

Critical Approaches to Orientalism

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The subject of Orientalism as a literary phenomenon has been focused on recently by creative writers all over the world. But not all those who write or wrote about Orientalism have the same understanding of it. Their views regarding Orientalism differ according to each one's background and ideologies. Hence, the researcher intends to categorize such views starting from the first critique of Anouar Abdel-Malek onward. From the various studies on Orientalism, it is observable that we can find three main categories dealing with the different attitudes or understanding of it. The first group is represented by Edward Said being the eminent critic of real negative attitude while the second group's representative is Dr. Mohammed Sharafuddin symbolizing the apparently positive attitude. On the other hand, there is Nigel Leask as one example of the critics of the justificatory attitude. The researcher agrees, to some extent, with Said's attitude since it is the most neutral and rational. However, he looks at the views of the critics belonging to the second and third groups as illogical and dangerous since they either justify or normalize the direct orientalist misconceptions of the Islamic East. Though those critics with their multiple views make the field of Orientalism much more complicated, this paper helps making the Critique of Orientalism somehow more organized and easier to observe and rationalize.

Key terms:

Orientalism, Anouar Abdel-Malek, Edward Said, Dr. Mohammed Sharafuddin, Nigel Leask, negative attitude, positive attitude, justificatory attitude

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Critique of Orientalism:

Orientalism is the major concept which writers and critics have heavily written and debated on. The first criticism of Orientalism emerged during the years of decolonization in the early 1960s during which the golden age of oriental criticism was established. Hubinette reveals that the assault on Orientalism was launched on three different fronts. The first critique came from Anouar Abdel-Malek's article "Orientalism in Crisis" (1962) in which he investigates the reasons of this crisis. He illuminates that the emergence and victories achieved by anti-colonial and national liberation movements in Asia encourage orientalists to write about Orientalism making such crises worse and deeper. The main reason of this crisis can be traced back to the intimate relationship between the orientalist scholars and the colonial powers which in turn makes the process of colonization easier and more effective.

According to Hubinette, two years after Abdel-Malek's article, the Palestinian historian A. L. Tibawi published his article "English-Speaking Orientalists" to explicitly criticize the way orientalists had portrayed Islam and the Arab world. As a continuation of this critique, he published "A Second critique of English-Speaking Orientalists" in 1979. He displays how contemporary orientalists after the Western power in Arabic countries had eclipsed. "Driven by the desire to

understand Islam as a means of combating the Muslims, [those orientalists] caused 'colossal failures' among their indoctrinated students and made it impossible for a Western scholar to adopt a fresh point of view of Islam” (Hübinette 75).

In 1978, the third critique came in with the Palestinian literary historian, Edward Said, at Columbia University in New York. He was the first to present Orientalism with its real negative connotations. He, as Hubinette argues, “managed to wage a frontal attack on Orientalism as a cumulative and hegemonic discourse in his pioneering work *Orientalism*” (75). For Said, the Orient is the West’s eternal Other over which it can always spread its power and domination. On the other hand, “Orientalism is a discourse that has survived and been able to reproduce itself for centuries, resulting in catastrophic consequences for the victims, the Asians themselves” (Said, *Orientalism* 3).

Said argues that the relationship between the West and the East has never been equal as the West conquered, colonized and exploited the lands and minds of the East. The Orient and Occident work as oppositional terms since the Orient is constructed as a negative inversion of the Western culture. Generally speaking, Hamed Kazemzadeh (2019) assures that Orientalism, as a book and a theory, is still working in the general atmosphere with new social and political phenomena. Even though the book was released in the 1970s, it is widely considered as a controversial book for recent M.A students and all types of readers since it brings up serious issues in the mind of any person.

After Said's different attempts to display the relationships of power between the Western colonizer and the Eastern colonized, numerous works have studied the different kinds of Western Orientalism from which many Eastern countries and cultures suffered. Critics have published many volumes debating and criticizing Orientalism as a literary concept and a political problem. Hence, they vary in their outcomes as some support and encourage such negative concepts, while others criticize, revolt and deny them.

Critical Approaches to Orientalism:

Recent Orientalism becomes a very broad term holding many different approaches and interpretations. Amongst the overlapping ideas regarding the real nature, implications and effects of Orientalism, theorists, critics and writers' interests have been increasing and disputing over time. They have discussed, analyzed and interpreted such a serious concept differently according to each one's background, ideology and interests. This paper, however, represents such different critics in three different groups according to the way they literarily perceive and present Orientalism. On one hand, there is Edward Said being the eminent critic of real negative attitude and Dr. Mohammed Sharafuddin representing the apparently positive attitude. On the other hand, there is Nigel Leask as one example of the critics of the justificatory attitude.

The Negative Attitude:

This group is represented by Edward Said and his way of dealing with Orientalism. Said, who died on 25 September 2003, is best known for his enormously influential works and post-colonial studies. He was full of formidable energy abounding in all areas that interested him;

literature, politics, music, history, philosophy, film, and much else. He was born in Jerusalem in 1935, and moved to Egypt with his family at the time of partition in 1947. He attended the secondary school in the *United States* and took his first degree at Princeton. He went on to receive a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature at Harvard. From 1963 until his death, he taught at Columbia University getting many awards including the Lionel Trilling for his second book, *Beginnings* (1975).

According to Michael Wood (2006), Said was a member of the Palestinian National Council from the late 1970s until 1991. He helped to bring about the formation of the Palestinian National Initiative founded in 2002 as a democratic opposition movement to the Palestinian politics. He was often attacked in the British and American press for his stance on Palestine. He often insisted that it was the “intellectual’s task to ‘speak truth to power’, and he did that so fearlessly and tirelessly, whatever the power in question was” (198).

Said had established himself as an undisputed world-class cultural and political theorist through his insistence on the importance of ‘worldliness’ presenting the relationship between culture and imperialism. He argues that we cannot really understand the power and the pervasiveness of imperialism unless we have understood the importance of culture. Culture is the power which changes the colonized's view of the world without the colonizer's need to resort to full-fledged military control. He strongly confirms that “adopting 'the politics of blame' approach, including condemning and rejecting the colonizer and blaming the colonized/victims, as a strategy of resistance is backward-looking and self-defeating” (qtd in Baharuddin iii).

It is true that Edward Said has not been the first to have written and criticized Western Orientalism, as he himself admits in his article “Orientalism Reconsidered.” However, he, by most accounts, revolutionizes the literary field and lays the ground for postcolonial theory creating an unprecedented dispute in the Academic circles in the West and East alike. Lutfi Hamadi (2014) professes that *The Economist* states that Said's *Orientalism* has been translated into tens of languages and become a foundation text for a great deal of post-colonial studies (40).

In *Orientalism*, Said speaks about the false images of the Orient, or the East, that have been fabricated by Western explorers, poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, and imperialists since Napoleon's occupation of Egypt in 1798. Those images have shown the Orient as the primitive entity and uncivilized Other, creating it as the opposite of the advanced and civilized West. This discourse reflects the real nature of those orientalists who are solely slaves for the imperial and political interests of their nations

Said considers Orientalism as “a style of thought that is based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between the Orient and the Occident” (2). He believes that such a discourse has been used either as a preparation or a justification for the Western military clashes and colonization on the Orient. It is quite misleading to think that such horrors have stopped with the end of direct colonization, they rather become much more devastating. Said believes that “the consequences of colonialism are still persisting in the form of chaos, coups, corruption, civil wars, and bloodshed, which pervade

many of these countries, mainly because of the residues of colonization” (Hamadi 39).

In this respect, Said thinks that the West, as the powerful colonizer, has imposed its own language and culture on the East being the weak colonized. Thus, the culture, history, values, and languages of the oriental peoples, the Middle East, have been neglected and even distorted by the colonialists for the sake of dominating these peoples, exploiting their wealth and colonizing their lands and minds in the name of elevating civilizing, and even humanizing them. A clear example of this is shown in the way the colonial texts have depicted the Indians, the Egyptians, the Palestinians, the Latin Americans, and many people as being almost the same. No matter if they are different in reality, they are all called Orientals, others or the entities which are always in opposition with ‘Us’, the Occidentals.

Said emphasizes the relationship between Orientalism and the critics' political and imperial interests. The orientalist never represent Islam and Arabs truthfully. Consequently, they prove themselves as typical products of their imperial culture. They disfigure the Orient by giving it a new frame and content that has no relationship with its real structure. They never have the intention to show the real identity of the Orient or find a possibility to bridge the gap established earlier between the Orient and the Occident. However, they subject their intellectual gifts to serve their imperial country and its biased politics, culture and literature. Orientalism is simply a mere process of falsification and misconceptions of the Orient based on the political interests of the Occident.

To discover such misconceptions and bring them to the surface, a fair scholar has to understand the orientalists' historical background. Hence, it would be easy to find that all those distorted images and fabrications about the East would be rooted in the political, imperial, cultural or colonial interests rather than the personal ones. According to Said, the orientalists aim at managing, dominating and controlling the Orient using a morally superior racist, imperialist and ethnocentric perspective. Similarly, the researcher clarifies that all the orientalists' attempts are considered as a plan to create a new Middle East with a religion, history and type of people that make the inferiority and aggressive attack in their writing reasonable and their control over them implacable though they only depend on an assumed affinity between reality and their literary production.

This paper provides many critics to support Said's views, including Said Abdul-Wahed, Partha Chatterjee and Kana Kabbani. They all show how the Western writers untruthfully project the East and present it within a frame they themselves draw its structure for their own good and interests. In *Orientalism and Romanticism*, Abdul-Wahed (1992) reveals the orientalists' deliberate ignorance and inauthentic apprehension of Islam as a different religion and Arabs as a separate nation. The West, particularly the Romantics, fell in the same trap of their forebears while underestimating Islam, stressing its inferiority and inserting misconceptions and distortions in their work. Like Said, Abdul-Wahed believes that they all were driven by their imperial and colonial interests since superiority and domination cannot be achieved without showing such differences that can directly shape the

Westerners' feelings towards Muslim Arabs, feelings which are full of hatred, fear and rejection of anything related to the Islamic East Orient.

Similarly, Chatterjee (1992) and Kabbani (1993) argue that the West would go to any extent just to prove its authority over the East. The Middle East, therefore, is connected to extreme lascivious sensuality and inherent violence in the orientalist works. The translations of the *Vathek* (1786), and *The Arabian Nights* the concepts presented in relation to harem, the roles of the Islamic characters and Voltair's plays *Mohamet the Prophet* and *Fanaticism* (1741) are few examples of such deliberate misrepresentations of the real identity of the Orient.

Voltair, for instance, subjects his eloquence to disfigure Islam, its prophet and adherents. In her thesis *Pseudo-Orientalism*, Alnaqeeb (2018) points out that he represents Islam negatively in his plays. Such negative projections and misconceptions of Muhammad (PBUH) can be grounded into two categories: religious and political. While the latter is shown through viewing him as “a legislator who brought his contemporaries out of idolatry, the former presents him as a prophet like the others, who exploits people’s naivety and spreads superstition and fanaticism” (13). This false representation affects the image of Islam in literature that is supposed to be free from any religious or cultural pressure or bias.

There are many other critics who view Orientalism not only as negative but also unfair in dealing with everything related to the Orient. The French writer Bernard Lewis (1993), for example, is concerned with the position of Islam in the mentality of the West throughout history. For him, all the European efforts to talk about any

idea related to Islam cannot be driven by anything but prejudice and directed only to protect Christians from Muslims' blandishments and converting those Muslims to Christianity instead. Mutahar remarks that they look at Islam, its prophet and the Holy Quran as polemic in purpose and scurrilous in tone.

Jalal-Uddin Khan, Caroline Franklin, Peter Kiston, Tony Ballantny, Sadik Jalal and Mathew Scott are also critics whose views have been clear examples of the negative attitude of Orientalism. They all agree that almost all the orientalists were and still are motivated by their imperial, political, colonial and national duties towards their nations in order to make the process of their superiority, domination and occupation much more successful and lasting. Others, like Rana Haider, think that such distortions and prejudice are the results of the way the Western writers deal with the East since they count on their fertile perverted imagination rather than authentic observation.

For the orientalists in this group, the West always considers the East as only a means to make its superiority and domination much more effective and eternal. The East, as Daniell Sered (2005) further explains, is only "constructed in and by relation to the West. It is a mirror image of what is inferior and alien to the West" (1). In short, Orientalism for those orientalists can be defined in Bouag's words as "a cultural enterprise that has produced a wide-ranging wealth of knowledge about an orient that has been represented as an undifferentiated entity with despotism, cruelty or even sensuality being as its main attributes" (iii).

The Positive Attitude:

This paper also presents the critics of the second group with their imaginary positive views regarding Orientalism in general and the content of the oriental works in part. Unlike the first group, the members of this group believe that Orientalism and Orientalists provide a crucial help and take an important role in the advancement and development of the Islamic East as a nation and Orientalism as a literary phenomenon. They claim that the Orient would not have been known without the great efforts of those orientalists.

Dr. Mohammed Sharafuddin (1994) belongs to this group and he is known for his claim of the existence of Realistic Orientalism. In *Islam and Romantic Orientalism: Literary Encounter with the Orient*, Sharafuddin rejects the whole idea of negative Orientalism presented by the critics of the first group as being unrealistic and purely political. For him, Orientalism has much more benefits which such critics ignore for the sake of proving their views and improving their positions in their countries. They create a kind of 'Anti-Orientalism' which is far away from the realistic one which Sharafuddin believes in and calls for. He states that realistic Orientalism "permeated British Romantic representations of the Islamic world, making gradual advance towards true understanding and sympathy with the Orient" (xviii).

The Romantic writers, who are the main concern of his view, tried to get rid of the fabrications and false images of the East depicted by their ancestors. Unlike Said, Sharafuddin looks at the orientalist works from different angles ignoring any negative imperial aspects found there. He believes that there is a genuine interest of the Romantic orientalists in discovering and depicting the real East truthfully. Generally, Sharafuddin asserts that the Romantic movement appeared

as resistance to the massive despotism and reaction against political and cultural centralization.

In fact, Said's views are on the end of the scale of Orientalism as a concept while Sharafuddin's are on the other end. Unlike Said who thinks that the Romantic orientalists were mere prisoners of their political, imperial and cultural ideologies, Sharafuddin argues that they had their own innovative tendencies away from any dogmatic conventions or colonial connections. He criticizes the critics who negatively affect the minds of the Eastern readers convincing them that the orientalists are only prisoners of a dogmatic view from which they can neither free themselves nor reform their own ideas. They turn those critics into what Sharafuddin describes as products of their own cultural and social milieus. However, they differentially rebelled against their age's prejudice and blindness towards other cultures; the fact that many critics including Said could not observe. He further adds that literature has wider and much more important purposes, yet those critics make it only a mere mirror of their social and political tendencies by considering all orientalist works purely negative.

Sharafuddin asserts that the different orientalist works can provide fair evidence that the Romantics' aim was positive in nature since they opened their imagination to develop their poetic careers and add a new poetic dimension to their writings. They looked at the translation of texts like the Holy Quran by George Sale (1734), Antoine Galland's (1704-17) translation of *The Arabian Nights* and William Beckford's (1786) *Vathek* as the main sources from which they could acquire authentic knowledge about Islam, Muslims and the culture of the Middle East. Sharafuddin states that such works helped them in

preparing the path towards a more authentic perception of alternative cultural realities and social identities.

Looking at Said and Sharafuddin's views, it becomes clear how much they differ and contradict each other. They both agree on the change in presenting the East in orientalist works during the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries. However, they look at it differently. Said sees such a change negatively while Sharafuddin thinks that it was authentic and positive. Sharafuddin's problem is not in claiming the existence of Realistic Orientalism but in the examples he uses to prove his belief as they all prove Said's claims of negative Orientalism. No doubt that Sharafuddin tries to bridge the gap between the East and the West, but he does this on the account of the East.

Al-Mousawi and Windschuttle (1999) are other critics believing in what is called positive Orientalism. Al-Mousawi supports Sharafuddin's questionable views, yet he denies any political role in the orientalist works as they are completely positive and they genuinely show a sense of development in the field of Orientalism. He feels really proud of any orientalist effort irrespective of its nature and source since those Romantic orientalists took their knowledge from authentic resources including the imaginary work of *The Arabian Nights*. For the critics of this group, such questionable sources heavily influenced many Romantic writers such as Beckford, Byron and Shelley. They, as Al-Mousawi thinks, helped in producing genuine oriental works free from any kind of distortion of the Islamic image. William Beckford's *Vathek* is an example supporting his claim though, in fact, it is a typical example of the misconceptions and fabrication of the East as a nation and religion.

Windschuttle opposes Said's perspectives about the presence of imperialism in the orientalist works. Even if there is any, he thinks that critics have to accept it as the ends justify the means. He believes that there is no sign of prejudice in orientalist works during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as such works were one of the first attempts within European scholarship that aimed at rejecting such inherited prejudices and enlightening the Western minds. He contradicts all the studies of critics of negative Orientalism because he believes that all the orientalist works are positive as long as there is an interest irrespective of its type, nature and content.

In short, the critics of this group have never seen the gap perceived by Edward Said between Orientalism as a literary phenomenon and the real Orient; all orientalist works are positive regardless of their nature, interests and consequences. Thus, the researcher argues that it is this group's belief that has led to the inaccurate facts and distorted images found nowadays within the field of neo-Orientalism.

The Justificatory Attitude:

The researcher explores the writers and critics belonging to the third group with their extremely unreasonable opinions in defending Orientalism as being purely positive in spite of all its accompanied distortions and fabrications. Unlike the first and second groups, the critics of this group admit the existence of misconceptions and inferiority of the Middle East in orientalist works, yet they believe that they have strong reasons to justify such attitudes. For them, orientalists, more specifically the Romantics, provide positive Orientalism though it shows negative aspects. They have so-called genuine pre-texts that only help in disfiguring the Orient and make such misconceptions

reasonable. Obviously, the ideology of this group is considered as a real source of danger for the field of literary criticism. Definitely, their views hurt and lead to destroy the field of Orientalism rather than to explore its dimensions. They aim at justifying the misuse of Orientalism by providing weak and unacceptable excuses behind its domination, imperialism and colonialism over the Middle East, in particular.

The critics of this group agree on the positive ideology towards Orientalism, however, they differ in the excuses given. Some believe that the contact between cultures is the reason behind such distortions as being an inevitable normal literary phenomenon. Others look at those distortions as a mechanism of defense which reflects the Western fear of the Orient as being a real threat and dangerous enemy. Obviously, the excuse given by such critics regarding those orientalists is a clear way of “asserting the superiority of their Empire and culture while presenting the East [which] was considered as a significant part of their national duty as British intellectual writers” (34).

Like Said, Nigel Leask (1992) does not deny the strong relationship between the knowledge about the East and the history of the Western colonial power. However, he thinks that the negativity presented in orientalist works is legitimate being a natural reflection of their Western anxiety and fear towards the Orient. It is only a manner in which they “consciously or unconsciously articulated their anxieties about the other” (2). Thus, the deliberate misconceptions of the religion and culture of the other is a predictable reaction of the fear of the external world; the fear of being mastered by the other. So, they expose it in their literary work showing their imperial attitude toward the other

because “in the scale of nations, She [their country] is then, the greatest in the world” (155). It is a national duty which they, as intellectual writers, have to present in their work defending their nation, religion and culture, and affirming their superiority over the whole world, not only the East.

Naji Oueijan (2000) is also an example of the members of the justificatory group. He argues against the existence of false Orientalism and believes that all literary works in the field of Orientalism are pure and authentic. For him, Orientalists should be thanked for presenting Islam regardless of the nature and content of their works. Byron and Beckford, for example, helped in developing the field of Orientalism depicting the reality of Islam and Muslims. They did show a sense of “determination to explore the mysteries of existing yet obscure realities of the East” (6).

Not only does Oueijan admit the existence of distortions in orientalist works but also defends them as being true as long as Orientalism is still developing and lasting. For Oueijan, Orientalism “could not have lasted long and developed had it been built only upon falsification and distortion” (2). It was driven only by their imagination in order to establish a scholarly authentic attitude towards the East devoid of any of the traditional Western conventions.

Emily Haddad (2002) is known by her view of pedagogy in pleasure. She emphasizes the importance of the presence of the Orient, especially the Islamic Middle East, in the orientalist works as a kind of poetic development. In her *Orientalist Poetics*, she looks at the conventional associations of Islam with tyranny, slavery, and violence

and their vehicles of religion and sexism in the English writings as a pedagogical means used to instruct the English reader regardless of the misconceptions and degradations involved. She wants the Eastern readers to feel sympathy with such orientalists as they do not aim at disfiguring the Orient, they rather have a noble mission which is to show pedagogy through literature. She argues that the ends justify the means.

In her article "Orientalism: A Critique," Tripta Wahi (1996) naturalizes any misconceptions of the East found in orientalist works. She finds the distorted images of the East predictable and normal because it is the only way Europe could see all other low nations, not only the Islamic East. "The Asians, the Africans, the people of the West Indies, the Red Indians, the Aborigines of Australia" have been all considered inferior, savage and backward (5). So, it is a predictable reaction driven by the desire to help the 'Other' who is in need for a superior force to control, educate and develop it.

Wahi, in a weak argument, puts India as an example of a low nation that is positively represented in the nineteenth century out of its own identity because of the British conquest which started India's industrial development. For her, this kind of prejudice included even the lower classes in Britain itself, women of their own race for example, not only other nations. Thus, the East should be proud and critics have to look at the sense of degradation in the orientalist works as a normal phenomenon since it is not only related to them but to other nations and groups as well.

Saree Makdisi (2009) is another member believing in the perspective of this group. He also looks at the strong sense of inferiority associated with the Islamic East in the Romantic era as natural being the result of the process of modernization of England at that time. Makdisi announces that Britain felt threatened by the “regions now becoming seen as peripheral to the center of modernity” (201). It could not define itself in relation to itself. However, it proved its modernity and superiority through oppositions with the Middle East as it was the only other against which it would expand its imperialism and domination. He is criticized by many including the researcher as having the right to be modern does not give the right to empty the other from its real identity and depict it despisingly.

Focusing on the person rather than knowledge is how Martin Bright (2004) defends his views on Orientalism in *Edward Said's Out of Place: A Memoir: A Book Review*. He accuses Said, of the Palestinian origin, as being a prisoner of his personal sufferings and a victim of imperialism inside and outside his home. For example, “his parents had very little confidence in him and maintained strict control over everything he did” (Bright 8). Hence, Bright considers Said's books as a natural reflection of the imperialism he personally suffered from as a child, scholar and refugee. Having no stability in his life, living in Cairo as a child, moving to Lebanon as a youth and to the *US* as a scholar, Said found it difficult to adapt to the American society and develop his own identity, the thing which has led to his negative attitudes towards literary works in Orientalism. Therefore, Bright concludes that Said's views cannot be generalized as they just reflect his own personality and experience. Bright's view cannot be taken into

account because he focuses on the person rather than his realistic ideas. He aims at proving Said's complexity not the invalidity of his ideas. He, therefore, offers no benefit to the field of Orientalism as such evidences are not valid or reasonable.

Orientalism, for this group, is seen as a kind of intellectual authority used by the West to control the strange other and dominate its mind and land under the pretext of educating, civilizing and humanizing it. These critics can no longer bury their ancestors' imperial and political interests which are crystal clear in their work. Hence, they start searching for suitable justifications and excuses for such unacceptable misconceptions and poisonous fabrications connected to the Orient in their works. In fact, nothing would justify their deliberate lies about the Orient's culture and nothing would make their prejudice and colonialism seem reasonable.

Conclusion:

Throughout history, orientalists have not attempted to use the right approach to write about the East. They have been always guided by their cultural pressures that tend to make more severe the sense of difference between the West and the East and the sense of superiority between Muslims and Christians. In their turn, critics have paved the way towards the development of the Critique of Orientalism through providing various critiques which either help defending the Islamic East or participate in making the fabrications made on it more vivid and reasonable. This paper, however, explores and humbly analyzes those critiques in details without any comments by the researcher for the sake of showing impartiality. Therefore, any academic researcher can scrutinize the three groups and he himself can determine which

really stands against the negative misrepresentations of the Islamic East and which looks at them as realistic representations of anything related to the East.

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