

**Orientalism**  
by  
Edward W. Said  
(Colonial and Postcolonial Studies)  
M.A. Sem. IV, Unit-II

**Created by-**  
Dr. Suchitra Gupta  
Professor of English  
Govt. V.Y.T. P.G. Auto. College, Durg  
Affiliated to Hemchand Yadav University, Durg

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Introduction – ‘Orientalism’ a seminal book published in 1978 by Edward Said has been highly influential and controversial in Post-colonial studies and other fields. In the book Said effectively redefined the term “Orientalism” to mean a constellation of false assumption underlying western attitude towards the Middle East. The two quotations given as preface of the book set the mood of his treatise that exposes the European Universalism that takes for granted white supremacy and authority:

“They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented.”

- by Karl Marx

“The East is a career.”

- by Benjamin Disraeli

### **Terms used in the text-**

The Orient- signifies a system of representations framed by political forces that made the Orient a mirror image of what is inferior and alien (other) to the West.

Orientalism- is a manner of regularized (or orientalized) writing, vision and study, dominated by an entire system of thought and scholarship.

The Oriental- is the person represented by such thinking. The man is depicted as feminine, weak, yet strangely dangerous. The Oriental is a single image, a sweeping generalization and a stereotype that crosses countless cultural and national boundaries.

Latent Orientalism- is the unconscious, untouchable certainty about what the orient is. Its basic content is static and unanimous. It is always the other, the conquerable and the inferior.

Manifest Orientalism- is what is spoken and acted upon. It is the expression in words and actions of Latent Orientalism.

### **Introduction-**

Many scholars place the beginning of postcolonial studies in history, literature, philosophy, anthropology and arts with the publication of Said's magnum opus "Orientalism". Said focuses his attention on the interplay between the "Occident" and the "Orient". The "Occident" is his term for the West (England, France and US) and Orient is his term for the romantic misunderstood Middle East and Far East.

In 1970 Said went to Beirut. There he got caught up in the Palestinian struggle for freedom. He became part of the community of academicians and writers who were involved in various colonial and post colonial struggles. During this time he translated the speeches of Yasar Arafat into English for the Western Press. He became an articulate voice for the liberation of Palestine in Europe and U.S. Having published “Orientalism” in 1978, the next three years saw a trilogy being formed with the publication of “The Question of Palestine” (1979) and Covering Islam (1981).

### **Major Influences on Said-**

Before explaining Said’s “Orientalism” it is imperative on our part to understand the major influences on him in the global context. The very concept of “Beginning” is derived from Vico who distinguishes between ‘Origins’ and ‘Beginnings’ saying the ‘Origins’ are divine and ‘Beginnings’ are human. The world is created by God, but the social world is the handiwork of man. Said learns from Vico that any attempt at beginning requires not only grounding in reality but also imagination which can sympathetically formulate it. Said also made use of Vichian idea of distinction between filiation and affiliation, the first being instinctive and the second social.

Apart from Vico Said was also influenced by Foucault’s concept of power and the correlation between knowledge and power. He asserts that without examining Orientalism as a discourse, one cannot understand the systematic way by which European culture was able to produce the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively during the Post-Enlightenment period.

Said was also influenced by Gramsci's concept of hegemony, "which is the exercise of power through the consent of the ruled" by incorporating and transforming their ideologies. The domination of the rulers over the ruled (i.e. the colonial power over the colonized was done at two levels- first at the level of administration through military education in schools and institutions like Church and other social organisations.

It is clear from Said's writings that he has made use ideas of Vico, Foucault and Gramsci to formulate his theory of Orientalism.

### **What is "Orientalism"?**

Orientalism is the study of the Orient by the Occidents. These two terms "Orient" and "Occident" are of Latin origin. Occident comes from the Latin "Occidents" which means the West and Orient comes from the Latin "Oriens" which means the East. So, one who studies the Orient is an Orientalist. The very term "the Orient" holds different meanings for different people. As Said points out, Americans associate it with the Far East mainly Japan and China, while for Western Europeans and for the British and the French, it is also the place of Europe's greatest and oldest colonies.

Said puts forward several definitions of "Orientalism" in the introduction of **Orientalism**. Some of these are widely quoted and influential.

- "A way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western experience"

- “a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between the Orient and (most of the time) “the Occident”
- “A Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient”
- “A distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical and philological texts”

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century oriental studies was an area of academic study, Said asserts that West had to create, invent East in order for this study to take place. He further asserts that the West has created a dichotomy between the reality of the East and the romantic notion of the Orient. The Middle East and Asia are looked with prejudice and racism. They are projected as backward, static and unaware of their culture and history. To fill the void, the West created a culture, a history and a promising future for them. On this framework rests not only the study of the Orient but also the political imperialism of Europe in the East. To Said “Orientalism” is more an indicator of the power the West holds over the Orient than about the Orient itself. By taking control of the scholarship the West also took political and economic control.

**The Structure-** The text is divided into three parts:

1. *The Scope of Orientalism-* forms the first part of the text. Here Said establishes the expansive and amorphous capacity of Orientalism. It is a discourse that has been in existence for over two centuries and one that continues in present. The focus in this section is to look at the question of representation in order to illustrate the

similarities in diverse ideas such as Oriental despotism, Oriental sensuality, Oriental modes of production and Oriental splendour.

Here, he also outlines his argument with several caveats as to how it may be flawed. He says that it fails to include Russian and German Orientalism, which he suggests has clean pasts and could be promising future studies. He also suggests that not all academic studies in Europe are Orientalist in intent. He also suggests that all cultures have a view of other cultures that may be exotic. It is not this view that he argues against. But when this view is taken by a militarily and economically dominant culture it can produce disastrous results. In this chapter Said draws on written and spoken historical commentary by Western figures like Chaucer, Shakespeare and others who portray Orient as inferior and “Other”.

2. *Orientalist structures and Restructures*- In the second section of the book Said sets out to establish how the main philological, historical and creative writers in the nineteenth century drew upon a tradition of knowledge that allowed them textually to control and construct the Orient. Said here outlines how Orientalist discourses were transferred from country to country and from political leader to author. He cites the examples of authors and scholars like Edward William Lane who spent 2 or 3 years in Egypt and came back with an entire book about them titled “Manners and Customs of Modern Egyptians”. This book was widely circulated and read as truth throughout Europe. The travelers and academics of the East depended on this discourse for their own education and so the Orientalism discourses of the West over the East was passed down.

3. *Orientalism Now*- The third section deals with Modern Orientalism. This section outlines where Orientalism has gone since the historical framework Said outlined in previous chapters. The book was written in 1978 and so only covers historical occurrences that happened upto that date. Said suggests that the discovery of oil in Arabian Peninsula and shift in regional power interests from England and France to U.S. were important events that shaped and reshaped Orientalist ideas. He says that the notions of the Orient were retranslated by people from the region who had gone to West to study. For example, a Saudi college student studying in the U.S. might return to Saudi Arabia with a retranslated notion about himself. In this section Said makes statement about cultural discourses. How does one represent other cultures? What is another culture? Is the notion of a distinct culture a useful one or does it always get involved either in self-congratulation of hostility and aggression.

The book makes following three major claims:

1. Orientalism though purporting to be an objective and disinterested study in fact served to function political ends. Orientalist scholarship provided means through which Europeans took over Oriental lands.
2. Orientalism helped define Europe self image. It gave Europe a sense of its intellectual and cultural superiority. It was assumed that the West is rational, developed, humane and superior whereas the Orient is aberrant, underdeveloped and inferior.
3. Orientalism has produced a false description of Arabs and Islamic culture. This happened because of the essentialist nature of the

enterprise- that is the belief that it was possible to define the essentialist qualities of the Arab people and Islamic culture.

Said presents his work not only as an examination of the European attitude towards the Arabs and the Islam but as a model for all the European discourses on the “Other”. Said is not prejudiced against the West. Rather he wants to do away with the binary opposition between the East and the West so that one cannot claim superiority over the other. He pleads for the extinction of Orientalist thinking. The person who has until now been known as “the Orient” must be given a voice. Remote scholarship and second hand representation must take a back seat.

**Critiques of Orientalism**- This highly notable and influential work of Edward Said immediately stimulated and continues to generate response from several quarters and varying degree of hostility. The vigour and range of these criticisms reveal the profundity of the influence of the book. The book’s urgent air of revealing injustice and its prodigal disregard for discipline have generated criticism that tend to confirm the unacceptability and marginality of what Said asserts. To historians he is unhistorical, to social scientists he conflates theories; to scholars he is unscholarly, to literary theorists he is unreflective and indiscriminate, to Foucaultians he misuses Foucault, to professional Marxists he is anti-revolutionary, to professional conservatives he is a terrorist. But none can lay claim to an authority so absolute as to undermine the work. The fact, that the text addresses the reader not from an abstract theoretical position, but from the continuing reality of an ‘Orientalised experience’, explains its resilience against the persistent critical attacks it has received.



Said's contention that the West had dominated the East more than 200 years was unsupportable because until late 17<sup>th</sup> century the Ottoman Empire had posed a serious threat to Europe. Further Said claimed that the British Empire extended from Egypt to India in 1880s, when in fact the Ottoman and Persian empires intervened. Even at the height of European imperialism the European power was not absolute in the East. In fact it heavily depended on local collaborators. The areas of Middle East on which Said concentrated including Palestine and Egypt are poor examples of his theory as they came under European control only for a relatively short period in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Said gave much less attention to more apt examples including British Raj in India and Russian dominions in Asia, because Said was more interested in making political issue of Middle East.

Said failed to acknowledge Orientals like Sir William Jones who were more concerned with establishing kinship between the East and the West. Said also made no attempt to categorise writers on the basis of their information and attitude towards the Orient.

Bernard Lewes describes "Orientalism" as a false thesis that bordered on the 'absurd'. He argued that it revealed "a disquieting lack of knowledge of what scholars do and what scholarship is all about." He further questions Said's ability to speak of Islam, his knowledge of Arab history and of Orientalist disciplines.

One of the most vigorous attacks on Said's Foucaultian position in recent times comes from Aijaz Ahmed. He is at pains to demonstrate that Said is inconsistent about whether Orientalism is a system of representations or misrepresentations. All representation is, in some sense, a misrepresentation, he asserts.

To Robert Young, Said's account of the Orient is no truer to Orientalism than Orientalism is to the actual Orient. He asserts that while Said argues that Orientalism has a hegemonic consistency his arguments are contradictory and do not confirm his ideology.

Said entirely ignored the fact that the oriental studies in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were dominated by the Germans and Hungarians – the countries that did not possess Eastern empires.

Nonetheless Edward Said has heralded an interdisciplinary movement called post colonial studies by exposing West through his famous term and theory known as Orientalism.

In October 2003, one month after the death of Edward Said, the Lebanese newspaper Daily Star recognized the intellectual import of the book saying "Said's critics agree with his admirers that he single-handedly effected a revolution in Middle Eastern studies in U.S. and that U.S. Middle Eastern studies were taken over, by Edward Said's postcolonial studies paradigm."