

**CVSP 204**  
**Edward Said's Orientalism**

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Edward W. Said was Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University in New York. Born in Jerusalem in 1935, he lived in Cairo until the age of 15, when he left for Mount Hermon School. He did his undergraduate and graduate degrees at Princeton and Harvard universities respectively. For many years, this Palestinian-American figure was considered America's foremost spokesman for the Palestinian cause. His scholarship in the fields of critical theory, literary and cultural studies, and comparative literature, influenced several generations of students and literary critics. He passed away in 2003 after a long battle with chronic leukemia.

Said's books have been translated into several languages, including French, Arabic, Turkish, and Persian. Among his works, which include twenty books and several articles, one may cite *Orientalism* (1978), *The Question of Palestine*, (1979), *Covering Islam* (1981), *After the Last Sky* (1986), *Blaming the Victims* (1988), *Out of Place* (1999) and *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (2002). *Orientalism*, considered as his most influential book, is a foundational text in postcolonial studies.

### **I. Theoretical Influences on Said's Work**

In general, Said's oeuvre shows the influence of a number of intellectual figures, philosophers and critics, including Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Jacques Lacan. In *Orientalism*, Said emphasizes the importance of the work of Michel Foucault, Erich Auerbach, and Antonio Gramsci in shaping his understanding of key concepts related to knowledge, power, and representation.

#### **A. Michel Foucault's Notions of Discourse, Discursive Field, and Writing**

According to Foucault, discourse refers to verbal and non-verbal communicative acts; it pervades all the fields of human activity in Western society.

In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972), Foucault makes the following distinction between the analysis of thought and the analysis of discursive field:

The analysis of thought is always *allegorical* in relation to the discourse that it employs. Its question is unfailingly: what was being said in what was said? The analysis of the discursive field is orientated in a quite different way; we must grasp the statement in the exact specificity of its occurrence; determine its conditions of existence, fix at least its limits, establish its correlations with other statements that may be connected with it, and show what other forms of statement it excludes (pp. 27-28).

In "The World, the Text, and the Critic," Said notes, Foucault's contention is that the fact of writing itself is a systematic conversion of the power relationship between controller and controlled into 'mere' written words—but writing is a way of disguising the awesome materiality of so tightly controlled and managed a production (47).

Foucault's influence on Said shows in his argument that Orientalism is a pervasive form of discourse; to understand it, one must account for its discursive field and context of unequal relations of power.

#### **B. Erich Auerbach, History and Representation**

The German scholar of comparative literature, Erich Auerbach, author of *Mimesis*, focused on the study of the production of an assumed entity called "Western culture." The main influences on his work were Kantian and Enlightenment rationalism. Edward Said describes Auerbach's project in the following passage:

He set himself the task of writing a general work based on specific textual analyses in such a way as to lay out the principles of Western literary performance in all their variety, richness, and fertility. The aim was a synthesis of Western culture in which the synthesis itself was matched in importance by the very gesture of doing it . . . . The discrete particular was thus converted into a highly mediated symbol of the world-historical process (pp. 258-59).

Auerbach's main focus in his approach to writing literary history was related to the study of the bases and categories of "representation." In *Orientalism*, Said uses Auerbach's method to study the representation of the Other, which he deems crucial for the analysis of processes of shaping/understanding the Self.

### C. Antonio Gramsci and the Concept of Hegemony

Explaining the Italian political theorist Antonio Gramsci, Said notes,

In any society not totalitarian, then, certain cultural forms predominate over others, just as certain ideas are more influential than others; the form of this cultural leadership is what Gramsci has identified as *hegemony*, an indispensable concept for any understanding of cultural life in the industrial West. It is hegemony, or rather the result of cultural hegemony at work, that gives Orientalism the durability and the strength I have been speaking about so far (p.7).

## **II. What is Orientalism? Three Interrelated Definitions**

A. "The most readily accepted designation for Orientalism is an academic one. . . . Anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient--and this applies whether the person is an anthropologist, sociologist, historian or philologist . . . is an Orientalist, and what he or she does is Orientalism" (p. 2).

B. "Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident'." This style of thought and more specifically the "basic distinction between East and West" constitute "the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, 'mind,' destiny, and so on" (pp. 2-3).

C. "Taking the late eighteenth century as a very roughly defined starting point Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient--dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (p.3).

- Main actors in the context of Orientalism: French and British empires (from the beginning of the nineteenth century until the end of World War II) and the United States (after World War II) (p. 17)

- Region "studied" or represented: India and the Levant (the countries bordering on the eastern Mediterranean Sea from Turkey to Egypt, including modern-day Syria, Lebanon, Israel, and Palestine)

- Reasons for the study of the Orient:

- "Primary" reason (given by the representatives of empire): Civilize the childlike natives and show them the way to progress and "true" religion

- "Secondary" reason: Financial and economic benefits

- Actual reason: The achievement of political domination and cultural control

- After World War II, the form and role of Orientalism shifted. To serve the interests of the US, there was a proliferation of "area specialists" who "lay claims to regional expertise, which is put at the service of government or business or both" (p.285). Orientalism then became a social science, presented as relying on "facts" and the expertise of area studies specialists. As far as the Arab World is concerned, especially after the Arab-Israeli wars, this period was/is marked by the vilification and stereotyping of the Arabs (pp. 285-87).

### III. Methodological Devices

#### A. Strategic Location and Strategic Formation

“My principal methodological devices for studying authority here are what can be called *strategic location*, which is a way of describing the author's position in a text with regard to the Oriental material he writes about, and *strategic formation*, which is a way of analyzing the relationship between texts and the way in which groups of texts, types of texts, even textual genres, acquire mass, density, and referential power among themselves and thereafter the culture at large.” (p. 20)

#### B. Exteriority and Representation:

“Orientalism is premised upon exteriority.” What the Orientalist “says and writes . . . is meant to indicate that . . . [he] is outside the Orient, both as an existential and as a moral fact.” (pp.20-21)

- This exteriority leads to specific forms of representation, a main focus in the study of Orientalism

#### C. Said's Own Location (or the personal dimension):

“Much of the personal investment in this study derives from my awareness of being an ‘Oriental’ as a child growing up in two British colonies [Palestine and Egypt].” (p. 25)

In “Identity, Authority, and Freedom,” Said further clarifies this point:

I was educated entirely in British colonial schools in Palestine and Egypt, where all study focused on the history of British society, literature, and values. Much the same was true in the main British and French colonies, such as India and Algeria, where it was assumed that native elites would be taught the rudiments of intellectual culture in idioms and methods designed in effect to keep those native elites subservient to colonial rule, the superiority of European learning, and so forth. Until I was about sixteen I knew a great deal more about the eighteenth-century enclosure system in England than I did about how the Islamic *waqfs* operated in my own part of the world, and –irony of ironies—colonial preconsuls like Cromer and Kitchener were more familiar to me than Haroun al-Rashid or Khalid ibn al-Walid (p. 391)

### IV. Characteristics of Orientalism

1) Establishment of Western identity through the othering and exotizing of the Orient. France, Britain, and the United States, confirmed identity through opposition to the Orient, which served as their Other (pp.1-2)

European and American Self: rational, virtuous, mature, normal  
Oriental Other: irrational, fallen, childlike, different

As a form of discourse, Orientalism is essentialist and reductionist. Historically, it has helped justify colonialism.

2) Modern Orientalism (as discussed in Section 3, “Orientalism Now”) focuses on the representation of the Arab in American popular culture.

- In the films and television, Arabs are represented as bloodthirsty, dishonest, low, lecherous, and oversexed. Some Arab roles in the cinema include those of the “[s]lave trader, camel driver, moneychanger, [and] colorful scoundrel” (pp. 286-87).
- Arabs are always shown in large numbers (mass or mob): related to the threat of Jihad (p. 287).
- The Arabic language is associated with violence reflecting the Arab mind and genes (p. 287).
- The silencing of Arab voices in the West: Who speaks *for* the Arabs? What is the location of the “representative voice(s)”? (p. 293).

• In the scholarship of Arabists and Islamologists, Islam and the Arab world are represented as a homogeneous entity: “For them [Arabists and Islamologists] there are still such things as *an* Islamic society, *an* Arab mind, *an* Oriental psyche” (p.301).

3) Participation of the “modern Orient . . . in its own Orientalizing” (pp. 324-5)

#### **V. Reception and Impact of Orientalism**

“In a Borgesian way,” Said noted in his afterword to the 1995 edition of *Orientalism*, this book “has become several different books.” Some intellectual figures and critics saw in this work a defense of Islam. Other scholars focused on the methods Said used to talk/write back to empire and give voice to the silenced in history, thus challenging Western cultural domination. As Moustafa Bayoumi and Andrew Rubin put it, “Native Americans, Africans, Asians, Latin Americans, and other colonized peoples and oppressed groups located in *Orientalism* a method to challenge a chronic tendency of the West to deny, suppress, and distort their cultures and histories.”

Soon after its publication, *Orientalism* was translated into several languages. In 1980, Editions du Seuil published the French version. The same year saw the publication of the Arabic translation by Syrian poet and critic Kamal Abu Deeb. This book was also translated into German, Turkish, Persian, Spanish, and Catalan. More recently, the Japanese, Swedish, Serbo-Croatian, Dutch, Polish, Portuguese, Korean, Greek, Vietnamese, and Hebrew editions appeared.

#### **VI. Questions for Further Discussion**

What mediates representation? How can one study other cultures without falling into the trap of essentialism?

What is the relationship between language and representation?

How does knowledge become a form of power and acquire a status of “normality” (or a factual/moral character)?

What is the role of the intellectual vis-à-vis the production and dissemination of knowledge?

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