

**Orientalism. Edward Said. Edition reviewed by Vintage Books, USA 1979. (pp. XIV + 370).**

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# **ORIENTALISM**

**Edward Said**

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**The book layout (pp. XIV + 370)**

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If the success of a book is measured by the amount of thought it generates, this is definitely a winner. Although it is not a new book, it is still the one most frequently quoted whenever the relationship between the East and the West is being discussed. It is a general study of Orientalism as system of ideas that dominated Western thought about the Orient for over two centuries.

So, what is Orientalism? In the introduction, the author proposes three definitions. One, Orientalism as an academic tradition; anyone researching, teaching or writing about the Orient is an Orientalist and what he does is Orientalism. Second, Orientalism as a style of thought based on unshakeable belief in a radical distinction between Orient and Occident upon which a large body of theories, novels, social portraits and political accounts were based. The interchange between the academic tradition of Orientalism and its imaginative counterpart more or less, produced the third meaning which is more historically and materially defined than the first two; Orientalism as a Western style (or will) for dominating the Orient. Nevertheless, we are cautioned not to look at Orientalism as a mere collection of lies but, rather, as a considerable Western cultural investment in the East constituting a system of theory and practice.

The book is limited to the Anglo-French American experience of Islam and the Arabs. Its main objective is investigating the internal consistency of Orientalism's ideas about the Orient not the correctness of these ideas. In fact, the author argues that the Orient, as Europe knows it, is nothing but a myth; a constituted entity; a word that acquired certain connotations in the Western mind which does not necessarily refer to the empirical Orient but, rather, to the imaginative field surrounding the word. True, the Arabs, Islam and the East were, and still are, misrepresented in the West. However, the book raises the question of whether there can be a real representation of anything or that representations because they are representations are colored by the language, shaped by the culture and operate for a purpose. That Orientalism makes any sense at all, therefore, depends exclusively on the West not the Orient.

In addition, the book studies the relationship between orientalism and imperialism; a study the author describes as being off limits. He argues that all

knowledge about the Orient was tinged by colonial aspirations and that orientalism is fundamentally a political doctrine imposed on the Orient because it was weaker than the West. Moreover, it provided prior justifications for imperialism. After all, if the Orient is backward, degenerate and incapable of self government why should not Europe step in it, rule it and "regenerate" it for the sake of the world at large? The study aims to show that generations of orientalist work have transformed the East from an "alien space" to a "colonial space".

The author points that the essential aspects of modern Orientalism theory and practice should be understood as a set of structures inherited from the past, secularized, modified and reformed by such disciplines as philology which in turn were modernized versions of christian supernaturalism. So, where have the original structures come from? Orientalism as a field of study was born in the bosom of the church in 1312 AD. Further, orientalism from its early phases reflected a problematic European attitude towards Islam and a constant sense of a confrontation between the two. In medieval Europe, Islam was regarded as the ultimate threat to christianity against which all Europe closed ranks and the literature of the period, in a self preservation attempt, reduced Islam and consequently the Orient to a manageable entity by describing it as a misguided version of Christianity so that it's strangeness could be dispelled and its threat coped with. Moreover, a diminished version of its figures, events and lore were incorporated into European folklore and a reservoir of oriental stereotypes, representations and certain characteristics believed to be oriental, such as sensuality, despotism, lechery... etc, was formed to serve the purpose of discussing Islam and the East. Later, the source of these representations changed but not their character and in time the distinction between the "real" Orient and the "orientalized" Orient was obliterated and the two became one.

The French expedition on Egypt in 1798 AD triggered a dramatic change in orientalism for it was the first operation in which orientalist knowledge was put to direct colonial use. Napoleon marched towards an Egypt he knew from orientalists' texts and myths. Before him, the Orient studied was a classical one. The modern Orient was first paid attention to by his entourage of scientists who made up the instiut de l'Egypte which was above all an agency of domination. Later, the Suez Canal dissolved the geographical barrier that

separated East and West since time immemorial but the ethnic and moral ones remained stronger than ever.

There were some strong currents of thought in 18th century Europe, such as the geographical expansion in the East and the systematic classification of mankind, which to a great extent, shaped the new structures of modern Orientalism and helped loosen up the religious framework in which the Orient was usually viewed. Yet, this is not saying that these frameworks were abandoned altogether, rather, they were retained and redistributed in the new structures and emerged later in new forms as in a romantic dream to reconstruct the Orient.

The modern terminology and practice of Orientalism in the 19th century produced compelling cultural and moral definitions which worked as a kind of Lexicographical censorship on non-orientalist (personal) experiences. It presented a set of omniscient definitions as the only adequate means of discussing the Orient. The Orientalist, assumed an Orient which is ontologically staple and radically different geographically, ethnically, morally and socially. The orientals, likewise, were conceived of as a platonic essence and were expected to conform to the qualities of an oriental, all negative naturally, otherwise, they were guilty of not being oriental enough. In representing the Orient to his readers, the orientalist selected what he regarded as illustrative fragments of the Orient, usually bizarre and vulgar, to amuse his readers and confirm their pre-existing ideas about the Orient.

The author points out that the most important development in 19th century Orientalism was the distillation of the popular ideas about the Orient into a separate and coherent category; thus the reference to the Orientals, the Arabs or the Semites meant identifying a certain information which has an almost scientific validity that no new evidence can disturb. These categories or terminals served as the starting point and end result of any argument. The power of these definitions stemmed from the fact that, in the 19th century, Orientalism associated itself with the reigning sciences of that era and formulated its ideas in the language that derived its power from them. In particular, it was the association with philology, a field whose accomplishments include comparative grammar, the classification of languages into families and the final rejection of the divine origins of languages that gave Orientalism its technical characteristics and the weight of scientific truth to its findings.

The author describes Orientalism as a tradition of continuity; a brotherhood based on a common doxology which imposed a set of restrictions on its adherents. This can be understood in the light of the fact that its legitimacy in the 19th century was derived from citing the authority of predecessors. This resulted in a loss of originality, the systematic exclusion of Oriental reality and the hardening of orientalist representations. It was the legacy of two traditions which made up the orientalist archive: learned (bookish) Orientalism represented by men whose work claims no direct knowledge of the real (existential) Orient and orientalist residence which got its authority from actual experience in the East.

The conception of the orient differed considerably between British and French pilgrims and their scholarly fruits varied accordingly. Whereas to the British the Orient meant their Empire; an association by which the reign of the imagination was curbed considerably by political reality, to the French, it was not defined by material reality; theirs was fixed in the imagination. So the author maintains that unless the oriental motif was a stylistic feature for as British writers as in Fitzgerald "Rubaiyat", it was aesthetically inferior to the works of French writers. Nevertheless, the differences between the French and British schools of Orientalism were manifest ones only, in form and personal style but underneath all there existed a layer of talent hostility towards the Orient.

In the 20th century, Orientalism accomplished its final self metamorphosis from a scholarly tradition to a colonial establishment. This "preposterous" transition was inevitable considering Orientalism's history in the 19th century. Now, the new reality of Orientalism is strictly speaking American. America inherited the European tradition of Orientalism and transformed it and broke it into several parts keeping intact, however, the typical antipathy towards Islam and the Arabs. The striking feature of the American social science interest in the Orient is its complete disregard of literature. Thereby, the American awareness of the Arab or the Islamic Orient appears as a dehumanized category. Oriental studies now are usually a part of a policy objective and are more likely to be commissioned by the government.

The author warns against what he calls the Orient Orientalizing of itself by accepting and circulating the Western stereotypes of it and the compulsive consumerism of everything American and European.

The failure of Orientalism is both human and intellectual for in taking such an inflexible opposition to the Orient, Orientalism failed to identify with human experience.

The book begins with a lengthy introduction (pp.1 – 28) in which the author describes several aspects of his study like its scope and methodological approach. Besides, it outlines most of the book's arguments and final conclusion while the main bulk of the book, three chapters each subdivided into four shorter units, are an elaboration and an exploration in depth of what has been summed up here which might make it a bit boring. Chapter one, "The Scope of Orientalism" (pp. 29–110) broadly explores all the philosophical and political themes of the subject. The first and fourth units I found to be a general sketch of what has been fully discussed in the following two chapters. Units two and three outline the early beginnings of Orientalism. Chapter two, "Orientalist structures and restructures" (pp. 111 – 197) gives an account of the rise and the development of modern Orientalism against the social, cultural and political background of the 18th and 19th centuries by a broad chronological order. Here, the author discusses the general characteristics of the works of important poets, artists and scholars and the similarities and differences between the British and French schools of Orientalism and their ideological tendencies. Chapter three, "Orientalism Now" (pp. 199 -328) studies the developments and subsequent transformations of Orientalism and the role of the Orientalist in the period from 1870 until the present day. The very last units, "The Latest Phase" surveys the new realities of Orientalism in the United States and the shift from British and French to American hegemony. This chapter on the whole is the most interesting in the book but I found the last unit too brief to give an accurate overall picture of American Orientalism. However, this topic is taken up more fully in "Covering Islam"; a study of the media coverage of events in Middle East; how it circulates and consolidates a negative image of the Orient.

One striking feature of this book is repetition; this part is expected because Orientalism as the author defines it is a system of repetition. Besides, the style of the author gets very complicated at times that you are tempted at times to forget about the whole book despite its interesting subject matter. But all in all, this book is very good and will no doubt contribute to one's understanding of a phenomenon that affected the life of all orientals considering one reads it at the right time and in the right mood.