

An Impression on Occidental and Orientalism in Cultural Studies

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Abstract

In Orientalism, Edward Said addresses the idea that the way the Orient has pictured and understood by the West is not only diminishing but closer to mythology than reality. Said argues that the desire to understand a different culture than our own in order to co-exist with it should have nothing to do with an exchange of power and dominance, as it too often happened and resulted in years of colonization, arbitrary drawing of frontiers and the over simplification of a multitude of civilizations and cultures under one stereotypical denomination: The Orient. This article will provide a conceptual analysis of Orientalism as defined by Edward Said to answer the question: How does Said's critique of the Orientalist discourse allowed for the development of a new way to interpret and represent the ideological conflict of perception between the Occident and the Orient? The characteristics of Orientalism such as: 'Orientalism as a discourse', 'the relations of power it implies', the creation of the 'Oriental other' as well as the notion of 'latent Orientalism' will be thoroughly examine. Then, this article will analyze, the criticism of Said's theory brought forward by Albert Hourani, Wang Ning and Daniel Martin Varisco. Finally, this article will provide insight as to why Said's Orientalism was at first a breakthrough when it came to understanding the effect 21 century colonization, and vision of the Orient, had on modern society but that its own limitations restricts its impact. This article will focus on Edward Said's book Orientalism, rather than focusing on the additional comments made in Culture and Imperialism and in Orientalism Reconsidered.

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Introduction

The term 'Orientalism' was originally used to describe an occidental artistic and literary current, conspicuously presented within French and English culture during the 19th century. In his book *Orientalism*, Edward Said (1935-2003) argues that the sphere of influence of this particular movement allowed for the oriental fantasy to be treated as a true representation of what constituted what the Orient and led to a recurring bias within Western societies in the

Way it was treated. Said goes further in arguing that the influences of this current transited to what he defines as the 'orientalist discourse', still influencing the way modern Europe perceives and treats its oriental counterpart. Edward Said was an Americano-Palestinian Literary critique and intellectual who developed his theory of Orientalism in the book of the same name (published 1978) and furthered his argumentation in *Culture and Imperialism* (Published 1993). The goal of this article is to provide a conceptual analysis of Orientalism in Order to assess how Said's critique of the Orientalist discourse allowed for the development of a new way to interpret and represent the ideological conflict of perception between the Occident and the Orient. In order to do so, Said's critique of Orientalism will be looked at in details, through the notion of the western construction of the Orient, Orientalism as a Discourse, the oriental Other and the rhetoric of power present within. Counter arguments and critiques on Orientalism and on Said's perspective will also be analyzed. Finally, this article will demonstrate that while Said's theory of Orientalism provided for an unprecedented Sphere of post-colonial criticism to be accurately analyzed, its own limitations restrains the global scope it intended to reach.

The Origins of Orientalism

The roots of Orientalism are found in the Middle Ages and Renaissance in the interactions of pre-modern Europe (particularly France) with the Orient, through the first European explorations and crusades and was used as an artistic influence in currents such as Baroque and Rococo until the end of the 18th century. Orientalism as an independent artistic and literary current emerged during the 19th century in Europe and while not associated with any particular pictorial style, it is rather its themes, such as the search of exoticism, sensuality and fantasy of the Orient. Orientalism as an art form was not only a way of representation, it served as a mean for European to come in contact with worlds and cultures they had never encountered before which influenced the way westerners of those time pictured the Orient. Said derives his theory on Orientalism from those artistic and historical basis, transforming into an actual post-colonial discourse of oppression.

Edward Said's Orientalism: The Orient Created By The Occident

In the 2003 preface to *Orientalism*, Said expresses a desire to open up the range of debate and criticism of post-colonial discourses through a humanist perspective. By humanism, Said implies that in order to analyze more profoundly the conflicts within Orientalism, one must adhere to the idea that no domain of research and study through time can exist independently from another. Rather, Said argues that in order to break the chains of the mind, which restrain from a reasonable historical reflection, one must consider injustices and suffering through a broader historical, cultural and socio-economic reality (Said, 1978, p.13). Said describes Orientalism as being an occidental theory based on the perspective the West has of its oriental Counter part. This social construction is based on a fantasized perception of the Orient influenced by a perceived superiority of the West over its former colonies and other 'exotic' cultures as well as an inaccurate cultural perspective transmitted through clichés: "The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity 'a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences'" (Said, 1978, p.29). This cultural dogma then led to the creation of an orientalist discourse perpetuating the prejudices Westerners have of Orientals.

Orientalism As A Discourse

A discourse is described by Michel Foucault as being a compilation of knowledge and thoughts regarding a common subject through similar methodology and present power relations as well as how it is talked about and perpetuated (Foucault, 1969, p.32). For Said, Orientalism is an occidental post-colonial discourse: "The Orient is an integral part of European material civilization and culture. Orientalism expresses and represents that part culturally and even ideologically as a mode of discourse with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial style" (Said, 1978, p.30). Said asserts the idea that without embracing Orientalism as a discourse, one cannot understand the past and current relations between the West and the East and the systematic oppressive ways in which they are being implemented. This provides for the continuity of oppression and misrepresentation of the Orient as it gives authority and legitimacy to the perceived domination of Europe within the world.

Relations of Power Within Orientalism

The Orientalist discourse fully embraces the notion of power and cultural

domination present in human societies, here with the West and the East: “Domination and inequities of power and wealth are perennial facts of human society” (Said, 1993, p.19). Said states that “in a quite constant way, Orientalism depends for its strategy on this flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationship with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand”(Said, 1978, p.38). A historical example of this rhetoric of power present in Orientalism is Napoleon’s conquest of Egypt and the derived cultural exploitation. All the knowledge brought back from the expedition not only allowed for the European public to cultivate themselves it also pushed for the power struggle between the French and the Egyptians to emerge as the former could use the knowledge they had of the latter to dominate them, while the opposite could not happen. The rhetoric of power within Orientalism uses knowledge to build domination, which is later translated into cultural relationship, the intrinsic importance of power being at the core of all social fields of study.

Once the construction of Western dominance was established, this knowledge was transformed into a dogma, transmitted from generations to generations resulting in an everlasting cultural domination.

Oriental Other Representation is a crucial concept in the construction of the Orientalist discourse. The notion that the West is the dominant force in an exchange of power with the East relies on the construction of the dominated, the oriental other. ‘Us’ only exists if ‘Them’ is acknowledged as an entity of its own. The colonial ideology relied on the notion that those who lived in non- European territories were radically different and deserved to be colonized and exploited on the basis that they were inferior. This, added to the previously fantasized vision the Occident had of those who inhabited the Orient led to the construction of cultural myths. The oriental Other can be considered the perfect Other, not only because, in essence, its construction opposes the Western ideals but also because the same western ideals were constructed in opposition with this otherness: “By inserting the domination of the Other into the very construction of the West, Said identifies a deep fissure in the operation of Western hegemony.

There, the West appeared both to reach its limits and to construct its dominance. For if the West represented itself as autonomous and universal in the domination of the Orient, then the encounter with the “native” was the point of both the limit and the fabrication of such representation” (Prakash, 1995, p211).

Dormant Orientalism

Edward Said considers Orientalism not only as a modern academic discipline

but also as a Latent form of expression. Latent Orientalism is defined by Said as being distinct from purely applied orientalist theories as it rather resides within a general unconscious certainty that the Orient is the way it has been described and pictured by Orientalists personalities: “The distinction I am making is really between an almost unconscious (and certainly an untouchable) positivity, which I shall call latent Orientalism, and the various stated views about Oriental society, languages, literatures, history, sociology, and so forth, which I shall call manifest Orientalism” (Said, 1978, p.354-355). In Said’s opinion, latent Orientalism is comprised of three broad characteristics: Racism, Ethnocentrism and Sexism (Varisco, 2007, p.58). Latent Orientalism therefore resides as an inherent part of the Orientalist discourse within society as it defines the popular vision the West has of the Orient.

Conclusion

Analysis of post-colonial ideologies, the limitations of his work render it more complex than simply being a linear and universally accepted theory on how the Orient is perceived and treated. Orientalism as defined and supported by Said remains an excellent theory to understand the past relations between the Orient and the Occident. It allowed for great discussions to finally take place between the (former) oppressed and their oppressors but lacks not only a distinction between certain aspects of Orientalism, such as institutional versus social forms but also promotes parts of the ideology it is fighting against. Ultimately, Edward Said’s work is crucial as a part of the argument and discussion surrounding Orientalism but should not be held as the absolute ideological truth. Edward said himself admitted and corrected some of his limitations and broad ideology in both *Orientalism* R econsidered and in *Culture and Imperialism*, engaging in an even more complex and broad analysis of the state of Orientalism and cultural power relations.

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