

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH, PATNA UNIVERSITY  
POSTCOLONIALISM  
MODULE 4  
Orientalism

The epigraphs Said uses at the beginning of Orientalism are:

“They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented.” —Karl Marx, The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte

“The East is a career.” —Benjamin Disraeli, Tancred

“One ought again to remember that all cultures impose corrections on raw reality, changing it from free-floating objects into units of knowledge. The problem is not that conversion takes place. It is perfectly natural for the human mind to resist the assault on it of untreated strangeness; therefore cultures have always been inclined to impose complete transformations on other cultures, receiving these cultures not as they are but as, for the benefit of the receiver, as the way they ought to be. Yet the Orientalist makes it his work to be always converting the Orient from something into something else: he does this for himself, for the sake of his culture; in some cases for what he believes is the sake of the Oriental”

- Edward Said’s evaluation and critique of the set of beliefs known as Orientalism forms an important background for postcolonial studies. His work highlights the inaccuracies of a wide variety of assumptions as it questions various paradigms of thought which are accepted on individual, academic, and political levels.
- Orientalism is the imitation or depiction of aspects in the Eastern World.
- Much academic discourse has begun to use the term "Orientalism" to refer to a general patronizing Western attitude towards Middle Eastern, Asian, and North African societies.
- In Said's analysis, the West essentializes these societies as static and undeveloped—thereby fabricating a view of Oriental culture that can be studied, depicted, and reproduced in service of imperial power. Implicit in this fabrication, writes Said, is the idea that Western society is developed, rational, flexible, and superior.
- The Orient signifies a system of representations framed by political forces that brought the Orient into Western learning, Western consciousness, and Western empire. The Orient exists for the West, and is constructed by and in relation to the West. It is a mirror image of what is inferior and alien (‘other’) to the West.
- The Oriental is the person represented by such thinking. The man is depicted as feminine, weak, yet strangely dangerous because his sexuality poses a threat to white, Western women. The woman is both eager to be dominated and strikingly exotic. The Oriental is a single image, a sweeping generalization, and a stereotype that crosses countless cultural and national boundaries.
- Edward Said said that Orientalism "enables the political, economic, cultural and social domination of the West, not just during colonial times, but also in the present.”

- 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 poets, 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. . . The thesis of Orientalism develops Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony and Foucault's theorisation of discourse to criticise the scholarly tradition of Oriental studies.
- Said said that Orientalism, as an "idea of representation is a theoretical one: The Orient is a stage on which the whole East is confined" in order to make the Eastern world "less fearsome to the West"; that the developing world, primarily the West, is the cause of colonialism.
- Orientalism (orientalist knowledge) does not necessarily imply a negative attitude towards these differences and the "orientals": they can even be admired and revered. But the knowledge and effect of this positive evaluation can still be orientalist, dubious, racist and so on.
- Moreover, in *Empire: A Very Short Introduction* (2000), Stephen Howe agreed with Said that Western nations and their empires were created by the exploitation of underdeveloped countries, by the extraction of wealth and labour from one country to another country.
- Orientalism is a 1978 book by Said in which the author developed the idea of "to define west's historically patronizing representations of "The East" —the societies and peoples who inhabit the places of Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East.
- Said argued that Orientalism, in the sense of the Western scholarship about the eastern world, is inextricably tied to the imperialist societies who produced it, which makes much Orientalist work inherently political and servile to power.
- Said used the term Orientalism in three interdependent senses:
  - 1) Orientalism as an academic field;
  - 2) Orientalism as a style of thought based upon distinctions made between "the Orient" and "the Occident";
  - 3) Orientalism as "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient."
- Latent Orientalism is the unconscious, untouchable certainty about what the Orient is. Its basic content is static and unanimous. The Orient is seen as separate, eccentric, backward, silently different, sensual, and passive. It has a tendency towards despotism and away from progress. It displays feminine penetrability and supine malleability. Its progress and value are judged in terms of, and in comparison to, the West, so it is always the Other, the conquerable, and the inferior.
- Manifest Orientalism is what is spoken and acted upon. It includes information and changes in knowledge about the Orient as well as policy decisions founded in Orientalist thinking. It is the expression in words and actions of Latent Orientalism.

- Post-colonial theory studies the power and the continued dominance of Western ways of intellectual enquiry and the production of knowledge in the academic, intellectual, and cultural spheres of the de-colonised country.
- Said's survey concentrated upon the British and the French varieties of Orientalism that supported the British Empire and the French Empire as commercial enterprises constructed from colonialism, and gave perfunctory coverage, discussion, and analyses of German Orientalist scholarship.
- Orientalism and Postcolonialism - Orientalism uses the concept of discourse to re-order the study of colonialism. It examines how the formal study of the 'Orient' (what is today referred to as the Middle East), along with key literary and cultural texts, consolidated certain ways of seeing and thinking which in turn contributed to the functioning of colonial power.
- These are not materials that traditional analysts of colonialism considered, but which are now, thanks both to Orientalism and to the changing perspectives on ideology and culture outlined above, understood as central to the making and functioning of colonial societies.
- Said's project is to show how 'knowledge' about non- Europeans was part of the process of maintaining power over them; thus the status of 'knowledge' is demystified, and the lines between the ideological and the objective blurred.
- It was not, Said suggests, that Europeans were 'telling lies', or that they individually disliked non-Western peoples or cultures.

## Sources

1. Wikipedia
2. Wordpress blog on Foucault
3. Honggangdoxue
4. Orientalism (1978) Edward Said
5. Ania Loomba