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Orientalism: clearing the way for cultural dialogue

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Abstract

Said's *Orientalism* has opened up reflections that were practically unthinkable under the hegemony of Orientalist discourse. By dismantling the Orientalist thesis of the hierarchy of Self and Other, of the West and the Orient, the book helped remove mental barriers, creating an intellectual space for cultural dialogues. The most striking achievement of *Orientalism* has been the undoing of racist dualisms. The book sets an example of how institutionalised biases can be questioned and ultimately redressed. This questioning in turn permitted the rise of alternative perspectives on the Other that went beyond Islam and the 'Orient'. Marginalised sectors in society have been inspired by *Orientalism* to question dominant views.

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Demystifying *Orientalism*

Orientalism and subsequent works of Said dealing with Islam in particular and the Other in general have contributed to opening unsuspected avenues of rethinking, and a space where dialogues of cultures, religions, beliefs and literatures are possible. Rather than a clash of civilisations, Said has made possible the 'dialogue of civilisations', as espoused by President Khatimi of the Islamic Republic of Iran, among others. Said's *Orientalism* did not initiate the dialogue, but it removed the intellectual barriers. It demolished the wall that had prevented genuine exchanges among cultures. At best, Orientalist discourse had turned cultural exchanges into a dialogue of the deaf and at worst had pitted one culture against another, creating an arena of conflict and confrontation, of hierarchy and racism. Knowledge of the Other was not presented and used in Orientalist discourse better to understand the Other, but better to confirm the Other's inferiority and not just difference, thus justifying the imperial quest. Anyone who reads Said's

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Orientalism as an attack on the West, or as a dualistic struggle between the East and the West, has completely missed the point. Said argues against the creation of entities essentialising a region or a people, whether it be East or West. His endeavour is precisely to demolish the conceptual constructions that divide the world into confrontational cultures or hierarchical civilisations. Said shows the hollowness of the field and deconstructs its premises.

In short, we can say that instead of the Orientalist paradigm in which the West was positioned on top and the East below, Said's *Orientalism* put the cultures of both on a horizontal level and revealed the racist underpinning of Orientalist discourse. Said's book contributed in a radical way to the shift from viewing Orientalists as high priests in the temples of knowledge to viewing them as agents of information gathering in the service of an ideological cause. 'Facts' were often manipulated to present disinformation in the respectable garb of specialised knowledge. Said demonstrated how the intricate web of relations between colonial authority and Orientalist discourse functions. The politician Cromer quotes the scholar Alfred Lyall:

'Sir Alfred Lyall once said to me: "Accuracy is abhorrent to the Oriental mind. ..." Want of accuracy, which easily degenerates into untruthfulness, is in fact the main characteristic of the Oriental mind. The European is a close reasoner, his statements of fact are devoid of any ambiguity; he is a natural logician, albeit he may not have studied logic. ... The mind of the Oriental, on the other hand, like his picturesque streets, is eminently wanting in symmetry. His reasoning is of the most slipshod description.' (cited in Said, 1978, p. 38)

Similes such as 'picturesque' and exclusive dualism stylistically present a hierarchical opposition between a competent Westerner and a deficient Easterner. This difference is presented not as a matter of education but as a matter of genetics, for the European is a 'natural logician'. These views in turn have pervaded such branches of culture as literature, fine arts and music, constituting a web in which the made-up Oriental is trapped. Writers like Flaubert and Nerval, Chateaubriand and Lamartine derived their views of the Other from the programmed discourse of Orientalists.

The prejudices of Orientalist scholars were often explicit and occasionally implicit. What Said has shown is that despite the variations among them, the Other remained a blind spot on their epistemological map. To specialise in a culture and produce monographs on it does not automatically yield an understanding of that culture. At times the lack of empathy and dehumanisation of the Other were latent and camouflaged in the arduous work the Orientalists undertook in editing, classifying and translating Arabic texts. There is no reason to belittle these contributions. However, Said draws our attention to the larger picture: where such scholarly works are embedded and how they are used not to fathom the culture of others but to dominate them. Said points out how Orientalism is a branch of knowledge maintained and supported as part of a colonial policy, not as a component of a humanist vision. Thus the motivation itself is suspect. Orientalist works, *grosso modo*, confirmed biases and created certain negative images of the so-called Orient, Arabs and Islamic peoples.

By revealing the mechanisms and the modes of undermining foreign cultures and the Other, Said removed the halo of the specialists and of institutional knowledge. We can now read the Orientalists not as revered scholars but as agents of the cultural phase of domination policy that ascribes prestige to itself by relying on experts who disparage the accomplishments of others. We have learned to look critically at revered scholarship.

Beyond *Orientalism*

After *Orientalism*, we cannot approach the works of well-known Orientalists as pure knowledge, untainted by politics, but as a mixture of knowledge and politics—all the more dangerous as scholarship veils the political. By displacing the glory of Orientalists, Said created a space where indigenous scholars—the voices of the Other—can be heard. Said allowed a different configuration of voices to emerge and opened up the confined space to broader horizons. Arab and Islamic scholars are no longer mere informants for specialised Westerners but are themselves spokespersons able to express views and work out facts in theoretical frameworks. This shift does not mean that the native intellectual is free of ideological biases and cannot adopt an ‘Orientalist’ posture or its mirror image, a ‘Nativist’ posture, but that the monopoly of representation is broken.

Said’s *Orientalism*, though it dealt with a given field of study and demystified an entrenched discipline, went in its effect beyond the so-called Orient. All ‘Others,’ all people marginalised by culture, race, class or gender, could apply the methodology of *Orientalism* in laying bare the prejudices surrounding them. Feminists as well as minorities demystified common myths in a way analogous to Said’s.

In my own work, which deals with comparative literature, Arabic literature traditionally occupied a marginalised corner, if it was not altogether banished. Comparative literature meant European comparative literature. If non-European literatures were allowed in this field, it was only to compare them with European literatures. In other words, Europe was the centre, and all other literatures could only aspire to position themselves on the peripheries of the centre. Said’s *Orientalism* helped to change this equation. Comparative literature today takes up Third World literatures seriously and enthusiastically. In fact, post-colonial literature and third world literature are in the mainstream now, thanks partly to *Orientalism*. Literary criticism and critical theory used to depend on mainstream European literatures, but more and more critics and theoreticians are referring to cases in non-European literatures to elucidate an issue. The Orientalists’ appropriation of texts written east and south of Europe is challenged. Their clubby scholarship has been unveiled. Thus we come across mainstream literary theory based on Bengali narratives as in the works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and criticism drawing on Arabic theoreticians the works of Said himself. In *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Said, 1983) Said points out the relevance of Ibn Hazm’s approach to the Koranic text in resolving the contemporary controversy over the paradox of the ahistoricity and historicity of literary texts. In Arab-Islamic culture the revealed text is timeless, yet related to a historical context. It addresses concerns of the new believers. Said recognises both the significance of textuality—the text as an aesthetic object that is not limited to its circumstantial genesis—and the insertion of the text in a historical context. Ibn Hazm, the medieval Arab scholar who opted for the school of interpretation that emphasised the event and the context in understanding the Koran, is referred to in Said’s critical theory not so much in order to expose a chapter in Islamic hermeneutics as to show how the Andalusian scholar can illuminate modern-day controversies—how a text can be both historical and metahistorical. Said proposes a double perspective exemplified in Ibn Hazm’s approach:

What Ibn Hazm does ... is to view language as possessing two seemingly antithetical characteristics: that of a divinely ordained institution, unchanging, immutable, logical, rational,

intelligible; and that of an instrument existing as pure contingency, as an institution signifying meanings anchored in specific utterances. (Said, 1978, p. 38)

Said's *Orientalism* also helped us to rethink other hierarchical and power relations in the Academy. Not confined to the way the East is portrayed in Western academic institutions, critics began to look critically into all other hierarchies in literature—elite versus popular, male versus female, written versus oral, the past versus the present—and to reflect on their underlying networks of imagery. In other words, all hegemonies and institutions of learning were investigated. In Islamic studies the dominant discourse on Islam gave way to an understanding of the ideological and political basis of many an interpretation that has been canonised. Progressive and radical interpretations like those of Nasr Hamid Abu-Zayd in his *Mafhum al-nass* (The Concept of the Text) (Abu-Zayd, 1990) distinguished between the divine text of the Koran and the human interpretations of the Koran influenced by the ideological factor. Even issues like grammar and the conflict between the grammarians of Basra and the grammarians of Kufa in medieval Iraq are read to reflect the political unconscious of the two groups (see Abu-Zayd, 1988). This sensibility to the underlying ideological motivation in a field that seems to be as bias-free as grammar would have been improbable in Arabic and Islamic studies before the lessons of *Orientalism*. Thanks to Said, our skepticism towards objectivity has opened to us the possibility of revisiting and rethinking our heritage. Said's *Orientalism* has been treated not only as a book about 'Orientalists' but also a work laying bare the mechanism of elite and institutional knowledge. In that spirit, Arab feminists concerned with Islam have looked critically at the fixed theological discourse and have distinguished between the sacred source and its exegesis by the patriarchal elite. They have drawn attention to the letter of the divine text versus the interpretation of human erudites. Fatima Mernissi's *Women in Islam: An Historical and Theological Inquiry* (Mernissi, 1991) and Leila Ahmed's *Women and Gender in Islam* (Ahmed, 1992) are examples of the new roads taken. Hoda Elsadda, an Egyptian feminist who co-directs the Women and Memory Forum, has singled out in an interview Said's *Orientalism* as the spark that triggered her interest in the representation of women and feminism (see Elsadda, 1999, p. 210).

With the crumbling of established hierarchies, the mainstream has begun accepting what used to be peripheral. We have started looking in comparative literature not only to West–West or to West–East but also to East–East and to South–South relations and analogies. Our offerings in the departments of English and Comparative Literature have begun to include such courses as African Literature and Anglophone Literatures. More and more graduate students have opted for hybrid literatures from the ex-colonised world as topics for theses and dissertations. South Indian, North African and West Asian critics—Aijaz Ahmad, Abdelkaber Khatibi and Adonis, to mention a few—have become as relevant as Northrop Frye, Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco. The frame of reference has not been confined to a few names from the First World. This enlargement could not have happened without Said's contribution to undermining the monopoly of a certain branch of knowledge and exposing its deformations. Clearly, all the credit cannot go to Said, but we can say that *Orientalism* functioned as a catalyst. It exploded certain false convictions and paved the road to other viewpoints. Said does not argue for replacing Orientalists by Nativists or for pitting a field of Occidentalism against that of Orientalism. He simply undermines the generalising and disparaging tendency of one field of learning in order to make room for a genuine examination of cultures, thus making cultural dialogue possible.

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