

Relevance of Orientalism Today: Theory & Practice

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***Abstract:** Orientalism has basically come as a reaction against the Western Intellectual manipulation. It pinpoints, through many references, how a perspective of condescendence was held towards East in terms of socio-political and economic imperialism. Has the world been really polarized between East and West? If it is politically so, intellectuals will propagate the theory in the manifestation of their innumerable hypothetical stands. If Orientalism is an attempt of reconstructing the understanding of East, it certainly is an intellectual imperialism, the age that follows the political colonization of the West. If we sum up Said's view, we roughly get a perspective that Orientalism is an imposed and deliberately misconstrued way of understanding a set of people. This paper attempts to show how oriental attitude that was constructed by the Westerners has been working in the context of modern political and intellectual arena, and how a newer understanding and a reconstructed definition has been imposed upon the Orientals, more significantly the Middle Easterners and Muslims rather than the Far Easterners.*

Benjamin Disraeli – as Said quotes at the beginning of his work *Orientalism* – holds the view, “The East is a career” (*Tancred Penguin Books India*, 2001). The very phrase condescends and distinguishes between East and West and puts them onto a superior-inferior positioning rather than relating to a sense of equality. East is an entity which is subjected to be written and reconstructed by others.

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Again, the others are pursuing a career by endeavoring to put one into a subordinating location – culturally and intellectually. Therefore, the very seed of the Western attitude has a political significance that does not talk of equity and justice from the Western intellectual perspective. If East is a career, then the easterners are the subject of writing, and thereby, subjugated into a minor situation if intellectually manipulated.

The Orient that appears in Orientalism is a system of representations framed by a whole set of forces that brought the Orient into Western learning, Western consciousness, and later, Western empire. As an influential academic discourse, this act of representation has been synthesized with a number of factors and defined as interdisciplinary. Orientalism is a definition that seems more relevant if one tries to justify its ground in the wake of post 9/11 situations. Walia defines Orientalism as a product of certain political forces and activities of deeper understanding of diaspora, exile, political depravation of an “unhomed migrant”, someone suffering an intellectual exile along with physical, a person living in “in-between-spaces”, or in the “third space” who is “[...] a Palestinian Christian, with an English name attached to an Arabic surname, residing in America” (Walia, *Postmodern Encounters*, p 4).

This paper evaluates various phases of Orientalism as presented by Said and tries to examine an article which Said wrote just a few days before his death. The essay “Orientalism 25 Years Later” subtitled as “Worldly Humanism Vs Empire Builders” has a specific poignant focus on the “neo-Orientalism” as Said defines in the wake of post 9/11. (Online, at <http://www.counterpunch.org/said08052003.htm>)

Said was born in British-mandated Palestine, but spent most of his childhood in Egypt in thoroughly Anglophone surroundings. Said, as he went to America for preparatory school, took his undergraduate degree at Princeton, finished his graduate studies at Harvard, and began to teach at Columbia, has seen and experienced the problems of representation of East in the West. Again, the system of representation is closely related to lingua-cultural factors. From this perspective, Said has shown how higher lingua-cultural control tends to set a condescending stand or domineering attitude towards a subordinate one. Marx’s words, as quoted by Said at the beginning of the text *Orientalism*, express – “they cannot represent themselves; they must be represented” (*Penguin Books India*, 2001) is very much expressive of Oriental thinking.

Most of the traditional ideas of power originated with Francis Bacon. Bacon first asserts, "Knowledge is Power." The phrase implies that with knowledge or education one's potential or abilities in life will probably increase. It is also used to justify a reluctance to share information. Knowledge can be used iconically to manipulate strength. It is possible that Bacon was paraphrasing Proverbs 24:5: "A wise man has great power, and a man of knowledge increases strength." (online, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Knowledge_is_Power)

In a study of how power influences knowledge, the author finds that even if Bacon's dictum that knowledge is power is true, it is also an oversimplification. The opposite is often more true that power is knowledge in the sense that power decides which knowledge is produced in a given social setting and gets to count as knowledge in discourse and decision making. On the contrary, Michel Foucault asserts a new model of the relations of power and knowledge. He called "power/knowledge." (Online available at: <http://www.msu.edu/~comertod/courses/foucault.htm>)

The relationship between power and knowledge is peculiarly contrapuntal. Foucault, in the broader premises of his discussion, involves factors such as economics, technology, politics, sociology. Paul Rabinow, in the introduction to *Foucault Reader*, (1984) paraphrases Foucault's view in the following words:

What is distinctive about Western Culture is that we have given so much importance to the problem of the subject in our social, political, economic, legal, philosophical and scientific traditions (p-7)

In giving importance to these disciplines, the knowledge itself has somehow been manipulated. Foucault observes – in the same way as Nietzsche did – that knowledge has been used or perhaps manipulated by the agencies and the factors that hold power at their disposal. This power grabbing authorities are none but the people who have more potentials to accumulate, exploit, and reconfigure knowledge. Again, power opens the newer avenues of source of knowledge, and newer bodies of information. This contrapuntal axis of power and knowledge are interwoven to facilitate and complement each other.

Said's Orientalism, or the Western representation of the East is no way a simple hypothesis. It involves a wide range of pattern (economics, technology, politics, sociology etc). The subordinated positioning of the East is not related with any sort of genealogical question that

Chomsky predicted. Chomsky thinks, “(...): there must be a bio-physical structure underlying the mind which enables us, both as individuals and as a species, to deduce from the multiplicity of individual experiences a unified language (**Paul Rabinow**, intro p-3). We cannot say, by nature, westerners are superior race, and their intellectual hemisphere is impregnated with certain abstract capacities. The superior positioning is, very predictably, the ability to exercise twins – knowledge and power – to the extent of indoctrinating and theorizing over others. Said examines layers of diverse aspects in forming an attitude. As a scholar, deeply influenced by Foucault’s school of thought, Said argues that

By Orientalism I mean several things, all of them, in my opinion, interdependent. The most readily accepted designation of for Orientalism is an academic one, and indeed, the label still serves in a number of academic institutions. 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. (From *Orientalism*, by **Edward W. Said**, p- 2)

Orientalism and the phases of its development are very systematic and procedural; it is very subtle and powerful. Edward Said’s evaluation and critique of the set of beliefs known as Orientalism, as an important background for postcolonial studies, highlights the inexactness of a wide variety of assumptions as it questions various paradigms (A set of assumptions, concepts, values, and practices) of thought that are accepted at individual, academic, and political levels.

In forming *Orientalism* Edward Said Also talks about the importance of geo-historical facts that have been playing important role in global perspective. Said has very systematically segmented the time and space as ‘phases of Orientalism’. Along the line of history, we find that it works as a legacy among colonial powers, which is actually handed down to the succeeding generations of more powerful empire. Stronger military and economic power seems to have been more liable Orientalist the way Americans dominate today.

My point is that Orientalism derives from a particular closeness experienced between Britain and France and the Orient, which until the early 19th century had really meant only India and the Bible lands. From the beginning of the 19th century until the end of World War II France and Britain dominated the Orient and Orientalism; since World

War II America has dominated the Orient, and approaches it the way France and Britain once did. Out of this closeness, whose dynamic is enormously productive even if it always demonstrate the comparatively greater strength of the Occident (Britain, France or America), comes the large body of the texts I call Orientalist. (Said, *Orientalism*. intro, p- 4).

The Orient exists for the West, and is constructed by and in relation to the West. It is a mirror image of something which is inferior and alien ("Other") to the West. Orientalism is "a manner of regularized (or Orientalized) writing, vision, and study, dominated by imperatives ideological biases apparently suited to the Orient. It is the image of the 'Orient' expressed as an entire system of thought and scholarship. Said even goes to the extent of telling, "Orient was almost a European invention" (intro. *Orientalism* P-1), and the Orientalism "gained strength and identity by setting itself up against the orient as a sort of surrogated and underground self". He also adds, " European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period. (Intro, *Orientalism*, P-3)

The Oriental is symbolized as a person represented by such thinking. Someone depicted as feminine, weak, yet strangely dangerous because it poses a threat to white – the Western women. The woman is both eager to be dominated and strikingly exotic. The Oriental is a single image, a sweeping generalization, a stereotype that crosses countless cultural and national boundaries giving a fascinating analogy through the characters – Flaubert and Kuchuk. Said says:

...Flaubert's encounter with an Egyptian courtesan produced a widely influential model of the Oriental woman; she never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence, or history. He spoke for and represented her. He was foreign, comparatively wealthy, male, and theses were historical facts of domination that allowed him not only to possess Kuchuk Hanem physically, but to speak for her and tell his readers in what way she was typically "Oriental." (Intro. *Orientalism*, P- 6).

Said tells that this demonstration of attitude is not an isolated instance, but it defines spaces for East and West, manifests Orientalism in what

is spoken and acted upon. It includes information and knowledge about the Orient as well as policy-decisions founded in Orientalist thinking. It is the expression in words and actions of latent Orientalism.

So, the canonical and systematic transfusion of Western hegemony and “positional superiority”, particularly from the time of Renaissance to the present, not only drew the dividing line geographically with man-made terminology like “Orient” and “Occident”, but also made the same line prominent at ideological level. The Orient is seen as separate, eccentric, backward, silently different, sensual, and passive. It has a tendency towards despotism and away from progress. Its progress and value are judged in terms of, and in comparison to the West. So, it is always the ‘other’, the conquerable, and the inferior. The emotional detachment and oppositional potency has grown more boisterous since then. In the post 9/11 periods, the emphasis falls on the political and ethical divisions. It has been a time for a newer phase of Orientalism, more violent in nature and more opposing, more intolerant to coexistence.

Orientalism is a living realism of the west. The ideological imperialism is actually extenuated in the huge bulk of references ranging from the colonial ruler like James Balfour, Lord Cromer to the academicians like Silvestra de Sacy and Ernest Renan. The politicians, philosophers, cultural anthropologists are all alike tainted with the sense of subordinating positioning and opposing factors of West and East. In the subsequent work named “Culture and Imperialism” Said forwarded his argument that “creative writers’ consciousness is seen to be shaped by the imperialist tendencies” (*Walia, Postmodern Encounter*, p-9). He shows how the imperial academies used culture as tool for resisting or sometimes bypassing the value of the East

The author focuses on the way in which this cultural legacy has embedded itself in the Western view of the East, and affects our relationship with the once-colonized world at all levels, both social and political. In a recent online review, certain reviewer named S. Wales says:

Western societies seem to have entered a phase of collective amnesia whereby colonialism, if it is remembered at all, is envisioned as ending somewhere along the length of the Suez Cannel. Said's thoughtful analysis challenges the modern myth of the end of Empire and of the slow decline of an age of economic and cultural imperialism which came to an end sometime after 1948 with the final dropping of the

Union Jack in the final colonially occupied territory. In many ways economic and cultural imperialism is as pervasive and violent today as it ever was, if not a little more so. (1996-2005, Amazon.com, Inc.)

The empire is geographically dislocated but it certainly bears the aspect of its domination and power which has been deep-rooted in their "hegemonic ascendancy". The west thus has reconstructed with "more than a mere oppositionality, there is a recreation and recontextualizing of the history written from a linear and univocal perspective" (Walia, *postmodern Encounters* p- 54).

The imperialism has now been changed and can newly be interpreted as far as the recent world history is concerned. Violence and intolerance speeded across the globe; rise of fanaticism, controversy, intolerance have given rise to a newer set of principles in understanding Orient globally. The American imperialism as a reconstructed model of Anglo-Franco-Spanish imperialism has added newer phases. It is more resistant to Occident, particularly to the Middle Eastern and some of the Asiatic regions. Terrorism is given an anti-biotic – that is, to counter a terrorist act, a more violent, large-scale counter terrorist plan has been installed.

Stein Tønnesson, a research professor, Nordic Institute of Asian Studies (NIAS) in his article "Orientalism, Occidentalism and Knowing about Others" has wonderfully given expression to the tensions of civilization. Referring to the findings of Professor Samuel P. Huntington, Stein shows how Western principles differentiated from the East in terms of Cultural identities and value judgment. He shows Huntington's observation

The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural, he says: "The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics". He defines a civilization as

"the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity people have short of that which distinguishes humans from other species"

(Tønnesson <http://www.colostate.edu/Depts/Speech/rccs/theory54.htm>)

He also says,

At a more basic level ... Western concepts differ fundamentally from those prevalent in other civilizations. Western ideas of individualism, liberalism, constitutionalism, human rights, equality,

liberty, the rule of law, democracy, free markets, the separation of church and state. often have little resonance in Islamic, Confucian, Japanese Hindu, Buddhist or Orthodox cultures.

(Tønnesson <http://www.colostate.edu/Depts/Speech/rccs/theory54.htm> research)

Said has certainly been criticized as having taken a more political stance. However, he argues even the most professional task is also a political one. The absence of political responsibility of an author of not having to deal with his own circumstances, environment and the place, he says, is not certainly having the power to become a great worker of art. Politics is, as if, an inevitable part of an intellectual thought that foregrounds Said's concern for the nationhood, liberty. In his exile and life as an immigrant, he cannot keep away from taking the responsibilities of national predicament and wide-scale suppression. He says:

No one ever has devised a method for detaching the scholar from the circumstances of life. From the fact of his involvement[...] with a class, a set of beliefs, a social position, or from a mere activity of being a member of the society. [...] No production of knowledge in the human science can ever ignore or disclaim its author's involvement as a human subject in his own circumstances Orientalism, intro., p-10)

Said's political attachment and his outspoken humanism is not muted even at the end of life. In an article named "Orientalism 25 Years Later", published in August 4, 2003, Said stated that the clichés "West" "East", "Our", "Other" etc. are dictating the sentiment and gaining more power out of contradiction and opposition. In one hand Said criticizes Arab and Muslim as having lived in their backwardness, lack of democracy, abrogating women's right; on the other hand, he sees the vested interest of the West, particularly of America, in initiating the profiteering economic enterprise in the 'arid' land. He deplores the heart-rending terminologies and buzzwords created by intellectuals, politicians or media-men that are set up against the Arab Orientals in order to denigrate their human identity. A sweeping generalization has provoked dichotomies, not the cooperation. He convicts American book stores that have been "filled with screed bearing screaming headlines... all of them written by political

polemicists” and the CNN or Fox, the Right Wing Radio hosts, innumerable journals and tabloids to be “ re-cycling the same unverifiable fictions [...] so as to stir up ‘America’ against the foreign devil”(Said, *Orientalism 25 Years Later*, *htm*). The legacy of imperialism is playing a different role, which had not been introduced to the people earlier. Referring to most of the imperial domination and colonial powers, Said finds a similar, or rather more aggressive kind of method in recent American attitude on Middle East. Said says:

So from the very same directorate of paid professional scholars enlisted by the Dutch conquerors of Malaysia and Indonesia, the British armies of India, Mesopotamia, Egypt, West Africa, the French armies of Indochina and North Africa, came the American advisers to the Pentagon and the White House, using the same clichés, the same demeaning stereotypes, the same justifications for power and violence [...] as in the earlier ones. These people have now been joined in Iraq by a whole army of private contractors and eager entrepreneurs to whom shall be confided every thing from the writing of textbooks and the constitution to the refashioning of Iraqi political life and its oil industry. (Said, *Orientalism 25 Years Later*, *htm*)

The Oriental ambition has not been over, in spite of rapid globalization; rather it increased and with an immense growth of world economy, the industrial West has launched an expansion of a different kind. The territorial integrity has been invaded under the disguise of some jargons like “terrorism”, “biological weapon”, “weapons of mass destruction (WMD)” “nexus of evil” etc. The power holders and economic heavyweights are taking the decisions across the table without involving international community. Different interest groups are profiting from empire builders. Tougher, weightier and bigger decisions are taken overnight by lobbies like “American Express” (a small but very powerful presidential political lobby) formed by only 5 to 6 influential state leaders and politicians headed by President of America himself). Said tends to call it “neo-Orientalism”, a newer dimension of Orientalism and Imperialism, which is finding a newer relevance today.

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