

Amardeep Singh

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 24, 2004

An Introduction to Edward Said, Orientalism, and Postcolonial Literary Studies

REQUEST: If you were assigned this post on Edward Said's "Orientalism" as part of a course, or if you're a teacher who is assigning the below, I would greatly appreciate it if you would leave a comment stating which class and which school below. Or, email me at amardeep [AT] gmail [DOT] com.

It's been about a year since Edward Said passed away.

Recently, there was a panel at Lehigh to talk about his legacy, specifically in the spheres of his contribution to literary studies, the representation of Islam, as well as his political advocacy. I was on the panel to talk about literary studies, especially his books *Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993).

Preparing a presentation gave me an opportunity to look at some Said essays on literature I hadn't ever read (see for instance this at LRB; or this at Al-Ahram). I was also particularly impressed by the Said resources at www.edwardsaid.org. There are dozens and dozens of essays by Said linked there, as well as a great many "tribute" essays written by critics all around the world, immediately after his passing. I highly recommend it.

The presentation was a challenging one to write. I include a modified (for the web) version of it below because 1) I haven't really found a simple, straightforward introduction to Said's argument in *Orientalism* on the web, and 2) I can't imagine publishing even a revised version of this, since my colleagues in postcolonial studies will know these arguments very, very well.

An Introduction to Edward Said, Orientalism, and Postcolonial Literary Studies

(For a very general audience; notes for a presentation given at Lehigh University on 9/23/04)

Basic Bio: "Edward Said was born in Jerusalem in 1935 and was for many years America's foremost spokesman for the Palestinian cause. His writings have been translated into 26 languages, including his most influential book, *Orientalism* (1978), an examination of the way the West perceives the Islamic world. Much of his writing beyond literary and cultural criticism is inspired by his passionate advocacy of the Palestinian cause, including *The Question of Palestine*, (1979), *Covering Islam* (1981), *After the Last Sky* (1986) and *Blaming the Victims* (1988). . . . He went to a New England boarding school, undergraduate years at Princeton and graduate study at Harvard." (from the

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Orientalism

Edward Said's signature contribution to academic life is the book *Orientalism*. It has been influential in about half a dozen established disciplines, especially literary studies (English, comparative literature), history, anthropology, sociology, area studies (especially middle east studies), and comparative religion. However, as big as *Orientalism* was to academia, Said's thoughts on literature and art continued to evolve over time, and were encapsulated in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), a book which appeared nearly 15 years after *Orientalism* (1978). Put highly reductively, the development of his thought can be understood as follows: Said's early work began with a gesture of refusal and rejection, and ended with a kind of ambivalent acceptance. If *Orientalism* questioned a pattern of misrepresentation of the non-western world, *Culture and Imperialism* explored with a less confrontational tone the complex and ongoing relationships between east and west, colonizer and colonized, white and black, and metropolitan and colonial societies.

Said directly challenged what Euro-American scholars traditionally referred to as "Orientalism." Orientalism is an entrenched structure of thought, a pattern of making certain generalizations about the part of the world known as the 'East'. As Said puts it:

"Orientalism was ultimately a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, West, "us") and the strange (the Orient, the East, "them")."

Just to be clear, Said didn't invent the term 'Orientalism'; it was a term used especially by middle east specialists, Arabists, as well as many who studied both East Asia and the Indian subcontinent. The vastness alone of the part of the world that European and American scholars thought of as the "East" should, one imagines, have caused some one to think twice. But for the most part, that self-criticism didn't happen, and Said argues that the failure there — the blind spot of orientalist thinking — is a structural one.

The stereotypes assigned to Oriental cultures and "Orientals" as individuals are pretty specific: Orientals are despotic and clannish. They are despotic when placed in positions of power, and sly and obsequious when in subservient positions. Orientals, so the stereotype goes, are impossible to trust. They are capable of sophisticated abstractions, but not of concrete, practical organization or rigorous, detail-oriented analysis. Their men are sexually incontinent, while their women are locked up behind bars. Orientals are, by definition, strange. The best summary of the Orientalist mindset would probably be: "East is east and west is west, and never the twain shall meet" (Rudyard Kipling).

In his book, Said asks: but where is this sly, devious, despotic, mystical Oriental? Has anyone ever met anyone who meets this description in all particulars? In fact, this idea of the Oriental is a particular kind of myth produced by European thought, especially in and after the 18th century. In some sense his book *Orientalism* aims to dismantle this myth, but more than that Said's goal is to identify Orientalism as a discourse.

From Myth to Discourse. The oriental is a myth or a stereotype, but Said shows that the myth had, over the course of two centuries of European thought, come to be thought of as a kind of *systematic knowledge* about the East. Because the myth masqueraded as fact, the results of studies into eastern cultures and literature were often self-fulfilling. It was accepted as a common fact that Asians, Arabs, and Indians were mystical religious devotees incapable of rigorous rationality. It is unsurprising, therefore that so many early European studies into, for instance, Persian poetry, discovered nothing more or less than the terms of their inquiry were able to allow: mystical religious

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devotion and an absence of rationality.

Political Dominance. Said showed that the myth of the Oriental was possible because of European political dominance of the Middle East and Asia. In this aspect of his thought he was strongly influenced by the French philosopher Michel Foucault. The influence from Foucault is wide-ranging and thorough, but it is perhaps most pronounced when Said argues that Orientalism is a full-fledged discourse, not just a simple idea, and when he suggests that all knowledge is produced in situations of unequal relations of power. In short, a person who dominates another is the only one in a position to write a book about it, to establish it, to define it. It's not a particular moral failing that the stereotypical failing defined as Orientalism emerged in western thinking, and not somewhere else.

Post-colonial Criticism

Orientalism was a book about a particular pattern in western thought. It was not, in and of itself, an evaluation of the importance of that thought. It was written before the peak of the academic 'culture wars', when key words like relativism, pluralism, and multiculturalism would be the order of the day. Said has often been lumped in with relativists and pluralists, but in fact he doesn't belong there.

In his later literary and cultural work, especially in *Culture and Imperialism* Said generally avoided the language of confrontation. Where others have angrily rejected the literary heritage of the Western Canon, Said, has instead embraced it, albeit ambivalently. Where others denounced Joseph Conrad and Rudyard Kipling as racist dead white men, Said wrote careful reappraisals of their works, focusing on their representations of India and Africa respectively. Said did not apologize for, for instance, Joseph Conrad's image of the Congo as an essentially corrupting place inhabited by ruthless cannibals. But Said did acknowledge Conrad's gift for *style*, and explored its implications: Conrad was sophisticated enough to sense that he did indeed have a blind spot. Conrad recognized that the idea of imperialism was an illusion, built entirely on a very fragile mythic rhetoric. You see some of this in the famous quote from *Heart of Darkness*:

The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea -- something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to. . . ."

The lines are spoken by the sailor Marlowe, who was in effect an observer-participant to the scene of Kurtz's fatal breakdown in the upper Congo. He is a veteran, of the colonial system, and this is the first place where his views become apparent. Like many others in his trade, Marlowe was in fact ambivalent about what was, in effect, his job. He knows the violence of it and the potential evil of it, but he still tries to justify it through recourse to the "idea at the back of it." But even more puzzling: that "idea at the back of it" is not an idea of reason, or human rights, or technology (or the pursuit of weapons of mass destruction). The idea is something to "bow down before, offer a sacrifice to..." The desire to conquer the earth, in short, is as irrational a desire as any.

Said refers to this passage a few times in his essays. One such response is as follows, where Said sketches an account of the political conditions that made imperialism possible in England and France, as well as general readings of several works of literature. I quote at length because this is a perfect example of Said's ability to blend political/historical analysis with literary criticism:

But there's more than that to imperialism. There was a commitment to imperialism over and

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above profit, a commitment in constant circulation and recirculation which on the one hand allowed decent men and women from England or France, from London or Paris, to accept the notion that distant territories and their native peoples should be subjugated and, on the other hand, replenished metropolitan energies so that these decent people could think of the empire as a protracted, almost metaphysical obligation to rule subordinate, inferior or less advanced peoples. We mustn't forget, and this is a very important aspect of my topic, that there was very little domestic resistance inside Britain and France. There was a kind of tremendous unanimity on the question of having an empire. There was very little domestic resistance to imperial expansion during the nineteenth century, although these empires were very frequently established and maintained under adverse and even disadvantageous conditions. Not only were immense hardships in the African wilds or wastes, the "dark continent," as it was called in the latter part of the nineteenth century, endured by the white colonizers, but there was always the tremendously risky physical disparity between a small number of Europeans at a very great distance from home and a much larger number of natives on their home territory. In India, for instance, by the 1930s, a mere 4,000 British civil servants, assisted by 60,000 soldiers and 90,000 civilians, had billeted themselves upon a country of 300,000,000 people. The will, self-confidence, even arrogance necessary to maintain such a state of affairs could only be guessed at. But as one can see in the texts of novels like Forster's *Passage to India* or Kipling's *Kim*, these attitudes are at least as significant as the number of people in the army or civil service or the millions of pounds that England derived from India.

For the enterprise of empire depends upon the idea of having an empire, as Joseph Conrad so powerfully seems to have realized in *Heart of Darkness*. He says that the difference between us in the modern period, the modern imperialists, and the Romans is that the Romans were there just for the loot. They were just stealing. But we go there with an idea. He was thinking, obviously, of the idea, for instance in Africa, of the French and the Belgians that when you go to these continents you're not just robbing the people of their ivory and slaves and so on. You are improving them in some way. I'm really quite serious. The idea, for example, of the French empire was that France had a "mission civilisatrice," that it was there to civilize the natives. It was a very powerful idea. Obviously, not so many of the natives believed it, but the French believed that that was what they were doing.

The idea of having an empire is very important, and that is the central feature that I am interested in. All kinds of preparations are made for this idea within a culture and then, in turn and in time, imperialism acquires a kind of coherence, a set of experiences and a presence of ruler and ruled alike within the culture. (see <http://www.zmag.org/zmag/articles/barsaid.htm>)

A final point, about postcolonial studies. The development of Said's ideas about literature and art paralleled those of the field of post-colonial criticism as a whole. It began in anger – Frantz Fanon, Aime Cesaire, Malcolm X. And it has ended up in a rather different place, embraced in the very academic settings that once might have laughed at the very notion of a canonical body of, say, African Literature.

Post-colonial criticism, which began under the combative spiritual aegis of [Frantz] Fanon and [Aime] Césaire, went further than either of them in showing the existence of what in Culture and Imperialism I called 'overlapping territories' and 'intertwined histories'. Many of us who grew up in the colonial era were struck by the fact that even though a hard and fast line separated colonizer from colonized in matters of rule and authority (a native could never

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 Ashes & Snow

aspire to the condition of the white man), the experiences of ruler and ruled were not so easily disentangled. (from the *London Review of Books*: http://www.lrb.co.uk/v25/n06/said01_.html)

That means that nativism cannot be an effective answer to western hegemony (later he gets more specific: "Afrocentrism is as flawed as Eurocentrism"). There's no simple way to achieve decolonization, just as (in the more limited context of the United States), there's no simple way for anyone to disentangle him or herself from the effects of racism.

But it also means that, in many respects, colonialism is still with us. It was through the colonial system that most of the national borders in Africa and Asia were drawn up, in many cases arbitrarily. But more than that are the effects of colonial language, the colonial state bureaucracy, and especially colonial attitudes to things like economic development.

Labels: EdwardSaid, Orientalism, Postcolonial

POSTED BY AMARDEEP AT 9:44 AM 

84 COMMENTS:

 Matt Kwan said...

Hi,

This blog post was pretty helpful towards my major essay re. South East Asia and Orientalist perspectives.

Cheers,

Matt

11:42 PM

 Anonymous said...

thanks...

it was really, really helpful.

regards,

john, Bangalore

11:49 AM

 Anonymous said...

thank you, most helpful,

Josna Pankhania,

PhD student exploring the development of spirituality (through satyananda yoga) as part of post colonial struggle and achievements

12:22 AM

 Anonymous said...

Thank you for this work it has helped explain how Said did not invent the term Orientalism and explain what he was trying to say.

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