

Orientalism

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“Orientalism is the study of the cultures and civilisations of the Orient or East... and includes the study of languages, literatures, history and religion.” - W. M. Watt

The word Orient is derived from the Latin *oriens*, which means ‘east’ and, equally likely, from the Greek word *he’oros*, meaning the direction of the rising sun. Orient is the opposite of Occident. In terms of the Old World, Europe was considered the Occident or the West, and its farthest known extreme the Orient or the East. Dating from the Roman Empire until the Middle Ages, what is now, in the West, considered ‘the Middle East’ was then considered the Orient. In that time, the flourishing cultures of the Far East were unknown; likewise Europe was unknown in the Far East. After a period, as Europe learned of countries farther East, the defined limit of the Orient shifted eastwards, until it reached the Pacific Ocean, in what Westerners came to call the Far East.

The term Orientalism describes the way in which the West looks at the Orient in order to understand it within the context of Western experience. More specifically, Orientalism is a categorical approach by Western scholars as an attempt to form a collective body of knowledge about the Orient. Included in this enterprise is the study of Eastern philosophies, history, religion, culture, language and social structures. In other words, it is the branch of scholarship that endeavours to understand and gather knowledge pertaining to the Orient.

Considered for long a place of romance, exotic beings, remarkable landscapes and experiences, the Orient as understood by the West is often declared a “European invention”.¹ Or that “the Orient is, in fact, only East from a European perspective: it is a relative, not absolute, term.”² It would however be a mistake to conclude that the Orient was nothing but an idea, or a creation with no corresponding reality³; or to assume that the structure of Orientalism is nothing more than a structure of lies or of myths; as it has given us much of what we know about the Oriental world at large. Late nineteenth-century authors are especially worthy of consideration for their contributions to an understanding of foreign cultures and peoples.

Moreover, writers such as Said hold that Orientalism was and to a great degree is influenced by the realities, political or otherwise, of the time; that the interest of, for example a nation in a specific region, coloured the understanding of the Orient. As Said writes:

I doubt that it is controversial, for example, to say that an Englishman in India or Egypt in the later nineteenth century took an interest in those countries that was never far from their status in his mind as British colonies. To say this may seem quite different from saying that all academic knowledge about India and

1 Said, E. *Orientalism*. New York, 1978., p.1.

2 Nooruddin, U. *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. 1998., p. 160.

3 Said, E. *Orientalism*. op. cit., p.5.

Egypt is somehow tinged and impressed with, violated by, the gross political fact – and yet *that is what I am saying* in this study of Orientalism.⁴

In this light it cannot be ignored that most nineteenth century writers were aware and influenced by the fact of an Empire.

Orientalism as a system of knowledge took shape in the late seventeenth century, reaching its zenith in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During this period Britain and France, and later the United States of America, were involved in the struggle for Western domination. This Anglo-French-American experience was essentially imperialistic. Implicit in the Orientalist attitude, therefore, is the belief that the Orient had passed its golden age as the West was being 'born', and was thus in decline. This view of the Orient as backward and barbaric led to interpretations which resembled more closely to what scholars wished to believe, rather than to what actually was the case. Along with this attitude, Orientalism also played an active role in advancing Western interests in the East. The pursuit of knowledge of the Orient was often not an end in itself. However, by the nineteenth century when scientific methods of study were developed nearly all those engaged in the study of the Orient above all sought "objectivity and accurate information."⁵

As I focus on the contribution and the role played by the Orientalists in understanding the Middle East or in other words the phenomenon of Islam I shall divide this study into two broad phases: The Advent of Islam up to the Crusades and the Colonial Period to date.

From the beginning, Orientalists have viewed Islam in two ways. First, as a tradition borrowed from Abrahamic religions, Islam was considered to be a crude parody of Christianity (this is evident in the treatment of Islam in St. John's work, *The Fount of Knowledge*). Second, Islam was looked upon as an alien menace which historically had enormous military and political success throughout the world, and consequently was a threat to Western civilization.

When the West first faced the challenge of Muslim power it had no knowledge whatsoever of what it was fighting. This produced a body of legends: the Muslims were idolaters, worshiped a false trinity, the Qur'ān was held to be full of absurdities and the Prophet, a man of impure life and worldly stratagem, and, Islam nothing more than a fantastical product of an evil imagination.

Since in the medieval period the scholars of both Islam and Christianity were chiefly concerned to show the "errors and weaknesses"⁶ of the other religion, Islam was therefore considered as a subject worthy of study only for the purpose of exposing its errors. St. John of Damascus, one of the great theologians of the Eastern Church, who lived in Syria under Muslim rule, seems to have been the first Christian thinker to have made a study of

4 Ibid., p. 11.

5 Watt, W. M. "The Study of Islam by Orientalists", *Islamochristiana* 14 (1988), p. 204.

6 Ibid., p. 201.

Islam. The works in which he deals with Islam are not works of political polemics but “serious attempts to refute its errors.”⁷ With similar attempts made, the one thing we cannot expect to find in the Middle Ages is the “spirit of detached and academic or humane inquiry.”⁸

The relationship between Christendom and Islam changed abruptly with the First Crusade. It brought for the first time the new religion and its followers under “sharper focus”⁹ and engendered “a growth of scholarly interest.”¹⁰ Soon, under the patronage of Peter the Venerable of the abbey of Cluny (d. 1156), the first Latin translation of the Qur’ān by Robert of Ketton was produced.

Crusades persisted up to more than two hundred years with some gaps. In its attempt to recapture land, the Christian Europe met with what is called a ‘humiliating defeat.’ The Christian scholars then embarked upon what may be termed as ‘Literary Crusades’ against the Muslims. This was an attempt to win in the literary field what they had lost in the battlefield. We hence find early writers concerned about issues such as whether an examination of the Qur’an could show contradictions, confusions, errors, traces of composite authorship so as to convince people that it was not what it claimed to be. Some even introduced the confusions alleged to be found in the Qur’ān. The spirit of this age reflects in the anti-Islamic works of the thirteenth century such as Ricoldo da Montecroce’s *Confutation Alchoran*.

They now sought methods other than war. These means were understood to be the presentation of such arguments against Islam as would require no real discussion. By the time of John of Segovia (d.1458), writes Southern, Christians were nearing to believe that:

War was the natural mode of expression of Islam, which was founded on a doctrine of conquest. But this was contrary to the essence of Christianity; therefore Christendom must always be at a disadvantage in this kind of struggle. It was therefore only by peaceful means that Christendom could win...¹¹

Or in the words of Roger Bacon (d. 1294): “Preaching therefore the only way in which Christendom can be enlarged.” Till the thirteen century the European view of Islam can be summed up in the words of Southern as, “imaginative and untruthful.”¹²

Naji Oueijan explains in his book, *The Progress of an Image: the East in English Literature*, that Orientalism was manifested in two movements: a genuine one prompted by scholars like Sir William Jones and literary figures like Samuel Johnson, William

7 Hourani, A. *Western Attitudes towards Islam*. Oxford 1974., p.10.

8 Southern, R. *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages*. Cambridge, Mssts. 1962., p. 3.

9 Rodinson, M. *Europe and the Mystique of Islam*. London, 1988., p. 6.

10 Watt, W. M. op. cit., p. 203.

11 Southern, R. op. cit. p. 90.

12 Southern, R. op. cit., p. 67.

Beckford, and Lord Byron, and a 'false' one motivated by religious and political literary propagandists. This 'genuine' movement was initiated in, what I shall call, the second phase of Orientalism. This second phase was caused and coincides with the colonial period. It was in the interest of the colonial rulers to understand the religion and culture of their 'Subject.' An overwhelming majority of these subjects were Muslims so the focus of the Orientalists of this period was naturally on Muslims and on their religion and culture. Edward Said calls Orientalism of this period the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient. It was this period which saw attitudes to 'otherness' consecrated in texts about conquered subjects and hardened in the process both into foreign policy and into the lax cultural repetition of received opinion. On the other hand, a new trend was on the rise:

...something new was growing in the nineteenth century... It was created by the vast expansion of the European mind and imagination so as to appropriate all existing things...the growth of universal intellectual curiosity, the desire to know everything, either in order to bring it under man's control, or to contemplate in it the manifold wonders of God's creative work.¹³

In the nineteenth century arose the movement of criticism and therefore a new way of looking at knowledge. The age of scientific culture and inquiry, marked by writers such as Thomas Carlyle (d. 1881), led to great intellectual change as scholars tried to distinguish various cultures or civilisations, to define the essence of each, and to trace the process of transmission from one to another. It was this spirit which sought nothing but the truth and caused the emergence of what may be called 'Scientific Orientalism.'

Criticism

Studies of nineteenth century literature have revealed that there is much that can be learned about the West's image of itself through the way Western writers have depicted the Orient. Writers such as Edward W. Said have focused on ways in which Orientalism reflects European preoccupations because of which the question whether an outsider can understand another religion or culture from the 'insider's perspective'¹⁴ has been asked by critics and voiced in Clinton Bennett's book *In Search of Muhammad*. Indeed Oriental studies reflect European concerns about a changing, expanding world full of new uncertainties and questions about one's own identity. However, Turner claims that "while many distortions and fantasies certainly existed, the notion of 'the Orient' as a negative mirror image of the West cannot be wholly true because attitudes to distinct cultures diverged significantly."¹⁵

Orientalism for scholars such as Abdel-Malek has for long been the "intellectual handmaiden"¹⁶ used to penetrate consciousness of the people in order to better assure its enslavement to the European powers of colonialism. As viewed in the light of colonial

13 Hourani, A. op. cit., p. 14.

14 Bennett, C. *In Search of Muhammad*. London, 1998. p. 8.

15 Turner, B. (ed.). *Orientalism, Postmodernism and Globalism*. London, 1994.

16 Little, D. "Three Arab Critiques of Orientalism", *Muslim World*, 1979., p. 115.

expansion the subject of Orientalism becomes a tool employed by the Western countries to strengthen their hold on the Orient and bring to fruition their self-appointed mission of bringing civilization to the East. Criticizing this, Malek declares that the Orientalists, in fact, are duty bound to “contribute in a creative manner to the elaboration of the fundamental problems of the struggle of the peoples of the Orient for their national and social liberation and to recover from their economic backwardness.”¹⁷ Though to many Orientalism remains exploitative and imperialistic this viewpoint has been questioned. Bernard Lewis asks:

What imperial purpose was served by deciphering the ancient Egyptian language, for example, and then restoring to the Egyptians knowledge of and pride in their forgotten, ancient past?¹⁸

Also, such theories do not explain why the French and English pursued the study of Islam in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, long before they had any control or hope of control in the Middle East. Gabrieli insists that although there are examples of Orientalists who were also ambassadors, missionaries, soldiers, or merchants, they are outnumbered by European scholars whose interest in the East was sparked by “pure scientific passion and a disinterested and impassioned search for the truth.”¹⁹

Moreover, the considering of the Orientals as mere “objects”²⁰ which can be reduced to an ethnic, racist type has been severely criticised; for it leads to acts of simplification that leave the actual ‘objects’ concealed. On the other hand, it is Tibawi’s complaint that almost all Orientalists, both past and present, if not actually hostile to Islam and the Arabs, “lack an elementary sympathy”²¹ for the Islamic religion which is evident in their denial of the cardinal Muslim belief that Islam is of divine origin. But the problem was deeper. It was the method of study which according to the Muslim scholars was not correct or fair. Orientalists of later days employed, for example, the anthropological approach to study Islam and according to such methods religion is merely a social phenomenon and not a revealed phenomenon. With such means they endeavoured to explain Islam as a phenomenon of history or social conditions and not a phenomenon of revelation. This caused the already acrimonious relationship of the East and the West to deteriorate further. Furthermore, the perennial attempts of Orientalists to seek the origins of Islam in Christianity and Judaism were also decried. Tibawi believes, writes Little, that Western interest in Islam as a religion has been tainted from the beginning by “hostility to Islam as a rival religion to Judaism and Christianity.”²²

Of the numerous points of contention and criticism it is seen that there runs, among the writings of most critics, a thread of deep bitterness and resentment with which most regard Western studies of the Arab-Islamic world, engendered from a battery of diverse

17 Ibid, p. 117.

18 Lewis, B. *Islam and the West*, New York, 1993., p.126.

19 Gabrieli, F. *Apology for Orientalism*, p.131.

20 Little, D. op. cit. p. 116.

21 Ibid., p. 112.

22 Ibid., p. 112.

reasons such as religious and political hostility which they detect in western scholarship, the capitalist exploitation of Orientals, the racism that they find in Orientalism toward the character, achievements, and aspirations of the people of the East. Connected with this feeling is the belief that Orientalism is virtually useless, the conviction that Orientalism as it is being practiced at present is prevented by its very nature from yielding results which are valid for Orientals or any one else.

Conclusion

In saying that Orientalism has been subject to imperialism, positivism, utopianism, historicism, Darwinism, racism, Freudianism, Marxism, Spenglerism, Edward Said misses the point that in the twenty-first century every subject and therefore Orientalism is now subject to scientific inquiry. Respecting this, Watt's analysis could have not been more relevant: "What Muslims fail to realise is that the Islamologists are applying to Islam the methods of historical and literary criticism which other scholars have applied to other religions."²³

In all truth it must be said that the West's insatiable curiosity is not directed specially to Islamic culture or religion. It arouses an interest in all religions and civilisations. The aim, to be achieved through applying the methods of scientific criticism, is to make a complete survey of human experience. Modernity, then, with its insistence on scientific criteria, is neither of the East nor of the West. It challenges all equally.

²³ Watt, W. M. op. cit. p. 207.

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