EDWARD SAID AND RECENT ORIENTALIST CRITIQUES

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Abstract: There have been many attempts in recent years to discredit Edward Said’s thesis of the “affiliation of knowledge with power” (1997: xlix) by those who argue that Orientalist scholarship represents genuine and accurate knowledge of the Arab/Islamic world. Said’s detractors claim that much of Orientalist scholarship has been “sympathetic” to the Orient and is free from any power motive. However, this article will attempt to show how all of these arguments fall apart when put to the test of reality, past and present, in literature, Orientalist scholarship and politics. After all the arguments of Bernard Lewis, Ibn Warraq and think tank and area experts, it is Said’s voice of humanism that drowns out all of his dissenters’ voices in this Orientalist war of words, which as Said believed, is “richly symptomatic of precisely what is denied” (1985: 91).

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Edward Said was obsessed with beginnings. However, his beginnings were never really about going back passively, but about actively making something new, or as Timothy Brennan prefers, Said “translated it [counter-tradition] into a particular idiom” (2008: 4), which inevitably meant challenging what was already there—and Orientalism was a part of what was there. It can safely be said that Said effectively began the interrogation of Western discourse on the other, and thus began a new field of study called “postcolonialism.” Orientalist discourse represented for Said an especially poignant example of the “affiliation of knowledge with power” (Said, 1997: xlix):

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. (1978: 3)

Said’s detractors, however, contend that many Western Orientalist scholars were in it for intellectual curiosity as Said observes: “Lewis has been busy responding to my argument, insisting that the Western quest for knowledge about other societies is unique, that it is motivated by pure curiosity” (1985: 96); or even for showing Arabs

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and Muslims in a positive light as Ibn Warraq has attempted to do in Defending the West: A Critique of Edward Said’s Orientalism (2007). How easily Ibn Warraq wipes out the disastrous effects of colonization and conquest, seeing it as a force of modernization, i.e. a civilizing mission (2007: 29). Even more mainstream scholars of Muslim backgrounds from the Arab world have attempted to discredit Said in their own quest for Western recognition and accolades; one of these writers calls literary Orientalism a “labour of love” (Al-Dabbagh, 2010: 29). Other Orientalist scholars, such as Robert Irwin (2006) and Daniel Martin Varisco (2007), have disputed Said’s thesis of the pivotal link between Orientalist scholarship and power by pointing out some weakly translated words and phrases in Said’s work and isolated “sympathetic” Orientalist examples, which they believe would dismantle Said’s thesis. However, the isolated example, the allegedly misused word, the bothersome turn of phrase or the weakly translated quotation from one source or another do not detract from the overpowering discourse, partly made up of Orientalist scholarship, carefully constructed media images, think tank and area expert discourses that are aimed at bringing about a certain cultural and political reality, which would be translated into military action and economic and cultural policies and strategies for generations to come. Is Orientalist thinking innocent, and was Said wrong about his main thesis of linking the West’s archive on the East to power? Why are area studies in the United States well funded and carefully watched? The US House of Representatives passed a bill, “HR 3077,” which would require international studies departments to “show more support” for American foreign policy or lose federal funding, especially after the “pernicious influence of the late Edward Said in Middle Eastern studies departments” (Michelle Goldberg quoted in Afzal-Khan, 2005: 22). Why are traditional English literature departments and American centers at Arab universities essential to education in the Arab world? This will be touched upon a little later.

I would argue that the Orientalist mentality of which Said speaks is still very much alive today and even more so than ever before since the intellectual factories funded by governments, corporate benefactors and other powerful interest groups in metropolitan centers, such as Washington, London and Paris are more sophisticated than they were in the past thanks to advanced communication systems and technologies, especially of course the internet and powerful media outlets, and thus can penetrate more subtly and insidiously any society whether Western or Eastern. This is precisely the idea Said described in his essay entitled “Figures, Configurations, and Transfigurations”:

The world system map, articulating and producing culture, economics and political power along with their military and demographic coefficients, has also developed an institution-
alized tendency to produce out-of-scale transnational images that are now in the process of re-orienting international social discourses and processes. (1990: 9)

These cultural productions, which Said calls “configurations,” aim at the “mobilisation of consent, the eradication of dissent, the promotion of an almost literally blind patriotism” (ibid.). It is indeed very difficult for the average citizen who is preoccupied with the hardships of everyday life to think beyond the confines of what seem to him to be a common sense reality. In fact, some Orientalist scholars, such as Bernard Lewis, have contributed significantly to the cultural dogmas of Western governments and societies. Matthew Abraham points out in his comment on the production of ideas that “[t]hese repetitive, mind-numbing incantations have taken on the form of cultural dogmas that are seemingly uncontested and uncontestable, where to question them is to commit a sort of thought crime, a high intellectual treason of sorts” (2005).

Bernard Lewis, who coined the term “a clash of civilizations” in his 1990 article entitled “The Roots of Muslim Rage,” has done a great deal in shaping a political and cultural atmosphere, which is hostile to Arabs and Muslims in general. The mere consideration of the titles of Lewis’ two essays, “The Roots of Muslim Rage” (1990) and “The Revolt of Islam” (2001) is quite revealing. These titles suggest that Islam, as a whole, is enraged and in revolt. Muslims are an angry and irrational mob or rabble, so to speak. Why are they so enraged? As Lewis explains in both articles, it is not imperialism, Zionism or American support for Arab dictators, but rather a “rejection of modernity in favour of a return to the sacred past” (“Revolt,” 2001), a past which Lewis traces back to the seventh century. Lewis refutes “Arab statements on the subject” (ibid.) of Muslim anger—that their anger would have anything to do with Palestine and the ethnic cleansing of its people, for example. Is it, as Lewis would have us believe, a rejection or fear of modernity, which Lewis equates with Westernness? Is it this individual’s longing to go back to a previous era of Islamic glory? Wouldn’t a more logical response be, in the case of the Palestinian, for example, as a result of the loss of land, home, belongings, identity and his now 63-year-old refugee status? What would affect an individual more potently, the circumstances of his present predicament or a theoretical hypothesis which traces his anger to centuries past as Lewis and others have done? But, then, Lewis, as an Orientalist scholar, presumes to know more about the Oriental than the Oriental knows about himself. The Oriental, it seems, cannot absorb the source of his own anger. By contextualizing the Arab/Muslim’s anger irrationally in this way, Lewis is not only intentionally distorting reality, but he is also not allowing for any genuine understanding of the Oriental (in the above example, Palestinian) who is irrationally transformed from a victim into a terrorist. After explaining the Arab/Muslim source of anger, Lewis presents the reader with a discussion of terrorism,
whereby we learn that terrorism is a time honored tradition in Arab/Islamic history, which Lewis traces back to the eleventh to thirteenth century Assassins, continuing with the PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization) before arriving at the current day “Islamic terrorists” (ibid.). By the time we arrive at this point in Lewis’ discussion, the Palestinian victim has intentionally been presented as a faceless and brutal terrorist/rebel without a cause. It is not by chance that the whole historical tragedy of Palestine is reduced by Lewis to the PLO, and that put within the greater framework of Muslim rage against modernity, democracy and Western civilization in general.

In *Covering Islam* (1997), Said makes the observation that political and military action in the Middle East “has often been preceded by a period of ‘Islam’s’ rational presentation through the cool medium of television and through ‘objective’ Orientalist study” (1997: 28). It would be interesting here to compare the political discourse of George Bush in 2001 with the Orientalist discourse of Lewis in 1990. In 1990, Lewis wrote: “Why so many Muslims deeply resent the West and why their bitterness will not easily be mollified” (“Rage,” 1990). In 2001, Bush similarly, but more simply asked, “Why do they hate us?” In 1990, Lewis answered: “At times this hatred…becomes a rejection of Western civilization…and the principles and values that it practices and professes” (ibid.). And a little later, Lewis makes reference to Muslim fear of genuine democracy (ibid.). Near the end of this essay, Lewis concludes that it is “secularism and modernism” that are the underlying causes for the Muslim’s rage (ibid.). These statements by Lewis are echoed in Bush’s answer to the causes of the Muslim’s anger: “They hate our freedoms—our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote” (Bush, 2001). Is it mere coincidence, then, that the same questions are asked and the same answers given? Hasn’t the political and military discourse already been set, as shown in the above example, by Orientalist scholars who propose to know the mindset not only of particular individuals, but the whole of Islam, which supposedly and irrationally sets itself up in a historical and cultural clash with a Judeo-Christian tradition?

This representation of the native’s “irrational” anger is also portrayed in literature by the “postcolonial” subject who is more lauded in the West than in his own homeland, V. S. Naipaul, whose short story “Tell me who to kill” presents us with the irrational and unfocused anger of the West Indian, who says: “O God, show me the enemy. Once you find out who the enemy is, you can kill him. But these people here they confuse me. Who hurt me? Who spoil my life?” (1971a: 98). Unlike Lewis’ Muslim, Naipaul’s native does not know the enemy, but he is a potential terrorist, a confused “seething mass of unfocused anger” (Walder, 2005: 63) who simply wants to kill. This is, of course, in line with Naipaul’s overall presentation of the colonized subject who is seen in his fiction as an irrational and uncivilized presence whose revolutions and very existence are chaotic and meaningless without Western civilization as Naipaul so casually describes in “The Tramp at Piraeus”: “He...
made reproduction furniture in Cairo and he said that business was bad since the Europeans had left. Commerce and culture had vanished from Egypt” (1971b: 4). The implication here, of course, is that without American and European colonialism, the native free state cannot become an economically and culturally viable state. The Europeans not only brought commerce to Egypt, but also culture because, as Naipaul presumes, Egypt lacks a rich history, culture and heritage. Lewis’ strategy of the intentional distorting of reality and blurring of histories and causes can be seen in Naipaul’s fictional style whereby he intentionally distorts reality by conflating historical events in Africa in order to make an ideological point about the inability of natives to have successful revolutions and rule themselves. As Derek Wright (1998) points out, Naipaul’s intentional conflation of the events in Uganda in 1965 (tribal wars) and the Mau Mau struggle in Kenya in 1963 (War of Independence against the British) is meant to show the utter failure of the colonized subject’s attempt at independence from colonization. Thus, Naipaul uses the imaginative (of course, he has poetic license) to distort the reality of African history in the same way that Bernard Lewis distorts, erases, generalizes and blurs in order to make an ideological point that is more than the truth. In this way, historical, Orientalist and literary texts are intentionally stripped of their context, a people of their history and the rebel his cause.

Political discourse, of course, is especially infected with the “clash of civilizations” mentality as in the case of the nuclear weapons debate in the Middle East where a “common sense reality” revolves around who has the right to possess nuclear weapons and who does not. Israel, for example, can smugly declare that it follows the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy towards nuclear weapons (Williams, 2009) and tacitly gain the approval of the West because as Lewis would have us believe, Israel, Europe, the United States and other nations which fall under the Western sphere of influence all belong to an old “Judeo-Christian” tradition that is civilized and democratic. Isn’t this the underlying tone of current Western foreign policy and Orientalist scholarship? This laxity towards Israel continues while at the same time Arab and other nations are vigorously watched (and sometimes have wars waged against them in the name of eradicating non-existent nuclear weapons) by the United States, Europe, the United Nations Security Council, the International Atomic Energy Agency and Israel should these supposedly historically, genetically, and culturally inferior nations ever have the intention or inclination of starting a nuclear program of any kind.

Considering the above, one can identify a certain discourse, which is supposed to be accepted by “civilized” society—that of a necessary Israeli superiority and Arab inferiority due to the Arab’s inferior genetic and ideological makeup, we are to presume. In fact, the argument being pursued here may sound preposterous to some who have already accepted the status quo as a “common sense reality” since Israel’s
necessary military superiority has already been accepted as part and parcel of its "superior" Western values and interests. How could anyone question this rationale? This is precisely what Said’s detractors cannot seem to understand or rather do not want to understand due to their basic assumption or belief that there should never be a questioning of Western power of which Western discourse (Orientalism) is an integral part. Because this “common sense reality” or paradigm of thought was rigorously exposed and challenged by Said, he was accused of “intellectual terrorism” (Ibn Warraq, 2007: 18) because again as an Arab, (worse, Palestinian), he can fittingly be labeled a “terrorist,” another Western “common sense reality” since terrorism is a phenomenon practiced by some people of a certain ethnic or religious background and not others; for example, a terrorist is one who blows himself up and kills himself and others, but not someone who flies an F16 and drops phosphorous and other kinds of bombs on civilians gathered in a UN school in Gaza, for example. Of course, the use of the word “terrorism” is supposed to trigger in the Western psyche certain carefully constructed images and specific events (to the exclusion of others), and it is rather interesting that Ibn Warraq uses this word in particular to describe a scholar of Palestinian origins. Isn’t Ibn Warraq’s pronouncement an example of textual violence and malevolence, not to mention racism?

Some criticisms of Said mourn the pre-Saidian days of “true” scholarship when the Orientalist scholar could pursue knowledge sincerely and presumably innocently, before Said and his disciples put them under a tainted political and ideological lens. Now, they claim, academia would never be the same, polluted, as it is by Said’s “fraudulent” ideas. It is as if, the “Orientals” for the Orientalists are merely passive objects of study and curiosity, who are not allowed to come to life. We are being asked to set politics aside and allow academicians to describe and classify as they will. But aren’t these objects of study not people in their own right who have a right to refuse this categorization, especially when these classifications penetrate to the very core of the Other’s existence—their real life existence and do not only constitute representations or images on the pages of an Orientalist book, picture or painting, but a real history or past? Not only are we being asked to cast politics aside, but also life, so to speak, in order to pursue “true” art or scholarship, which would be totally free of the bias that politics and life would bring to it. Is it merely consequential, then, that one of the first actions the American army oversaw in Iraq was the ransacking of Iraq’s National Museum of Antiquities in Baghdad, which housed 170,000 items (including Hammurabi’s Code) spanning 7,000 years of Iraqi history from ancient Sumerian, Babylonian, Akkadian and other civilizations and the complete destruction of its card catalogue, its libraries and the whole infrastructure of the country (Martin, 2003)? What about the assassination of hundreds of Iraqi scientists and scholars, which the BRussells Tribunal calls a “war to erase the culture and the future of the Iraqi people” (2011)? Were these actions part and parcel of
liberating the Iraqi people and bringing freedom to Iraq? Perhaps America’s war of freedom in Iraq meant to free Iraq of its history and culture. What about the Israelis who transferred the “archives of the Palestine Research Centre in Beirut to Tel Aviv” (Said, 1995: 119) in 1982, the year of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the massacres of Palestinians in the Sabra and Shatilla refugee camps.

It seems that one of the first acts of conquest is to erase a people’s history, culture, collective memory and knowledge base (whether that be in history, culture, science, technology or others); important historic and scientific documents that preserve a people’s heritage, achievements and scholarship conveniently disappear without much fanfare in the press. Wouldn’t this fact alone stand as a witting testimony to the inevitable link between scholarship and conquest, or as Said so aptly put it in the title of his 1987 book *Culture and Imperialism*? Would denying this pivotal link contribute to a more “genuine” understanding of art, literature and the life and history of the peoples and nations under study? Said’s idea of “culture and imperialism” is a most formidable thesis to counter by the weak argumentation of Ibn Warraq, who like V. S. Naipaul, is motivated by winning accolades from the West for supposedly “exposing” the native from within being the “insider” that he is. Ibn Warraq uses the strategy of extolling Western civilization by citing “three defining values of the Occident,” which he claims are “rationalism, universalism and self-criticism” (2007: 12). Of course, by attributing to the West these values, Ibn Warraq is also arguing that these values are not possessed by any other civilization. He then goes on to give specific examples from some texts, basically from the Classical period, which are supposed to prove that “truth, objective knowledge, and intellectual curiosity” are all unique possessions of the West (ibid.).

At one point, Ibn Warraq quotes from the British Prime Minister Herbert Henry Asquith’s diary to prove that Britain always had good intentions towards other peoples and nations, keeping with the rational and universal qualities that Ibn Warraq bequeathed upon Western civilization. He goes on to argue that Britain, and by inference France, did not want to establish empires in the “five major provinces” of “Anatolia, Armenia, Syria, Palestine, and Iraq-Jezirah” (ibid.: 31). The fact that Britain and France drew up the Sykes-Picot Agreement in 1916, which divided the Arab world into British and French mandates and colonies, is, we suppose, of no historical significance, as long as Asquith’s intention in 1915 (as he wrote in his diary) was that Britain “had taken and gained nothing” (ibid.). One wonders if this is a good example of Western rationalism. In order to prove the “universalism” of the West, Ibn Warraq goes back to “Herodotus’s great history” (ibid.: 33); ancient Greece becomes Western civilization—past, present and future. Of what significance is Ibn Warraq’s discussion of how in the Middle Ages the Christian Church was trying to “objectively” understand Islam to our modern world, which is particularly marked by Western imperialism? Is this similar to twenty-first century efforts to
answer the peculiarly racist question, “Are Muslims Distinctive?”? Ibn Warraq, who accuses Edward Said of racism for linking Europe’s nineteenth century “interest” in the Orient to imperialism, makes an utterly racist statement when he states: “Marxists, Freudians, and anti-imperialists, who crudely reduce all human activities to money, sex, and power, respectively, have difficulties in understanding the very notion of disinterested intellectual inquiry. European man, by nature, strives to know” (ibid.: 38). What exactly does the above statement mean? Does it mean that “Marxists, Freudians, and anti-imperialists” are not “by nature” European? Or does it mean that they are not “true” Europeans? And is it only “European man, [who], by nature strives to know”? Doesn’t [wo]man, by nature, strive to know? Don’t Arabs, Africans, Chinese and Indians also strive to know? Ibn Warraq’s weak defense of the so-called rationalism, universalism and self-criticism of the West does not erase the fact of the devastating effects of imperialism on the colonized, especially Said’s own Palestinian people who are still suffering from the consequences of British colonial policies and the Zionist movement. The West’s successes and values as described by Ibn Warraq do not erase this postcolonial fact to which academia has always been complicit. Ibn Warraq’s weak logic (A equals B) is exposed in his book because the fact that the West produced great science or great art (A) does not mean that it had only good and noble intentions towards other peoples and nations (B). Nations do, in fact, produce great science and art and wage military and cultural wars against other peoples and nations.

Many critics try to deconstruct Said’s thesis by providing “sympathetic” Western texts, which they claim, prove that Said’s thesis is inherently false (Al-Dabbagh, 2010: 3-4). However, even the supposedly sympathetic Orientalism of which Said’s detractors speak can be called into question. In his attempt to deconstruct Said’s thesis, Al-Dabbagh offers texts that he believes represent literary Orientalism that would render Said’s thesis defunct. Al-Dabbagh writes:

The two works of English fiction that seem to me to stand explicitly and consciously within this tradition of literary orientalism that we have been describing are George Eliot’s Daniel Deronda and E.M. Forster’s A Passage to India. Both works owe their generating, and all-pervading, creative urge to a similar sort of sympathetic defense of the East, against distorting and hostile attitudes, that lay behind the works of Shakespeare and Scott. (Ibid.: 53)

The above quotation represents weak argumentation, and, in fact, makes some false assumptions. First of all, Al-Dabbagh here assumes that if the discourse is “sympathetic” to the East, then it is necessarily non-imperialist. However, an Orientalist discourse can be “sympathetic” to the East, as Forster often is, and still maintain an attitude of superiority (again as Forster often does), which, is then, of course, translated into power—the power to pass judgments, classify and define,
the power of a higher moral and civilizing presence, the power to guide, lead and bestow either acceptance or rejection upon the less civilized (as Forster allows his English character Fielding to do in dealing with the immature and irrational Indian Aziz)—of course all of this is done while maintaining a veneer of a “sympathetic defense of the East” (ibid.). Another false assumption that Al-Dabbagh makes is that *A Passage to India* is free from a “distorting” attitude as found in Shakespeare and Scott; thus, we are to suppose that everything in *A Passage* is beyond any reasonable doubt, the truth. However, it is indeed very difficult for the perceptive reader to read Forster’s text without noticing very clearly the superiority of Western civilization, geography, architecture and humanity. The Ganges deposits “rubbish” on the side of Chandrapore where the “mud moving” Indian inhabitants live, but becomes a “noble river” near the “Civil Station” where the English reside (1924: 31).

In her essay, “The Geography of a *Passage to India*,” Sara Suleri argues that Forster’s India “is really not other at all, but merely a mode or passageway to endorse the infinite variety that constitutes a reading of the West” (2005: 272). In fact, Forster does not “reduce” his India to Hinduism and Indians—“India is really far older” (1924: 137). Thus, a primeval India is universal; no people can lay claim to it. Forster’s India is, as Suleri points out, “only real in prehistory” (2005: 275), not in the reality of Indian history. Even the structure of the novel, divided as it is into the three parts of mosque, caves, temple, reinforces the idea of the ineffectiveness and emptiness of an unreal Indian architecture, civilization and religion, otherwise labeled “muddle” (Forster, 1924: 278, 282). Mosque, caves and temple are gaping holes, which fail to provide the European characters in the novel with any meaningful experience (Suleri, 2005: 272). Forster, ironically, presents India as the image of the rapist (ibid.), thus reversing the historical reality of Britain’s colonization of India with one carefully crafted stroke in which he exonerates Aziz of rape only to blame it on an Indian guide, and through him, India. And what are we to make of Forster’s comments (through his character Fielding) on form and beauty?

In poor India everything was placed wrong. He [Fielding] had forgotten the beauty of form among idol temples and lumpy hills; indeed, without form, how can there be beauty? Form stammered here and there in a mosque, became rigid through nervousness even, but oh, these Italian churches! (1924: 278)

Thus the further west we travel, the more form, beauty, civilization we encounter—the westward movement from the formless Hindu temple to the nervously stammering form of the Muslim mosque brings us, finally, to the exquisitely perfect form of the Christian church. The “fields of Egypt” (ibid.: 277) are praised only because they are more to the west than poor India’s mess. Immediately after celebrating the joys of Western form, which Fielding’s Indian friends would not be able to understand anyway because they would only “see the sumptuousness of Venice, not its shape”
(ibid.: 278) we are taken to “Part 3 Temple,” where Hindu chaos reigns supreme: “this approaching triumph of India was a muddle (as we call it), a frustration of reason and form” (ibid.: 282).

An even more curious choice that would supposedly dismantle Said’s thesis, as Al-Dabbagh believes, is George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda*. Dabbagh, ironically, argues:

George Eliot wants to fight anti-Jewish hostility and to correct anti-Jewish prejudice through, note her exact words, “sympathy and understanding.” This anti-Jewish prejudice (anti-semitism, if you like) is not confined, she continues, to Jews, but extends, again mark her exact words, to “all oriental peoples.” (2010: 54)

Again, here, Al-Dabbagh makes the false assumption that “sympathy” is enough to exonerate Orientalists of any wrongdoing towards Orientals. Does sympathy for the other necessarily exclude the feeling of superiority or the motive of power? Here, because George Eliot “wants to fight anti-Jewish hostility,” Al-Dabbagh implies, she is innocent of any imperialist or racist attitudes. Why doesn’t Al-Dabbagh go on to explain how Eliot “wants to fight anti-Jewish hostility” in Europe? Eliot advocated the founding of a Jewish “Homeland” for Jews in Palestine. In fact, in her “Introduction” to Eliot’s novel, *Daniel Deronda*, Carole Jones writes: “in 1935 the historian Nahum Sokolow declared that *Daniel Deronda* had paved the way for the Balfour Declaration” (2003: xiv). Jones goes on to point out that “Eliot’s text relies on the vision of a Jewish homeland without acknowledging—or perhaps realizing—that she was advocating Western-style colonialism” (ibid.). Eliot, in typical imperialist fashion, ignores the fact that Palestine already had its “indigenous inhabitants,” as Jones points out (ibid.)—the Palestinians or the Arab inhabitants of Palestine. It can even be argued that Eliot’s “appropriation of Zionism” is, in fact, anti-semitic in its gesture of wanting to displace or remove Jews from England by creating a homeland for them in Palestine (ibid.) in the same way that Abraham Lincoln advocated the removal of African Americans by arguing for their resettlement in Central America as has been recently revealed in a new book (Barakat, 2011). *Daniel Deronda*, in fact, can be viewed as a literary text that has helped shape modern history, and thus has taken part in one of the most tragic and still unresolved imperialist legacies of our time. It should be underscored that a “largely sympathetic portrait of the East” (Al-Dabbagh, 2010: 54) does not reduce the imperialistic outlook of many Western texts whether in literature, history, politics, or journalism.

This pivotal link between knowledge and power is clearly illustrated by an example from the period of Britain’s colonization of India when Thomas Macaulay, a British administrator of India argued for encouraging the obedience of the natives by consent, a principle of domination popularized by Antonio Gramsci; this would,
of course, be best achieved by education since the work of the English missionaries failed to achieve the required effect in India. The actual aim behind colonial policies as revealed in Britain’s Charter Act of 1813, the “Parliamentary Papers” of 1852-53, current English literature departments in the “postcolonial” (only in name) world and especially the Arab world (where English literature is taught at the university level to the exclusion of Arabic literature in many institutions), is as Thomas Macaulay clearly spelt out in 1835 in “Minute on Indian Education” to create “a class of persons, Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect” (1995: 430). Imperialism is, by nature, a racist principle at the core, and the discourse of imperialism is both racist and instrumental—it aims to achieve native “consent” through education and other cultural means. Imperialist/Orientalist discourses are especially pronounced in those nations that had empires to maintain.

Said’s discussions of Orientalist scholarship are, by and large, limited to the specific areas and histories on which he focuses, those where much of Orientalist knowledge is inevitably linked with British and French imperialism—hence accusing him of concentrating his writings on Arab and Muslim Orientals, or restricting examples to British, French and American Orientalists to the exclusion of German Orientalists (because they would not fit quite nicely into his scheme of things), is inane. The argument can, in fact, be turned against the accusers. If German Orientalism has been more sympathetic, it is also true that Germany did not have colonies in the Arab world. This is precisely why Said did not feel that he had to “defend” his lack of concentration on German Orientalism in his essay “Orientalism Reconsidered”: “Others [criticisms]—like my exclusion of German Orientalism, which no one has given any reason for me to have included—have frankly struck me as superficial or trivial, and there seems no point in even responding to them” (1985: 90). Said, in fact, is concentrating on that Orientalism which was more directly involved in “… the Orient’s colonial accumulation and acquisition by Europe” (ibid.: 93), which, of course, was a British and French (and later, American) preoccupation. Said is careful to note the shift in Orientalist scholarship when the West’s attention turned towards the conquest of the Orient, as can be seen in this quotation from Orientalism:

If I have concentrated so much on imperial agents and policy-makers instead of scholars in this section, it was to accentuate the major shift in Orientalism, knowledge about the Orient, intercourse with it, from an academic to an instrumental attitude. What accompanies the shift is a change in the attitude as well of the individual Orientalist, who need no longer see himself—as Lane, Sacy, Renan, Caussin, Muller, and others did—as belonging to a sort of guild community with its own internal traditions and rituals. Now the Orientalist has become the representative man of his Western culture… (1978: 246, emphasis added)
Said’s concern with Orientalism as a Western designed archive of knowledge on the Orient is in its inevitable link to imperialism. If the colonial administrators used armies to keep the natives under physical control, the discourse of Orientalism and education in general was employed to keep the natives under mental and psychological control as eloquently argued by Gauri Viswanathan in her essay “The Beginnings of English Literary Study in British India.” As Viswanathan recounts, the British administrators of India hoped to promote British interests through instructing the Indians of the superiority of “Western literary knowledge” (1995: 435). In her book aptly titled *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (1989), Viswanathan very interestingly argues that the institutionalization of English literary study coincides with the British colonization of India, and this kind of study actually saw its beginnings in India rather than England. She goes on to effectively show how indeed English literary study in India is a “mask of conquest,” which the colonizer used to gain the “consent” of the colonized as can be seen in a minute issued by J. Farish in the Bombay Presidency:

> The Natives must either be kept down by a sense of our power, or they must willingly submit from a conviction that we are more wise, more just, more humane, and more anxious to improve their condition than any other rulers they could possibly have. (Quoted in Viswanathan 1989: 2)

Thus, the superiority of the colonizer and inferiority of the colonized is the first given in this equation that relies heavily upon a carefully selected educational program, which would eventually lead to the colonized’s “consent,” and this acceptance (to be ruled) would render forceful conquest unnecessary as a result of the more peaceful mask of conquest through “education.” The colonizer sets himself up as the bearer of civilization, and more recently freedom and democracy, and this would “justify” the imperialist project past and present. The imperialist’s military might can only be effective if it is accompanied by an acculturation campaign whereby the “native” is taught about the Westerner’s superior values, and this is especially disquieting when these “superior” values are fiercely defended by “natives” such as Naipaul and Ibn Warraq, thus supposedly giving more credence to the colonizer’s civilizing missions, freedom wars and democracy spreading military campaigns. The “native” must learn about the European’s (and, of course, more recently, the American’s) superior literature, culture and values—this indeed must become part and parcel of his very being, his common sense reality. Isn’t this, after all, the aim behind English literature departments and American studies centers at universities in many “postcolonial,” or specifically Arab nations (which are not “postcolonial” in any sense)? These departments seem to reinforce the work of “area studies” departments at American universities, which as Said points out, are “affiliated to the mechanism by which national [American] policy is set” (1997:
The individual “area expert” is not really free to work on independent research projects because he/she will inevitably be caught in a “network of government, corporate, and foreign policy associations [whereby] funding would be affected, the kind of people met would also be affected, and in general, certain rewards and types of interaction would be offered” (ibid.). Thus, the “area expert” needs to respond to all of these givens in order to receive the kind of funding that would enable his/her academic survival and relevance.

After all has been said and done, and after all the critics and dismantlers of Said’s work have had their say, it is Said’s thesis of the “affiliation of knowledge with power” that in reality is a much more plausible and realistically applicable thesis than the refutations of Said’s detractors, some whose criticisms have taken a rather personal turn, as in the piece in Commentary in 1999 that discussed Said’s pre-1948 family home in West Jerusalem, which Justus Weiner argued belonged to Said’s grandfather, then paternal aunt, not to Said’s father or what school Said did or did not attend in Jerusalem as if that were enough to discredit Said’s thesis or even his Palestinian birth, roots and experience, and more significantly Palestinian history as a whole because as Weiner and his backers hope if you discredit the spokesman, then you discredit the cause. Said’s thesis, however, most poignantly shows how winning Iraqi or any colonized peoples’ “hearts and minds” or “confidence and cooperation” or Gramsci’s notion of “consent” involves more than subjecting the “natives” to the thrilling after effects of “shock and awe.” Experts on the Arab world and Islam, such as Bernard Lewis and Fouad Ajami, as Said points out, helped American policy makers decipher the “Arab mind” (2003), setting the stage for America’s “Operation Iraqi Freedom.” America’s “freedom wars,” however, did not catch fire in the Arab world; it was rather Tunisia’s Mohammed Bouazizi’s flame which sparked the revolutionary fire across the Arab world, and the fire keeps spreading by the day. Thus, it seems that all of the area studies’ departments in the US and elsewhere in the Western world, think tanks and similar institutions and all the Orientalist minds put together along with all the intelligence departments throughout the Western world were not able to predict the revolutionary fire spreading across the Arab world today. Unfortunately, however, the initial revolutionary fervor of these uprisings seems to have been absorbed and appropriated by the West and Arab reactionary regimes, allowing for a counter-revolutionary tide to settle in, backed by the financial support of Arab Gulf dollars.

The interesting point to make here, however, is that when the dust begins to settle, the weakening of Western influence in the Arab world may not come, as Bernard Lewis and other experts claim, from militant Islam and Al Qaeda dogma, which is currently being peddled by Western backed Arab reactionary forces, but from mass grassroots movements that reject these Western protected and other self-serving dictatorships, which mistakenly believed that they had to serve and
maintain Western and Israeli interests rather than their own populations’ interests. Thus, the Arab masses are reacting to years of oppression, dictatorship and tyranny, torture, the lack of basic human rights and corruption in what Rami Khoury has called “The Arab Awakening” (2011), and not to, as Bernard Lewis explained in his “Roots of Muslim Rage,” “an ancient rival against our ‘Judeo-Christian’ heritage, our secular present, and the worldwide expansion of both” (1990). The Arab people are angry with Western governments for what they have historically done in the Arab world—for their policies, not their Judeo-Christian heritage. Lewis speaks of the Muslims’ “irrational” reaction in the same way that Forster presents us with the irrational Aziz and Ibn Warraq posits a rational West against an irrational East. It seems that rationalism is a possession of the West, and any reaction of the non-West is insidiously irrational. According to such a hypothesis, twenty-first century Arab anger should have its roots in the seventh century, or is perhaps a genetic disposition of the “Arab-Islamic” mind (as is still being studied and written about today, see Are Muslims Distinctive?), and not a result of more recent historical events that have indeed greatly impacted the modern Arab world, such as the dispossession of the Palestinian people, Western imperialism and support for Arab tyrants, who would, in turn, “protect” Western interests while they crackdown on their own people and deny them all kinds of human rights and freedoms. As has been made vividly clear in this post-Bouazizi Arab world, these experts, in fact, did not provide accurate, well meaning and well intentioned analysis of the Arab world; they continued to do what they were meant to do—construct discourses, dogmas, images which would become America’s “wars on terror.” This makes such experts or Orientalists not only accomplices in the imperialistic enterprise, but the enablers, making the whole endeavor possible.

As Said pointed out in an article which he penned just two months before his death, without the construction of the “traditional Orientalist dogma” of the other’s supposed lack of appreciation of Western values (of which Ibn Warraq is very fond), the war on Iraq could not have been possible. After brute force or “shock and awe” is over, winning Iraqi consent or “hearts and minds” involves the cooperative venture of “experts,” such as Orientalists, “private contractors and eager entrepreneurs to whom shall be confided everything from the writing of textbooks and the constitution to the refashioning of Iraqi political life and its oil industry” (2003). The “traditional Orientalist dogma,” of which Said speaks, blurs the history, beliefs and reality of the other, and does not lead to a true understanding between peoples and cultures; instead we get a perpetuation of an imperialistic discourse of the higher moral values of the white man, which is, perhaps, best illustrated by Bush, who famously asked, “Why do they hate us?” and more infamously answered, “They hate our freedoms—our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote…. (2001). Bush’s 2001 speech, which emphasizes Muslim hate for Western freedom...
and democracy, still resonates in David Cameron’s more “sympathetic,” but equally racist 2011 comments about the post-Bouazizi Arab world:

Britain has been guilty of a prejudice bordering on racism for believing that Muslims cannot manage democracy, David Cameron will say…. the Prime Minister will abandon decades of so-called “camel corps” diplomacy by saying Britain was wrong to prop up “highly controlling regimes” as a way of ensuring stability. (Watt, 2011)

We are to believe that Cameron now believes that Muslims (notice the strategy of “lumping”) can now probably manage democracy. How would it sound if a Muslim leader says or implies that Christians can now manage democracy? Is democracy a Christian teaching? The over a billion and a half Muslims in the world today (of course, as we are led to believe, Muslims comprise one unit) can now manage democracy, as Cameron has now suddenly realized. Cameron’s statement, however, is more than just racist. It presupposes that the main motivation behind imperialism is the amelioration of the native, a “mission civilisatrice,” but the colonizer was not there because the natives of these lands could not manage democracy or rule themselves; imperialism has always been about power and interest. This twenty-first century political discourse about democracy, is, in fact, rather similar to Forster’s early twentieth century literary discourse, as we find on the first page of his novel, A Passage to India in his description of the city of Chandrapore: “nor was it ever democratic” (1924: 31), and it is, in fact, Forster’s representation of India as never having been democratic that is important here. The survival of this discourse depends on this pivotal link between politics, scholarship and literature, whose combined force resonates in all fields of study and serves the purpose of power, an idea which is at the core of all of Said’s work, and which Terry Eagleton believes “was basically right….[since] [t]he west’s denigration of the east has always gone with imperialist incursions into its terrain” (2006).

Genuine, well meaning scholarship which would lead to a more “truthful” understanding of the past and present of peoples and nations entails, as Vaclav Havel suggests, “what’s happening under the surface of the society” (2011). The experts studying the Arab/Islamic world, for example, were wrong about what is really happening under the surface because, as Havel believes, they were more concerned with power and material interests: “And as long as the economic interests will be superior to human interests and the interests of human rights, the development of this civilization won’t be good” (ibid.). What, for example, can one understand from the following words written by Benjamin R. Barber, “a senior fellow at Demos, a New York-based think tank focused on the theory and practice of democracy,” about Libya’s Gaddafi:

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This partner possesses vital sulfur-free gas and oil resources, a pristine Mediterranean shoreline, a non-Islamist Muslim population, and intelligence capacities crucial to the war on terrorism. (2007)

Is Barber more interested in democracy in Libya or is his discourse more clearly tied to power and interests? Libya, for Barber, translates into oil, not to mention the “pristine Mediterranean shoreline,” which Westerners can use for their exotic retreats. Add to this Libya’s “non-Islamist Muslim population,” a very interesting classification in itself. Whole Arab populations can now be conveniently classified as “Islamist” and “non-Islamist,” and experts like Barber can help to categorize people in this way. This piece of information, for example, can be used in later dealing “appropriately” with Islamist and non-Islamist Muslim populations. Gaddafi’s “intelligence capacities” would also help bolster the language (and action) of the “war on terrorism,” a discourse put in place by experts, such as Barber, who represent the “think tank” infrastructure of policy makers. One cannot survive without the other. To deny that Orientalist representation whether in literature, Oriental studies, history and politics is contaminated by power and interest is to deny the reality of imperialism and its machinery, where power, position and material interests have always come first masked by Joseph Conrad’s “unselfish belief in the idea… [which] you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to” (1902: 32), Britain’s and France’s twentieth century “mission civilisatrice” and America’s and the Allies’ twenty-first century “freedom” and “democracy” agenda and wars on terrorism. Orientalism’s imperialist connection is a clear and potent message behind Said’s work. It is not really about the isolated example here and there that would “disprove” Said’s thesis of the power motive behind this discourse in all fields of study. Imperialism and its discourse have been especially pronounced in the Arab world, where oil has proven to be more of a curse than a blessing.

Countering Said’s thesis translates into an unwillingness to address the “truth of Orientalism’s political origin,” and this resistance is, as Said has perceptively diagnosed, “richly symptomatic of precisely what is denied” (1985: 91). This stance does not allow for a genuine understanding of the past and present of those dispossessed peoples who have been victimized by history and who are still suffering the consequences of historical processes and conspiracies. The victimized, in many cases, are represented as irrational, fanatical terrorists without a cause or history. An appropriate response to Said involves a positive radical shift in thought that would dispose of the expert of Oriental or area studies, and bring about the birth of the intellectual who Said defines as:

an individual with a specific public role in society….whose raison d’être is to represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug. The intellectual does so on the basis of universal principles: that all human beings are entitled
to expect decent standards of behavior concerning freedom and justice from worldly powers or nations, and that deliberate or inadvertent violations of these standards need to be testified and fought courageously. (1994: 9)

This intellectual humanist position inevitably entails a disengagement from existing power structures, which aim to stifle the truth that the intellectual must speak “in the face of power,” as Neil Lazarus states in his elucidation of Said’s often quoted phrase “speaking truth to power” (2005: 120). Power, in this equation, already knows the truth; thus power is not the addressee here. The intellectual must take it upon herself/himself to become the voice of the voiceless, to work for the oppressed, allowing for their erased histories and silenced voices to be heard. As Lazarus explains, Said’s intellectual is autonomous in terms of being free from any attachments to power structures, but at the same time committed to speaking on “behalf of those who need or request representation coupled with the aptitude for and acquisition of the ‘art of representing’” (ibid.: 117). The work of the expert (who speaks in the name of power) is inevitably linked to that of the policy maker, and is diametrically opposed to the work of the intellectual humanist, who is more concerned with justice, rather than material interest, which has unfortunately been the driving force behind the rise and fall of empires in the East and West, past and present.

Said’s main contribution to literary and cultural theory revolves around his dual ability to deconstruct knowledge previously considered indestructible (Orientalism and Culture and Imperialism) before he is able to construct anew a homeland (After the Last Sky is a good example here), in Said’s particular case, a textual homeland of Palestine, which can be viewed as a symbol of universal human suffering, as Mustapha Marrouchi would have it (2004: 112). Thus, Said was actually not only writing back to the West, deconstructing imperialism, but he was also writing forward, constructing a homeland, in fact, in all directions, oppositionally, creating textual homelands in exile, which would act as a counternarrative before liberation, the counterpoint to imperialism, could be realized. What Said has given the world of literary and cultural theory is a new way of looking, or perhaps a question Marrouchi envisions Said’s work posing from the outset: “Have I made a whole world and led you through it toward a new comprehension of our life and time, maybe all human history?” (ibid.: 6)

References


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