
DYNAMICS OF POSTCOLONIAL DISCOURSE AND THE IDEOLOGICAL CONTEMPORANEITY OF EDWARD SAID

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Abstract: At the centre of Postcolonial discourse is the ideological enterprise of Edward Said. His works *Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) have a continued relevance in unsettling and transforming ideologies and discourse across cultural and national boundaries. Edward Said is responsible for initiating the primary drives behind the inception, expansion and subsequent popularity of this discourse. He redefined culture and power to give invaluable place to the democratic aspirations of subjugated and excluded voices of Eastern cultures in the cultural discourse at the global level. Postcolonialism challenges the established notions of West and East, Oriental and Occident. It also refreshes debates on humanism, freedom, universality and nationalism. It awakens the academic world to the reality of how much still remains to be articulated in the context of a perpetual power struggle which spills over the historical phase of 'colonialism' and continues to control the attitudes across national and cultural boundaries. Despite the popular success of postcolonialism in the Western academic, the subtle forms of oppression through 'naturalizing' tools of power are going on in the developed nations and their academies. This paper is an attempt to foreground the continued relevance of Edward Said's ideology in relation to the internal dynamics of Postcolonialism and contemporary culture.

Key Words : Postcolonialism, Ideology, Orientalism and Culture.

The Postcolonial discourse gains momentum with *Orientalism* (1978). This pathbreaking study of Edward Said (1935–2003) marks the beginning of a new self-consciousness among intellectuals and academics in both – East and West. With the popularization of debates on culture, nationality, power, knowledge and politics, the staleness and homogeneity of Western discourse on non-Western cultures and literatures comes to be challenged. In *Orientalism* Edward Said mainly initiated a critique of the Western methods of interpreting and understanding the East through intellectual modes of mystification and domination. The dichotomy of East and West or Orient and Occident prefigure in Said's writings as categories of analysis as well as tools of historicizing the onset of a typical inequality in human relations and cultures. In order to understand the significance of Edward Said as a thinker, *Orientalism* as a text needs to be placed afresh in the cultural dynamics of the contemporary discourse. This can be done only by assessing the centrality of Said's analytical outlook that has generated a new attitude in the political and cultural discourse in Humanities all over the world. Instead of continuing with the universalist and neutral readings and reception of Western knowledge systems, Edward Said exposed how Western enlightenment and its objectives have been entrenched in the origins and subsequent expansion of colonial mindset. Describing his initial ideological motive in *Orientalism*, Edward Said says, 'My contention is that Orientalism is fundamentally a political doctrine willed over the Orient because the Orient was weaker than the West...As a cultural apparatus Orientalism is

all aggression, activity, judgement, will-to truth, and knowledge' (*Orientalism* : 204). In these perceptions, the ideological overtones of Michael Foucault and Jacques Derrida are evident. What is being identified and targeted is nothing less than the foundations of Western epistemology. However, Said is not of the view that cultures always interact on grounds of conflict, domination and violence. Apart from the recognition of an unequal mutuality and exchange of cultures, he also maintains that cultural interaction is normally based on a certain view of the other culture. Exchange among cultures, he argues, has also been due to genuine mutual appreciation and without damaging the subjective richness of the other culture. But Postcolonial discourse has attained the character of a diversified area of knowledge with its impact constantly increasing on the fields of knowledge as well as the current processes of cultural formation. Homi K Bhabha in *The Location Of Culture* (1994) recognizes this reality when he says, 'The power of the postcolonial translation of modernity rests in its performative, deformative structure that does not simply revalue the contents of a cultural tradition, or transpose values 'cross-culturally'. The cultural inheritance of slavery or colonialism is brought before modernity not to resolve its historic differences into a new totality, nor to forego its traditions. ... There is for instance a kinship between the normative paradigms of colonial anthropology and the contemporary discourse of aid and development agencies. The 'transfer of technology' has not resulted in the transfer of power or the displacement of a neo-colonial tradition of political control through philanthropy – a celebrated

missionary position'(346-347). The main contention here being that Said's ideas are not about a 'past' – something over in human history and experience. In *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) Edward Said remarks, 'As the twentieth century moves to a close, there has been a gathering awareness nearly everywhere of the lines between cultures, the divisions and differences that not only allow us to discriminate one culture from another, but also enable us to see the extent to which cultures are humanly made structures of both authority and participation, benevolent in what they include, incorporate, and validate, less benevolent in what they exclude and demote'(15). The history of this process of inclusion and exclusion has been critically examined in the main argument of *Orientalism*. The Western countries privileged with military, economic and technological advancements perpetuated *Orientalism* – an inherently self-promotional encounter with Eastern cultures. With power and inequality being structural to the process, subjugation of other cultures – of East by West was legitimized. In his critical analysis of the whole enterprise when England attains centrality on behalf of the West, Said finds a subtle naturalization of the images and notions of the Orient and the Occident. The ideological make-up of Edward Said is an instance of owning the role of a public intellectual. The historical enterprise of uncovering the making of 'othering' – the very process of exchange as well as distancing that finally profits the powerful and the already privileged cultures is central to his academic pursuits. Dwelling upon the complex issue of how the *Orientalist* discourse actually began and was subsequently transferred from one place to the other, Said focuses on authentic records. He emphatically states that this discourse of cultural politics and inequality was set up as a foundation of all studies and discourse to come on the Orient by the Occident. He says, 'The four elements I have described - expansion, historical confrontation, sympathy, classification - are the currents in eighteenth century thought on whose presence the specific intellectual and institutional structures of modern *Orientalism* depend. Without them *Orientalism*, as we shall see presently, could not have occurred' (*Orientalism* :120). Said unhesitatingly relies on the evidence from 19th century European figures as Sir Richard Francis Burton and Chateaubriand. He demystifies their popular works. He suggests that the mainstream discourse about the Orient was situated within the old one and 'authors' or 'scholars' such as Edward William Lane (1801-1876) played key role in it. Lane, Said says, constructed a narrative on Egypt which was immediately accepted as axiomatic truth about the 'other' culture by the Europeans. Interestingly, Lane spent a brief period in Egypt but

came out with an entire work, *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (1836). This tendency of narrating the Orient becomes almost a primary and collective obligation of the Western scholars and writers in the times to come. However, its forms and academic locations varied according to contextual compulsions. Edward Said finds in the *Orientalist* approach a deep politics of culture. This further led the curious travelers and academics of the East a tendency of utter dependence on this discourse constructed by the West. For them, even for education and for understanding their own culture, the *Orientalist* discourse of the West becomes the only substance of curriculum and educational enterprise. In this way *Orientalism* as a system of European or Western knowledge about the East or Orient attains a status beyond criticality and challenge. About this side of the internal dynamics of this cultural discourse, Said says, 'How does one represent other cultures? What is another culture? Is the notion of a distinct culture (or race, or religion, or civilization) a useful one, or does it always get involved either in self-congratulation (where one discusses one's own) or hostility and aggression (when one discusses the other' (*Orientalism* 325). With a remarkable boldness, Said examines the scope of *Orientalism* and locates its real genesis in the production of knowledge about the Orient in pre-modern Europe. By creating an imaginary history and geography of the Orient, the Europeans went on with their limited empirical view to function other than mere knowledge or understanding of the Orient. It helped them produce their limited world-view in relation to a description of the East. The Occident outlook, however, was least aware that what they were producing was a discourse full of 'stereotypes'. With the expansion of political and economic authority, As these textual constructions of the Orient first got canonical legitimacy in Europe, and hence the very foundation of 'scholarship' on Eastern cultures. even Edward Said examines how right from the beginning of this *Orientalist* discourse, the real historical and cultural experience of the East had been excluded from the stereotypical constructions by the Europeans. Even when the nineteenth century witnessed the transformation of the academic culture in West and other parts of the globe, *Orientalism* survived with its basic character in discourse. Outside it, the aggressive strategies of colonialism gave it an impetus and justification that culminated in the power hungry phraseology of the 'burden of the white' to civilize the East. Commenting on the vast space that the Postcolonial approach has occupied Leela Gandhi observes, 'Finally, there is the question of postcolonialism's constituency- the cultural audience for whom its theoretical

disquisitions are most meaningful. In my reading of this field, there is little doubt that in its current mood postcolonial theory principally addresses the needs of the Western academy. It attempts to reform the intellectual and epistemological exclusions of this academy, and enables non-Western critics located in the West to present their cultural inheritance as knowledge. This is, of course, a worthwhile project and, to an extent, its efforts have been rewarded. The Anglo-American humanities academy has gradually stretched its disciplinary boundaries to include hitherto submerged and occluded voices from the non-Western world. But, of course, what postcolonialism fails to recognise is that what counts as 'marginal' in relation to the West has often been central and foundational in the non-West. Thus, while it may be revolutionary to teach Gandhi as political theory in the Anglo-American academy, he is, and has always been, canonical in India. Despite its good intentions, then, postcolonialism continues to render non-Western knowledge and culture as 'other' in relation to the normative 'self' of Western epistemology and rationality. Rarely does it engage with the theoretical self-sufficiency of African, Indian, Korean, Chinese knowledge systems, or foreground those cultural and historical conversations which circumvent the Western world' (The Postcolonial Reader ix). However, there are conflicting perspectives on the relevance of Said's ideas on the Western and Eastern discourse. On the ideological presence of 'Orientalism' in contemporary culture, Haroon Khalid says, 'This prejudice was also found in the orientalist (scientist studying the orientals); and all their scientific research and reports were under the influence of this. The generalized attributes associated with the orientals can be seen even today, for example, the Arabs are defined as uncivilized people; and Islam is seen as religion of the terrorist' (<http://www.renaissance.com.pk/FebBoRezy6.html>). The impact of Edward Said's thought is essentially not limited to American academies or literary studies only. Cutting across cultural and national boundaries, his ideas have travelled to wide and deep contours of fields of knowledge. Said's ideological impact is quite wide, as Amandeep Singh puts it succinctly, 'Edward Said's signature contribution to academic life is the book *Orientalism*. It has been influential in about half a dozen established disciplines, especially literary studies (English, comparative literature), history, anthropology, sociology, area studies (especially middle east studies), and comparative religion'. The argument continues, 'If Orientalism questioned a pattern of misrepresentation of the non-western world, Culture and Imperialism explored with a less confrontational tone the complex and ongoing

relationships between east and west, colonizer and colonized, white and black, and metropolitan and colonial societies. Said directly challenged what Euro-American scholars traditionally referred to as 'Orientalism' (<http://www.lehigh.edu/amsp/2004/09/introduction-to-edward-said.html>). Edward Said is of the firm view that any discourse about other cultures and nations is destined to be sharply ideological. His argument on the political, economic, academic and literary discourse relating to Arabs, Islam and the Middle East inheres a critique of the notions of Orientalism taking place first in England and France, and then in overpowering presence of the United States in world politics. Towards the end of his life, he adhered to his view how the popular divide between East and West is employed to authenticate the divide and to project the West as the unquestionable superior culture. This is how, Said says, the West succeeded in ushering an era of silent strifes and intricate issues of active hegemony over the East. In a review of *Defending the West: A Critique of Edward Said's Orientalism* (2007) which is a study of Orientalism by Ibn Warraq, A.J. Caschetta says: *Defending the West: A Critique of Edward Said's Orientalism* by Ibn Warraq, founder of the Institute for the Secularisation of Islamic Society, reveals just how massive a fabrication Said's version of history is. The book spells out in great detail Said's deeply flawed writings and his legacy: the modern academic fetish for examining microscopically the flaws and failings (real and imagined) of the West while simultaneously portraying an ever-peaceful East perpetually victimized by the technologically superior but, of course, morally benighted West. This is the fashionable narrative in the humanities departments of virtually every college and university in America, if not in all of Western academia. (<http://www.meforum.org/2069/defending-the-west>). Ibn Warraq's argument that Said's overall approach is a distortion of history and facts is fundamentally made from the location of traditional 'Occident'. The ideological make up of Said does not originate from any simplistic or oversimplified interpretation or understanding of history. Before coming to literary and journalistic narratives of travellers, he unmasks the contradictory realm of Western Enlightenment and modernity. This is where he distances from Karl Marx and comes closer to the Postmodernists. Edward Said primarily takes notice of the contradictory realm of Western Enlightenment. He re-reads Western figures such as Arthur James, Napoleon, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Byron and Dante. To them, like other Orientalists the 'East' was definable only as the 'inferior' and 'other' of the West. European studies of the region by

Orientalists including the *Bibliothèque Orientale* by French author Barthelemy d'Herbelot de Molainville reflect the depth of Orientalist discourse. It has been equally influential in European politics, and academics including the literary productions. But with its advent in the 1980s, postcolonialism has embarked upon an inter-connectivity with such areas of knowledge and transformation as women/gender studies, cultural studies and other disciplines of marginalized discourses like gay lesbian studies. These new fields of knowledge which are normally covered under the title of 'new humanities' have foregrounded the dynamics of 'exclusions' and 'elisions'. The privileged authority of canonical texts and knowledge systems have been unsettled. The marginalised voices or narrations that were silenced by Orientalist ethos entrenched in humanist curriculum, is now placed at a more liberated academic space. Defining this transition, Leela Gandhi says, 'Each of these disciplinary areas has attempted to represent the interests of a particular set of 'subjugated knowledges', which is Foucault's term for 'knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naive knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity' (Foucault 1980a, p.82). These 'minor' knowledges, as Deleuze and Guattari write, embody forms of thought and culture which have been violently 'deterritorialized' by major or dominant knowledge systems' (The Postcolonial Reader : 42). This complex proliferation was possible because Said has all along been genuinely critical of a particular dimension of the Western culture. He is not a taker or promoter of any type of extremist ideology. In the epilogue of *Orientalism*, he categorically warns that to be 'anti-Western' would mean a succumbing to a unitary and homogeneous image of 'the West'. Since his whole philosophy rejects the notion of an Orient

he also rejects the notion of an Occident. However, Orientalism is an indictment of the scholarship that emerged out of the West concerning the East and as such, it is bound to evoke strong responses. In its contextual locations, postcolonialism is said to encompass 'life' in totality. Homi K. Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* tries to theorize the most complex and enlightening achievement of Postcolonial discourse: Between what is represented as the 'larceny' and distortion of European 'metatheorizing' and the radical, engaged, activist experience of Third World creativity... This time round, the term 'critical theory', often untheorized and unargued, is definitely the Other, an otherness that is insistently identified with the vagaries of the depoliticized Eurocentric critic. Is the cause of radical art or critique best served for instance, by a fulminating professor of film who announces, at a Flashpoint in the argument, 'We are not artists, we are political activists?' By obscuring the power of his own practice in the rhetoric of militancy, he fails to draw attention to the specific value of a politics of cultural production; because it makes the surfaces of cinematic signification the grounds of political intervention, it gives depth to the language of social criticism and extends the domain of 'politics' in a direction that will not be entirely dominated by the forces of economic or social control. (28-29) The primary objectives behind the inception, expansion and subsequent popularity of Postcolonial discourse, as Edward Said visualized, was to place the democratic aspirations of marginalized cultures at the heart of the cultural discourse at the global level. This is exactly what his impact on contemporary thought means. His relevance, so far as inequality among human beings and their constructed identities survive, will continue to exhort and guide the minds of humankind beyond parochial considerations of race, nationality and cultural difference.

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