

## ***Orientalism* by Edward Said**

*Orientalism* is a 1978 non-fiction book by Arab-American historian Edward Said. Exploring themes including colonialism, racism, and imperialism, the title of *Orientalism* refers to the way Western academia studies Eastern cultures. Considered one of the most important works regarding how Western and Eastern cultures interact, *Orientalism* is critically acclaimed for its exhaustive work in chronicling the history of cultural exchange and the negative implications towards Eastern cultures that followed, although it is considered controversial for the negative view it casts on traditional scholarship in the field. *Orientalism* is considered a foundational text in the field of post-colonial culture studies, and has been debated extensively both during Said's life and after.

*Orientalism* is a historical text, and as such does not have a conventional narrative. Rather, it moves from topic to topic, exploring how the imperial-minded study of Orientalism influences the cultures it purports to be exploring. Said states that Orientalism is the exaggeration of difference, the presumption of Western superiority, and the use of clichés and outmoded analytical models for interpreting the Eastern world. Said holds Orientalism responsible for the inaccurate cultural representations that until recently have served as the foundation of Western study of the Eastern world. Said has a particular focus on the way the Middle East is portrayed, and considers Orientalism a source of persistent Eurocentric prejudice against Arabs and Muslims. He states that East Asian cultures dominate Western perspective of the region, and all others are frequently ignored.

Said holds the Arab elites of the region partially responsible for the spread of Orientalism as well, stating that Europeanized Arab elites have internalized the fictional, romanticized portrayals of Arab culture. As such, they often pattern their cultures not after Arab historical influence but after what Western cultures portray as their heyday. Said states that Orientalist stereotypes of the cultures of the Eastern world serve as implicit justifications for colonial ambitions, and that his people are frequently viewed as little more than oil suppliers or potential terrorists, which frequently leads to military action against the region.

*Orientalism* proposes that most Western study of Islamic civilization comes not from an honest perspective, but from one of political intellectualism. Its goal is to affirm European identity and leave the student with a sense of superiority, rather than examining another culture from an objective perspective. As such, Orientalism served as a method of cultural discrimination and was used as justification of empire. Thus, Said asserts that the Western portrayals and writings of Eastern cultures from earlier time periods cannot be trusted due to their biased perspectives. European colonial rule distorts all intellectual objectivity, even of the most renowned and sympathetic Western student of Orientalism.

According to Said, the Western world dominated the Eastern world for over two thousand years, beginning with Greek conquests of the Persians and proceeding until the time *Orientalism* was written. As such, the practice of Orientalism was normalized. Eastern languages and arts were appropriated and became believed in time to be Western creations. The East became known as exotic and inscrutable, and Western scholars viewed it as inherently inferior. One of Said's most well-known concepts is that of The Other. Said states that Western scholarship tends to cast the Orient as an irrational, psychologically weak and feminized other, which is contrasted negatively with the West, which is usually portrayed as rational, strong and masculine. This leads to Western scholars separating themselves psychologically from the people they study. This binary relationship is used to justify colonialism and other harmful policies towards Eastern nations.

*Orientalism* is considered one of the most significant texts in the study of East-West relationships, and came to prominence during the 1970s when great upheaval was occurring in the Middle East. It is considered to have perpetrated a sea change in the study of literary theory, cultural studies, and human geography. All fields were heavily reformed to purge themselves of Orientalist thought, and the field of post-colonial studies was born out of this reform.

Edward Said is considered one of the forefathers of the field of post-colonial studies. A professor of literature at Columbia University, he was best known for *Orientalism*, although he also wrote an additional seven books in the areas of literary criticism and decolonization. Said was as known for his politics as for his writings. Heavily active in left wing and anti-colonialist politics, he was known for speaking out against western powers including the United States. He was prominent as a member of the Palestinian National Council and advocated for the establishment of a Palestinian state. He was also an accomplished pianist, and co-founded the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, which brings together young Arab and Israeli musicians. Said won many award prior to his death in 2010, including Harvard's Bowdoin Prize, the New Yorker Book Award for Non-Fiction, and the Wellek

Prize of the American Comparative Literature Association. His work, *Orientalism* in particular, is still taught extensively in colleges.

/\*\*

*Orientalism* by Edward Said is a canonical 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 orientalists (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:

### **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 in to two parts by using the concept of *ours* and *theirs*. An imaginary geographical line was drawn between what was *ours* and what *wastheirs*. The orientals were regarded as uncivilized people; and the westerns 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 orientalists 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 orientalist of the 19<sup>th</sup> 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 20<sup>th</sup> century. The main difference was that where the earlier orientalists were more of silent observers the new orientalists took a part in the everyday life of the orientals. The earlier orientalists did not interact a lot with the orientals, whereas the new orientalists 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 orientalists.

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 whereas 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.