

Orientalism

Introduction

“Orientalism” is an influential work by Edward Said, first published in 1978. In this work, Said critiques Western representations of the Orient (East) and argues that they are often based on stereotypes, prejudices, and power dynamics rather than accurate understanding. He analysis how Western literature, art, and scholarship have contributed to the construction of the Orient as exotic, backward, and inferior to the West. Said’s analysis has had a profound impact on postcolonial studies and continues to be widely influential in academic and cultural spheres.

Key Terms used in Edward Said’s Orientalism

In Orientalism, Edward Said has used various terms to describe, represent, and study the East, particularly the Middle East and Asia, from a Western perspective.

Orient

The word “Orient” which literally means the East, the direction from which the sun rises. Geopolitically Orient signifies the Middle East, Asia and North Africa, regions of the world located to the east of Europe.

Oriental

“Oriental” is an adjective derived from “Orient” and is often used to describe people, cultures, or objects from these regions.

Orientalist

An Orientalist refers to someone who studies or portrays the Orient from a Western perspective. This could include scholars, artists, writers, travelers, and others who engage with Eastern cultures and societies.

Orientalism

The term “Orientalism” refers to a specific way of understanding and representing the Orient from a Western perspective.

Definitions of Orientalism

Edward Said described several definitions of ‘Orientalism’ in the introduction of his book Orientalism. Some of these are:

“Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and ‘the Occident.’”

“Orientalism is a corporate institution for dealing with the Orient”

“Orientalism is a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.”

Said criticized Orientalism for its tendency to essentialize, stereotype, and exoticize Eastern cultures, portraying them as backward, primitive, and in need of Western guidance.

Orientalism as a discourse

Edward Said described ‘Orientalism’ as a discourse, borrowing this idea from the French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault. Foucault explained discourse as a system of thought that shapes the knowledge people have, based on preconceived notions and ideas. He believed that discourse is created through the interaction of power and knowledge, and that knowledge itself is a form of power.

Said used Foucault’s ideas to reflect the relationship between power and knowledge in Orientalism. He argued that to truly understand how European culture dominated and shaped the East, one must see Orientalism as a discourse. This discourse allowed Europe to control the Orient in many ways—politically, militarily, socially, scientifically, and imaginatively—especially during the post-Enlightenment period.

Shapes of Orientalism

1. Orientalism constructs binary divisions

Orientalism makes a clear division between the Orient and the Occident (the West). The West is depicted as modern, rational, civilized, and superior. The East is portrayed as traditional, irrational, uncivilized, and inferior. The Orient is conceived as being everything that the West is not, its alter ego. If the West is assumed on the seat of knowledge and learning, then it follows the Orient is ignorant and ill-mannered. Consequently, this binary opposition justifies Western dominance over Eastern societies.

2. Orientalism as a Western Fantasy

Orientalism frequently reflects the fantasies that the West has about the East. In Western literature, art, and culture, the Orient is romanticized and made to seem exotic. These illusions reduce Eastern cultures and people to crude, frequently disparaging stereotypes, ignoring their actuality. It is a human invention, crafted by individuals who aspire to power, rather than an inert truth of the natural world.

3. Orientalism is an institution

Orientalism is institutionalized within Western academic, political, and cultural systems. It involves structured knowledge production about the East, often by Western scholars and experts. Orientalism as an institution supports and legitimizes Western control over Eastern regions.

4. Orientalism is literary

Western literature plays an important role in shaping Orientalist discourse. Western novels, travelogues, poetry, and other literary forms depict the East as mysterious, strange and backward. Common themes include exotic landscapes, sensual women, and barbaric customs. These literary depictions create and reinforce stereotypes about Eastern cultures and peoples.

5. Orientalism is legitimating

Orientalism serves to justify the superiority of the West over the East. The West is seen as having better moral and intellectual qualities. The Western systems and ideals that are imposed on the East are justified by this apparent superiority. Orientalism provides justification for colonialism and imperialism by depicting Eastern nations as primitive, undeveloped, and in need of Western leadership.

Stereotypes of Orientalism

1. The Orient is timeless

If the West was considered the place of historical progress and scientific development, than the Orient was viewed as distant from the influence of historical change. In Orientalism, the Orient exists as a timeless place, changeless and static, cutt off from the progress of Western history.

2. The Orient is strange

The Orient is not just different, it is oddly different. If the Occident was rational, sensible and familiar, the Orient was irrational, extraordinary, abnormal.

3. Orientalism makes assumptions about race

Orientalism often involves racial stereotyping of Eastern peoples. All Arabs were violence, all Indians were lazy. Racial stereotypes are perpetuated by orientalist discourse, which frequently portrays Eastern peoples as strange, exotic, and fundamentally different from Westerners. The idea that Western civilizations are superior to Eastern society is strengthened by the portrayal of Eastern societies as less developed and capable.

4. Orientalism makes assumptions about gender

Orientalist discourse often portrays Eastern men as odd, abnormal, and Eastern women depicted as exotic and sexually mysterious. But in the West men are meant to be active, brave, strong and women are meant to be passive, moral, chaste.

Western policies and actions in Eastern countries are influenced by gendered Orientalist presumptions. They influence how the West views Eastern cultures, frequently using the pretext of “liberating” or “saving” Eastern women to justify military and political activities.

5. The Orient Is feminine

In Orientalism, besides categorizing individuals based on gender, there was also a broader classification of the Occident (West) and the Orient (East) as embodying stereotypical versions of masculinity and femininity. In Orientalist discourse, the East as a whole is feminised, passive, submissive, exotic and sexually mysterious. While, the West is masculine, active, dominant, self controlled and rational. These stereotypes reinforced power dynamics and hierarchies between the West and the East.

6. The Oriental is degenerate

Oriental stereotypes fixed typical weaknesses, cowardliness, laziness, untrustworthiness, violence and lust. So, once again, in creating these stereotypes, Orientalism justified colonialism by claiming that Oriental peoples needed saving from themselves.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Orientalism works as a powerful tool of Western hegemony, shaping perceptions of the East through a lens of exoticism and inferiority. By constructing binary divisions and perpetuating racial and gender stereotypes, Orientalism not only justifies but also legitimizes Western colonial and imperial rule. Edward Said's critique calls for a critical examination of these representations and a move towards a more respectful understanding of the East.