

Edward Said and his Anti-West Philosophy

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Abstract

It has been found that mainstream western philosophers and writers write a number of books on the Middle East, basing themselves on certain prevalent stereotypes. They actually do not have any real connect to the people, society, and culture of this region. History witnesses that their writings are biased and xenophobic. It is a fact that the rich philosophical traditions of the Middle East and the indigenous people are completely undermined, ignored and criticized by almost the majority of the writers in the West and in other countries. Edward Said, a Palestinian born American writer, claims that the Western thought about the Middle East is negative. “The structure of Orientalism represented by them is nothing more than a structure of lies or myths.” This paper wishes to highlight his ideology as depicted in his work regarding the west by bringing itself on and throwing light on his revolutionary book Orientalism and a glimpse into his book will help the reader to understand the genius of his thought on Orientalism.

Keywords: Middle Eastern Studies, Representation of Reality, Western philosophy, Stereotypes, Orientalism.

Introduction

In any writing reflecting the image of Islam, the western, and particularly, American media, has represented Islam in such a way that Edward Said says “I have not been able to notice any period in European or American history since the Middle Ages, in which Islam was generally discussed in its true sense.” The Palestinian American writer of the twentieth century, Edward Wadie Said, was born in Jerusalem on November 1, 1935, when the city was part of the British occupied Palestine. He was an intellectual and an academic, devoting much of his energy to support Islam and Palestinian people and their aspirations. He went to school in Egypt having Arabic as his native language, and English, his school language. He attended Princeton University, graduating in 1957 and earned Masters and Ph.D. degrees at Harvard, receiving his doctorate in 1964. He was appointed at Columbia University in New York as an instructor in 1963, later in 1970, he became the professor of English and comparative literature.

In 1978 Edward Said published ‘Orientalism’, his best-known work and one of the most influential scholarly books of the 20th century. It remains Said’s best-known and the most leading work of our times.

Indeed, the Western sense of dominance over the East includes stereotyping, distortion, and misinterpretations regarding the Middle East. Said could grasp easily through his readings of literature by scholars in the west, quickly West's relations to other cultures of the developing world by other scholars. Edward Said's work opened up numerous new avenues for investigation of Western representations of other cultures and of indigenous responses to such representations in so-called postcolonial literature. Said observed and found that the East, as different to the West, was a creation designed as a political justification for Western colonialism. Said explores the present spread of Islam-phobia is not down to the fact that there are now only a few public figures that have enough moral authority and intellectual integrity to be able to challenge hatred against Muslims and those related to Muslims. The power to face the dominant discourse of Orientalism was a product of complex hypothetical development and not just the result of a dependent coalition of a number of like-minded public intellectuals.

“The Orient suddenly appeared lamentably under humanized, antidemocratic, backward, barbaric, and so forth, ‘the orient was undervalued’ Edward Said (1979)

Said's central theory was that Western views of Middle Eastern cultures were rife with stereotypes of irrationality, immorality, and violence. Edward Said's investigation changed and improved the growing process of academics in literary theory, literary criticism, and Middle-Eastern studies, how academics examine, describe, and define the cultures being studied. As a foundational text, Orientalism was controversial and debatable among scholars of Oriental Studies, philosophy, and literature. Moreover, Edward Said challenged the concept of differences between East and West. He says that with the start of colonization the Europeans came in contact with the lesser-developed countries for example, the Middle East, and divided the world into two parts the East and the West. The most important argument of Edward Said's book orientalism was that they defined themselves by defining Orientals, for example, the qualities such as barbaric, Irrational and uncivilized were related to Orientals and active, rational and civilized were attributes of the Europeans. Rizvi Fazal and Bod Lingard (2006) states, “Said's writings exemplified that rare combination of conceptual clarity and political commitment. He taught us how to think honestly and clearly, as well as creatively and critically, about issues of knowledge and power, of theory and practice and culture and imperialism.”

Orientalism and Media Representation

Rizvi Fazal and Bod Lingard quoted Edward Said's book 'Covering Islam', which turns its attention to the images and language, employed by the American media as well as writers in the period of American ascension after World War II. In which Said argues that American media has been for the most part complicit in advancing “a limited series of crude, essential caricatures of the Islamic world in such a way as to make that world more vulnerable to military aggression. American aggression is buttressed by representations that depict Muslims, Arabs, and Persians as either “oil suppliers or as potential terrorists.” For example, in the year 1979, some of the major newspapers and magazines created a certain image about Iran's Islamic revolution in the European mind about the Iranians that infused a bias in the European attitude towards Iran. The two major newspapers in Nov 1979 issues of the Time and Newsweek both ran features about Iran's “Ideology of Martyrdom” (Time) or “Martyr Complex” (Newsweek). Both articles argue that Iranians are Shia Muslims they are supernaturally disposed towards merciless bloodshed. Until the emergence on the world scene of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini R.A, a Shia Muslim fundamentalist, Americans tended to supervise the crucial importance of religion in Iran. Angus Deming and Chris J. Harper (1979) published an article that “The Shiites place great virtue in martyrdom, as reflected in the ceremonies of self-flagellation with which they mark the martyrdom Muhammad's grandson, Imam Hussein in 680 A.D, revenge is another component of Islam in general and of Shiism in particular.

The Nation (1990) published an article by Edward Said, in which said points out the Western media and says, “The media have become obsessed with something called Islam.” The fundamental role of Western media, especially in the USA and Britain, can be held accountable for planting seeds of prejudice and irrationality and creating a distorted picture of Islam and Muslims in Westerner’s minds. Islam has been portrayed, as a religion that breeds terrorism, violence, and global threat. Emad A. (2015) “Muslims are always held responsible for any terrorist attack occurring in the world, and the Oklahoma City terrorist attack is a case in point. When it happened, U.S. and Canadian media agencies speculated concerning an Islamic connection to the terrible attack and Muslims were blamed for killing innocent civilians, a claim that turned out to be completely false as two fundamentalist Christians were eventually convicted of committing this crime.” Many Muslims, especially American Muslims, were victims as the consequence of this hateful propaganda. The anti-Muslim representations in Western media have been blamed for inciting many to commit violent crimes, offenses, and attacks against Muslims who live in Western countries.

Edward Said’s (1981) surveys and comments on the way “the Iranian Islamic Revolution 1979 and Crisis (1979-1981) have both shaped the re-presentation of Islam as News and determined the role, the American media would thenceforth play in the diplomatic relations between Islam and the US.” A predominant feeling that a secular and powerful West imposes its values upon the Muslim world enhances the sense of threat to the Muslim cultural identity. Mirza Mesic, Imam, Professor of Islamic History wrote when we asked the open-ended question, “In your own words, what do you resent most about the West?” the most frequent response across all Islamic countries for both moderates and political radicals was “ethical and moral corruption” and “hatred of Muslims.” Another source of anger comes from the depiction of Muslims in the Western media. Jack Shahan did a survey in his book, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies People* found that the vast majority of Arab characters in 900 American films were absolute racist characters. Images of everyday life and ordinary Muslims in their countries are almost non-existent or so badly formed in the Western media.” Moreover, the Western media, which are most popular in the Muslim world, encourage Western fashion, personalities, and values.

Moreover, The Nation (1990) published another article by Edward Said, in which he wrote “The main difference is that the Orientalists use the authority of their standing as experts to deny-no, to cover their deep-seated feelings about Islam with a carpet of jargon whose purpose is to certify their “objectivity” and “scientific impartiality.” As mentioned earlier, Islam has consistently looked to Europe and the West in general as a threat. Today, the phenomenon is more in evidence than ever before because on the one hand there has been an enormous media convergence upon what has been called the emergence, return or resurgence of Islam, and on the other hand, because parts of the Islamic world—Palestine, Iran, Afghanistan, among other places—which have been undergoing various unequal processes of historical development and have also seemed to be encroaching upon traditional Western (more particularly American) domination. The views of the experts and the media are nearly identical to this. Far from attempting to improve, or even disagreement with the gross image of Islam as a threat, the scholarly, intellectuals, and policy community in the United States has significantly enforced and concentrated the image.

The understanding of Said on the fundamental meaning of Western view for Orientalism, basically making the East as the other for the West that should be seen as completely different. It can be a clear explanation for their colonial activities because of the norm of accepting Orient people as human beings as they are not in the first place anytime in the Western view of Orientalism. Because of this idea, Said argued that Western writings on the Orient, and the perceptions of the East provided in them, are doubtful and can not be taken at worthy enough. Said explored the history of European colonial ruling and political power over the East incorrectly deform the writings of even the most famous, well-meaning and sympathetic Western “Orientalists.”

Edward Said's landmark study, 'Orientalism', and his subsequent 'Covering Islam' clear a theoretical space. This paper highlights a few passages that are relevant to this study. In his rereading of many foundational texts on the study of the Middle East and the literature depicting the "Orient," Said argues that Orientalism is "a way of coming to terms with the Orient." This nativeness of the Orient, Said argues, becomes a central source of the Occident's captivation with the Orient: studying it, speaking about it, and romanticizing about it and all interact with the project of dominating it. Said argues that the West utilizes two "essential motifs."

In the delineation of West and East, which he calls "imaginative geography? First, Europe constructs itself as "powerful and articulate while Asia is defeated and distant. Second, the East is rendered as a threat to Europe insinuating mortal danger: Eastern excesses, those mysteriously attractive opposites of what seem to be normal values, undermine rationality.

In his following work, 'Orientalism' and 'Covering Islam', Said takes up the media responses to the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Dissecting one example of shabby journalism, Said aptly describes the larger cultural problems of Americans 'Covering of Islam': Nevertheless, Said argued: "the West had dominated the East for more than 2,000 years since the confirmation of the Persians by Aeschylus," means that Europe had dominated Asia that is total East, Orient called in his writing. It was politically so absolutely for so extensive period that the most superficially objective writings from West on the East were always with prejudice that even most of the well-known historian Western scholars could not identify. His argument was not just that the West has control over the East politically but also that Western scholars have taken the survey and analysis of the Orient's languages, their past, and civilization for themselves by that domination. Therefore, Said claims, "they have written East's history and built its modern identities from a perspective that takes Europe as the norm, from which the "exotic", "inscrutable" Orient deviates." It means Europe was the authority that can write and decide that the West has modern norms but in contrast that East has only exotic, a mystery that could be just the other. Said does a worthy job at arguing that Orientalist racism? He organizes challenging evidence to show that the Orientalist West has often depicted "the Arab" or ("the Muslim," conceived secretly as a racial category) based on pseudo-empirical generalizations about racial essences. And he does a wonderful job at unmasking the rationalizations by which racial categories pretended as non-racial ones. Since the end of World War II, the US with their zeal and zest has been taking positions of superiority and hegemony in the Islamic world. The nation quoted:

The Middle East and Islam has become a subject familiar to every consumer of news in the West, world has become the subject of the most profound cultural and economic Western saturation in history—for no non-Western realm has been so dominated by the United States as the Arab-Islamic world is dominated today—by the exchange between Islam and the West, in this case, the United States is profoundly one-sided.

After his years of research and writing for his book 'Orientalism' (1978), Said thought he knew exactly what was going on in his analysis of systematic Western misunderstandings and misperceptions of Islam. According to Khawaja Irfan (2015) "Orientalism was to be vindicated by a harsh critique of this orientalist discourse about the Iranian revolution. His critique would draw heavily upon his earlier writings." Orientalism, however, clearly advances and improves the Islamic category (over the socio-economic category) as the dominant one. In other words, to an Orientalist, Muslims were not Political and rational beings, so their revolutions could not be rational political acts. Since the same regulating norms, viewpoints, and ideological biases dominated all these narratives; they came to constitute what Said calls a system of representation, Edward Said. (1979)

Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident."

Thus a very large mass of writers, among whom are poet, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists, and imperial administrators, have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, “mind,” destiny, and so on.

Edward Said’s, western mission of learning, visualization, and information about the Orient was not interested in a disinterested search for truth, but by a desire to serve Western colonialism and dominance. The Oriental is in vast and multi-faceted literature thus determinedly portrayed as barbaric, devoted to dictatorship and submission, and lacking “high culture” and civilization. In other, the Western defater might impose their rules, and change political order and their way of life. He explored western policy and continued to determine, the irregular relationship between the Western “We” and the Oriental, or colonial, “Them” Said’s understanding of other cultures must be rooted in human experience.

We should remember that the study of man in society is based on concrete human history and experience not on donnish abstraction, obscure law or arbitrary system. Carrying his thoughts further it permits us to look behind the mirror of representation and to observe the abstract classes and the totalizing leanings of the discourses that cover the world. Yet, in criticizing the Orientalists (or more generally lumped as the west), the Islamists adopted the very same style of thinking as orientalists. This acknowledged by Said and he termed it as “Orientalized Orientals.” Edward Said says indeed, the Muslim world was once producing scientists and philosophers, without Muslim contribution west will never be what they are today. Incredible intellectual energy and efforts had been directed towards retrieving the science from the west and ‘Islamizing’ them, not to mention the number of efforts and creativity done in tracing scientific discoveries to the Quran and thus diverting Muslims from pioneering the scientific field themselves. The once colonized people must now prove, themselves that they had a glorious past and they too are equal (superior) to the colonizers.

But unfortunately, Edward Said has often been accused of Occidentalism, of creating a blended and undifferentiated image of the West. The modern academic study of Islam, as we have argued above, emerged out of a distinct academic route from Oriental Studies to the Middle Eastern Studies and now, owing to Said’s critique, has become a part of the religious studies. However, the apologetic foundation upon which the organization of Islamic Studies rests continues to prevail in the 21st century. The idea of representation is usually based on the notion of being faithful to the original. However, representation is largely intertwined with many other things besides ‘truth’. It is defined not just by inherent common subject matter, but also by a common history, tradition, and universe of discourse that exists within a particular field Edward Said (1979) pointed out Representation is a phenomenon created by writers, intellectuals, artists, commentators, travelers, politicians, as well as others working within similar discursive formations.

For Said, the West’s representation of the East works within the context of intended and determined effort at subordination. Orientalism, this Western discourse about the Orient, has always served to legitimize and perpetuate the interests of Western imperialism. In the contiguous result of his early death, a large number of essays appeared assessing Edward Said’s contribution to contemporary thought. The collection “Edward Said: Continuing the conversation” edited by Homi Bhabha and William Mitchell (2005), is perhaps the most significant and important of these. However, the appraisal of Said’s work after his death reached from glowing and celebratory to critical and even hostile. Said would have expected no less. In the post-Sep. 11 eras, some critics without any excuse viewed Said’s work as in an identifiably distinctive manner, overlooking the fact that he was no less critical of many recent improvements in Islam and spoke out against injustices and prejudice, wherever they originated.

Conclusion

Edward Said's cultural theory is undoubtedly a great help to the academics and scholars in particular in the field of Middle East studies. Said tried to stop the negative stereotyping portrayal Muslims without much technical knowledge and empirical study of the domain through his book *Orientalism*. It remains one of the most enduringly significant critical studies of the second half of the 20th century. It transformed the meaning of the term 'Orientalism' such that it no longer refers to a disinterested field of scholarship but an expression of power relations, a way of positioning the East as inferior to the West. Edward Said's studies made a major contribution to the undoing of the premise that the aesthetic is a realm of independent values by representing the literature's complex affiliations with European colonialism and Western imperialism. He was explicit regarding Islamophobia, and discrimination against Islam and made the western scholarship responsible for the distortion of the Middle East, which has remained current ever since as being the true representation of the whole Islamic world. Said defines Orientalism as a Western-style for ruling, dominating, controlling, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. Edward Said's book 'Orientalism' has revolutionized the field of cultural studies and ever since its publication remained the primordial reference for any researcher desirous of delving further in this field. It has changed the mindset of many writers across the globe and resulted in a better understanding of the "Other."

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