



## A CRITICAL READING OF SAID'S *ORIENTALISM*: THE STORY OF THE TRIUMPH AND FAILURE OF THE TRADITION OF THE STEREOTYPING OF THE ORIENTAL

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### ABSTRACT

In the introduction of *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said claims that the major role of novels is not only to please but also to reveal the relationship between culture and imperialism. Culture is a stage where all religions, references, experiences, ideological and political causes integrate to perform a coherent work. Imperialism is a central idea of concern for the western writers because it is standing for the freedom and order in the 3<sup>rd</sup> world countries. Said argues against this point considering those writers blind to the fact that also have their own history and culture but the western world does not admit it. He supports his claim by giving an example about the great western writer Joseph Conrad who sees imperialism as a system representing this 3<sup>rd</sup> world and that the "we" is exceptional not empirical. Said finds Conrad in his novels a representation of both figures the imperialist and the anti-imperialist. Conrad to Said is an imperialist when rejecting the idea that the 3<sup>rd</sup> world countries have their independent culture or history and an anti-imperialist in the sense that he is aware of the corruption caused by domination and imperialism. Said claims that the empire causes culture to become "heterogeneous, extraordinary, and different." Hence, the advantage of narratives is that they represent this integrated relationship among cultures that is hard to be separated.

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### INTRODUCTION

Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) may well be considered the cornerstone in his anti-imperialism thesis that pervaded most of his numerous works. A first in his confrontation with received ideas, the Western policy of hegemony and the Occidental use of knowledge as power and knowledge and power, the thesis engrained in *Orientalism* was nurtured often in later works by the Professor of English of Palestinian Origin. Among these works is *Covering Islam* that made its subject matter the treatment of mass media in the West of the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Besides, one of his latest published books was *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), universally conceived as a sequel, albeit of an inferior importance, to *Orientalism*. *Orientalism*, probably the first scholarly word in analyzing the relationship between the great powers and their previous colonies, ushers in the rise of a new field of studies, Post-colonialism, that attracted many great names, such as

Chinua Achebe, Hommy Baba, Camille Paglia and others, as well as a widespread controversy over its scope and issues. Said, who shot to fame after this influential critique of Western construction of the Orient, tried in his *Culture and Imperialism* to qualify his thesis on Orientalism in mainly two ways. He highlighted the somewhat positive multifaceted effect of colonialism, at least as it, unwittingly of course, provides the colonized with the weapons to launch his attack on it. On the other hand, Said further reiterated the benignity of his thesis by remarking that the core of the problem was that the colonial agent was unaware of the imperialist aspect of his job while the colonist could not see any other aspect in that job. Due to the novelty of the field of study, the author of *Orientalism* devoted an unusually long chapter to draw the scope of the study. This interesting game of argument and recounting brought in a great preponderance of names of politicians, writers and explorers, together with a long list of works that can be, theoretically, accommodated in this new field of study. However, the author kept reminding his reader, probably more often than necessary\_ and that probably because of the many instances of digression in the book\_ of the major thesis. This was that Orientalism was a Western method of knowing the

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Orient and making it familiar and so divesting it of its threatening quality. This method, the thesis continues, did not come out all of a sudden, but developed from a cruder version that dates back to antiquity, to the Greeks of Euripides and Aeschylus and probably before. The development of this method, referred to as Orientalism and then Modern Orientalism, is then traced from the time of its budding, as a simplistic division between "Us" and "Them", through the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt and its aftermath, to the present time with the dominating American political interest. In the first chapter, entitled The Scope of Orientalism, We are introduced to Arthur James Balfour, he of the 1917 infamous Declaration, a few years before he was involved in the Palestine question. In 1910, the honorable M.P. lectured the House of Commons on the vital role England played in Egypt in the teeth of the adverse argument, taken up by the Opposition, that England had overstayed Egypt's hospitality and the stay was backfiring. Said marks in Balfour's speech the two dominant themes: knowledge and power. His argument was that England *knew* Egypt and so was dominating it, that it was good for Egypt to have England exercising absolute government over it. The author argues that Balfour never cared to ask the Egyptians their opinion of what was good for them; further it did not occur to him to let the Egyptian speak for himself for anyone who would speak was more likely to be an "agitator [who] would wish to raise difficulties" to England than someone who would overlook the "difficulties" of foreign domination. Said remarks that Balfour's utterances identify Egypt with England's knowledge of Egypt and so England's occupation of Egypt becomes part of the latter's identity. Moreover, Balfour establishes a connection between what is going on in Egypt, the relation between the English and the subject race, as the Egyptians are referred to and as he advises that they should stay, on the one hand, and what goes on in England, on the other. The disturbance of the relation between the governed and the governor in Egypt due to Parliament's doubts at home, will result in the undermining of the authority of the "dominant race".

Lord Cromer who served in Egypt, from the beginning of the British Occupation in 1882, as England's representative in Egypt became, after his retirement in 1907, an authority on that country. His two-volume book, *Modern Egypt*, is a full register of his 25-year-long service there, and from one of the many chapters of the book, Said excerpts a passage in which the Egyptian character is misrepresented as lacking accuracy, unable of drawing the most obvious conclusions and his stories are full of contradictions. He proceeds to alert to the threat to the European government of the contradiction between the local policies of the resident agent and the government back home. Both Cromer and Balfour seem to be talking identically about the Orient, Egypt, the right of the dominant race to govern, the benefit of the colonized race from such government and the necessity of scrutinizing and filtering local policies back at home before applying them. (p. 378). On this Said comments: "That Balfour and Cromer could strip humanity down to such ruthless cultural and racial essences was not at all an indication of their particular viciousness. Rather it was an indication of how streamlined a general doctrine had become by the time they put it to use \_ how streamlined and effective". (p. 36). Said then moves to introduce Orientalism as a method that developed as a prototype in the middle of the eighteenth century. That was before Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798.

One of the major works of the late 17<sup>th</sup> century was by d'Herbelot entitled *Bibliothèque Orientale* which served as an anthology of writing on the Orient that meant only to "satisfy one's expectations" (p. 234). Said read in the latter expression attributed to a certain Galland that it meant that the *Biblio* did not attempt to revise commonly received ideas about the Orient. There have been of course attempts to accommodate the Orient, represented by Islam at one stage in the fifteenth century when its armies had entered Eastern Europe. The attempt however, is of significance: four learned Europeans among whom was John of Segovia and Aeneas Silvius (Pius II) attempted to deal with Islam through *Contraferentia* (conference). The idea was to convert Muslims wholesale to Christianity in a conference that even if it would take ten years was "less expensive and less damaging than war" (p. 163). It is not lost on an objective reader that Muslims were then considered as followers of a Christian heresy who need be guided and shown the light. It was, in fact, a common practice in the West to compare Islam with Christianity in every detail, so Mohammed was to Muslims as Christ was to Christians. (P.161-162). Thus, he was an imposter. This theme was made the core of many works that dealt with Islam, the most famous of which was Dante's *The Divine Comedy*. In this epic by a major figure of the Renaissance, Maometto (Mohammed) features as one of the followers of Satan (*Inferno*, Canto 28). He is in the ninth Circle with only Judas, Brutus and Cassius (the two Roman senators who designed the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 BC). Mohammed's punishment was to be cleft endlessly in two from his chin to his anus like, Dante tells us, a cask whose staves are ripped apart. After a disgusting description of how the punishment is done (entrails and excrement described in detail), Mohammed is made to have a conversation with the author. The Prophet asked his wandering visitor to tell Fra Dolcino, an Italian Priest who had reportedly expounded community of women and goods and was an advocate of revolting sensuality, that this is what awaits the like of him. Dante thus leaves no doubt as regards the suggested identity between the Prophet and the debauching priest, the Italian poet's contemporary. Dante's prejudice is further evinced in his insistence on placing Avicenna and Averros, the celebrated Muslim philosophers, whom he openly admired, together with Plato and other Greek philosophers in the *Inferno*, albeit the first circle, for the mere reason that they were not Christians.

The theme of Islam as a heresy was still embraced in the twentieth century, Said reminds us by referring to an article in *Muslim World* magazine (January 1933), in which the author, Duncan Black Macdonald claims that "Islam is really no more than a second-order Arian (related to Arius, the 4<sup>th</sup> century Alexandria priest who expounded the belief that Jesus was only a prophet of God, and not his son) heresy" (p. 3). Two major works on the Orient preceded Napoleon's invasion of Egypt and prepared for it; one was by Araham-Hyancinthe-Anquetil Duperron (later Anquetil, b. 1731) who translated Avestan texts and completed his translation of the Avesta (a job that, among other things, served Voltaire's purpose that was to make the Bible more unbelievable). The other was the translation from Sanskrit the Bengal laws by William Jones, who believed that Sanskrit, Latin and Greek came from the same source. Napoleon's knowledge of the Orient, Said tells us, was textual. The book acquires a greater authority and use even than the actuality it describes, and this is what formed the heart of the crisis in Orientalism. Anquetil and Jones learnt what they did about the Orient only after they got there.

Nothing was done in advance to prepare the project for its success. With Napoleon, it was the first time that Orientalists' expertise was put directly to functional colonial use. Among the institutions that were established to study the Orient and its languages was Ecole Publique des Langues Orientales that hired the services of Sylvester de Sacy in 1796 to teach Arabic. De Sacy was to become the teacher of all French experts in Arabic. He and Ernest Renan are considered the fathers of Modern Orientalism. With Sacy and Renan, no more was the Orientalist overriding the Orient using a line of verse, for example, to reveal the peculiar mentality in Egypt, Iraq or Arabia, or a Koranic verse to support the claim about Muslim sensuality. Sacy, however, held that Arab heritage should not be made available as a whole to western taste, but should be excerpted and selected carefully and then offered to the Western reader. In this context, he published his 3-volume *Chrestomatie Arabe* (1806 - 1827) which as its title suggests is made of selections. This is a continuation of the tradition that the Orient is silent, and should not be permitted to speak for itself, rather it needs someone to do that for it. One point in common between Sacy and Renan on the one hand and other Orientalists before them is that they all came to Orientalism from philology. Renan, however, went further ahead with philology to the extent that it was comparable with philosophy. However, what was more significant, in Renan's career, is the division of peoples on the lines of language and his hostility to the Semitic peoples whom he regarded as inferior to other races. This anti-Semitism was imported to the United States and utilized in the formation of the image drawn to the Arab and Muslim in US mass media after the 1973 Arab-Israeli war. As the United States was reported to have entered the First World War on the understanding that it will help to create a Jewish state in Palestine, Renan's discourse in attacking the Semites was filtered to include only the Arabs. So, these were portrayed as hooked -nosed callous terrorists and after the 1973 oil crisis as people who wanted to hurt the West and Israel and who own resources that the West needs and so should not held to ransom for them.

Said believes that US scholars did not come to Orientalism from the discipline of philology, but from social sciences. The burden of Orientalism fell on the shoulders of the Americans because of the void left after WWII after the withdrawal of France and Britain. Other exigencies were the competition with the USSR in the Cold War and missionary attitudes towards Orientals who were seen to be ripe for guidance. This in no way reduces the great impact of European Orientalism on its US counterpart. One evidence is the employment of European Orientalist discourse of Renan, Becker and Massignon by Gustave von Grunbaum, a European who came to the United States fleeing Fascism. He is well-known for his hostility towards Islam which he describes as antihuman, incapable of development, self-knowledge, or objectivity, as well as uncreative, unscientific, and authoritarian. (Said, p. 297). Grunbaum's position is an illustration of how the new Orientalist, despite making changes in the field that made scarcely recognizable, took over the attitudes of cultural hostility and kept them. Two more names feature in the sphere of US Orientalism, one is Sir Hamilton Gibb who, in the mid-1950's was head of the Harvard Center of the Middle East Studies and Philip Hitti of Princeton University (late 1920's).

Not much is said about Hitti saving that his work was less attached to government policies. As for Gibb, who is famous for opposing the adoption in the Arab world of nationalism on the basis of the latter's eroding effect on the Orientalism of Islam, he "focused Orientalism on a Cold War area studies approach" (296). In conclusion, Said tells of two factors that give the impression of Orientalism having triumphed. One is that the Arab cultural elite, and despite the mitigation of political hostility towards the West and the US, as an effect of the Western bias to Israel, see themselves as satellites in the Western orbit. Students and even professors from the Arab world still want to go and sit at the feet of the Western Orientalist for asking guidance. Another factor is the fact of consumerism in the region. While the US is the customer of a selective product (oil), the Arabs are consumers of virtually all American goods, which resulted, *inter alia*, in the standardization of taste. Taking heart from the emergence of a new class of Orientalists, among whom are Maxim Rodinson, Jacques Berque, Roger Owen and others, who leave their work open to critical scrutiny and bring other disciplines into their work, Said ends with an optimistic note, claiming that Orientalism failed. "I consider", he writes, "Orientalism's failure to be a human as much as an intellectual one; for in having to take up a position of irreducible opposition to a region of the world it considered alien to its own, Orientalism failed to identify with human experience, failed also to see it as human experience. The worldwide hegemony of Orientalism and all it stands for can now be challenged, if we can benefit properly from the general twentieth-century rise to political and historical awareness of so many of the earth's peoples" (p. 328).

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