

An Introduction to Edward Said's Orientalism

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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.

Edward Said argues that the Europeans divided the world into two parts; the east and the west or the occident and the orient or the civilized and the uncivilized. This was totally an artificial boundary; and it was laid on the basis of the concept of them and us or theirs and ours. The Europeans used orientalism to define themselves. Some particular attributes were associated with the orientals, and whatever the orientals weren't the occidents 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. 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.

Here is a brief summary of the book, followed by a critique by Malcolm Kerr.

Chapter 1: The Scope of Orientalism

In this chapter, 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 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 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 everything 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. 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.

Chapter 2: Orientalist Structures and Restructures

In this chapter, Edward Said points the slight change in the attitude of the Europeans towards the orientals. The orientals 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 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.

In this chapter, Edward 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, 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 attention and many future orientalists worked of in its line.

Chapter 3 : Orientalism Now

This chapter 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 orientatlists.

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 biased 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 2, all the Europeans 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.

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.

Malcolm Kerr's review on Orientalism

Malcolm Kerr did his specialization in International Relations and specialized in the Middle East from Princeton University. He worked on his PhD thesis with Gibb, and spent two years with him in Cambridge University.¹ Malcolm's review on Orientalism can be concluded by his following remarks, "This book reminds me of the television program "Athletes in Action," in which professional football players compete in swimming, and so forth. Edward Said, a literary critic loaded with talent, has certainly made a splash, but with this sort of effort he is not going to win any major race. This is a great pity, for it is a book that in principle needed to be written, and for which the author possessed rich material. In the end, however, the effort misfired. The book contains many excellent sections and scores many telling points, but it is spoiled by overzealous prosecutorial argument in which Professor Said, in his eagerness to spin too large a web, leaps at conclusions and tries to throw everything but the kitchen sink into a preconceived frame of analysis. In charging the entire tradition of European and American Oriental studies with the sins of reductionism and caricature, he commits precisely the same

error”². He further goes on to say “The list of victims of Said’s passion is a long one, too long to examine in detail. Some of them deserve it: he has justly taken the measure of Ernest Renan. Some others are probably not worth it. One wonders why he is so ready to lump nineteenth-century travellers with professional philologists; why he found it necessary to twist the empathy of Sylvain Levi for colonized peoples into an alleged racism (pp. 248-250), or to dismiss the brilliance of Richard Burton as being overshadowed by a mentality of Western domination of the east (p. 197); why he condemns Massignon for his heterodoxy, and Gibb for his orthodoxy; or why he did not distinguish between Bernard Lewis’s recent polemics on modern politics and his much more important corpus of scholarship on the history of Islamic society and culture. For those who knew Gustave von Grunebaum and were aware of his scholarly genius and his deep attraction to Islamic culture in all its ramifications, Said’s exercise in character assassination (pp. 296-298) can only cause deep dismay. Suffice it to say that von Grunebaum’s view of Islamic culture as “antihumanist” was a serious proposition, and in fact not an unsympathetic one, denounced but not rebutted by Said, who seems not to recognize the difference between an antihumanist culture and an inhumane one. He might have done well to note that Abdallah Laroui, whose penetrating criticism of von Grunebaum’s .work he invokes, earned thereby an invitation from von Grunebaum to teach at UCLA”³