

# Analysis of Edward Said's Orientalism

BY NASRULLAH MAMBROL ON NOVEMBER 10, 2020 •

Edward Said's publication of *Orientalism* (1978) made such an impact on thinking about colonial discourse that for two decades it has continued to be the site of controversy, adulation and criticism. **Said's intervention is designed to illustrate the manner in which the representation of Europe's 'others' has been institutionalised since at least the eighteenth century as a feature of its cultural dominance.** Orientalism describes the various disciplines, institutions, processes of investigation and styles of thought by which Europeans came to 'know' the 'Orient' over several centuries, and which reached their height during the rise and consolidation of nineteenth-century imperialism.

The key to Said's interest in this way of knowing Europe's others is that it effectively demonstrates **the link between knowledge and power**, for it 'constructs' and dominates Orientals in the process of knowing them. The very term 'Oriental' shows how the process works, for the word identifies and homogenises at the same time, implying a range of knowledge and an intellectual mastery over that which is named. Since Said's analysis, Orientalism has revealed itself as a model for the many ways in which Europe's strategies for knowing the colonised world became, at the same time, strategies for dominating that world.

Orientalism, in Said's formulation, is principally a way of defining and 'locating' Europe's others. But as a group of related disciplines Orientalism was, in important ways, about Europe itself, and hinged on arguments that circulated around the issue of national distinctiveness, and racial and linguistic origins. Thus the elaborate and detailed examinations of Oriental languages, histories and cultures were carried out in a context in which the supremacy and importance of European civilisation was unquestioned. Such was the vigour of the discourse that myth, opinion, hearsay and prejudice generated by influential scholars quickly assumed the status of received truth.

***Orientalism* is an openly political work. Its aim is not to investigate the array of disciplines or to elaborate exhaustively the historical or cultural provenance of Orientalism, but rather to reverse the 'gaze' of the discourse, to analyse it from the point of view of an 'Oriental' —to 'inventory the traces upon...the Oriental subject, of the culture whose domination has been so powerful a fact in the life of all Orientals' (Said 1978:25).** How Said can claim to be an 'Oriental' rehearses the recurrent paradox running through his work. But his experience of living in the United States, where the 'East' signifies danger and threat, is the source of the worldliness of Orientalism. The provenance of the book demonstrates the deep repercussions of Orientalist discourse, for it emerges directly from the 'disheartening' life of an Arab Palestinian in the West.

The web of racism, cultural stereotypes, political imperialism, dehumanizing ideology holding in the Arab or the Muslim is very strong indeed, and it is this web which every Palestinian has come to feel as his uniquely punishing destiny...The nexus of knowledge and power creating 'the oriental' and in a sense obliterating him as a human being is therefore not for me an exclusively academic matter. Yet it is an intellectual matter of some very obvious importance. (1978:27)

*Orientalism*, as we can see, is the fruit of Said's own 'uniquely punishing destiny'. In this book, a Palestinian Arab living in America deploys the tools and techniques of his adopted professional location to discern the manner in which cultural hegemony is maintained. His intention, he claims, was to provoke, and thus to stimulate 'a new kind of dealing with the Orient' (1978:28). Indeed, if this binary between 'Orient' and 'Occident' were to disappear

altogether, 'we shall have advanced a little in the process of what Welsh Marxist cultural critic Raymond Williams has called the "unlearning" of "the inherent dominative mode" (1978:28).

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**Said's own work of identity construction underlies the passion behind Orientalism. The intellectual power of the book comes from its inspired and relentlessly focused analysis of the way in which a variety of disciplines operated within certain coherent discursive limits, but the cultural, and perhaps even emotional, power of the book comes from its worldly immediacy, its production by a writer whose identity has been constructed, in part, by this discourse, who still feels the effects of Orientalist 'knowledge'.** Passion can be a confusing and unreflective element in intellectual debate, and while the passion no doubt explains a great deal about the popularity of Orientalism, the refusal by many critics to take the book's worldliness into account has tended to limit their perception of its significance.

Before the publication of *Orientalism*, the term 'Orientalism' itself had faded from popular usage, but in the late 1970s it took on a renewed and vigorous life. The disciplines of modern Oriental studies, despite their sophistication, are inescapably imbued with the traditional representations of the nature of the Orient (especially the Middle East) and the assumptions that underlie the discourse of Orientalism. While Said laments the sometimes indiscriminate manner in which Orientalism has been appropriated, there is little doubt that it has had a huge impact on social theory in general. By 1995, Orientalism had become a 'collective book' that had 'superseded' its author more than could have been expected. **One might add that it is a continually growing book, in that the analysis of the strategies of Orientalism has been useful in detecting the specific discursive and cultural operations of imperial culture in various ways. For the analysis hinges on the ideological nature of representation and the ways in which powerful representations become the 'true' and accepted ones, despite their stereotypical and even caricatured nature.**

## **STRUCTURE**

**Orientalism is divided into three main parts.** In the first part Said establishes the expansive and amorphous capacity of Orientalism. It is a discourse that has been in existence for over two centuries and one that continues into the present. The focus in this section is to look at the **question of representation** in order to illustrate the similarities in diverse ideas such as 'Oriental despotism, Oriental sensuality, Oriental modes of production, and Oriental splendour' (1976:47).

The second part of the book is an exposition of 'Orientalist structures and restructures'. Here, Said sets out to establish how the main philological, historical and creative writers in the nineteenth-century drew upon a tradition of knowledge that allowed them textually to construct and control the Orient. This construction and rendering visible of the Orient served the colonial administration that subsequently utilized this knowledge to establish a system of rule.

The third part is an examination of 'Modern Orientalism'. This section shows how the established legacies of British and French Orientalism were adopted and adapted by the United States. For Said, nowhere is this better reflected than in the manner in which these legacies are manifested in American foreign policy. The book is a complex articulation of how the absorptive capacity of Orientalism has been able to adopt influences such as positivism, Marxism and Darwinism without altering its central tenets.

The term 'Orientalism' is derived from 'Orientalist', which has been associated traditionally with those engaged in the study of the Orient. The very term 'the Orient' holds different meanings for different people. As Said points out, Americans associate it with the Far East, mainly Japan and China, while for Western Europeans, and in particular the British and the French, it conjures up different images. It is not only adjacent to Europe; 'it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other' (1978:1).

Part of the pervasive power of Orientalism is that it refers to at least three different pursuits, all of which are interdependent: an academic discipline, a style of thought and a corporate institution for dealing with the Orient. As an academic discipline, Orientalism emerged in the late-eighteenth century and has since assembled an archive of knowledge that has served to perpetuate and reinforce Western representations of it. Orientalism is 'the discipline by which the Orient was (and is) approached systematically, as a topic of learning, discovery and practice' (1978:73). As a style of thought it is 'based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction' (1978:2) between the Orient and the Occident. This definition is more expansive and can accommodate as diverse a group of writers as classical Greek playwright Aeschylus (524–455 BC), medieval Italian poet Dante Alighieri (1265–1335), French novelist Victor Hugo (1802–85) and German social scientist and revolutionary Karl Marx (1818–83). The third definition of Orientalism as a corporate institution is demonstrative of its amorphous capacity as a structure used to dominate and authorize the Orient. Hence, Orientalism necessarily is viewed as being linked inextricably to colonialism.

The three definitions as expounded by Said illustrate how Orientalism is a complex web of representations about the Orient. The first two definitions embody the textual creation of the Orient while the latter definition illustrates how Orientalism has been deployed to execute authority and domination over the Orient. The three are interrelated, particularly since the domination entailed in the third definition is reliant upon and justified by the textual establishment of the Orient that emerges out of the academic and imaginative definitions of Orientalism.

## THE SCOPE OF ORIENTALISM

The core of Said's argument resides in the link between knowledge and power, which is amply demonstrated by Prime Minister Arthur Balfour's defense of Britain's occupation of Egypt in 1910, when he declared that: 'We know the civilization of Egypt better than we know any other country' (1978:32). Knowledge for Balfour meant not only surveying a civilisation from its origins, but *being able to do that*. 'To have such knowledge of such a thing [as Egypt] is to dominate it, to have authority over it...since we know it and it exists, in a sense, as we know it' (1978:32). The premises of Balfour's speech demonstrate very clearly how knowledge and dominance go hand in hand:

England knows Egypt; Egypt is what England knows; England knows that Egypt cannot have self-government; England confirms that by occupying Egypt; for the Egyptians, Egypt is what England has occupied and now governs; foreign occupation therefore becomes the very basis of contemporary Egyptian civilization. (1978:34)

But to see Orientalism as simply a rationalization of colonial rule is to ignore the fact that colonialism was justified in advance by Orientalism (1978:39). The division of the world into East and West had been centuries in the making and expressed the fundamental binary division on which all dealing with the Orient was based. But one side had the power to determine what the reality of both East and West might be. Knowledge of the Orient, because

it was generated out of this cultural strength, 'in a sense *creates* the Orient, the Oriental and his world' (1978:40). With this assertion we come right to the heart of *Orientalism*, and consequently to the source of much of the controversy it has provoked. To Said, the Orient and the Oriental are direct constructions of the various disciplines by which they are known by Europeans. This appears, on the one hand, to narrow down an extremely complex European phenomenon to a simple question of power and imperial relations, but, on the other, to provide no room for Oriental self-representations.

Said points out that the upsurge in Orientalist study coincided with the period of unparalleled European expansion: from 1815 to 1914. His emphasis on its political nature can be seen in his focus on the beginnings of modern Orientalism: not with William Jones's disruption of linguistic orthodoxy, but in the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt in 1798, 'which was in many ways the very model of a truly scientific appropriation of one culture by another, apparently stronger one' (1978:42). But the crucial fact was that Orientalism, in all its many tributaries, began to impose limits upon thought about the Orient. Even powerful imaginative writers such as Gustav Flaubert, Gerard de Nerval or Sir Walter Scott were constrained in what they could either experience or say about the Orient. For 'Orientalism was ultimately a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, "us") and the strange (Orient, the East, "them")' (1978:43). It worked this way because the intellectual accomplishments of Orientalist discourse served the interests, and were managed by the vast hierarchical web, of imperial power.

**Central to the emergence of the discourse is the imaginative existence of something called 'the Orient', which comes into being within what Said describes as an 'imaginative geography' because it is unlikely that we might develop a discipline called 'Occidental studies'.** Quite simply, the idea of an Orient exists to define the European. '[O]ne big division, as between West and Orient, leads to other smaller ones' (1978:58) and the experiences of writers, travellers, soldiers, statesmen, from Herodotus and Alexander the Great on, become 'the lenses through which the Orient is experienced, and they shape the language, perception and form of the encounter between East and West' (1978:58). What holds these experiences together is the shared sense of something 'other', which is named 'the Orient'. This analysis of the binary nature of Orientalism has been the source of a great deal of criticism of the book, because it appears to suggest that there is one Europe or one West (one 'us') that constructs the Orient. **But if we see this homogenisation as the way in which the discourse of Orientalism simplifies the world, at least by implication, rather than the way the world is; the way a general attitude can link various disciplines and intellectual tributaries despite their different subject matter and modes of operation, we may begin to understand the discursive power of this pervasive habit of thinking and doing called Orientalism.**

The way we come to understand that 'other' named 'the Orient' in this binary and stereotypical way can be elaborated in terms of the metaphor of theatre. Where the idea of Orientalism as a learned field suggests an enclosed space, the idea of representation is a theatrical one: the Orient is the stage on which the whole East is confined.

On this stage will appear figures whose role it is to represent the larger whole from which they emanate. The Orient then seems to be, not an unlimited extension beyond the familiar European world, but rather a closed field, a theatrical stage affixed to Europe. (1978:63)

In this way certain images represent what is otherwise an impossibly diffuse entity (1978:68). They are also characters who conform to certain typical characteristics. **Thus, Orientalism**

**shares with magic and with mythology the self-containing, self-reinforcing character of a closed system, in which objects are what they are because they are what they are, for once, for all time, for ontological reasons that no empirical material can either dislodge or alter. (1978:70)**

Imaginative geography legitimates a vocabulary, a representative discourse peculiar to the understanding of the Orient that becomes the way in which the Orient is known. Orientalism thus becomes a form of ‘radical realism’ by which an aspect of the Orient is fixed with a word or phrase ‘which then is considered either to have acquired, or more simply be, reality’ (1978:72).

**The focus of Said’s analysis is provided by what he sees as the close link between the upsurge in Orientalism and the rise in European imperial dominance during the nineteenth century.** The political orientation of his analysis can be seen by the importance he gives to Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt in 1798. Although not the beginning of the Orientalism that swept Europe early in the century, Napoleon’s project demonstrated the most conscious marriage of academic knowledge and political ambition. Certainly the decision by Warren Hastings, Governor-General of India in the 1770s, to conduct the Indian court system on the basis of Sanskrit law paved the way for the discoveries of William Jones, who helped translate the Sanskrit. This demonstrated that knowledge of any kind is always situated and given force by political reality. But Napoleon’s tactics—persuading the Egyptian population that he was fighting on behalf of Islam rather than against it—utilizing as he did all the available knowledge of the Koran and Islamic society that could be mustered by French scholars, comprehensively demonstrated the strategic and tactical power of knowing.

Napoleon gave his deputy Kleber strict instructions after he left always to administer Egypt through the Orientalists and the religious Islamic leaders whom they could win over (1978:82). According to Said, the consequences of this expedition were profound. ‘Quite literally, the occupation gave birth to the entire modern experience of the Orient as interpreted from within the universe of discourse founded by Napoleon in Egypt’ (1978:87). After Napoleon, says Said, the very language of Orientalism changed radically. ‘Its descriptive realism was upgraded and became not merely a style of representation but a language, indeed a means of creation’ (1978:87), a symbol of which was the immensely ambitious construction of the Suez Canal. Claims such as these show why Said’s argument is so compelling, and why it caught the imagination of critics in the 1970s. Closer inspection would reveal that much of the most intensive Oriental scholarship was carried out in countries such as Germany, which had few colonial possessions. Wider analysis might also reveal that various styles of representation emerged within Orientalist fields. But Napoleon’s expedition gave an unmistakable direction to the work of Orientalists that was to have a continuing legacy, not only in European and Middle Eastern history but in world history as well.

Ultimately, the power and unparalleled productive capacity of Orientalism came about because of an emphasis on textuality, a tendency to engage reality within the framework of knowledge gained from previously written texts. Orientalism was a dense palimpsest of writings which purported to engage directly with their subject but which were in fact responding to, and building upon, writings that had gone before. This textual attitude extends to the present day, so that

if Arab Palestinians oppose Israeli settlement and occupation of their lands, then that is merely ‘the return of Islam,’ or, as a renowned contemporary Orientalist defines it, Islamic opposition to non-Islamic peoples, a principle of Islam enshrined in the seventh century. (1978:107)

## THE DISCOURSE OF ORIENTALISM

**Orientalism is best viewed in Foucaultian terms as a discourse: a manifestation of power/knowledge. Without examining Orientalism as a discourse, says Said, it is not possible to understand ‘the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period’ (1978:3).**

Following on from the notion of discourse we saw earlier (p. 14), colonial discourse is a system of statements that can be made about colonies and colonial peoples, about colonising powers and about the relationship between these two. It is the system of knowledge and belief about the world within which acts of colonisation take place. Although it is generated within the society and cultures of the colonisers, it becomes that discourse within which the colonised may also come to see themselves (as, for example, when Africans adopt the imperial view of themselves as ‘intuitive’ and ‘emotional’, asserting a distinctiveness from the ‘rational’ and ‘unemotional’ Europeans). At the very least it creates a deep conflict in the consciousness of the colonised because of its clash with other knowledges about the world.

As a discourse, Orientalism is ascribed the authority of academics, institutions and governments, and such authority raises the discourse to a level of importance and prestige that guarantees its identification with ‘truth’. In time, the knowledge and reality created by the Orientalist discipline produces a discourse ‘whose material presence or weight, not the originality of a given author, is really responsible for the texts produced out of it’ (1978:94). By means of this discourse, Said argues, Western cultural institutions are responsible for the creation of those ‘others’, the Orientals, whose very difference from the Occident helps establish that binary opposition by which Europe’s own identity can be established. The underpinning of such a demarcation is a line between the Orient and the Occident that is less a fact of nature than it is a fact of human production’ (Said 1985:2). It is the geographical imagination that is central to the construction of entities such as the ‘Orient’. It requires the maintenance of rigid boundaries in order to differentiate between the Occident and the Orient. Hence, through this process, they are able to ‘Orientalise’ the region.

**An integral part of Orientalism, of course, is the relationship of power between the Occident and the Orient, in which the balance is weighted heavily in favour of the former. Such power is connected intimately with the construction of knowledge about the Orient. It occurs because the knowledge of ‘subject races’ or ‘Orientals’ makes their management easy and profitable; ‘knowledge gives power, more power requires more knowledge, and so on in an increasingly profitable dialectic of information and control’ (1978:36).**

**The knowledge of the Orient created by and embodied within the discourse of Orientalism serves to construct an image of the Orient and the Orientals as subservient and subject to domination by the Occident. Knowledge of the Orient, because generated out of strength, says Said, in a sense *creates* the Orient, the Oriental and his world.**

In Cromer’s and Balfour’s language, 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 case the Oriental is contained and represented by dominating frameworks. (1978:40)

**The creation of the Orient as the ‘other’ is necessary so that the Occident can define itself and strengthen its own identity by invoking such a juxtaposition.**

The Orientalist representation has been reinforced not only by academic disciplines such as anthropology, history and linguistics but also by the ‘Darwinian theses on survival and natural selection’ (1978:227). Hence, from an Orientalist perspective, the study of the Orient has been always from an Occidental or Western point of view. To the Westerner, according to Said,

the Oriental was always like some aspect of the West; to some German Romantics, for example, Indian religion was essentially an Oriental version of Germano-Christian pantheism. Yet the Orientalist makes it his work to be always converting the Orient from something into something else: he does this for himself, for the sake of his culture. (1978:67)

**This encoding and comparison of the Orient with the West ultimately ensures that the Oriental culture and perspective is viewed as a deviation, a perversion, and thus is accorded an inferior status.**

**An essential feature of the discourse of Orientalism is the objectification of both the Orient and the Oriental.** They are treated as objects that can be scrutinised and understood, and this objectification is confirmed in the very term ‘Orient’, which covers a geographical area and a range of populations many times larger and many times more diverse than Europe. Such objectification entails the assumption that the Orient is essentially monolithic, with an unchanging history, while the Occident is dynamic, with an active history. In addition, the Orient and the Orientals are seen to be passive, non-participatory subjects of study.

This construction, however, has a distinctly political dimension in that Western knowledge inevitably entails political significance. This was nowhere better exemplified than in the rise of Oriental studies and the emergence of Western imperialism. The Englishman in India or Egypt in the latter nineteenth century took an interest in those countries that was founded on their status as British colonies. This may seem quite different, suggests Said, ‘from saying that all academic knowledge about India and Egypt is somehow tinged and impressed with, violated by, the gross political fact—and yet that is what I am saying in this study of Orientalism’ (1978:11). The reason Said can say this is because of his conviction of the worldliness of the discourse: ‘no production of knowledge in the human sciences can ever ignore or disclaim its author’s involvement as a human subject in his own circumstances’ (1978:11). The idea that academic knowledge is ‘tinged’, ‘impressed with’, or ‘violated by’ political and military force is not to suggest, as Dennis Porter supposes (1983), that the hegemonic effect of Orientalist discourse does not operate by ‘consent’. Rather, it is to suggest that the apparently morally neutral pursuit of knowledge is, in the colonialist context, deeply inflected with the ideological assumptions of imperialism. ‘Knowledge’ is always a matter of representation, and representation a process of giving concrete form to ideological concepts, of making certain signifiers stand for signifieds. The power that underlies these representations cannot be divorced from the operations of political force, even though it is a different kind of power, more subtle, more penetrating and less visible.

**A power imbalance exists, then, not only in the most obvious characteristics of imperialism, in its ‘brute political, economic, and military rationales’ (1978:12), but also, and most hegemonically, in cultural discourse. It is in the cultural sphere that the dominant hegemonic project of Orientalist studies, used to propagate the aims of imperialism, can be discerned. Said’s methodology therefore is embedded in what he terms textualism, which allows him to envisage the Orient as a textual creation.** In Orientalist discourse, the affiliations of

the text compel it to produce the West as a site of power and a centre distinctly demarcated from the 'other' as the object of knowledge and, inevitably, subordination. This hidden political function of the Orientalist text is a feature of its worldliness and Said's project is to focus on the establishment of the Orient as a textual construct. He is not interested in analysing what lies hidden in the Orientalist text, but in showing how the Orientalist 'makes the Orient speak, describes the Orient, renders its mysteries plain for and to the West' (1978:20–1).

The issue of representation is crucial to understanding discourses within which knowledge is constructed, because it is questionable, says Said, whether a true representation is ever possible (1978:272). If all representations are embedded in the language, culture and institutions of the representer, 'then we must be prepared to accept the fact that a representation is *eo ipso* implicated, intertwined, embedded, inter-woven with a great many other things besides the 'truth' which is itself a representation' (1978:272). The belief that representations such as those we find in books correspond to the real world amounts to what Said calls a 'textual attitude'. He suggests that what French philosopher Voltaire (1694–1778) in *Candide* and Spanish novelist Cervantes (1547–1616) in *Don Quixote* satirised was the assumption that the swarming, unpredictable, and problematic mess in which human beings live can be understood on the basis of what books—texts—say' (1978:93). This is precisely what occurs when the Orientalist text is held to signify, to represent the truth: the Orient is rendered silent and its reality is revealed by the Orientalist. Since the Orientalist text offers a familiarity, even intimacy, with a distant and exotic reality, the texts themselves are accorded enormous status and accrue greater importance than the objects they seek to describe. Said argues that 'such texts can create not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe' (1978:94). Consequently, it is the texts that create and describe the reality of the Orient, given that the Orientals themselves are prohibited from speaking.

**The latest phase of Orientalism corresponds with the displacement of France and Britain on the world stage by the United States.** Despite the shifting of the centre of power and the consequent change in Orientalising strategies, the discourse of Orientalism, in its three general modes, remains secure. In this phase, the Arab Muslim has come to occupy a central place within American popular images as well as in the social sciences. Said argues that this was to a large extent made possible by the 'transference of a popular anti-Semitic animus from a Jewish to an Arab target...since the figure was essentially the same' (1978:286). The dominance of the social sciences after the Second World War meant that the mantle of Orientalism was passed to the social sciences. These social scientists ensured that the region was 'conceptually emasculated, reduced to "attitudes", "trends", statistics: in short dehumanized' (1978:291). **Orientalism, then, in its different phases, is a Eurocentric discourse that constructs the 'Orient' by the accumulated knowledge of generations of scholars and writers who are secure in the power of their 'superior' wisdom.**

It is not Said's intention merely to document the excesses of Orientalism (which he does very successfully) but to stress the need for an alternative, better form of scholarship. He recognises that there are a lot of individual scholars engaged in producing such knowledge. Yet he is concerned about the 'guild tradition' of Orientalism, which has the capacity to wear down most scholars. He urges continued vigilance in fighting the dominance of Orientalism. The answer for Said is to be 'sensitive to what is involved in representation, in studying the Other, in racial thinking, in unthinking and uncritical acceptance of authority and authoritative ideas, in the socio-political role of intellectuals, in the great value of skeptical critical consciousness' (1978:327). Here the paramount obligation of the intellectual is to resist the

attractions of the 'theological' position of those implicated in the tradition of Orientalist discourse, and to emphasise a 'secular' desire to speak truth to power, to question and to oppose.

**Reference:** <https://literariness.org/2020/11/10/analysis-of-edward-saids-orientalism/>