

## **ORIENTALISM REVISITED: INDIA IN EDWARD SAID'S MIND**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Edward Wadie Said's<sup>1</sup> Orientalism (1978) inaugurated a thought process, which has given birth to the kind of thinking which seems to safeguard the interest of what has now come to be known as the Orient. It is true that the Orient was created by the West for its material interest; the West did not have the will or the motivation to see the Orient at par with the Occident. The structures that the West generated were supported by the political power and the subjugation of the markets that compelled the Orient to remain poor. It is to be said on the contrary that even though Edward Said raised the voice of the millions of the negatively called "Third World Countries" but Said does have his limitations. India has an old and the most antiquated past; however, India as well as some other countries have been marginalized in the taxonomical scheme of Edward Said. The paper aims to focus the peripheral representation of India in Said's Orientalism. The question the paper aims to answer is this: Does India begin or end the Oriental experience? What is the place of India in the historiographic narrative on any account on Orientalism.

**KEYWORDS:** Orientalism, Historiographic, Literatures

### **INTRODUCTION**

Edward Said had the misfortunes of experiencing the fate of an immigrant, who migrated to Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt, and finally settled in USA coming as he was from a Greek Orthodox Christian minority stock living in Jerusalem. The initial immigrant experiences laid the foundations of structures that were dismantled even before they were made.<sup>2</sup> The condition of permanent exile and artificiality of existence offered Said tremendous stress and anxiety of not belonging to any particular space, of moving around, of exploring in a true sense the multi-dimensional world. Works like Orientalism, Culture and Imperialism, Reflections on Exile and Representation of Intellectuals are the translations of Said's agonized soul, of his exile, of his moving from one identity to another.

In his seminal work Orientalism Said's concern has been to examine how and why language, people, culture, history, religion and race have been studied and represented by the West and in the West in a specific manner. He has attempted to explain the ways and means adopted by the Occident to understand and represent the Orient. Said selects a specific area for the study of his Orientalism- the cultural, geographical and religious proximity between Europe and Arab countries.<sup>3</sup> He sees the Arab and Islamic world as a whole hooked into the Western market system. He talks about the near East or the Arab land, or the Islamic land leaving aside the Far East that is India, China, Japan and other countries that normally come under the broad categories of the Orient. And this geographical de-limitation of space of the Orient is perhaps due to Said's being a native of Arab. There are very little references to India in Said's study of Orientalism. Moreover he never substantiates his views to the given references. Thus one can undoubtedly put it in this way that the West has created the Orient but Said has bifurcated the Orient. This is some what on the lines of William Blake having said of Milton that "he belonged to the devil's party without knowing it."

### **India in Historiographic Narrative**

Historical writings in India began in the 18<sup>th</sup> century as a result of the establishment of the rule of the English East India Company.

The Englishmen who colonized India were interested in knowing the religion, habits and history of the people of India. Thus several English Scholars worked on Sanskrit and related subjects at a number of European Universities. The Christian missionaries were always interested in India but for a different purpose. They had no sympathy for Hinduism which, in their view, was 'at best work of human folly and at worst the outcome of a diabolic inspiration'. Charles Grunt presents a very derogatory picture of the Indians. About the people of India he opined that they lived in a degenerate condition because Hinduism was the source of dishonesty, purgery, selfishness, social divisions, sexual vices, etc. The Christians saw no future for the people of India and firmly believed that their upliftment could be possible only when they are converted to Christianity.

Like the Christian missionaries, the utilitarians of England also had a low opinion for Indians. James Mill was a Utilitarian. In his book *History of British India Vol. I*, published in 1817, he divided Indian History into three periods viz., Hindu, Muslim and British. He was critical of Indian culture, which he called barbarous and anti-rational. He was of the opinion that Indian civilization showed no concern for political values and India had been ruled by a series of despotic rulers who were ruthless. He maintained that the Indian society had always been stagnant opposed to progress and things could improve only by laws passed by the British Government. The *History of British India* by James Mill was a prescribed text at the Hailey Barry College and other institutions where English officers were given training before they were sent to India.

V. A. Smith, a member of Indian Civil Service who came to India in 1869, formed the same view for Indians like James Mill. He wanted to show that the people of India were not fit to rule themselves. He compared the Arthashastra system with that of imperial Germany under Bismark. He described Kautilya's penal code as 'ferociously severe'. He tried to emphasize the superiority of the things Western. The prejudiced European writers maintained that Indian culture had been static and did not change on account of the lethargy of the Indians and that they were gloomy and had fatalistic attitudes towards life. Rudyard Kipling's travelogues too describe India as a land of riches and good place to loot.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the accounts of the European Orientalists already show a tendency on their part to dehumanize and destructure the Orient in general and India in particular.

### **Representation of India in the Taxonomical Scheme of Edward Said**

Edward Said devoted much less attention to British rule in India, by far the lengthiest and most successful example of European hegemony in the Orient. He makes his first reference to India on pages 11 and 14 of his book *Orientalism* where he says that an Englishman took interest in India to colonize it. The West believed that it belonged to a power and hence had shown a definite interest in the Orient. He gives a list of Victorian writers like John Stuart Mill, Arnold, Carlyle, Newman, Macaulay, Ruskin, George Eliot, Dickens, etc. and asserts that they had definite views on race and imperialism, which can be seen in their writings.

Said further talks about the two Orientalists, Balfour and Cromer, who dealt with the Orient (Egypt) in general and India in particular and used glorious terms to express the relationship between the Orient and the Occident. The Oriental was defined as "irrational, depraved, and 'different' and the European as rational, virtuous, mature, normal..." (p.40). Both Balfour and Cromer were of the view that the subject races did not have it in them to know what was good for them. Edward Said quotes Cromer from the 34th chapter of his *Modern Egypt* and says that Cromer puts down a sort of personal canon of Orientalist wisdom. He says, "Oriental cannot walk on either a road or pavement...Orientals are inveterate liars....are lethargic and suspicious...oppose the clarity, directness, and nobility of the Anglo-Saxon race" (pp.38-39). Said accuses Cromer for considering the Anglo-Saxon race superior to the Orient and for tagging the Orient.

This demarcation between European and non-European was just a part of power game. To the Occident “the Oriental was an Oriental...that could be written without even an appeal to European logic or symmetry of mind” (p.39). Said examines that the knowledge of subject-races made their management profitable and easy. Said carries forth his reference to India on p.75 where he states that after the Portugal invasion of India in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, England ruled over it commercially and politically, and India itself never provided any threat to its invaders as the native authority could not stand united, thus, allowing itself to be treated by European haughtiness of manner.

Anquetil Duperron’s translation of Avesta (at Surat) and the Upanishad (in Paris), William Jones’ works on India, Charles Wilkins’ Institute of Manu and Bhagwat Gita, Napoleon’s Descriptio de L’Egypt and Friedrich Schlegel’s learning of Sanskrit in Paris all had a close association with the Oriental renaissance in Europe.

Edward Said in his book also talks about William Jones’ interest in India. William Jones was already master of Arabic and his ambition was to know India better than any other European ever knew it and thus he made a list of topics that he were to study during his stay in India. Jones curiosity for the laws of Hindus, geography of Hindustan, governance in Bengal Arithmetic and Geometry, and Mixed sciences of the Asiaticks, Medicine, Chemistry, Surgery and Anatomy of the Indians, natural Productions of India, Poetry, Rhetoric and Morality of Asia, Music of Eastern Nations, Trade, Manufacture, Agriculture and Commerce of India (p.78) paved a way for sustained governance of the British rule in India. Said maintains that Sanskrit language, Indian religion and history did not procure the status of scientific knowledge until after Jones’ efforts in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Said examines Jones’ interest in India and his open throated praise for Sanskrit language “that (it) is more perfect than Greek and more copious than the Latin” (p.79) had a dual purpose to play firstly to rule and to learn and then to compare the Orient with the Occident. Said also gives an account on how Charles Wilkins, a company official was assisted by William Jones to first master Sanskrit and then to translate the Institues of Manu (Wilkins incidentally, was the first translator of Bhagwat Gita, 1785).

About the Indian religion, the Orientalists had different views, which are discussed in short by Said in his Orientalism. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe stood for the loss of that origin, innocence, purity as a result of mechanization, industrialization and scientific advancement. Europe had the dream of regaining the genealogical essence through its understanding of the Oriental past. Friedrich Schlegel and Novelis said, “It was Indian culture and religion that could defeat the materialism and mechanism of Occidental culture” (p.115). But to some of the German Romantics, Indian religion was essentially an Oriental version of Germano-Christian Pantheism” (p.67).

Indian religion is the most antiquated religion and the West’s thoughtless categorizing of Indian religion seems to be just a part of their Orientalistic strategy. Some Orientalists explained oriental religion and culture in terms of mysticism and exoticism. Islam and Oriental religion, including Hinduism, were projected as exotic items devoid of rationality (p.317) and as full of metaphysics and mystic elements (p.268). Joseph Conrad’s Heart of the Darkness, Rudyard Kipling’s Kim, and the traveling account of Lane, Burton, Chateaubriand, and other establish Europe’s search for exoticism and mysticism in the East. Said also focuses on Schlegel’s enthusiasm for India and then his ensuing abhorrence from it. The Orient that was merited for its pantheism, its spirituality, its stability, its longevity, its primitivity, and so forth and in which Schelling saw a preparation of the way for Judeo-Christian monotheism: Abraham was prefigured in Brahma; such regards for Oriental polytheism was followed by a counter response. “The Orient suddenly appeared lamentably under-humanized, antidemocratic, backward, barbaric, and so forth...the Orient was undervalued” (p.150).

Said’s most significant reference to India is his comments on Karl Marx’s analyses of British rule in India. Marx being a defender of European capitalism identifies European colonialism as the historical power which facilitates the

globalization of the capitalist mode of production and thereby, the destruction of 'backward' or pre-capitalist forms of social organization. Marx believed that there is link between the progressive role of capital and the progressive role of colonialism. There is a citation from Marx journalistic analyses of British rule in India in *Orientalism* where Marx says:

“...whatever may have been the crimes of England she was the unconscious tool of history in bringing about that revolution”. (p.153)

By revolution Marx meant social-economic revolution. Marx also says:

“England has to fulfill a double mission in India: one destructive and the other regenerative – the annihilations of the Asiatic Society, and the laying of the material foundations of Western society in Asia”. (p.154)

Referring to this dual role about which Marx mentions, Said argues that the Marxist thesis on socio-economic revolution is ultimately and ethically flawed from the perspectives of the colonized world - first, because its vision of progress reiterates 19<sup>th</sup> century assumptions of the fundamental inequality between East and West; and secondly, it inadequate because Marx follows the insidious logic of the colonial civilizing mission in postulating Europe as the hyper real master-narrative, which will pronounce the redemption of poor Asia.

Said's anti-Marxist attitude has been criticized by Aijaz Ahmad, the confirmed Marxist intellectual and critic in one of his most significant works *In Theory: Class, Nations, Literature* (1992), and in his article “Between Orientalism and Historicism: Anthropological Knowledge of India” (p.1991). In *Theory* he says: “I disagree with him so fundamentally on issues both of theory and history that our respective understandings of the world as it is now, and as it has been at many points over the past two thousand years or so – are simply irreconcilable” (p.159).

Aijaz Ahmad projects Said as an Orientalist and as a positive force, a representative of the metropolitan culture of the West. Since Said has only discussed canonical text and not Oriental texts, he is a canonist and he is one-sided. He believes that Said's only job is to denounce everything that is Western, by terming them almost blindly as colonialist, imperialist and Orientalist.

The allegation against Said that Ahmad has brought in is Said's anti-Marxist position. He has devoted a full chapter to Marx in *In Theory: “Marx on India: A Clarification”*. He believes that Marx's observations are misconceived by Said. He finds Said's observation in *Orientalism* on Marx's 1853 essay as highly misplaced.

Like Aijaz Ahmad, Irfan Habib too is critical about Said's observations on Marx in *Orientalism*. Referring to Marx's idea of the regeneration of India, Habib argues that British colonialism was instrumental in building up a modern secular India. He believes that the two dominant themes of the French revolution i.e. liberty and equality, had a significant role to play in the process of “formation of new India”. It was also instrumental in creating of a new class of peasants and workers, who had some decisive role to play in the Indian freedom struggle.

Aijaz Ahmad and Irfan Habib's critique of Said's anti-Marxist view is suggested to be studied in the light of Indian history. India was a land of riches and from time to time varied invaders came to this land to plunder and to loot its riches and in return tried to affirm their own culture and religion. Moreover, the India of the past was past of the socially upper castes. Several types of evils prevailed in the Indian society. Although India had been plundered and colonized by the Britishers to satisfy their selfish ends, India did learn certain important lessons – the ones of nationalism and planning the infrastructural development of the nation. Thus, it can be said that Said's way of analyzing all the Orientalist texts with one measuring rod is hardly justifiable.

Said's limited range of reference to the Far East countries and India, in particular again calls for criticism. Said's *Orientalism*, a book of nearly 400 pages, that addresses the theme of denial of the East by the West, is in fact just a narrow study of one part of the Orient. The book explores only the historically imbalanced relationship between the world of Islam, the Middle East and that of European and American imperialism. Wasn't this imbalanced relation to be found in the Far East countries of which Said makes no mention? The act of differentiating and categorizing was a primary act of European hegemony but the act of sub-categorizing seems to be completely a Saidian invention. The issue whether Said was biased in his approach to the Orient has to be seriously thought of. It seems that Said's alienate existence in America did not let him live in peace and thus it shouldn't be taken by surprise that his strong contempt for the Occident that took shape from his private deeps had only to deal with the Near East rather than the Far East.

Another point that needs to be risen is that why at all did Said, who in his *Orientalism* acts as an advocator of Islamic countries, religion and culture, spent his entire life in America and openly criticized the European and American imperialism? Was it a deliberate act to embrace antagonistic positions? Said's concern for the Palestinian cause also needs close examination. It appears quite ironical that Said lived in US but talked about Palestine.

In order to build up one's grounding one has to connect himself to his roots; one has to encounter all challenges, but Said was never ready to leave his comfort zone. Moreover, Said never stayed at any of the Islamic countries and even the South Asian countries (only dropping of names) that he talks about in *Orientalism*. It has to be really looked into whether Said was a true messiah of the Orient, speaking for the marginals, who unveiled the crudities of the Occident and tried to wake up the Orient from centuries of deep or he was just an Occident within an Orient.

## CONCLUSIONS

The forgoing diachronic discussion traces the idea of the Orient, vis-à-vis India, as an epistemic reality that the West has too realistically perceived in order to maintain and safeguard its material and commercial interest. The Orient, therefore, is an orphan child of Western imagination, which the Orient as in itself it really is cannot adopt. This is truer about India which has an antiquity that European imagination simply cannot accommodate.

As a consequence, India has been mythologized; it is considered to be a country of superstitious and lethargic people who cannot create structures of governance for themselves. Therefore, the western logic comes handy – India and the Orient must be ruled by the Western structural paradigms that have seen the development of science, culture, technology, and other forms of knowledge. Said is worried about what Mathew Arnold said – “the object in itself as it really is”; let the Orient and India have a language which must be listened to, cared for and nourished. What happened to thousands of years old structures of culture, religion and the rest that the West is simply not trying to consider and understand? India is larger than the idea of itself and Edward Said is aware of this within his limited range of references to India. All said and done, and whatever amount of critique one might make of the Western structures as they are imposed upon the Orient and India, the truth is that India and the Orient did not exist as an entity that had language and power paradigms accessible to it. This is also saying that India and the Orient allowed the West to rule them for centuries because they could not stand united even after thousands of years of pretence under the rubies of culture and religion.

## NOTES

1. Edward Said, the Old Dominion Foundation Professor in Humanities at Columbia University, USA was born in Jerusalem on Nov. 1, 1935. He came from a tiny Protestant Group among the larger Greek Orthodox Christian minority in Israel. In the larger Palestinian domain, Said is a minority inside a minority. He was forced to leave

Jerusalem after the formation of Israel in 1948. He spent his early years in Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt and underwent the bitter experiences of an immigrant. His stay at Cairo, Egypt helped him shape his cultural and political sensibility and his later metropolitan thought. Said's Lebanon connection also brought him closer politically, intellectually and culturally to the Palestinian cause. In the 70s and 80s, Beirut was the center of the Palestinian revolution for a separate homeland. Lebanon had been giving shelter to the Arab and Palestinian exiles since 1947 and the 1948 Arab-Israel War. The 1967 Arab-Israel War, completely shattered Said's world; his Palestinian hopes of returning home.

2. As Said recalled in *Out of Place*, the 1967 war "seemed to embody the dislocation that subsumed all other losses, the disappeared worlds of my youth, the unpolitical years of my education, the assumption of disengaged teaching at Columbia...I was no longer the same person after 1967; the shock of that war drove me back to where it all started". Edward W. Said, *Out of Place: A Memoir*, New York: Knopf, 1999, p.293.
3. See James Clifford, "On Orientalism", in *The Predicament of Culture*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1988, p.267.

James writes: "Said limits his attention almost exclusively to statements about the Middle East, omitting, regretfully but firmly, the Far East, India, the Pacific, and North Africa...Said's second genealogical limitation restricts the national traditions under consideration to the British and French strands, with the addition of a recent American offshoot. He is obliged to rule out Italian, Spanish, Russian, and specially German Orientalism" (p.267). Also see Bernard Lewis' "The Question of Orientalism", *The New York Review*. 24 June (1982) 51. He writes, "His (Said's) orient is reduced to the Middle East, and his Middle East to a part of the Arab world".

4. For a detailed account of European's understanding of India see E. F. Oaten, *European Travellers to India During 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, and 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries*. Also see R. W. Frazer.

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