

# Edward Said and the Question of Colonial Discourse

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Knowledge is not innocent but profoundly connected with the operations of power. This Foucaultian insight informs Edward Said's foundational work *Orientalism*, which points out the extent to which 'knowledge' about 'the Orient' as it was produced and circulated in Europe was an ideological accompaniment of colonial 'power.' This is a book not about non-Western cultures, but about the Western representation of these cultures, particularly in the scholarly discipline called Orientalism. Said shows how this discipline was created alongside the European penetration into the 'Near East' and how it was nurtured and supported by various other disciplines such as philology, history, anthropology, philosophy, archeology and literature.

*Orientalism* uses the concept of discourse to re-order the study of colonialism. It examines how the formal study of the 'Orient' (what is today referred to as the Middle East), along with key literary and cultural texts, consolidated certain ways of seeing and thinking which in turn contributed to the functioning of colonial power. These are not materials that traditional analysts of colonialism have considered, but which can now, thanks both to *Orientalism* and to the changing perspectives on ideology and culture, can be seen as central to the making and functioning of colonial societies. Said explains that certain texts are accorded

the authority of academics, institutions, and governments ... Most important, such texts can create not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe. In time such knowledge and reality produce a tradition, or what Michel Foucault calls a discourse, whose material presence or weight, not the originality of a given author, is really responsible for the texts produced out of it<sup>1</sup>).

Said accords as greater importance to individual authors than does Foucault, but, like Foucault, he also wishes to connect them to structures of thought and to the workings of

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1) Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (London: Routledge and Paul Kegan, 1978), p. 94

power. Accordingly, he brings together a range of creative writers, statesmen, political thinkers, philologists and philosophers who contributed to Orientalism as an institution which then provided the lens through which the 'Orient' would be viewed, and controlled; but equally this control itself spawned these ways of knowing, studying, believing and writing. Thus knowledge about and power over colonized lands are related enterprises.

*Orientalism* can be said to inaugurate a new kind of study of colonialism. Said argues that representations of the 'Orient' in European literary texts, travelogues and other writings contributed to the creation of a dichotomy between Europe and its 'others,' a dichotomy that was central to the creation of European culture as well as to the maintenance and extension of European hegemony over other lands. Said's project is to show how 'knowledge' about non-Europeans was part of the process of maintaining power over them; thus the status of 'knowledge' is demystified, and the lines between the ideological and objective blurred. It was not, Said suggests, that Europeans were 'telling lies,' or that they individually disliked non-Western peoples or cultures. In the case of Richard Burton (the translator into English of books like *The Arabian Nights*, *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* and *The Kama Sutra*) for example, Said points out that

No man who did not know Arabic and Islam as well as Burton could have gone as far as he did in actually becoming a pilgrim to Mecca and Medina. So what we read in Burton's prose is the history of a consciousness negotiating its way through an alien culture by virtue of having successfully absorbed its systems of information and behavior. ... [Yet] every one of Burton's footnotes, whether in the *Pilgrimage* or in his translation of *The Arabian Nights* ... was meant to be testimony to his victory over the same scandalous system of Oriental knowledge, a system he had mastered by himself<sup>2)</sup>.

So the impressive knowledge of Orientalists was filtered through their cultural bias, for the 'study' of the Orient was not objective but

a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, 'us') and the strange (the Orient, the East, 'them').... When one uses categories like Oriental and Western as both the starting and the end points of analysis,

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2) Ibid, pp. 195-196.

research, public policy ... the result is usually to polarize the distinction — the Oriental becomes more Oriental, the Westerner more western — and limit the human encounter between different cultures, traditions, and societies<sup>3)</sup>.

Said argued that knowledge of the East could never be innocent or 'objective' because it was produced by human beings who were necessarily embedded in colonial history and relationships. Some such point had also been made, albeit less 'theoretically,' by the Indian nationalist Bipin Chandra Pal earlier in the century when he pointed out that

When ... the European scientist studies the physical features of our land, when he mensurates our fields, trigonometrates our altitudes and undulations, investigates our animal, our vegetable or our mineral kingdoms, the records of his study of man belongs altogether to a different plane .... Here also the eye sees, the ear hears, but the real meaning of what is seen or heard is supplied not by the senses but by the understanding, which interprets what is heard in the light of its own peculiar experiences and associations<sup>4)</sup>.

Many years before Said, Franz Fanon had concluded his indictment of colonialism by pronouncing that it was Europe that "is literally the creation of the Third World" in the sense that it's material wealth and labour from the colonies, "the sweat and the dead bodies of Negroes, Arabs, Indians and the yellow races" that have fuelled the 'opulence' of Europe<sup>5)</sup>. Western intellectuals such as Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin and Hannah Arendt had also explored the connection between the intellectual production of the colonial world and its growing global domination<sup>6)</sup>. But although Said's critique is anticipated by others, it was new in its wide-sweeping range and focus, in its invocation of Foucault's work to make connections between the production of knowledge and the exercise of power, and innovative also in its use of literary materials to discuss historical and epistemological processes. In many ways Said's use of culture and knowledge to interrogate colonial power inaugurated colonial discourse studies.

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3) Ibid, pp. 45–46.

4) Bipin Chandra Pal, *The Soul of India: A Constructive Study of Indian Thoughts and Ideas*, (Calcutta: Yugayatri Prakashak, 1958), pp. 8–9.

5) Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans by C. Farrington. (New York: Grove Press), pp. 76–81.

6) R. Williamson And L. Chrisman, (eds), *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 7.

Discourse analysis, as it has been deconstructed, makes it possible to trace connections between the visible and the hidden, the dominant and the marginalized, ideas and institutions. It allows us to see how power works through language, literature, culture and the institutions which regulate our daily lives. Using this expanded definition of power, Said could move away from a narrow and technical understanding of colonial authority and show how it functioned by producing a 'discourse' about the Orient — that is, by generating structures of thinking which were manifest in literary and artistic production, in political and scientific writings and more specifically, in the creation of Oriental studies. Said's basic thesis is that Orientalism, or the 'study' of the Orient, was ultimately a political vision of reality whose structure promoted a binary opposition between the familiar (Europe, the West, "us") and the strange (the Orient, the East, "them").

Said shows that this position is crucial to European self-conception: if colonized people are irrational, Europeans are rational; if the former are barbaric, sensual, and lazy, Europe is civilization itself, with its sexual appetites under control and its dominant ethic that of hard work; if the Orient is static, Europe can be seen as developing and marching ahead; the Orient has to be feminine so that Europe can be masculine. This dialectic between self and other, derived in part from deconstruction, has been hugely influential in subsequent studies of colonial discourses in other places — critics have traced it as informing colonial attitudes towards Africans, Native Americans, and other non-European peoples. Since *Orientalism*, colonial discourse studies have analysed a wide range of cultural texts and practices such as art works, atlases, cinema, scientific systems, museums, educational institutions, advertisements, psychiatric and other medical practices, geology, patterns of clothing, ideas on beauty. According to one critic, 'colonial discourse analysis ... forms the point of questioning of Western knowledge's categories and assumptions'<sup>7)</sup>

Said's book denies the claim of objectivity or innocence not only within Oriental studies but on the part of any Western scholarship. It also implicates other human and social sciences as they were traditionally constituted — anthropology, philology, art history, history, economic and cultural studies, and literary studies. All of these disciplines, for various reasons, were inadequate for analysing the colonial construction of knowledge and culture in Said's sense. Anthropological studies rested upon the assumption that non-European peoples were backward, primitive, quaint, sometimes even 'noble,' but always different from the products of Western

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7) R. Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*. (London: Routledge), 1990, p. 11.

civilization. Historical scholarship claimed 'objectivity' while being riddled with cultural bias, and its crude separation of 'fact' from fiction had precluded its ability to probe the ideologies that informed Western scholarship's claim to 'truth-telling.' 'Classical' economics was notoriously culture-blind, and even the study of art was premised on cultural generalizations that masqueraded as 'aesthetic taste.' Orthodox literary studies claimed to be 'above' politics altogether, interested only in something called 'the' human condition, and, as Said points out, certainly hostile to any discussion of cultural difference, colonialism and imperialism. Colonial discourse studies entail inter-disciplinary work which was only made possible by radical changes within many of these disciplines.

Despite the enormous influence of *Orientalism*, the book has evoked much hostility as well as criticism, especially from Orientalists themselves, but also from other fundamentally sympathetic to Said's project. One recurring critique is that *Orientalism* suggests that a binary opposition between East and West has been a more or less static feature of Western discourses from classical Greece to the present day. Thus Said's book is seen to flatten historical nuances into a fixed East versus West divide<sup>8)</sup>. According to this view, attitudes to non-Europeans fluctuated greatly, not only over time, but also within any given context. Ahmed<sup>9)</sup> also accuses Said of homogenizing the West, but the grounds of his criticism are that Said does not sufficiently connect Orientalist knowledge production to colonial history and its connections with the development of capitalism. Instead, it is suggested, he inflates the importance of literary, ideological and discursive aspects at the expense of more institutional or material realities, and hence implies that colonialism was largely an ideological construct. Critics have pointed out too that Said's analysis concentrates, almost exclusively, on canonical Western literary texts. A third, most frequent charge is that Said ignores the self-representations of the colonized and focuses on the imposition of colonial power rather than on the resistance to it. By doing so, he promotes a static model of colonial relations in which 'colonial power and discourse is possessed entirely by the coloniser' and therefore there is no room for negotiation or change<sup>10)</sup>.

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8) D. Porter, "Orientalism and its Problems," in F. Barker, P. Hulme, M. Iverson and D. Loxley (eds), *The Politics of Theory*, Proceedings of the Essex Sociology of Literature Conference. (Colchester: University of Essex Press), 1983, pp. 179-193.

9) L. Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam, Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992.

10) H. K. Bhabha, "Difference, Discrimination, and the Discourse of Colonialism," in F. Barker, P. Hulme, M. Iverson and D. Loxley (eds), *The Politics of Theory*. Colchester: University of Essex Press, 1983, p. 200.

This last question — that of the nature of colonial power — is and has been a vexed one for postcolonial studies. Some scholars criticize the entire field of ‘colonial discourse’ for adapting a Foucaultian view of colonial power as all pervasive. *Orientalism* is held responsible for this bias in suggesting that Western texts create not only knowledge about the Orient but the very reality they appear to describe and thus implying that

The historical experiences of colonial peoples themselves have independent existence outside the texts of Orientalism .... At a theoretical level, then, Said appears to have placed himself in the position of denying the possibility of any alternative description of ‘the Orient,’ any alternative forms of knowledge and by extension, any agency on the part of the colonised. The fact that this theoretical position runs counter to Said’s professed political aim of effecting the dissolution of ‘Orientalism’ could be seen as an ironic validation of his own theory, since even he seems trapped within the frame of Orientalism, unable to move outside it<sup>11)</sup>.

Foucault, one should recall, suggests that power manifests itself not in a downward flow from the top of the social hierarchy to those below but extends itself in a capillary fashion — it is part of daily action, speech and everyday life. Is such a notion of power useful for re-conceptualising social domination, or does it render it all pervasive and therefore difficult to challenge? Edward Said has himself said he finds such an understanding of power disabling for politically engaged criticism<sup>12)</sup>. Some commentators find an irreconcilable contradiction between Said’s use of Foucaultian perspectives to critique the operations of colonial discourse, and his political commitment to the possibility of social change. Others have insisted that such contradictions can in fact be productive in dismantling previously secure methods of analysis. In his later work, Foucault began to emphasize the instability of resisting this control. But Foucault also discusses how dominant structures legitimize themselves by allowing a controlled space for dissidence — resistance, in this view, is produced and then inoculated against by those in power. Certain influential bodies of literary and cultural criticism inspired by his work, such as new historicism, emphasize the ways in which, in the final analysis, all manner of oppositional ideologies or resistance groups or individuals are contained by

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11) Megan Vaughn, “Colonial Discourse Theory and African History, or has Postmodernism Passed Us By?”, *Social Dynamics* 20(2), 1994, p. 3.

12) Edward Said, *The World, the Text and the Critic*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1984, p. 284.

power structures. One can see how such a pessimistic theoretical framework would be criticized by those who are beginning to uncover the histories of women or colonized subjects as histories of resistance and opposition and not just as stories about oppression. But other theorists have appropriated Foucaultian ideas to conceptualize multiple challenges to authority.

These are matters of ongoing debate. It is true that *Orientalism* is primarily concerned with how the Orient was 'constructed' by Western literature, travel writing and systems of studying the East, and not with how such a construction was received or dismantled by colonial subjects. However, it would, it seems, be unfair to conclude that just because Said does not venture into the latter territory, he necessarily suggests that the colonialist's discourse is all pervasive. Those who study modes and ideas of domination cannot necessarily be accused of being complicit with it — Said's own critique, and the work of other scholars before him such as Raymond Schwab, are themselves proof that Orientalist thought can be challenged. Elsewhere Said discusses anti-imperialist theorists such as Fanon in order to think about resistance in the present context<sup>13)</sup>. But colonial authority, like any other, is legitimized through a process during which it constantly has to negotiate with the people it seeks to control, and therefore the presence of those people, oppositional or otherwise, is a crucial factor in studying authority itself. Foucault's own work suggests that domination and resistance are inextricably linked. So Said's story about how a body of texts constructed the East is necessarily incomplete without some sense of the specific peoples and cultures it re-wrote, and situations into which it intervened.

By pointing out how deeply its knowledge systems were imbricated in racial and colonialist perspectives, Said has contributed to, indeed extended, the discrediting of the project of the Enlightenment by post-structuralists such as Foucault. As Said has persuasively demonstrated, language and literature are together implicated in constructing the binary of a European self and a non-European other, which as *Orientalism* suggests, is a part of the creation of colonial authority. Peter Hulme's work on the formation of a colonial discourse in sixteenth-century America is extremely illuminating in this regard. Hulme shows how two words 'cannibal' and 'hurricane' — were lifted from Native American tongues and adopted as new words into all major European languages in order to 'strengthen an ideological discourse.'<sup>14)</sup>

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13) Edward Said, "Representing the Colonized, Anthropology's Interlocuters", *Critical Inquiry* 15, Winter: pp. 205–225.

14) Peter Hulme, "Colonial Encounters," in F. Barker, P. Hulme, M. Iverson and D. Loxley (eds), *Europe and its Others*, vol. 2, (Colchester: University of Essex Press, 1986, p. 101.

Both words came to connote not just the specific natural and social phenomenon they appear to describe but the boundary between Europe and America, civility and wildness. 'Hurricane' began to mean not simply a particular kind of tempest but something peculiar to the Caribbean. Thus, it indicated the violence and savagery of the place itself. Similarly, 'cannibalism' is not simply the practice of human beings eating their own kind, not just another synonym for the older term anthropophagy. The latter term referred to savages eating their own kind, but cannibalism indicated the threat that these savages could turn against and devour Europeans. Hulme further shows that there was a blurring of boundaries between these two terms, although hurricane supposedly referred to a natural phenomenon and cannibalism to a cultural practice, they both came to designate whatever lay outside Europe. Moreover, 'cannibal' was etymologically connected to the Latin word *canis* (dog), reinforcing the view that 'the native cannibals of the West Indies hunted like dogs and treated their victims in the ferocious manner of all predators.' Hulme discusses how a play like Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (far from being a romantic fable removed from the real world) is implicated in these discursive developments, and in the formation of colonial discourse in general, how its tempests are hurricanes in this new sense, and why Caliban's name is an anagram for cannibal, and why also Prospero turns a dog called Fury on to the rebels<sup>15</sup>). Literature, in such a reading, both reflects and creates ways of seeing and modes of articulation that are central to the colonial process.

Literary texts are crucial to the formation of colonial discourse precisely because they work imaginatively and upon people as individuals. But literary texts do not simply reflect dominant ideologies; they also militate against them. Such complexity is not necessarily a matter of authorial intention. Plays such as *Othello* and *The Tempest* thus evoke contemporary ideas about the bestiality or incivility of non-Europeans. But we can differ about whether they do so in order to endorse dominant attitudes to 'race' and culture or to question them. Does *Othello* serve as a warning against inter-racial love, or an indictment of the society which does not allow it? Does *The Tempest* endorse Prospero's view of Caliban as a bestial savage, or does it depict the dehumanization of colonial rule? It is difficult to establish Shakespeare's intentions, but we can certainly see how these plays have been read differently by people over time and in different places. *The Tempest*, for example, has been staged, interpreted and appropriated as a romance that has nothing to do with colonialism, as an imperial fable depicting the victory of the white man's knowledge over both nature and the savage, and as an

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15) *Ibid*, pp. 89-134.

anti-colonial text that depicts the struggle of the enslaved Caliban.

Literary and cultural practices also embody cultural interactions. Morris dancing, which might be regarded as quintessentially English, evolved from Moorish dances brought back to Europe through the Crusades. In fact, throughout the medieval and early modern periods we can see the European appropriation of non-European texts and traditions, especially Arabic texts, so that European literature is not simply literature written in Europe or by Europeans but is produced in the crucible of a history of interactions going back to antiquity. The syncretic nature of literary texts or their ideological complexities should not lead to the conclusion that they are somehow 'above' historical and political processes. Rather, we can see how literary texts, both through what they say, and in the process of their writing, are central to colonial history, and in fact can help us towards a nuanced analysis of the history. Even a discipline like comparative literature which acknowledged the profound interaction of various literatures and cultures, was hierarchically organized, and its central assumption was that 'Europe and the United States together were the center of the world, not simply by virtue of their political positions, but also because their literatures were the ones most worth studying.' Instead, Said suggests that Western cultural forms be placed 'in the dynamic global environment created by imperialism.'<sup>16)</sup>

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16) Edward Said, "Secular Interpretation: The Geographical Element, and the Methodology of Imperialism," in G. Prakash (ed.), *After Colonialism*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 1995, pp. 22-28.