

# Orientalism Summary

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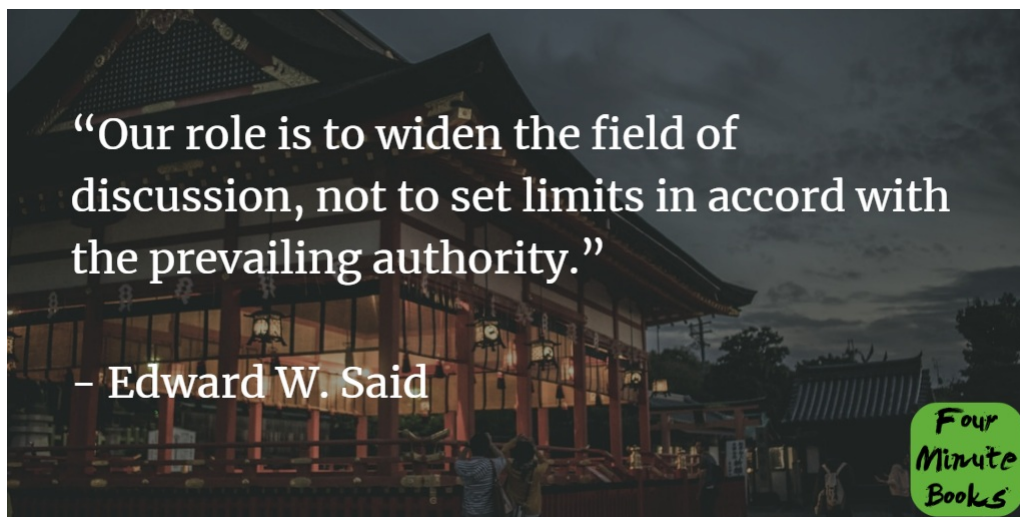


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**1-Sentence-Summary:** *Orientalism reveals Western nation's assumptions about and racism toward Eastern countries that date back to the 1700s and still affect the way many people see the Eastern world today.*

**Read in:** 4 minutes

**Favorite quote from the author:**



Do you remember the last time you saw a travel ad for a place in Asia? It was likely portrayed as seductive and exotic. A completely different picture than the West's rational, scientific atmosphere, right?

Sadly, these depictions are not only false, but they're also harmful. As the West imposes its views of what Eastern countries actually are, it misconstrues this part of the world as something more akin to being from a fairy tale. This type of marketing and thinking further divides an already segregated world.

Orientalism is the study of the Orient or the Eastern world. But it's also the title of a book by Edward Said that reviews the effect of this belief system on the connections of Eastern and Western nations. This book reviews the history of this idea and how it's still prevalent today.

Here are the 3 most interesting lessons I learned about Orientalism:

1. Western people fabricated views of Eastern nations, telling stories in ways that would benefit Western nations.
2. The inroads of Orientalism made it difficult for even those with a genuine interest in the East to see it truthfully.

3. Although the name has faded, three key characteristics still govern modern Orientalism today.

Are you ready for this book to upend what you think you know about Eastern nations? Let's begin!

## Lesson 1: Western nations falsified information about the East for their own gain.

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Orientalists, or "experts" on the Orient, misidentified this part of the world. They classified these countries initially as a way to approach and understand them. The false belief sprouted that people from these areas were stereotypically exotic and irrational, letting their passions run wild. But nobody knew for sure, and the lies continued to perpetuate further.

When we study something, we get positive results, right? In the case of the Orient, studying it had the opposite effect by reinforcing the subjugation many of these areas were under. What began as a form of understanding quickly grew into a means for political and economic gain.

Napoleon, for example, led an expedition to Egypt that included over 150 scientists and scholars. These later became Orientalists who protected trade between Egypt and France.

**They portrayed the Koran to characterize the French army's influence as advantageous to this Oriental nation.**

Orientalism even went so far as to set itself up as a judge of what the people of the Orient were or weren't. The Orientalist authorities claimed to know more about these parts of the world than the people who lived there did. And the more the West learned about their Eastern neighbors, the greater their power and dominance over the Orient was.

## Lesson 2: While some made an attempt to understand the East, earlier forms of Orientalism got in the way of seeing these nations accurately.

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Not long ago I went on a trip to Spain. I found myself wanting to spend time with the locals instead of at all of the tourist destinations. After visits with multiple friends in Spain and seeing the sights, I realized that the people were much more interesting and important to me than any building or museum.

Orientalists of the 19th century similarly wanted to get to know the culture of these regions. Unfortunately, it was much harder to actually see and experience the culture accurately because of the Orientalist way of thinking.

Edward Lane was one of these that sought to really know the people of the East. His immersion in the daily life of Orientals was his way of understanding them. After this experience, he withdrew to what he knew so he could report on his discoveries.

However, the true nature of these regions was lost in the fog of Orientalist nuances surrounding these cultures. Lumping people together into categories like Oriental, Arab, or Jew, for example, did help people understand this part of the world. **Sadly, because of this characterization method, much of the diversity within individuals in these nations was lost.**

It also kept everyone from seeing these people accurately. The common notion was that Orientals were irrational. Upon discovering a rational-thinking Easterner, most Westerners dismissed them as an exception.

### Lesson 3: Orientalism is still alive today, and we can see it in three distinct places.

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Colonialism may be long gone, but the tenets of Orientalism are still alive and well today. A new form of this lie perpetuates in the United States, and focuses on three key aspects:

- Popular Imagination
- Universities
- Government Policies

Let's take a closer look at each of these.

A good example of the influence of Orientalism in popular imagination is the concept of the Arab, formed during the oil crisis of 1973. Cartoons of Arab sheik's by oil pumps became prominent in the 70s. Such images continued throughout the 19th and 20th centuries in various anti-Semitic pamphlets as well. **This stereotype cast the East as the villain and made people think of Arabs as less civilized to justify American intervention.**

Take a look at any sociology, history, anthropology, or political science department at a university and you can see Orientalism continues here too. Dialogue and generalizations speaking of "Arabs," "Muslims," or "Islamic culture" set these nations up an opposing threat to the West.

Government Policies also preserve the benefits to foreign policy that Orientalism provides. Funded research and books like Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations*, which further perpetuate the clash of East and West, act as a means of foreign policy. Many don't realize that these ideas began hundreds of years ago with a way of thinking that was racist, demeaning, and a lie.

## Orientalism Review

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Although I didn't notice the word racism in the Blinkist summary, *Orientalism* is all about racism. I had no idea that the idea of the Orient was a wild fabrication to benefit Western nations. It seems that this has led to much of the modern-day misunderstandings and racism toward some of the Eastern nations. I'm glad to now be aware of this predisposition so I can work toward removing it!

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## Who would I recommend the Orientalism summary to?

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The 45-year-old historian who is interested in getting a more balanced view of the world, the 21-year-old college student who is learning about Eastern civilizations in their classes, and anyone who lives in a Western country.