

THEORETICAL PROBLEMS OF EDWARD SAID'S ORIENTALISM

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ABSTRACT

Said's most significant argument is that texts of Orientalism can create not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe. At the same time his most important political claim is that as a system of learning about the Orient, Orientalism has close ties to enabling socio-economic and political institutions to the extent that it can be seen to have justified colonialism in advance as well as successfully facilitating its successful operation. On the one hand Said maintains that Orientalism is a system of representation, a discursive field with an internal consistency', which has no connection with the 'real Orient', while on the other hand he also seeks to prop colonialism and imperialism on the knowledge accumulated or constructed by Orientalism. In the present paper we look into the theoretical objections of Aijaz Ahmad and Robert Young to Said's position regarding Orientalism as a discourse in the Foucauldian mould.

Keywords: Orientalism, Discourse, Representation, Indicative, Subjunctive, Humanism, Anti-humanism

Raymond Williams makes a very useful distinction between “indicative” and “subjunctive” texts. Whereas the former simply indicate what is happening in the world, the latter, he argues, gestures toward a radical perspective or impulse which is neither socially nor politically available, neither for that matter entirely permissible within the established social order. Thus “subjunctive” texts are always 'attempting to lift certain pressures, to push back certain limits; and at the same time, in a fully extended production, bearing the full weight of the pressures and limits, in which the simple forms, the simple contents of mere ideological representation can never achieve'¹. Said's critics, particularly Aijaz Ahmed, invoke the logic of William's distinction between “indicative” and “subjunctive” texts to insist that *Orientalism* is utterly and simply boringly symptomatic and indicative of what was happening in the Anglo-American academy in the late 1970's and early 1990s. These critics insist that the academic world of Said's book was still recovering from the cataclysmic events of 1968. As is well known, this date commemorates the accidents of a utopian revolution which swept across Europe, bringing workers and students in a combined and unprecedented offensive against authoritarian educational institutions and the capitalist state. The agitation, of course, spluttered to a pathetic end on the streets of Paris - partly due to the disorganized character of the offensive itself, and partly because of the betrayal of the movement by its Stalinist leaders. The failures of 1968 brought in their wake a serious and disillusioned reconsideration of Marxist theory and its omissions. To some extent, this reconsideration was articulated through post structuralism - a theoretical enterprise which acquired academic prominence in the period directly leading to the publication of *Orientalism*. Consider Aijaz Ahmed in *In Theory*: ‘*Orientalism* appeared in 1978, a rather precise point in the history of the world, in the history of the demographic composition and reorganization of the political conjuncture in the United States, and in the history of intellectual productions in the metropolitan countries generally. Each of these aspects ...

have some bearing on how books were being read, and how this book in particular intervened in intellectual history'.²

Talking of the precise time when this book acquired distinction and guided intellectual opinion, Ahmed says that coupled with the disillusionment of 1968, the absence of serious or legitimate "leftist" thought made the era reactionary in which most intellectuals guiltily took refuge in ecologism and Third-Worldism:

'The characteristic posture of this new intellectual was that he or she would gain legitimacy on the left by fervently referring to the Third World, Cuba, national liberation, and so on, but would also be openly and contemptuously anti-communist; would often enough not only not affiliate even with that other tradition which had also descended from classical Marxism, namely social democracy, nor be affiliated in any degree with any labour movement whatsoever, but would invoke an anti-bourgeoisie stance in the name of manifestly reactionary anti-humanisms enunciated in the Nietzschean tradition and propagated now under the signature of anti-empiricism, anti-historicism, structuralism and post-structuralism'.³

Ahmed says that the time of *Orientalism* coincided with the global offensive of the right, global retreat of the left, and the retreat also of that which was progressive even in our canonical nationalisms. This provides the essential backdrop for the analysis of the structure of intellectual productions and their reception in our time. The emergence of an entirely new type of intellectual, who had strong antipathy for Marxism and still called themselves from the left, is, according to Ahmad, symptomatic of the post 1968 era. Orientalism is symptomatic of the age and simply and tiredly "indicative" of what was going on in the academic circles post 1968.

This assertion that Orientalism is simply "indicative" does not stand scrutiny as it can be shown to be "subjunctive" in that it challenges and codifies the structural and formal boundaries of Western thought.

Aijaz Ahmed discusses the emergence of the category "Third World Literature" and its relation to the pattern of immigration to the metropolitan centers. 1960 onwards, a substantial number of Asian immigrants found their way to the metropolis based now among the petty-bourgeois and techno-managerial strata. Those who came as students in the Humanities and the Social Sciences, tended to come from the upper classes in their home countries. In the process of relocating themselves in the metropolitan centers, they needed to prove that they were the oppressed. According to Ahmed, the upwardly mobile professionals in these metropolitan centers found out to their benefit that the narratives of oppression could get them preferential treatment, reserved jobs, higher salaries in the social position they already occupied, namely, as middle-class professionals, mostly male. *For such purposes, Orientalism was the perfect narrative.* When, only slightly later, enough women found themselves in that same position, the category of the "Third World Female Subaltern" was found highly serviceable.

There is some substance in his specific criticisms of Orientalism but there is also reason to argue that in his criticism of Said, Ahmed ventures a bit too far. To ascribe all his achievements, his place in the Western literary critical pantheon to his roots in the upper strata of a once colonized place is, to say the least, a protest carried too far. Not until the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* did Eurocentrism and its relation to colonialism become a significant issue for Anglo-American literary

theory. Only two years earlier, Said had protested that “the literary-cultural establishment as a whole had declared the serious study of imperialism off limits”; it would not be too much to suggest that *Orientalism* broke that prescription, and as such cannot be underestimated in its importance and in its effects⁵ It has been the salutary effect of *Orientalism* on subsequent literary criticism in the Anglo-American literary critical establishment that there has emerged a substantial tradition of political criticism. 'His injunction that criticism must be affiliated to the world of which it is a part has exercised a powerful moral pressure. It has also enabled those from minorities, whether categorized as racial, sexual, social, or economic, to stake their critical work in relation to their own political positioning rather than feel obliged to assume the transcendent values of the dominant discourse of criticism. This in turn has contributed to the widespread interrogation of the history and presuppositions of that dominant discourse and, particularly, its relation to Western imperialism in both its colonial and neo-colonial phases.'⁶

Despite the acclaimed success of *Orientalism*, there are some criticisms of Said - some forceful and valid while some overstretched. It has been an accusation against Said that he borrowed freely from various writers coming from diverse fields but failed to acknowledge his debt to any one of them in any major way. Said borrowed and built upon the earlier studies of Tibawi, Alatas, Abdel-Malek, Djait and others such as Abdullah Laroui, Talal Asad, K.M. Pannikar, Romila Thapar, and so on, but he did not acknowledge any one of them. *Orientalism* seems to have emerged ready-made and fully-fledged, as though from nowhere, and proceeded to shape and dominate the debate. Aijaz Ahmad says:

'As one turns to Said's actual citations of Romila Thapar, one finds that the only publications of hers that he cites are two text books on ancient and medieval India which she wrote, very much on the side, for middle school pupils. The idea that Thapar's seminal work on Indian history is to be known only through her little textbooks is somewhat breath-taking. As for his other reference to an Indian writer in this list, the whole range of Said's citations - and he is copious in this matter - seems to suggest that the only significant book by an Indian writer that had come his way until well after he had published *Orientalism* in 1978, was, precisely, K.M. Panikkar's good old *Asia and Western Dominance*'.⁷

According to his critics, thus, Said says nothing new in *Orientalism*. Said is not raising any new questions; neither is he providing a critique more profound or more thorough than his predecessors. As James Clifford notes, 'in the French context, the kinds of critical questions posed by Said have been familiar since the Algerian war and may be found strongly expressed well before 1950'⁸ Ziauddin Sardar says that Said's contribution is not very significant when compared to Hodgson, Daniel and Southern on the one hand and Tibawi, Alatas and Djait on the other. Nevertheless, Said's book did start a new debate focused specifically on something called “the Orient”.

The new debate started by Said is based on some innovative features of *Orientalism*. First, to the standard scholarly and historical analysis, Said added a new dimension: literary criticism. To Arabists like Ockley and Gibb, colonial administrators like Cromer and Curzon, travellers like Burton and Doughty, historians like Muier, and Frenchmen like Volney and Chateaubriand, Said added a new category: the values that enabled empire and Imperial exploitation, he argued, also shaped not just the fiction of writers like Kipling, Forster and Conrad but the novels of even those figures we rarely associate with imperialism such as Austen, Dickens, Hardy and Henry James. Indeed, Said contends, there would have been no European novel without imperialism. Second, and most important

theoretically, Said was able to bring the different strands of scholarly critiques of Orientalism into a multi-disciplinary cultural analysis. In *Orientalism*, Said argues that analysis of the politics of Western ethnocentrism must begin with the question of representation as formulated by Foucault. Foucault contended that knowledge is constructed according to the rules and limits of a “discursive field” and every writer has to be in conformity with these rules to be understood, 'to remain in the true' and to be accepted. Said shows how this also works for the European constructions of knowledge about other cultures. *Orientalism* argues that a complex set of representations was fabricated which for the West effectively became “the Orient” and determined its understanding of it, as well as providing the basis for its subsequent self-appointed imperialist rule. Said's contribution in *Orientalism* is his positing of Orientalism as a discourse in the Foucauldian mould. Said says in *Orientalism*:

'I have found it useful here to employ Michel Foucault's notion of a discourse, as described by him in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and in *Discipline and Punish*, to identify Orientalism. My contention is that without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly 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'.⁹

Said presented Orientalism as the grandest of all narratives despite all his assertions against the metanarratives or grand narratives as he calls them.

Said's acceptance of the Foucauldian discourse theory led him to a corner from where he seems unable to extradite himself. Foucault's discourse is a coercive structure by its very definition. Young says, '... the entirely correct refusal to offer an alternative to Orientalism does not solve the problem of how Said separates himself from the coercive structures of knowledge that he is describing. What method can he use to analyse his object that escapes the terms of his own critique? The absence of such a method constitutes the significant lacuna of the book, with the result that in many cases, Said finds himself repeating the very structures that he censures'.¹⁰

This problem can be seen to be more serious at a general level in relation to the whole project of the book itself. Any account of “Orientalism” as an object will both repeat the essentialism that he condemns and more problematically, will itself create a representation that cannot be identical to the object it identifies. Said's account will be no truer to Orientalism than Orientalism is to the actual Orient, assuming that there could be such a thing. The question that begs attention is - what kind of representation can be posited - if at all? The coercive structure of knowledge which force a critic to represent something in the ambit of its own rules and structures will demand a different methodology if at all he wishes not to repeat the structures that are being criticized. Said's inability to provide any alternative forms of knowledge, or a theoretical model for such knowledge, results from his unwillingness to address the problem of methodology in any rigorous way. The theoretical difficulty which emerges in *Orientalism* is highly instructive for any attempt at decolonization of European thought.

Said finds himself entangled in the problem of representation. He is found quoting Nietzsche in *Orientalism*. Since language is the medium of representation and as Nietzsche says language is 'a mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms - in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed and embellished poetically and rhetorically,

and which after long use seem firm, canonical and obligatory to a people: truth are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are'¹¹

Said himself says in *Orientalism*, 'I believe it needs to be made clear about cultural discourse and exchange within a culture that what is commonly circulated by it is not "truth" but representations'¹². The question that poses itself most forcefully in *Orientalism* is whether there can be a true representation of anything. Said's position is that there is no possibility of a true representation of anything given the nature of language, the limitations on our thoughts imposed by culture and the facts of power. If this is Said's position, he has no moral right to question the "truth" of Orientalist representations of the "Orient". Any representation is equally near to the truth and Said cannot claim that his "Orient" is nearer to the actual "Orient" any more than the Orient of the Orientalists.

Said's most significant argument is that texts of Orientalism 'can create not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe'.¹³ At the same time his most important political claim is that as a system of learning about the Orient, Orientalism has close ties to enabling socio-economic and political institutions to the extent that it can be seen to have justified colonialism in advance as well as successfully facilitating its successful operation. On the one hand Said maintains that Orientalism is a system of representation, a discursive field with an internal consistency', which has no connection with the 'real Orient', while on the other hand he also seeks to prop colonialism and imperialism on the knowledge accumulated or constructed by Orientalism. Robert Young remarks, 'This means that at a certain moment Orientalism as representation did have to encounter the "actual" conditions of what was there, and that is showed itself effective at a material level as a form of power and control. How then can Said argue that the "Orient" is just a representation, if he also wants to claim that "Orientalism" provided the necessary knowledge for actual colonial conquest.

Said posits a genealogy of Orientalism in which its essential characteristics are shown to repeat themselves throughout historical time from Aeschylus to the present day. Said divides the history of Orientalism in two parts - the first is its development as a system of thought, as an academic discipline and the second is the employment of Orientalism in the exercise of power. 'The book therefore falls in two halves, the first concerned with the invention of the Orient by Europe, and its construction as a representation, the second with the moment when this representation and the academic knowledge that was fabricated around it, became an instrument in the service of colonial power as the Orient shifted from an "alien to a colonial space", and an academic attitude became an instrumental one, participating in and shaping oriental history for the first time'.¹⁴

Said faces the major theoretical difficulty of showing how a representation that it is claimed bears no relation to its putative object could nevertheless be put in the service of the control and domination of that object. Said attempts to overcome this difficulty by propagating the idea that, in the later nineteenth century, the Orientalist "essentializing vision" was increasingly susceptible to the pressure of "narrative" or history. Said argues that there are two different kinds of Orientalism - the Orientalism of "representation" and that of the "real". That is, there are two forms of Orientalism - that of the apparatuses of classical scholarship, constructing its object, and that of the 'descriptions of a present, modern, manifest Orient articulated by travellers, pilgrims, statesmen'¹⁵ Robert young says that Said's resolution of the problem is far from satisfactory. Rajnath says, 'I at times feel that Said would have been on safer ground, had he concentrated on the Orientalists' overall attitude towards the Orient rather than the complicity between Orientalism and the West's will to political power over the

East. We cannot maintain that there was always complicity between Orientalism and imperialism and that the Orientalists were only paving the way for colonization. This complicity so much stressed by Said founders on German Orientalists whose studies in the religion and culture of the East did not result in a German empire.¹⁶

Furthermore, if Said denies that there is any actual Orient which could provide a true account of the Orient represented by Orientalism, how can he claim in any sense that the representation is false? Having denied the category of the “Orient” altogether, he sidesteps the difficulty by positing another one in its place which we may call human. While his theoretical mentor Foucault was specifically concerned with attacking the human as an explanatory or experiential category, Said constantly appeals to the values of humanism and to the notion of the human spirit. Said's fundamental thesis is that Orientalism involves an attempt to eliminate “humanistic values” and that “Orientalist reality is both anti-human and persistent.

Said's penchant for humanism and the “human” lead him to a theoretical difficulty. His mentor and theoretical master Foucault, of whose debt Said himself unequivocally acknowledges, jettisoned any humanistic affiliation. In fact, Said's theory of Orientalism as a discourse itself comes from the anti-humanistic tradition of Nietzsche. On the one hand he accuses the Western humanistic tradition of complicity in, or precisely still, of having roots in discrimination for defining the identity of the “West” while on the other hand he wishes to have the category of the human intact.

'We are humanists' Said declares tautologically in a discussion of “American Left Literary Criticism”, 'because there is something called humanism, legitimated by culture, given a positive value by it'.¹⁷ In other words, the idea of the human which Said opposes in the Western representation of the Orient, itself derives from the Western humanist tradition. If Said is appealing to the human and the humanist tradition, we know of only one humanist tradition that Said talks of - that of Western liberal human tradition. Said seems unwilling to address the complexity that anti-human Orientalism was the product of the same humanist culture to which he wishes to revert. The question is to what extent Said's humanism itself will remain marked with anti-humanism.

Aijaz Ahmad talks about Said's relationship with humanism and says that Said embraces the ideals of humanist values 'precisely at the time when humanism-as-history has been rejected so unequivocally'.¹⁸

An objection commonly raised against Orientalism is that it offers no alternative to the discourse it criticizes. Indeed, Said sees no reason why there should be an alternative. Said refused to be drawn into the debate of providing an alternative because he says, 'the general, essentialist paradigms which constitute knowledge of “the Orient” also constitute “the Orient” as an object in the first place - to provide an alternative to Orientalism would be to accept the existence of the very thing in dispute'.¹⁹ Ziauddin Sardar says that an alternative to Orientalism is not possible for Said because for him there is no option beyond secular humanism and its high culture. For Said, there is only one culture: European high culture which somehow contains all the seeds of resistance and liberation. Ziauddin Sardar says that Said is so enamoured with secular humanism of Western origin that he exhibits as much hatred for things non-Western as the Orientalists showed towards things Oriental. According to Ziauddin Sardar, because Said cannot think of any other humanism (as for example religious humanism), for him, 'all Islam is a figment of someone's imagination, “acts of will and interpretation”, secular humanism emerges in his thought as something real and concrete'.²⁰ Because

Said vacillates between anti-humanism and humanism, he considers Orientalist texts as having failed to identify with human experience but he himself, according to Ziauddin Sardar, is never too far from the classical troupe of Orientalism in his depiction of Muslims. In *The Politics of Dispossession*, for example, the believing Muslims are dismissed as “traditional”, - the very word has notions of inferiority - simple, emotional, conformists. The '58 million Egyptians', Said tells us, all fall 'back into simple patterns of Islamic conformity'.²¹

We have already seen Said's acknowledgement of Foucault's debt to him. Said talks of Orientalism as a discourse in the Foucauldian sense. But then he differs from Foucault in one important respect - whereas Foucault dismisses any form of individual agency in a discourse which is autonomous and having its own moment, Said talks of the determining role of individual agency - 'Unlike Michel Foucault, to whose work I am greatly indebted, I do believe in the determining imprint of individual writers upon the otherwise anonymous collective body of texts constituting a discursive formation like Orientalism'.²²

This position of Said was theoretically necessary because on the one hand he wants to argue that Orientalism as a discourse decided and forced individuals to write within its frame while on the other hand, he also wants to retain individual agency in order to be able to retain the possibility of his own ability to criticize and change it. This position leads to a fundamental contradiction because it contradicts the main thesis of *Orientalism* namely the determining influence of discursive formations like Orientalism on Individual writers. It seems that he would like to have it both ways. Dennis Porter says that this fundamental contradiction remains unresolved in *Orientalism* 'due to the incompatibility of the thought of Said's two acknowledged *maîtres*, Foucault and Gramsci, of discourse theory and hegemonic theory'.²³

Aijaz Ahmed says that his partial distancing from Foucault is in fact a part of the number of shifts that have occurred in Said's more recent writings, which includes a retreat from the Nietzschean position of all representations being mis-representations and admits concomitantly, the possibilities of resistance from outside the colonial discourse. Said's model for an ideal critic is that he or she should occupy a space of 'critical consciousness' between the dominant culture and the totalizing forms of critical systems. The double task of the critic is then to resist the pressures both of the dominant culture and “system”, “theory”, “grand theory”, “disciplinary knowledge” and so on, names by which Said refers to any frame of looking into the world and its history. 'All such *systems* are rejected, in the characteristic postmodernist way, so that resistance can always only be personal, micro and shared only by a small determinate number of individuals who happen, perchance, to come together, outside the so-called “grand narratives” of class, gender, nations'.²⁴

This theoretical position of Said is uncannily similar to what Said himself says about Foucault's notion of *pouvoir* or power.

'Foucault's eagerness not to fall into Marxist economism causes him to obliterate the role of classes, the role of economics, the role of insurgency and rebellion in the society he discusses...'

Said's position according to Ahmed, of an independent critical consciousness, is itself a ruse for escaping Marxist economism.

The question that thrust itself on Said's position is from what position and theoretical postulates should the critic intervene given that he is as distant from dominant culture as from theory, what is a “responsible adversary position” of a 'critical consciousness'. 'Although it does not apply to

Said's own politics, the possibility for the critic who imagines that he maintains a critical distance both from the dominant culture and theoretical practices can become restricted to a quietism of the most passive type, clutching to a hope that an individualistic criticism will make us better, more aware people'.²⁵

Said's project has been exemplary in its protest against the representational violence of colonial discourse and, indeed, in its commitment to the onerous task of consciousness rising in the Western academy. At the same time, Orientalism is often theoretically naive in its insistence that Orientalist stereotype invariably presupposes and confirms a totalizing and unified imperialist discourse. Accordingly, several recent theorists have visited the site of Orientalism to argue that cultural stereotypes are considerably more ambivalent and dynamic than Said's analysis allows. Homi Bhabha, in particular argues that negative Oriental stereotype is an unstable category which marks the conceptual limit of colonial presence and identity.

Oriental stereotypes did not only perform the negative role of disparaging and depreciating the culture of the "Orient"; it was also affirmative and helped in defining an indigenous cultural identity in opposition to Western culture and consequently aided anti-colonial nationalist movements. Gandhian cultural resistance depended on the Orientalist image of India as inherently spiritual, consensual and corporate. Correspondingly, enthusiastic Indians responded to pejorative stereotypes about India's caste dominated, other-worldly, despotic and patriarchal social structure with reformist zeal and agency. Thus, Orientalist discourse was strategically available to the Empire but also to its adversaries. Moreover, the affirmative stereotypes attached to the Orientalist discourse were instrumental in fashioning the East as a utopian alternative to Europe. Countless scholars, writers, polemicists, spiritualists, travellers and wanderers invoked Orientalist, idealizations of India to critique - in the spirit of Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* - the aggressive capitalism and territorialism of the modern West.

A common criticism of Said is that he has presented the discourse of Orientalism as an unchanging, monolithic, predominantly male-oriented discourse. In contrast, Orientalism expressed a whole range of voices, Islamophobics as well as lovers of Islam, hegemonic movements as well as counter - hegemonic endeavours, differentiated by gender, ideology and sexual preference. Said's reduction of this diversity and heterogeneity actually amounts to Occidentalism - a stereotyping in reverse.

If Orientalism is a limited text, it is so primarily because it fails to accommodate the difference within Orientalist discourse. Sometimes, in his obdurate determination that Orientalism silenced opposition, Said, ironically, silences opposition. Thereby he defeats his own logic of intellectual egalitarianism by producing and confirming a reversed stereotype. After Orientalism, it becomes our task not only to demonstrate the ambivalence of the Oriental stereotype, but also - and crucially - to refuse the pleasures of an Occidental stereotype. If we agree to the unified and monolithic discourse of Orientalism as presented by Said, we will be unable to appreciate the thoughts and sentiments of Sir Williams Jones, Orientalist *par excellence*, when he speaks about the uncivilized cultural insularity of Europe:

'Some men have never heard of the Asiatic writings, and some others will not be convinced that there is anything valuable in them; some pretend to be busy, and others are really idle; some detest the Persians, because they believe in Mahomed, and others despise their language, because they do not

understand it: we all love to excuse, or to conceal, our ignorance, and are seldom willing to allow any excellence beyond the limits of our own achievements: like the savages who thought the sun rose and set for them alone, and could not imagine that the waves, which surrounded their island, left coral and pearl upon any other shore'.²⁶

Surely Jones' appeal on behalf of non-European knowledges exceeds the bounds of Said's Orientalist discourse, and begs to be accommodated in a less formulaic reading of Orientalism. Said's Orientalism takes the form of a series of judgments according to which each writer is identified in turn as complicit in the intellectual subordination of the East by the West. Said's remorseless drive to judge the texts of Orientalism into a straightforward "for" and "against" division leads him to conclude that 'it is therefore correct that every European, in what he could say about the Orient, was consequently a racist, an imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric'.²⁷

If Said's discourse of Orientalism is as inclusive and as determining as Said shows with a list of writers writing about the East, the theoretical difficulty that imposes itself forcefully is - how can he escape the terms of his own theory of discourse; how can he write other than according to the dictates of the all-determining discourse.

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