

Essay One

Islam Today

Does Edward Said's Model of Orientalism Contribute to an Understanding of Islam in "the West"?

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Introduction:

Edward Said's acclaimed text, *Orientalism* has changed the way scholars view, not just the "East" (or "the Orient" as Said commonly refers to), but reevaluate the approach of Western scholarship and the biases included in them. Though Said commonly refers to the "Orient" in his work, often listing geographical areas across the Asian and African continent, the 19th-century European usage of the "Orient" commonly applied to "the Arab world or generally the Middle East."¹ Similarly, Said's designation of the "West" is often referred to the 19th-century European powers, such as Great Britain and France, and later incorporates post World War II, United States.

Said makes the compelling argument that the academic pursuit of the Orient by Western scholarship has an inherent bias, primarily due to its history of colonialism and imperialistic interests of these geographical areas. Said commonly refers to the implications western colonial powers have had on its relationship with Islam and Muslims, making *Orientalism* eerily relevant, in regard to contemporary Islam and interfaith relations. Said's model of "Orientalism" has profound relevance to understanding the issues surrounding Islam and its perception in the West, many of which are mentioned in *Orientalism*. Concepts, such as how the "Orient" is not able to freely define itself along with the lack of Muslim perspectives in discourse, and the imperialist/colonial interests of the past, as well as contemporary political issues, are all arguments and claims that are relevant to Islam's perception within the contemporary West. This essay will examine these arguments, as well as revisionist Orientalist scholars, to illustrate the relevance of Said's assessment on the West's understanding of Islam.

¹ Samiei, Mohammad. 2010. 'Neo-Orientalism? The relationship Between the West and Islam in our Globalised World', Third World Quarterly, 31: p. 1145

I. Representation of the Orient & Muslim Perspectives

One of the most critical arguments Said refers to in *Orientalism*, is how the Orient was and is not capable to represent itself and is only represented once the Western Orientalist scholar has completed the task of explaining the Orient.² Therefore, the task of the native participant to illustrate the religious, social, or political perspective of his/her environment, is not needed or a valued perspective. This perspective is not considered credible, and the only credible perspective of this specific field is when the perspective of the Orientalist scholar is expressed, eventually becoming the dominant discourse.

This point by Said is relevant to the contemporary understanding of Islam within the West. There are a plethora of occasions where scholars who are either engaged in discussions regarding Islam, Islam's relationship with the West, or contemporary Islam, witness an absence of Muslims within this critical discourse. From an academic perspective, how can a scholar who is engaging in research of a specific region or religion, not include perspectives from members within this specific region or religion? The discourse and thereby, the representation of Islam is completed by non-participants, rarely ever letting Muslim perspectives reach above the surface.

Bernard Lewis, a scholar of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, is often the target of Said, specifically when Said makes the claim that Western Orientalist scholars do not believe the Orient is capable to express itself on its own. Lewis contended that Islam was and is not compatible with democratic values and presented a civilizational danger to the West unless Western-style reforms were not implemented, thereby needing to maintain a military presence in Islamic-dominated areas. However, Lewis often ignores major factors to consider on the issue of democratic compatibility in Muslim-dominated countries. Oftentimes, Lewis attributes these

² Said, Edward W. 1979. *Orientalism* p. 283

issues of political instability, regional tensions, and economic underdevelopment to “Muslim adherents to Islamic values.”³

This is similar to another reference Lewis makes in his essay, “The State of Middle Eastern Studies.” In it, Lewis states that within the Middle East, academic curiosity and maturity to engage in research outside its geographical area does not rival that of Europe, citing how “the only attempts to study the languages and civilizations of India and China in the universities of the Middle East have been made in Turkey and in Israel- the two countries in the region which have consciously chosen a Western way of life.”⁴ In either of Lewis’ two perspectives, whether by cultural acceptance or by military submission, he implies that the Muslim world is only capable of salvation by either submitting its sovereignty or indigenous culture (or perhaps both) to the West. Therefore, according to this rationale, Muslim perspectives are not needed or necessary.

These beliefs are not only problematic for a plethora of reasons but also hold relevance in the contemporary Western discourse regarding Islam. Oftentimes, political instability and underdevelopment in the Middle East or Muslim-dominated areas are employed as tools to designate Islam as incompatible with the contemporary West. For one, Lewis’ perspective of Muslim-dominated countries being underdeveloped as compared to their Western counterparts, due to their beliefs in Islam as a system, negates the crucial political factors for its underdevelopment, many of which were former colonial subjects of European imperialism. To dismiss this significant factor when assessing underdevelopment and instability would be to

³ Khan, M.A.Muqtedar. 2020. *'Post-Orientalism and Geopolitics; Three Debates that Inform Islam and U.S. Foreign Policy'*, Insight Turkey, 22: p. 132

⁴ Lewis, Bernard. 1979. *'The State of Middle Eastern Studies'*, The American Scholar, 48: p. 366

categorically ignore contributing factors in contemporary Middle Eastern economics and politics. If a native scholar of Islam or the Middle East was a part of the discourse of discussing underdevelopment in Muslim-dominated countries, he/she may be better qualified to address political instability and economic underdevelopment, possibly countering this narrative detailing the effects of colonial and post-colonial factors. Even when analyzing the argument perpetuated by Lewis, such as adherents to Islamic values being the cause of this underdevelopment, scholarly Muslim perspectives are rarely, if ever, used.

Although the absence of Muslim voices is changing, with the surge of Muslims in Europe and in Western academia, there is still an inherent lack of Muslim perspectives in discourses regarding Islam. Not only does this lead to an ignorant form of academic inquiry, preventing a healthy approach to incorporate various perspectives, but it can also lead to incorrect analysis, even if the intent is not so. For example, in *Orientalism*, Said highlights how early Western Orientalist scholars would inaccurately designate Islam as “Mohammedanism” incorrectly assuming that “since Christ is the basis of Christian faith it was assumed-incorrectly- that Mohammed was to Islam as Christ was to Christianity.”⁵ However, if a scholarly Islamic perspective were incorporated, this scholar would detail the inaccuracies of this designation and argument, since Muhammad’s role as a Prophet in Islam is not like the centrality of Christ within the Christian concept of the Trinity. This discourse is incorrectly assigning Christian designations and descriptions to a different faith, thereby illustrating why Muslim perspectives are crucial when discussing any aspect of Islam.

⁵ Said, Edward W. 1979. *Orientalism* p. 60

II. Post-Orientalist Scholars & Policy

Edward Said's analysis of Western approaches to the study of the Orient, often highlighting areas in which Islam is the dominant religion, led to a change in the discourse of not just Islam, but Oriental Studies as a whole. Western academics became more cognizant of some problematic themes often accompanying this form of academic study, including the study of Islam and the lack of Muslim perspectives. This led to post-Orientalist scholars, such as Dr. John Esposito, an American Professor of Islamic Studies, to address some of these weaknesses. Esposito not only challenged the narratives of Orientalist scholars like Bernard Lewis but incorporated Muslim perspectives to be included within his academic discourse of Islam. Esposito's approach to Islamic Studies was rare, in which Muslim attitudes and beliefs were used in analyzing Muslim perspectives. This is demonstrated when Esposito challenges the narrative often brought by Lewis, who contradicts the claim that Islam is not compatible with democracy, citing how Islam was more of a spiritual and religious phenomenon, as compared to a political one, including Muslim perspectives to reach this conclusion.⁶

However, even within the post-9/11 discourse regarding Islam, the traditional Orientalist approach to scholarship Said critiques, still dominate not just academic discourse, but political foreign policy as well. Though Lewis' perspective on Islam is that of one scholar, it affected, not just how Muslims and Muslim societies are viewed, but actions taken by political administrations in foreign policy.

For instance, President George W. Bush, the President of the United States during the tumultuous September 11th attacks had been "spotted in the White House carrying a marked

⁶ Khan, M.A.Muqtedar. 2020. *'Post-Orientalism and Geopolitics; Three Debates that Inform Islam and U.S. Foreign Policy'*, Insight Turkey, 22: p. 135

article written by Lewis.”⁷ It comes as no surprise that when the Bush administration engaged in discourse, they often attributed conflict with that of sectarian terminologies, often associated with claims Lewis makes, such as when President Bush used the term “crusade” when discussing terrorism, although it was eventually redacted.⁸ If Muslim perspectives were incorporated by the Bush administration in its inception, it wouldn’t have needed a redaction on the designation of the term “crusade” to begin with, since a Muslim scholar could point out the potential dangers of this sort of messaging, including the potential of recruitment by radical Islamic outfits. This illustrates not just the power of scholarly discourse in the approaches of academic inquiry, but how this can also shape the viewpoints of society, including policymakers.

Conclusion:

Edward Said’s *Orientalism* makes a profound contribution to understanding the discourse of Islam and Muslims within western contexts. Said highlights the inherent flaws of a limited approach to academic scholarship, and the inherent biases included in them, oftentimes attributing these biases to colonial history and imperialistic interests. However, with the continuing trend of globalization and accessible technology, various perspectives are not only more feasible but necessary. It has been noted how scholarly attitudes have a profound impact on society, especially that of significant political personalities, who decide the route of global foreign policy. It is imperative that when engaging in discussions regarding Islam or Muslims within western contexts, scholarly Muslim perspectives are included within academic discourse for a comprehensive and cohesive outlook.

⁷ Khan, M.A.Muqtedar. 2020. '*Post-Orientalism and Geopolitics; Three Debates that Inform Islam and U.S. Foreign Policy*', *Insight Turkey*, 22: p. 134

⁸ Samiei, Mohammad. 2010. '*Neo-Orientalism? The relationship Between the West and Islam in our Globalised World*', *Third World Quarterly*, 31: p. 1153-1154

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