

Edward Said's "Orientalism" and Postcolonial Theory

Edward Said was born in West Jerusalem and named Edward after the Prince of Wales. His Palestinian father, Wade after serving the First World War took American citizenship and his mother Hilda (an admirer of Edward, the Prince of Wales) was born in Nazareth of Palestinian and Lebanese parentage. He left Palestine for good in 1947 just before the creation of Israel out of the territory of Palestine in 1948 and settled in USA where he worked as a Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University. Being a Polyglot, (he knew such languages as English, Arabic, Spanish, German, Italian and Latin), he had inwardness with European languages and culture. He became conscious of Western attitude to the East embedded in the term 'Orientalism.'

If postcolonial aesthetic owes its origin to Frantz Fanon's book, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), postcolonial theory is based on Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978). Said's contribution to postcolonial theory can be understood in its proper perspective against the backdrop of his concept of 'Orientalism' explained and developed in his major works such as *Beginnings* (1975), *Orientalism* (1978), *The Question of Palestine* (1979), *Covering Islam* (1981), *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) and *The World, The Text and The Critic* (1983). The term 'Orientalism' occurs in Said's magnum opus *Orientalism* which refers to "the historical and ideological process whereby false images of and the myths about the Eastern or the 'Oriental' world have been

constructed in various Western discourses, including that of imaginative literature" (Murfin and Ray, 1998: 262). Orientalism which is based on the cultural superiority of the West over the East paved the way for imperialism. In other words, imperialism an upshot of orientalism refers to 'the authority assumed by a state over another territory—authority expressed in pageantry and symbolism, as well as in military power. It is a term associated in particular with the expansion of the European nation-state in the nineteenth century. Colonialism involves the consolidation of imperial power, and is manifested in the settlement of territory, the exploitation or development of resources, and attempt to govern the indigenous inhabitants of occupied lands' (Boehmer, 1995: 2). Postcolonialism, refers to the period after colonialism and helps the native inhabitants to take their place by gaining independence and overcoming political and cultural imperialism. Thus, these four terms (i.e., 'Orientalism,' 'imperialism,' 'colonialism' and 'postcolonialism') are interrelated and interdependent. In order to understand Said's contribution to postcolonial theory we would do well to understand these terms in their context clearly.

Before explaining Said's 'Orientalism' it is imperative on our part to understand the major influences on him in the global context.

Though critics tend to evaluate Said on the basis of his works beginning with *Orientalism* and after, his first major critical work, *Beginnings* (1975) cannot be glossed over easily. It is here that Said turns to the eighteenth century Italian Philosopher, Vico for new ideas. Rajnath gives an interesting account of Said's indebtedness to Vico in the following words:

The very concept beginning is derived from Vico who distinguishes between origins and beginnings saying that the origins are divine, whereas beginnings are human. The world is created by God, but the social world is the handiwork of man. Explaining how Vico's concept of beginning makes him a modern thinker, Said remarks, "Vico is the prototypical modern thinker who perceives beginning as an activity requiring the writer to maintain an unstraying obligation to practical reality and sympadietic

imagination in equally strong parts." Said learns from Vico that any attempt at beginning requires not only grounding in reality but also imagination which can sympathetically formulate it. This emphasis on imagination marks Vico as well as Said off from the Vulgar Marxists who emphasized political content to the exclusion of imaginative recreation (JLC 9: 1, 2000: 75).

Said made use of Vichian idea of the distinction between filiation and affiliation, the first being instinctual, and the second, social. "Filiation is the outcome of sexual relationship which leads to procreation and repetition. Sexual relationship gives rise to the institution of marriage which in turn brings into being legal institutions and so on. All these institutions, which are called by Vico affiliation and which are meant to protect filiation, join people together" in a non-genealogical, non-procreative but social unity. In the modern age, says Said, "Filiative relationships have been displaced by affiliative relationships" (JLC 9: 1, 2000: 75).

Apart from Vico, Said was also influenced by Foucault's concept of power and the correlation between knowledge and power. In *Orientalism* Said writes: "I have found it useful here to employ Michel Foucault's notion of discourse, as described by him in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and in *Discipline and Punish*, to identify Orientalism." My contention is that without examining Orientalism as a discourse, one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European Culture was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period (1978: 3).

And again, Said was also influenced by the Marxist Italian Philosopher, Gramsci, particularly the latter's concept of hegemony, "which is the exercise of power through the consent of the ruled by 'incorporating and transforming' their ideologies." The domination of the rulers over the ruled (i.e., the colonial power over the colonised) was done at two levels—first, at the level of administration through military power and second at the social level through education in schools and institutions

like Church and other social organizations. The colonial power had exploited the colonized both politically and culturally and sought to establish the superiority of the West over the East. This kind of Orientalism paved the way for imperialism which Said contests in his works. Said quotes the following extract from Macaulay's 1835 minute to show how the West has tried to brainwash the Indians and Africans to accept the superiority of Occident:

I am quite ready to take the Oriental learning at the valuation of the Orientalists themselves. I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European Library was worth the whole native literature of India and Africa (1983: 12).

It is clear from Said's writings that he has made use of ideas of Vico, Foucault and Gramsci to formulate his theory of Orientalism. And I concur with Rajnath when he says that, "Said's postcolonialism has its roots in his *Beginnings* and that *Orientalism* is best viewed as the culmination of the earlier work rather than a new beginning" (JLC 9: 1, 2000: 76).

Orientalism is taken as a source book which gave a sense of identity and status to the marginal (i.e., the colonised) in the eyes of the West. *Orientalism* as Aijaz Ahmad rightly points out, "marks such a radical break in Said's own intellectual career precisely because the writing of this book was an attempt at coming to terms with what it meant for him to be a Palestinian living and teaching in the USA, armed with not much more than a humanist intellectual training, a successful career as literary critic, and a splendid mastery over wide areas of European literary textuality" (1999: 161). Edward Said also makes it clear in the "introduction:"

My own experience of these matters is in part what made me write this book. The life of an Arab Palestinian in the West, particularly America, is disheartening [...]. The web of racism, cultural stereotypes, political imperialism, dehumanizing ideology holding in the Arab or the Muslim in very strong indeed, and it is this web which every Palestinian has come to feel as his uniquely punishing destiny (1978: 27).

As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has rightly pointed out that, "the study of colonial discourse, directly released by work such as Said's has [...] blossomed into a garden where the marginal can speak and be spoken, even spoken for. It is an important part of the discipline now" (1993: 56). Leela Gandhi goes a step ahead when she says that:

Orientalism is the first book in a trilogy devoted to an exploration of the historically imbalanced relationship between the world of Islam, the Middle East, and the 'Orient' on the one hand, and that of European and American imperialism on the other. While *Orientalism* focuses on the well-rehearsed field of nineteenth century British and French imperialism, the two subsequent books in this series, *The Question of Palestine* (1979) and *Covering Islam* (1981) foreground the submerged or latent imperialism which informs the relationship between Zionism and Palestine and that of the United States and the Islamic World (1999: 66).

Said argues that the Western attitude towards Orientals is based on ignorance of the Eastern culture and literature. Hence, the colonisers imposed their culture and literature on the colonized people through various means. Said tries to show that the West was wrong to treat the East as inferior both culturally and intellectually. In his works Said has successfully demonstrated the values of Oriental Culture and brought the marginalised 'Other' to the centre stage. I am inclined to agree with Leela Gandhi when she makes the following observation on this subject:

Orientalism is the first book in which Said relentlessly unmaskes the ideological disguises of imperialism. In this regard, its particular contribution to the field of anti-colonial scholarship inheres in its painstaking, if somewhat overstated, exposition of the reciprocal relationship between colonial knowledge and colonial power. It proposes that 'Orientalism'—or the project of teaching, writing about and researching the Orient—has always been an essential cognitive accompaniment and inducement to Europe's imperial adventures in the hypothetical 'East.' Accordingly,

it claims that the peculiarly "Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" [Said 1991 (1978), 3] is inextricable from the peculiarly Western style of studying and thinking about the Orient. In other words, its answer to the way the East was won suggests that we reconsider some of the ways in which the East was known (*Ibidem*: 67-68).

The Orient is the place geographically adjacent to Europe and was its former colony with a rich cultural heritage. It has several rich languages and literatures of comparable standard with the West. It is not the 'Other' in the sense (i.e., the attitude of dismissal) that the West understands it. That is why, Said in his book, *Orientalism* explains the term Orientalism very clearly to dispel ambiguity about it. He says:

It will be clear to the reader (and will become clearer still throughout the many pages that follow) that by Orientalism I mean several things, all of them, in my opinion, interdependent. The most readily accepted designation for Orientalism is an academic one, and indeed the label still serves in a number of academic institutions. Anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient and this applies whether the person is an anthropologist, sociologist, historian, or philologist—either in its specific or its general aspects, is an Orientalist, and what he or she does is Orientalism. Compared with Oriental studies or area studies, it is true that the term Orientalism is less preferred by specialists today—both because it connotes the highhanded executive attitude of nineteenth century and early twentieth century European colonialism. Nevertheless books are written and congresses held with 'the Orient' as their main focus, with the Orientalist in his new or old guise as their main authority. The point is that even if it does not revive as it once did, Orientalism lives on academically through its doctrines and theses about the Orient and the Oriental (Mongia, 1997: 21).

Said has made a significant contribution to literary criticism by emphasizing the worldliness of the text. He questions the new critical position (i.e., the stand taken by the New Critics of

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America in the 1940s) of reading a text as a self-contained unit without any reference to the world (i.e., the culture and milieu in which it is written) and suggests that the text is of the world and about the world. It exists in the world and for the world. He asserts in the essay, "The World, the Text and the Critic" that "the point is that text have ways of existing that even in the most rarefied form are always enmeshed in circumstance, time, place, society—in short, they are the world and hence, wordly" (1983: 16). Said believes that the text is affiliated with the world and therefore questions the insular approach of the New Critics and some post-structuralists who believe that the text is what it means to the reader (Reader-Response Critics). Thus criticism should go beyond the text and take intertextuality as its province. Therefore, Said emphasizes that, "Criticism cannot assume that its province is merely that text—not even the great literary text" (*Ibidem*: 225).

In the twenty-first century when we look back to the past and particularly to the origin of post-colonial theory, we cannot help saying that Said's *Orientalism* is one of the chief sources of it. Said's *Orientalism* brings out the binary opposition between the West (i.e., Europe) and the East—the Occident and the Orient. Ania Loomba makes a pertinent point when she says,

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 the objective blurred (1999: 44-45).

The West has misrepresented the Orient in certain aspects to which Edward Said draws our attention in no uncertain terms. R.K. Kaul brings out these aspects in the following words:

(i) It was assumed that the West is rational, developed, humane, superior, the Orient is aberrant, underdeveloped and inferior; (ii) The Orientalist was guided by the classical texts in his attitude to the orient rather than modern oriental realities; (iii) The Orient was considered to be unchanging and uniform; (iv) Finally since the Orient is incapable of defining itself, an objective assessment of the East must be made by the Western Orientalist (Jain and Singh, 2000: 62).

Edward Said has been instrumental in bringing post-colonial theory to the centre stage by marginalizing formalist trends in Anglo-American Criticism. No wonder that some people charged him with West-bashing. Said is not against the West but he wants the West and the East to come closer for better understanding. Further he wants to do away with the binary opposition between the West and the East so that one cannot claim superiority over the other. His central thesis is that the study of the Orient (i.e., Orientalism) "was ultimately a political vision of reality whose structure prompted a binary opposition between the familiar (European, the West, 'us') and the strange (the Orient, the East, 'them')" (Loomba, 1999: 47). Towards the close of *Orientalism* Said pleads for the extinction of both the terms Orientalism and Occidentalism. He writes:

I hope to have shown my reader that the answer to Orientalism is not Occidentalism. No former "Oriental" will be comforted by the thought that having been an Oriental himself he is likely, too likely—to study new "Orientals"—or "Occidentals" of his own make-up. If the knowledge of Orientalism has any meaning, it is in being a reminder of the seductive degradation of knowledge, of any knowledge, anywhere, at any time. Now perhaps more than before [...] (JLC 9:1, 2000: 83).

Said is of the opinion that since all cultures are hybrid and heterogeneous, the complete separation of the West from the East is well nigh impossible. In the concluding paragraph of *Culture and Imperialism* Said says:

No one today is purely *one thing*. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are no more than starting

points which, if followed into actual experience for only a moment, are quickly left behind. Imperialism consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale. But its worst and most paradoxical gift was to allow people to believe that they were only, mainly, exclusively white, or black, or Western, or Oriental. No one can deny the persisting continuities of long traditions, sustained habitations, natural languages, and cultural geographies, but there seems no reason except fear and prejudice to keep insisting on their separation and distinctiveness as if that was all human life was about. Survival in fact is about connections between things; in Eliot's phrase, reality cannot be deprived of the "other echoes [that] inhabit the garden." It is more rewarding and—more difficult—to think correctly and sympathetically, contrapuntally, about others than only about "us." But this also means not trying to rule others, not trying to classify them or put them in hierarchies, above all not constantly reiterating "how our 'culture' or country is number one (or not number one, for that matter,) for the intellectual there is quite enough of value to do without that" (1993: 407-408).

Rajnath makes a perceptive comment on the passage just quoted above in the following words:

This is addressed as much to the West as to the East. The passage contains a warning and a suggestion. The West must not repeat its past error and the East must take its imperialist phase as a historical experience rather than permanent divide between it and its other. Cultural hybridity, a term frequently used by Said, has come to stay and no amount of effort can fence off the East and the West. Hence, Said's rhetorical question:

Who in India or Algeria today can confidently separate out the British or French component of the past from present actualities, and who in Britain or France can draw a clear circle around British London or French Paris that would exclude the impact of India and Algeria upon those two imperial cities (*Culture and Imperialism*, 15).

Cultures are so mixed up that we are slowly moving towards one culture which will have the components of

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both, the East and the West. He rejects the very idea of purity. We live "in a world of interdependent mongrelised societies. They are hybrids, they are impure," says Said in an interview. He inveighs against nativism which will entail Occidentalism, an inverted form of Orientalism. He regrets the two directions in which *Orientalism* has been taken, anti-Westernism and nativism (JLC 9: 1, 2000: 84).

In conclusion, it can be said that Edward Said has heralded an interdisciplinary movement called postcolonial studies (i.e., theory) by exposing the West through his famous term and theory known as Orientalism. He has made the marginalised East the focus of Anglo-American Studies. Furthermore, he has challenged the critical theories of the West beginning with formalism through deconstruction for their lack of 'worldliness' and brought postcolonial theory to the forefront of critical studies in the English Speaking World.