

ORIENTALISM AND WESTERN ACADEMIA

AN INTRODUCTORY STUDY

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Abstract

The article discusses Orientalism in Islamic perspective and sees how this trend of writing has evolved through colonial and post-colonial era. It also discusses the influence of Orientalists in European and American academia in shaping Middle Eastern Studies and Near Eastern Studies departments. The article underscores the political and colonial dimensions of the whole movement of the Orientalist methodology that still dominates research in American universities. Relationship between Orientalist scholarship and political hegemony is also highlighted. Views of non-Western scholars such as Abdullah Laroui and Anwer Abdul Malek and Abdul Latif Tibawi against Orientalist scholarship reflects how politics of knowledge in the field of Islamic Studies has always been shadowed by prejudice, racism stereotyping and biases.

Keywords:

Islam, Orientalism, Western, scholarship, Middle East, Near East, political hegemony, Gibb, European, Edward Said.

In Western academia we come across two trends of writing on Islam and Muslim societies. One is the orientalist trend and the other non-orientalist. Orientalist trend is dominated by western discourse on Islam and Arabs saturated with pre - conceived biases and ideological distortions, whereas non-orientalist scholarship is grounded firmly in sound methods of research, is non-biased, non-polemical and is instrumental in promoting academic honesty.

The scholarship which reflects bias about the Muslim world in the East is termed as Islamic Orientalist scholarship. To understand the objectives behind this trend of scholarship a word on Orientalism is in order. For this Edward Said is referred to who in his ground breaking publication '*Orientalism*'(1979) gives three fold definition of Orientalism; a general definition, an academic definition and a historical definition. In its general meaning Orientalism is '*a style of thought based upon ontological and epistemological distinction made between the 'Orient' and the 'Occident'*'. Academically it means, '*Anyone who teaches, writes about or researches the Orient- and it applies whether a person is an anthropologist, sociologist, historian or a philologist- either in its specific or its general aspects, is an orientalist, and what he or she does is Orientalism.*' Historically speaking Said defines it as, '*a corporate institution for dealing with the Orient- by making statements about it, authorizing views about it, describing it, teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism is a western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient.*'(1)

In 1994 Edward Said wrote an afterword for his book '*Orientalism*'. In this afterword he says that Orientalism is a study of ways in which power, scholarship and imagination of a two hundred years old tradition in Europe and America viewed the Middle-Eastern Arabs and Islam. It would not be wrong to say that knowledge about Islam and the Orient used by colonial powers to justify their colonialism was derived from orientalist scholarship. By stating so, Said established strong parallels between colonialism and modern orientalist scholarship. Edward Said further writes in his seminal work that '*Orientalism is a politically constructed binary, a category of interpretation rooted in pre-conceived and historically constituted ideas about the 'Orient' as an 'Other'*'.(2)

According to Sachadina(3) "Orientalism" is an academic methodology which uses classical heritage of Islamic civilization, mostly textual, to analyze it philologically emphasizing "evolution" of ideas through borrowing and syncretic endeavors and prove that

nothing is “original” in Islamic civilization. It was Greek thought and Hellenism, as well as the *Jahiliya* literature that played a role in giving rise to Islamic culture.(4)

This article underscores the political and colonial dimensions of the whole movement of the orientalist methodology that still dominates research in the departments of Near Eastern and Middle Eastern Studies in European and American universities. In the contemporary or post-modern world this relationship of scholarship with political hegemony continues between the Area Studies scholars and government departments of Foreign Affairs. According to Said the aim of this scholarship is exploitation and aggression in Muslim world. This makes sense of the opposition demonstrated by non-western scholars towards Orientalism because they perceive it as a scholarship originating in an era of colonialism aimed at establishing power and control in the Orient.

The first wave of European colonization took place in early 15th century when Portuguese conquered Ceuta in 1415 C.E. and it continued until early 19th century when France invaded Algeria in 1830 C.E.(5) In this era Europeans colonized the Americas and created European colonies in India and Maritime Southeast Asia. During 16th and 17th centuries study of the Orient was an enduring feature of western learning. Europeans took keen interest in the study of Arabic language, Arabic literature, Arabic science and Islamic philosophy. Western world used this knowledge of the Orient to their advantage and to gain control over them. France and England controlled the East by making them believe that they are backward and uncivilized and it is only with the help of guidance and control of the West that they will lead to the path of progress and welfare. Western writers studied Far Eastern(6) and Near Eastern(7) societies based on certain assumptions and were successful in creating a unique stereotyped image of Arabs and Muslims. *‘Hence, the deep-rooted collective image in the Western minds about Arabs their culture and history has been largely relying on the representations which the orientalists provided throughout the years.’*(8) This body of literature concerning Islam and Arab culture written by the West was short of objectivity and loaded with misrepresentations.

The second phase of European colonization also known as New Imperialism was primarily focused on Africa and Asia. During this era classical Arabic texts were translated into European languages which were then analyzed, criticized and exploited by the European scholars against the Arabs and Islam. This wealth of information and

knowledge replicated by the West about the East is today termed as orientalist scholarship. This scholarship flourished under European Imperialism and reinforced essential differences between the Muslim World and Europe. The imperative framework within which this body of knowledge was shaped had an imprint of hostile encounters between the Muslims and the West.

There were three fundamental problems with the resultant academia. Firstly, European scholars engaged in limited and selective reading of the original Arabic texts. Secondly their studies focused on essentializing the cultural differences rather than minimizing it. Lastly the framework which guided these readings contained heavy bias against Arabs, Asians and Muslims. Britain and France produced leading orientalists during colonial era. Later this tradition was passed to the Germans and finally to Americans.

An Egyptian scholar Anwer Abdul Malek sees a close connection between the colonizers and orientalists and Abdullah Laroui (b. 1933), one of Morocco's leading intellectuals in contemporary era is well known for his critique on orientalist scholarship. He criticized orientalists for showing sympathy for Muslim tradition. He criticizes leading orientalists Lewis (b.1916), Gibb (d.1971) and Smith (d.1894) and those who followed them. Abdullah Laroui's first critique on Orientalism, *'The Ideology of Contemporary Arabs'* explains that Orientalism is not Western because it predominates countries of the West, but because it shares common epistemological assumptions. The main divide in Laroui's view is neither religious affiliation nor mother tongue but the perspective chosen by the scholar. This is expressed in following words,

'Many Easterners will share Western values and therefore will be counted among Western Orientalists, while many Westerners will be doubtful of their own heritage and will be excluded from the congregation. Nationality, religion and mother tongue do not count as much as the perspective chosen by the writer.'(9)

Anglo-American Orientalist Tradition

In 1865 Foundation of Hartford Theological Seminary was laid down at Connecticut, USA, by a leading missionary scholar Samuel Zwemer where majority of experts on Islam were missionaries. The objective of their study of Islam was to find in Islam a truncated version of Christianity. In 1919 Henry Breasted, an American, established Oriental Institute at University of Chicago and in 1927

Princeton University started the Department of Islamic Near East headed by a Christian Arab Philip Hitti (1886-1979) who then started a program of 'Arabic and Islamic Studies' at Princeton, he introduced the field of 'Arab Culture Studies' to United States. This was the time when orientalist methodology shifted from philological approach to historical approach. Leading orientalists who adopted this methodology to study Islam were Ignac Goldziher and Joseph Schacht.

Duncan Macdonald (1863-1943) was the first expert on Islam in American academia. He is addressed as the father of the field of Islamic Studies in America. He studied Semitic languages at Glasgow and Berlin before teaching at Hartford Theological Seminary in U.S. He studied Muslim theology and believed that stories in '*One Thousand and One Nights*' reflected Muslim piety. Throughout his writings Macdonald seems to be essentializing the difference between an Oriental and Occidental mind. Macdonald was of the view that Muslim mind is unable to comprehend complexity. Hamilton Gibb the next most famous orientalist took Macdonald's axiom for granted and proceeded to explain why Muslim societies behaved in accordance with Macdonald's dictum.(10)

In early twentieth century American orientalist scholarship focused on the ancient Near East and showed less interest in Arabic and Islam. The trend in study changed from philological approach to social science research. But the problem was that not many scholars were trained in social science research studies. The first effort to study Middle East by adopting social science research technique was done by Gibb and Bowen. In 1930s Gibb and Harold Bowen were commissioned by London based Royal Institute for International Affairs to study Western impact on Middle East, as a result of their research they published two volumes on the nature of Islamic society titled, '*Islamic Society and the West: A Study of the Impact of Western Civilization on Moslem Culture in the Near East*'. These books provided blue print for the development of Middle Eastern Studies in US. Gibb succeeded Margoliouth as professor of Arabic and came to Harvard as visiting professor in 1950. He later became director of Harvard Center of Middle Eastern Studies and strongly proposed the adoption of social science research agenda.(11)

Joseph Schacht (1902-1969) a British-German professor of Arabic and Islam at Columbia University stands at the nexus of European, British and American orientalist scholarship. His focus was mainly Islamic law and Hadith literature and his two ground breaking

publications(12) raised huge controversy and debate between Muslims and orientalist. Schacht was born in Germany and moved to Britain during WW-II, taught at Oxford University in 1946 and was naturalized as British subject in 1947. He moved to Columbia University in 1959 and taught there till the end of his life.

Bernard Lewis (b.1916) a leading orientalist of contemporary era studied at University of Paris and SOAS London. He earned his name as British American historian, scholar in Oriental Studies, and professor emeritus of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University. Bernard Lewis is recognized for his phenomenal influence in policy circles but his influence in intellectual and academic field is minimal. His advice on Middle East is sought by policy makers of US administration. Edward Said characterized Lewis work as a prime example of Orientalism. He questioned scientific neutrality of Lewis' work on the Arab World and contends that:

'Lewis knowledge of the Middle East was so biased it could not be taken seriously and claimed 'Bernard Lewis hasn't set foot in the Middle East, in the Arab world, for at least 40 years. He knows something about Turkey, I'm told, but he knows nothing about the Arab world.'(13)

Bernard Lewis too acknowledges the academic weakness of Orientalism. To him, Orientalism has not emerged as a purely academic discipline. It has been devoid of scientific methods of investigation. European orientalists have been unable to overcome the language disability and build cultural bridges between East and West. But he differs from the post colonialists when he asserts that the backwardness of the Middle East is due to their religion and culture whereas according to the post-colonialists views the major problems of the region are political and economic under development due to 19th century European colonization. Bernard Lewis also exemplifies Said critique on the relationship of scholarship to power. In 2002, Lewis' ties to the US State Department were further exposed in his book *What Went Wrong?* Which explained 9/11 as the decline of Islamic Civilization. In it he warned *'that the suicide bomber may become a metaphor for the whole region.'*

Ahmad Jawad in his honors thesis *'The Great Orientalist Bernard Lewis'* critically analyzes his two recent books *'What Went Wrong'* and the *'Crisis of Islam'*. He contends that Lewis is not able to convey historical facts in an objective manner. The aim of historical study is to be able to observe the actions and reactions that made the world as it is today, and from these observations gain a better

understanding of other peoples, cultures, and belief systems in order to allow them to coexist in peace and harmony. Lewis's writing does not offer this understanding, rather, it drives his readers to see Arabs and Muslims as ancient opponents and in this way Lewis seeks to legitimize the policies and military campaigns of his benefactors, the influential men of power who seek what is arguably imperialistic control and hegemony in the Middle East.(14) Muhammad Samiei compares Lewis, Esposito and Kepel in his PhD dissertation (2009) in which he concludes that Lewis is a persistent follower of the old fashioned school of dualism.

'His dismissal of the diversity and dynamism of Islam, his reliance on historical evidence and his reluctance to look directly at modern Muslim societies, his exaggeration of the religious part of Muslim identity, his overestimation of radicalism and his discourse of rage, clash and fear, his positivist methodology with his self-assured objectivity: all of these elements are the heritage of his orientalist predecessors.'

University-based scholars such as, Gibb, Bowen, Schacht, Hitti and Lewis etc. who studied Islam in Europe and the United States came to be situated in departments or institutes of 'Oriental Studies' or 'Near Eastern Studies' or 'Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations' or some variant thereof, though others might work in departments or institutes focusing on art, history or even anthropology.

Orientalism in American Scholarship

By mid twentieth century that is after the World Wars and during Cold War era, Americans had started influencing the world politics in all its spheres so the orientalist tradition is dominated by American scholarship in the 20th century. Ahmad Dallal(15) writes that American academy accepted most of the European paradigms for the study of Islam. From the beginning of nineteenth century till the end of World War II America dominated the Orient and approached it as France and Britain once did but it is the British orientalist tradition that left the most lasting imprints on the American field of Islamic Studies.

Ford Foundation established the Foreign Area Fellowship program in 1951 and a Division of International Training and Research in 1952 with a mandate to establish university Area Studies Centers. In 1951, the SSRC (Social Science Research Council) initiated social science research on Middle East and five leading universities of US including Columbia, Princeton and Michigan established centers of Middle Eastern Studies. When US universities

established Middle Eastern Studies and Area Studies departments Gibb suggested that methodologies of social sciences should be adopted instead of philology to develop a better understanding of cultures. US universities were unable to find experts on Middle East who were trained in philology as well as social science research. As a result different area studies programs were headed by European orientalists all trained in philology and languages of the Orient and not in the disciple of the social science. (16) After the Second World War American policy makers identified the need of experts in languages and cultures of Middle East and Islam for intelligence and Foreign Service. At this time United States was projecting its role as super power and increasing its global involvement. The increased interest of US in Middle Eastern Studies and Islam overlapped with the growth of Area Studies in US. In 1958 National Defense Education Act (NDEA) was passed by Congress. The law provided large scale government funding for higher education, especially for Area Studies and languages. Area Studies in turn gave largest incentive to Middle Eastern Studies and Islamic Studies in US. The objective of area studies initiative was to apply social science methodology to understand the cultures and regions of the world. By comparison cumulative NDEA funding of area studies centers from 1959-1987 amounted to \$167 million of which \$ 22 million were allocated to Middle Eastern Studies. (17)

Gibb moved to Harvard University in 1955 where he directed the center for Middle Eastern Studies. Austrian orientalist Gustave Von Grunebaum (1909-1972) was appointed by UCLA in 1958. German scholar Frantz Rosenthal was hired by Yale in 1956 and Joseph Schacht (1902-1969) was hired by Columbia University. In 1960s gradually other universities started establishing centers of ME Studies. Thus the newly established centers of Middle Eastern Studies failed to apply methods of social sciences. Gibb suggested that there is a need to have the orientalists and social scientists work together, but sadly though the traditional orientalist approach was carried forward by American orientalists which treated Islam as an ahistorical monolith.

By 1996 Area Studies was under attack from scholars in several fields who in general argued that area studies had been an invention of the Cold War, reflected US political interests and Eurocentric prejudices, and now that Cold War was over ,the area studies has lost its rationale and value. Numerous charges were levied at area studies scholars such as imposition of national agendas through

scholarly writings. It was argued that the orientalists through their writings are denigrating other societies that have almost always been politically and economically subordinated.

There must be some truth in these charges as Michael Foucault says, ‘...that political power and position and the generation of knowledge are inevitably entwined’.(18)

Michael Edwards(19) says that politics of knowledge is ‘*how ideas are created, used and disseminated*’. Western interest in the field of Islamic studies and Muslim societies is closely linked with politics of knowledge. The dilemma is that the politics of knowledge in the field of Islamic Studies has always been shadowed by prejudice, racism stereotyping and biases. This trend is observed in the writings of seemingly learned scholars of the West when they write about Islam and the Muslim world. Professor Abdul Latif Tibawi(20) (1887-1973) in his critique on English Speaking Orientalists writes that contemporary orientalists in their desire to understand Islam in order to combat Muslims made it impossible for their indoctrinated students to have a positive view of Islam. He contends that it is actually western bias against Islamic societies which bars them from understanding of the Muslims.

References

- (1) Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Group, 2003) p.48.
- (2) Ibid.
- (3) Prof. Abdulaziz Sachadina, is currently teaching at George Mason University, USA, in the department of Religious Studies and is endowed IIIT Chair at its Washington D. C. office.
- (4) Professor Sachadina explains Orientalism in a lecture delivered at IIIT, Washington D.C. to participants of Winter Institute on January 15, 2014.
- (5) <http://medlibrary.org>, retrieved on June, 14, 2013
- (6) Far East includes regions of East Asia, South East Asia and Russian Far East.
- (7) Term Near East was coined from the Western perspective of European writers. The earliest use of Near East is dated 1856. In 1958, the State Department explained that the terms “Near East” and “Middle East” were interchangeable, and defined the region as including only Egypt, Syria, Israel, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Qatar. The first official use of the term “Middle East” by the United States government was in the 1957, which pertained to the Suez Crisis. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles defined the Middle East as “the area lying between and including Libya on the west and Pakistan on the east, Syria and Iraq on the North and the Arabian Peninsula to the south, plus the Sudan and Ethiopia.”

- (8) Tahir Ramdane and Merah Saud, 'Between Orientalists and Al-Jazeera: Image of Arabs in the West (Comparative Inquiry)' *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, Vol.1 No. 4, April 2011. p. 64.
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- (11) Ibid. p.12.
- (12) Schacht's ground breaking publications are '*Origins of Mohammadan Jurisprudence*' (1950) and '*An Introduction to Islamic Law*' (1964).
- (13) Edward Said, *Orientalism*.
- (14) Jawad, Ahmad, (2012). 'The Great Orientalist Bernard Lewis' Outstanding Honors Thesis Paper, University of South Florida, p. 108. Available at http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1107&context=honors_et
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- (19) Michael Edwards is a writer and activist based in upstate New York, and the editor of *Transformation*.
- (20) Dr. Abdul Latif Tibawi,(1910–1981) was a Palestinian historian and educationalist.

