

Orientalism at 45: Why Edward Said's seminal book still matters



Anonymous Venetian orientalist painting titled The Reception of the Ambassadors in Damascus, 1511, at the Louvre (Public domain)

Orientalism is a critique of European essentialist representations of the "Orient", which tend to describe other cultures as static and monolithic, rather than ever-changing negotiation processes whose fluidity is enhanced by globalisation. It is also an analysis of the ambivalent relationship between knowledge and power, or the institutional orientalist tradition and imperialism, with the first applied in the service of the latter. [...]

Discourse is produced by establishing a collective understanding of social facts developed in a particular historical period. These facts are established by systems of power that create rules for truth and legitimacy in knowledge production.

As power shifted westwards in the 17th century, Orientalist discourse premised on cultural "otherness" and "the basic distinction between east and west" spread, reflecting attitudes of European colonialism. The "Oriental" is therefore always analysed through the western scholar's "Occidental" lens and regarded as ontologically unequal. As Said explains, "the essence of Orientalism is the ineradicable distinction between western superiority and Oriental inferiority."

Orientalist discourse is based on binary logic, supported by an imaginative geography: there is an "Us" (the West) and there is a "Them" (the East). It is a static definition of the other that helps in defining ourselves: the "Orient" is everything the West is not.

Between 1815 and 1914, worldwide territories under European colonial rule increased from 30 to 85 percent of the earth's landmass. In the same period, almost 50,000 books on the Near East were published. After Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798, Orientalism entered its modern global phase and even took on a scientific character in *Description de l'Egypte*, a massive volume published between 1809 and 1828. Abd al-Rahman al-Jabarti, a chronicler of those times, witnessed the Napoleonic invasion and was the first to describe it as an "epistemological conquest, other than military".

The Armée d'Orient, or the French military force, was in fact accompanied by around 160 Orientalists: explorers and researchers who documented their "objective" observations during the conquest of Egypt. These scholars worked to facilitate the domestication of future colonies while relying on confirmation bias and centuries-old beliefs about the "Orient".

At the time of the Napoleonic invasion, Islam was not observed in itself but in opposition to Christianity - stretching back to the Crusades and the mediaeval period when the Muslim world became a target for European Christian domination. Napoleonic Orientalists were a product of this colonial, hence hegemonic relationship, with produced scholarship being an attempt at "assimilating" an Orient that was marked by a "constitutive otherness".

From that moment onward, the Orientalist tradition triggered a set of discourses that for the next 200 years would be defined by cultural essentialism perpetuating immutable assumptions about a culture that is, in fact, shifting and mutating, and is able to readapt itself to the local traditions of different people around the world.

These discourses would lay the foundation for a twofold approach: on one side, especially from a vaguely left-wing posture, a paternalistic one ("Orientals need our guidance/help"); on the other, a more right-wing, racist attitude ("Orientals are savages").

An example of this appears in chapter 34 of *Modern Egypt*, a two-volume account of the British occupation of Egypt, published in 1908 by the colonial administrator, Evelyn Baring, or Lord Cromer:

"The European is a close reasoner; his statements of fact are devoid of ambiguity; he is a natural logician even though he may not have studied logic; he loves symmetry in all things; he is by nature sceptical and requires proof before he can accept the truth of any proposition; his trained intelligence works like a machine. The mind of the Oriental, on the other hand, like his picturesque streets, is eminently wanting in symmetry. His reasoning is of the most slipshod description. He is often incapable of drawing the most obvious conclusions from simple premises."

As Said writes, during the early 20th century, political figures like Lord Cromer could produce such racial and cultural generalisations because a well-consolidated Orientalist tradition bequeathed them effective words and images.

Orientalism supported the idea of European world domination. The metamorphosis was complete: from an academic discourse aimed at a theoretical appropriation, Orientalism turned into an imperial instrument serving a number of states' national interests, becoming a tool of colonial appropriation. [...]

Another typical Orientalist trait is the invocation of sexual imagery to denote western domination of the "Orient". In European literary works, the "Orient" is often represented as having typically "feminine" traits - seduction, vulnerability, fecundity - as if its conquest metaphorically implies sexual submission to the western male. The relationship between imperialism and gender has been examined and developed further by postcolonial and gender studies scholars.

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15 September 2023

<https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/orientalism-edward-said-seminal-book-matters-still-why>