

Postcolonial Literature

Lecture 4

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Hello and welcome to another lecture on postcolonial literature. Now if you remember, we had ended our previous discussion by briefly mentioning Edward Said and his book *Orientalism* and we had also mentioned how both Said and his book *Orientalism* are associated with the foundation of postcolonial studies as an academic discipline. In today's lecture, we are going to carry forward with that discussion.

Introduction to *Orientalism*

In this book *Orientalism*, which was first published in 1978 and here you can see the cover of the first edition of the book, Said's main argument is that European colonial domination of the Orient was integrally associated with how the Orient was conceptualised, researched and talked about in Europe. In other words, Said is saying that the military and economic dominance of the Orient was tied up with the discourse about the Orient. And it is this discourse about the Orient that Said refers to as Orientalism. As you can see this builds upon Foucault's idea that power, knowledge and the discursive manifestation of knowledge are closely integrated but what Said is doing here is that he is taking this generalised concept of Foucault and applying it to the specific context of European colonialism of the Orient. So let me repeat again, Orientalism as Said defines it means the European coloniser's discourse about the Orient which is tied up with the military and economic domination of the Orient. This is a rough-and-ready definition of Orientalism and in today's lecture we will try to elaborate on this to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of the concept of Orientalism.

So let us start by looking at term Orientalism. This term derives from the root word "orient" and its derivatives like "oriental" and "orientalist", and broadly all of these terms refer to the

East or things related to the East. But the question is of course East of what? Well the reference point here is Europe and the Orient signifies the land that lies East of Europe – more specifically it refers to the land that we now know as the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent.

This Orient or the East is contrasted with the Occident or the West which of course refers to Europe. Together, the Orient and the Occident or the East and the West form a conceptual binary that informs texts like Rudyard Kipling's "The Ballad of East and West" where he writes "East is East and West is West, and never shall the twain meet". Such use of East and West or Orient and Occident as contrasting conceptual categories also occur regularly in more mundane conversations where terms like East and West or Orient and Occident are used as cryptic shorthand way to denote not just geographical spaces but also certain cultural values that includes things like food habits, dress codes, bodily postures and even moral conduct. In these instances, the Orient and the Occident offer a kind of matrix to conceptualise the world by dividing it into two broad mutually exclusive categories where whatever is represented by the Occident the exact opposite is represented by the Orient.

According to Said, this peculiar style of thinking is a vital aspect of what constitutes Orientalism. But it is only one aspect. Along with this one, Said also talks about two other aspects which together form the notion of Orientalism. And here in this slide you can see the three broad aspects of Orientalism that Said talks about. First, Orientalism is way of thought that is pivoted on contrasting the Orient from the Occident. Second, Orientalism is an academic discipline. Third, Orientalism is a corporate institution for dealing with the Orient.

Orientalism as a style of thinking

Let's start with the first point. According to Said, instances of Orientalism as a binary way of thinking can be traced as far back as the Greek tragedies of the 5th century BCE where the Orient was imagined as not just the land of Asia but also as the "other" of the European "self".

That is to say whatever Europe stood for, the Orient, as a foil, stood for the exactly opposite thing. If the Occident stood for masculinity, then the Orient by contrast assumed a feminine entity in this imaginative geography. If the Occident represented mature adulthood the Orient became a representative of childish immaturity. If the Occident considered itself to be at the pinnacle of civilization, then the Orient came to represent the depths of barbarism and moral and cultural depravity. In other words, the discourse of Orientalism presents the Orient as this dark and unregenerate counterpart of the Occident which is simultaneously foreign, loathsome and yet enticingly exotic. As I have just told you, such a discourse that presented a sinister as well as an alluring image of the Orient has been prevalent in Europe for more than a millennia. But during the heydays of European colonialism, this discourse enjoyed special relevance and mutated itself into an academic discipline.

Orientalism as an academic discipline

And here we come to the second aspect of Said's understanding of Orientalism. According to Said, it was precisely when European powers started militarily conquering the Orient during the late eighteenth century onwards that Orientalism emerged in Europe as an academic discipline. Till before seventeenth century European access to the Orient was limited but military conquests during the eighteenth century allowed European scholars to scrutinise the Orient more closely. Thus, as Said points out, when in 1798 Napoleon Bonaparte led a military expedition to Egypt, he was accompanied not merely by an army of soldiers but also by an army of scholars and scientists who transformed the occupied territory into an object of enquiry and a field of systematic knowledge.

After the Napoleonic conquest, Egypt, for Europe, did not merely remain a distant exotic land known primarily through hearsays, but it became one of its objects of scientific enquiry. And this systematic enquiry resulted in a multi-volume encyclopaedia of Egypt called *Description*

de l'Égypte which apart from texts on natural histories and description of Egyptian antiquities also contained engravings and detailed maps of the region. Such an exercise to systematically know the conquered country is also visible in the efforts of Warren Hastings in India during the last quarter of the eighteenth century. Hastings, who was the first Governor-General of India, along with two other colonial officials William Jones and Nathaniel Halhed researched, compiled and published voluminously on various aspects related to India that included law, literature, astrology, botany, history and language.

This kind of systematic knowledge gathering, which was made possible largely because of the military conquest and control of the Orient, inaugurated academic fields like Egyptology or Indology all of which were subsumed under the broad umbrella of Oriental studies; and by the end of the nineteenth century, Oriental studies had become an integral part of the Western academia.

The huge amount of documents that this academic Orientalism produced was soon acknowledged in Europe as the most authentic way of knowing about the Orient so much so that someone like the British philosopher James Mill could justify writing a multi-volume history of India just by consulting the available documents in England and without ever visiting India and without knowing any Indian languages. This is what Mill wrote in the preface to his history of British India justifying his position:

This writer [...] has never been in India; and [...] has a very slight, and elementary acquaintance, with any of the languages of the East. [...] [Yet] it appeared to me, that a sufficient stock of information was now collected in the languages of Europe, to enable the inquirer to ascertain every important point, in the history of India.

Preface, Volume I, *The History of British India*

If we think about it, the very audacity of this claim to know all the important points about the history of India without either living in India or knowing any of the Indian languages is mind boggling. Yet such claims to knowledge about the Orient without ever going there or knowing any of its languages was to become commonplace during the nineteenth century. Indeed, in this regard, James Mill's *History of British India*, whose first volume was published in 1817, can be very well clubbed together with Thomas Babington Macaulay's equally audacious 1835 *Minutes Upon Indian Education* which dismissed the whole of Sanskrit and Arabic literary traditions without even knowing any of these languages.

It is important to note here that the rise of Orientalism as an academic discipline during the late eighteenth and nineteenth century did not mean that the earlier form of Orientalism completely disappeared. The style of thinking about the Orient as a dark, backward, sinister and barbaric other of the Occident continued to underline the new form of academic Orientalism and its more systematic form of knowledge production. Thus, for instance, if we look at the article on "The British Rule in India" written by Karl Marx and first published in 1853, we see that Marx in spite of being aware of the havoc that British colonialism wrecked in India by destroying its traditional economic and social structures considered this to be a boon in disguise. This is because Marx's analysis of the exploitative colonial situation was at the same time underlined by the millennia-old prejudice that the Orient represents a backward and barbaric society. And though as a result of the British rule Indians were "thrown into a sea of woes", "lost their ancient form of civilization" "hereditary means of sustenance", what was actually lost was ultimately in Marx's estimate barbaric and unregenerate customs and ways of living. And though the British colonisers inflicted this destruction they were also ushering in a much needed social revolution because at the end of the day, for Marx, they represented a superior civilization. Therefore, for Marx even the most blatant forms of economic exploitation become

excusable only because the exploiters belong to the Occident and the exploited belongs to the Orient.

Ofcourse these millennia old prejudices about the Orient not only influenced academic writings but they also formed the basis of the literary texts that made the Orient its subject, and therefore in Said's study of the new form of Orientalism that emerged during the eighteenth and nineteenth century we find that the names of literary writers like Lord Byron, Gerard de Nerval, Gustave Flaubert occurring almost as frequently as the names of James Mill, Thomas Macaulay and Karl Marx.

Orientalism as Corporate Institution

But how was it that such prejudices, myths and half-baked researches that characterised the discourse of Orientalism gained such prevalence since the late-eighteenth century? This question is very easily answered using the insight of Michel Foucault. As Foucault argues it is always the discourse that is generated, circulated and ratified by the institutions of the powerful which gains acceptance as truth. Similarly, after the European conquest of the Orient during the eighteenth century it was discourse of Orientalism which was validated and circulated by institutions of the Occident that gained acceptance as truth.

These various institutions, which included the colonial legislature and judiciary, the schools, colleges and universities set up in the colonised parts of the world to propagate western learning, and learned societies like the Institut d'Égypte or Asiatic society together forms what Edward Said identifies as the third aspect of Orientalism. These were the institutes which connected colonial power with colonial knowledge. On the one hand, as institutes representing the authority of the colonising people, it ratified the biased views and partial researches as the truth about the Orient, and on the other hand it enabled the colonial power to justify its rule over the Orient by using the myths of Orientalism. Thus, when the institutionally ratified discourse

identified the Occident as the seat of civilization and the Orient as the den of barbaric customs and vile rituals it made eminent sense that European powers should have control over the Orient not simply because it is economically profitable but also because it is morally the right thing to do. In other words, it was precisely this institutional framework which supported the discourse of Orientalism that repackaged the profit making motives of European colonialism into a civilizing enterprise.

Contrapuntal Reading

Though Said's *Orientalism* beautifully unfolds the power knowledge nexus that connects the discourse of Orientalism with the military and economic domination of the Orient by Europe, Said's main purpose is not just to reveal this connection but to disrupt it. And the way in which Said seeks to bring about this disruption is through "contrapuntal reading" of the texts using the discourse of Orientalism. What is contrapuntal reading? Well contrapuntal reading is an attempt to read the Orientalist texts against the grain, against the way in which its authors intend them to be read...and this is done by questioning the inherent assumptions that underline this text. For instance, if we question the basic assumption that Orient is civilizationally backward then we will see that Marx's arguments in favour of the British rule in India immediately breaks down. So the intention of contrapuntal reading is to question the Europe centric values of the colonisers' texts and to point out and critique the myths and prejudices that underline them. In our next lecture we will make use of this technique of contrapuntal reading when we discuss Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Thank you.