
THE EAST - WEST PHOBIA: DECONSTRUCTING EDWARD SAID'S ORIENTALISM

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Abstract

For decades, the illustrious work of Edward Said's *Orientalism* has been feted for not only having deconstructed the encounters between the Orient and Western Orientalists as a significant form of 'Othering' representation but also for adopting the Foucauldian discourse as a central methodology in his writing work. Orient in this case was the West dictate framed by the political forces and designed to primarily establish cultural and political supremacy over the Orient in Egypt, Persia, India, Asia Minor, Japan, China and Mesopotamia. Orientalism on the other hand was a manner of regularized writing dominated by the perspectives, stereotypes, imperatives and ideological biases apparently suited to the Orient. Edward's work depicts the way the Orient was and is perceived by the Westerners which in essence is gradually diminishing and not a reality any more. He also notes that the general representation of the East by the Westerners was a complex hegemony and was completely over-exaggerated and for this reason, the Europeans had for long seized the opportunity to justify imperialism and domination over the East. He argues that by voluntarily adopting another culture in order to peacefully co-exist does not imply that volunteers have willingly relinquished their power and dominance and can therefore be easily colonized. In the light of the foregoing, this article therefore examines the concept of Orientalism as defined by Edward which in turn answers the question of ideological conflict of perception between the Orient and Occident. Moreover, the article analyses the concept and characteristics of 'latent orientalism' and 'oriental other.' In addition, a critique on Edward's work on Orientalism that is still regarded as the first breakthrough in appreciating the compounding effect of the XIXth century colonization is undertaken. Finally, a summary of the article along with recommendations is made in the conclusion section.

Keywords: Orientalism, Orient, Occident

INTRODUCTION

The Orient, a western invention has, for decades been a place with haunting memories but which Edward Said and most of other authors describe as a remarkable place of experience which has since gradually disappeared (Habib, 2010). Orient was not only a significant oldest colony where the richest and influential Europeans preferred to live but is also considered as the origin of languages, culture and civilization. Moreover, the Orient has facilitated to explain the true definition of the West (Europe) in terms of personality, ideas, and experience. Besides, Orient (which in most cases the Easterners consider as barbaric, negative, feminine and exotic) was the West dictate framed by the political forces and designed to primarily establish cultural and political supremacy over the Orient in Egypt, Persia, India, Asia Minor, Japan, China and Mesopotamia whom they consider need westernization (Lewis, 1996).

Orientalism on the other hand has several meanings. *First*, it was a manner of regularized writing dominated by the perspectives, stereotypes, imperatives and ideological biases apparently suited to the Orient (Güven, 2019). In other words, Orientalism may be considered as a style of thought hinged upon and epistemological and ontological difference between the Occident and the Orient (Said, 1978). It was a style designed by the Westerners to dominate and exercise authority over the Orient and as such the Orient was never a free subject of action or thought as Orientalism unilaterally determined the Orient's actions and speeches. *Secondly*, Orientalism is the ideological suppositions, fantasies and images relating to a certain jurisdiction in the world referred to as the 'Orient' (Schmidt, 2014). It may also refer to a western scientific discipline specialized in the study of numerous oriental traditions and cultures particularly between Asia and Europe (Little, 2000).

According to Edward Said, Orientalism refers to anyone who researches, deals with, teaches, describes or writes about the 'Orient' (Said, 1978). *Third*, Orientalism which is perceived as being linked inextricably to colonialism gives a clear description of the 'Orientalist structures and re-structures' in terms of historical, philosophical and dictatorial

ways in which the Orientalist adopted to construct and control the Orient and which ultimately led to the establishment of a unique system of rule over the Orient. *Finally*, through Orientalism Edward Said comprehensively analyses the 'Modern Orientalism' doctrine initially established by the French and British and which was gradually adopted and extensively applied by the Americans. According to Edward, this 'Modern Orientalism' is better manifested and reflected in a manner in which the Americans have enacted and apply their foreign policies.

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In the light of the foregoing, this article therefore examines the concept of Orientalism as defined by Edward which in turn answers the question of ideological conflict of perception between the Orient and Occident. Moreover, the article analyses the concept and characteristics of 'latent orientalism' and 'oriental other.' In addition, a critique on Edward's work on Orientalism that is still regarded as the first breakthrough in appreciating the compounding effect of the XIXth century colonization is undertaken. Finally, a summary of the article along with recommendations is made in the conclusion section.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Edward Said's book on Orientalism is perhaps one of the most celebrated literary pieces in post-colonial world of literature that comprehensively outlines the journey of the Middle East inhabitants and in general the 'Other' (Guhin & Wyrzten, 2013). Traditionally, the term 'Orientalism' is associated with the study of literature, social life, history, thought, languages, culture, art and religion of the Easterners designed specifically to safeguard them from the occidental cultural arrogance during the era of imperialism (MacKenzie, 1995). Edward Said's book on Orientalism however, concentrates on a new conceptualization by the Westerners on Orientalism (Habib, 2010). Brennan Timothy alleges Edward's conceptualization is rather a counter-tradition of a particular idiom.

Over the years, Orientalism has exposed the Western centric biases amongst various scholars' approaches in relation to the Orient who have openly displayed their authority and ingrained perceptions of the 'Oriental Other' within the Western thoughts with imbedded colonial and imperial politics (Farris, 2010). Edward Said is neither an exception. His literary work has tried to fragment the Orient myth and Eurocentric nature propagated and publicized by the Westerners against the non-European 'Other' (Farris, 2010). In particular, the American political scientist, Samuel Huntington considers the differences existing among the people and the purported dominating nature of the few is none other than the political and cultural life of the civilians (Huntington, 1993). The constant conflict between civilizations eventually dominates global politics to the disadvantage of the few and this can be well depicted during the Cold War era when the world was typically split into First, Second and Third worlds (Huntington, 1993). This has eventually led to grouping of countries in lines of civilization and culture rather than basing on economic and political status or development (Huntington, 1993).

Edward Said equally resonates well with the imperialistic history perpetuated by the American global intervention in imperialism, political, economic and culture (Juan Jr. , 2002). By attacking the doctrinaire Marxists, Edward elucidates that the American imperialism, intellectual vocation, hegemony and culture as depicted by James L. R. and Gramsci presents a symptomatic aura of leftism to his novel on Orientalism (Juan Jr. , 2002). He further argues that representation of some dominating cultures from the West and the intricate relationship between knowledge and power exhibited by such dominating societies in the Middle East has over the years remained unchallenged hence the continued significance of his literary work (Said, 1978).

The Western historical analysis of the Orient as depicted by Michel Foucault differs with that of Edward Said (Turner, 2004) Nonetheless, both authors agree on the idea of discursive formation or discourse that generally profiles the way individuals perceive the happenings in the world which, in turn, can be applied to Orientalism. In particular, Edward's detailed explanation on the obscure relationship between the colonial Western empires and their deeply rooted knowledge has over the years created a novel dynamic of discursive formation. He doubts whether modern Orientalism ever ended in the Orient and goes ahead to portray a new pattern of imperial culture (Said, 1978) existing between the Western and the Arab-Muslim East and which requires urgent change and intervention (Schmidt, 2014). Such doubts make Edward a controversial figure in the West where he incidentally lives (Said, 1978).

In analyzing Orientalism, James Clifford raises a number of questions relating to the nature of cross-cultural discourses that demonstrate the distinct ways that humanity has to contend with (Hoon, 2017). For instance, cross-cultural

understanding and representation in dealing with procedures of restructuring, dichotomy and textualisation and particularly in explaining specific statements regarding the alien in the society is one such significant question (Hoon, 2017).

Conceptualizing ‘latent orientalism’ and ‘oriental other’

Edward Said is a great literary writer of more than twenty titles that includes *Out of Place* (1999), *Representation of the Intellectual* (1994), *The Politics of Dispossession: The Struggle for Palestinian Self-Determination* (1994), *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), *After the Last Sky* (1986), *The World, the Critic and the Text* (1983), *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (1981), *The Question of Palestine* (1980), *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (1975) and *Orientalism* (1978). Among all these, Edward Said’s novel on Orientalism has had a significant impact on the way scholars and ordinary citizenry think about colonial discourse which has over the past three decades has attracted controversies, criticism and adulation.

The origin of Orientalism can be traced back to the Middle Ages and Renaissance of the European exploration and crusades (specifically France) with the Orient *i.e.*, Rococo and Baroque in the XIXth century. Orientalism, as a literary work that emerged in Europe operates under various themes *i.e.*, sensuality, dominance, exoticism, representation and fantasy of the Orient. Since its emergence, Orientalism was adopted by Westerners to explore different cultures and worlds. It is through this that Edward draws his theory on Orientalism to explain the colonial discourse of oppression of the Orient.

Edward’s work on Orientalism illustrates the way the Westerners view the ‘Others’ (Easterners) as a central way of showing their cultural dominance ‘Oriental Other.’ Edward clearly demonstrates this by distinguishing the levels of power and knowledge or intellectual mastery of the dominants verses the ‘Other’ as well as the linguistic and racial origins (Said, 1978). In other words, Edward’s work clearly exposes ways in which majority of scholars and reader have distorted the notion of Western representation which ideally has a considerable impact whenever anyone desires to undertake a study on post colonialism. Moreover, his work clearly enlightens many on the relationship between knowledge and power.

Edward in his novel has tried to explain what ‘Latent Orientalism’ refers to. According to him, such Orientalism is unique from the commonly applied orientalist theories since it is engrained in a general unconscious certainty and is comprised of three aspects *i.e.*, ethnocentrism, racism and sexism (Varisco, 2007). He points out that Latent Orientalism is not only a form of expression but also a modern academic discipline adopted by many scholars to distinguish the vision of the West and the Orient (Said, 1978).

The oriental languages as elaborated by Edward along with the histories and cultures of the Orient make the ‘Other’ inferior to the European civilization (Said, 1978). For instance, Edward uses the word ‘Us’ which he says can only exist if ‘Them’ are acknowledged as a distinct entity. By this, Edward intended to pass a message that those who resided out of Europe jurisdiction were a unique species that ought to be colonized and exploited based on the fact that they were inferior to the Westerners who regarded themselves as universal and autonomous in exerting influence over the Orient (Prakash, 1995). This ultimately led to the construction of cultural myth designed against the ‘Oriental Other’ or the Orient but which led to the great opposition from the Easterners. Through this Edward makes out a deep fissure in the operation of the Western hegemony that was all out to extend their dominance over the ‘Oriental Other’ Edward Said’s book demonstrates the Orientalists’ deep disheartening lives which the ‘Other’ have to undergo. According to the Westerners, the East signifies threat, cruelty, obliterating, danger and misery which is the main source of the worldliness of Orientalism of particularly the Arab Palestinians in the West who in most cases undergo a web of racism, political imperialism, economic and cultural stereotypes which the ‘Other’ feel as a unique punishing destiny (Said, 1978). In writing the novel, Edward’s intention was to provoke and stimulate a new way of handling the Orient in order to eliminate what Raymond Williams refers to “unlearning of the inherent dominative mode” (Said, 1978).

In his book, Edward argues that there is a clear link between power and knowledge which he extensively demonstrated using the example of Arthur Balfour, the British Prime Minister in his defense of the State’s unlawful occupation of Egypt in 1910 wherein he stated:

We know the civilization of Egypt better than we know any other [State in the world]. Knowledge for Balfour meant not only surveying a civilization from its origins but [being] able to do that. To have such knowledge of such a thing [as Egypt] is to dominate it, to have authority over it ... we know it and it exists, in a sense as we as we know it (Said, 1978). Egypt is what England knows. England knows that Egypt cannot have self-government. England confirms that by occupying Egypt. ... Foreign occupation therefore becomes the very basis of contemporary Egyptian civilization (Said, 1978).

Orientalism led to the splitting of the word into West and East and which in turn shaped the way the two worlds could relate with one another. One side was privileged to have power and knowledge to determine what the other side could

do or not do (Said, 1978). This led to notable controversies. According to Edward, the Oriental and the Orient are “a direct construction of the various disciplines by which they are known” (Said, 1978).

Edward Said's book further explains what happened after the Napoleon handed over power to his deputy Kleber. According to Edward, Kleber was to act under the strict instructions of the Napoleon in administering Egypt with the help of the Islamic religious leaders and the Orientalists (Said, 1978). This however led to not only the “birth [of the] modern experience of the Orient as interpreted from within the universe of discourse [established] by the Napoleon in Egypt but it also drastically altered the common language of Orientalism, a symbol of which led to the building of the Suez Canal (Said, 1978). From the foregoing, it may be noted that Napoleon's desire was indeed to extend his authoritarian rule and legacy to the work of Orientalists not only in the Middle East and European continent but also in the entire world history. The textual attitude of the Napoleon's dreams may at present be demonstrated with the way the Arab Palestinians have continually opposed the Israel settlement and occupation of their territory and as Edward and the latent Orientalist describes it, “Islamic opposition to non-Islamic peoples, a principle of Islam enshrined in the Seventh Century” (Said, 1978).

Edward Said's Orientalism: A Critique

Even though Edward Said's book on Orientalism is perhaps one of the most celebrated literary pieces as noted above, it continues to attract a number of issues across literary scholars in the world. For instance, even though the novel unmasks instances of injustice and calculated disregard for discipline, to most scholars, this is unhistorical, unreflective, unscholarly, anti-revolutionary, and indiscriminative. Moreover, Edward fails to comprehensively analyze, using various examples, the diversity and complexity of Western representation or colonization of the Middle East and how the Easterners had also played a role in representing the (Abaza & Stauth, 1988).

According to Fitnat Al-Mutakhayyal in his bestselling book, *The Seduction of the Imagined* 2002, Edward Said's intense study on the powerful Orientalism, completely distracts him from appreciating the transformative Arab world that has almost done away with the stereotyping of the Orient (Al-Yusufi, 2002). Edward, as such, failed to find an alternative to the modern Orientalist that portrays the contemporary Arab-Islamic World as underdeveloped, barbaric, primitive and uncivilized as compared to the modern developed and most civilized Western world (Al-Yusufi, 2002). According to Patrick Porter, this is not a surprise. Edward writes as such because he is actually neither an Arabic critic nor an Arab intellectual (Porter, 2013). This is even acknowledged by the fact that even though he had an Arabic origin, Edward himself does not consider himself that he is an Arab but rather a scholar whose work is in English and whose culture and readings are considerably Western par excellence but with a general view of the Palestinian cause (Brennan, 1992). This therefore puts Edward's status equal to that of an individual sandwiched in two different worlds without claiming his/her right of residence to either. Instead of maintaining barriers, he was rather comfortable criss-crossing the two worlds. In Murid Barghuthi's words:

I have no doubt that this was made possible because I traversed the imperial East-West divide, enterer into the life of the West and yet retained some organic connection with the place I originally came from. I would repeat that this was very much a procedure of crossing rather than maintaining barriers (Porter, 2013).

Edward's novel claims that until the end of 17th century, the Westerners dominated the Easterners for a period of more than two hundred years but this was incorrect since dominance was not absolute as Edward claimed. There were local collaborators that the Westerners relied on in their rule in the East.

In addition, Edward alleges that the British Empire's rule extended from Egypt to India particularly in the era of 1880s when in fact it was the Ottoman and Persian Empires that dominated the region. Besides, Edward's novel concentrates more on Egypt and Palestine which he claims to represent the Middle East and which he contends to have been under European control for a long time but which in reality became colonized the late 19th century and early 20th century.

In his novel, Edward failed to provide a detailed analysis on the Russian rule in Asia and the British Raj in India. He also failed to acknowledge some of the key Orientals *i.e.*, Sir William Jones who desired to create kinship between the West and the East. Any information and the nature, ability or attitude that some scholars had on the Orient is also not captured by Edward in his work. For instance, Bernard Lewes, questions Edward's knowledge and ability to analyze the Islamic religion and his extent of knowledge of the various Orientalist disciplines and the Arab history. Aijaz Ahmed has also questioned Edward's Foucaultain position on Orientalism. He claims that Edward does not properly analyse the system of representation or mis-representation.

According to Robert Young, Edward's work does not give a true picture of Orientalism as some of the countries he claims to have dominated the East *i.e.*, Hungary and Germany did not actually colonize the East in the 19th century. Besides, some authors *i.e.*, Daniel Martin, Wang Ning (in *Orientalism Versus Occidentalism*) and Hourani Albert (in *History of the Arab People*) assert that Edward's work does not clearly lay down the mental and physical boundaries of what exactly constitutes the Orient. In particular, Wang Ning claims that Edward's perception of the Orient is too biased and restrictive as it leaves out certain key States *i.e.*, Japan and China. He however, considers the Orient to be

only those concentrated in Middle East and Near East which in essence limits his work's reach as a global and humanist ideology (Ning, 1997). Moreover, Wang Ning argues that by taking into account the literary work penned by most Western authors, Edward's work perceives the Orient's culture to be unilateral and heterogeneous and this is clearly depicted by the West's assertions:

The Western idea of culture that we usually deal with ... refers to the ideology or cultural concepts based on bourgeois value standard prevailing in Western Europe and North America. Among Oriental cultures, the prominent form of this cooperation is the Confucian-Islamic connection that has emerged to challenge Western interests, values and power (Ning, 1997).

Affirming Wang Ning's assertions, Daniel Martin in his work *Reading Orientalism: Said and the Unsaid* also claims that Edward Said's work is too restrictive as he even says himself:

The most readily accepted designation for Orientalism is an academic one. ... Anyone who teaches, writes about or researches the Orient ... either in its specific or ... general aspects, is an Orientalist and what he or she does is Orientalism (Said, 1978).

In view of the above, Daniel Martin argues that such a discourse compels Edward to "flip-flop on who is a good Orientalist and who is bad" (Varisco, 2007). This apart, Daniel disputes the claim that the Orient was established as a result of the western domination based on the fact that the actual ground management in States *i.e.*, Japan, China and a significant part of the Middle East was indeed absent particularly after the Second World War (Varisco, 2007).

On the aspect of "Latent Orientalism" as analysed by Edward Said, Daniel argues that it is written in rhetorical style with no facet of singular sense and is therefore extremely difficult to discern the 'Latent' characteristic of Orientalism in Edward's work (Varisco, 2007). According to Daniel, Edward should have instead ensured that the "Latent tendencies transcend rather than define a specifically Orientalist discourse" (Varisco, 2007).

On his part, Hourani Albert argues that the European oppression against the Orient resulted in a new set of mind between the East and West which Edward fails to demonstrate in his work (Hourani, 2010). In addition, Hourani asserts that the Orient (Arab world) established themselves "not just in the light of European domination but also according to its own values and merits" (Hourani, 2010). Further, Hourani claims that both the Arab world and the colonial empires played a key role in the construction of the modern day Orient unlike what Edward asserts that it was purely the work of the oppressors.

One of the famous thinkers who penned a number of books on Nationalism, Mohammed Abid Al-Jabri, points out that the way Edward Said tries to analyse Orientalism is not exactly correct as the ontological partition of the world into West and East and the Westerners' imperial outlook of the Orient is not exactly Orientalism. By explaining Orientalism, Edward rather exposes the local elite that support the Western idea of Orientalism.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

As noted above, Edward Said's literary work is considerably a remarkable piece of literary work that clearly documents a genealogical account of the evolution of the Orientalist in Europe. Edward analyses the ground-breaking history of the cultural representations by the West in the East by methodically arranging relevant statements in a simplified well understandable discourse of how the West perceived, treated and inaccurately represented the East. To date, such perceptions however continue to serve the interests of the colonialists. The work therefore helps many to clearly understand the past relationship between the Occident and the Orient. Besides, it challenges many young authors, scholars, readers, *etc.*, to consider to what extent some aspects *i.e.*, travel writing, power, science, culture, philosophy may bring about colonialism.

Even though Edward attempted to comprehensively provide a clear road map of how particularly the British, French and Americans spearheaded Orientalism, he nonetheless failed to expansively demonstrate the role of the Hungarians, Dutch, Germans, Australians, *etc.*, in Orientalism which could have been a plus point in his work. Orientalism, as highlighted above enables readers to understand cultural generalizations hence, any attempt to desist from laying down a complete account about it outside of Britain, France and/or America weakens an author's work, as Edward did, when he generally adopted terms *i.e.*, "European" or "Christian" which in essence do not include other States.

Edward's work does not examine whether there were possible avenues of cross-cultural power relations between the Orient and Orientalists that may have occurred at the time of colonization.

It is equally important that to reach a sustainable plural future, Edward's work should have adopted concepts *i.e.*, "strategy" and "habitus" to shift the object of study in his work from texts to actions. This implies that instead of studying Orientalists as "labels," they may rather be studied as "players" to make the work more interesting and/or captivating.

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