

Orientalism: A Critique

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Abstract: According to Edward Said's 1978 book *Orientalism*, Western understanding of the Orient is a discourse that is inextricably linked to the Occident's political and imperial dominance over the Orient rather than a neutral body of knowledge. This essay summarizes Said's main points on the construction of the Orient, the distinction between hidden and obvious Orientalism, and the divide between political and pure knowledge. The main criticisms of Said's thesis from Aijaz Ahmad, James Clifford, Dennis Porter, Valerie Kennedy, and Tripta Wahi are then examined, raising concerns about its theoretical foundation, historical exclusions, and political ramifications. Despite these serious concerns, the text ends with orientalism, which is a fundamental component of both post-colonial studies & cultural studies.

Keywords: Orientalism, Edward Said, post-colonial studies, discourse and power, latent and manifest Orientalism, Eurocentrism

INTRODUCTION

Orientalism was summed up by Edward Said as follows:

“My contention is that Orientalism is fundamentally a political doctrine willed over the orient because the orient was weaker than the west... Orientalism is all aggression, activity, judgment, will to truth and knowledge.”

Published in the year 1978, *Orientalism* has had a significant impact and sparked debate in several disciplines, including postcolonial studies. By the end of this book, Said has successfully recast Orientalism as a set of misconceptions that underpin Western perspectives on Asia. Many consider this piece to be postmodern or postcolonial in nature; it draws heavily on the writings of philosophers such as Chomsky, Foucault, and Gramsci. This paper examines Said's central arguments in *Orientalism*, tracing his key qualifications and the pure/political knowledge distinction, and then evaluates the major criticisms levelled against his thesis by later scholars.

The idea of Orientalism, or the division between the East and the West, has been contested by Edward Said. According to him, the less developed eastern nations were first seen by Europeans during the era of European colonialism. They created the field of Orientalism, which studied individuals from distant civilizations, since they thought their culture and way of life were fascinating.

According to Edward Said, the west and the east, or the occident as the orient, or the civilized or the uncivilized, were created by Europeans. Based on the idea of "them" and "us" or "theirs" and "ours," this false border was set up. Orientalism was a self-definitive tool for the Europeans. The Orientals were seen to possess certain qualities, whereas the occidents were thought to lack whatever it was that the Orientals lacked. Europeans rationalized their colonization of the East by claiming racial superiority over the indigenous inhabitants of the region. They said it was their global responsibility to bring civilization to the barbaric globe. But the real issue began when Europeans began to generalize the traits they thought were typical of Orientals and began to represent these traits in a Western context via their literature, scientific writings, and other forms of media. Essentially, it shaped European perceptions of the East and contributed to prejudice toward those regions' indigenous peoples. Even among orientalists, or scientists who study the East, there existed this bias, and it colored all of their findings and publications. Even in modern times, stereotypical views of Arabs and Islam as a religion practiced by terrorists are prevalent, illustrating the persistence of orientalist stereotypes.

In Said's opinion, there is a moral general meaning of Orientalism apart from the academic tradition. Compared with oriental studies and area studies – Nowadays, people tend to avoid using the term "orientalism" due to its associations with the authoritarian colonialism that was prevalent in the 19th and 20th centuries and the fact that it is too broad and nonspecific. Karl Marx, Aeschylus, Dante, and Victor Hugo are just a few of the many authors who have used the fundamental western-eastern divide to construct ideas about the East and its people, culture, and philosophy.

There are material and historical ways to describe orientalism. When seen from a western lens, it represents the corporate entity that rules over, reorganizes, and dominates the East. The scholarly and creative interpretations of Orientalism, however, are always interacting with one another. One cannot comprehend the very methodical discipline that European culture

managed or even created the orient without investigating Orientalism as a discourse. Because of the pervasiveness of this idea of the orient, Orientalism put constraints on all forms of expression and thought. There was never any freedom for the East. The American participation in the Orient differs quantitatively and qualitatively from the French-British involvement, both historically and culturally. Orientalism and the East were largely shaped by France and Britain in the early nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, respectively. Following WWII, the United States adopted a similar stance and began to dominate the East. There is a vast corpus of literature that may be referred to as orientalist due to this proximity, which through to the early 19th century actually meant the countries of the Bible and India. Orientalism, according to Edward stated, cannot dictate what may be stated about the orient.

The first premise of said is that the orient is not an inherent property of space and time. Similar to how a supernatural event is not simply an incident, it is not something that happens. Like the occident, the orient has a history & tradition of thinking, images, and terminology, and both are man-made. Reasonable qualifiers have been offered by Said to bolster this premise.

First Qualification

In the first caveat, Said argues it would be incorrect to assume the fact that Orient was nothing more than a made-up concept. There are cultures and nations in the east, whose histories and customs are greater than anything propagated by the west. East as a career, as Disraeli puts it, is an all consuming passion. East usually refers to the created consistency of Orientalism – where there is a lack of the ‘real’ orient. John MacKenzie later challenged this picture, arguing that Western engagement with the East also produced genuine curiosity and artistic exchange, and was not solely a matter of imagined consistency (MacKenzie 1).

Second Qualification

Said argues in his second qualification that studying the force or configurations of power is essential to any serious examination of ideas, civilizations, or histories. A person's imagination did not orientalize the Orient. Hegemony and dominance characterize the connection between the Orient & the occident. One may argue that the Orient is Oriental. Said argues that Flaubert's famously renowned portrayal of the "oriental woman" was born out of his relationship with an Egyptian prostitute. Throughout her life, this lady remained silent and unrepresented in any way, shape, or form. He was her advocate and spoke on her behalf. His foreignness, affluence,

and masculinity were historical truths of dominance that enabled him to physically own Kuchuk Hanem and also represent her to his audience by describing her as "typically oriental." The speaker maintains that this is not an outlier. It represents both the dominance of the West over the East & the discussion of the Orient. This silencing of Kuchuk Hanem's own voice anticipates a concern later central to Gayatri Spivak, who asks whether the colonized subject, and especially the colonized woman, can ever be heard on her own terms within such structures of representation (Spivak 271–274).

Third Qualification

The final caveat is that, according to Said, we must never presume that Orientalism is based on myths and falsehoods. More important than any discussion of the Orient itself is the fact that Orientalism stands as a symbol of European dominance in that region. Orientalism has made its way into popular culture via this artificially constructed corpus of thought and practice, which has tangible implications for many generations.

Edward Said elaborates on Gramsci's insightful analytical difference between political and civil society, defining the former as consisting of consent-based voluntary attachments like families, schools, and unions, and the latter as consisting of other similar institutions. In contrast, the political society is comprised of the dominating state institutions, such as the police and the army. The power and longevity of Orientalism may be attributed to its cultural dominance and leadership. In addition to the idea of European supremacy, Said discusses positional superiority, which allows a westerner to maintain power in a variety of interactions with eastern countries. Since the era of European domination was so lengthy, this could not have been any different, according to Said. A complex Orient that is amenable to study, exposition, reconstruction, and depiction of all types arose with minimal opposition from the Orient under the cover of western rule. Orient was prone to exaggeration and misrepresentation since each author's experience with the region was unique, influenced by their own realities, goals, and investments.

Homi Bhabha would later complicate this picture of stable domination, suggesting that colonial discourse is marked by ambivalence, and that the coloniser's authority is never as secure or unified as Said's account of positional superiority implies (Bhabha 121–122).

Pure and Political Knowledge: An Overview

Edward Said continues the article by contrasting "pure" knowledge with "political" knowledge. The author's participation being a human subject in his own circumstances, he argues, cannot be ignored or disclaimed by any human sciences creation of knowledge. Said posits that some historical sources suggest that the interest of Europe and the United States in the Orient was influenced by political considerations. He terms this complex view of the East as "Orientalism," which he says is the result of cultural factors as well as political, economic, and military justifications. Culture is constantly dependent on output, and Orientalism has not been well researched, as said. He looks at the historical context of Orientalism as a conversation amongst writers about big political issues influenced by the British, the French, and the Americans. One of the major ideas that Said passed on to postcolonial studies as a whole was the inability to disentangle knowledge from politics (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2018) (Ashcroft et al. 167).

The Difference Between Political and Pure Knowledge

Section three of the introduction is where Said elaborates on and addresses the "three elements of [his] contemporary reality," (9) that have shaped his work so far. Which will be addressed in the section that follows.

In "the distinction between intellectual and political knowledge" (9), Said shows that, despite appearances, it is difficult to draw a clear line between the two types of information, even when knowledge seems to be apolitical. that is, (genuine political understanding)

No one has ever devised a method for detaching the scholar from the circumstances of life, from the fact of his involvement (conscious or unconscious) with a class, a set of beliefs, a social position, or from the mere activity of being a member of a society. These continue to bear on what he does professionally, even though naturally enough his research and its fruits do attempt to reach a level of relative freedom from the inhibitions and the restrictions of brute, everyday reality. (10)

The political undertones in the works of Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Keats, and Mills are obvious to anybody reading them. No matter how blatantly political or non-political it may be,

Orientalism, according to Said, is an amalgam of several areas of knowledge. According to Said, Orientalism brings up a number of political issues:

What other sorts of intellectual, aesthetic, scholarly, and cultural energies went into the making of an imperialist tradition like the Orientalist one? How did philology, lexicography, [...], novel-writing, and lyric poetry come to the service of Orientalism's broadly imperialist view of the world? What changes, modulations, refinements, even revolutions take place within Orientalism? What is the meaning of originality, of continuity, of individuality, in this context? How does Orientalism transmit or reproduce itself from one epoch to another? “ (15)

We should conduct a research that deals with politics and culture, i.e., a humanistic study, to investigate the connection between knowledge and politics, as Said argues in "Orientalism as a kind of human work" (15). He goes on to say that this link must be formed for each humanistic analysis according to the study's topic, historical setting, and other unique characteristics.

Orientalism, Latent and manifest

A "Fairly constant sense of conflict felt by Westerners dealing with the East" (201) was the situation, as stated by Said. Because of this contentious resonance, he argues that academic forms of "Science" like Orientalism are not as objectively accurate as we would like to believe (202).

Everything that came before this section on Orientalism was an effort "to explain the economy by rendering Orientalism a coherent subject matter, while also allowing that the word Orient has a considerable & interesting cultural resonance in the West as an idea, concept, or image." According to Said, there is a unique approach to studying, teaching, and pronouncing the East.

According to Nietzsche, cited by Said, metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms constitute the essence of language. These elements, once used and reinforced within a society, "become canonical or obligatory to a people." (203) In his quest to enlighten on the veracity of Orientalism's ideology—which exceeds mere error—Said quotes Nietzsche. He then moves on to discuss the ideology's political motivations while taking into account human nature features that arise from studying it. Said posits that

The orient was a word which later accrued to it a wide field of meanings, associations, and connotations, and that these did not necessarily refer to the real Orient but to the field surrounding the word.

Thus Orientalism is not only a positive doctrine about the Orient that exists at any one time; in the West it is also an influential academic tradition (when one refers to an academic specialist who is called an Orientalist). (203)

In addition, he states that the phrase should be seen as a "area of concern defined" by a wide enough spectrum of individuals, "to whom the Orient is a specific kind of understanding of specific places, peoples or civilizations." (203)

While "the various stated perceives about Oriental society, languages, literatures, history, sociology, as well as so forth" (206) constitutes manifest Orientalism, the differences between latent and manifest Orientalism become apparent when discussing the "almost unconscious (and certainly untouchable) positivity" (205). According to Said, one is eternal and unchanging, while the other is based on that same constant but is subject to the ever-changing dictates of its own ideology. Said continues by demonstrating how hidden Orientalism shaped Western views of Asian men as backward and unmotivated to advance, and how Westerners viewed Asian women through "Sexist blinders" (207) that rendered them "usually beings of a male power fantasy."

In the last section of the article, the author reviews the main arguments and explains how Orientalism evolved over the twentieth century. A key distinction between the new and old Orientalists was that the latter actively participated in the orients' daily lives, while the former just observed. Before the new Orientalists resided among them, there was no contact; today, they want to learn as much as possible about them so they can dominate them effectively. One such orientalist was Lawrence of Arabia. Both overt and covert forms of orientalism are discussed by Said. Manifest Orientalism follows any changes in understanding of the Orient, while hidden Orientalism remains relatively unchanged across time.

This distinction has itself attracted sustained criticism. Bernard Lewis argued that treating Orientalism as a single, largely unconscious positivity unfairly collapses centuries of genuinely rigorous scholarship into one ideological formation (Lewis 52), while Robert Irwin, focusing on the neglected German tradition of Orientalist scholarship, similarly questioned

how stable and unified this “latent” structure really was (Irwin 5). Khalid Haroon, by contrast, situates the latent/manifest distinction as Said’s most enduring methodological contribution, one that later scholars of the region continued to build on (Haroon 12). Bryan Turner, reviewing this entire debate, concludes that despite such objections, Said’s insistence on the durability of latent Orientalism as a structure of power remains difficult to dislodge (Turner 175).

CRITICISM AND CONCLUSION

Although Orientalism, Edward Said's 1978 groundbreaking book in post-colonial critique, has been widely praised by many scholars, it has also been heavily criticized by other thinkers. According to Gill, these critiques cover a wide variety of topics, including doubts about the purported originality of Said's work, issues with the text's theoretical underpinnings (Porter 151), or feminist grievances about the lack of gender discourse (Kennedy 44). Some have argued that the book gives an inaccurate or incomplete picture of orientalism's goal. Orientalists' "high humanism" has been questioned by thinkers like Aijaz Ahmad & James Clifford. The inclusion of Foucault's theory of wisdom and authority was another point of contention for Ahmad, who also raised concerns about the exclusion of Russian and German orientalism. It is unclear, according to Ahmad's criticisms, if colonialism is a byproduct of orientalism or vice versa. However, this much praised survey of Western perspectives on Asia has solidified its place as a classic in the fields of cultural studies and postcolonial studies. A Marxist critique by Tripta Wahi goes further, arguing that Said treats Orientalism as a single, undifferentiated system of ideas and ignores the class divergences within European scholarship on Asia, including strands of British writing that were openly critical of colonial rule.

Taken together, these critiques show that Orientalism is far from a flawless or uncontested text: its critics have questioned its theoretical borrowings, its silences on gender, class and non-Anglo-French traditions of scholarship, and its tendency to treat a highly varied body of Western writing as a single, monolithic discourse. Yet the very scale and persistence of this debate is itself a measure of the book’s importance. By naming and systematically analysing the link between knowledge and power in the study of the East, Said opened a field of inquiry – post-colonial studies – that continues to shape how literature, history and politics are read today. Its critics have refined and complicated its arguments, but they have not displaced

Orientalism as the starting point for any serious discussion of how the West has represented the East.

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