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**Decoding Edward Said: A critical review of the genesis of 'Orient',
'Occident', and 'Other'**



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Decoding Edward Said: A critical review of the genesis of ‘Orient’, ‘Occident’, and ‘Other’.

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper critically examines Edward Said’s seminal concepts of the "Orient," "Occident," and the "Other" within postcolonial discourse, focusing on how these constructs have shaped Western perceptions of Eastern societies. By analyzing Said’s influential ideas, this study explores how Orientalism fostered an intellectual hegemony that underpinned Western dominance over the East.

Methodology: The methodology comprises an in-depth literary analysis of Said’s foundational texts, *Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), alongside a critical review of secondary sources in postcolonial studies, including contributions from Foucault, Gramsci, and Spivak.

Findings: Findings reveal that Said’s framework exposes the cultural and political subjugation enforced by the West while uncovering the power-knowledge mechanisms sustaining these inequalities.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: The unique contribution of this paper lies in its synthesis of Said’s discourse with contemporary theories of cultural hegemony, providing fresh insights into the enduring impact of Orientalist thought on modern geopolitics and epistemology. This study underscores the ongoing relevance of Said’s critique for understanding present-day cultural and intellectual dominance in the postcolonial context.

Key words: *Orient, Occident, Other, Colonization, Hegemony, Strategic Essentialism.*

Introduction:

Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) remains one of the most influential and debated works in postcolonial studies, significantly shaping contemporary understandings of the relationship between the East and West (Zhang). In this seminal text, Said critiques the concept of Orientalism, which he defines as the Western style of dominating, restructuring, and asserting authority over the "Orient" (Said 3). Said argues that this body of knowledge, historically constructed by Western scholars, was not a neutral or objective study but rather a form of intellectual and political hegemony that justified colonial exploitation and subjugation. By presenting the Orient as fundamentally different, inferior, and in need of Western intervention, Orientalism became an ideological tool to perpetuate the power dynamics between the Occident (West) and the Orient (East) (Said 36).

The terms 'Orient,' 'Occident,' and 'Other' are central to Said's discourse and have become integral to the field of postcolonial studies. These terms are not merely descriptive; they serve as mechanisms through which the West asserts cultural and intellectual dominance. The 'Orient'—a constructed concept representing the East—is depicted as mysterious, backward, and static, while the 'Occident' is seen as rational, progressive, and civilized (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin 23). This dichotomous representation creates a binary opposition that reinforces the West's self-perception as superior and justifies its imperial pursuits. As Said emphasizes, "The relationship between the Orient and the Occident is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony" (Said 5).

Said's approach to Orientalism draws heavily on Foucault's concept of power and knowledge, allowing for a deeper critique of Western narratives about the East (*El Aidi and Yechouti* 32). Bhatnagar also highlights Foucault's influence on Said, especially in shaping his understanding of Orientalism as a discourse tied to Western power structures (Bhatnagar 55). Foucault posits that knowledge is not disinterested but is created within the context of power structures, meaning that knowledge can be a domination tool (Foucault). Said adopts this framework to show that Western knowledge about the Orient was a means of controlling and dominating the East. He asserts that Orientalism was not only an academic discipline but also a political strategy through which the West maintained its dominance over the East (*Said* 12).

This paper seeks to explore the origins and significance of the terms 'Orient,' 'Occident,' and 'Other' within Said's critique of Orientalism. By analysing how these terms are used to construct power relations between the East and West, this study aims to demonstrate how the conceptualization of the 'Other' has facilitated not only colonial domination but also the ongoing cultural and intellectual hegemony of the West over the postcolonial world (*Loomba*). Furthermore, the study will highlight the broader implications of these constructs in modern geopolitical and cultural contexts, showing their persistent influence in shaping Western attitudes towards the non-Western world.

Methodological Approach

The methodological approach of this paper is a critical literary analysis combined with a theoretical synthesis. It focuses on Edward Said's core texts, *Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), employing close reading to unpack Said's definitions and applications of the terms "Orient," "Occident," and "Other." This approach is enriched by engaging with secondary sources from key postcolonial theorists, including Foucault's ideas on power-knowledge dynamics, Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony, and Spivak's insights on representation and marginality. Through this interdisciplinary framework, the paper explores how Said's ideas expose the West's intellectual and cultural dominance over Eastern societies. This combination of primary text analysis and theoretical contextualization allows the paper to offer a nuanced view of Orientalist discourse and its lasting influence.

Discussion and Analysis:

The West Divided the World into Two Unequal Halves

Said asserts that the perceived division between the Orient and the Occident was regarded as an undeniable truth, not a constructed fiction for the Orientalists. He argues that this dichotomy was not only a sociological issue but one deeply entangled with political domination and racial discrimination. From a cultural standpoint, a clear line of separation between these regions was drawn, with the West assuming a position of superiority. The supposed epistemological dominance of the Occident over the Orient provided the West with the confidence to impose control, backed by its claims to superior knowledge and authority. This was evident in both political and economic realms, manifesting through the practice of capitalistic colonization (*Mignolo & Sahli*).

Zagumny and Richey state that Orientalism was not simply a political tool; it was embedded within the scholarly, religious, geopolitical, economic, and cultural fabric of the West (*Zagumny and Richey 474*). Western powers' initial approach involved winning the indigenous populations' trust, often by presenting their motives as benevolent and morally righteous. However, according to Smith, this facade quickly crumbled, revealing the true intentions of hegemony and colonization (*Smith 12*). As imperial powers extended their influence, their control infiltrated both economic and cultural, social, and intellectual domains.

Alongside imperialism, Western Orientalists reinforced an ontological divide between East and West. Hinrichsen believes that they constructed a worldview in which Westerners were positioned as the "master race" and Orientals as inherently inferior or enslaved (*Hinrichsen 45*). Said observes that this imperial project was not limited to the political realm but also permeated aesthetic, scholarly, economic, and sociological domains. As he argues, "Western imperialists plot to hold down the Oriental world. It is rather a distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts; it is an elaboration not only of a basic geographical distinction (the world is made up of two unequal halves, Orient

and Occident) but also of a whole series of ‘interests’ which, by such means as scholarly discovery, philological reconstruction, psychological analysis, landscape and sociological description, it not only creates but also maintains" (*Said 12*).

How Knowledge of ‘Orient’, ‘Occident’, and ‘Other’ Works

Varol contends that Edward Said’s argument is deeply rooted in the connection between power and knowledge, a concept largely drawn from Michel Foucault’s theory (*Varol 80*). Foucault famously asserted that knowledge is shaped and determined by power structures. Power does not always need to be exercised through coercion; it can also be asserted subtly through the dissemination of knowledge and persuasive cultural narratives. In Said’s analysis, Orientalism was a strategic tool used to redefine and relocate European conceptions of the "Other." Through the process of orientalization, the West established its dominance by asserting the superiority of its knowledge about the Orient. Ashcroft and Ahluwalia reinforce this view, emphasizing how myths, opinions, and prejudices from influential scholars quickly gained the status of accepted truths. Thus, when renowned Western scholars like Ernest Renan made derogatory remarks about the Islamic world—such as, “Every person, however slightly he may be acquainted with the affairs of our time, sees the actual inferiority of Mohammedan countries” (*Renan 85*)—their statements were received as incontrovertible facts. Such views perpetuated the idea that the Orient was inherently inferior and further justified the West’s dominant position.

Renan’s additional statement— “All those who have been in the East or in Africa are struck by the way in which the mind of the true believer is fatally limited, by the species of iron circle that surrounds his head, rendering it absolutely closed to knowledge” (1896: 85)—echoes the long-held belief in the intellectual and cultural superiority of the West. Said argues that this dichotomy between the West and the Orient was not only maintained through political strategies but also deeply entrenched within intellectual and cultural frameworks. These binary categories of ‘us’ and ‘them’, ‘we’ and ‘other’, reinforced through scholarship and media, helped imprison both the West and the Orient in stereotypical roles.

Aesthetics and Customs Influenced by Power

In Said’s framework, power is not only exercised through politics and economics but also through the control of aesthetics and cultural norms. According to Robinson-Moore the dominance of a particular group can shape even the standards of beauty and identity within a society (*Robinson-Moore 72*). Toni Morrison’s novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970) provides a striking illustration of how the standards of beauty imposed by a dominant culture can penetrate deeply into the psyche of the marginalized. In the novel, the protagonist, Pecola longs for blue eyes, believing that only by conforming to the white standard of beauty will she be loved and accepted. Pecola’s inability to attain this ideal, and the deep-seated self-hatred it causes within her and her community, exemplifies how power structures impose damaging ideologies on the subaltern. Morrison’s narrative reveals that the ideology of the dominant class can become so

ingrained that it shapes not only the external judgments of others but also the self-perception of the oppressed (*De Voss*).

Said also emphasizes that this dynamic is not limited to aesthetics; the entire ideology of a community can be framed by the values of the dominant power. Hall suggests that the Western portrayal of the East as the 'Other' is deeply rooted in this type of cultural hegemony (*Hall 249*). As Said points out, "*The challenge to Orientalism... was a challenge to the muteness imposed upon the Orient as object. Orientalism was a science of incorporation and inclusion by which the Orient was constituted and introduced into Europe, not as its interlocutor, but as its silent Other*" (*Said 348*).

The Discovery and Rediscovery of the 'Orient' by the Occident

According to Prakash the Orient was repeatedly "discovered" and "rediscovered" by Western scholars and travellers, each time reaffirming the entrenched notion of the fundamental difference between East and West (*Prakash 353*). Nash believes that Oriental history became a tool for Western philosophers, anthropologists, and ethnographers to reinforce the idea of the Orient further as 'savage' and 'uncivilized' (*Nash 45*). Curtis believes that these ideas were essential in shaping early European disciplines such as anthropology and ethnography, which were largely built upon the concept of radical difference between cultures (*Curtis 45*). Said refers that European literary and historical texts consistently depicted the Orient as backward and inferior, further cementing the West's self-assumed superiority (*Said 165*).

For instance, the British imperial project in the Middle East is often reduced to a simplistic narrative of exploitation. Western powers, such as Britain, used the wealth of the so-called 'savage' Orient to fuel their own prosperity. In his book titled *International Relations of the Middle East*, Hudson narrates that the Middle East, viewed through a lens of scorn by the West, became a "supplier of oil" and, in the modern narrative, a source of terrorism (*Hudson 356*). Mamdani critiques the Western perception that links Muslims inherently to terrorism, driven by groups like the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, arguing that this view promotes a simplistic and often misleading portrayal of the region and its diverse populations (*Mamdani 766*).

Intellectual and Political Domination

Said emphasizes that the relationship between the West and the Orient is one of both intellectual hegemony and political domination (*Said 43*). Chomsky posits that the West's continued engagement with the East is driven by economic interests and a desire to maintain global political influence (*Chomsky 35*). Said highlights this aspect when he observes that, "Orientalism was ultimately a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, 'us') and the strange (Orient, the East, 'them')" (*Orientalism, 43*). The persistence of this binary view has only deepened the gap between East and West, reinforcing the mutual perceptions of 'us' and 'them'.

Nevertheless, Said rejects the essentialist distinction between East and West. He contends that the invention of terms like ‘us’ and ‘them’ serves only to perpetuate division and conflict. For Said, these categories are abstract constructs designed by the West to assert its dominance. He argues against creating a counter-term like "Occidentalism" to study or critique the West, instead advocating for mutual respect and the coexistence of cultures without hierarchical distinctions. In Fanon’s view, such terms are not only unnecessary but dangerous, as they prevent genuine cross-cultural understanding and perpetuate the cycle of domination and conflict (*Fanon 15*).

Counterarguments: Bernard Lewis and Daniel Pipes

Said’s ideas have been challenged by scholars like Bernard Lewis, who argue that the West is the primary source of "authentic knowledge." Lewis contends that Western curiosity and intellectual rigor contrast with the supposed stagnation of the Muslim world. In his view, the West’s civilizing mission was a noble endeavour aimed at bringing enlightenment to the East. Daniel Pipes echoes this sentiment in his book *In the Path of God: Islam and Political Power*, where he argues that Islam, in its perceived inferiority, poses a threat to the West. Said, however, refutes such arguments, pointing out the irony that the West, under the guise of civilizing the East, has historically exploited it. Warraq contends that Said’s critique of Orientalism reveals the biases and prejudices embedded in Western perspectives, underscoring the West’s persistent oversight of the contributions and merits of Eastern cultures (*Warraq*).

The Myth of the ‘Other’

According to Westwood, Orientalism as a postcolonial discourse draws its authority from institutions, governance, and epistemology, elevating it to a level where it claims alignment with ‘truth’ (*Westwood 95*). Azeez in his “Beyond Edward Said: An Outlook on Postcolonialism and Middle Eastern Studies” explores how Orientalist discourse claims truth by leveraging institutional authority and epistemological frameworks (*Azeez 432*). Said argues that Occidental cultural institutions were central to the creation of the ‘Other’. This process of ‘Othering’ is deeply rooted in the Occidental mindset, where the idea of cultural superiority became an intrinsic belief (*Thomas-Olalde and Velho*). The West’s confidence stemmed from this notion of superiority, which allowed it to define and depict the Orient as ‘exotic’, while portraying itself as ‘elite’ (*Vukovich & Anand*). Said contends that Orientalism functioned as a means for the West to assert dominance by framing the East as fundamentally different, inferior, and incapable of self-representation.

Ragab notes how writers like Daniel Pipes often depict the Middle East as lacking self-representation, reinforcing the need for Western intervention (*Ragab*). This notion aligns with Karl Marx’s famous assertion that those who cannot represent themselves must be represented by others. This idea further solidified the West’s perception of the Orient as the ‘Other’—an entity distant from the ‘civilized’ world of the West. The relationship between the West and the

East was thus framed not as one of mutual exchange but as one of dominance and subordination, where the East became synonymous with the ‘Other’.

Boatcă argues that the "civilizing mission" was a guise for Western economic and political domination, creating a wider disparity between the West and the Orient (*Boatcă*). Iqbal believes that the expansion of Western power, under the guise of civilizing the Orient, ultimately served the economic and political interests of the West. Colonialism, coupled with capitalism, widened the gap between the Occident and the Orient, not just economically but also socially and politically (*Iqbal*). The term ‘Other’, used by the West to describe the Orient, became a symbol of this divide. Ueno contends that the West, portrayed as strong, masculine, and advanced, stood in contrast to the Orient, which was depicted as weak, feminine, and backward (Ueno 25). This distinction gave rise to binary oppositions like ‘We’ versus ‘They’ and ‘Us’ versus ‘Them’ (*Al-Bayyati and Alattiya*).

Attempts by scholars like Bernard Lewis to dissociate Orientalism from the colonial regimes of Western powers are misguided. Hallaq critiques Lewis’s stance on Orientalism, asserting that efforts to present it as purely academic ignore its imperialistic foundations (*Hallaq 42*). Centuries of British, French, and other European imperialism had already ingrained a sense of inferiority within the hearts of the Oriental people. Memmi believes that under colonial rule, the East was forced into a state of submissiveness, unable to resist the imposition of Western customs, rituals, and values (*Memmi 105*). This power dynamic precipitated the formation of what Said refers to as the ‘Other’—a term used by the West to define the Orient as uncivilized, uncultured, and less knowledgeable. The Orient, largely unaware of this designation before Said’s critique, had long been categorized by the West in pejorative terms.

Massad notes that Said was particularly troubled by the West’s unwillingness to recognize its role in constructing the ‘Other’ (*Massad 45*). Buruma and Margalit argue that the West framed the Orient as a fragmented, detached part of history, separate from the rationality and order of Western civilization (*Buruma and Margalit 21*). Western superiority, characterized by order, rationality, and cultural refinement, was juxtaposed with the ‘disorder’, ‘irrationality’, and ‘primitivism’ of the non-Western world. This binary relationship, supported by racial and biological theories of superiority, justified the West’s role as the ‘civilizer’ of the Orient (*Fanon 27*). Said critiques this grand design as nothing more than a pretext for colonial domination, where the West’s mission to ‘civilize’ the East masked its true intent of exploitation and control. Aimé Césaire's essay, *Discourse on Colonialism* (1950), also critiques this "civilizing mission," arguing that colonialism dehumanizes both the colonizer and the colonized, exposing the hypocrisy of Western claims to bring civilization to the East (*Césaire*).

The Genuine Motive Behind Civilizing

Said argued that the perceived binary relationship between the advanced West and the backward Orient further encouraged the West to impose its values on the Orient under the guise of

civilizing. The West's intervention in the Orient was not driven by a genuine desire to educate or uplift but by a self-serving colonial agenda (*Varisco 45*). The Orient, seen as backward and in need of Western intervention, failed to recognize the West's true imperial motives. Said contends that the West's claim to civilize was a thinly veiled effort to materialize its colonial ambitions. Britain, for example, under the pretext of civilizing the Indian subcontinent, turned it into an economic resource, exploiting the natives and turning a once-opulent land into an impoverished one. The exploitation reached such an extent that even some British voices, like Edmund Burke, raised opposition to the injustices inflicted upon India. Burke's scathing critique of British rule illustrates the destructive impact of colonialism:

“England has erected no churches, no hospitals, no palaces, no schools; England has built no bridges, made no high roads, cut no navigation, dug no reservoirs. Every other conqueror of every other description has left some monument, either of state or beneficence, behind him. Were we to be driven out of India this day, nothing would remain, to tell it had been possessed, during the inglorious period of our dominion, by anything better than orang-outang or the tiger” (*Burke*).

This passage underscores the hypocrisy of the West's civilizing mission, where the promise of cultural purification gave way to the brutal realities of economic exploitation. Said's analysis reveals that the West's efforts to 'civilize' the Orient were, in fact, a savage dehumanization of the people they claimed to help.

Cultural Disparity and Western Hegemony

Said argues that cultural differences between the West and the Orient were used as a justification for Western domination. In *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Said explores how Western cultural imagination fuelled European expansion, driven by a belief in the West's inherent right to rule over others (*Said 17*). This 'superiority complex' of the West was a significant factor in the decolonization process and the marginalization of non-Western cultures. Said advocated for cultural coexistence and mutual respect, but the West's obsession with its own superiority made it difficult to bridge the gap between the Occident and the Orient.

Said posits that one of the main reasons the West continued to view the Orient as inferior was its lack of understanding and knowledge about Eastern cultures (*Said 48*). In a lecture at the American Enterprise Institute, he remarked, “Arab culture is not widely known in this country. If you were to ask a generally literate American about what is now taking place culturally in the Arab world—in poetry, in fiction, in the arts generally—he would be very hard put to name a single figure of any importance” (*American Enterprise Institute 2*).

This lack of awareness contributed to the West's tendency to view its own culture as the standard against which all others were judged. Said challenges this ethnocentrism, arguing that culture cannot be judged from a singular perspective (*Said 2*). He criticizes the Western canon, which tends to impose its standards on the rest of the world. In *Orientalism*, Said argues that the Orient

was almost a European invention—a place of exoticism, romance, and adventure constructed to serve Western interests. Disraeli's comment, "The East is a career," highlights the materialistic motivations behind the West's engagement with the Orient (*Tancred* 37).

The West's cultural hegemony, described by Antonio Gramsci as the process by which the dominant culture imposes its values on others, was evident in the way the West defined and redefined the Orient's customs, behaviours, and ideologies (*Gramsci* 52). The divergence between the East and the West, Said argues, is not merely geographical but deeply psychological, with Orientalism reinforcing the superiority of the West over the 'Other' (*Said* 3). In this context, Denis Hay's idea of Europe—identifying Europeans as the superior 'us' against the non-European 'them'—serves as the foundation for the West's continued cultural and political dominance over the Orient (*Bisaha* 17), (*Pagden* 45), (*Gifford and Hauswedell* 22), (*Hay* 30).

Conclusion

The work of Said explains how the western countries, in their sense of superiority, constructed the Oriental and occidental binary opposition. By the control of knowledge, power and dissemination, the Occident manages to compose its area of self as the great master while the east is placed into an inferior, othered view. This division was ideal for justifying colonialism and at the same time asserting the west's superiority over the east, both in thought and in physical terms. The notion of the 'Other' has not been abolished, on the contrary, it affects the acting of Eastern cultures in the contemporary world position. As we have established already, the east's perspective is a subordinate imaginary, for they do not validate American maritime dominance which does not derive purely from militaristic struggle but rather a systemic imperial vision that condoned eastern subordination. The process of Othering is equally relevant in modern spaces in the context of international relations and is an etiology of colonial style association of west and east. Said's work continues to exacerbate the analysis of the relationship between the east and west in the context of power binary. He articulates a vision of equality and justice for the world order, built on respect for one another, cohabitation, and going beyond constructed differences. The difficulty, however, is changing views and practices that are quite rigid and have been in practice for ages. Such and related questions should be pursued in future studies in order to examine how such relations are constructed, sustained, and transformed in the postcolonial world and how the 'Other' is attempting to construct its image and representation. In short, Orientalism in its various forms has importance and continues to endure in this discursive age, hence cannot be simply forgotten. Understanding Western forms of dominance and de Eyikanion Relations and their interaction with other cultures helps generations strive towards an honest portrayal of inter-cultures that is devoid of oppression and colonialism.

Recommendations for further research

In light of the conclusions drawn from Said's critique of Orientalism, a number of perspectives for future work are observed. In this context, the following aspects may be of interest in the future studies based on the conclusions drawn:

• The Modifications in the Orient's Characteristics in the Western Representation

Because Said's critique focused on literature and concerns of scholarly narratives, further research may seek to examine how Orientalism continues to exist or how it has morphed in contemporary contexts such as social media, digital journalism, and entertainment. This study could provide fresh understandings about stereotypes or domination patterns associated with the portrayal and perception of Eastern societies in the present day.

• Culture, Representation and the Other in 'Othering' Processes of Euro-Centrism

A comparative study of Western and non-Western narratives of 'Othering' may be used to assess the applicability of Said's paradigm. In this regard, other societies may be investigated as to how they understand and present foreign cultures which will demonstrate the phenomenon of 'Othering' within other times and places.

Educational presentation and curriculum development

Given the importance of Orientalism in understanding global perspectives, incorporating Said critique into educational courses could lead to critical thinking about representation and bias. Further research could focus on developing learning models using Said concepts to educate students on cultural respect and historical awareness. Besides, examining how the Orientals engage with gender issues can provide a new perspective on Said's ideas. For example, an examination of the representation of Eastern women in Western media may reveal unique aspects of gender-based cultural and gender hierarchies that are consistent or different from Said's original critiques each of these.

Explore the impact of 'otherness' on self-identity in postcolonial societies

Extending Said's theory, research can explore how individuals and communities in postcolonial societies internalize or resist the notion of the 'other'. This study might include psychological, sociological, or anthropological methods to understand the lived experiences of those affected by Orientalist stereotypes.

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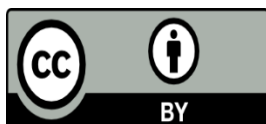
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