (Halliday 1983: 160).

Said's thesis, shaped by both Gramscian Marxism and post-modernist French "high theory" (particularly that of Foucault), has provided the magnetic pole around which much of the recent debate about Orientalism has gravitated. Said's argument was not altogether new but the originality and force of *Orientalism* derived, at least in part, from his insistent application of the Foucauldian principle that knowledge can never be "innocent" and is always deeply implicated in the operations of power. Through a wide-ranging analysis of literary texts, travel writing and a mass of European documents, Said uncovered a system of cultural description which was "deeply inscribed with the politics, the considerations, the positions, and the strategies of power." (Oldmeadow 2004: 9).

Ziauddin Sardar in his recent work "Orientalism" argues that the problem of Orientalism, what makes the dissection and display of its skeletal being a tricky matter, is the very fact of its existence. Because Orientalism exists we have a world where reality is differently perceived, expressed and experienced across a great divide of mutual misunderstanding. To discuss Orientalism one has to urge people to go beyond this misunderstanding and see what has been made invisible: to distinguish a different outline in a picture that has been distorted by centuries of myopic vision. There is nothing about Orientalism that is neutral or objective. By definition it is a partial and partisan subject. No one comes to the subject without a background and baggage. The baggage for many consists of the assumption that, given its long history, somewhere within or about this subject there is real knowledge about the Orient; and that this knowledge can be used to develop an understanding of the cultures East of the West. The task of this book is to undermine this assumption. While Orientalism is real, it is still, nevertheless, an artificial construction. It is entirely distinct and unattached to the East as understood within and by the East. There is no route map, no itinerary locked within the subject to bridge that divide (Sardar *Orientalism*: 75)

Orientalism is a book with a thesis—that "Orientalism derives from a particular closeness experienced between Britain and France and the Orient which until the early nineteenth century had really meant only in India and the Bible lands". To prove this point Said makes a number of very arbitrary decisions. His Orient is reduced to the Middle East, and his Middle East to a part of the Arab world. By eliminating Turkish and Persian studies on the one hand and Semitic studies on the other, he isolates Arabic studies from both their historical and philological contexts. The period and area of Orientalism are similarly restricted (Lewis 1982: 50)

Said's account contains many factual, methodological and conceptual errors. Said ignores many genuine contributions to the study of Eastern cultures made by Westerners during the Enlightenment and Victorian eras. Said's theory does not explain why the French and English pursued the study of Islam in the 16th and 17th centuries, long before they had any control or hope of control in the Middle East. Critics have noted Said ignored the contributions of Italian, Dutch, and particularly the massive contribution of German scholars. Lewis claims that the scholarship of these nations was more important to European Orientalism than the French or British, but the countries in question either had no colonial projects in the Mideast (Dutch and Germans), or no connection between their Orientalist research and their colonialism (Italians). Said's theory also does not explain why much of Orientalist study did nothing to advance the cause of imperialism (Lewis 1982: 52)

The critique of Orientalism raises several genuine questions. A point made by several critics is that the guiding principle of these studies is expressed in the dictum "knowledge is power" and that Orientalists were seeking knowledge of Oriental peoples in order to dominate them, most of them being directly or objectively in the service of imperialism. Another charge leveled against the Orientalists is that of bias against the peoples they study, even of a built-in hostility to them. The most important question least mentioned by the current wave of critics – is that of the scholarly merits, indeed the scholarly validity, of Orientalist findings. And Said has hardly touched on this question and has indeed given very little attention to the scholarly writings of the scholars whose putative attitudes, motives, and purposes form the theme of his book (Lewis 1982: 54)

In his book Dangerous Knowledge, British historian Robert Irwin criticizes what he claims to be Said's thesis that throughout Europe's history, "every European, in what he could say about the Orient, was a racist, an imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric." Irwin points out that long before notions like third-worldism and post-colonialism entered academia, many Orientalists were committed advocates for Arab and Islamic political causes.

Irwin's argument is that the field of European research into Middle Eastern language, culture, and history was by no means so tightly linked to Western imperial ambitions as Orientalism suggests. He is also very skeptical of the value of analyzing Orientalist scholarship alongside Western literary texts devoted to the East—evading the distinctions between kinds of texts by treating them all as manifestations of a colonialist discourse.

While acknowledging the great influence of Orientalism on postcolonial theory since its publication in 1978, George P. Landow - a professor of English and Art History at Brown University in the United States -

finds Said's scholarship lacking. He chides Said for ignoring the non-Arab Asian countries, non-Western imperialism, the Occidental ideas that abound in East towards the Western, and gender issues. Orientalism assumes that Western imperialism, Western psychological projection, "and its harmful political consequences are something that only the West does to the East rather than something all societies do to one another." Landow also finds Orientalism's political focus harmful to students of literature since it has led to the political study of literature at the expense of philological, literary, and rhetorical issues. Landow points out that Said completely ignores China, Japan, and South East Asia, in talking of "the East," but then goes on to criticise the West's homogenisation of the East. Furthermore, Landow states that Said failed to capture the essence of the Middle East, not least by overlooking important works by Egyptian and Arabic scholars. In addition to poor knowledge about the history of European and non-European imperialism, another of Landow's criticisms is that Said sees only the influence of the West on the East in colonialism. Landow argues that these influences were not simply one-way, but cross-cultural, and that Said fails to take into account other societies or factors within the East. He also criticises Said's "dramatic assertion that no European or American scholar could 'know' the Orient." However, in his view what they have actually done constitutes acts of oppression. Moreover, one of the principal claims made by Landow is that Said did not allow the views of other scholars to feature in his analysis; therefore, he committed "the greatest single scholarly sin" in Orientalism.

In *Defending the West*, Ibn Warraq demonstrates that Said is guilty of the major intellectual errors he ostentatiously decries in the twenty-fifth anniversary edition preface: obscuring the diversity and complexity of lived experience by falsely ascribing essential features to peoples and civilizations; and rendering categorical moral and political judgments without the adequate historical knowledge on which responsible judgment depends. He shows that Said routinely produces pretentious, meaningless, and contradictory speech. Most notably, in the fashion of the more glib postmodernism, Said stresses that "the Orient" does not exist but is rather the paranoid construction of Western scholars. This, however, does not prevent him from blatantly contradicting himself by positing that two centuries of study by scholars in Europe and the U.S. have produced "a growing systematic knowledge in Europe about the Orient" and "a fair amount of exact positive knowledge about the Orient." Nor does it stop Said from decrying Orientalists because contrary to his insistence that a real Orient does not exist and contrary to his acknowledgment that the Orientalists have gained substantial knowledge of it — they have "no interest in, much less capacity for, showing what the true Orient and Islam really are."

Said's case against the West is seriously flawed. Warraq accuses Said of not only willfully misinterpreting the work of many scholars, but also of systematically misrepresenting Western civilization as a whole.

Charles Paul Freund in his article "The end of the Orientalist critique" argues that Said in his book *Orientalism* was a harsh interpretation of the West's attitude toward just these matters, and the critique he established has since dominated the intellectual appraisal of the West's political and cultural relationship to the Muslim world and other peoples of the East. What was Orientalism? Said identified it in his foundational work as the political, cultural, and intellectual system by which the West has for centuries "managed" its relationship with the Islamic world. The central stratagem of this process has been reductionist misrepresentation. In brief, according to Said and the army of intellectual critics and journalists who have come in his wake, Orientalism transforms the East and its people into an alien "Other." That Other—usually a Dark Other—was in every way the inferior of the West: unenlightened, barbarous, cruel, craven, enslaved to its senses, given to despotism, and, in general, contemptible. Having established an Eastern Other in these degrading terms, the West emerged at the center of its self-serving discourse as, by obvious contrast, enlightened and progressive.

Conclusion

Edward Said in his study "Orientalism Reconsidered" as an answer to these criticism writes "my argument was that neither existed except as 'communities of interpretation', and that, like the Orient itself, each designation represented interests, claims, projects, ambitions and rhetorics that were not only in violent disagreement, but were in a situation open warfare. So saturated with meanings, so overdetermined by history, religion and politics are labels like 'Arab' or 'Muslim' as subdivisions of 'The Orient' that no one today can use them without some attention to the formidable polemical mediations that screen the objects, if they exist at all, that the labels designate."

Said in "Orientalism Reconsidered" argues that the challenge to Orientalism, and the colonial era of which it is so organically a part, was a challenge to the muteness imposed upon the Orient as object. Insofar as it was a science of incorporation and inclusion by virtue of which the Orient was constituted and then introduced into Europe, Orientalism was a scientific movement whose analogue in the world of politics was the Orient's colonial accumulation and acquisition by Europe. The Orient was, therefore, not Europe's interlocutor, but its silent Other. From roughly the end of the eighteenth century, when the Orient was re-discovered by Europe, its history had been a paradigm of antiquity and originality, functions that drew Europe's interests in acts of recognition or acknowledgement but from which Europe moved as its own industrial, economic and cultural development seemed to leave the Orient far behind. Oriental history for Hegel, for Marx, later for Burkhardt, Nietzsche, Spengler and other major philosophers of history was useful in portraying a region of great age, and what had to be left behind. Literary historians have further noted in all sorts of aesthetic writing and figurative portrayals that a trajectory of 'Westering', found for example in Keats and Holderlin, customarily saw the Orient as ceding its historical preeminence and importance to the world spirit moving westwards away from Asia and towards Europe.

Said in the study writes

The divergences between the numerous critiques of Orientalism as ideology and praxis are very wide nonetheless. Some attack Orientalism as a prelude to assertions about the virtues of one or another native culture: these are the nativists. Others criticize Orientalism as a defence against attacks on one or another political creed: these are the nationalists. Still others criticize Orientalism for falsifying the nature of Islam: These are, *grosso modo*, the believers. I will not adjudicate between these claims, except to say that I have avoided taking stands on such matters as the real, true or authentic Islamic or Arab world. But, in common with all the recent critics of Orientalism, I think that two things are especially important one, a methodological vigilance that construes Orientalism less as a positive than as a critical discipline and therefore makes it subject to intense scrutiny, and two, a determination not to allow the segregation and confinement of the Orient to go on without challenge. My understanding of this second point has led me entirely to refuse designations like 'Orient' and 'Occident'.

(Orientalism Reconsidered 1985)

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