

Islam Today

Written Assessment n. 1

Does Edward Saïd's model of 'Orientalism' contribute to an understanding of Islam in 'the West'?

The text "Orientalism" published by Edward W. Saïd in 1978 still represents an essential starting point for those who are about to explore the imagination of the other and specifically the construction of the representation of Islam by the West. Saïd systematically analyses how countless contexts and fields of knowledge – academia, art, literature, etc. – have contributed constructing a monolithic, simplistic, reified and essentialized image of the East, basing this image on a supposed superiority of the West versus inferiority of the East. This image of the East as regressed and inferior has been internalized by the East itself, due, among other things, to the asymmetrical power relations between an imperialist and colonizing West on the one hand and a colonized East on the other. This interpretative paradigm has made it possible in recent decades – from the publication of Saïd's volume – to deconstruct the representation of Islam and Muslims in an orientalist perspective, starting from a multiplicity of sources and contexts: from education and formal knowledge transmitted by educational institutions – through, for example, school textbooks - to literature, cinema, art, the web, politics, etc. This paradigm, therefore, represents a valuable track and key to interpreting the cultural and social reality capable of unhinging stereotypes and prejudices rooted in Western societies, often unwittingly.

The German institute Georg Eckert, for example, which deals with the analysis of textbooks and in this sense represents a unicum at an international level, in 2011 published a research project on the representation of Islam in the textbooks of five European countries¹ – England, Spain, France, Germany and Austria – from which a monolithic, retrograde, undifferentiated Islam emerges. The study realized that the lack of differentiation of Muslims and their reduction to a single and homogeneous group generate and open the way to forms of "cultural racism", in which religious difference is treated as something immutable. Even if the description of Islam in the medieval period occurs in favourable terms, as a period of splendour of Islamic civilization, the predominant idea is that of "broken" cultural development, which would have been interrupted later in Muslim-majority societies. Three adjectives summarize which representation of Islam is reiterated by the manuals: homogenization, essentialization and timelessness². In essence, there is no separation between the cultural, religious and political past, and information relating to Islam from the Middle Ages to the modern age. Furthermore, nothing is said of the enormous differences within the variegated Islamic world. The study of the Georg Eckert Institute represents a vital starting point for the orientalist representation of Islam in knowledge transmitted through textbooks.

¹ "The Current Status or Representations of Islam and Muslims in Textbooks in European Countries – Germany, Austria, France, Spain and England" (2011), <http://www.gei.de/en/projects/completed-projects/current-status-or-representations-of-islam-and-muslims.html>.

² Lucenti, M. (2018). *Il mondo arabo-musulmano e l'occidente nei manuali di Italia e Tunisia*. Aracne.

This study is certainly not the only one of its kind. In recent decades, numerous studies have been published on the homogenized and simplified representation of Islam in formal education in general and in textbooks in particular, in addition to studies that emphasize the “political” and “identity” value of textbooks³. These examples show us the relevance of the topic and the need to continue observing reality with a critical look to identify and deconstruct conventional stereotypes, as they are still part of an orientalist vision of Islam and Muslims.

Starting from Saïd and thanks to his contribution, further insights and analysis on the role of orientalism in the construction of gender emerged, giving rise to what has been defined as “feminine orientalism”⁴, where Pepicelli⁵ emphasizes how:

“the woman is the subject on which the West has made the image of the whole East converge, making it become the very representation of its immutable essence, its culture, its value system. A systematic process of ‘feminization’ and ‘inferiorization’ of the East has therefore inscribed the latter's narrative in that of his women, portrayed as oppressed and backward, and consequently to be saved and made progress” (p.17).

Although, therefore, Saïd's work has contributed significantly to inaugurating new important avenues of research, it has not been exempt from criticism. As Salim Kerboua⁶ points out:

“Saïd's scholarship paved the way for a myriad of works exploring and interpreting literary, historical, and political texts and issues from a postcolonial perspective. However, Saïd's work is also challenged in academia. Two kinds of critiques can be identified. The first has emerged out of the wish to comprehend the dimension of postcolonial scholarships and balance its analysis of Western interpretations of the Orient. The second critique is motivated less by intellectual rigor and more by political and ideological outrage with regard to Saïd's personal intellectual trajectory and his political commitment to the Palestinian cause. This second kind of critique originates from influential neo-Orientalist circles” (p.12).

According to the author, the main criticisms levelled at him are: of not having understood post-World War II American post-orientalism, of representing the West as univocal and undifferentiated, of not recognizing the Marxist dimension of the historical relationship between knowledge and power, of having generated questions about the legitimacy of scholars and artists in interpreting the cultures and identities of other groups without answering these questions. In addition to these criticisms that come from the academic world, there are others of an ideological nature, coming from the neoconservative world and often linked to the Zionist

³ Among the numerous studies we mention: Abbassi, D. (2009). *Quand la Tunisie s'invente. Entre Orient et Occident, des imaginaires politiques*. Edition Autrement; Bandini G. (2012). *Manuali, sussidi e didattica della geografia. Una prospettiva storica*. Firenze University Press; Blanchard et al. (2002). *Zoos humains et exhibitions coloniales. 150 ans d'inventions de l'Autre*. La Découverte; Boutan, P., Maurer, B. & Remaoun, H. (2012). *La méditerranée des méditerranéens à travers leurs manuels scolaires*. L'Harmattan; Brunelli, C. et al. (2007). *Oltre l'etnocentrismo. I saperi della scuola al di là dell'Occidente*. EMI; Chabchoub, A. (2000). *Ecole et modernité en Tunisie et dans les pays arabes*. L'Harmattan; Choppin, A. (2008). *Le manuel scolaire, une fausse évidence historique. Histoire de l'éducation*, n.117, p.7-56; Lucenti, M. (2018). *Storie altre. Il mondo arabo-musulmano e l'occidente nei manuali di Italia e Tunisia*. Aracne; Nasr, M. (2001). *Les Arabes et l'Islam vus par les manuels scolaires français*. Editions Karthala; Procacci, G. (2005). *Carte d'identità. Revisionismi, nazionalismi e fondamentalismi nei manuali di storia*. Carocci; Verdelhan-Bourgade, M. et al. (2007). *Les manuels scolaires, miroirs de la nation ?* L'Harmattan.

⁴ Pepicelli, R. (2012). *Il velo nell'Islam. Storia, politica, estetica*. Carocci.

⁵ Pepicelli, R. (2014). *Le donne nei media arabi. Tra aspettative tradite e nuove opportunità*. Carocci.

⁶ Kerboua, S. (2016). From Orientalism to neo-Orientalism: Early and contemporary constructions of Islam and the Muslim world. *Intellectual Discourse*, 24:1 (2016) 7–34.

movement⁷. The element of interest is that the author, in addition to highlighting the scientific weakness of these latest criticisms and sanctioning an overcoming of the same and a sort of reconciliation with the thesis supported by Saïd, hypothesizes further developments that would explain not only the actuality of the paradigm of Orientalism, but also a historical change of the same and an adaptation to contemporaneity in the form of a Neo-Orientalism. September 11 and the war on terror would have strongly contributed to the birth of this new declination of orientalism, which has a less territorialised dimension.

Following the author's thinking and based on the examples cited about the representation of Islam in contemporary European textbooks, we can argue that Saïd's paradigm of Orientalism, although partial and not exhaustive, is not only still valid for the understanding of Islam in the West, but paved the way to further reinterpretations and re-semanticizations based on the needs of contemporaneity:

“Neo-Orientalism generates an “us versus them” schema that brings the differentiation – and even confrontation – between identities, religions, and civilisations to the fore of any intercultural thinking. Neo-Orientalist discourse and knowledge and their entailing connotations, essentialisation, and Manichean constructions hence aggravate the divide between the West and Islam in the sense that they fail to deliver nuanced and objective understanding of the Muslim faith and peoples. This renewed Orientalist knowledge hides the reality of the existing diverse scholarly Islamic debates within the Muslim world.”⁸ (p.27).

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⁷ Ibidem.

⁸ Ibidem.

- Lucenti, M. (2018). *Storie altre. Il mondo arabo-musulmano e l'occidente nei manuali di Italia e Tunisia*. Aracne.
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