

# Orientalism by edward said: a valuable study with its limitations

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## **Introduction**

In his extended critique of the study of the “ Orient,” Edward Said’s book *Orientalism* provides a deep analysis of British and French imperial scholarship. *Orientalism* serves as a book intended for consumption by experienced scholars to bring their attention to the flaws in the field of Orientalism. However, Said’s narrow focus in location and factors influencing the Orientalist mindset should be addressed before applying his framework to the study of European Empires.

## **Said’s Motivations**

Edward Said was a scholar with expertise in the field of comparative literature. Therefore, it is unsurprising that *Orientalism* focuses on the analysis of Orientalist texts and how such texts support Said’s argument. Said reasons that the importance in studying Orientalist texts derives from the ease of transfer of imperialist mindset and biases against the “ Orient” that texts provide. He argues that the written texts of Orientalist scholars spread through cultures up through leaders, including Napoleon, who depended on this scholarship for his understanding of the lands he sought to conquer. While the subjects addressed in *Orientalism* may not appear to tie into Said’s career as a professor of literature, his motivation for writing the book is strongly tied to personal interests. As an American of Arab descent and a pro-Palestinian activist, Said had a personal and political motivations to present such issues in *Orientalism*. He utilized his skills as a professor of literature to analyze and construct a text revealing the flaws in the study of Orientalism and its influence throughout history.

## **The Main Ideas of the Book**

Said begins his narration of the issues of Orientalism with Napoleon's invasion of Europe and continues through the changes in Orientalism as influenced by the world wars. Said's focus is almost exclusively on French and British "Orientalists" in the Middle East. By selecting such a narrow focus, Said discussed the empires of interest in depth but does not include other European empires and regions beyond the Middle East studied by Orientalists. However, his narrow scope is warranted in order to be able to analyze what is explored more extensively.

Orientalism argues that the field of Orientalism and the creation of scholarly sources in this field contributed to an imperial mindset which led to justifications for European expansion and "othering" of the Orient. This argument is presented throughout the book, as it is repeated to make clear Said's argument. In one instance, Said expressed that "Once we begin to think of Orientalism as a kind of Western projection onto and will to govern over the Orient, we will encounter few surprises." Here, one can see that Said did not just view Orientalism by its traditional definition as the study of the "Orient," but as a tool for oppression and European expansion.

## **The Strengths of the Book**

The most significant strength in Said's work was his clear and scholarly analysis of works produced by Orientalists and his criticism of sources that Orientalists deem as valuable. His style of writing also adds to the persuasiveness of his arguments as he uses strong descriptions and comparisons. An example of such a deep and persuasive analysis can be

found in Said's criticism of T. E. Lawrence. Popularly portrayed as a defender of the Arabs due to his involvement in the Arab Revolt, Said went against this opinion by explaining how Lawrence's portrayal of the Arabs was as nothing more than willing followers in need of his help to take part in such a revolt. The argument is persuasive as Said goes in depth into T. E. Lawrence's descriptions of the Arabs and using convincing words and analogies to convey his point about Lawrence.

### **The Weaknesses of the Book**

While Orientalism contains extensive analysis of Orientalist works to present Said's argument provides depth to the work, there is a lack of breadth in the subject. Orientalism's sole focus is on the British and French empires in the Middle East following Napoleon's invasion of Europe through World War II. In pursuing such a limited scope, Said ignores the study of additional European empires, including the Spanish and the Portuguese. Orientalism also lacks the study of countries beyond the Middle East including India, China, and Japan. His framework may apply to these other empires, but subtle differences in the interactions between cultures may render aspects of his argument useless in other cases.

The presentation of Orientalist scholarship within Orientalism also seems not to account for the complexity and contradictions present in a human mind, particularly in the minds of the Orientalists. Said dwells heavily on the biases present in Orientalist texts. For example, in Said's criticism of George Orwell's presentation of the people of Marrakech, he pointed out how Orwell creates a separation between the white Europeans and the non-white

subjects. While this criticism is entirely warranted, Orwell appears to have conflicted feelings about empire and colonial rule.

This characteristic of Orwell's is obvious in his short story, *Shooting an Elephant*. In this story, Orwell both presented the biases and racism that Said criticizes in *Orientalism* and criticisms of British imperial rule such as in the treatment of the Burmese and British administration. Though these conflicting viewpoints in Orwell's own mind are perhaps overshadowed by the biases in his work, it is important for scholars studying imperialism to take into account the psychological complexity of people involved in imperial rule, from those with the power to those without.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, Edward Said's book *Orientalism* is a valuable tool for scholars studying the effects and rise of empires. *Orientalism* clearly presents the spread of imperialist views through scholarly works developed by scholars from the European empires of England and France who sought to study the "Orient." The same critical study of scholarship should be applied to works from other countries and other fields. It is, however, important to understand that Said's work possesses limitations and therefore only the aspects of the framework that are relevant to specific area of study should be utilized.

*Orientalism* is a book intended for scholars, as is indicated by the density of the text and assumptions that the reader understands French. Because of its intended audience, scholars will gain the most from reading the book.

However, exposing undergraduate students to the text allows them to enter

into scholarly debates and understanding of criticisms within scholarly communities.