

Relevance of Orientalism in the 21st Century: A Critical Analysis

Sara Qazi

Lecturer in English(visiting), Abdul Wali Khan university, Mardan.
Email; iamsaraqazi@gmail.com

Sana Sherdil

MPhil Scholar, Department of English, Islamia College University
Email: sanayakh55@gmail.com

Momina Javid

MPhil scholar from Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan
Email: mominakhan1586@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper critically analyzes the relevance of orientalism in the 21st century. It highlights the new propaganda of West about the rest, specifically the Middle Eastern states. It delves into the history of West that how they create their enemy to maintain their superiority. Utilizing theoretical framework, the paper explores the evidence of orientalism in 21st century. It exposes West stereotyping about East as extremist, uncivilized, backward and believe that they are the only entity to control and educate them. In contrast, it further studies, the emergence of new trends in the Middle Eastern countries that contradict western assumptions about Arab people. This paper concludes that, the West treatment with East is still as orients, but new trends in Middle Eastern states debunk their claims.

Keywords orientalism, west, middle east, Muslims, Arabs, Edward said

1. Introduction

The study of orientalism came forth to the academicians after the historical work of Edward Said in 1978. In his famous work, he decoded the works of orientalist such as Michael Foucault and others regarding the orients. He explained that the orientalist have constructed a narrative and developed a discourse about the orients that is based on misconceptions and fallacies. According to him, it is a constructed narrative where the orientalist call themselves supreme, developed, rationale and of high race while they portray the image of orients as aberrant, underdeveloped and irrational. The concept of orientalism is still as relevant as fifty years ago. Today, the West produces more literature about Islam and the Middle East that is biased and based on their version of interpretations. It is important to note that after the collapse of USSR and the defeat of communism, the West needed another global issue and a new narrative to rule the world. For this purpose, they portrayed and presented Islam as a new enemy. In the words of Francis Fukuyama, the world is ready for a new ideological battle and that would be

the clash among the civilizations. However, the recent developments like globalization have diluted the concept of orientalism too. This article would shed light on the background of orientalism and would discuss the causes of the orientalist study and the recent developments in this regard.

2. Understanding orientalism

Orientalism is a way of seeing that imago, emphasizes, exaggerates, and distorts differences between Arabs people's culture as compared to that of Europe and the U.S. It often involves seeing Arab culture as exotic, backward, uncivilized, and at times dangerous (Aboueid, Islamophobia). Generally, they talk about the east but specifically, they are pinpointing the Middle East states as orientalist. The western states have made a concept about Middle East states that they are the inferior and we are the superior (Buzan, 2009, pp 24-44). In short, orientalism is the concept or image of eastern states in the minds of western people. They think the orientalist-Middle East states- are irrational, illustrate, lazy, and dull. They believe that advancement like democracy and civilization does not suit them. In a nutshell, Western states are considering themselves superior and desert or Arab states inferior.

3. Edward Said's work on orientalism

For the first time in history, Edward said wrote a book on orientalism in 1978 (Said, 1978). For the first time, these topics came under discussion as an academic course. He highly criticized the writers of that time that they have misrepresented the people of the Middle East. In his book, *Orientalism*, he decoded the discourse of the west that is biased and wrong. Western does not have first-hand experience with the east, they never visited east states. They don't know about their history and culture. He specifically criticized the work of Michael Foucault and the discourse they had developed about the Middle East (Racevskis, 2005, pp 83-97). Although, this book gained criticism too, yet it is the most studied and most appreciated work about orientalism and on the Middle Eastern Studies.

4. The concept of Orientalism is still relevant in 21st century

The concept of Orientalism used as a tool by the west to suppress the east. This concept was academically discussed by Edward said as a propaganda against the east, and he rejected it. In his book, '*Orientalism*' which had written almost 50 years ago, in 1978 but the concept of Orientalism still exists in the twenty-one centuries (Samiei, 2010, pp 1145-1160). It is discussed below.

a. The collapse of USSR and Islam as new enemy, Huntington's thesis

It is a convention of western world that they needed an excuse to prove their superiority and treat others as inferior to them. Similarly, United States of America or the western world use the concept of orientalism as a tool for

running their politics. Revisiting historical events, after World War II, they raise the issue of communism. They announced communism as a biggest threat to the world, and declare it as a major issue of concern. They planned for countering communism because when USSR collapsed in 1989 the west has no point to run their politics (Koslowski, et al, 1994, pp 215-247). A power vacuum has been created, prompting them to seek new adversary. Then they pick Islam as a new enemy and claim that there are fundamentalists in the Middle East. In this way, they highlighted Islam as conservative religion. Therefore, it is argued that the concept of orientalism is still relevant today.

b. Globalization and clash of civilization

Globalization turned the world into a global village. Due to globalization, the world becomes interconnected. Every state depends on the other state. Due to the globalized world, the people connected very easily, and they get aware of the external activities. The interconnectedness of states and the communication among people got intensified, people from one corner of the world to another corner of the world, causing a clash of civilizations. Samuel Huntington wrote that the west ideological rival has been ended (Huntington, 2000, pp 99-118). In response to this Francis Fukuyama wrote in his theory Clash of Civilization that no, the real ideological foe is started now by the clash of civilizations. By interacting with Muslims, the west makes interpretation of their religion and misinterpreted Islam in the 21 centuries

c. Increased religiosity in East and West

Over time the world is moving toward religiosity both in the east and west-Muslims as well as Christians-. Christian missionaries are spreading their literature in the Muslim world and Muslims open Islamic institutions in the west. Muslims build mosques, arrange gatherings in the public places of the west, and opened Islamic centers which increased their religiosity in the minds of the west (Göle, 2001, pp 383-392). Looking at their religious activities west considers them extremist and orientalist. Specifically, when Bush attacked Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, in his speech he uses religious terms to attract the audience which means that they still consider the Muslims as religious, fundamentalist, and orientalist. Hence, we can conclude that yes, the concept of orientalism still exists in the 21 centuries

d. Explosion of publications on Islam in the west

As the research is increasing day by day and many academics pinpoints different issues and present them to the world through their publications. Western academicians and authors published a lot of work on Islam (Lewis, 1993). They study Islamic literature and interpret it from their point of view. West has very much literature on Islam in their interpretation and it is expanding in the modern era in a new way like publications. For example, if they saw a woman covered face, they will interpret it on their own that Muslims are extremists, and they have caged their women etc. etc. so from

their publication in the western world they still consider Muslims as orientalist and they still have the wrong image of Islam in their mind.

e. Rational, humane, developed, superior vs. aberrant, underdeveloped and inferior

West think of the east as aberrant, underdeveloped, and inferior in contrast they think of themselves as rational, humane, developed, and superior. They called eastern snake charmers that they are uncivilized, they have no good life, they live in jungles, they don't give right their women, and they are illiterate. On the other hand, the west are civilized people, have educational institutions, have a standard way of life, they are intellectual, developed, and hence superior to that of the east (Shohat, 1987). This mindset of the west existed in history and still existed in the twenty-one centuries. Precisely, the west thinks about the eastern states in the twenty-first century as the same and are still called Muslim orientalist

f. Orient is to be feared so either to be controlled or occupied

The main purpose of introducing the concept of Orientalism was to colonize the people of eastern states. By the term oriental, they introduced Muslim countries as uneducated, uncivilized, and inhumane and they indirectly wanted to show that we are here to civilize them (Fatmawati, 2014). They spread the propaganda that orients are very dangerous people, and they must be feared, either they should be controlled or occupied which means that the orient should be colonized. And the same colonization is happening in the Middle East countries. America is playing its role in the Middle East countries. Hence, there is a big game behind the term orientalism, which is to colonize the eastern states.

g. Poisoned and polluted history of the orients by western writers

If we look back in the history of Islamic states and Muslims, western writers have poisoned and polluted it. In their writings, books, and other written material they have misrepresented eastern history. They interpret it differently from reality. They represented the Islamic heroes as villains. For example, Salah din Ayubi is the hero of Muslims while they called him Salah din and represented him as a villain (Iqbal, et al, 2020, pp 1-10). Currently, in France they were making carry catchers of Prophet P.B.U.H is making fun of the religion Islam and realizing that they are inferior to the west. West still has the opinion that Easter's are very brutal people. Concluding, the Western writer put their full efforts to subjugate Islam and eastern states.

h. Racist power and cultural supremacism

Race and culture are the important traits of national supremacy. West people are also involved in the differences of race and culture. They believe that we are racial, our race is superior, due to which we are more civilized and

sophisticated than others like east and specifically Middle East Arab states. They also consider their culture superior to other nations' cultures. They claim that our culture is more advanced and modern than that of Muslims (Ballantyne, 2002). And they are successful in their mission of presenting their race and culture as superior. By using the term orientalism, they took this burden that we will advance the eastern states, and we will educate them. In this way, they had introduced their culture to the east and the eastern state blindly follows them. In this way, they colonized the eastern states. For example, eastern states followed their dressing and we as a nation speak their language. It is all because of the colonization which is the result of orientalism. Hence, we can say that orientalism is still relevant in the twenty-first century as eastern states are still colonized by the west.

i. Western misconceptions and prejudices about Islam and the Arabs

West has a lot of misconceptions about Islam and the Arabs. The picture they had shown to the world in past is very negative. They wrote in their books and literature about the eastern states and merely based on their analysis they interpret the eastern people negatively. They have no first-hand experience with eastern people, nor have they done any research about the eastern religion, culture, society, or races but they have just written what they perceive (Rezga, 2019, pp 166-179). They did not study the religion of Arabs and what is the philosophy behind their worship and good deeds with the people. But for their supremacy, they started the propaganda of orientalism throughout the world to stabilize their politics in the world. In a nutshell, these misconceptions started 50 years, and they still exist in the name of Islamophobia, Islam as terrorist religion in the twenty-first century.

j. Muslims resistance to change

This is also one of the misconceptions of the west about the Middle East. They think that whenever a good change came to the world, eastern states resist. They spread this misconception in the west that Muslims are underdeveloped, and old-fashioned which is why they resist the moderation process and modernization process (Said, 2014, pp 126-144). They resist any change in the world. They are extremist and fundamentalist. They are inferior and under development. West do all his efforts to portray the negative points of Middle East states in an exaggerated form to the whole world. These misconceptions were presented long ago and are still present in the twenty-first century.

In a recent incident, a veiled girl in India was harassed by a group of people. They were making fun of her hijab and realizing she was the inferior gender of the religion, but she stayed firm (Khan, 2022). West thought that the hijab is enforced by the eastern male on their women, but they do not understand

that a Muslim girl owns it by choice and feel comfortable in it. If the west says to the female Muslims that off hijabs and they resist, then they will call it resistance of Muslims to modernization. While they do not know that Islam is the most advanced religion. But for them, aim thing is that modernization criteria are different from Muslims. Concluding, this concept of the west still exists in the twenty-first century.

k. Iranian revolution, Palestinian intifadas, 9/11, mujahedeen victory

According to the west thinkers, the people of Middle East are backward, they are old-fashioned, reluctant to change, and are against modernization. These misconceptions are developed based on some incidents in the past (Samiei, 2010, pp 1145-1160). For instant, there was monarchy in Iran. The revolution forms a Shia Islamist government. The establishment of religious government in iran, the west presumed that the muslims are still living in the past and are unwilling to advance their lives. Moreover, west perceived that msulims do not want in the world and after the Iranian revolution, they establish their traditional form of government. To cut short, they are extremist, conservative and old fashioned. By using these terms, they stigmatize muslims from attaining their rights. For instant, the Israel illegally attacked Palestine territory, violating international human rights, but when the Palestinians confronts them, the west count them in the extremist and propagate the negative image of middle east as terrorist. The west favors the Israel attack on Palestine and are of the opinion that the Palestine should also silently accept it, without confrontation. Furthermore, in the incident of 9/11, they interpret [Muslims as terrorists] (Rane, et al, 2012, pp 310-322). Even they have misinterpreted the word (Taliban). By creating their own terrorist groups and making their getup like the real Taliban look, and then use them in different terrorist activities, showing the negative image of Taliban and Muslims in general. They misrepresent islam to the world through these tactics. In contrast, when the Afghan Mujahedeen military show resistance to the external forces destablising their internal peace, the west again blames mujahedeen as recludant to change. In a nutshell, since the Iranian revolution till war/jihad in Afghanistan (that ended in 2021) against the superpower status, the west called Muslims and the Middle East as Orients.

5. New trends

There are some new trends for the discourse and narratives which westerns have made about the eastern, that they are orientalist. The new trends and the misconception that west built about east and specifically the Middle East are discussed below:

a. Globalization

The world is transforming to a new world order. One of them is globalization. Globalization has transformed the world into a global village, where the technological advancement, communication and

interconnectedness in societies have changed the whole pattern world system. For example, the globalized internet has made it easier for people to access every corner of the world in a blink of an eye. So, the phenomenon of globalization in the middle east and other muslim countries challenged and abolished the misconception of west that Muslims are orientals (Pieterse, 2018, pp 39-60). West is getting aware of the religiosity of Muslims and their philosophy of being modern in following their religion, culture, and so on. Hence, the concept of orientalism is gradually abolished through the new trend of globalization.

b. Interconnectedness

Interconnectedness is another new trend that plays a vital role in removing the misconceptions of the west about the east. Inter-connectedness is always political. Today all the 193 states of the world are part of the United Nations. For example, G7 is a western organization but Saudi Arabia is part of it (Wade, 2011, pp 347-378). By interconnectedness of east and west, they are experiencing practical activities with each other's and observe the religion, culture, tradition, and norms of one society. It is kind of their introduction to each other. Another good example of interconnectedness is students exchange programs. Which are wholly arranged for the cultural exchange of different countries? In this way, the concept of orientalism is changing in the minds of the west and a new image of the east is built in the west.

c. Muslims in western universities portraying positive image of Islam

Due to globalization, students around the world can study abroad at universities easily. Students from the west came to eastern universities and students from the east went to the west for pursuing their degrees. Through this proper channel of getting an education in the east and west students represent their religion, culture, and society in each other's states and discover different things (Funk, et al, 2001, pp 1-28). Similarly, the Muslim students portray the positive image of Islam in the West that Muslims are not backward, extremist, or fundamentalist. They are civilized and educated people. In short, by portraying a positive image of the east in the west the concept of orientalism is diluted.

d. Muslim businessmen in west

There is a famous saying that if you want to know about the dealing and behavior of someone, does business with him/her. The same is the case with eastern businessmen in the west. The Muslim businessmen go to the west for business. There they do business according to the terms and conditions of their religion Islam. Islam has very good instructions for a businessman. By doing business with the western people, they came to know that those who we consider dull, apparent, underdeveloped know all the good ways of trade and business (Haddad, et al, 2002). Here their misconception about Muslims that they are confined to mosques and religiosity, changes that the

Muslims also know how to live life in the modern world. So, the businessmen also play role in abolishing the concept of orientalism.

e. Global mass media and internet

On daily basis new technologies are introduced such as airplanes, mobile phones, and internet facilities which make the world interconnected. For instant, in the covid-19 pandemic, states all around the world were so interconnected and interdependent on each other, that they cannot stop the spread of the virus. Owing to the advanced technology, many countries do import and export health Medicare to one another. The eastern countries sent their doctors and nurses to the west and the west sent advanced technology to the east to combat the virus. Through global mass media, east and west remains constantly updated from each other. Global mass media share the major and minor issues of different states of the world (Lynch, 2000, pp 307-330). This collaboration of eastern and western countries weakens the concept of orientalism in the twenty-first century.

f. Islamic academia in western languages

Islamic academia works in the western languages also play a big role in challenging the concept of orientalism in the twenty-first century. The interpretation of Muslim academia in western languages is a proof that muslims are well educated and they know how to propagate their knowledge to the world. The westners on the other hand, believe that muslims are radicals, illiterate and not capable of attaining knowledge. They perceive that muslims are dull minded with no literature or educational background. So by publishing Islamic works in western language clear their mind that the Muslims are educated enough to translate or interpret their works in other languages as well. (Eid, 2014, pp 99-119). Secondly, the west has neither any experience of the east nor they have done any research to present logical grounds for their claim of east as orientalist. But they are declaring east as orientalist just because they wanted to have someone inferior to them and maintain their supremacy. So, the publishing of Islamic academia in western languages deny the west concept of east as orientalist. Hence, the interpretation of Islam in the western language is helping to weaken the concept of orientalism in the twenty-first century.

g. Democracy in Islamic states

When the democracy was introduced by the western states, it was believed that Muslims mindset is not ready to accept this new form of government. Muslim believe in caliphate because it was their Islamic form of government. In caliphate sovereignty belongs to Allah and then to the people while in western democracy sovereignty belongs to people. Westerns believe in democracy more than the caliphate. Over time majority of the Muslim states implemented democratic form of government which is another proof of muslims advancement and adopting new ways of life (Nasr, 1995, pp 261-

285). Hence, the establishment of democratic form of government in the eastern states diminish the concept of orientalism in the twenty-first century.

6. Conclusion

In a nutshell, the concept of orientalism still exists the 21st century. Edward Said, stated 50 years ago, that the West make their own version of reality about the orients and then portray them as underdeveloped, irrational and people to be feared. Samuel Huntington had written in his thesis that the ideological contest between communism and capitalist had reached to the logical end after the defeat of communism in 1989 (Huntington, 2007, pp 53-79). But Francis Fukuyama opened a new chapter in the conflict studies that the ideological battle had just begun (Fukuyama, 2015, pp 16-27). He alarmed the world that now the cultural and civilizational fissures would deepen, and the world would divide on ideological patterns. According to him, it would be a fight between the West vs. the Rest. Therefore, the West started blaming Muslims for every wrongdoing in the world and spreading stereotyping about them as terrorists and extremists (Sultan, 2016, pp 1-10). The orientalist wrote much about Islam and published. In all those writings, they tried to distort the image of Islam and the Muslims. The orientalist pointed out the Iranian revolution, the emergence of terrorist organizations, the happenings in the Islamic world and other events as the factors to prove that Muslims resist change in their lives and in the world. However, some recent developments have diluted the concept of orientalism too. For instance, the intensified globalization, the political interconnectedness and the economic integration has brought the people of Middle East and the West near to one another and today people know one another more than ever. Therefore, the misconceptions about the eastern states are fading away.

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