

In his introduction to the term “Orientalism,” Edward Said begins by paraphrasing the writing of a French journalist’s view of the present-day Orient in order to express the major common Western misconception about the East. This misconception exists in the Western mind, according to Said, as if it were irrelevant that the Orient itself was actually sociologically affected. He then goes on to describe the basis of Orientalism, as it is rooted in the Western consciousness.

Said uses the phrase “The Other” to describe the Western fascination with the Orient. This is a reference to Jacques Lacan’s terminology, which describes the mirror stage of development. This is the stage in growth during which children supposedly learn their own identity by successfully separating their own being from a mirror image of themselves. In this context, someone only finds an idea of themselves through a contrast with an “Other.” It is in this circumstance that our desires and expectations of being complete are projected onto this entity. This is a fitting comparison to Said’s topic, considering the emphasis he puts on “the Orient’s special place in the Western experience.” Said suggests that the Orient does not mean the same to American as it does to the European countries, which fits logically into the equation (Europe as the analog of the child that derives its feeling of self from an “Other”). This makes historical sense, since the Orient was adjacent to Europe’s earliest civilizations and the cultural exchange has always existed.

The first designation Said uses for the topic is the academic interpretation. He lends this to the field of work of anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient. This definition is generally too indistinct as compared to the introductory designation. Although it incorporates the multiple discourses of knowledge, it fails to

distinguish the Orient as existing comparatively instead of just being the subject of examination. The second definition draws attention to this distinction and clarifies Orientalism, while also extending its breadth to all that is not considered West (The Middle East, India, Russia, etc.). Said notes that there has been a fair amount of interchange over the last few centuries over these two theoretical fields of coming to terms with the Orient.

Said then proposes a third definition of Orientalism, using an analysis substantially more applicable in the historical context. Orientalism as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient, as the Western authority has done. He professes to be motivated here by Foucault's notion of a discourse. Michel Foucault's theories that have come to bear on this discussion are his ideas of the critical relationship under which the ontology of subject and object come to be known and how these associations may come to constitute knowledge. According to Foucault, the problem is not isolating any empirical conditions that may bring about this subjectivity, but to determine what the subject is and to what conditions it is subject. Said's application of this theory fits his third definition well, and provides a strong platform for the rest of his argument. The Orient has, for much of history, been the active object to the European missionary and scientist positions.¹

He then lists his findings about the recent history of the Orient's relationship with the West. Said suggests that the balance of power from Franco-British involvement to a largely American involvement has not had so great an effect Orientalism as would be expected. This is because the Orient is not nearly as sterile as effective Western domination would bring about; it is a thriving entity just like those cultures that have

¹ <http://foucault.info/foucault/biography.html>

power over it. Additionally, his observations make sense in the scope of colonialism, since certain sections of the Orient have been excluded from the whole at certain times (The Middle East or India).

In his qualifications for interpreting Orientalism, Said includes several points of interest and clarification. He agrees with Disraeli, in saying that the East is more than just an idea with no corresponding reality. In fact, this is concurrent with the fact that many Western scholars have dedicated their entire lives to studying the Orient. Secondly, Said reinforces that it is irresponsible to discount the control that the West exercised over these societies. The study of Orientalism could not exist had the East not been the victim of Western power and domination.

Next, Said differentiates between the types of society and how cultural influence is derived. He cites Antonio Gramsci as distinguishing between civil and political society, and the different configurations and responsibilities therein. According to Gramsci, a political society is one in which the citizen is directly dominated and imposed on by the state, who create and maintain the social institutions. Civil society, however, is made up of citizens voluntarily affiliating themselves with certain social responsibilities. Only under this type of society does the derivation of cultural enterprise instantiate itself. Gramsci's main argument is that in any form of society that is not totalitarian, certain types of culture will thrive. It is this societal happening that he calls hegemony, which Said explains is the phenomenon that necessitates interest in cultural 'otherness' such as Orientalism.

After listing the three aspects of his contemporary reality, Said discusses and attempts to address three realities that would bring the puzzle of Orientalism closer to a

solution. In differentiating between pure and political knowledge, he mentions the difficulty of distrusting political knowledge in the realm of a subject that is so interconnected with politics and international awareness. It seems to come through in the writing that Said is finding it hard to address a problem that is so deeply involved in imperialism, yet not trustworthy of political knowledge. This sharp paradox problematizes his attempt to understand Orientalism in its historical situation.

The second step is the proposition of his methodological devices, which are in answer to the evident absence of the “problematic” in this study. Said uses these devices to examine the authority that is descriptive of the West’s relationship with the Orient. The first device is strategic location, which describes an author’s position in his study with regard to the Orient. Every person who writes about the Orient must associate themselves with either the Orient or the West (Their strategic location), therefore adding certain connotations and themes to their interpretations. Strategic formation, the second device, incorporates the study of the Orient and the way in which different intellectual standpoints gain acceptance and credibility. Just as everyone must be either associated with the West or the East, anyone who considers the Orient in their thoughts must create a basis for whatever argument or position they assume. The intellectual basis of their position is composed of referential knowledge that relates to other works (Their strategic formation). At the end of this section, he reminds the reader that information that is popularly disseminated by a culture is only a representation of truth, not reality itself. He uses this clarification to elucidate the use of language as being culturally, not universally, expressive.

The final reality that must be addressed to bring a greater understanding of Orientalism is what Said calls the personal dimension. He quotes Gramsci as saying “The starting point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and knowing thyself.” This quote applies directly to the subject matter at hand, and also to Said’s analysis of it. He mentions his upbringing, the pertinence of which relates back to the aforementioned methodological devices considering his particular background and previous knowledge of those who are involved in the Orient. Some elements of his personal reflection on Orientalism are the long history of prejudice against people of Arab and Islamic descent, the struggle between the Arabs and the Israelis, and its effects on American population. The one-sidedness of this struggle has to do mainly with the largely liberal American identification with Zionism and the reinforcement of stereotypes of the Orient in the electronic and popular media.

In his concluding remarks, Said delves further into the reasoning behind the futility of a positive view of Arab life in the West. His remaining comments include that his experiences as a person of Arab descent are what motivated him to write about Orientalism in the first place. For someone who is so directly and negatively affected by Western perceptions of the Arab world and the Orient altogether, his analysis is a fairly objective and sophisticated view of Orientalism. Perhaps it is because of his experiences with lifelong stereotypes and the apparent dichotomy of Western and Eastern approaches to the subject. His final comment is somewhat of a plea to the reader in the hopes that if a greater understanding of the topic is derived from reading, then an unlearning of the processes of cultural domination can conceivably begin.