

A Critique of Edward Said's Orientalism as a Source Text for Postcolonial Approaches to Literature

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"Specialists in these fields have often been critical of his (Said's) interventions, but they have not on the whole been able to ignore or dismiss him out of hand."

**-Michael Sprinker
'Introduction to Edward Said: A Critical Reader**

Abstract

In this paper, I will examine and evaluate Edward Said's *Orientalism*, published in 1978. *Orientalism* is a seminal text for understanding postcolonial approaches to literature. Many major theorists and critics have acknowledged the importance of Said's work in shaping and defining the postcolonial field. For instance, Homi Bhaba argues that, *Orientalism* 'inaugurated the postcolonial field'. Gayatri Spivak views *Orientalism* as the 'source book in our discipline'. Keeping the centrality of the text in mind, I shall first try to understand Said's *Orientalism* and then try to analyze the arguments and methodology of Said both with reference to the criticisms forwarded by other critics as well as my own ideas.

In the introduction to *Orientalism*, Said clearly states the object of the study, his methodological premise/tools, as well as the nature and scope of the source material he employs in his book to substantiate his points. He states that the object of his study is "Orientalism." He explains that the term "Orientalism" is used in three different ways. One use is an academic designation, wherein "Orientalism" is used to designate "oriental studies" or all research on the subject of the "Orient." The other use is as a "style of thought" based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "The Orient" and (most of the time) "The Occident." This would include a lot of poets, writers, philosophers, political theorists, economists, imperial administrators etc., whose works/arguments are based on this distinction. The third use of "Orientalism" is roughly described as "the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient"- of describing, discipline, controlling and representing the orient.

In this sense, "Orientalism" functions as a discourse with an internal logic and coherence; a discourse in which the production/structuration of knowledge are interlinked with the project of actual control. Within "Orientalism," the Orient is an idea or a contract with a history and a vocabulary. This idea act like a filter through which the real (?) Orient is appropriated by the west for the purpose of domination. Hence, stereotypical categories and characteristics are used for first de-wording the Orient and then re-wording it. In this sense, "Orientalism" operates like an archive or corpus of information built by the colonialists over a period of time. As far as the west is concerned, the genealogy, existence, and identity of the Orientals depend on this archive. It is this third use of the term "Orientalism" that Said theorizes about and explains in detail in his book *Orientalism*.

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As regards his methodology, Said refers primarily to Michel Foucault's notion of 'discourse' and Antonio Gramsci's idea of 'cultural hegemony' as his primary theoretical tools for understanding "Orientalism." He bases his study on texts from various disciplines and fields, primarily in the area of Anglo-French-American experiences of the Arabs and Islam over approximately a thousand years. He utilizes the notion of the "problematic" forwarded by Louis Althusser wherein a 'determinate unity of a text, or group of texts... is given rise to by analysis'. Said argues that his principal methodological devices for studying the authority over the "Orient" are, a) strategic location and b) strategic formation.

Strategic location is explained as a way of 'describing the author's position in a text with regards to the Orient material he writes about'. Strategic formation is explained as 'a way of analyzing the relationship between texts and the way in which groups of texts, types of texts, even textual genres, acquire mass, density, and referential power among themselves and thereafter in the cultural large'. Said also argues that while his hybrid approach is broadly historical and anthropological, unlike other scholars who study the history of ideas, he believes in the considerable importance of the imprint of individual writers within a large body of texts. He also argues that studies make sense within the politics of location. He views himself as someone who is dislocated/displaced. His non-rootedness or his rootlessness, therefore, helps in his intellectual assessment about colonialism and Orientalism. It is in the broad framework of all these assumptions that Said develops his corpus of ideas about "Orientalism."

In Said's view, Orientalism operates in the service of the West's hegemony over the East. The East is discursively produced as the West's inferior "other." Consequently, the West constructs itself as superior in contrast. The distinguishing identities of the East and the West are essentialised through stereotypes. For instance, the East is characterized as voiceless, sensual, feminine, despotic, irrational, backward, liar, lazy and gullible. The West is characterized as masculine, democratic, rational, moral, dynamic, progressive, truthful, active, and logical. Such binary oppositions, as illustrated by Said, exist in wide fields of knowledge like literature, travel books, journalistic writings, and political tracts, religious and philological studies etc. Said argues that Orientalism is almost always a European representation. It does not deal with the real orient, but because of its discursive impact, it has a reality of its own.

However, the correspondence between the real orient and the "Other" is very little. The nature of the idea about the "Orient" is hegemonic since it is shared by many and has a role to play in making policy frameworks for colonialists in a real and sustained way. The act of supposedly knowing the orient by appropriating it through created and produced ideas, becomes the basis for further constructs and stereotypes. Said argues that Orientalism is an invention and it limits further invention by defining the limits of imagination. As a discourse, it gives structure to the stereotypes about the "Orient." The categories defined by Orientalism become the premise or the basis for gaining any kind of knowledge about the "Orient."

These categories reaffirm the centrality/power of the West. Only the West could represent the Orient, because it had the categories to know it. Orientals were there only to be judged. A sense of both danger and delight are associated with the Orient, and Orientalism becomes a way of controlling these opposite characteristics. In the writing of Milton and Shakespeare, the Orient is described in terms of emptiness gripped with a sense of loss and breakdown. Therefore, western interference and intervention becomes necessary. Thus, the increasing colonial exploits of 16th and 17th century England is represented for the English. In the discourse of Orientalism, the orient is deprived of the capacity to power. Its people cannot cultivate his or her own self. Only the occident can articulate the orient, it has the power of a puppet master who can give life to the orient, the power to create in familiar and acceptable ways. So, the sense of danger can be transformed into the familiarity of discipline and control.

Said exemplifies this by Western representation of Islam which is critiqued and rejected as a pale replica of Christianity, a fraud religion. The fear of Islam is dealt with by the representation of Islam as fraudulent. Orientalism presents the Orient as a 'closed field', as a stage which is always affixed or linked to Europe. The dual images of attraction and repulsion are repeatedly reworked. The culture of the orient is transformed into an inferior version of the West's own image. Thereby, the authority, superiority of the Occident and the subservience of the Orient is reaffirmed. Said argues that Orientalism is structured primarily within two frameworks. One in which the West looks at the Orient compassionately, with sympathy. It tries to understand. It tries to enter the orient by communing with the orient. It uses the trope voyage or travel to produce a certain type of relationship with the orient.

The visitor/writer/author/actor moves from the occident to the peripheries of the orient and then returns back to the occident/centre. This return is a movement which establishes power, authority, and initiative. It reaffirms the centrality of the power centre. The other framework is one of the "ennumerictradition" which emphasizes the need to keep dispassionate distance and objectivity. It emphasizes the importance of observation from a distance rather than from proximity. It is within these two frameworks that, according to Said, western works about the orient fall under. He studies and illustrates from a lot of texts about "Orientalism."

Overall, the notion of colonial representation was not used in literature or literary theory before Said. No direct link was made between representation/perception of colonialism with colonial power. The fact that conceptions about self and Other were constructed and in fact structured the relationship between the West and the East hardly existed in the form of any theory before Orientalism. Said's argument in Orientalism changed the pattern of writing in literary study and helped in defining the new field of study about colonial culture/ representation/ discourse and post-colonial studies. Said's work makes one conscious about imperial conceptions about the "Orient." His work helps to recognize these conceptions and critique them. Said's Orientalism literally redefined colonial notions in literary studies and made post-colonial theory come of age in mainstream critical studies.

While the impact and influence of Said's work is undeniably considerable on the theoretical frameworks operational in research and study, the critiques about Said's work have also been many. These criticisms can mainly be divided into two types.

- (a) Inconsistencies of Said's method
- (b) Inconsistencies in Said's representation of the "Orient"

For instance, Aijaz Ahmed in *Theory: Classes, Nations, Literature*, (1993) argues that while writing about "Orientalism" Said defines continuity from Greek thought to the present. He follows the logistics of Aurbach's "high humanism" to locate the present ideas in their origins. According to assumptions of high humanism, identities are shaped from the origins of time and they have a continuous, enraptured history. They can be traced back to unbroken continuities. These identities are formed from unbroken histories. Culture and ideas are shaped by, reflected in and expressed within canonical texts which are foundational in nature. It is easy to see how Said bases much of his methodology and approach on Aurbach's work. However, he also borrows liberally from Foucault's notions about knowledge, discourse, and power. According to Foucault, one cannot trace back ideas. Rather, one can study the interrelations in a particular discourse at a particular time. Each discourse/culture has its own internal structure which has its own relationship. This constitutes a structure. This discourse can be displaced by a different structure with different elements and relationships. Relationships shape a paradigm and the paradigm shapes relationships. Internal logic of these structures/paradigms is important but so are "ruptures" and "fractures." One cannot have a history of ideas; rather, one can have a history of discourse. For this, one has to look at texts apart from canonical texts. As per Aijaz Ahmed, both Aurbach and Foucault have an eclectic presence in Said's thought. While the former argues for humanism and continuity, the latter is anti-humanist and believes in breaks and ruptures. So, the two are methodologically irreconcilable. As per Aijaz Ahmed, conceptual borrowings from different traditions do not constitute a sound methodological base. This is the biggest problem with Said's Orientalism.

Benita Parry in "Problems in current theories of colonial discourse" in *Oxford Literary Review* 9 (1987) makes an important criticism about Said's work, that it is premised on homogeneity in oriental thought, i.e., it essentialised both the East and the West. While on the one hand he is criticizing the homogeneity of imperial discourse, he is creating a different homogeneity himself. According to her, Said suggests that when colonialism and Orientalism develop, there is a process of integration. Through this process, an all powerful ideology as well as a triumphant, heroic, and tragic narrative develops. This ideology has total agency and it cannot be hindered or resisted. Said does not allow for tensions anxieties or conflicts within the frameworks of imperialist thought. Benita Parry also argues that textual gaps are not recognized. Alternate and contesting voices are also not recognized.

It is precisely these aspects which are developed by Homi Bhaba in *The Location of Culture* (1994), both as a development as well as a critique of Said's Orientalism. Bhaba emphasizes on the dialogic within texts. Unlike Said, who argues that Orientalism "renders Orient mute," Bhaba argues that the orient represents itself in a variety of ways.

His notions of colonial power are continuously marked by "ambivalence," "anxieties", "contestations", "uncertainties" and "hybridity". He constantly undermines the notion of "projected coherence" of official culture. According to him, there is constant dialogism between self-representation and imperial representation. Gayatri Spivak in "Can the subaltern speak?" (1988) argues that the resistance to colonialism was not merely a response to colonialism but had initiative of its own. The colony should not be seen only as experience, it is also an active assertion of its own ideas, signs, oppositions, demands, ethics, and culture. Therefore, Saidian categories of distinct phases of colonialisation followed by decolonization do not hold true.

While many of these arguments hold true, it is also significant to note that in a subsequent work entitled *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), a more flexible approach is followed by Said. In this work, Said pays much more attention to anti-colonial and post-colonial writings. Although criticisms about methodological problems or cosmetic shifts from *Orientalism* have been made by many critics, it is important to emphasize that Said's *Orientalism* is undoubtedly a very important post-colonial theoretical text.

I would argue that though criticisms have been made, many criticisms have their own problems. For instance, when Aijaz Ahmad criticized high humanism he seems to fully endorse Foucault's idea of histories of frameworks or discourses. However, it can equally significantly be said of Foucault that he does not deal with origins at all. The fact that Aijaz Ahmad takes, for granted the validity of Foucault's ideas is by itself problematic.

Homi Bhaba, who deals with anti-colonial discourse in his works, can also be brought as much under criticism as said himself. It has often been argued that Bhaba sees all nationalisms as it and homogenizes them. The opposition between the colonizer and the colonized tends to get totally diffused in Bhaba's works. He also argues that resistance effectively reaffirms the original and does not question or overthrow colonial power. This creates theoretical problems in Bhaba's works about perceiving 'resistance'.

All in all, I believe that Said's *Orientalism* is a compelling piece of work which has the power to significantly alter every reader's mind. Apart from its theoretical and academic significance, it is a very interesting text based on exhaustive scholarship. Whatever criticisms have been made about him it can reasonably be argued, that many criticisms have been acknowledged and addressed by him as well. There may be shortcomings in his work, but the concepts he has dealt with certainly have opened up new debates in the entire academia.

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