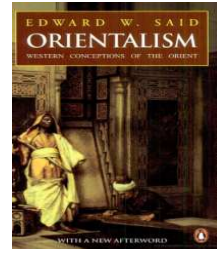


What is Orientalism?

Perspective:

**Edward Said's
Orientalism (1978)**



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Abstract: *Orientalism is a burning topic of discussion regarding the classification of Europeans and non-Europeans. It is a discourse that leads the doors open for diverse critical concepts like racism, subjugation, hegemony, colonialism, imperialism, and feminism. The Europe considers the non-European territories as their subjects and believes that it is their duty to teach them the manners of civilization. In the name of compassion, subjugation, maltreatment and misrepresentation takes place and Edward Said has highlighted these issues in his famous book Orientalism. General readers hardly investigate the reality and authenticity of the written resources and adopt an inferior view of the Eastern communities. It turns inevitable to overlook the description of scholars who have practical experiences by facing the Eastern communities and their dexterous verbal and written presentations of observations that hypnotize the readers to believe the misrepresented East in varied mediums. Under such a scrutiny, this article sets out to illustrate Said's conception of Orientalism in a nutshell. Comparative studies are also presented to elucidate the critical statements. Examples from literary fields are given to make arguments more lucid and comprehensive.*

Key words: *Orientalism, imperialism, colonialism, feminism, subjugation, racism*

Analysis:



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Orientalism, a term widely used and expanded in the fields of representation of the non-European territories to the European world. Edward Said is acknowledged for coining the term to the wide-spread fields of research and therefore it turns into a vital topic of discussion regarding the judgment of the cultures and beliefs of non-Europeans. His book *Orientalism* (1978) elaborated the concept into varied levels of interpretations. It is known as a discourse that has several viewpoints from diverse critics:

Said argues that Orientalism was and is a discourse in which the West's knowledge about the Orient are inextricably bound up with its domination over it. Using Michel Foucault's proposition that all forms of knowledge are productive of power (constituting someone/thing as an object of knowledge is to assume power over it)...and representations of, the Orient Said is able to consider how Orientalism's classification of the East as different and inferior legitimized Western intervention and rule. (Lewis, 1996, p.16)

Though, Said's views are recommended as the touchstone for all other opinions. His views define the position of the Occident, textually marked as the superior one, and the Orient, textually marked as the inferior one. According to him, 'the relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony' (p. 5). It is the Occident that defines the Orient as less powerful and maverick setting a direct contrast between two cultures. The way the Europe dresses, speak, eats, and thinks is considered the ideal ones and anything that goes opposite of these actions and manners is considered imperfect. This idea of perfection or imperfection is the byproduct of Orientalism.

Moreover, 'Orientalism is more particularly valuable as a sign of European-Atlantic power over the Orient than it is as a veridic discourse about the Orient.' (Said, p. 6). This is true because the effect of the world wars can easily mark the differences that took place between the ruled and the ruler countries. It is evident that the Europeans define Africa and the Arabia as the continents that do not know how to act and react according to the rules of sophistry and soberness. This sort of aversive views are not directly presented but indirectly injected with scholarly presentations. For example, in Albert Camus's *The Outsider*, the European protagonist kills the Arab marking him abusive. Shakespeare's *Othello* defines black man's sexual desire and unbound jealousy toward the white society. The representation of Caliban in *The Tempest* also defines the non-Europe as a deformed creature. Therefore, the representation itself practices the concepts of orientalism in many implied ways. By showing the Orient directly or indirectly in inferior class, the European turns superior to the readers: 'Orientalism is –and does not simply represent- a considerable dimension of modern political-intellectual culture, and as such has less to do with the Orient than it does with our world.' (Said, p.12)



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Orientalism is also a way of seeing that imagines, emphasizes, exaggerates and distorts differences of Arab peoples and cultures as compared to that of Europe and the U.S. marking that ‘there are Westerners, and there are Orientals. The former dominate; the latter must be dominated.’ (Said, p.36). It often involves seeing Arab culture as exotic, backward, uncivilized, and at times dangerous. Edward W. Said, in his groundbreaking book, *Orientalism*, defines it as the acceptance in the West as:

the eccentricities of Oriental life, with its odd calendars, its exotic spatial configurations, its hopelessly strange languages, its seemingly preserve morality, were reduced considerably when they appeared as a series of detailed items presented in a normative European prose style. (Said, p.167)

According to him, Orientalism dates from the period of European Enlightenment and colonization of the Arab World. Orientalism provided a rationalization for European colonialism based on a self-serving history in which “the West” constructed “the East” as extremely different and inferior, and therefore in need of Western intervention or “rescue”. Examples of early Orientalism can be seen in European paintings and photographs and also in images from the World’s Fair in the U.S. in the 19th and early 20th centuries:

The Oriental is depicted as something one judges (as in a court of law), something one studies and depicts (as in a curriculum), something one disciplines (as in a school or prison), something one illustrates (as in a zoological manual). The point is that in each of these cases the Oriental is contained and represented by dominating frameworks. (Said, p.40)

The paintings, created by European artists of the 19th and early 20th centuries, depict the Arab World as an exotic and mysterious place of sand, harems and belly dancers, reflecting a long history of Orientalist fantasies which have continued to permeate our contemporary popular culture. France colonized Algeria from 1830 to 1962. From roughly 1900 to 1930, French entrepreneurs produced postcards of Algerian women that were circulated in France. While Algerian women are portrayed in these photographs as if the camera is capturing a real moment in their everyday lives, the women are actually set up in the photographer's studio. As demonstrated in Malek Alloula's book, *The Colonial Harem*, the photographs were circulated as evidence of the exotic, backwards and strange customs of Algerians, when, in fact, they reveal more about the French colonial perspective than about Algerian life in the early 1900s. This is an example of how Arab women have been eroticized and eroticized for the pleasure of the European male voyeur, as these photographs make visible French colonial fantasies of penetrating the harem and gaining access to Arab women's private spaces.

Showing orientals helpless, specially the women the writer expresses Said's view: 'Orientalism can also express the strength of the West and the Orient's weakness- as seen by the West.' (Said, p.45) Said also mentions in his book how orientalism is also an "imaginative geography," because of two reasons. The first reason being "Europeans projected a single culture into the space of the 'Orient' that was at odds with the diversity of peoples, cultures and environments contained within the space" and second, "this space was defined by texts and not by people from the Orient itself. These texts preceded experience, so empirical evidence was included but was fitted into the categories that were already constructed. Travelers saw what they expected to see" (Sharp 2009, 31). By placing all of the 'other' countries and by other meaning any countries outside of the western civilisation into a single form of the Orient, it automatically makes a situation of us versus them. This is problematic to thinking because the Orient will never be seen as 'upper class' as the west; not only this but, putting together a large group of people into one single category leaves no room for differences between those people, they will all now be seen as the same.

For the second point Said makes references too, for travelers who leave from the west to go into an Orient country, the travelers already have a preconceived notion of what they will be seeing. As being someone who grew up in the west, I know that I have been taught in a western school system and that I think of the Orient countries to be places of poverty, diseases, and of people who look or act a certain way. Since I have been taught that, when I go to travel I will be consistently looking for that image of the Orient that is in my head, and because of this "imaginative geography" of the Orient "... Orientalism [has] shaped the real geographies practiced in the space of the Orient" (Sharp 2009, 31). With these ideas it leads us to the topic of Michel Foucault's term of power and knowledge that illustrates the concept of Orientalism more.



Courtesy:www.dailykos.com

Power and knowledge are things that are seen as intertwined; they are both used with each other and are seen to respond together. For Foucault this term of power and knowledge are “not to suggest that power equalled knowledge, but to emphasize the fact that power and knowledge are always and everywhere inseparable” (Sharp 2009, 32). This idea of power and knowledge relate to Orientalism, because the Orient was never allowed to speak for themselves, they always had someone else describing them. This has within it a power of naming, western men where the people who wrote about the Orient because they held the power, and with power comes the idea of knowledge. The West was seen to have higher power and knowledge so it was up to them to make the history of the Orient.



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This was especially seen when it came to the concepts of the new world, European taxonomies were the ones to 'first' explore the new world and from that they made the histories of that land, which entitled them the power to control it. An example of how this powered can be seen through the use of maps. "Europeans drew maps of new lands, with boundaries inscribed to identify territories claimed by different nations. The names given to places by indigenous people were ignored, their claims to ownership or rights of access were similarly discarded, and instead European words and meaning were written onto the maps. Once these European maps had been created and accepted, they started to influence the nature of the actual space they represented. Places took on their European names, reflecting European ownership" (Sharp 2009, 32). The idea of power and knowledge was used to make maps and not only make the maps but also take ownership and claimed certain areas of land as their own. With the views of power and knowledge also brings the idea of discourses. Discourses can be seen as a way of looking at the world through a view that has been altered by power and knowledge. Discourse can also be seen as looking at a particular thing with a leans or blinders so that you only see part of it, or that you only see what you want to see.

Orientalism has many discourses within it; Said believed that for people to understand the world they had to use discourses and that they would not be capable of understanding world without these discourses. "He is not suggesting that the world is made up only of our imaginations of it, but that we cannot access the real world except through the cultural structuring of discourses" (Sharp 2009, 32). As mentioned earlier when we think of splitting the world into two the West also known as the Occident and the Orient or the East, we create a situation of them verses us. When viewing the world in this way, the Occident is always seen on top or superior to the Orient. The Orient can be seen as doing things wrong or backwards from the Occident and because of that the Orient must always espier to be like the Occident.

There can be many different discourses that are viewed through Orientalism; this is only a list of four major discourses. First is development, the Occident is seen as developed and the Orient is seen as backwards. This is also another reason why the Occident is usually known as the first world and the Orient is known to be the third world. Second is sciences the occident is viewed as being scientific which entitles them as having knowledge, and the Orient is seen as superstitions which is traditions that have been passed down between generations and do not encourage much knowledge. The third discourse is morality; the Occident is seen as having morals and goals to aspire too, as were the Orients do not have morals and that is why we see pictures of naked women flaunting themselves in front of men, or also why there is a notion of Orients as just lazing around not doing any work. The final and forth discourse is religion; Occident's are seen as having accepted Christianity as religion, as were the Orients have not accepted it and the Occident's believed that the Orients should convert to Christianity. For those four discourses along with many more we can see that the situation of us versus them has been see as the Occident being the one in power and the Orient being the one who needs to change.



Courtesy: sirismm.si.edu

Said further explains how the science of orientalism developed and how the Orientals started considering non-Orientals as non-human beings. The Orientals divided the world in to two parts by using the concept of *ours* and *theirs*. An imaginary geographical line was drawn between what was *ours* and what was *theirs*. The Orientals were regarded as uncivilized people; and the Westerners said that since they were the refined race it was their duty to civilize these people and in order to achieve their goal, they had to colonize and rule the Orientals. They said that the Orientals themselves were incapable of running their own government. The Europeans also thought that they had the right to epitomize the Orientals in the West all by themselves. In doing so, they shaped the Orientals the way they perceived them or in other words they were *Orientalizing* the Orientals. Various teams have been sent to the East where the Orientalists silently observed the Orientals by living with them; and everything the Orientals said and did was recorded irrespective of its context, and projected to the civilized world of the West. These practices are highlighted in literature too. For example, Joseph Conrad went to the Congo and observed the maltreatment of the Europeans towards the helpless Africans. Later, he wrote a novella called *Heart of Darkness* which described the harsh effects and practices of European imperialism, subjugation and slavery. The depiction of the African mistress marks feminist concern linked to orientalism.

Likewise, this resulted in the generalization. Whatever was seen by the Orientals was associated with the Oriental culture, no matter if it is the irrational action of an individual. The most important use of Orientalism to the Europeans was that they defined themselves by defining the Orientals. For example, qualities such as lazy, irrational, uncivilized, crudeness were related to the Orientals, and automatically the Europeans became active, rational, civilized, sophisticated. Thus, in order to achieve this goal, it was very necessary for the orientalist to generalize the culture of the Orientals. Another feature of Orientalism was that the culture of the Orientals was explained to the European audience by linking them to the Western culture, for example, Islam was made into *Mohammadism* because Mohammad (PBUH) was the founder of

this religion and since religion of Christ was called Christianity; thus Islam should be called *Mohammadism* according to Orientalists.

The point to be noted here is that no Muslim was aware of this terminology and this was a completely western created term, and to which the Muslims had no say at all. Moreover, Said points the slight change in the attitude of the Europeans towards the Orientals when they were really publicized in the European world especially through their literary work. Oriental land and behaviour was highly romanticized by the European poets and writers and then presented to the Western world. The Orientalists had made a stage strictly for the European viewers, and the Orient was presented to them with the colour of the Orientalist or other writers perception. In fact, the Orient lands were so highly romanticized that Western literary writers found it necessary to offer visits to these exotic lands of pure sun light and clean oceans in order to experience peace of mind, and inspiration for their writing. The East was now perceived by the Orientalists as a place of pure human culture with no necessary evil in the society. Actually it was this purity of the Orientals that made them inferior to the clever, witty, diplomatic, far-sighted European; thus it was their right to rule and study such an innocent race. The Europeans said that these people were too naive to deal with the cruel world, and that they needed the European fatherly role to assist them. Such a view is well demonstrated by Conrad through Charlie Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*.

Another justification the Europeans gave to their colonization was that they were meant to rule the Orientals since they have developed sooner than the Orientals as a nation, which shows that they were biologically superior, and secondly it were the Europeans who discovered the Orient not the Orientals who discovered the Europeans. Darwin's theories were put forward to justify their superiority, biologically by the Europeans. Said also explains how the two most renowned Orientalists of the 19th century, namely Silvestre de Sacy and Ernest Renan worked and gave Orientalism a new dimension. In fact, Said compliments the contribution made by Sacy in the field. He says that Sacy organized the whole thing by arranging the information in such a way that it was also useful for the future Orientalists. And secondly, the prejudice that was inherited by every Orientalist was considerably low in him.



Courtesy: www.modernartimages.com

On the other hand, Renan who took advantage of Sacy's work was as biased as any previous Orientalist. He believed that the science of Orientalism and the science of philology have a very important relation; and after Renan this idea was given a lot attention and many future Orientalists worked off in its line. Said also explains how the geography of the world was shaped by the colonization of the Europeans. There was a quest for geographical knowledge which formed the bases of Orientalism. He talks about the changing circumstances of the world politics and changing approach to Orientalism in the 20th century.

The main difference was that where the earlier Orientalists were more of silent observers the new Orientalists took a part in the everyday life of the Orientals. The earlier Orientalists did not interact a lot with the Orientals, whereas the new Orientals lived with them as if they were one of them. This wasn't out of appreciation of their lifestyle but was to know more about the Orientals in order to rule them properly. Lawrence of Arabia was one of such Orientalists. Then Said goes on to talk about two other scholars Massignon and Gibb. Though Massignon was a bit liberal with Orientalists and often tried to protect their rights, there was still inherited biased found in him for the Orientals, which can be seen in his works. With the changing world situation especially after World War I, Orientalism took a more liberal stance towards most of its subjects.



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After World War I the centre of Orientalism moved from Europe to USA. One important transformation that took place during this time was instances of relating it to philology and it was related to social science now. All the Orientalists studied the Orientals to assist their government to come up with policies for dealing with the Orient countries. With the end of World War II, all

the European colonies were lost; and it was believed that there were no more Orientals and Occidentals, but this was surely not the case. Western prejudice towards Eastern countries was still very explicit, and often they managed to generalize most of the Eastern countries because of it. For example Arabs were often represented as cruel and violent people. Japanese were always associated with karate whereas the Muslims were always considered to be terrorists. Thus, this goes on to show that even with increasing globalization and awareness, such bias was found in the people of the developed countries. Edward Said concludes his book by saying that he is not saying that the orientalists should not make generalization, or they should include the Orient perspective too, but creating a boundary at the first place is something which should not be done. The distinguished scholars do create differences with the dexterity of their intellectual skills and the boundaries spontaneously arise in the subjective faculty of the readers:

Consider how the Orient, and in particular the Near Orient, became known in the West as its great complementary opposite since antiquity. There were the Bible and the rise of Christianity; there were travelers like Marco Polo who charted the trade routes and patterned a regulated system of commercial exchange, and after him Lodovico di Varthema and Pietro della Valle...these are the lenses through which the Orient is experienced, and they shape the language, perception, and form of the encounter between East and West. (Said, p.58)

Orientalism has been a standard spectacle through which the entire world views the non-Europeans. It is a touchstone that measures the fundamentals of civilized and uncivilized worlds. This scholarly discourse evokes many other critical concepts like racism, imperialism, subalternity, hegemony, chauvinism, and so on. The post-Orientalism tries to break the conventionality of the previous ethics of Said's Orientalism but it can hardly deny the effects of the former one. Readers will adopt the features it displays in various disciplines and therefore the emergence of post-orientalism will be more critical and confronting in the future researches of the term.

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