A New Perspective in Orientalism

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Abstract

In his introduction to the term "Orientalism," Edward Said begins by paraphrasing the writing of a French journalist's view of the present-day Orient in order to express the major common Western misconception about the East. This misconception exists in the Western mind, according to Said, as if it were irrelevant that the Orient itself was actually sociologically affected. He then goes on to describe the basis of Orientalism, as it is rooted in the Western consciousness. Said uses the phrase "The Other" to describe the Western fascination with the Orient. This is a reference to Jacques Lacan's terminology, which describes the mirror stage of development. This is the stage in growth during which children supposedly learn their own identity by successfully separating their own being from a mirror image of themselves. In this context, someone only finds an idea of themselves through a contrast with an "Other." It is in this circumstance that our desires and expectations of being complete are projected onto this entity. This is a fitting comparison to Said's topic, considering the emphasis he puts on "the Orient's special place in the Western experience." Said suggests that the Orient does not mean the same to American as it does to the European countries, which fits logically into the equation (Europe as the analog of the child that derives its feeling of self from an "Other"). This makes historical sense, since the Orient was adjacent to Europe's earliest civilizations and the cultural exchange has always existed.

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The paper draws attention to this distinction and clarifies Orientalism, while also extending its breadth to all that is not considered West (The Middle East, India, Russia, etc.). Said notes that there has been a fair amount of interchange over the last few centuries over these two theoretical fields of coming to terms with the Orient. Said then proposes a third definition of Orientalism, using an analysis substantially more applicable in the historical context. Orientalism as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient, as the Western authority has done. He professes to be motivated here by Foucault's notion of a discourse. Michel Foucault's theories that have come to bear on this discussion are his ideas of the critical relationship under which the ontology of subject and object come to be known and how these associations may come to constitute knowledge. According to Foucault, the problem is not isolating any empirical conditions that may bring about this subjectivity, but to determine what the subject is and to what conditions it is subject. Said's application of this theory fits his definition well, and provides a strong platform for the rest of his argument. The Orient has, for much of history, been the active object to the European missionary and scientist positions.[1]

In his qualifications for interpreting Orientalism, Said includes several points of interest and clarification. He agrees with Disraeli, in saying that the East is more than just an idea with no corresponding reality. In fact, this is concurrent with the fact that many Western scholars have dedicated their entire lives to studying the Orient. Secondly, Said reinforces that it is irresponsible to discount the control that the West exercised over these societies. The study of Orientalism could not exist had the East not been the victim of Western power and domination.

"East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet."

(Rudyard Kipling, The Ballad of East and West)

In his much quoted verse above Rudyard Kipling revealed something of the nucleus of the long-lived tradition of Orientalist thought. According to J. J. Clarke: "the ambivalence of the West towards the East is age-old. The "rich cultures," "superior civilizations" and "ancient wisdom" of the Orient have inspired many Westerners, but on the other hand, the threats of its "monstrous mysteries" and "absurd religions" hailing from its "stagnant past" have abhorred at least as many. For many, the Orient has been a dominion of hordes and despots or spiritual mystics and exotic sensuality. Exaggeration and imagination together with a range of both positive and negative stereotypes connected to popular prejudices have been essential to these views. Encountering the East has been significant for the self-image of the West producing identities ranging from decadent European modernity to concepts of cultural, racial and moral superiority"[2]

Orientalism, for Said, means European academic and popular discourse about the Orient. The Orient has not been significant to Europe only for its sheer proximity, but for the fact that European states have had their richest and oldest colonies in the territory which has also been seen as the source of European civilizations and languages. In a way, the Orient has also been Europe's cultural contestant and, hence, one of the most significant images of the other. In addition to defining its Other by looking at the Orient, Europe has used the contrasting images, ideas, personalities and experiences of the Orient to define itself .Said's study of Orientalism as a discourse functions as an example of "the postcolonial predicament" of Asians and Westerners alike. In

Western scholarly work the West is either implicitly or explicitly, but nevertheless rather uncritically, accepted into a dichotomous relationship with the East, as Bhatnagar states: "Said was a part of a rather critical academic conjuncture around the turn of the 1980s, drawing on theoretical developments in deconstructionism, feminism, poststructuralism and neo-Marxism"[3]

In the case of India, Mary Douglas has claimed: "that India is 'a mirror image' of Europe and thus a totally opposite world to the West. Moreover, Louis Dumont imagined a modern Western society that – unlike India – aspires to rationality and was essentially individualist compared to the collectivist or holistic India"[4].

The Western imagery of the Orient makes the image of the Occident possible, and thus produces a kind of imagined binary ontology. It should be remembered, though, that the ethnocentrist binary anthologies are not only Western privilege. Non-Western societies – or any other societies for that matter – often have their own binary world-views dividing the peoples of their world. However, Western Orientalism is said to distinguish from Eastern Occidentalism for its intertwined relationship with colonialism. In Orientalist discourse, the Orient has been expressed and represented with the support of institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles. In Said's words Orientalism is: "the discipline by which the Orient was (and is) approached systematically, as topic of learning, discovery, and practice. But in addition I have been using the word to designate that collection of dreams, images and vocabularies available to anyone who has tried to talk about what lies east of the dividing line. These two aspects of Orientalism are not incongruent, since by use of them both Europe could advance securely and unmetaphorically upon the Orient"[5].

Orientalism, for Said, is "a kind of Western projection onto and will to govern over the Orient." Orientalists, he claims, have plotted their narratives about the history, character, and destiny of the Orient for centuries but in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the geographical vastness of the Orient had shrunk, the discipline had expanded with colonialism, and "Orientalism had accomplished its selfmetamorphosis from a scholarly discourse to an imperial institution." There was a new, positive, twist to Orientalism: "since one cannot ontologically obliterate the Orient [...], one does have the means to capture it, treat it, describe it, improve it, radically alter it."[6]

Although Edward Said concentrated mainly on European Orientalism focusing on Arab Middle East, the Saidian approach to Orientalist discourse is thought to be validly applicable to other parts of the non-Western world, and various scholars influenced by Said have expanded his theories to include India. In Orientalism   Said himself only occasionally refers to Orientalist discourse on India. For example, he mentions William Jones,the founder of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, who, according to Said, " with his vast knowledge of Oriental peoples was the undisputed founder of scholarly Orientalism. Jones wanted to know India better than anyone in Europe, and his aim was to rule, learn and compare the Orient with the Occident"[7]. Said finds it interesting that many of the early Orientalists concentrating on India were jurisprudents like Jones or doctors of medicine with strong involvement with missionary work.Said further says: " Most Orientalists had a kind of dual purpose of improving the quality of life of Indian peoples and advancing arts and knowledge back in the heart of the Empire"[8]

Said also describes Romantic Orientalism that sought to regenerate materialistic and mechanistic Europe by Indian culture, religion and spirituality. Biblical themes were used in the project: the death of cold Europe was imagined, its spiritual rebirth and redemption sought after, but India per se was not as significant as the use of India for modern Europe. The Orientalists mastering Oriental languages were seen as spiritual heroes or knight-errants who were giving back to Europe its lost holy mission. Although the themes were implicitly Christian, the Romantic project appeared secular in its post-Enlightenment ideology. It is rather obvious that unsatisfying Judeo-Christian thought and the "cold materialism" of Enlightenment made many Europeans seek for a lost spirit in the promised land of India, and, as Clarke describes: "search for childlike innocence, a vision of wholeness, a yearning for the recovery of what the poets and philosophers of the period felt the age had lost, namely a oneness with humankind and a oneness with nature, and for a reunification of religion, philosophy, and art which had been sundered in the modern Western world"[9].

Thus, there was a new twist to Orientalism, a 'metaphysical thirst' which for the Romantics replaced the earlier politico-ethical need of Orientalism. Thus India begun to be seen as 'the realm of Spirit.' The nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Orientalism was rather explicitly racist, lauding Indian caste system as protector of racial purity and seeing contemporary Indians as bastardized and hence inferior race to the 'original' and 'pure' Aryan race. The caste system of Aryan Vedic society seemed to them as a functional hierarchical system which had degenerated in time. However, the same Orientalists who formed these racist theories at the same time looked romanticizingly to the East to criticize the degenerate Europe. Clarke says: "When the Indian independence movement gathered momentum, Orientalist texts were used to evoke national self-identity. For example, Bhagavad Gita was respected as the core or uniting holy text of whole India and the Hindu Renaissance used Orientalist literature to form modern Hinduism and – concurrently – India's nationhood"[10].

According to Breckenridge and van der Veer, the consequent 'internal Orientalism' seems to have been

the most problematic issue in postcolonial scholarship of India. The Orientalist habits and categories still have such power that it is exceedingly difficult for either Indians or outsiders to view India without reverting to the outdated discourse. The Orientalist ideas of difference and division from the colonial times have affected – or perhaps, infected – the foundations of public life in India. In the postcolonial era, Breckenridge and van der Veer states:

"Orientalism without colonialism is a headless theoretical beast, that [is] much […] harder to identify and eradicate because it has become internalized in the practices of the postcolonial state, the theories of the postcolonial intelligentsia, and the political action of postcolonial mobs."[11]

Bhatnagar interprets Indo-Orientalism by applying Frantz Fanon's writings, who saw in colonialism a triangular dialogue with a permanent illusory confrontation that included the settler, the native and the native intellectual he further says: "In this realm versions of origins are offered and resisted in a continuing dialectic; thus Fanon likens the self-justifying ideological operation of colonialism to the mother "who unceasingly restrains her fundamentally perverse offspring from managing to commit suicide and from giving free rein to its evil instincts. The colonial mother protects her child from itself, from its ego, and from its physiology, its biology and its own unhappiness which is its very essence."[12]

According to Bhatnagar, Fanon sees this relationship as an Oedipal tyranny in which the colonized people search for identity and continually return to "the terms of opposition set by the colonial mother." An impossible pure origin is something the reactionary forces of indigenous revivalism use and long for to obtain meaning for its contemporary being. Bhatnagar claims that this uncritical and politically suspect ideology is especially dangerous in the Indian context where the plural and secular identity has had to give way to a Hindu identity that has its imagined source in the Vedic times.

The essentialism, and the concept of a religiously/spiritually unique India that goes well together with it has become part of Indian nationalistic politics where all group differences are seen as dangerous separatisms. In contemporary India, a political group (e.g. a labor union) is in dire straits to constitute itself on the basis of shared interest without others thinking the interests are only a disguise for religious, caste or sectarian interests. "This essentialization and somaticization of group differences is probably the most damaging part of the orientalist bequest to postcolonial politics."[13]. Especially the reinforcement of Muslim-Hindu opposition was a significant fundamental contribution of Orientalism in India. In Orientalist knowledge the two groups were essentialized and later institutionalized in nationalist political representations.

The final reality that must be addressed to bring a greater understanding of Orientalism is what Said calls the personal dimension He mentions his upbringing, the pertinence of which relates back to the aforementioned methodological devices considering his particular background and previous knowledge of those who are involved in the Orient. Some elements of his personal reflection on Orientalism are the long history of prejudice against people of Arab and Islamic descent, the struggle between the Arabs and the Israelis, and its effects on American population. The one-sidedness of this struggle has to do mainly with the largely liberal American identification with Zionism and the reinforcement of stereotypes of the Orient in the electronic and popular media. His remaining comments include that his experiences as a person of Arab descent are what motivated him to write about Orientalism in the first place. For someone who is so directly and negatively affected by Western perceptions of the Arab world and the Orient altogether, his analysis is a fairly objective and sophisticated view of Orientalism. Perhaps it is because of his experiences with lifelong stereotypes and the apparent dichotomy of Western and Eastern approaches to the subject.

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