

Orientalism: Edward Said's vision of the clash of cultures

Arnaldo M.A. Gonçalves

The *Orientalism* is probably more than an intellectual overhaul to the legacy of the European colonialism in the Middle East. It is according to one of its most ferocious opponents (the Palestinian intellectual Edward Said), ‘a way of coming to terms with the Orient’ that is based on the Orient’s special place in European experience, the place of Europe’s greatest and richest colonies. A site that helped to define Europe (or the West) as the East contrasting image, idea, personality and experience’ [Said 1978:1-2]. My commentary aims to look inside Edward Said’s theory and see how it passed the test of time and the consolidation of American hegemonism and Islamic political radicalism.

As original component of Europe’s civilization and culture, *Orientalism* represents an ideological insight, a mode of discourse with supporting institutions, a vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, colonial bureaucracies and styles, Said writes. It is a multidimensional concept as it comprehends an Academic outlook comprising anthropologists, sociologists, historian and philologists on what Orient is. It is, secondly, an ‘ontological and epistemological distinction made between the Orient and the Occident’ that inspires poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists and administrators about the Orient’s people, customs, mind or destiny which include such distinguished people as Victor Hugo, Dante and Karl Marx. It is, thirdly, a ‘corporate institution for dealing with the Orient making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it’ or saying it in a short form ‘is a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient’ [Said 1978:3]. It is, fourthly, a way for extending, through ideological and discursive tools, the domination of the West (and mainly Europe) over these colonial outposts - namely the French and British empires of the East. By affirming its individuality to what categorizes as the ‘Orient’, the European culture (or civilization) gained in strength and identity by placing itself against a mythical personalization of the Orient as a kind of ‘subrogate or underground self’ [Said, *ibid*; Hall 2004].

In his most famous book, Edward Said asserts that a qualitative and quantitative differentiation between the French and British imperial domain of the Orient and the attachment of other European and American powers, exists. It is for the Palestinian, a ‘British and French cultural enterprise’ incorporating India and the Levant, ‘the Biblical lands’, the spice trade, the colonial armies, the colonial administrators and the Oriental ‘experts’ in the academy, a collection of European designs (Oriental despotism, splendor, cruelty and sensuality) [Said 1978:4]. Said forecasts a closeness between Britain and France and the Orient, a situation that spread during the nineteen century until the outbreak of the World War II. In that time America substituted the former European colonial powers become heir to their doctrine to grasp control over that region. Incorporating the idea of ‘discours’ defined by Michel Foucault in *Surveiller et Punir, Naissance de la prison* and the suggestion of ‘cultural hegemony’ stated by the Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci, Edward Said underscores an intimate relationship between the producer of culture and his ‘material’ (the Orient and the Orientals) and a bond between the texts (the ideological arsenal) and the building-up of a mode of discourse about the Orient, that he spots as prejudicial, arrogant and biased [Fenouillet, 1992].

As a discourse, *Orientalism* is an elaboration, ‘a distribution of geopolitical awareness’ to adjacent fields to hard power (intellectual, cultural, moral) [Said 1975:12] what leads to the assertion that ‘political imperialism governs an entire field of study, imagination and scholarly institutions’[Said 1975:12]. The narrative of ‘truth’ resided in the ability of writers and scholars to tell stories and tales of the Orient that they claim where the ones to describe it, framed by a set of racial and ethnic binary oppositions that always worked against the Orientals and in favor of the Europeans [Hall 2004]. A set of oppositions that include notions of hyper-sexuality of women that made them objects of Western desire, Oriental irrationality and indolence against Western common behaviour, rationality and industry [Hall, *ibid*; Oren 2008: 542; Dahab 2003].

Edward Said elaboration in *Orientalism* has influenced several generations of social scientists, students, political militants, political parties and scholars in general. Even if today we may consider banal the idea of denouncing an Orient as ‘pure construction’ this paradigm influenced renowned European experts of Islam as Renan, Louis Massignon or T.E Lawrence [Weill 2013]. Although known as a Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, he was - outside of the academy – an active and outspoken advocate of the Palestinian cause and a harsh critic of Israel and in the last years of his life [he died in 1993] of Yasser Arafat, the president of the Palestinian Authority [Whalout 2001]. This triple dimension of Said as a professor of English culture, a radical anti-Israel activist and an advocate of postmodernism and post-colonialism makes him a very interesting subject of study. His 1978’ book and those who follow it¹ make possible to think, in new ways, the reality of colonialism, the heritage of the British Empire and the questions of race and otherness active in cultural studies [Hall 2004].

Said’s perception of the role of religion in the context of *Orientalism* is negligible as he sees Orientalists such as Duncan Macdonald or Hamilton Gibb trying to balance the ‘transcendent’ nature of Islam with the new fissures induced by nationalism, class struggle and individualization of human beings. He sees them ‘being comfortable with the idea of a monolithic East whose existential circumstances cannot easily be reduced to race or racial theory” [Said 1978: 278]. Modern Orientalism essay to secularize elements of the eighteen century European culture including new reference points as India, China, Japan and Sumer, Buddhism, Sanskrit, Zoroastrianism and Manu [Said 1978:120].

In the preface to the 2003 re-edition of *Orientalism*, Said argues that there is a difference between knowledge of other peoples and other times ‘that is the result of understanding, compassion, careful study and analysis for their own sakes”, and knowledge ‘that is part of an overall campaign of self-affirmation, belligerency and outright war’. ‘There is, after all, a profound difference between the will to understand for purposes of co-existence and humanistic enlargement of horizons, and the will to dominate for the purposes of control and external dominion’ he adds². Said’s aim is to ‘use humanistic critique to open the fields of

¹ *The Question of Palestine*, New York, 1979; *Culture and Imperialism*, New York, 1993; *The Politics of Dispossession. The Struggle for Palestinian Self-Determination, 1969-1994*, London, 1994; *Peace and its Discontents: Essays on Palestine in the Middle East Peace Process*, New York, 1996; *Out of Place: A Memoir*, New York, 1999; *Reflections on Exile and other Literary and Cultural Essays*, London, 2000.

² Said, Edward, *Preface to Orientalism*. London: Penguin (2003). Available at [http://www.odsg.org/Said_Edward\(1977\)_Orientalism.pdf](http://www.odsg.org/Said_Edward(1977)_Orientalism.pdf) (Accessed 4.01.2015).

struggle', defining by that a 'sustained sense of community with other interpreters and other society and periods'. Said looks to raise his voice against misperceptions in the study of Islam, 'especially concerning Islam's relation to modern faith religious experience , violence and democracy, advising to avoid generalisations and stereotypes when facing the issue of 'religion' [De Vries 2005].

What is the balance of supporters and opponents of Edward Said towards his innovative approach to the history of imperialism and post-colonial studies? Ella Sholat sees him as a traveller between different territories, that abandons fixed positions in order 'to live in new rhythms and rituals' and recalling that *Orientalism* was published at a very specific moment in the history of US' academy when ethnic studies, women's studies and Third World studies had transformed the academic scene. Sholat sees Said as a hero, an ardent militant of a just cause fighting injustice and the weight of the Jewish state even with the peril of his life [Shohat 2014]. Elizabeth Dahab emphasizes Said's journey as an advocate of the Palestinian cause, a prolix contributor to the study of humanities and social sciences, with his books being turning points in the history of ideas. Dahab highlights a 'constant awareness that things like novels, plots, cultural and political events are worldly as they occur in a given time and place'. She also draws attention to the correctness of Said's criticism of the cult of professionalism 'that threaten to transform scholars into myopic and highly specialized individuals' putting them apart from the struggles of their time. In Dahab words 'Said's life and work prove exemplary for all who believe in integrity in thought and practice' [Dahab 2003].

Catherine Hall points out Said's contribution to clarify the relations between old and new forms of colonialism and how Britain and the West came to perceive the 'rest of the world' unmasking sets of relations which were not previously identified as central [Hall 2004]. Hall appreciates Said's radical scepticism about categorical designations as allowing scholars to re-examine the convention of colonial knowledge and how these conventions have shaped modern scholarship. Jacqueline Rose praises Said dedication to the Palestinian cause, his critique of all sorts of Zionism and his statement (abundantly repeated) that the creation of the state of Israel had led to all sorts of historic injustices that were still waiting to be repaired. She saw him as a man marked by the exile, a condition that may produce 'rancour and regret 'but in case of Said allowed 'a sharpened vision' [Rose 2004].

Gauri Viswanathan accentuates that Said had a unwavering conviction that the value of literary works is not compromised but defined by the political interests that determine their writing and thus to read literature one need to take into account its political contexts and origins [Viswanathan 2014]. Said remained in profound conflict with schematizations of all kind and was impatient with a patterned and predictable reasoning, which entails rigidities instead of creative openness to discovery and knowledge, Viswanathan explains. Said adherence to 'secular criticism' - a term to characterize intellectual work that opposes to prevailing orthodoxies and mainstream ideologies - was a form of dissent from established principles as a form of resistance form to religious authority, she continuous. Said used

secular in a non-conventional meaning to ‘refer to worldly engagement with human rather than divine history’, Vishwanathan underscores.

Hicham Yezza sees Said militancy in the Palestinian cause as remarkable and prophetic his vision of the falsity of the Oslo Peace Agreements, what was confirmed by the ‘aggressive settlement policies of the state of Israel’ and ‘the on-going plight of the Palestinian people’[Yezza 2103]. Yezza stress Said’s perception of the ‘terrorism discourse’ as a device of an imperial discourse to justify what Americans do and to delegitimize what others [the Arabs] do. The commentator of the *Open Democracy* site retains Said contribution to denounce the prevailing intellectual culture of ‘experts’ ‘for hire, willing to peddle the ‘right’ opinions to the highest bidder’. [Yezza *ibid*].

Avihu Zakai looks deeply to the dimension of exiled and displaced existing in Said’s literary journey, as he exposed in *Reflection on Exile and Other Essays* [2000] ‘the novelty of our time is that so many individuals have experienced the uprooting and dislocations that have made them expatriates and exiles’. In Zakai words, Said aligned with exiled intellectuals such as Joseph Conrad, James Joyce and Vladimir Nobokov, to emphasize the importance of language as a reflexion of personal experience, criticizing modern literary critics by looking to escape contextualisation.

Reviewing the main criticisms of Edward Said’ thesis, Richard King comments that some of the critics argued that *Orientalism* reflected inconsistencies of Said main argument that the idea of the Orient was constructed by Western imagination and is not adapted to the Orient that existed ‘out there’. In King’s words, Said was unable to counter propose an alternative representation of the ‘true’ Orient what Said later clarified that resided in the belief that the separation between East and West is an act of imagination. This cannot lead to the conclusion that only one Orient exists as King concludes [King 2003: 294]. For Bernard Lewis and David Kopf the term “Orientalist” is ‘now polluted beyond salvation, representing a sewer category for all the intellectual rubbish Western have exercised in the global market of ideas³. King acknowledges that is misleading to see the critique of *Orientalism* as a simple rejection of Western attitudes towards the East. He remembers that the fascination of Western Romanticism towards the Orient continues, in this day, in the New Age doctrines of eastern mysticism and philosophy, which continue to see the diversity of the East in terms of homogenised stereotypes [King, 2003: 297].

Orientalism, the pioneering work of Edward Said, was a child of his time reflecting the disquiets of a generation of Arab intellectuals that look to find in the Western universities the space and the publics for their radical and leftist statements about Israel expansionism and American imperialism, better understood in the context of the Col War. The book was published when Edward Said was a member of the Palestinian National Council, membership that he will later abandoned in rupture with Yasser Arafat and the PLO. Said critique of

³ King quotes from Bernard Lewis, “The Attack on Orientalism”, *New Review of Books*, 24.06.1982, pp. 49-56 and David Kopf, “Hermeneutics versus History”, *Journal of Asia Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 3.

Orientalism helped to broadcast these views taking benefit of the free speech existing in the American academy. During the 1980's, Said books become fashionable for students and political activists that criticized capitalism and Western hegemony. But as the representation of the East was constructed by the West for selfish purposes, without taking into account the cultural, social and religious diversity of the East, no alternative paradigm comes from Said's books what can be explained because no homogenised Middle East can be designed. Nations of the Middle East are culturally and religiously diverse and the only trace they have in common is their disparateness to the Christian Europe and America. Likewise, Said's more contemporary books fail to explain the importance of events as the political Islam and terrorism and why they are so entrenched in the Muslim culture and society alienating generations of educated Arabs and silencing those who raise against that fundamentalism. By restricting his analysis to the Middle East, to the places where he was born and raised, Said left aside the realities of the Far-East [China, Japan, Southeast Asia] as if they have no importance to his theory of power and cultural oppression of the Orient, by the West. This lapse may have been deliberated because Said could not ignore that in other parts of the East diversity prevails and no unifying religion or culture exists. So the Otherness he diabolized is not a phenomenon restricted to the dichotomy Middle East-West but is something that makes today even more sense among the different components of the East.

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