

Edward Said's 'Orientalism': A Post-Colonial Culture Study

Priyansh Ranjan

Class XII, St. Karen's Secondary School, Patna, India

"East is east, West is west
And never the twain shall meet"

Edward Wadie Said was a Palestinian American literary theorist. He was born in Jerusalem. He was an American citizen through his father. Said's father was a Palestinian who soldiered in the US army in World War I. Said's father was granted US citizenship for his military services. After the War in 1919 Said's father moved to Cairo and established his stationery business. Said spent his childhood in Jerusalem and Cairo (Egypt), where he attended elite British and American schools. Subsequently he left for the United States, where he obtained Bachelors Degree from Princeton and a Doctorate in English Literature from Harvard. Said then joined the faculty of Columbia University in 1963 where he became Professor of English and Comparative Literature in 1991. Some of the great works of Said are – 'Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography'(1966), 'Beginnings: Intention and Method'(1975), 'Orientalism'(1978), 'The Question of Palestine'(1979), 'Covering Islam'(1981), 'Yeats and Decolonization'(1988). Said is best known for his book 'Orientalism'. Said's work became one of the foundational texts for Post Colonialism or Post Colonial studies.

The word 'orientalism' is a noun form of the adjective 'oriental' which means something related to eastern countries, but in the context of Said 'orientalism' simply does not mean 'something related to the eastern countries, it means 'the misrepresentation of the people and the culture of the Eastern countries Like Middle East, Asia and North Africa. Said used the word 'Orientalism' to refer to the West's perception and depiction of Middle Eastern, Asian and North African societies. Edward Said defines "*Orientalism*" as follows:

"Anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient and this applies whether the person is an anthropologist, sociologist, historian, or philologist either in its specific or its general aspects, is an Orientalist, and what he or she does is Orientalism."¹

Like his Post-Modern intellectual mentors, the Post Structuralist philosophers Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, Said was fascinated by how the people of the Western World perceive the people of and the things from a different culture. Thus Edward Said is a founding intellectual of Post Colonial criticism. Said argues that the history of European Colonial rule, and of the consequent political domination of the civilization of the East, distorts the writing of even the most knowledgeable, well-meaning and culturally sympathetic Western Orientalists; thus the term 'Orientalism' was rendered a pejorative term. "'Orientalism' is a way of seeing that imagines, emphasizes, exaggerates and distorts differences of Arab people and cultures as compared to that of Europe and the US. It often involves seeing Arab culture as exotic, backward, uncivilized and at times dangerous. The West construed the East as extremely different and inferior and therefore in need of Western intervention and rescue."² Examples of early Orientalism can be seen in European paintings and photographs and also in images from the World's Fair in the US in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The paintings created by European artists of the 19th and 20th centuries depict the Arab World as an exotic and mysterious place of sand, harems and belly dancers, reflecting a long history of Oriental fantasies which have continued to permeate our contemporary popular culture. The western countries looked upon the orientals as people of inferior kind, they are poor uncivilized, immoral, dirty. Such views may at times be inaccurate which is presented by the west through literature, paintings, films or other forms of artistic expression. Danny Boyle's movie 'Slumdog Millionaire' may be an example of orientalism in films, as it presents a very ugly picture of India through its slum dwellers, beggars and petty criminals. France colonized Algeria from 1830 to 1962. French entrepreneurs produced postcards of Algerian women that were circulated in France. While Algerian women are portrayed in these photographs as if the camera were 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", these photographs were circulated as evidence of the exotic, backward and strange customs of Algerians, when in fact, they reveal more about the French colonial perspective than about Algerian life. This is an example of how Arab women have been exoticized and eroticized. Edward W. Said, in his ground breaking book, 'Orientalism' defined it as the acceptance in the West of 'the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social description, and political accounts concerning the orient, its people, customs, mind, destiny and so on. The line from Rudyard Kipling's poem, "Ballad of East and West", a poem about India "East is East and West is west

And never the twain shall meet”³, explains ‘orientalism’

According to Said, Orientalism dates from the period of European colonization of the Arab World. Orientalism provided a rationalization for European colonization. The World fairs in Chicago(1893) and St. Louis (1904) helped to reinforce oriental imagery in the United States. The crossover from European to US Orientalism can be seen in the images from James Buel’s photographic book that catalogued the 1893 World’s Fair in Chicago. This publication includes photographs of recreated Arab streets, accompanied by captions that capture the orientalist thinking of the time. For example, the caption that accompanies the image “Egyptian Girl in street of Cairo” refers to the peculiar manners of the Egyptians. In addition to being written about as an object on display, her characteristics are described as belonging to a backward culture. Since the publication of Edward Said’s ‘Orientalism’ in 1978, much academic discourse has begun to use the term ‘orientalism’ to refer to a general patronizing Western attitude towards Middle eastern, Asian and North African societies. In Said’s analysis, the west essentializes these societies as static and undeveloped – thereby fabricating a view of oriental culture that can be studied, depicted, and reproduced. Implicit in this fabrication, writes Said, is the idea that Western society is developed, rational, flexible and superior.

‘Orientalism’ by Edward Said is a cononical text of cultural studies in which he has challenged the concept of orientalism or the difference between east and west, as he puts it. He says that with the start of European colonization the Europeans came in contact with the lesser developed countries of the east. They found their civilization and culture very exotic, and established the science of orientalism, which was the study of the orientals or the people from these exotic civilization. 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. Said starts by analysing public speeches and writings of the British imperialists of the early 20th century about Egypt, that since the British Imperial authorities ‘know better’ their country, they have a natural right to rule it.-

“There are Westerners, and there are Orientals. The former dominate; the latter must be dominated, which usually means having the land occupied, their internal affairs rigidly controlled, their blood and treasure put at the disposal of one or another Western power.”⁴ 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 orientalist (scientist studying the orientals); and all their scientific research and reports were under the influence of this. The generalized attributes associated with the orientals can be seen even today, for example, the Arabs are defined as uncivilized people; and Islam is seen as religion of the terrorist.

Western misrepresentations of Islam is a dominant aspect of orientalism. The word "Orientalist" generally refers to any Western scholar who studies Islam regardless of his or her motives and thus, inevitably, distorts it. Said has described the misrepresentation of Islam in these words: “So far as the United States seems to be concerned, it is only a slight overstatement to say that Moslems and the Arabs are essentially seen as either oil suppliers or potential terrorists. Very little of the detail, the human density, the passion of Arab-Moslem life has entered, the awareness of even those people whose profession is to report the Arab world. What we have, instead, is a series of crude, essentialized caricatures of the Islamic world presented in such a way as to make that world vulnerable to military aggression.”⁵

Moving on to a more detailed look at the West's distorted view of Islam, in general, and Orientalism in particular . . . Edward Said accurately referred to Orientalism a "*cultural enterprise*". The academic study of the oriental East by the occidental West was often motivated and often co-operated hand-in-hand with the imperialistic aims of the European colonial powers. Without a doubt, the foundations of Orientalism are in the maxim "*know thy enemy*". When the Christian Nations of Europe began their long campaign to colonize and conquer the rest of the world for their own benefit, they brought their academic and missionary resources to bear in order to help them with their task. Orientalists and missionaries whose ranks often overlapped were more often than not the servants of an imperialist government who was using their services as a way to subdue or weaken an enemy, however subtly.

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 was the founder of this religion and since religion of Christ was called Christianity; thus Islam should be called *Mohammadism*. 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.

Edward Said explains how the science of Orientalism developed and how the orientals started considering the orientals as non-human beings. The orientals divided the world into two parts by using the

concept of 'ours' and 'theirs'. An imaginary 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. Edward Said notes that orientalism "enables the political, economic, cultural and social domination of the West not just during colonial times, but also in the present."⁶

They said that the orientals themselves were incapable of running their own government. The Europeans also thought that they had the right to represent 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 orientalist silently observed the orientals by living with them; and every thing the orientals said and did was recorded irrespective of its context, and projected to the civilized world of the west. 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 orientalists to generalize the culture of the orientals.

Oriental land and behaviour was highly romanticized by the European poets and writers and then presented to the western world. The orientalist had made a stage strictly for the European viewers, and the orientals were 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 pilgrimage 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 orientalist 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.

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 orientals not the orientals who discovered the Europeans. Darwin's theories were put forward to justify their superiority, biologically by the Europeans.

Edward Said in his book 'Orientalism' 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, Edward 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 orientalist. And secondly, the prejudice that was inherited by every orientalist was considerably low in him. 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 of attention and many future orientalists worked of in its line.

In Chapter 3 'Orientalism Now' Said starts off by telling us that 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.

The author then 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 every day 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 Edward 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 bias found in him for the orientals, which can be seen in his work. With the changing world situation especially after World War 1, orientalism took a more liberal stance towards most of its subjects; but Islamic orientalism did not enjoy this status. There were constant attacks to show Islam as a weak religion, and a mixture of many religions and thoughts. Gibb was the most famous Islamic orientalist of this time.

After World War 1 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 where as 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.

Thus to conclude the paper it can be said that Said is most famous for the description and analysis of 'Orientalism' as the source of the inaccurate cultural representations that are the foundations of Western thought towards the Middle East, of how the West perceives and represents the east. The crux of 'Orientalism' is the existence of a subtle and persistent Eurocentric prejudice against Arabo-Islamic people and their culture. Such perceptions, and the consequent cultural representations, have served, and continue to serve, as implicit justifications for the colonial and imperialist ambition of the European powers and the United States. 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.

References

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