

Postcolonial Theory and Orientalism: Orientalist Perspectives of the Arab people

Noorah Fazal Jukaku

Institute of Social Research and Cultural Studies
National Chiao Tung University

Postcolonial theory is a study of the impacts of imperialism and its cultural hegemony over the colonized people. Western imperialism took over many parts of the Arab world, colonizing them not only through military intervention but also by maintaining a cultural hegemony. They intended to create a binary social relation; us and them, which led to fantasized borders dividing the world into the "Occident" and the "Orient". The imperialists colonized many Arab lands such as Egypt, Algeria, and Morocco. Orientalism is part of postcolonial discourse. It indicates how orientalists helped the advancement of the colonial regime in the Arab lands. Even years after colonization ended, the traces of their legacy still exist. This paper discusses the history of orientalism and orientalist scholars and how they succeeded in marginalizing Arab societies by representing them as the "other" while portraying themselves as superior. They used the language and religion of the Arabs to demean and degrade their personalities, describing them as primitive and despotic. Orientalism influenced the Eastern lands just as it had impacts in the Western world. Imperialist motives fulfilled by Orientalists helped gain control over Arab states and maintain their hegemony in Arab nations.

Keywords: orientalism, colonization, Arab, Arabic language, us and them

Orientalism, as mentioned by world-famous scholar Edward Said in his book "Orientalism", is a way of the West to portray the Arab world and its people. Said states that the West imagines, exaggerates and distorts the picture of the Arab, representing them as backward, primitive, and barbaric. The West constructed an image of the East as uncivilized and in need of Western intervention to help them progress in their lives. This representation could be seen in many fields of oriental works by Western scholars such as their writings and displays of their art in world fairs. (Said, 1978). Today, we see the effect on various occasions in the media and movies.

The beginning of orientalism is unknown with certainty. History shows the profound interest of the western priests in the Iberian Peninsula due to its eminence in their time. Realizing the cultural significance of the Arab lands, they began to gain knowledge in Arab institutions and started translating the Quran and other Arabic literature to their languages. They studied various sciences under Muslim scholars, particularly in the field of philosophy, medicine, and mathematics. The first ones to indulge in this field were, French priest named Jerbert who was elected pope of Rome, in the year 999 C.E., Pierrele Aenere (1092-1156 C.E) and Gerard de Gremone (1114-1187 C.E).

Interests in the oriental study led many individuals to study the Islamic religion and the Arabic language, translating books until the 18th Century, which marked the beginning of Western imperialism over the Arab world. Numerous Western scholars that gave importance to orientalism brought manuscripts, some of which are the rarest forms. These manuscripts which were imported from Arab and Islamic lands are still present in Western libraries. The number of journals exceeded fifty thousand at the beginning of the 19th Century and kept increasing. The first conference for orientalists was held in Paris in the last quarter in the Nineteenth Century, precisely in the year 1873. Many conferences were held where Orientalism and the East; its religions and culture is the main topic of discussion (Sibai, pg.18-19, 1968). With the beginning of the colonization of the East by Europe in the 18th Century, orientalism developed with the needs of expanding European states.

The Arabs were victorious in the war of Crusaders, and this hugely disappointed the West. They could not perceive that the Arabs were capable of war, and they saw the Arabs as a threat to their power. Their eagerness to study the orient was not merely to gain insight but rather to cast doubt and degrade. After the war ended, they continued to travel to Arab lands to learn more about their culture, language, religion, and anything that seemed to pave the way for them to gain power over Arab nations. After treading the path of knowledge, they would try their best to bring out the weaknesses of the Arab culture and its people. They would highlight the weak points because they not only wanted to gain colonial and political dominion but also to cast doubts in the hearts of the people of those lands to make them feel inferior. Giving the example of the Arabic language, orientalists would try to demean the Arabic language by making bizarre claims about its originality which in turn was a way of defaming the Arabs, their personalities, their culture as well as their religious beliefs.

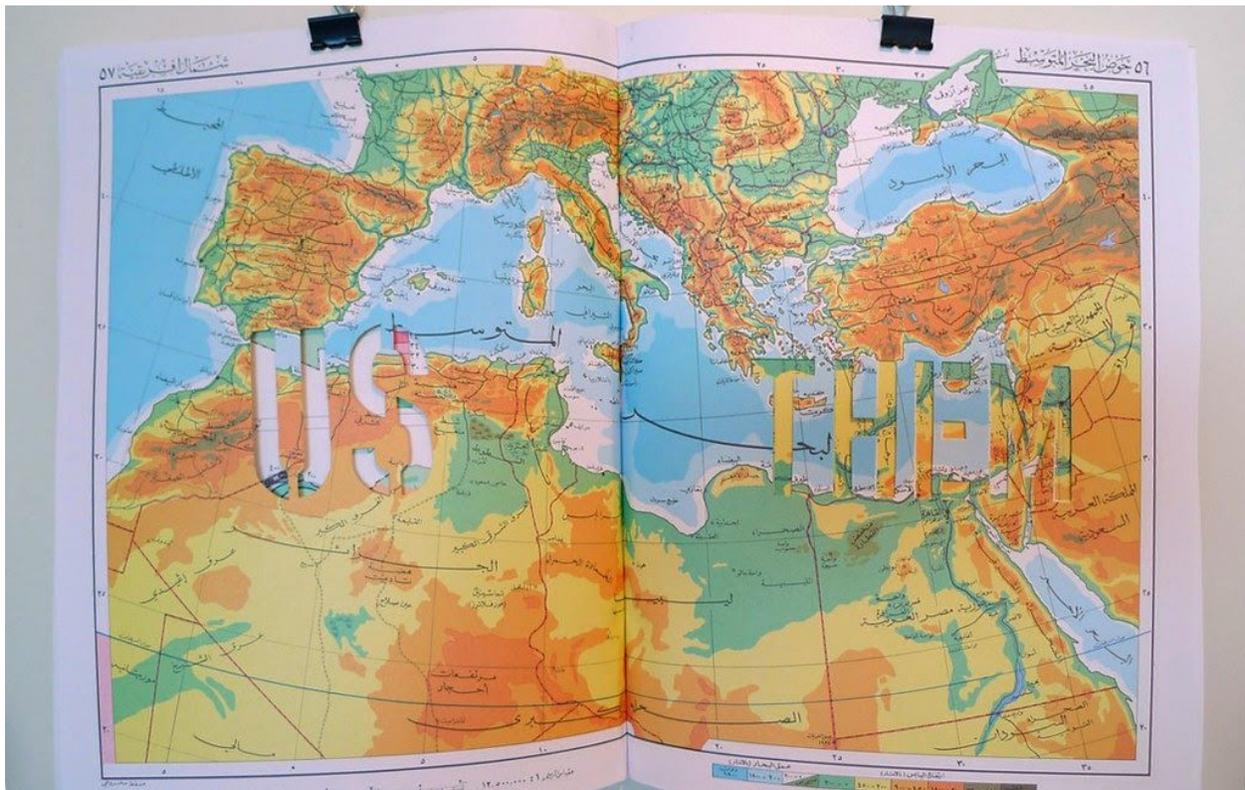
My intent is not to generalize that all orientalists have hidden intentions behind studying the orient, keeping in mind some of their exceptional services to the Arabic language and other fields. However, their works prove that the majority demonized, by various means, "the other"—anyone besides them. Orientalism helped the colonization regime to politically and culturally colonize the Arab lands.

Ignac Goldziher (1850-1921), one of the famous orientalists of the European world, was granted a generous stipend from the Hungarian minister of education and culture, Baron Jozef Eotvos, for a study tour at the Universities of Leipzig and Berlin, where he spent most of his time with Arabic manuscripts. Goldziher said: "I was lured more by the historical than the factual side." (Goldziher, pg.45, 1878). Goldziher was considered an authority in oriental studies. He focused mainly on a critical review of the works of Abu Aswad Addoualy, portraying him as the founder of Arabic grammar. He ignored those before him, the likes of Ali bin Abi Talib who established the foundations of Arabic grammar. He tried to prove that the essence of the Arabic language had no links with Hijaz (West of Saudi Arabia), otherwise well known in the Arab World, assuming that the Arab world does not happen to possess intellect and innovation. Goldziher not only mentioned that the Arabic language had inspirations from the Greek language, but that the Greek way of thought influenced the construction of the language where the Arabs built the concepts of the Arabic language from Greek terminologies. His assumptions show the Eurocentric nature of his claim. He tries to point out the superiority of the Greek language and its originality. He assumes that Arabic is a language with Greek origins and the Arabs are unable to invent something of their own.

Many linguists, such as Renan and Chomsky, point out the Arabic language's originality and mention that the claim of its extraction from another language is false. Chomsky states in his works;

"Syntactic structure" and "Aspects of the theory" that every language has a unique history and advancement. (Chomsky, pg. 19, 1957; pg.4, 1965).

Other prominent and influential orientalists that gave importance to the field were Dutch Semiticist Arent Jan Wensinck and British Orientalist Arthur John Arberry. People in the West were very influenced by the works of these orientalists when it came to the knowledge of the Arabic language and Islamic culture. But their influence did not stay confined within the Western world. Many from the East that studied orientalist works were impressed. They would travel to Western countries from the East to learn about the East from the Western perspective. They would give more importance to Western institutes built in the East while considering these institutions as better options for Eastern studies.



"[US/THEM \(arabic\)](#)" by [Michael Mandiberg](#) is licensed under [CC BY-NC-ND](#).

Orientalism developed significantly in the 19th and early 20th Century with advancing colonization. The growing political and economic needs necessitated an increase in the materials of study as well as the development of subject matter which led to an increase in travel from European countries like Germany and France to the Middle Eastern countries to search for and collect relics, historical monuments and antiques. An expansion of different fields of specializations was essential due to the growing economic and political requirements. Gaining more knowledge regarding the East and presenting their views on it, which they deemed to be correct helped them to dominate better. Orientalists set up institutes exclusively for the study of orientalism in the Arab countries they visited and also in other countries like Russia and America. The departments included a study of languages, including Arabic (AlAtawi, pg 74, 2002).

However, if one focuses on its influence in the Arab world, European orientalism introduced by way of its study, the first and most crucial ideology, that the Arabic language needed renewal and mending. From one of the early Arabs who were influenced by the western way of perceiving the Arabic language was Rifa At-Tahtawi. He was very impressed by orientalist views on the language. His works on the comparison of the Arabic and French language clearly states a need for a direct connection between a person and the foreign culture. He believes that after imbibing a foreign culture, a person can carry it to his country and implement it, whether he has lived in that environment or not. His admiration for Western culture and an agreement for it to be superior to his own is evident.

The effects of orientalism not only remained on individuals but also on the State. Egypt was one of the countries that had a contract with the European authorities in the year 1870, where they agreed that the Germans would lead the Egyptian National Library and Archives also known as Library of Khideve in Cairo, the most extensive Library in Egypt and one of the largest in the world. It houses thousands of antique collections and massive amounts of crucial Arabic language and Eastern studies manuscripts. The National Archives contain vital information about the Egyptian social and political history. We can see more significant effects in Egypt after the establishment of Cairo University in the Year 1908 when many German orientalists traveled to Egypt to teach at the university in the field of language origins. On the other hand, the Egyptians who lived in the West and mastered foreign languages easily understanding it were seen as "Educated Arab Elites". These "Elites" introduced and paved the way for Occidental form of theatre into Egypt.

Whether the Arabs traveled to study under orientalists in the Western lands or whether Westerners traveled to the East to impart knowledge, the Arabic language had to be conceptualized in the Western way. This way of learning Arabic stresses the point that the language is in constant need of development and modification as pointed out in several lectures by German linguist Gotthelf Bergstrasser, who specialized in Semitic studies.

Coming to the effect of orientalism in the Western world, we see that the Arabs, their culture, and language need representation from the West. The Arabs are a people to be feared, and their language is terrorizing or strange. An expert in philosophy and literature, the French leader De Gaulle said about the Arabic language: "Strange and different". This perception points out to how tortuous the orient is and how orientalist scholars are authority and mediators in getting to know these "uncanny people". Exploring the production of French books that deal with or talk about Arab culture, we can notice a wide gap not only between the number of Arab writers and Western authors, the latter being dominant. We can also see the difference between the number of works written in the French language compared to those translated from Arabic. Not only should they be represented by the West, as confirmed by Edward Said in his book, but also if they need representation; it should be done so in the European language.

One of the best examples is the book written by Gilles Perault: *Notre ami le roi* translated as "Our friend, The King" in which he talks about Hassan II, the violent king of Morocco and his poor record in human rights. Another clear example would be Betty Mahmudy's bestseller that sold around 1,910,000 copies, where she talks about her mother's horrific escape from her father's family in Iran.

My aim here is not to judge the author's circumstances or intentions. However, to bring to light the issue of promoting such views on the orient is necessary. The Arab has little or no concern for others

even if they are his family, fantasizing the personalities of the Arabs as fathers and rulers who subjugate those under them with cruelty and oppression. Exoticization of the Arab and stereotyping them as the one dressed in weird garb and traveling on camels in the desert means they need superior Western guidance to become civilized. As a result of colonial and postcolonial history, we see a trend of inequality in the relationship between the Western and the Third World countries in terms of culture, race, and language.

In the field of translation of Arabic works into French. It can be seen in the readings, how they distort the view of the orient. Acceptance of work from the Arab world in France necessitated that they conformed to the French ideologies and values. Occidentalized Egyptians were welcome to submit their works, only after which translation into the French language took place. Their writings were far from Egyptian culture. They emphasized the backwardness of the Arab people and focused on the flaws. One such representation is present in the work of Tawfiq al-Hakim named *Yawmiyat Naaib fil Aryaf*. French writer Jean Grenier says he was introduced to this book to gain a better perspective on Egypt. Nada Tomiche criticizes that this book paved the way for Grenier to gather information on Egypt's customs, namely the dire poverty faced by the peasants and does not serve the primary purpose which was to show the inadaptability of legal procedures borrowed from the West. (Tomiche, pg. 21, 1978)

The end of Europe's political control over the Arab lands did not necessarily wipe out the cultural colonization and its traces. It continues to affect the orient.

The Crossover: American Orientalism, A Continuation of Imperialist Hegemony on the Arab World

American orientalism is viewed differently from European orientalism. However, both have common traits such as establishing orientalist institutions, issuing journals and having specific fields of study in universities regarding Middle Eastern politics and economy. It grows with increasing political interference, economic interests and cultural hegemony in the area. Exoticizing the orient and representation through the Western lens was borrowed from European orientalism. However, American orientalism developed gradually compared to that of European orientalism.

Historically, the U.S. realized the significance of the geopolitical position of the Middle East. They established military bases Post-Cold war, having significant involvement in political issues such as the Kuwait-Iraq war or Israel's occupation of Palestine. It followed European orientalism in terms of De-Arabizing Arabia.

The establishment of American institutions in the Middle East is a significant part where dissemination of Western culture through these institutions are perceived as superior. Only the one who can represent the East in a Western perception is given priority to enlighten such as Occident or the Occidentalized Arab scholars who have accepted Western culture after living in the West. Teaching modernized Arabic language and secular Islam, they portray classical Arabic as something that is "difficult" to comprehend and traditional Islam is viewed as radical. The Arab who can speak the English language as opposed to only the Arabic language or someone who can blend the English language is considered modern. Sentiments of inferiority are felt within individuals if they fail to excel in the English language and adapt to Western culture.

In the Western world, the Arabs are represented as despotic, living amid deserts and unaware of worldly affairs. Their language is identified as a language of terror, portraying the orient in constant need of improvement. As can be seen in the World's Fairs in Chicago in 1893 and St. Louis in 1904, a reinforcement of Orientalist imagery in the United States occurred. James Buel's photographic book that catalogued the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago includes photographs of peculiar Arab and Islamic individuals captioning the Orientalist views on the Arab and Islamic culture. One of the most curious-looking pictures is of a veiled Egyptian lady, characterizing her as someone from an unsophisticated culture. In addition to being an object of display, she is written about as someone who is oppressed.

Conclusion

The critique of orientalism and the works of orientalist scholars indicate that the colonization regime cannot do without orientalism. An absolute difference reflects in orientalist works. The Arab man and woman are portrayed as inferior and backward while the West is conceived as superior and modern signifying bias.

References

Sebawy, Amr (750-847), *Al Kitaab* (The Book).

Goldziher, Ignaz (1878), *On the history of Grammar amongst the Arabs*

Chomsky, Noam (1957), *Syntactic Structure*; (1965), *Aspects of the theory of syntax*

As Sibai, Hassaan Mustafa (1968), *Al Istishraaq wal Mustashriqun* (Orientalism and Orientalists)

Said, Edward (1978), *Orientalism*

Tomiche, Nada (1978), *La Littérature arabe traduite, mythes et réalités : De l'image que se fait l'Occident du monde arabe contemporain à travers les traductions de la littérature arabe en langues française et anglaise* (Translated Arabic Literature, Myths and Realities: From the Western Image of the Contemporary Arab World through Translations of Arabic Literature in French and English Languages)

Al Atawi, Abdurraheem (2002), *Al Istishraaq Ar Rousi* (Russian Orientalism)

Jabiri, Nadeem (2005), *Athr Al Istishraaq Fil Fikr Al Arabi Al Muaasar Ind Edward Said, Hassan Hanafi and Abdullah al Aroori* (The impacts of Orientalism on the contemporary Arabic thoughts from the works of Edward Said, Hassan Hanafi and Abdullah al Aroori).

Al Azami, Muhammed Mustafa (2005), *The History of the Quranic text: From revelation to compilation*.

Ad-Da'mi, Muhammad (2006), *Al Istishraaq* (Orientalism).

Samiei, Mohammad (2010), *Neo-Orientalism: The relationship between the West and Islam in our Globalized world*.

Abulhab, Saad (2011), *De-Arabizing Arabia: Tracing Western Scholarship on the History of Arabs and Arabic language and Script.*

Kharyoush, Dr. Abdurraouf (2015), *Dor Al Mustashriqeen Al Faraciyeen Fi Naqal Al Thaqafah Al Arabiyyah ilal Gharb* (The role of French Orientalists in transmission of Arab culture to the West).